

ESTABLISHMENTS AND TOLERATION

The development of religious toleration in England was an ultimate and wholly unintended consequence of the Reformation.

(Henriques 1961: 1)

In the late nineteenth century one finds examples of countries which had maintained relatively homogeneous Protestant cultures espousing the principle of religious liberty as part of a wider package of constitutional reforms. Examples of this can be found in the case of the Scandinavian Lutheran churches which will be discussed at the end of this chapter. But prior to the spread of modern democratic government, established churches were naturally loath to relinquish their positions, and it was only their failure to prevent significant dissent which led them to moderate their claims. In challenging the position of established churches, enduring dissenting movements also presented their governments with problems in maintaining punitive sanctions against nonconformity. Although one can occasionally find examples of perceptive leaders of establishments promoting religious toleration, it is generally the case that the relaxation of the legal superiority of the establishment resulted from the government's need to acquire wide popular support (and hence to cultivate nonconformists) rather than from the established church's willing abandonment of its privileges. In this sense, the rise of dissent both precedes and causes the corresponding changes in the claims of the religious establishment. This process will be illustrated with material drawn from English Protestantism.

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PROTESTANTISM IN ENGLAND

Henriques (1961) suggests that the growth of toleration in England can be described in three phases. In the first, from Henry VIII's break with Rome to the Civil War, the practical conditions for toleration were created, although few people appreciated the enormity of the changes that had taken place or espoused the obvious ideological legitimisation for those changes. The rejection of Rome had changed the English Church from a branch of Catholicism into a national church headed by the monarch and thus, as in other European countries, made it possible for the political interests of the monarch to override the religious interests of the Church, which suffered a considerable loss of economic and political power through the confiscation of its property. This did not, of course, immediately mean greater tolerance or diversity. It simply made subsequent changes in priorities more likely. As Henriques notes (1961: 2), none of the competing parties – Church, Protestant dissent, or Catholic remnant – was willing to accept diversity until attempts to enforce uniformity had failed. The Scots Presbyterians and their English supporters failed, during the Commonwealth, to remake the English Church in their own image and the Restoration church leaders failed in their counter-attempt to eliminate Protestant dissent. These failures were followed by a period – from the Toleration Act of 1688 to the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act in the early nineteenth century – in which dissenters were permitted to worship but still suffered civil and political restrictions: 'a strict Nonconformist, one who would not take the Anglican sacrament, could neither hold office under the crown nor in the Municipalities, and was excluded from the Universities' (Bebb 1980: 71). But with one or two reverses (such as the hostility to dissenters which followed the French Revolution and the European wars), this period saw the slow and steady removal of restrictions on nonconformists. By the middle of the nineteenth century, religious affiliation had ceased to be of any great significance for civil and political rights, and the periodic outbreaks of church and chapel conflict – despite the energy which the protagonists expended – concerned relatively minor matters of mostly symbolic advantage.

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From the Reformation to the Civil War

For our purposes, the story of English Protestantism can begin with the Anglicanism which was pioneered by Henry VIII, when he broke with Rome, and consolidated by Elizabeth. In this form, the structure of the Church remained hierarchical and episcopal while much of the doctrine became Protestant. The Church became a state church but it did not develop the strong element of 'princeliness' which characterized European Lutheran Churches (possibly because the Anglican Church, although stripped of much of its wealth, was considerably less financially dependent on the state than did its Lutheran counterparts). To what extent Protestant Christianity really informed the lives of the common people is not clear. The writings of clerical critics certainly testify to widespread ignorance and indifference (Thomas 1971: 189-99).¹ Cases brought before ecclesiastical courts show that many of even those who did attend church services were a little short of appropriate reverence: 'Members of the congregation jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep and even let off guns' (Thomas 1971: 191). There certainly seems good reason to question Laslett's view that 'all of our ancestors were literal Christian believers all of the time' when, as Collinson (1982: 198) points out, almost every page of *The World We Have Lost* contains evidence to undermine it. Yet we need to be cautious of the claims of contemporary clerics, many of whom had a very narrow definition of religion and a vested interest in painting as bleak a picture as possible. There were many parts of the country in which religious offices were rare and religious knowledge still rarer. It was also the case that a considerable culture of magical and superstitious practices continued and that many villagers resisted the attempts of the more zealous to control their lewd and licentious amusements. Detailed evaluation of the evidence of popular religion in Elizabethan England would be out of place in this study but the material presented by Collinson (1982, 1983) suggests that the Church had considerable popular compliance, if not active support, in those areas where it provided offices, and that 'the godly people' were growing in number even among the lower ranks of village and town life.²

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The first significant element of dissent came from members of the Church who felt that Henry's reforms had not been pushed far enough. Usually designated Puritans, these Churchmen were not themselves united behind any clear alternative notion of what the Church should look like. As Collinson correctly points out, the position of the Puritans was for a long time an ambiguous one within the Elizabethan Church (1983: 6–16). Although the Puritan ministers with parishes and settled charges tried at first to see their mission as a mission to the whole people of their parish, the logic of their stress on religious experience, tests, and exercises meant that their followers tended to form a gathered remnant. In some areas, Puritan ministers maintained fraternal links with each other in a vaguely presbyterian manner while working in their parishes and relating to their followers in a congregational or 'independent' fashion. A detail which is relevant here, although more germane to the early Hanoverian period, is that, while deviation was often tolerated from individual ministers and congregations, dissenting organizations were not. Hence early dissent had only the most rudimentary and amorphous structure beyond each incidence of deviation, and one must therefore be cautious of too readily accepting as accurate descriptions of early dissenters, labels later used to identify separate denominations.

It is important to the thesis of this book to note that the English Puritans, like the Scottish Covenanters, were not advocates of toleration. As Skeats and Miall put it: 'they held to a purer doctrine than their opponents, but none the less, did they require it to be enforced by "the authority of the civil magistrate"' (Skeats and Miall 1891: 16). So that there will be no mistake about this, I will quote at length the views of Thomas Cartwright, one of the leading Elizabethan Calvinists, on the correct attitude towards atheists, the disobedient, and other unregenerate people:

therefore the church having nothing to do with such, the magistrate ought to see that they join to hear the sermons in the place where they are made, whether it be in those parishes where there is a church, and so preaching, or where else he shall think best, and cause them to be examined how they profit. and if they profit not. to punish them: and. as their contempt groweth, so to increase the punishment, until such times as they declare manifest tokens of unrepentantness; and

then, as rotten members that do not only no good or service in the body, but also corrupt and infect others, cut them off; and, if they do profit in hearing, then to be joined unto that church which is the next place of their dwelling.

(Quoted in Little 1970: 99)

Note the magnificent reach which Cartwright wishes for the civil magistrate. It is not enough for the state to enforce attendance. He wants the magistrate to ensure that the unregenerate are listening and learning. Little makes an interesting distinction between the defensive intolerance of Anglicans such as Whitgift, Bancroft, and Laud who wished to maintain the existing order, and the offensive intolerance of the Elizabethan Puritans who wanted to impose their new order. In this brave new world 'idolaters, blasphemers, contemnners of true religion and of the service of God' would be executed.

The Puritans were the spiritual fathers of the Presbyterians and the Independents, although both terms are difficult to apply consistently in this period. While those who were called Presbyterians were more fond than were the Independents of some sort of collective and centralized authority over individual congregations, there was considerable shifting of views, and very few of the English Presbyterians were wholeheartedly committed to the Scottish model. Nevertheless, in the first three decades of the seventeenth century, many of those divines who were later claimed as the founders of Independency were really non-separating congregationalists who combined what was essentially a congregational practice with a willingness to remain within the Church and to condemn those who advocated separation. In addition, even some of the divines who could sensibly be seen as Independents were convinced of the virtue of the Scottish notion of the civil magistrate enforcing religious orthodoxy.

Of the more popular and influential elements of the first wave of English dissent, only some of the Baptists could realistically be described as conscious advocates of religious toleration: a position which followed rather obviously from their views on baptism and membership of the Church.³ If only individuals who had come to some personal apprehension of the truth of Christian doctrine, and who had been baptized in such a knowledge were 'real' Christians, the idea of state enforced orthodoxy was ridiculous.

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The element of personal choice in Baptist thinking made it very difficult for its advocates to continue to believe in state churches, Lutheran or Calvinist.⁴ Collinson's argument, which seems unobjectionable, is that the religious beliefs of the English reformers led inevitably towards something like Independency (Collinson 1983: 5–10). In the absence of the sort of social order which Calvin tried to create in Geneva, the religious impulses of the godly were bound to become turned inwards: from the parish to the family hearth: from society to the saved individual.

As was often the case, what turned these Anglican 'congregationalists' into outright separatists was not simply the working out of the logic of their own beliefs but also the actions of their opponents. In this case, Archbishop Laud's attempts to reintroduce elements of pre-Reformation liturgical worship to the Church of England, and his unwillingness to tolerate the presence of proto-dissenters, led some to reason that it was more convenient (and consistent) to leave the Church than to remain within it.

AN ASIDE ON SERIAL PLURALISM

Although it complicates the issue slightly, it is worth adding a brief but interesting note. The problem of knowing just how religious the people of pre-Civil War England were has already been introduced. For many historians the problem is one of assessing the extent of 'the Reformation'. We know what sort of changes occurred in the official ideology, practice, and structure of the Church but we clearly cannot simply assume that popular religion changed in step with official religion. Hill offers an important caution:

at the time men must have thought of themselves simply as members of the English Church, which was undergoing some modifications. It is only in retrospect that reform becomes 'the Reformation'. The majority of clergymen retained their livings throughout these three decades, and we should be wrong to think of them as merely time-serving. Most of the laity must altogether have missed what seems to us the point.

(Hill 1960: 86)

It is certainly true that 'the Reformation' is an observer's construct. It is likely, as Hill suggests, that a good part of the laity and the

lower ranks of the clergy (as distinct from the leading protagonists) had little sense that they were part of a series of related changes which would later be seen as radically separating what came after from what had gone before. None the less, the observer's construct has not been cut from whole cloth and changes in official ideology must have had some impact on ordinary people. After all, in Norwich and Chester in the 1630s, at least three and possibly four different catechisms were used in succession (Reay 1985a: 96). Anyone who was more than minimally involved in the life of the Church must have felt that the world, even if it was not yet turned upside down, was shaking a bit.

An important argument developed below the delegitimizing and secularizing effects of pluralism. Until now, and hereafter, it has been and will be 'contemporary' pluralism – the simultaneous existence of competing alternatives – which is the main focus. But Reay's example of changing catechisms suggests another sort of pluralism which, following the practice of describing the present American pattern of marriage, divorce, and re-marriage as serial monogamy, we might call serial pluralism. In those parishes which were affected by the officially sponsored changes, the religious career of any active church member would have had similarities with that of someone in the twentieth century who moved from the Church to Methodism to a pentecostal church and back to Methodism. But there is an important difference. People who choose to move from one organization to another, although they are disillusioned with each one that they leave and may eventually give up searching for a church that suits them, presumably take up each new commitment with enthusiasm. People who stay in the same organization and have it change around them might be expected to have far less enthusiasm for each new development. One might expect, and it would be an interesting topic for research, that such alternation had delegitimizing effects. I do not intend to pursue the notion of serial pluralism beyond pointing out that the gross destabilizing changes in the religious life of the nation, which can be seen in factionalism, schism, and expulsion, had their harmonic resonances in internal upheavals. It is a truism to say that all things change but there are degrees of instability. The involvement of many people in the life of the Anglican Church was so slight that, as Hill reminds us, they may have been unaware of the strangeness of the times in which they lived. But for

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active Anglicans, the changes must have been disturbing. They were nothing as compared to the upheavals of the Civil War.

The Civil War and its aftermath

The outbreak of the Civil War not only called into question the nature of the state; it also challenged the nature of the church.⁵ In order to produce some agreed and accepted scheme for the order of religion, in 1643 the Long Parliament summoned the Westminster Assembly of thirty lay assessors and 121 divines of varying views. However, this gathering of the godly was always unlikely to produce a scheme acceptable to the whole of England and Scotland. In the first place, the Baptists were excluded from its deliberations. In the second, the more Presbyterian elements refused to accommodate those who preferred a more independent or congregational organization (Bradley 1982). Furthermore, a major element of political strategy entered into these deliberations, with the Scottish model being promoted by some politicians anxious to win Scottish support for the Parliamentary Army in the war. In one significant respect, the proposals of the Assembly were even less tolerant of religious diversity than the previous Anglicanism. The Prayer Book and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church had been enforced only on the clergy. The Westminster divines wished to impose the Scottish Solemn League and Covenant on the whole population.

The majority of the English public (meaning by that, those people whose views counted) did not accept Scottish Presbyterianism. Cromwell and other leading parliamentarians grew tired of the Presbyterians' refusal to produce a broadly acceptable and comprehensive scheme and the Assembly was brought to an end. Thus the already existing fragmentation of the more reformed Protestants into three competing factions effectively ruined the last opportunity for a consistent and popular reformation of the national Church of England. To return to the major theme of these chapters, the fissiparousness of dissent produced further fragmentation.

The period of the Commonwealth was one of unprecedented religious freedom. Episcopallians were permitted to continue in their parishes and, even after he had defeated them at the battle of Dunbar, Cromwell was prepared to allow the Scots Presbyterians

to maintain their rhetorical support for the League and Covenant. An Order of the Council of state of 1653 allowed 'That none be compelled to conform to the public religion by penalties or otherwise: but that endeavours be used to win them with sound doctrine, and the example of a good conversation' (in Skeats and Miall 1891: 44). However, this was not religious *laissez-faire*. Popery and prelacy were forbidden, as was anything likely to lead to licentiousness, although how one was to recognize such a thing was not explained!

Given that they were later hailed as the fathers of toleration, it is ironic that the persecution of this period was largely the work of Presbyterians and Independents, who were responsible for the incarceration of many of the 3,000 Quakers imprisoned during the Protectorate. It required Cromwell's personal intervention on behalf of the Friends to secure the release from prison of George Fox and a relaxation of the harassment of Quakers, but they were still denied permission to meet in public for worship.

The restoration of the Stuarts brought mixed consequences for dissenters. As usual, the Presbyterians were to be found arguing against their own interests. At the Savoy Conference of Episcopalians and Presbyterians, supposedly called to discuss a comprehensive scheme for a state church which both sides could accept (but suspected of being designed to keep the Puritans out), they repeated their demand for the reform of the establishment and only limited toleration for Independents and Baptists. In the interests of political stability, Charles II preferred to return to an Episcopal Anglicanism, and through the 1660s a series of Acts against dissenters was passed.⁶ The Corporation Act made it impossible for them to hold municipal office, the Act of Uniformity silenced their ministers, the Conventicle Act outlawed meetings of more than five people in addition to the members of one family, and the Five Mile Act kept dissenting ministers that distance from any corporate borough. Finally, the 1673 Test Act made all civil, naval, and military employment dependent on having taken the sacraments in a parish church (Bebb 1980: 69-71).

Although these measures were designed as a major assault on the freedoms of dissenters, the actual situation in many areas was slightly more liberal. In the first place, it was always possible for dissenters to engage in occasional conformity; they could take the

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sacrament once in a parish church but could continue to worship with a dissenting group. In the second, Charles II had some notion

freeing himself from the Anglican Tory party by building an alliance of Catholics, Protestant dissenters, and ex-Cromwellians. He was thus less than enthusiastic in his support for punitive measures against dissenters and had often to be encouraged by his ministers. As a result relaxation and restriction see-sawed. Early 1662 was restriction; December 1662 was indulgence. The three years after 1664 saw restrictions; 1667 to 1669 saw relaxation. The passing of the second Conventicle Act in 1670 heralded one of the worst years for dissenters, but in 1672 a Declaration of Indulgence granted freedom of public worship to nonconformists (Bebb 1980: 39-41).

There was also a strong lobby in the Anglican Church which wanted to strengthen the establishment by broadening the Church to encompass the more moderate dissenters and thus reserve penal measures for only the most obdurate sectarians. Those more interested in the stability of the state than in the fortunes of the Church shared such an aim. Foreign and domestic policy would have been well served by uniting Protestants against the threat of popery. There were also complex internal pressures on religious alliances. While Protestant dissenters shared some common interest with Catholics, their anti-popery gave them common cause with Anglicans. When the Anglican establishment was in the ascendancy, the dissenters were at odds with the Church, but under the reign of Charles's less cautious brother, James VII and II, 'even High Church bishops found a common cause with Dissenters against a King who used royal prerogative to romanize the country' (Henriques 1961: 3).

The final departure of the House of Stuart brought William and Mary and further relaxation of restrictions on dissent. It was not the Protestant millennium which some had expected - William had too much need of the support of the Church to disestablish it - but it did confirm the general trend towards greater toleration and made it difficult for Queen Anne's Tory ministers to turn the clock back. They tried to do just that with one Act to prevent occasional conformity and another to force dissenters to raise their children as Anglicans, but without any great success.

In terms of organized efforts to improve their position, dissenters were relatively quiet during the first quarter of the

eighteenth century. While the Dissenting Deputies – representatives of most English dissenters except the Quakers – performed a useful function in protecting the civil and religious rights of dissenters at local level, they hardly agitated for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, seemingly willing to accept Prime Minister Walpole's claim that, although he was on their side, the time was not right to begin any agitation which would again raise the cry of 'The Church in danger!' Probably because they suffered the greatest disabilities, the Quakers were more persistent. Their refusal to pay tithes to the Church led them to suffer severe penalties. Not only were they fined for non-payment, but their cases were tried in expensive superior courts. Many were imprisoned and more were ruined by the judicial process. Under skilled political leadership, the Friends painstakingly put together petitions to promote an Act which would not free them from fines (that would have been going too fast) but which would lessen the costs of their dissent by having their cases dealt with by faster and less expensive procedures. For once, Walpole responded and pushed the Bill through the Commons, only to see it thrown out by the House of Lords, led, hardly surprisingly, by the bishops. This humiliation seems to have been a major reason why Walpole was thereafter unwilling to risk his prestige by further moves to accommodate the dissenters.

As was the case in Scotland, the 1745 Jacobite rising inadvertently improved the reputation of the dissenters. Only Roman Catholics and High Church Anglicans (and only some of them) rejoiced in the arrival of the Young Pretender. English dissenters followed the example of the Seceders in Scotland and proved their loyalty to the Protestant Succession by actively mobilizing against Charles Edward Stuart. Like Ebenezer Erskine in Stirling, Philip Doddridge encouraged his supporters to enlist in, and to organize, volunteer companies, and many dissenters were sufficiently keen to act on their Protestantism that they violated the terms of the Test Act by accepting commissions in the volunteer forces. After that display of loyalty, it was increasingly difficult for Anglicans to claim that dissent was dangerous because it encouraged rebellion.

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Changes in ideology

In this period both dissent and establishment views of the civil magistrate changed. Some English Presbyterians and Congregationalists began to follow the Baptist lead and argue that the state had no obligation or right to support a particular religious organization. Others, almost certainly the majority, had moved some way in this direction but had stopped short of advocating religious *laissez-faire*. Thus one finds Doddridge, probably the most influential dissenting leader of the period, arguing that the state could, if it so chose, establish a church and expect even those who did not accept its teachings to support it financially. He justified this position from the analogy with wars. A representative government could expect people to pay their taxes and use those funds to support a war which many of the tax-payers might not wish to see fought. Only if the majority of the people opposed the war could it be legitimately opposed and taxes withheld. Similarly, only if the majority of the English people dissented from the Church, could nonconformists withhold their tithes.

Doddridge's position is important for the novelty of his grounds for religious establishment. Unlike the Puritans or the Scottish Seceders, he did not regard the religious obligations imposed by the civil magistrate as divinely ordained but as matters of democratic will. The legitimacy of a state church now came from its popular support. It was no longer God's will but the people's will which was crucial.

There was a similar and reciprocal shift in the arguments of churchmen for establishment. Although some continued to argue from theories of divine right and apostolic succession, many were offering a new and pragmatic defence. Church and state should form a constructive partnership, not because God demanded it, but because it was socially useful. In return for the state granting the Church various privileges, the Church promoted social order, morality, and loyalty. Such a utilitarian position may initially have seemed appropriate to the age but it was highly precarious because it could be undermined by evidence either that the Church was failing to be socially useful or that nonconformity was as good as Anglicanism at performing these social functions. The combination of the display of loyalty of the dissenters during the two Jacobite adventures, and the parlous moral state of many parts

of the national Church, rotten as it was with plural holdings, absenteeism, placemen, and plain corruption, made it ever easier for dissenters to insist, on pragmatic grounds, that the state would benefit as much from even-handedness as it did from supporting the Church. Where a dissenting body was strong, the argument for social order disposed the government seriously to consider dividing its support. In Australia, the government first supported the Anglican Church and then, in the 1836 Church Act, divided its affections between the Church *and* the dissenting bodies (Turner 1972). To give an example from South Carolina after the colonial war, the ruling classes, while themselves mostly members and active supporters of the established Anglican Church, followed the logic of the functionalist argument and disestablished the Anglican Church in order to consolidate the support of the other Protestant churches which were stronger in the inland parts of the colony (Bolton 1982).

Methodism

In 1736, the year that Walpole effectively killed a bill to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts by refusing to support it in the Commons, George Whitefield was ordained. Three years later John Wesley began open-air preaching. The Methodist movement had begun.

The rise of a new dissenting movement was much helped by the stagnation of the establishment and the decline of old dissent. The reasons for these conditions need not concern us, but the former can be explained briefly as a result of the Church's refusal to think in terms of competing in a 'market'. Although it was obvious that the Church had lost the support of large parts of its constituency, there was little serious thought given to the need to adapt its structure and practice to face the new situation. In part, the Church had never really recovered from the depletion of its resources first under Henry and again under the Commonwealth. Many of the legal pressures to conform had gone, and only in those lowland arable areas with small settled rural communities headed by a resident squire was there strong informal social pressure to conform to the establishment. It is not coincidence that, outside the growing cities, the Methodists (and other dissenters)

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made their greatest inroads in places where the Church had large parishes, where there was no effective squirearchy, and where there were large numbers of freehold small farmers (see Gilbert 1976: 94–126). Why old dissent should have declined is a more complex question. In the half century before 1740 'first the socially distinguished and then the economically powerful sections of early nonconformity almost disappeared, having been for the most part reabsorbed into the Anglican Communion' (Bebb in Gilbert 1976: 16). At its peak around 1700, some 300,000 people had been dissenters. By 1740 this number had been halved.⁷ The loss of the elite support could have been compensated for by the recruitment of what Doddridge called 'the plain people of low education and vulgar taste', but by then dissent had become elitist and introverted, and had lost its evangelistic impulse. There was thus a clear place in the market for a movement which could fill the gaps left by the stagnation of the Church and the ossification of old dissent. Wesley, Whitefield, and other Methodists seized the opportunity.

Attracting huge crowds and considerable public support, the Methodists were soon forced to abandon their equivocal attitude towards the Church. While Whitefield was tolerant of any man who preached what he believed to be the truth, the Wesleys had always insisted that they were churchmen. Although he may have been employing hyperbole, Charles Wesley did remark that 'he would sooner see his children Roman Catholic than Protestant dissenters' (Skeats and Miall 1891: 307), and John Wesley was similarly critical of dissent. In their own minds, the Wesleys were promoting a revitalization movement within the establishment. However, the practice of preaching and arranging meetings wherever there was an audience undermined the authority of the parish system and challenged the hierarchical structure of the Church. Furthermore, the failure of large numbers of Anglican clergymen to rally to the Wesleyan standard meant that, as the movement expanded, it had to develop its own organization and recruit its own functionaries. In 1744 Wesley called the first conference of Methodist clergymen and lay leaders. The rift with the establishment was deepened by the gradual expansion of the role of unordained men from reading scripture in meetings to preaching. Despite their claims to the contrary, the Methodists were becoming dissenters.

Some indication of the growth of Methodism can be given from statistics of Wesleyan membership, which grew from 22,410 to 77,402 between 1767 and 1796 (Gilbert 1976: 31). In the same period there was a revitalization and a considerable increase in the active support for Baptist and Congregational congregations. The 'new dissent' Baptists had largely broken with Calvinist predestinarian theology and acquired a new zeal for evangelism. The Congregationalism of this period was also discontinuous with the old Independency and much closer to the Arminian evangelism of the Wesleys. The net result of these movements was to increase considerably the number of dissenters and to undermine further the viability of the religious establishment.

Although English reaction to the French Revolution involved yet another attempt to construe dissenters as an internal fifth column and inspired politically motivated attacks on dissenters, the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries saw the gradual removal of all legal restrictions on dissent. The Conventicle and Five Mile Acts were repealed and the oath required of Quakers was dropped. Although they had ignored it with impunity, the Unitarians were offended by the existence on the statute books of a law which made it an offence to deny the doctrine of the Trinity; in 1813, the statute was removed. Finally on 9 May 1828, the offensive Test and Corporation Acts were repealed, this time with the active support of the majority of the Anglican bishops, who had finally accepted that unpopular legislation could not turn dissenters into Anglicans.

The political power of the dissenters was increasing all the time. Not only were they becoming relatively more numerous but the social strata which supported them were becoming richer and more powerful. The 1832 Reform Act brought more dissenters into parliament and their power in the major urban centres was considerable. In the late 1830s a number of cities refused to set church rates and thus forced the issue of dissenting financial support for the established Church.

Where the Dissenters were strong enough to do so, they forced the injustice of their position on public attention by frustrating the operation of the law and taking the consequences. One notorious case at Braintree in Essex resulted in legal proceedings that went on for sixteen years! There were other cases in

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which nonconformists were sent to prison for contempt of court.

(Vidler 1974: 137)

It is common for a dominant group which has recently and reluctantly accepted the need to give up some of its privileges to become *more* rather than less tenacious in the defence of its remaining advantages. Those whose position has been allowed to improve are supposed to be grateful for what they have received and not press further. Given the obvious presence and stability of dissent and the growth in economic and political power of the nonconformists, the removal of the final hurdles seems to have taken an unconscionable amount of time and effort: church rates, for example, were not abolished until 1869.

Another site of conflict was education. Although popular schooling had been pioneered by the Free Churches (and evangelicals within the Church whose denominational affiliation did not prevent them working outside its structures), once the established Church realised the appeal of the schools, it became active. As happened in Scotland, bills to improve schooling were often taken by churchmen as opportunities to repeat their claims to state favour. However, such attempts to constrain social innovations within a crumbling framework of outdated relationships regularly failed. An attempt in 1843 by conservative churchmen to monopolize factory schools was soundly defeated by nonconformists. In 1870 the Forster Education Act created a network of state Board schools to work alongside the voluntary schools. The Church wanted Anglican religious teaching in such schools, while nonconformists argued for a secular education with religious instruction being provided outside the school system. The solution was a compromise which permitted undenominational or 'simple Bible teaching' and barred the use of distinctive formularies such as the Church Catechism (Vidler 1974: 138).

Far more space could be given to the arguments between Victorian churchmen and nonconformists, but the end point is so clear that further detail of the renegotiation of relations between church and state would be superfluous. Nonconformists had won the removal of all restrictions on their civil and political rights. The expansion of elements of the secular state (such as mass

education) was so great that the relative advantages enjoyed by the Church of England in, for example, retaining its own schools became trivial. Like the Church of Scotland, the Church of England retained a patina of establishment but real privilege had gone, leaving only pomp and ceremony.

SUMMARY: THE ESTABLISHMENT ROUTE TO TOLERATION

Enough historical detail has been given to allow me to sketch the key elements of the establishment route to toleration. The story can be clarified with the separation of two different sorts of cause: those related to changes in religious affiliation and those which resulted more directly from changes in the state. The initial establishment reaction to dissent was to outlaw it and to coerce waverers into conformity. The ineffectiveness of this quickly became clear when those dissenters who were most vigorously persecuted – the Quakers, for example – thrived. Not long after the failure of the Elizabethan settlement to create a united and coherent Church, the more far sighted Church leaders appreciated the failure of persecution. They sought a basis for 'comprehending' the majority of dissenters which would allow them to reserve punitive action for a small, and hopefully unpopular, minority. When this strategy also failed, some churchmen began to abandon altogether the notion of enforced conformity.

It would be a mistake to accept too readily the view that pre-revolutionary Protestantism was built on a class fracture of society, with the Puritans and the high Episcopalians representing two competing classes: the old and the new. There were religious divisions within as well as between social strata and, where they were strong, the Puritans were firmly on the side of social order. While Walzer (1965) is right to see the overthrow of the traditional order as the obvious long-term consequence of puritan doctrine, Collinson deploys considerable evidence to show that the non-sectarian Calvinists were considerable respecters and consolidators of traditional authority (Collinson 1982: 180–8). Clearly one needs to specify more accurately just which group of dissenters one is considering in any identification of political tendencies, but such detail is unnecessary for my argument. It is enough that there is a general element of truth in the picture of

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England as a society in which most of the aristocracy and the gentry at the top and the peasants at the bottom sided with the established Church, while the dissenters, as in Scotland, drew their support from the rising middle and artisan classes (this is especially true of Methodism).⁸ The changes in the economy which brought a shift in political power thus favoured nonconformity and made it more and more difficult for the politicians to rule by relying on the support of 'Church and King'. But even before political expediency made it necessary to incorporate the growing body of urban dissenters into the body politic, changes in the political arena had undermined the moral authority of the established Church. One could almost return to the Henrican Reformation and point to the delegitimizing effects of the confiscation of Church property. To use the title of an excellent brief discussion by Hill (1986a: 41-57), the 'Social and Economic Consequences of the Henrican Reformation' were the most immediate and obvious, but the very fact of deliberately organized change in the structure of the Church called into question the legitimacy of any future structure: 'in temporarily solving the economic problems of the ruling class it gave a stimulus to ideas which were ultimately to overthrow the old order' (ibid.: 7).

As if Henry's reforms and later changes in the relations between church and state had not been enough, the Williamite revolution caused further and massive problems for the leaders of the establishment. Until then it had been possible (with some gnawing over Henry's break with Rome) to maintain that the doctrines of the divine right of kings and the apostolic succession of bishops were inexorably linked. Their experiences in the Commonwealth and Protectorate periods gave conservative churchmen and politicians, in the reign of the 'restored' Charles II, very good reason to preach Church and King.

As a class the clergy became deeply committed to a high religious theory of kingship. Each 30 January, the anniversary of the execution of Charles I, and each 29 May, the day of his son's return, the pulpits thundered for the doctrines of the divine hereditary right of kings and the utter sinfulness of resistance to his commands.

(Bennett 1969: 156)

But desire to believe and ability to do so are not the same and the expulsion of the Stuarts and the invitation to William and Mary to accept a 'contractual' monarchy made it very difficult to argue that God rather than the people determined monarch selection. As Stromberg put it: 'The truth is that for both Whig and Tory, *jus divinum* became irrevocably obsolete.' In the words of some bad contemporary verse:

I would by no means Church and King destroy
And yet the doctrine taught me when a boy
By Crab the Curate now seems wondrous odd
That either came immediately from God.

(Quoted in Stromberg 1954: 131)

The irony of the Revolution settlement and its implications for an established Church was that it was precisely the most consistent believers in the divine ordering of church and state – the nine bishops and some 400 clergymen who refused to accept William and Mary – who were deposed. Although post-Revolution monarchs continued to maintain a state church, they had to do so without the support of the very people who believed that such an institution was divinely ordained. The new breed of Whig bishops gradually shifted to a more pragmatic justification for a state church and, with it, a more tolerant attitude towards dissenters. Nonconformists could now be regarded as socially disruptive but they could hardly be judged to be acting against God's will. Although Hoadly was one of the more Whiggish of the new bishops, his view that 'mutual charity, not . . . a pretense of uniformity of opinions' was the correct foundation of religious harmony, although a little premature, was a forerunner of future pragmatism (ibid.: 91). This is not to say that the High Church party did not resist; they frequently did. Between 1702 and 1704, for example, Rochester and Nottingham introduced bills to outlaw the common practice of dissenters avoiding civil resuscitations by engaging in 'occasional conformity'. The bills were rightly seen as an attempt to turn back to a more robust interpretation of the Toleration Act than was then common, and were defeated. An act did make it to the statute books in 1711 but it was rarely used (Bennett 1969: 172).

Hopes for religious uniformity were additionally undermined by the expansion of the English state and its failure to convert the

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Presbyterians of Scotland and Ulster, and the Catholics of the rest of Ireland, to Anglican Episcopalianism. Although it took a long time to be recognized:

there lurked an inherent contradiction in the circumstance that within the single British polity established in 1707 there existed not one but two established churches, different to some extent in their theology and still more different in their form of government. If Ireland, still a separate kingdom up to 1801, did not also present a contradiction, it did furnish an anomaly.

(Christie 1982: 33)

Initially Protestant dissent had to be accommodated to present a united front against the papist threat of Britain's European enemies and, finally, British Catholics had to be accommodated in the hope of defusing the Irish problem.

Thus one sees two principles working together to create a secular state tolerant of religious diversity. On the one hand, the establishment had to learn to live with its failure to retain the dissenters; the costs of enforcing conformity became too high and penal sanctions counter-productive. At the same time, various exigencies forced the political establishment to reduce gradually its commitment to promoting conformity to a state church. Although the Episcopal Church remained the legally established Church of England and Wales, the real advantages which it enjoyed over the Free Churches were reduced to the point where many nonconformists could ignore them.

THE FINAL IRONY: PROTESTANTS AND CATHOLICS

The English Independents and Scots Seceders who objected to Queen Anne's Toleration Act on the grounds that it paved the way for the acceptance of Roman Catholicism were right, although they failed to see the part their own dissent would play in the process. The debates among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestants about the limits of toleration always assumed that Catholics were beyond the pale, and the various political intrigues engaged in by some Catholics did nothing to change that perception. The gradual abandonment of the idea of state-enforced religious conformity benefited the Protestant dissenters first, and only in the nineteenth century were there serious moves

to incorporate Roman Catholics fully into the body civil. Although many conservative Protestants campaigned against Catholic emancipation, their previous efforts to argue on universalistic democratic principles for their own rights made it difficult for them to appear consistent when proposing the denial of the same rights to some other dissenting group. And the government had good reason to want to indulge Catholics. Lord North was willing to provoke the anti-Catholicism expressed in the Gordon riots of 1778 because he wanted to enlist the Scottish highlanders (who had not yet converted from Catholicism and Episcopalianism to evangelical Protestantism) to fight in the American colonial and French wars. The full emancipation of English and Scottish Catholics was a result, not of their own agitations, which tended to be of a very moderate and unassuming nature, but of attempts to stabilize government in Ireland. Just as the 1707 union of the Scottish and English Parliaments called into question the allocation of political rights on the basis of religious affiliation, so the 1801 union of the British and Irish parliaments created further pressure for Catholic emancipation, which was granted in 1829. As Otto Hintze has argued (in Hechter 1975: 61), the British government's need to develop some sort of stability in Ireland led it to grant citizenship to Irish Catholics. English and Scottish Catholics also benefited. Thus one sees the final fulfilment of what had been latent since Henry's break with Rome: the subordination of the religious interests of the Church to the political interests of the state.

One suspects that even concerted opposition to Catholic emancipation from conservative Protestants would have been ignored by the government but the Protestants were too fragmented to present a united front. There were those who followed the establishment logic to argue that, as Roman Catholics existed, their further persecution would only cause more problems than it solved. Furthermore, the threat of French jacobinism seemed more potent than that of British popery. Given that religious conformity was long dead, social cohesion became a more pressing cause. There were also versions of the dissenting reasoning. Although some conservative Protestants wanted to draw the line of permitted variation at their own dissent, others were driven to support the Emancipation Act, both by a desire for

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consistency and because it was another stick with which to beat the religious establishments.

If some supported emancipation out of a genuine respect for the religious and civil rights of Catholics, others did so in order to convert Catholics from their unchristian ways. Thomas Chalmers, who was then still an evangelical within the Kirk, thought that the conversion of the Irish would be aided by putting all religions on the same legal footing. In his view, it was only natural resentment at the privileged position of Protestantism which prevented the poor wretches from seeing the superiority of evangelicalism. Although he did not endorse voluntary principles, Chalmers suspected that establishment devalued the established religion by implying that it *needed* state support. Such an argument was, of course, only necessary and possible in those conditions of pluralism which the conservative Protestants had done so much to create and which Chalmers was about to extend by leading the Disruption.

Thus conservative evangelical dissenters, evangelicals within the establishment (but not convinced establishmentarians), and liberal dissenters could all, for their various reasons, support the Catholic Emancipation Bill. But those who did so remained a minority. Although the supporters could draw on the cultured elites, they could not claim to have the country with them. However, opposition to Irish Catholics was weakened by regional variations in both religious affiliation and Catholic settlement. For the national churches of Scotland and England, Catholics were not a general problem because they were concentrated in particular areas (on England, see Gay 1971; on Scotland, see Bruce 1985a). As those areas were generally the growing urban centres, which were under-represented in the national churches, relations with Catholics were only an issue for a minority of officers of the churches. This was even more the case for the increasingly centralized state which gave little attention to regional issues.

Whether they liked it or not – and most of them did not – the actions of schismatic conservative Protestants had created religious pluralism and thus made possible a climate of opinion which endorsed that reality by promoting private conscience and religious *laissez-faire* as valued principles. That the climate they had created inadvertently benefited Rome, the old enemy, was much

regretted but there was little or nothing conservative Protestants could do about it. The chance to create a reformed and popular national church had been offered by the Long Parliament. The failure of the Westminster Assembly to seize that chance had permitted the fragmentation of the religious culture to increase to the point where it could not be reversed by the insignificant threat of British Catholicism or the distant conflict with Irish Catholics.

The unintended nature of the rise of religious toleration is made clear by Dickens in the epilogue to his study of *The English Reformation*. He lists the one or two pious Protestants – William Turner, the physician to Protector Somerset and John Foxe, for example – who openly espoused toleration, but clearly has trouble finding many representatives. The best he can say of Cranmer, for instance, is that 'he persecuted only a few extremists' (Dickens 1983: 440). For the times, Cranmer's self-denial may have been unusual and laudatory, but there is something bone-chilling about that 'only'. In his last paragraph, Dickens comes very close to the point I am arguing in these chapters:

While the Reformation was slow to produce genuine tolerance among its devotees, it soon destroyed the more solid psychological bases for religious persecution. Once Catholic Christendom had been succeeded by a multiplicity of national churches and dissenting groups, persecution began to occasion practical disadvantages which could be seen, intermittently at least, to outweigh the advantages of uniformity. Such situations inevitably led to practical experiments in toleration, and where it was proved that such toleration could subsist without disaster, the more positive appeals of religious liberty were bound sooner or later to make their appeal.

(Ibid.: 441)

It is a measure of Dickens's skill that, although the *consequences* of pluralism are not the focus of his work, he none the less concludes with an observation which could be taken as a text for the rest of this book: 'At varying rates most of the people bought their freedom. The price in terms of spiritual confusion often proved high, for history is usually a hard bargainer with men' (ibid. 1983: 441).

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THE THIRD WAY: SCANDINAVIAN LUTHERANISM

This and the previous chapter have offered detailed illustrations from Scottish and English church history to support the argument that a major contributing factor to the rise of religious toleration was the essential fissiparousness of Protestantism. Although it may be argued that class differentiation and the expansion of the British state would eventually have caused the abandonment of religious affiliation as an important criterion for the allocation of social, political, and economic rights, the material presented above suggests that the fundamentally democratic nature of Protestantism, by permitting the fragmentation of the religious culture, was a significant factor in three related developments: the gradual shift among dissenters from a sectarian to a denominational self-image; the establishment's gradual acceptance of the rights of nonconformists; and the rise of a secular state.

There are two important Protestant cultures in which religious toleration did not result from internal fragmentation producing religious pluralism: those of America and Scandinavia. The pluralism of American Protestantism was a natural consequence of the settlement of the continent. Each ethnic group brought its own variation and, even before the attack on privilege popularized by the colonies' revolt against English rule had fuelled widespread opposition to religious establishment, the imported fragmentation made anything other than denominationalism difficult to sustain outside small areas. If America differs from Britain in the source of its pluralism, the Scandinavian situation differs in the comparative lateness of its espousal of toleration and the source of the ideology of religious freedom. The cases of Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland will be used to introduce the third route to toleration: the modern democratic impulse.

Although there are interesting differences between the Scandinavian countries, they may, for most of our purposes, be treated as a single case. Around the 1550s, all the Christian churches in Scandinavia were reformed along the lines established by Martin Luther. However, what Vogt says of Norway could be repeated for the other countries: 'There is a profound continuity, both in the faith of the people and in the institutions, territorial

divisions, etc. between the Medieval Catholic Church in Norway, and the modern Lutheran Norwegian Church. Many phenomena today are virtually unchanged' (Vogt 1972: 381). There was very little Calvinist influence. The Church Assembly in Uppsala in 1593 rejected as heretical both Catholicism and Calvinism. For almost 250 years from the end of the sixteenth century, Lutheranism enjoyed a state enforced and state supported monopoly in Scandinavia. It was only in the middle and late nineteenth century that basic religious freedoms were introduced. In 1845, Norway permitted all Christian bodies to practise and evangelize. Even then civil servants were excluded from the provision that allowed Norwegian citizens to leave the national church. After 1849, Danes were allowed freedom of worship. Eleven years later, Swedes were permitted to leave the national Lutheran Church but until 1951 they were legally obliged to affiliate to another recognized Christian body.

What is significant about the Scandinavian countries is that religious toleration came to be recognized as a fundamental characteristic of modern democracies (and was usually introduced as part of a major constitutional change from absolutist monarchy to parliamentary democracy) without there being much by way of preceding religious dissent. That is, toleration was accepted more as a 'good thing' in its own right than as a necessary accommodation to *de facto* pluralism. Given the crucial role which pluralism played in other Protestant settings, this requires explanation.

The lack of fragmentation can be explained by the relative absence of the two factors which explain British fragmentation: the individualistic ethos of reformed Protestantism and social differentiation. As Vogt (1972) makes clear, the Scandinavian Lutheran Churches were less 'Protestant' than either Calvinist Presbyterianism or Anglicanism. In sociological terms, there was far less emphasis on individual judgement and far more weight given to the community that was the Church. In this sense, Scandinavian Lutheranism lay somewhere between reformed Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The less radically reformed Lutheran Churches remained national churches. To return to the classificatory typology presented in the first chapter, while Calvinism drew heavily on the Bible as its source of authority,

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Lutheranism retained greater reliance on the Church. It was thus less ideologically prone to factionalism and schism.

As late as 1870, only 10 per cent of Swedes worked in industry or craft occupations. In the most developed of the Scandinavian countries – Denmark – it was only 25 per cent. In Norway, Finland, and Iceland it was considerably less. Norway remained a rural society until the twentieth century. Christiania (later Oslo) had only 9,000 residents in 1880. There was thus far less social differentiation in the Scandinavian countries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries than there was in Britain. This is not to say that social differentiation causes religious fragmentation, but it is to recognize that the increase in social distance between classes is a major factor in the development of different emphases within the same dominant religious tradition, as different classes alter the faith to suit their new interests and perspectives.

Even when regional and elementary class divisions did produce revivals similar to those which attended the Seceder and Free Church splits in Scotland, they did not cause serious fragmentation. 'At a time when revivalism in some other Protestant societies led to separatism and to new religious organizations, the Church in Finland was able to assimilate these movements' (Seppanen 1972: 145). Like enthusiastic movements in Catholicism, Lutheran revitalization movements tended to remain within the Church. Hauge, the leader of the first major revival in Norway, was far more consistent (and successful) than Wesley in imploring his followers to remain within the Lutheran Church. The second Norwegian revival – the 'firm believers' – also 'decried all sectarian departures from confessional Lutheranism' (Hale 1981: 51).

A third reason for the greater homogeneity of Lutheranism in Scandinavia was that, unlike the British establishments, it was totally reliant on the state. The Henrican Reformation in England had deprived the English Church of a lot of its wealth, and hence much of its independence, but it was never entirely Erastian. Bishops and clergy retained important elements of financial and legal independence. The Scottish Presbyterians were even less dependent on the state. Even in those periods when the right to appoint the clergy was removed from congregations, the clergy enjoyed considerable legal security and were subordinate, not to a

centralized state authority, but to the local state of heritors and patrons. The Scandinavian Lutheran national churches were completely subordinate to the state in the training and appointment of the clergy and were heavily dependent on the state for financial support. Such conditions were not conducive to independent thinking and, combined with the Lutheran tendency to reject independency and voluntarism, explain why tensions within the dominant religious traditions did not blossom into full-blown dissent.

The first pressures in the Norwegian Parliament to relax legal control of dissent concerned restrictions on lay-led conventicles and came from the supporters of Hauge. The rural Haugean members of the Parliament supported greater toleration within confessional Lutheranism but when other legislators pushed for the legalization of dissent from the Church, they voted against the moves. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century the example of other European societies was becoming increasingly attractive as a model for a modern democracy. It is important that nearly all the government officials – those members of the elites with the widest international contacts and with the professional responsibility for running the state – voted for the liberalizing dissenter law. Similarly, twelve of the sixteen pastors who held seats in the Storting also voted for the changes. Their reasoning was that of Thomas Chalmers: if there was going to be market competition, the true religion was so self-evidently superior that it did not need artificial support.

In some places, there was an element of French Revolution and Enlightenment inspired anti-clericalism but this was far more muted than it was in those Roman Catholic countries where the rise of a labour movement and social democracy divided the society into strong clerical and anti-clerical blocs. However, the left-right division was stronger in Scandinavia than it was in England where the considerable body of dissenters who aligned themselves on the left (and the small but influential number of Anglican clergymen who promoted liberal and leftist causes) prevented the development of a firm association between the church and the right.

The arrival of religious toleration in the Scandinavian countries comes then, not as a consequence of religious struggles (which, because of the cohesion of Lutheranism and the relative lack of

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social differentiation. remained muted). but as part of a general re-evaluation of civil rights in the light of the rise of democracy across Europe. In this it resembles the Catholic model more than it does the British experience. This observation allows us to complete this analytical account of the rise of religious toleration.

THE RISE OF TOLERATION: A SUMMARY

To recapitulate the argument of this and the previous chapter, it is suggested that the view which stresses the influence of Enlightenment and modern democratic notions of individual liberty as a cause of religious toleration is really correct only for the last of three stages. The chronologically and causally primary route to toleration comes from the inadvertent and unintended consequences of Protestant dissent. The early Baptists advocated religious liberty from the first but they were an exception, driven out of most of Europe, unknown in Scotland, and far less numerous in England than the Puritans, who mostly followed Thomas Cartwright's view that idolaters, blasphemers, and other ecclesiastical ne'er-do-wells should be executed. Most schismatic Protestant groups accepted the idea of state enforced orthodoxy and wished to lead a legally established national church. Far from wishing to see greater toleration, they wanted their own narrower orthodoxy to become the creed of a *more* authoritarian state church. Only after they had failed to win their ideological battles with the establishment did they begin to see the sense in the positions taken by the very early liberals whom they had persecuted.

In the second stage, religious establishments were forced – by their failure to prevent dissent – to moderate their claims, and the state moved to a position of ever-increasing toleration. First, Protestant dissent was grudgingly permitted, and then all claims to distribute civil and political rights according to religious affiliation were abandoned. The failure of the established churches to remain national popular institutions forced the state to expand its activities to take over functions previously performed by the churches.

The third element of this account concerns those Protestant societies where the establishment was Lutheran and where industrialization and urbanization came late. Once religious

liberty had become firmly established as part of the nature of modern democracies, those countries which had maintained a relatively homogeneous Protestant establishment also adopted the practice of religious toleration.

Where this account differs from that offered by other sociologists and historians is in its stress on the fissiparous nature of Protestantism. Class fragmentation and regional tensions within developing nation states provided a major part of the thrust towards religious pluralism, but the impact of such social differentiation was mediated and amplified by the individualism of conservative Protestantism which made it possible for different social groups to develop the dominant religious tradition to suit their own interests. Although one might suppose that the separation of religious affiliation and civil rights is such a necessary element of any industrial democracy that it must eventually have come to pass, it is the case that Protestant schism hastened the process. The related point which I have stressed is the unintended nature of the rise of religious toleration. While one can identify small groups of innovators who dissented in order to advocate religious liberty, it is generally the case that the publics which they addressed were unreceptive. It was only when the advocates of competing religious orthodoxies failed to impose their doctrines and standards on the population at large that they began to accept, reluctantly at first, an ideology which legitimated the reality created by their own failures. The Covenanters, Seceders, Puritans, and Independents were not pioneering liberals or early proponents of denominationalism, and the established churches did not willingly give up their legal privileges. Very few religious innovators wanted denominationalism. It was thrust upon them by their failure to convince or suppress their rivals. That there were so many rivals is explained by the essentially individualistic nature of Protestantism.