**The Religious Toleration of James I**

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James I was a firm believer in Christian unity; Dorothy Boyd Rush describes his distrust of extremists, Catholic or Protestant.

During much of the seventeenth century, the concept of *cuius regio, eius religio* which had been established by the Peace of Augsburg (1555) prevailed throughout Europe; religious uniformity was as much desired for political as for religious reasons.

Even England, where the course of the Reformation had been unique in many respects, required at least the outward conformity of all. Moreover, the unsettled state of the royal succession made the religious situation in Elizabethan England additionally complex.

For much of Elizabeth’s reign, her ‘legitimate’ heir was not only a foreign Queen, but an avowed Catholic. After the execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587, Elizabeth’s probable heir became James VI of Scotland, Mary’s son. By training and inclination, James was basically a Calvinist; by conviction, he was an early ecumenicalist whose religious expectations frequently exceeded the possible.

Unfortunately, during his formative years, James’s simultaneous pursuit of his religious ideals and the throne of England often placed him in a difficult position. What seemed possible and desirable to James often seemed merely devious and deceitful to his contemporaries.

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The medieval ideal of Christian unity was far from dead in James’s day; yet his approach to religious considerations was essentially modern. According to James, religious moderates, whether they were Catholics or Protestants, obviously had more in common with each other than they had with the extremists of their respective faiths.

Therefore, if the Pope could be persuaded to renounce his claims of temporal authority and the militant political methods of the Jesuits, whom James came to scorn as ‘Puritan-Papists’, James would be willing to denounce the Protestant extremists who ‘infected’ his own realm, whether they were Scottish Presbyterians or English Puritans.

For a time, especially during the pontificate of Clement VIII (1592-1605), James even hoped that an ecumenical council might be called to end the recent divisions in Christendom. James periodically asserted that he was ready to support and follow the ‘fair’ dictates of such a council. He, apparently, thought he could read the trend of the future in Catholic Europe’s growing fear of Spain, the acknowledged champion of the Catholic Reformation, and in Henry of Navarre’s commitment to religious toleration in France.

While still in his Scottish kingdom, James became convinced that religious differences were primarily the result of unnecessary disagreement about non-essentials. This Calvinist son of Mary Stuart and former pupil of George Buchanan and Andrew Melville preferred to consider himself a member of the ancient Catholic and Apostolic Church; a modern prince dedicated to the primitive Church.

Like the Anglicans he eventually hoped to lead, James generally used the year 500 as a rough dividing line between the era of primitive Christianity and the emergence of the Bishop of Rome as Pope. By examining Christendom before 500 and stressing the pre-Papal history of the Roman Church, James initially decided that a general council could ultimately reach some acceptable compromise on both dogma and ritual. The flaw in his thinking was that he supposed the Catholic Church, and especially the Roman pontiff, to be willing to abandon the host of practices and precedents that had arisen since 500.

In theory, James’s only concession to Roman Catholicism was to be his willingness to recognize the primacy of the Pope in the new Church. He felt that such pre-eminence was justifiable on the basis of the practice of the primitive Church. Were not the patriarchs above the Bishops during the days of the Church Fathers?

Thus, James Stuart, especially before his own supreme governorship in England, contemplated the time when Europe, possibly under his leadership, would again accept the Pope as a sort of universal bishop with spiritual jurisdiction, but with no temporal power whatsoever. James’s equally willing acceptance of the primacy of royal prerogative and appreciation of unfettered temporal authority also profoundly influenced his religious considerations.

Once on the throne of England, James’s vision of the ‘New Church Universal’ seems to have shifted perceptively. He came to believe that the Church of England, which he found not to be at all in conflict with his basic Calvinist beliefs, was literally a religious half-way house, a *via media*, between Rome and Geneva.

Accordingly, it seemed to James that it should be a relatively simple matter for both Catholics and Calvinists to make the necessary concessions that would enable them to meet on common-ground, in the Church of England. He felt that, with the proper guidance, it would not be a difficult matter to convince both sides of the error of their ways; for both extremes were obviously mistaken in James’s eyes.

James allowed himself to be deluded, perhaps willingly, about the true nature of the Church of England. Few, then or now, can readily accept the idea that the Church of England even remotely approached the hypothetical *via media* that James sought and believed he had discovered. Her predominantly Catholic ritual and form of worship were as unacceptable to Puritans as her basically Calvinist doctrine was abhorrent to Roman Catholics.

At best, the Church of England represented a unique and somewhat paradoxical combination of both religious extremes. Its appeal, especially in the religiously charged atmosphere of the seventeenth century, was decidedly limited. Yet, had James been as religiously practical, both before and after his arrival in England, as he was idealistic, he might possibly have made the Church of England a true *via media,* if not for Europe, at least for his own southern Kingdom.

Since he was not, however, he could not. In fact, when James’s attempts to be practical even touched on religion, they were more often than not doomed to failure. This was especially true when James attempted to insure his English inheritance by cultivating support within the various religious factions in England by making what later came to be regarded by those involved as conflicting promises.

Because English Catholics were well aware of James’s dealings with much of Catholic Europe since attaining his majority in Scotland, and of his sporadic, albeit indirect, contacts with the Papacy, they expected a greater degree of religious toleration from him when he finally ascended the throne of England than they had ever hoped from Elizabeth. Yet, although James’s wife, Anne of Denmark, was for a time an open convert to Roman Catholicism, neither the English Catholics nor the Pope ever seemed to have seriously entertained the idea that James himself would actually be converted, especially after 1603.

In truth, probably because of the close and rather unique relationship that exists in England between the established Church and the monarchy, such a conversion was never regarded as likely. Nevertheless, James, as King of Scotland, consistently did all in his power to foster his popularity among English Catholics, even encouraging the idea that they could expect increased toleration when the Stuarts finally came to power in England. To a large degree, he was successful; only a handful of the most radical Catholics opposed his ascension and continued to press the more remote claims of the Spanish Infanta, a daughter of Philip II.

There was only one tenet of belief upon which James insisted: obedience to himself as King of England and Scotland and, eventually, acknowledgment of his supremacy in the Church of England. While in Scotland, he had had more than enough of Andrew Melville’s ultra-Calvinist interpretation of the relationship of Crown and Church:

*Thair is twa Kings and twa Kingdoms in Scotland. Thair is Chryst Jesus the King and his Kingdom the Kirk, whase subject King James the Saxt is, and of whase Kingdom nocht a King nor a Lord nor a heid but a member. And they whom Chryst has callit and commandit to watch over the Kirk and govern his spirituall Kingdom has sufficient power of him and authoritie sa to do.*

It hardly seems strange that the organization of the Church of England and the relative subordination of its clergy had great appeal for James.

No doubt because of his earlier injudicious encouragement, James’s initial moves after his arrival in England seemed inconclusive and far more ‘conservative’ than most Catholics had anticipated. As a consequence, Catholic plots against the Crown again became the order of the day.

Yet, paradoxically, those very plots were probably the indirect cause of James’s first genuine steps toward increased religious toleration for Catholics in England: he suspended the collection of recusancy fines, allowed Catholics to worship in private as they pleased, and ignored the immigration of Catholic priests. Such moves were consistent with James’s rather abstract ideas on toleration and, at the same time, were intended to produce some immediate practical results.

James hoped that his display of toleration for his Catholic subjects would be rewarded by what he regarded as an important Papal concession: the admission that Catholic subjects had a duty of allegiance to their King with which their religion could not interfere. In essence, James wished the Pope to affirm that the Divine Right of both Catholic and non-Catholic rulers should be equally inviolable.

With the Catholic-Reformation in full swing however, such a pronouncement was hardly possible. James was, moreover, under the delusion that he could make it a condition of continued toleration that there should be no appreciable increase in the total number of Catholics within England. Unfortunately, before too many days had passed, the Papal claim that there were at least 100,000 staunch Catholics in England no longer seemed unrealistic.

The immediate results of his toleration forced James to take stock once again of his position, especially as he did not wish to meet with his first Parliament while a supposed Catholic revival was under way. James’s religious policy underwent its second reversal in less than nine months. He ordered all priests, especially the Jesuits, to leave England immediately; a few known priests who lingered were summarily hanged by the assize judges before James could intervene. Soon afterward, to the extreme displeasure of all Catholics, the suspended recusancy fines were vigorously reimposed.

Yet, in spite of all subsequent Catholic plotting, including the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, James obviously continued to favour toleration for moderate Catholics. He was apparently determined to maintain a clear distinction between the guilt of individuals and the innocence of the group. But, because of his wavering approach and the fact that more had been expected of him, it was never deemed sufficient.

The only enduring results of his attempts at toleration were that the suspicions of even the most tolerant Anglicans were aroused, and that the so-called ‘Puritan Thesis’, which identified Bishops and ceremonies with a Catholic reaction and Catholicism with foreign and tyrannical governments, became almost a part of the English credo.

James’s personal tendency to regard such things as ritual, and clerical vestments as theologically indifferent matters, made his own transition into the Anglican Church relatively simple. He apparently liked ceremony, both for itself and because it exalted the person of the monarch by increasing the aura of divinity that surrounded his throne. That such ‘religiously indifferent’ matters could be the cause of permanent division was really inconceivable to James.

More than anything else, it was his insistence on Divine Right that made him the natural ally of the English Bishops; both were meeting with increased opposition. In addition, it was undoubtedly among his English churchmen that James came closest to discovering the promised land he had sought so long.

From the first, a fateful and intellectual alliance arose between the Bishops and the King. Unfortunately, James’s intimacy with the Bishops, both individually and collectively, did much to arouse the latent misgivings of what was to become England’s most zealous group of religious malcontents, the Puritans. It cannot be denied that James had promised the Puritans much before his accession; and they, like the Catholics, subsequently interpreted his earlier promises and later actions in the light of their own expectations.

While James was on his way from Edinburgh to London, some members of the Puritan clergy presented him with what has come to be called the Millenary Petition. To a considerable degree, it reflected the late Elizabethan quiescence of the group. It was studiously moderate and most respectful in tone; accordingly, it emphasized the fact that the petitioners were neither factious Presbyterians nor schismatic Brownists, but loyal subjects of the King.

Among other things, the Millenary Petition asked for modification of ritual, abolition of the sign of the cross at baptism and of the ring in marriage, and the recruitment of the clergy from the more able and learned classes.

James received the petition with a great show of courtesy; although there is some evidence to the contrary, supposedly he had not as yet identified Puritanism with the Scottish Presbyterianism he had come to hate. Moreover, the Puritan request for a conference with Anglican leaders appealed to James.

It would provide him with the opportunity to display his not inconsiderable learning and, hopefully, allow him to play the role of ‘an English Solomon’. He apparently failed to understand that such a conference would give the Puritans the formal recognition they had previously been denied and certainly raise hopes that would inevitably be frustrated.

The fact that James had been so gracious about the Millenary Petition encouraged the more radical Puritans to press for changes that were more clearly reminiscent of Presbyterian-ism. Opponents of the Puritans, frequently in high places, branded them as treasonous and seditious persons - persons very like the ministers whom James had fought for so long in Scotland.

As a result, even before the proposed conference convened at Hampton Court, James equated, if he had not already done so before, the English Puritan and the Scottish Presbyterian. As this idea took hold in James’s mind, he began to stress, for the first time, his resolve to keep the Church of England essentially as he had found it.

James’s resolve boded ill for all concerned; English Puritanism, as James initially found it, was mild and diffuse. It was only after it found itself thwarted in all its efforts for change that it abandoned its idea of purification from within and became a radical and dangerous force outside the Church and inside the Houses of Parliament. Circumstances had again forced James to abandon his tentative efforts toward increased toleration and change.

Generally speaking, the Hampton Court Conference did not go well. A partial explanation for this failure can be found in the recurring blunders of one of the four Puritan divines who attended, Dr Knewstubs, and in James’s proclivity to lecture rather than ameliorate differences in the interest of harmony, as Elizabeth unquestionably would have done under similar conditions. It became apparent that, despite his laudable theorizing, James’s concept of toleration did not include the possibility that men who differed from him might, in the final analysis, be right.

Apart from clearing the way for the preparation of the King James Version of the Bible, the net result of the conference was a worsening of the climate of opinion that existed between James and his Puritan subjects. By refusing to sanction concession to the Puritans on points that even his more conservative Bishops regarded as ‘matters indifferent’, and by expelling from their livings approximately ninety Puritan ministers because of personal feelings of animosity and dislike, James identified the monarchy with the most reactionary element in the Church of England. He was, in essence, directly responsible for the Anglican community becoming increasingly exclusive and sectional rather than comprehensive and national.

Like his simultaneous attempts to deal with his Roman Catholic subjects, James’s dealings with the Puritans ended in disaster. With the best intentions and the most advanced royal ideas on toleration that the seventeenth century would see, James, before he had been in the ‘land of milk and honey’ for a year, had already started England on the road to destruction and civil war.

Temporary toleration of the extremes did not weaken their respective resolve to oppose the prevailing order of society. What James succeeded in doing was to antagonize both extremes with his inconsistency and unclear methods of attack, and to weaken the Crown’s traditional hold on the middle by arousing its suspicions concerning his relations with the extremes.

Neither Europe nor England was as yet ready for the kind of toleration that James envisioned. It was only after England had moved further away from a religiously oriented social order toward a scientifically and industrially based society that any successful approach to toleration could take root and flourish. James had been a bit ahead of his time.

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