The Glorious Revolution used to be recognised as a milestone in the history of religious freedom. Despite its theoretical inconsistencies, the Toleration Act of 1689 was held to have achieved as wide a measure of liberty of conscience as was practicable in the circumstances. 'It is true that the Toleration Act recognised persecution as the rule, and granted liberty of conscience only as the exception', observed Macaulay, 'but it is equally true that the rule remained in force only against a few hundreds of Protestant dissenters, and that the benefit of the exceptions extended to hundreds of thousands.'

Such claims are at a discount nowadays. Modern historians are inclined to dismiss the Act as granting the minimum concessions that the Anglicans could grudgingly be brought to yield. They point out that it actually reduced the area of religious freedom which James II had created by his Declarations of Indulgence. These provided freedom from prosecution under the penal laws to all Christians in theory, including Catholics, and even to non-Christians in practice. James is thus seen as a genuine enthusiast for universal toleration. The so-called Toleration Act removed the right to worship from Catholics and Unitarians, and insisted that the Test and Corporation Acts, restricting office in local and national government to communicating Anglicans, remained on the statute book. Insofar as the Revolution is worthy of commemoration at all, therefore, it stands as a monument to Anglican bigotry, condemning non-Anglicans to the status of second-class citizens until the nineteenth century. In this view the Toleration Act made little or no difference to the concept of the con-

Bill Speck considers the three-cornered manoeuvrings between Anglicanism, Dissent and Catholicism that culminated in the events of 1688-89.

**RELIGION'S ROLE IN THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION**

'The Protestant Grindstone' – this 1690 cartoon of William and the Anglican clergy bringing the Pope into line, clearly underlines the religious impetus behind the overthrow of James II.
fessional state.
To ascertain which view is nearer to the truth requires an investigation of the circumstances leading to the passing of the Act. In particular it necessitates a solution to the problem of how Anglicans came to accept the need to grant some form of toleration, however grudging, to dissenters. For, after the Restoration of the Church of England on a surprisingly narrow basis — insisting upon subscription to all thirty-nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and episcopal ordination, and proscribing by the statutes known as the Clarendon Code all who could not subscribe to them — such an outcome of the religious tensions of Charles II’s reign seemed most unlikely. On the contrary, in the last four years of his reign relations between the Church of England and Protestant dissent reached the peak of intolerance.

Tolerance of dissent could only come about through political rather than through religious conviction. It was not enough to be converted to the view that other denominations might reasonably be treated as fellow Christians and be allowed to worship in peace. Indeed, in practice most Anglicans seem to have been prepared to accept this proposition, even to Catholics. Except at moments of acute political tension, dissenters were normally left undisturbed in local communities. It is not often remarked upon, but it is nonetheless remarkable, that there was near unanimity amongst the respondents to James II’s canvass of opinion in the winter of 1687-88 on the question of whether or not they would live peaceably with their neighbours of all religious persuasions. All but an insignificant minority were prepared to answer ‘yes’ to this, even though, as worded, it allowed for the toleration of non-Christians, as well as of Catholics and Protestant dissenters.

The negative replies to the other questions, however, involving the repeal of the penal laws and Test Acts, reveals that the discrimination was not religious but political. Roman Catholics and Protestant nonconformists were regarded as threats to the constitution in Church and State. This crucial qualification lay behind offers of toleration throughout the seventeenth century. When Charles II offered an indulgence to tender consciences in the Declaration of Breda he did so with the proviso that it was not on offer to those who disturbed the peace of the kingdom. He probably had in mind Fifth Monarchists and other militant sects thrown up during the Civil War. Others might include Baptists, Independents and Quakers. Certainly these sects remained much more suspect, and prone to persecution, than either papists or Presbyterians for most of his reign. The very fact that they had been spawned during the Interregnum, and largely recruited from the middle or lower orders of society, was enough to identify them with incipient social revolution by the Anglican élite.

It was to take a lot to persuade that élite to accept that such sects were peaceably enough disposed to be granted a measure of toleration. Above all, it took the perceived threat from the Catholics, which came to be seen as far greater than any from Protestant nonconformists, to convert the Church of England to tolerate them.

Roman Catholics were regarded as a subservient force because they owed allegiance to a foreign power, the pope. His Holiness was held to be intent on bringing back the whole of Christendom within the fold of Rome by any means. It was widely believed that the Catholics condoned regicide if this would promote the reconversion of the country. Such beliefs lay behind the panic and paranoia of the Popish Plot of 1678.

In the Tory reaction after the Exclusion Crisis, however, Anglicans came to fear dissent more than they feared popery. The years 1682-86 marked the height of severity against Protestant dissenters. They were associated with Whiggery and with the ‘good old cause’. Once more, therefore, they became linked with political subversion. As Edmund Bohun expressed it, their ‘ultimate object was the destruction of the monarchy and the bringing in of a republic’. In Cheshire the number of prosecutions for absence from church services rose dramatically: 300 in 1681; 506 in 1682; 622 in 1683; and 718 in 1684. The number of indictments of conventicles also rose from eight in 1681 to 144 in 1683. The Quakers fared relatively well in that county, for only nine Friends were recorded as being in prison there on March 2nd, 1685, out of a total of 1,460 imprisoned in the whole country. There were over 3,800 arrests in London for breaches of the penal laws, while some 400 meeting houses were harassed.

James II’s general pardon of 1686 temporarily, and his Declaration of Indulgence the following year permanently, ended this period of repression. He expected the dissenters to be grateful to him for bringing it to an end. His strategy was to win them over to his side and ally them with Catholics against the narrow, persecuting Anglicans. The sincerity of his policy was questioned at the time and has been doubted since. After all, James had identified himself with the Anglican establishment during the period of the Tory reaction. As Lord Halifax warned the nonconformists in his Letter to a Dissenter: ‘The other day you were sons of Belial, now you are angels of light.’ Whig historians were convinced that James was cynically exploiting the dissenters for his own purposes. Yet he himself announced in his Declaration of Indulgence that ‘we humbly thank Almighty God it is and hath of long time been our constant sense and opinion . . . that conscience ought not to be constrained nor people forced in matter of mere religion’.

The key to the apparent contradiction is in the adjective ‘mere’. Liberty to tender consciences was permissible if they did not offer any political threat. Before 1686 James could claim that he could not grant an indulgence, despite his religious beliefs, because of his conviction that the dissenters were politically subversive. William Penn felt ‘obliged in conscience to say that he has ever declared to me it was his opinion that conscience should be free’, and even

Gilbert Burnet — religious adviser to William, Bishop of Salisbury after 1689 and leading exponent of Broad Church Protestantism.
Bishop Burnet conceded that 'when I knew him he seemed very positive in his opinion against all persecution for conscience sake'. Yet the Quakers suffered more than other dissenters, while all endured persecution in the years 1681 to 1686. James was converted, not to religious toleration, but to the view that, so far from being his political enemies, the Protestant dissenters could become valuable allies.

The Anglicans also experienced a change of heart at the same time for precisely the same reasons. The twin nightmares they had dreaded, either a papist or a Puritan government, had become horrifically real, and were not alternatives but joined together in an unhappy alliance against Anglicanism. The prospect of rule by both papists and Puritans was too frightful to contemplate. Yet the only alternative was to accept the dissenters as allies against the Catholics, which meant offering them at very least toleration. Political expediency thus dictated the relaxation of the penal laws against nonconformists by James, and the promise to relax them by Anglicans.

There ensued a battle for the hearts and minds of the dissenters fought between James and his Anglican opponents. Supporters of the king claimed that he alone was genuinely committed to toleration, and that the Anglicans were the worst enemies of the dissenters. Anglican apologists refuted the king's sincerity, and insisted that only a Toleration Act could guarantee liberty of conscience and freedom of worship. A statute passed by both Houses of Parliament and the Crown would be unequivocally legal, whereas the legality of the suspending power, on which the Declaration of Indulgence was based, was very much in doubt. Moreover, toleration based on the king's will could be reversed if he changed his mind, as Charles II had shown in 1673.

Some Anglicans were prepared to offer dissenters more than mere toleration. The issues dividing the Church of England from moderate Presbyterians were not regarded as irreconcilable in some circles on both sides. At various times in the seventeenth century, from the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 to the Savoy Conference of 1661, divines had tried to reach a compromise. During the Exclusion Crisis the Whigs had introduced bills into Parliament aimed at reconciling the established Church and the Presbyterians. Had these attempts been successful, the Presbyterians might never have seceded from the established Church in the first place, or might have been absorbed back into it in the second. Comprehension, as such absorption was termed, was more attractive in many ways than mere toleration. It retained the ideal of a single national Church which comprehended the majority of Englishmen. A measure of religious tolerance need only be required for the minority who could not be integrated into such a Church: Baptists; Congregationalists; Quakers. Protestant reconciliation against the Catholics during James' reign therefore involved the policy of comprehension as well as converting Anglicans to the idea of tolerating the dissenting sects.

Such a policy was plainly not on for the king. The divisions between Catholics and Protestants ran far too deep for an ecumenical approach to work. What James hoped to achieve was the conversion of most Englishmen to Catholicism. This was not to be done by force. On the contrary, James' sincerity need not be doubted when he deplored the consequences of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV, and insisted that coercion:

... has ever been directly contrary to our inclination, as we think it to the interest of government, which it destroys by spoiling trade, depopulating countries and discouraging strangers; and finally, that it never obtained the end for which it was employed.

Instead, James hoped to convert his fellow countrymen by persuasion. He himself had been converted by the same means, and he was convinced that if only people would give heed with unprejudiced minds to the tenets of Catholicism they would, like him, be persuaded as to their essential truth. As he explained to Lord Dartmouth, 'did others enquire into the religion as I have done without prejudice, prepossession or partial affection, they would be of the same mind in point of religion as I am'.

Consequently he encouraged a publicity campaign to disabuse Englishmen of their prejudiced misconceptions of the Catholic faith, and to propagate its true doctrines. In turn Anglicans sprang to the defence of the Church of England against what they saw as the errors of Rome.

Despite some spectacular conversions to Catholicism among his courtiers, only a handful of the aristocracy and gentry were converted to the king's religion. Amongst the Anglican clergy there might have been thirty, including nine fellows of Oxford and Cambridge colleges. The missionary effort was rather more successful amongst the lower orders. It was reported that still those 'most noted whores in Oxford are gone over'. In Birmingham and Worcestershire 176 conversions were recorded during James' reign. As John Miller concludes, however, 'there are no signs of a mass movement towards Catholicism'. The low number of conversions and the status of most converts led Burnet to assert that 'there were but very few proselytes gained to popery; and these were so inconsiderable that they were rather a reproach than an honour to him'.

Nor can James have been better pleased with the reception which his edict of toleration received from the dissenters. There was an initial burst of enthusiasm, during which it was noted that the Declaration 'pleases the Quakers, and independents and anabaptists and some of the Presbyterian very well'. Then caution crept in. A campaign to support the Declaration by formally addressing the king to thank him for it, an expression of gratitude which he indicated was appropriate, produced a very mixed response. Although the pages of the Gazette reported addresses for over a year, from April 14th, 1687, to April 17th, 1688, which in itself indicates a desperate attempt to maximise their significance, only 197 were published. Moreover a close analysis of these reveals that, with the exception of William Penn, the Quaker leader, who had helped to draw up the Declaration, the most influential dissenters did not subscribe to addresses, but urged their co-religionists to refrain also.

Prospects for an alliance between dissent and Anglicanism on the other hand were no more encouraging until 1688. Despite the notoriety of Halifax's Letter to a Dissenter it does not appear to have been effective immediately after its appearance in the summer of 1687. His assurances that the established Church had undergone a change of heart were not particularly convincing. As the Presbyterian Roger Morrice noted on November 19th:

... I do not find that any of the tories, especially of the clergy, are come one inch further towards the Reformed Protestant churches, but still have as great an enmity and disgust against all the reformed churches as ever they had.

A more influential pamphlet in persuading them to budge was Pensionary Fagel's letter to James Stewart,
'giving an account of the Prince and Princess of Orange's thoughts concerning the repeal of the Test and Penal Laws'. This 'open' letter to Stewart, dated Amsterdam, November 4th, 1687, was published in Dutch and English shortly afterwards. Fagel assured him 'very positively, that their highnesses have often declared ... that no Christian ought to be persecuted for his conscience'. They therefore offered 'full liberty of conscience' even to Roman Catholics. But they were not prepared to agree to the repeal of the Test Acts. This clarification of their position made it clear to the Anglicans that toleration at least was here
to stay, since the next successor was as committed to it as was James.

But what finally converted the majority of Anglicans to the view that some accommodation with the dissenters had become vital was the Second Declaration of Indulgence and the order in Council which bade the clergy read it from their pulpits. The petition of the seven bishops against the order denied that their aversion to distributing the Declaration arose 'from any want of tenderness to Dissenters, in relation to whom they are willing to come to such a tempem as shall be thought fit, when that matter shall be considered in parliament and Convocation'. Thus the Church of England, which started the reign still persecuting the dissenters, came round by the spring of 1688 to the view that toleration, if relations between them and 'the chief of the Dissenting ministers' were so cordial that they held several conferences in July together with 'the clergy of London'.

During the Revolution, however, Anglican commitment to accommodating dissent diminished. Two attempts at comprehension, the first in the Convention, the second in Convocation, were abortive. In the event, only a limited measure of toleration was placed on the statute book.

The expectations of the summer of 1688 withered largely because they were overtaken by unforeseen and, to many Anglicans, unacceptable events. Archbishop Sancroft and his episcopal colleagues conceived their proposals in the context of a continuation of James II's rule. They put pressure on him to reverse his commitment to Catholics and to restore the status quo which had prevailed at his accession. During the invasion crisis his panic led him to concede many of their demands. This rapprochement between Crown and Church persuaded many dissenters that both had sold them down the river. The archbishop and most bishops were, however, probably sincere in their undertaking to introduce measures of comprehension and toleration into Convocation and Parliament; but they assumed that those bodies would be convened by the rightful and lawful king. When he fled, and a Convention assembled, summoned by the Prince of Orange, who to them was a usurper, the whole political context on which they had based their scheme was shattered beyond repair. Many of the principal architects of it, including the archbishop himself, refused to recognise the new rulers.

William was particularly suspicious of high churchmen because he was an avowed Calvinist. His Calvinism, together with his conviction that fellow Protestants were numerous and powerful in England, led him to make some disastrous moves at the outset of his reign. Thus he held out to dissenters the prospect of a very generous measure of comprehension, 'wherein all the Reformed Churches do agree'. Even more alarming to Anglicans was his announcement to both Houses that he was in favour of repealing the Test Act for 'all Protestants that are willing and able to serve'.

These moves rallied the Tories in the Convention. There had been a Tory majority in the Upper House all along, but this was strengthened. More significantly, Tories in the Commons who had been prepared to

Anti-papal propaganda, such as that (above) of 'Pope Joan' in a 1675 pamphlet, fuelled a climate that claimed James' own secretary Edward Coleman (right) among the victims of the Popish Plot persecutions in 1678.
co-operate with Whigs over the constitutional settlement now firmly resisted proposals to settle the religious issues on a broad basis. A group of them met at the Devil Tavern and determined to oppose any relaxation of the sacramental test. Moreover, their numbers were augmented by many moderate Whigs alarmed at the radical measures being proposed on religion. As Roger Morrice observed, 'the house of commons was stronger by 80 to 100 voices to reform things amiss in the State than in the Church'. The consensus which had marked the debates on the Declaration of Rights evaporated. Two bills for comprehension, one which came down from the Lords, another which originated in the Commons, were dropped, and the question of comprehending Protestant dissenters within the Church of England was referred to Convocation. When this convened in the autumn it proved to be even more intransigently high church than were the Tory MPs in the Convention. The mood of clergy elected to the Lower House was summed up in a speech by its prolocutor, 'Nolumus leges Anglitiae mutari' ('We are unwilling for the laws of England to be changed'). Comprehension was killed by the intransigence of High Church Anglicans alarmed at the accession of a Calvinist king.

All that survived the Anglican alliance with dissent against a Catholic king was the Toleration Act of 1689. But this measure was more restricted than the Declarations of Indulgence which the churchmen had undertaken to enact in order to give dissenters the security of statute rather than the uncertainty of a royal proclamation. The Corporation and Test Acts were specifically reinforced. Dissenters had to continue to pay tithes to the established Church. Only Protestants who believed in the Trinity were allowed to worship separately from it. The virtual universal toleration introduced by James II was severely curtailed. Such a limited concession after so many reassurances ensured that the friction between Anglicans and dissenters was long to survive the Revolution, especially since many Tories thought that it went too far. As one put it in a speech objecting to the measure when it was before Parliament:

...when James the second published his Declaration for Indulgence (intended for the ruine of the Church of England) these very dissenters join'd the Papists to ruine the Church of England, and promise to assist the King to get such a Parliament chosen as would be for his Dispensing Power.

James II's attempts to redraw the religious map did not succeed in obliterating the divisions deeply entrenched in English society.

And yet, grinding though it was, the Toleration Act did mark a major concession by Anglicans. They ceased persecuting Protestant dissenters, many of whom set up rival establishments to the Anglican Church in the 1690s. In the words of the late G.V. Bennett, the Church of England was 'partially disestablished' in 1689. In these respects the Glorious Revolution was a turning point in religious as well as in political history.

This article is adapted from the author's Reluctant Revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688 published in early July by Oxford University Press at £17.50.

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