

JAMES II AND THE DISSENTERS

The policies of Charles II and still more of James II constitute a fascinating epoch in the relations of Roman Catholics and Dissenters. The long record of hostility, alternating with total indifference, which forms the staple of the history of this relationship, was broken by the needs of these monarchs to secure benefits for the Catholics towards whom Charles was inclined and among whom James counted himself. This paper glances at some part of that complex course of events, which initially was without consequence, but in a more ecumenical age is worth recalling.

The Restoration inaugurated for Dissenters the period of the 'great persecution', with the imposition of the Clarendon Code. Roman Catholics too continued to be on the receiving end of government repression. To a certain extent, as before the Civil War, the pendulum of oppression swung between the two, largely in response to political considerations. When Charles II's need to placate Louis XIV was greater than usual, pressure on Catholics eased and the Nonconformists were in larger measure the victims; at other times, and most notably of course during the period of the Popish Plot, things were easier for the latter and more threatening for the former.

In other ways Nonconformists and Catholics were driven together as fellow victims of oppressive policies pursued in support of the Established Church. According to John Miller, 'Some Protestant magistrates went out of their way to protect their Catholic friends from the operation of the penal laws, and there is also evidence of Catholic gentlemen living on good terms with Protestant Dissenters and trying to protect them'.¹ The Protestant magistrates were of course Anglicans, but it is interesting that Dissenters were among those who sometimes benefited from friendship with Catholics, at least at the gentry level. Charles II himself told Colbert, the chief minister of Louis XIV, in 1669 that the Dissenters hated Anglicans more than Catholics,² which is hardly surprising at a time when Anglicans were their persecutors and Catholics their fellow victims.

A common experience of persecution may create a degree of fellow-feeling, but does not betoken much sense of partnership: after all, Puritans and Catholic recusants suffered long at the hands of an Anglican *Via Media* without learning to love each other. It was perhaps a sign of a further development in relationships when Richard Baxter argued that Catholics might be saved. But it was a concession hedged with qualification: they might be members of the redeemed community not *because* they were Catholics, but *despite* that fact.

Not as Papists; as such they can be no members of it; but if with any of them Christianity be predominant and prevail against the infection of Popery, so that it practically extinguish [*sic*] not Christianity, then as Christians they may be members of the Church, and be saved too, but not as Papists.³

Charles II consistently attempted to follow a policy of toleration. His sincerity has been the subject of much debate, but the truth does not seem very obscure. Primarily he wanted to secure toleration of Roman Catholics, whose company he joined on his death-bed, but in those times it was impossible to pursue that end in isolation; it would have to be part of a wider policy of toleration for all sorts of Dissenters. But this was not a conclusion reluctantly accepted by Charles. He genuinely wanted a wider toleration. It would make for peace and tranquillity. In any case, why not? All species of religion might contain some truth, but the whole matter was pretty doubtful; why persecute? Moreover he resented the constraints implied by his association with the dominant religious party, the intransigent Anglicans of the Reformation era. Hence the 1672 Declaration of Indulgence. Charles' efforts at toleration were defeated by the intransigence of Parliament; the Cavalier Parliament defended its rights and privileges against royal encroachment

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with something of the determination of the Long Parliament. Ironically, the Puritans and their successors were now the victims of parliamentary pride rather than its beneficiaries.

Despite the frantic efforts to bar him from the succession, James, Duke of York, acceded to the throne in 1685. While Charles had deferred his entry into the Roman Church till the point when no earthly threat could deter him, James had made his submission at an earlier stage of life. James had observed Charles' efforts to benefit Roman Catholics by appeasing Protestant Dissenters, and had shared the same hopes. In November 1674 he had welcomed the approach of Presbyterians on the issue of liberty of conscience, and represented himself as protector of both Catholic and Dissenting interests against what Miller calls 'Danby's intolerant Anglicanism'. In December he obtained pardons for some convicted Dissenters.⁴ At Tunbridge Wells he met John Owen and had several conversations with him. After returning to London he sent for Owen and in the course of a long interview 'told him that he might always have access to the royal presence, expressed his belief in freedom of worship, and gave him a thousand guineas to distribute among the distressed Nonconformists,' This gave rise to a public outcry that the Nonconformists were being bribed to serve popish interests, an allegation hotly denied by Owen and his friends.⁵

The growing power of Lord Treasurer Danby provoked Dissenters to look for allies wherever they might be found. In 1675 they established contact with the Marquis de Ruvigny, Louis XIV's ambassador, who was attempting to whip up support for the Duke of York and his claim to the throne.

Reporting specifically upon his talks with a small number of Presbyterian and Congregationalist members of the Commons, he wrote in September that they were beginning to respond to his overtures and wanted him to use his influence with Charles to obtain freedom of conscience.⁶

In return, the Nonconformist leaders were willing to grant Charles the supplies he needed and undertook to do nothing contrary to French interests. Ruvigny claimed that he was reporting on behalf of six Nonconformist leaders, but does not reveal who they were.⁷ Nothing developed from this contact, but it was a foretaste of the more serious negotiations which were to take place after James came to the throne.

When James succeeded in 1685, his over-riding aim was to secure at least some degree of freedom for his fellow-Catholics. Traditionally Protestants have believed him to have been involved in a deep plot to overthrow the Protestant establishment in England and restore a Catholic tyranny. To this his defenders reply that he took no steps which would have led decisively in that direction, and that such a belated reversal of the Reformation was plainly impossible. It might be replied that he had no time to do more than take a few preliminary steps towards his conceived goal; while, as for the absurdity of the attempt, it might be said that rulers not infrequently attempt the obviously impossible. But what matters is not what James might have done, given more time, but what he actually did.

While estimates of the Catholic population of England for the period vary widely, there can be no doubt that Catholics were a relatively small minority. Already the threefold pattern of English religion - Anglican, Nonconformist, Roman Catholic - was discernible. Was it therefore a better strategy for James to seek repeal of the laws prejudicial to Catholics only, or would he be well-advised to work for toleration for Nonconformists also, thereby lining up two of the religious groups against the third and dominant one? In practice he vacillated between these two possibilities, and his cause was not helped by such hesitations.⁸

THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

In the early months of his reign he sought the favour of the Anglican authorities, in the hope that they would not obstruct concessions to Catholics. But when nothing came of this policy he decided to try the alternative possibility, a deal with the Nonconformists.⁹ The latter therefore found themselves in the unexpected position of holding the balance between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, and even of being courted by both parties. 'As a result', says Douglas Lacey, 'not only did their status improve but their new position also raised hopes of realizing long-sought religious and constitutional goals.'¹⁰ But their opportunity was also their dilemma, for the question of how to react to their new-found popularity posed for Nonconformists acute issues of political expediency and religious principle. The consequence was division. There were, of course, old divisions, and very sharp ones, among Nonconformists, dating from the Civil War, but the era of persecution had done much to diminish them. But moderate Dissenters still hoped for comprehension within a reformed Church of England and their whole inclination was to line up with moderate Anglicans. All Dissenters more radical than Presbyterians had little hope of comprehension and so less motivation for alliance with any group within the Establishment.

The changed situation became apparent in 1686. On 10 March the king issued a general pardon and granted freedom to Nonconformists in prison, mostly Quakers. Indeed he seemed deliberately to favour Quakers: the Dutch ambassador reported that soldiers guarding a Catholic chapel in Lime Street during Sunday worship 'disturbed a Presbyterian conventicle, and left undisturbed the Quakers who have obtained his Majesty's permission for that purpose . . .'¹¹ The closeness of the relationship between James and the Quakers is one of the curiosities of the period. Apart from William Penn,¹² whose association with the king is well-known, there was also Robert Barclay,¹³ whose account of his relationship with James is worth quoting:

It was the year 1676 before I ever spoke to him, or saw him that I mind of; and then it was of no design of becoming a courtier, but, being at London and employed of my Friends to obtain a liberty for them out of their imprisonment at Aberdeen . . . and not being able to gain any ground upon the Duke of Lauderdale . . . I was advised by a friend to try the Duke of York, who was said to be the only man whom Lauderdale would bear to meddle in his province or who was like to do it with any success. And . . . I found him inclined to interpose in it, he having then and always since to me professed himself to be for liberty of conscience. And, though not for several years yet at last his interposing proved very helpful in that matter, and, to do him right, I never found reason to doubt his sincerity in the matter of liberty of conscience, which his granting so universally after he came to the Crown hath to me much confirmed. After, his happening to be in Scotland, giving me opportunity of more frequent access, and that begetting an opinion of interest, I acknowledge freely that I was ready to use it to the advantage of my friends and acquaintances - what I esteemed just and reasonable for me to meddle in . . . I must own nor will I decline to avow that I love King James, that I wish him well, that I have been and am sensibly touched with a feeling of his misfortunes, and that I cannot excuse myself from the duty of praying for him that God may bless him and sanctify his afflictions to him. And, if so be His will to take from him an earthly crown, He may prepare his heart and direct his steps so that he may obtain through mercy an heavenly one, which all good Christians judge

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the most preferable.¹⁴

Such a testimony, given after the flight of James, is impressive.

The sympathy of Quakers for James II naturally brought them under suspicion of being secret Catholics. Penn was indeed suspected of being a Jesuit. It was said that he had been trained at the Jesuit college at St Omer and had taken orders at Rome, with a special dispensation to marry. Braithwaite compares the accretion of legend around Penn to the development of the stories in the apocryphal gospels. Penn, he points out, had studied at Saumur and subsequently visited Italy, going as far as Turin. Legend turned Saumur into St Omer and Turin into Rome. Barclay too was reputed to be a Papist and a Jesuit.¹⁵

During the summer relations between the king and the Church of England deteriorated. The Bishop of London refused to suspend John Sharp, Rector of St Giles in the Fields, for public criticisms of Catholic doctrines. Many Dissenters sympathized with the bishop, but such sympathy waned rapidly as Anglican persecution continued. James' agent, Sir John Baber,¹⁶ explored the possibilities of alliance with the Dissenters, and asked Roger Morrice, one of the leading spokesmen for the Presbyterians, 'whether if liberty and impunity would be granted by a law, we would in a body signify our thankful acceptance thereof?'¹⁷ It was not suggested that Catholics would have freedom to worship in public, nor that the Test Acts would be repealed. It was an important consideration that the freedom from punitive laws was to be bestowed by parliament and not by the exercise of the royal prerogative. Morrice's own understanding of the situation was that three courses were open to the Dissenters. They could ally themselves with Anglicans in resisting James, so laying themselves open to the danger of persecution by both; or they could sit still and 'wait what providence will do in process of time for their deliverance'; or they could choose deliberately to take James' side, which alternative Morrice himself favoured.

Although there seemed to be some special favour for Quakers, James also tried to win the support of other Dissenters, notably Baptists. In July 1686 a group of Baptists in Abingdon was pardoned and freed from interference on religious grounds.¹⁸ The king used his prerogative to halt legal proceedings against Dissenters. He met Baptist leaders and promised that he 'would not only give them liberty by his own authority for his life, but have it together with the same for the Papists confirmed by this or another Parliament if their friends would concur.'¹⁹

The veteran Baptist leader, William Kiffin,²⁰ was made an alderman of the City of London and summoned to the palace to hear the good news from the mouth of the king himself. But two of Kiffin's grandsons had been executed for involvement in Monmouth's rebellion, and he had no wish to accept public office under the regime responsible for his loss:

As soon as I heard it, I used all the means I could to be excused, both by some lords near the King, and also by Sir Nicholas Butler and Mr Penn. But it was all in vain; I was told that they knew I had an interest that might serve the King, and although they knew my sufferings were great in cutting off my two grandchildren and losing their estates, yet it should be made up to me both in their estates, and also in what honour or advantage I could reasonably desire for myself.

Kiffin refused to exercise the office of a JP and used only the title of alderman, and after nine months he was discharged.²¹

James' overtures had the effect of splitting the Dissenters. He overestimated the advantages of gaining their support, even if it had been unanimous, because of his belief that with the Roman Catholics they formed a large section of the

population.²² But the response was far from unanimous, being much more favourable from Quakers and Baptists than from Presbyterians or Independents. It was the Baptists who were most divided; support from the other two main Dissenting groups was very limited.

James was greatly displeased by the rejection of his courtship of the Presbyterians and Independents. He was incensed that they would not be 'beholden to him for their liberty, but in opposition to him fall in with the Church that has used them so severely.'²³ Some people believed that the king's anger with the main Dissenting bodies offered a golden opportunity to the Anglican authorities to deal with them even more harshly. But the Anglicans were alarmed at the concessions which were now on offer. They feared that the king would appoint Nonconformist JPs, and they were alarmed too at the opening of a licensing office where for fifty shillings a dispensation could be purchased to stop all legal proceedings against particular Nonconformists. Once again it was the Baptists who made most use of it, while Presbyterians and Independents in the main ignored it.

On 4 April 1687 the king issued his first declaration of indulgence. It was important for him, in order to bolster up his waning power, that the Dissenters should express their thanks for this concession, and this forced them to make a decision about their attitude to him. To express thanks would seem to condone action taken by royal prerogative, a radical departure from Dissenting tradition. Those whose consciences forbade them to express such gratitude might simply refuse to give thanks, or they might respond by pointedly expressing the hope that by constitutional means they would be given an assured and permanent freedom. Comparatively few opted for the first alternative, of refusing to give thanks at all, although they included some of the most prominent leaders: Richard Baxter, Dr Bates²⁴ and John Howe²⁵ among the Presbyterians; Richard Stretton among the Independents; William Kiffin and Joseph Stennett²⁶ among the Baptists. The majority of Dissenting leaders worked for a response which made some reference to the need for parliamentary approval of the king's action, 'that all this may be confirmed unto the present and after ages by law'.

Every effort was made by the authorities to produce the response James sought, and a number of prominent Nonconformists acted as agents in mounting his campaign. One such was Vincent Alsop,²⁷ Presbyterian minister at Tothill Street, Westminster, from 1677 to 1703, who was to be a leading figure in Dissent after 1688. Before toleration he avoided looking for trouble, but he declined to refrain from preaching, and consequently spent a period in prison. He also occupied himself in writing satirical material against leading Anglicans, including William Sherlock and Edward Stillingfleet. In 1681 and 1682 the Tothill Street congregation 'caught the chilling winds of persecution',²⁸ and by the autumn of 1682 had to meet in secret. It was this period of persecution which formed the background to Alsop's negotiations with James II. With the issue of the declaration of indulgence, a crop of addresses of thanks came in very quickly, but the supply soon stopped. William Penn got to work with good results, but James needed support wider than that of the Quakers. The court sent Sir John Baber to campaign among the London Presbyterians. The result was the prize specimen of an address of thanks, Alsop's *The Humble Address of divers of Your Majestie's Loyal Subjects dwelling in or near Your City of Westminster, and the Liberties thereof*.²⁹

Throughout the planning which produced this address, Alsop was 'a leading light, a beam blazing in a world dark with uncertainty and befogged by indecision.'³⁰ He went beyond what was expected of him in canvassing signatures not only from members of Dissenting churches, but also from local inhabitants generally. The address was presented to the king by three gentlemen, three citizens and three

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ministers. It spoke warmly of James as the father of his people, and pledged loyal support. Yet it avoided all comment on the constitutional issue. But Anglicans saw it as a complete capitulation, especially as Alsop in his speech contrasted James' clemency with Anglican severity. For him, the end was religious freedom, the means immaterial.

James was delighted with the meeting. The address was quickly printed in the *London Gazette*, the official newspaper, and James asked Alsop for a copy of his speech, so that that too could be published. Subsequent historians have seen Alsop's actions as self-interested, and in particular as directed towards obtaining a pardon for his son, Benjamin, who had taken part in Monmouth's rebellion, but R. A. Beddard argues that his attitude at this time was wholly consistent with his earlier career. At any rate, if his motivation was to save his son, it was successful, though it was a month before James issued a warrant for his reprieve.

Beddard judges that Alsop deserves credit, not opprobrium, for the part he played at this time. He sees James' declaration as inaugurating the era of toleration: the Toleration Act of 1689 merely ratified a situation which had recently been created. 'It is,' he says, 'one of the odder coincidences of history that a Roman Catholic zealot and a handful of dogmatic dissenters, including the independently minded Presbyterian, Vincent Alsop, are to be reckoned among the founding fathers of religious freedom in England.'³¹

It was important for James that he should not only receive letters of thanks, but that they should be framed in such terms as justified his use of prerogative power. In this aim he remained unsuccessful: though there was a flood of messages of thanks they almost all avoided satisfying him on this point. The case of Vincent Alsop illustrates the fact that they were not, as they were represented as being, spontaneous outbursts of gratitude, but were elicited with varying degrees of pressure; they constituted an early example of a public relations exercise. Nonconformists gave in to the pressure, but retreated to the nearest line of defence: expressions of thanks which carefully denied James what he most eagerly sought.

Yet there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the gratitude. Nonconformists who had lived through the age of the 'great persecution' had little reason to be sparing in their appreciation of relief. Little reason, that is, except that freedom was now offered to them along with parallel measures of relief for Roman Catholics. But many who had recognized the drawback nevertheless welcomed the concession. Ralph Thoresby,³² a representative of those dissenters who saw no objection to attending the parish church as well as their own services, wrote of the Indulgence that 'though we dreaded a snake in the grass, we accepted it with due thankfulness.'³³

While such caution was typical, there were those who cast hesitation aside and were unequivocal in their expression of gratitude. It seems surprising, at first sight, that the warmest in appreciation of James' policy were the Quakers; but the improbability of their response is diminished by the severity of their suffering under the previous legislation. Their spokesman was William Penn. Penn believed that religious freedom and the sweeping away of all barriers to full civil and political rights were pre-eminent necessities. Just as William Booth saw no sense in refusing gifts from somewhat tainted sources when they could be turned to good uses, so Penn displayed no reluctance to accept such great blessings out of perhaps unworthy suspicion of their source and their means of bestowal. And Penn already had good reason for gratitude to James, because of his support in 1681 over the creation of Pennsylvania. When Penn had been in danger of losing his proprietary rights over the colony, James' swift intervention had saved the day for him.

As soon as James came to the throne, the Quaker leaders were working for a general indulgence. Penn wrote a defence of the earlier declaration of indulgence,

that of Charles II. At the same time he believed that any new declaration should be only the preliminary to parliamentary action, and it was perhaps through Penn's influence that James' own declaration contained reference to proposed action of this kind. Penn wrote extensively in support of religious liberty, but did not pay much attention to the constitutional issue. The concern which he and others shared for parliamentary ratification arose not so much from anxiety for constitutional propriety as from a wish to secure some sort of guarantee of permanence for toleration.

Dissenters, even if cautious in their expression of gratitude, could be accused of justifying the royal policy merely by taking advantage of it, and some leading Presbyterians were ready to offer more overt justification. John Howe offered the defence that the penal laws were contrary to God's will and so had themselves no legitimate authority: 'The king permits what God bids', as John Humfrey put it.³⁴ But overwhelmingly Dissenters made clear their disapproval of the king's use of the prerogative, either by making no reference to the means by which they had received relief, even while expressing gratitude for the fact, or by making specific reference to the need for parliamentary concurrence. Indeed, some offered no expression of thanks at all, despite the pressure to do so. Over and above any concern about the constitutional aspect, they sought for greater future security than the declaration could offer, and they had serious qualms about drawing benefit from a measure which also favoured Roman Catholics.

According to Sunderland,³⁵ James' closest adviser and confidant, Dissenters fell into three groups: those who simply wanted freedom of worship, but who wanted to retain the Test Acts in order to exclude Roman Catholics from office; those who would repeal the first Test Act but retain the second so that Catholics could hold public office but not sit in parliament; and those who would repeal both Test Acts, but hope that on other grounds Catholics would be ineligible to sit in the Commons. Since most Dissenters took the first position in the interests of keeping Catholics out of office, they were making as little concession as possible to James' wishes.

The best hope of winning Nonconformist support lay in the continuing bad relations between Nonconformists and Anglicans. Roger Morrice worked hard for an alliance between Dissenters and moderate Anglicans on the basis of a commitment to the cause of William of Orange, but the latter was far from forthcoming in assurances to Dissent, to Morrice's disappointment. At the same time Anglican leaders showed little inclination to make any such alliance, and the proposed allies manifested every sign of mutual suspicion. Halifax's³⁶ *Letter to a Dissenter*, intended to persuade Dissenters that Anglicans rather than Catholics were their friends, therefore had less effect than its author hoped.

Some Dissenters who had been members of parliament were tempted to play safe and contract out of political life, but the veteran Presbyterian leader, John Swynfen, asserted their need to demonstrate their political strength. Although they differed on tactics the great majority were clear on aims: religious liberty; the continued exclusion of Catholics from office; rejection of prerogative action to over-rule parliament.

In October the king asked deputy lieutenants and JPs three questions. If elected to parliament, would they oppose the penal laws and the Test Acts? Would they work for the election of MPs with such aims? Would they support a royal declaration for liberty of conscience? It was clear that he was determined to secure a parliament committed in advance to the repeal of the Test Acts. Replies showed the scale of Dissenting opposition, especially among occasional conformers who were in any case eligible for government positions. Such replies greatly irritated the king. William Penn tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to compromise, by abolishing the penal laws while putting up with the continuance of the Test Acts, but James

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declined to do any such thing.

The boundary between the divided groups of Nonconformists began to be blurred. Even some Quakers were disinclined to go along with Penn, while some on the other extreme, those Nonconformists least inclined to compromise, could not see how concessions to Dissent were conducive to James' ultimate aims. The Presbyterian Dr Bates and the Bishop of St Asaph, William Lloyd, re-opened Anglican-Dissenting negotiations, which proceeded uncomfortably. Penn worked against any such agreement, while the king was reported to be angrily contemplating action against both parties to it.

Meanwhile it became known that William of Orange was prepared to offer religious toleration along with retention of the Test Acts, the deal which the negotiators were hoping for. The court was alarmed at the potential effectiveness of this proposal among Dissenters, and went to some trouble to deny its authenticity. William's Anglican chaplain, William Stanley,³⁷ sought to do him a service by putting it about that the prince would be a devoted upholder of Anglican privileges, which may have gained some support among rigid Anglicans but also frightened off some Dissenters. But hopes of agreement continued to grow, and even Penn was willing to talk with Johnston,³⁸ William's agent, to discover what was to be hoped for in that direction. James was increasingly worried that the whole body of Dissenters would go over to William, and circulated a story that Anglican leaders proposed to remove all restrictions on Catholics while keeping them on Dissenters, which some Anglican spokesmen promptly denied. He also sent for the prominent Presbyterian, John Howe, and talked with him. Howe was criticized for accepting this invitation but claimed that he had William's approval.

Penn was much more interested in getting rid of the penal laws and establishing religious toleration than in getting the tests abolished. He was also concerned at the growing tension between James and William, bringing them closer to war, and saw his own campaign as a contribution to keeping the peace. He hoped that eventually the Test Acts would be abolished, but he believed that in the meantime he could persuade James to concede religious freedom; the Test Acts could be dealt with later. James made a show of going along with this policy but it was not really acceptable to him. In the terminology of the present day, the issue was one of toleration versus full civil rights.

Enquiries throughout the country on attitudes to the forthcoming parliamentary elections revealed the dangers threatening James' policy. Most Presbyterians continued to favour retention of the Test Acts, while on the other hand the Quakers and many among the Congregationalists and Baptists supported the king. But these are broad generalizations. Many even among the Quakers had begun to have doubts and hesitations about Penn's policy. When the latter in June 1688 sought official support and encouragement, he was opposed by George Fox and such support was not forthcoming. Thus division appeared among the Quakers as among other Dissenters.

The king's agents were occupied in approving suitable candidates for parliament. Many of these were Presbyterians or Congregationalists, and many others moderate Anglicans who were regarded by Dissenters as their allies. But it was an ominous sign for the king that many of both groups who had previously sat in parliament had been exclusionists - those who sought to bar James from the throne because of his Catholicism. They were therefore unlikely to favour measures giving full rights to Catholics. The king's agents were giving the stamp of royal approval to a group likely to oppose the repeal of the Test Acts. On the other hand, Dissenters were less united than they had been over exclusion. But while some whose support of the royal policy was decidedly qualified received the backing of his agents, it was noticeable that some Presbyterians who had played a prominent part in the previous

parliament were omitted from such approval. Whatever James' agents did, it was clear that the support they were winning among Dissenters was not enough to serve his purposes and that some were moving away from such support to the middle position which favoured keeping the Test Acts.

James issued a second declaration of indulgence on 27 April 1688. While basically similar to the first, it restated more emphatically the intention of following up the declaration with parliamentary action. Where James made a fatal mistake was in ordering that the declaration should be read in all Anglican churches. Spokesmen for the Church of England approached moderate Dissenters to ask their views on a projected refusal to comply, and received replies which encouraged them in such defiance. In response the Anglicans indicated that they were willing to contemplate moves towards toleration for Dissent. James' policy had therefore done the one thing he needed to avoid at all costs - brought Anglicans and Dissenters together.

James reacted by planning to order Dissenting ministers also to read the declaration, but Roger Morrice succeeded in averting this. Instead there was pressure for a new congratulatory address, and a meeting was held at Howe's house on 23 May 1688 for this purpose, but the proposal for an address was defeated. The birth of an heir to the throne on 10 June transformed the situation, persuading Penn and his allies that an understanding between James and William of Orange was no longer a possibility. Nonconformists and Anglicans alike realized that prospects for a successful invasion were improving. It was becoming clear to Johnston, William's agent, that the Dissenting leaders supporting James had little following. Some prominent leaders, such as John and Richard Hampden, now committed themselves to supporting William.

The acquittal of the seven bishops on 30 June led to popular justification. Three alleged Dissenters, Sir Christopher Vane, Silius Titus and Sir John Trevor, were appointed to the Privy Council in a rather desperate attempt to rally Nonconformist support, but their connection with Dissent was only peripheral. As a further concession, Sunderland proposed that the Test Act of 1673 should remain in force, and Catholics be admitted to public office only by royal dispensation. James agreed, after a delay, but such a proposal was in no way reassuring to Nonconformists. Support for William continued to grow. In September James was told that Dissenters were still resolved to support his policy, but Lacey argues that he 'should have examined the reports more closely, for the agents' judgment had been influenced by the Court's pressure to discover supporters in the increasingly desperate situation.'³⁹ In other words, the agents were determined to find what the king wished them to find. As Morrice commented, 'Whoever gives them such information I know not, and have no reason at all to be of that persuasion.'⁴⁰ By late September James and Sunderland had come to the same conclusion and were once again contemplating new approaches to the Anglicans. As the expectation of a Dutch invasion grew, Nonconformists were alarmed, not knowing what it portended. Perhaps the disaster of Monmouth's rebellion would be repeated; perhaps William had made terms with the Anglican leaders to the disadvantage of Dissent. James summoned before him leading Nonconformist ministers, including some who had been steady opponents to him, to exhort them to give him their support but failed to secure much response from them.

When William landed, with the memory of Monmouth still vivid, people were very cautious of coming out in his support. Dissenters reacted in very varied manner. Some were delighted, while some Quakers continued to support James, and many occupied positions in between. As William's progress continued, more and more gave him their support, in action rather than words.

In conclusion, one may revert to the question raised at the outset concerning

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James' motivation. It is not easy to judge his sincerity. There has been a general Protestant consensus that indulgence for Dissenters was merely a tactical device useful in securing emancipation for Catholics, and that emancipation for Catholics was intended merely as a step on the way to Catholic supremacy - and persecution for Protestants. Maurice Ashley, in his biography of James⁴¹, pictures him as a good but foolish man, genuinely devoted to toleration, quoting Robert Barclay, the Quaker, as testifying to his sincerity.⁴² Ashley blames Macaulay for misrepresenting James, for example in abusing him for subjecting Richard Baxter, when old and ailing, to a cruel trial, although he had nothing to do with that and indeed granted Baxter a full pardon, remitting his fine.⁴³ Halifax's *Letter to a Dissenter*, arguing that toleration was merely a cover for Catholic intrigue, entered into the mainstream of the Whig interpretation of history and was repeated again and again by eighteenth-century authors. 'But it is not true . . . James has always been (like his brother) a believer in liberty of conscience for all.'⁴⁴

Richard E. Boyer, in an article in the *Catholic Historical Review*,⁴⁵ offers a back-handed defence of James as sincere in his belief in toleration but lacking in commonsense. He describes how in December 1686 James sent Penn to The Hague to ascertain William's views on toleration. Penn had devised a scheme by which public offices should be divided equally between Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Dissenters. James' declaration of indulgence of 1687 aroused the worst suspicions of many Nonconformists, but such suspicions were easily aroused. Richard Baxter believed that Roman Catholics recognized no authority except that of the Pope, that Jesuits had caused the Great Fire of London, and that all the allegations of Titus Oates were true.⁴⁶ Boyer notes the expressions of thanks and offers the perhaps questionable comment: 'Behind this impressive revelation of public opinion, there was no political organization at work collecting signatures; no pressure was exerted upon public bodies.'⁴⁷ Penn, he notes, was rumoured in some quarters to be a Jesuit.

Much of Boyer's paper is devoted to a survey of pamphlet literature, beginning with Halifax's *Letter to a Dissenter*. His conclusion is

His [James'] desire for toleration probably surpassed his desire freely to exercise his kingly power, but he attempted to exercise the one through the other, thus posing for the modern evaluator of his reign the problem of how to condemn the one objective, which the twentieth century rejects, without disapproving the other, which it claims to uphold.⁴⁸

James himself denied any intention of imposing Catholicism - but, it is said, he naturally would. Nothing that he did was in itself calculated to achieve Catholic supremacy; it is replied that his reign came to an end before he was able to get so far, but that is to condemn him for what he would have done if he had had the chance - a judgment which would fall harshly on many of us. More to the present point is the attitude of Dissenters. Penn played the central role. He had been a supporter of the Exclusionists, but by 1686 had swung round completely to the king's side. Again motives can be queried. He was anxious about the continuation of his charter for the colony of Pennsylvania, a charter he had obtained from Charles II and for whose continuance he was dependent on the favour of James. Dissenting leaders who refused to go along with the royal policy were influenced by Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a mere matter of months earlier, and saw prospects of similar events in England, although James disapproved of the persecution of the Huguenots and contributed £500 to a fund for their relief.⁴⁹

Michael Watts makes the point that one of the consequences of James' policy was the appearance of a more tolerant attitude towards Dissent on the part of

moderate Anglicans.⁵⁰ In their refusal to read the declaration of indulgence the bishops obtained the prior approval of Dissenting ministers; in their petition they disclaimed 'any want of due tenderness towards the Dissenters'. Archbishop Sancroft instructed his clergy to show every courtesy and friendliness to them. In the Convention Parliament of 1689 the number of Dissenters increased and soon the Toleration Act was passed, on which the religious freedom of Nonconformists was to rest for the future. James had always protested that he intended to serve the cause of toleration: considerable indeed was the service he was fortuitously to render. He did not become in his own reign, and has not become since, a folk-hero of Nonconformity, but at least a case could be made out for offering a better assessment of him than has been customary in Free Church circles. In an age when friendly conversations, at Malines confined to a fringe of Catholic-minded Anglicans and liberally-inclined Roman Catholics, have become relatively commonplace between Catholics and the descendants of the Dissenters, the rapprochement between James and some of the latter can be seen as a harbinger. Self-interest was certainly involved, but then when is it totally absent?

NOTES

1. J. Miller, *Popery and Politics in England 1660-88*, 1975, p.16.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.112f.
3. Irvony Morgan, *The Nonconformity of Richard Baxter*, 1946, p.94, quoting *A Key for Catholics*, ed. J. Alport, 1839, page not given.
4. Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.136f.
5. C. E. Whiting, *Studies in English Puritanism from the Restoration to the Revolution, 1660-1689*, 1931, p.79, with footnote reference to Burnet's *Own Times*, I, p.555.
6. Douglas R. Lacey, *Dissent and Parliamentary Politics in England 1661-1689*, 1969, p.79.
7. Letter dates 19 September 1675. Lacey suggests that some French ambassadors were vague in their use of the terms Presbyterian and Independent, but that Ruvigny, being a Huguenot, was likely to be accurate. (Note, *op.cit.*, p.297, referring to p.79).
8. Miller, *op.cit.*, p.200.
9. Lacey, *op.cit.*, p.175.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p.176.
12. William Penn, 1644-1718, DNB III, pp.311-320.
13. Robert Barclay, 1648-1690, DNB III, pp.167-170.
14. William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, 2nd edn., ed. Henry C. Cadbury, 1961, pp.118f.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.146ff.
16. Sir John Baber, 1625-1704, physician to Charles II, DNB II, pp.307f.
17. Lacey, *op.cit.*, p.177.
18. Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.210f.
19. Lacey, *op.cit.*, p.178.
20. William Kiffin, 1616-1701, DNB XXXI, pp.98-100.
21. Braithwaite, *op.cit.*, pp.136f.
22. Lacey, *op.cit.*, p.179.
23. *Ibid.*, p.181.
24. William Bates, 1625-1699, DNB III, pp.399f.
25. John Howe, 1630-1705, DNB XXVIII, pp.85-88.
26. Joseph Stennett, 1663-1713, DNB LIV, p.150.
27. Vincent Alsop, d.1703, DNB I, pp.345f.
28. R. A. Beddard, 'Vincent Alsop and the Emancipation of Restoration Dissent', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* XXIV, No.2, April 1973, p.168.
29. *Ibid.*, p.176.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, pp.182ff.
32. Ralph Thoresby, 1658-1725, DNB LVI, pp.282-284.
33. Lacey, *op.cit.*, p.181.
34. *Ibid.*, p.184.
35. Robert Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, 1640-1702, DNB LIII, pp.368-377.
36. George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, 1633-1695, DNB L, pp.356-364.
37. William Stanley, Dean of St Asaph, 1647-1731, DNB LIV, pp.84f.
38. James Johnston, 1643?-1737, DNB XXX, pp.64f.
39. *Ibid.*, p.218.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Maurice Ashley, James II, 1977.
42. *Ibid.*, p.185.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, p.220.
45. Richard E. Boyer, 'English Declarations of Indulgence of 1687 and 1688', in *Catholic Historical Review*, October 1964, pp.332-371.
46. Ref. to F. J. Powicke, *Life of Richard Baxter*, pp.260f.
47. Boyer, *op.cit.*, p.351.
48. *Ibid.*, p.370.
49. Ashley, *op.cit.*, p.187.
50. Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters from the Reformation to the French Revolution*, 1978, pp.257-9.

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