

Protestant Pluralism: The Reception of the Toleration Act, 1689-1720

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The history of religious toleration during the early modern period has been revitalised over the past decade. Scholars such as Alexandra Walsham and Benjamin Kaplan have shown that early modern society did not view toleration as the social virtue that was later espoused by enlightenment thinkers. Instead, toleration was understood as another word for the exercise of restraint toward religious groups or practices that one disagreed with. To tolerate different religious beliefs did not mean that you accepted their validity; it meant that you reluctantly acknowledged their existence.⁽¹⁾ Toleration could be practised under different models that ranged from attempts at confessional co-existence that were worked out by different religious groups, to the legal toleration of worship outside of an established Church. These arrangements were underpinned by the widespread belief that toleration was not an accepted practice, and that its legal enactment was a temporary measure to ensure religious stability.

Ralph Stevens' book *Protestant Pluralism: The Reception of the Toleration Act, 1689–1720* is an important contribution to this historical field, and sheds new light on a topic that has long deserved a substantial examination. The 1689 Toleration Act granted England's Protestant dissenting ministers legal protection to erect meeting houses and to worship outside of the Church of England if they qualified by swearing the oath of allegiance to King William III and Queen Mary, and by subscribing to 36 articles within the Church's doctrinal standard, the Thirty-Nine Articles. The Act was designed to cater for the variety of dissenting groups that had emerged in England after 1662 when hundreds of ministers were ejected from the Church for refusing to accept the episcopal settlement that followed Charles II's restoration. The Presbyterians, who were England's largest dissenting group, were the main beneficiaries of the Act. However, smaller dissenting groups, like the Quakers and the Baptists, were also granted protection by the inclusion of provisions that accommodated these groups' scruples over state oaths and infant baptism respectively. Only Roman Catholics and Anti-Trinitarians were excluded from these provisions. Despite not mentioning 'toleration' in its official title, the Act's ratification on 22 May 1689 marked a notable shift away from the persecutory religious culture that had underpinned the Church of England's authority during Charles II and James II's reigns, towards a diverse culture that was founded, as Stevens demonstrates, upon conflicting interpretations of the said statute.

The book shows that while the Act's provisions were previously vaunted by 'Whig' historians as a defining moment in England's constitutional history—and later dismissed by revisionists as a pragmatic compromise to secure religious stability—the reception of its terms has not been explored in depth. The Toleration Act, Stevens argues, turned England into a 'religious marketplace' in which both the Church of England and the dissenting groups had to compete for the adherence of the laity (p. 21). However, members of the Church and the dissenters themselves had different views over what the Act allowed. Conservative clergy within the Church—such as the infamous Henry Sacheverell, and their Tory political allies—believed that the dissenters had gone beyond the statute's terms by carrying out baptisms and erecting schools to educate the next generation of ministers. By contrast, the new bishops that were appointed after 1689—like Archbishop John Tillotson of Canterbury and Bishop Gilbert Burnet of Salisbury—believed that a 'moderate' pastoral approach was required 'to pacify the evolving and unavoidably controversial relationship between Church and liberated dissent' (p. 23). The pluralism that the Act created, Stevens' argues, was complicated, and this forced the religious authorities and the dissenters to develop competing political and pastoral strategies to oppose and benefit from the state respectively.

The book stands out from recent scholarship that has examined the Toleration Act, such as that of John Spurr, by not focusing wholly on the politics behind the Act's passage.⁽²⁾ Instead, Stevens builds on the new approaches to toleration that have been pioneered by Walsham and Kaplan to produce a fresh examination of the Act's reception. The Act's ambiguity, which Stevens emphasises throughout the book, meant that its reception was a 'drawn out process of experimentation, debate, and contest, rather than a transformative constitutional moment' (p. 8). The debates between the established Church and the dissenting ministers over the Act's ambiguities—and over their competing pastoral strategies—directed how England transitioned towards a culture of legal protestant plurality.

The book's structure focuses on this transition by addressing specific points of controversy between the authorities and the tolerated dissenters that were revealed by the Toleration Act. The introduction and the first chapter, entitled 'Religion after the revolution', provides the context behind the Act's passage. Thereafter, the proceeding four chapters focus on the controversial issues: Public Office; Reformation of Manners; Education; Baptism; and Chapels. The final chapter focuses on Protestants in Hanoverian England. This thematic approach allows the reader to better understand how the Act was received and provides fresh insights into the social and political conflicts that it caused, which have only been touched upon by previous scholarship. The author's approach, coupled with his lucid style, ensures that the reader puts down the book knowing that the Toleration Act caused further issues that had to be worked out during the gradual acceptance of Protestant plurality in England.

In the first chapter, on 'Religion after the revolution', Stevens argues that religious toleration was inevitable after the revolution of 1688–9, when the new government wanted to secure its authority on a broad Protestant basis. The ambiguities within the Toleration Act stemmed from the failure of the parallel scheme to receive the Presbyterians into the Church through a comprehension settlement. A Comprehension Bill, which was presented at the same time with the bill that became the eventual Toleration Act, would have received these ministers into the Church by offering modifications to the Book of Common Prayer and making kneeling at communion optional. The Toleration Bill would have then protected the smaller nonconformist groups who remained outside the Church. The dismissal of the Comprehension Bill by the Tories in the House of Commons, and later by the lower house in the Church of England's Convocation, forced William III's government to arrange the quick ratification of the Toleration Act to provide some protection to the nonconformist groups. This meant that a statute that was initially designed to apply to a few groups was quickly accepted by most of them. Furthermore, as Stevens demonstrates, the Act not only confirmed the public presence of dissent in English life, but also caused dissenting groups to experience a 'denominalisation' process and to move from being a religious 'sect' to a distinct denomination. A good example that Stevens uses to show this are the divisions that the Toleration Act revealed among England's Presbyterians, who were internally split between the older 'Dons'—who had been ejected in 1662 and still hoped for comprehension—and the younger 'Ducklings', who had been ordained into dissent and were less

receptive to being received into the established Church (p. 19).

The second chapter, on 'Public office', focuses on one of the most notable controversies that the Act raised, that of 'occasional conformity'. This practice involved nonconformists qualifying themselves for public office by attending Church of England services once a year. Stevens acknowledges that occasional conformity has received significant historical attention from a political and polemical perspective but argues that the main issue behind clerical opposition to the practice was a fundamental disagreement over pastoral strategy. The dissenters, whose numerical strength resided in urban centres, quickly used this loophole to strengthen their position in borough governments. In rural areas such as Lancashire—the county that the author draws most of his examples from—the Presbyterian minority used the authorities' concern about Jacobite plotting among the county's Catholics, and the support of a sympathetic Whig Lord Lieutenant, to acquire public offices in the 1690s. It was only with Anne's accession that these hostile sentiments towards nonconformity manifested themselves. To prove this, Stevens provides an interesting examination of the career of John Sharp, the former rector of St Giles-in-the-Fields, who was later raised to the archbishopric of York under William III. Stevens argues that Sharp's career shows that England's second most senior cleric stood out from his moderate episcopal colleagues, like Bishop Burnet, because he came to disagree with the Act. Sharp, who lamented the failure of the Comprehension Bill in 1689, supported Tory legislation against occasional conformity not because he feared nonconformists, but because he realised that the evolving interpretations of the Toleration Act had unintended consequences. These hostile Tory sentiments would eventually culminate with the passage of the Occasional Conformity Act in 1711, which attempted to close this loophole.

The third chapter, on 'Reformation of manners', tries to link the themes of toleration and the emerging denominational status of the dissenting groups together. The societies for the reformation of manners, the author argues, were bound up with questions of Protestant identity and ecclesiastical unity. These societies were driven by a desire to root out social scandal. Although the author does do justice to this topic, the reader occasionally wonders how this chapter is different from existing work by Tony Claydon and Craig Rose.⁽³⁾ Despite this, the author does provide good insights into how these societies were initially bound with the ideas of 'Protestant unity' that were promoted by moderate clergymen and dissenters after the revolution of 1688–9. Both the Church and the dissenters were committed to improvement of England's moral fibre by the reduction of social scandal. The societies, Stevens argues, acted as a forum for the religious groups to achieve this. However, the concentration of the societies' activities in England's main urban centres—which became strongholds of dissent after 1689—and the active involvement of dissenters in their organisation, undermined their effectiveness by increasing conservative fears that the Church of England was on the verge of being overwhelmed.

The fourth chapter, on 'Education', is one of the most enjoyable in the book and provides nuanced insights into the Toleration Act's ambiguities. At the centre of the controversy over education was the issue of whether unlicensed dissenter schools were no longer illegal after the Toleration Act had passed. After 1689 many qualified nonconformists regarded the educational services that they provided through private academies that had emerged in the 1670s as legal. Their establishment counterparts, by contrast, insisted that these educational services were outside of the Toleration Act's provisions and pushed for the men who conducted them to be prosecuted. The training that these academies provided for future generations of nonconformist ministers, Stevens argues, was central to the 'denominalisation' process that the groups experienced. Dissenting education was founded upon 'the silences and ambiguities within the 1689 legislation' (p. 100). However, patterns of confessional co-existence, and the desire to avoid conflict in the localities where these services were provided, meant that the prosecution of nonconformist schoolmasters was not widespread. The different interpretations that were held by the dissenters and established clergy over what the Act meant for education became openly hostile after Anne's accession. Tory discontent with nonconformist education manifested itself in the 1714 Schism Act which, like the earlier Occasional Conformity Act, attempted to close this loophole by requiring that schoolmasters receive an episcopal license.

The fifth chapter, on 'Baptism', expands upon a similar loophole within the Act. Baptism was a pre-eminent religious practice whose importance was shared by the Church of England and the dissenters. It signified the initiation of a child into the wider parish communion. The basis for dissenters to baptise under the Toleration Act was, as Stevens explains, a confused affair. The Act did not contain any provision for dissenters to baptise children and its practice was 'a matter of interpretation rather than a clear right' (p. 106). Its enactment allowed dissenters to do publicly what they had previously only done in private. By baptising children, dissenters were able to legitimate their status as a separate denomination. The clerical reception of this practice was, as the author demonstrates in the previous chapters, hostile. Many clerics, such as Archbishop Sharp, believed that the Act only covered preaching or teaching in private, but were reluctant to launch legal proceedings. A key point that Stevens makes in this chapter is that legal religious pluralism created a rival Protestant pastorate and inadvertently created a 'public marketplace of religious ritual' (p. 111). The idea of a religious marketplace has recently been emphasised by sociologists of religion, like Jan Stievertmann and Philip Goff, and Stevens make a strong case for its application in England after 1689.[\(4\)](#)

The idea of a religious marketplace in England after the Toleration Act is extended into the sixth chapter, on 'Chapels'. Like baptism, the chapels and meeting house that were erected by dissenters were physical manifestation of the controversies that were raised by the Act. Stevens emphasises the difference between the private dissenting chapels that were erected by Protestant households, and the public chapels that were erected by dissenter congregations after 1689. Private chapels had existed since 1662 with the tacit consent of the local established clergy. Public chapels were more controversial due to the Toleration Act's requirement that meeting houses be registered. Establishment clergymen hoped that registration would allow them to oversee the new dissenting meeting houses. However, registration provided another means for dissenters to legitimate their status as separate denominations and the newly-built chapels were 'symbols of mainstream dissent's final separation from the establishment' (p. 140). Toward the end of the chapter, Stevens provides an excellent insight into the relationship between Queen Anne's Bounty and the dissenter chapels. The Bounty, which was endowed in 1704 to aid poor clergy, was, Stevens argues, a 'finishing stroke' that clarified the relationship between the dissenter chapters and the ecclesiastical authorities (p. 150).

The final chapter, on 'Protestants in Hanoverian England', provides some brief insights into the status of dissenters after the Hanoverian succession in 1714. The accession of George I secured Protestant plurality in England and this was confirmed by the repeal of the Occasional Conformity and Schism Acts in 1719. This restored the ambiguities that were created by the Toleration Act and represented the 'most significant advancement for dissenters until the aftermath of the American Revolution' (p. 157). Despite this, Stevens reminds us that dissent was in decline by George I's death in 1727. The growth of 'rational dissent' caused internal divisions among England's dissenters, while the Church of England adapted to Protestant plurality and gradually reasserted its presence in English society. However, the Hanoverian succession ensured that Protestant pluralism would become embedded in English society.

Overall, this is an excellent book and will become essential reading for all future scholars of religious toleration. Stevens shows that the Toleration Act both cemented England's religious divisions and created a religious environment that was essential to the 'denominalisation' of English society. His emphasis on conflicting pastoral consequences, his meticulous scholarship, and his thorough examination of the ambiguities that the legislation raised, shows that the Toleration Act created a complicated path in England's slow move towards religious diversity. In short, the reader puts down the book knowing that legal religious pluralism was both a constitutional and an adaptive process.

Notes

1. Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester, 2006); Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John Spurr, 'The Church of England, comprehension and the Toleration Act of 1689', *English Historical Review*

- , 104 (1989), 927–46[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Tony Claydon, *William III and the Godly Revolution* (Cambridge, 1996).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Religion and the Marketplace in the United States, ed. Jan Stievermann, Philip Goff, Detlef Junker, and Anthony Santoro (Oxford, 2015).[Back to \(4\)](#)
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