



## Book Review

Ralph Stevens, *Protestant Pluralism: The Reception of the Toleration Act, 1689–1720* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018), pp. xiv + 220. ISBN: 9781783273294. RRP £65 or \$115.  
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In 1707 Samuel Wesley, rector of Epworth, wrote to Bishop William Wake of Lincoln to ask whether he should prosecute those in his parish who did not attend either the parish church or go to any of the local dissenting meeting houses. It was a question that concerned many parish clergy in the years after the passage of the 1689 Toleration Act. Had all discipline regarding church attendance broken down altogether, or did the Toleration Act require parishioners to attend one or other service but not sanction their abandonment of worship altogether? Ralph Stevens's impressive book on the effects of the Toleration Act in the ensuing 30 years traces the impact of the Act on English society. As Stevens shows, the passage of the Act through Parliament was hurried and it had been intended to be twinned with a wider comprehension act which would have brought many Dissenters back into the fold of the Church of England. Without that second measure, the Toleration Act was incomplete and appeared on some matters to be ambiguous. For the parish clergy who faced the changed social consequences, it created practical and legal difficulties.

Of course, the Act itself was not quite the model of religious tolerance that later historians have sometimes claimed. It allowed only very circumscribed and limited toleration of Trinitarian Protestant Dissenters; but not Catholics, Unitarian or heterodox Protestants. As Thomas Emlyn was to experience, the persecution of Unitarians was to remain fierce and brutal for years to come. Moreover, the Test Acts, which restricted public office to those who receive communion once a year in the Church of England, remained in place, so that Anglicans retained a monopoly on public appointments. As Stevens shows, the Act threw up all manner of issues and concerns. If dissenting worship was lawful, was their baptism valid? The so-called 'lay baptism' controversy fed off the sense that Dissenters were a legitimate presence in the country and should be permitted to baptize their own. The 'occasional conformity' debates which sought to prevent Dissenters from using a loophole of annual receipt of Holy Communion in order to qualify for public office raged in Parliament and Convocation from 1703 to 1705. There was a ferocious debate between Samuel Wesley and Samuel Palmer about the legitimacy of Dissenters' education and what Wesley thought was blasphemous and offensive behaviour in the dissenting academies. Finally, the firebrand preacher Henry Sacheverell attacked those in the Church of England who were sympathetic to Dissenters as 'false brethren' and thereby sparked a controversy, which led to his

trial before the House of Lords and a landslide victory for the Tories in the 1710 general election. If these were the immediate consequences of the Toleration Act, Stevens is right that the law settled very little about the relationship of Anglicans and Protestant Dissenters.

Stevens is also perceptive in arguing for a nuanced understanding of the consequences of the Act. On the one hand, it began a process of religious toleration that ended in Catholic Emancipation in 1828, but on the other it was not a simple or uncontested process. Some churchmen, like Gilbert Burnet, thought that the Church of England gained from the Toleration Act since it gave Anglicans a sense of competition – if only in the pulpit – with Dissenters which would urge them on to better performance. While this view was offensive to High Churchmen, it encouraged Benjamin Hoadly to argue that the Church had to become more accommodating to Dissenters to win them back. This is one aspect of the consequences of the Toleration Act that Stevens does not pursue, perhaps reasonably for reasons of space. Nevertheless, this is an extremely well-researched and scholarly book that examines for the first time the impact on society of the first legal loosening of the restrictions of religion. It will be essential reading for future scholars of religion in the 'long eighteenth century'.

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