

Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558-1689

Review Number:

192

Publish date:

Monday, 30 April, 2001

Author:

John Coffey

ISBN:

582304644X

Date of Publication:

2000

Pages:

224pp.

Publisher:

Longman

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Keith Lindley

Two anti-Trinitarians shared the distinction in 1612 of being the last persons to be burned for heresy in England. The execution of Oliver Plunkett in 1681 was the last martyrdom of a Catholic on English soil. A Scottish student hanged for blasphemy in 1697 was the last person in the British Isles to be executed for his religious views. The careful noting of these milestones by John Coffey inevitably imparts a Whiggish tinge to his admirable and stimulating study of religious persecution and toleration in England from the accession of Elizabeth I to the passage of the Toleration Act of 1689. Indeed in terms of interest in the subject, if not necessarily in analysis and understanding, our debt to the Whig history of toleration has proved to be an enduring one. Dr Coffey's book, the first overview of the subject to be published in over fifty years, derives from his earlier study of a staunch defender of religious persecution, Samuel Rutherford (a Scottish Covenanter), and it certainly has more to say about persecution than toleration. The first three chapters are historiographical, conceptual and analytical in approach; the next four traced the themes in a chronological framework; and the final chapter, bucking the trend of most recent research, celebrates 1689 and 'the rise of toleration'.

The weaknesses of the Whig analysis are well rehearsed and familiar: a teleological, and sometimes anachronistic, account of the emergence from a dark and hostile pre-Protestant past of modern liberal democracy and a corresponding rise of religious toleration. A crucial watershed in this progressive process, it was argued, was the mid-seventeenth century 'Puritan Revolution' which permanently transformed England by laying the basis for a liberal, multi-faith society. This is history enthused with national pride; the peculiar nature of its Protestant history was seen as enabling England not only to steal a lead over the rest of Europe, but also to export its liberal and tolerationist principles to the New World. The story is told by those historical giants, S. R. Gardiner, William Haller, A. S. P. Woodhouse and W. K. Jordan, who have had a formative influence on a whole generation of historians. However, in the last thirty years or so 'revisionist' historians (broadly defined) exploring the same territory have launched a frontal assault on this Whig

analysis. The past, it is argued, should be understood in its own terms when peoples' ideas, values and perspectives could be radically different from our own. For much of the early modern period in England it was religious *intolerance* rather than tolerance that was most noticeable, as instanced by the political impact of anti-popery and the bitter divisions among Protestants. The case put for religious toleration during the Puritan Revolution should not be exaggerated. Cromwell and others traditionally portrayed as pro-tolerationist in the 1640s and 1650s had in fact much more modest aims; they were seeking to secure liberty for godly Protestants and toleration was to be withheld from the ungodly and followers of false religions. They were certainly not striving to create a liberal society in which divergent religious opinions were openly tolerated. After the Restoration, a reinvigorated intolerance was the order of the day as firstly Dissenters and later Catholics experienced severe persecution. Those still prepared to argue the case for toleration did so in qualified terms; John Locke, a much cited example, explicitly excluded Catholics and atheists from toleration. When legal toleration was finally achieved in the 1689 act it was never the intention to establish religious equality even when restricted to Protestants. The great Whig milestone was in fact a fortuitous compromise and a fudge rather than the final triumph of a tolerationist ideal. England is also to be stripped of its title to European leadership; at the start of the seventeenth century, Protestant England, in common with most other Protestant countries, was still intent on enforcing religious uniformity, thus lagging behind the Catholics lands of Poland and France where a remarkable degree of toleration had been established. Furthermore, the generally accepted narrative of a chronological progression from a backward persecuting past to a modern tolerationist future has been shown to ignore earlier tolerationist efforts and other continuities, leaving those who seek to trace the rise of a tolerationist ideal with the problem of where to place the Taliban and other religious fundamentalists in our own world.

Dr Coffey offers a persuasive post-revisionist approach to the central concerns of his book. Recognising in one important respect the strength of the revisionist argument, he places an emphasis on the power of intolerance in early modern England and devotes more space to discussing and explaining persecution than tolerance. At the very outset, he bravely nails his colours to the mast declaring that it is his intention to argue that there is considerable truth in the Whiggish claim that seventeenth century England witnessed a dramatic transformation from religious persecution and enforced uniformity to toleration and religious pluralism. He finds himself in broad agreement with Haller and Woodhouse in arguing that the 1640s were the key decade and that the initial impetus behind tolerationist ideas came from radical puritanism. The 'Puritan Revolution' is alive and well. Tolerationists emerged during those years to provide a *principled* opposition to religious persecution, even of heretics and schismatics, and to make the case for the peaceful co-existence within one society of a plurality of churches and religions. In the longer term, the stubborn survival of Dissenting churches (and of Papists) punctured the monopoly of the national church and an earlier consensus in favour of using coercion to support religious uniformity crumbled. The 1689 toleration act was indeed an important landmark in the struggle to achieve religious toleration.

The book begins with a definition of the broad concept of toleration itself. 'Those who tolerate', Coffey argues, 'disapprove of an opinion, act, or lifestyle, and yet choose to exercise restraint towards it' (p. 10). When applying such a definition in the early modern period it soon becomes clear that toleration could take many different forms and exist at different levels, as Bob Scribner has shown and as Coffey himself is only too aware. The two forms that lie at the heart of this study are civil and ecclesiastical toleration that are to be clearly distinguished. The policy of the state towards religious dissent, and especially the role of the civil magistrate, provides the focus for the debate about civil toleration and the preoccupation of pamphlets and other primary sources with this subject helps to ensure its heavy emphasis by Coffey. At one end of the scale, civil tolerance might grant Dissenters relief from persecution but deny them full equality as citizens (as under the 1689 act) while, at the other, it might bestow freedom of worship and full rights as citizens or even separate church and state entirely. The degree of diversity tolerated within a particular church (whether a radical sect or the Anglican establishment) is the focus of ecclesiastical toleration. Coffey correctly stresses this distinction and is critical of those historians who have blurred the two. Thus sectarian Protestants could make a heart-felt plea for civil tolerance while countenancing ecclesiastical intolerance within their own churches. A third form of toleration distinguished by Coffey, following Scribner and others, is toleration in its social context; the practical tolerance of religious dissidents by neighbours, relatives or friends. This

could of course swiftly turn sour when there were anti-popish panics or upsurges of political protest against Dissent. Yet the chief interests of the book, largely due to the kinds of source materials Coffey restricts himself to, are decidedly more theological, philosophical and political than social.

To fully understand the theory behind Protestant toleration we must first explain how its opposite, persecution, was justified. Coffey gives us a familiar but clearly expressed account of the Protestant theory of persecution from the model established by Old Testament Israel, the accounts of the first centuries of the Christian church, St Augustine's justification of the use of coercion by the magistrate, the persecution of heresy down the centuries and the sanctioning and encouraging of persecution by the great Protestant reformers, with some initial reluctance on Luther's part. Protestantism's reputation as a liberating and modernising creed has to face the fact that its founding fathers believed in persecuting, even to death, anti-Trinitarians, Anabaptists and Jews and found some of each other's religious beliefs absolutely intolerable. Toleration was to be condemned for encouraging erroneous, soul-destroying beliefs, leading to schism and inviting the wrath of an angry God. The many evils flowing from toleration and religious pluralism could all be demonstrated from recent history; Europe's wars of religion, Popish plots and rebellions and the association of religious dissent with sedition. Even the persecuted believed in persecution as both Catholics and Dissenters demonstrated when they were in charge. However, it is remarkable that a study of persecution and toleration in the early modern period fails to mention the Anabaptist take-over of Münster in 1534-5, and its legacy, and the contribution made by the social dimension generally to a climate of persecution does not receive the full attention that it merits. Toleration was widely condemned as subversive of society and morality. That great advocate of persecution, Thomas Edwards, spent a good part of *Gangraena* spelling out the dire consequences of toleration; if ever conceded men would never again enjoy peace in their families or 'ever after have command of wives, children and servants' and conventional morality would also be undermined. These were powerful arguments in a patriarchal society. At the 1648 Whitehall debates, where the role of the magistrate in religious matters was at issue, the Independent divine, Philip Nye, recalled trying to convince a convicted bigamist of the error of his ways only to be met with the man's response that he was being persecuted for his conscience.

Coffey is right to insist on the importance of the debates of the 1640s in establishing a Protestant case for toleration. Prior to then, there was very little public debate in England about the subject, the General Baptist Leonard Busher being a notable exception. It was Baptists and other radical puritans who were to be at the forefront of the call for toleration in the 1640s when for the first time (and this deserves emphasis) it could be freely and openly debated. Roger Williams is traditionally seen as opening the debate in 1644 when his call for toleration went as far as embracing heretics, blasphemers, Catholics, Muslims and pagans. Coffey correctly reminds us of the importance of the theological arguments for toleration which some modern scholars, usually those from a history of ideas tradition, tend to bypass in favour of philosophical arguments. The New Testament teachings of Jesus, and especially the calls to love your neighbour and to do unto others as you would be done by, and the replacing of the old dispensation by the new with the coming of Messiah, provided the biblical and theological foundation for toleration. The parable of the wheat and the tares (the believers and non-believers) was a key text; both should be allowed to grow peacefully together until judgement day for any attempt to uproot the tares risk pulling up wheat as well. The need was to restore primitive Christianity and to experience the freedom that had been lost in the fourth century when worldly concerns came to preoccupy the church. Importance was also attached to drawing a clear distinction between the Old and the New Testaments; the duty incumbent on the magistrate under the old dispensation to punish idolatry and enforce the Ten Commandments (and the First Table in particular) was now gone with the coming of Jesus and Israel could no longer provide a model for justifying magisterial coercion in religious matters. Secular arguments supporting coercion were now turned on their head; rather than war, chaos and famine, toleration would bring political stability in place of the wars of religion caused by intolerance and tolerating societies were indeed viable and peaceful, and economically prosperous, as the often cited example of the Netherlands proved. For instance, the Independent divine Hugh Peter at the Whitehall debates quoted the example of the Netherlands as both a tolerant and a flourishing society.

However, the goals envisaged by some of those endorsing toleration could be very restrictive and some

beliefs were plainly intolerable. Support for toleration could be based on a negative position; freedom of conscience was necessary now in order that eventually truth might manifest itself. Toleration thus became an expedient rather than a positive statement of belief in the virtues of religious diversity. Before Roger Williams is confirmed in his place in the liberal pantheon it needs to be recognised that the welfare and fortunes of the godly elect, the 'wheat' or true believers in the parable of the tares, were his primary concern. The 'tares' or non-believers had a terrible fate awaiting them for 'when the world is ripe in sin, in the sins of Antichristianism ... then those holy and mighty officers and executioners, the angels, with their sharp and cutting sickles of eternal vengeance, shall down with them, and bundle them up for the everlasting burnings'. There might be toleration in this world but certainly not in the next and ultimately Williams's God is a wrathful deity. Yet this important aspect of Williams, a prime example of a very different kind of mentality from that current in most modern debate about toleration, is missing from the discussion in Colley's book. It suggests a history of ideas bias in which historical context is insufficiently appreciated.

Atheism, blasphemy, idolatry and adultery were all to be condemned and excluded from toleration, even by most tolerationists, because they were regarded as contrary to natural reason and public order. Catholics posed a particularly difficult problem because they could be excluded from toleration both as idolaters and as disloyal citizens owing allegiance to a hostile foreign prince. Williams was remarkable in the toleration he was prepared to concede to Catholics who should be 'suffered to breathe and walk upon the decks, in the air of civil liberty and conversation in the ship of commonwealth' yet this was to be 'upon good assurance given of civil obedience to the civil state'. Cromwell, Milton and Locke were among those not prepared to grant Catholics toleration upon one or both of the grounds for exclusion. Coffey also cites Sir Henry Vane, junior, as arguing 'at length' that freedom should be extended to Catholics (p. 140) in his anonymous 1652 work *Zeal Examined*. However, while denying the magistrate the power to restrain or punish idolaters, Vane makes it clear that 'by excusing idolaters, I do not intend a necessary toleration of Papists, much less of priests and Jesuits, for though they may not come within the magistrate's cognizance by their worshipping of images or the host in the sacrament, yet they may as they maintain the jurisdiction of a foreign power over their consciences, if that foreign power [i.e. the Pope] do maintain principles that are inconsistent with all magistrates and people that are not of his religion'. Vane is prepared to concede that 'in regard there is not many of them in this nation, and those that are have already suffered much', that there might be 'more tenderness' used when dealing with lay Catholics but, establishing no rules in this case, he leaves it 'to the prudence of the magistrate'. Apparently in the debate over whether to extend toleration to Catholics Vane was closer in opinion to his friend Milton than Coffey and other writers have suggested.

Disappointingly, given the centrality of religious toleration to the movement, the Levellers and their distinctive contributions to the debate are given a relatively low profile in this book. It is to the Levellers that we are indebted for the notion of constructing a constitution that gave the state no religious role, even if circumstances and events later obliged them to accept modifications to that basic principle. They were also great popularisers of the idea of religious toleration and figures like William Walwyn and Richard Overton (as Coffey acknowledges) had radical and highly persuasive contributions to make. In this context, Coffey's references to the Levellers and Diggers as though they were religious sects (pp. 211, 144) are distinctly odd.

Coffey describes the ferocity of the persecution of Protestant by Protestant after the Restoration as unparalleled in seventeenth century Europe. Backed up by parliamentary legislation, there were clerical ejections on a large scale, prisons crammed full of religious dissidents, religious tests placed on the holding of public office and a theoretically restored Anglican monopoly of political and social life. On a pragmatic level, the tolerationist lessons of the 1640s and 1650s had sunk very shallow roots. Yet, as at other stages in the religious history of England, there was often a gap between the letter of the law and its implementation and there was an influential Anglican minority who sought to avoid schism and were prepared to concede a degree of ecclesiastical toleration. There was much later a championing of toleration from some unexpected quarters including James II whom Coffey is prepared to speculate may have been sincere. William III, the Protestant hero of Orange mythology, we are reminded tried to extend legal toleration of religious worship to Catholics. Although excluded from benefit of the 1689 toleration act, Catholics were able to benefit from the simple fact that, in practical terms, church attendance could no longer be made compulsory and they

were able to establish discreet places of worship. In the early eighteenth century, practical toleration of most religious dissident was well advanced even if principled tolerationists were still a very small minority.

To end on a justifiably positive note, this will prove to be a most useful text for undergraduate teaching with its admirable clarity, its extensive coverage of primary and secondary material and its construction of extremely useful tables. The placing of the debate in a wider European and New World perspective is also very valuable. Coffey is to be congratulated for re-igniting discussion of toleration at a time when examples of intolerance in our own world are only too self-evident.

Other reviews:

H-Net

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/192>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1184>

[2] <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.php?id=5025>