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Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700

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There is a traditional, whiggish, account of toleration in early-modern England that sees it as the polar opposite of persecution, and charts its gradual triumph over its evil antithesis. Over time, this story goes, enlightened notions of religious pluralism, personal freedom, and the humane treatment of other souls gained wider public acceptance, so that they first challenged the coercive imposition of a single faith?most notably in the years of the mid-seventeenth century?and then finally overthrew it with the passage of the Toleration Act 1689. In this vision, spiritual emancipation matched Parliamentary sovereignty as the crowning glories of England?s escape from tyranny. Its achievement under the Tudors and Stuarts distanced the country from continental norms, and laid the foundations for her later championing of liberty around the world.

In this magisterial study of attitudes to persecution in England between 1500 and 1700, Alex Walsham challenges this whole tradition. Drawing on her own earlier researches (as well as incorporating the findings of a very wide range of other scholars who have studied real community relations as well as the history of thought?this book?s bibliography is a comprehensive catalogue of work in the field), she argues that the relationship between tolerance and intolerance was far more complex, perhaps even interdependent, than

polarity would imply. Few who opposed coercion believed in religious freedom per se; those who did advocate greater liberty did not make any steady progress; and arguments for oppression and indulgence frequently fed off each other. So, for example, Walsham demonstrates how deep-rooted and popular the arguments for coercion remained. Throughout the early-modern age, theorists, governments, and neighbours all assumed that they had a duty to save heretical souls, or at least to rescue everyone else from the providential smiting that would result if the unorthodox were allowed to live unmolested. Similarly, religious forbearance rarely involved straight rejection of this logic. People failed to persecute, not out of concern for human liberty, but for a variety of reasons springing from a far less tolerant mindset. So, for example, they recognized the difficulty of searching the inner workings of conscience (why punishment tended to be reserved for outward, and especially politically-dangerous action, rather than mere belief). They also knew oppression could be counter productive (suffering could bestow the appearance of virtuous martyrdom and gain supporters for the heretical cause). They objected to cruelty because they themselves were being persecuted (episcopalians under the puritan lash in the 1650s were not the first to complain that advocates of restraint had changed their tune when they gained the upper hand). They realized that the heterodox could be more easily identified if toleration meant they did not have to hide (a logic which may have lain behind 1689). And they weighed the demands of spiritual purity against the sometimes opposed considerations of social order, neighbourliness, and kinship (a calculation explaining the persistent reluctance of local magistrates and populations to proceed against those at the heart of settled communities). In other paradoxes, Walsham shows that tolerance of individuals may have ramped up bigoted language (others had to be delineated and denounced more vigorously in rhetoric when they were not attacked directly), or that attempts to relax strictures by authorities could spark intolerance among people who were concerned that rulers were failing in their roles as godly magistrates (note, for example, the attacks on catholics at moments in Charles II or James II's reigns). In all these ways, tolerance was not the triumphant enemy of intolerance; it shared its assumptions and frequently channeled its displaced energies.

Very much of this is salutary. Looking at broad trends in elite thought, it is easy to write a whiggish history of toleration, and Walsham's is an impressive warning against this. It corrects the tendency to concentrate on supposed heroes of liberalism, such as John Locke or John Milton, with a wealth of social history, and it also makes useful and extensive international comparisons to suggest England may not have been diverging so far from European patterns of behaviour. Yet this reviewer wonders if babies have not gone missing in the bathwater. As the author from time to time admits, there were trends towards greater tolerance over the period: fewer and fewer people were executed for heresy; arguments for indulgence became more common; and official persecution became more sporadic. These shifts need explaining. Of course, it is important to point out that any explanation must be subtle, and that the processes involved may be counter-intuitive. The approach adopted here, however, may make it harder to formulate a positive alternative to whiggery. Very clear chapters cover every aspect of the field (official and popular intolerance; responses by the persecuted; community forbearance; and conceptualizations of religious pluralism), but most examine attitudes and practices that they tend to assume spread across the whole period, and draw their examples promiscuously from different decades. This muddies any sense of change over time, and permits only sporadic (though often insightful) ideas about why it might have occurred.

This is a shame because Walsham may actually have assembled the material for a new formulation. Embracing her ambiguities and paradoxes (and making systematic a case which she hints at but does not really lay out explicitly) we might argue that toleration made headway precisely because there was still such widespread commitment to promoting a single, correct version of Christianity. Far from accepting individuals' liberty to seek God in their own ways, the English may have left them unmolested because steadily-mounting evidence in the centuries after a unity-shattering reformation proved coercion aided non-conformity. It encouraged heretics by turning them into martyrs, or made them harder to identify and stigmatize because they hid from its effects, or created instruments of oppression which could be turned against true faith when it lost political control. A toleration born from the theoretical legitimacy, but practical disadvantages, of persecution would suit Walsham's world view well. A conclusion ramming home this idea would have been fine icing on a fine cake.

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