

JAMES II - PIONEER OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Although the republicans had won the English civil war in 1645, the resulting instability led to the Monarchy being restored under Charles II in 1660. Before his coronation he issued 'The Declaration of Breda' which called for religious tolerance as the way to bring peace to England. But during the following years Parliament passed vicious laws against Dissenters (Protestants who did not accept Anglican teachings) and Catholics. Charles did what he could to ease the lives of those in prison, and save those sentenced to death, but lacked the political strength to have the laws abrogated.

The Royalists had an overwhelming majority in Parliament, republicanism seeming to be a cause without a future. But in 1673 Charles' younger brother James became a Catholic.

The strongest emotive force in the country was a neurotic fear and hatred of the Pope and Catholics. So the Whigs, as the republicans were now known, called for the exclusion of James from the throne if Charles died. If this could be achieved they would have established the principle of parliament being able to override the rights of monarchical inheritance, and thereby have made Parliament superior to the Monarchy.

By conducting an unprincipled campaign of anti-Catholicism, and establishing a frenzied fear of having a Catholic king, they persuaded Parliament to pass a Bill excluding James from his right to succeed his brother. Charles knew that this was an attempt to destroy the Monarchy as the ultimate authority in the kingdom. So, to prevent the Bill becoming law he suspended Parliament and, when he died three years later, James became king.

James recalled Parliament and made clear that he was determined to achieve religious liberty within his kingdoms and, when Parliament demanded the strenuous enforcement of the persecuting laws, he suspended it and ruled alone for the remainder of his reign.

From a young age James had shown tolerance — he had friends of many religions, refused to dismiss Catholic servants, established freedom of religion in the American colonies, worked with Quakers to found Pennsylvania, assisted many Dissenters in prison and, when king, protected the Jews and helped Protestant Huguenot refugees.

Using his royal authority, he issued a Declaration of Indulgence, whereby all citizens were to be free from the application of the laws passed to persecute religious minorities.

He released over 1300 prisoners of conscience from jail, and his rule was the first in over 200 years during which no one in England was executed because of their religious beliefs.

The Whigs relaunched their vicious campaign of anti-Catholic hatred, claiming that James was preparing to establish a despotism, and would slaughter all who refused to join the Catholic Church. With some Tory support, they organized resistance to the Indulgence by denying non-Anglicans their new rights. Because of earlier purges, conformists were in control of the Universities, and had a vested interest in thwarting James' policy. They refused to admit Dissenters and Catholics as students or lecturers. When James used his legal right to dismiss the involved Dons from one college, and forced it to admit non-Anglicans, James was depicted as crushing the liberties of the Universities.

Although his Indulgence was gradually being implemented, the laws themselves had not been abolished, and this was necessary to make religious freedom secure.

James built an army able to quell any Whig inspired attempt to seize power, and worked for the election of a majority of libertarian M.P.s in the November 1688 General Election. As part of this campaign he re-issued his Indulgence with the addition of an explanation of why he believed in religious freedom, stressing that it would bring peace and prosperity to the country. He ordered it to be read in the churches, which was not an unusual procedure at that time. But the clergy feared that if the penalties for not attending the State Church were lifted, a large part of their congregations would be lost. Playing on this fear, Whig agitators caused a vocal section of the clergy to press the bishops not to read the Indulgence. Seven bishops were persuaded to petition James saying that it was of doubtful legality. James was furious with them. They were his personal friends and a private row developed, with James saying that to refuse was sedition.

After a while, James seems to have decided that it might be best not to press his demand. But a Whig plotter, to the horror of the bishops, made the dispute public.

James' royal authority was now at stake and he said that the matter would have to be decided in a Court of Law. In a fit of pettishness, as one of them admitted afterwards, the bishops refused to provide bail, so had to be retained in custody. At the trial they were found not guilty, but Whig organized mobs had so terrified the judges, jury and witnesses that legal experts now agree that it was not a fair trial and can not be taken as a legal precedent.

As in the case of the University college, the politically skilful Whigs had outmanoeuvred James so as to make it appear that he was the one opposed to freedom and civic rights, and that they were the defenders of them.

James still had hopes of obtaining a libertarian Parliament, and used the promise of royal patronage, persuasion, threats, bribery, tax reforms and preferential treatment of towns, to overcome the bigotry, fear, republican ambition and vested interests of his opponents. But three weeks before Polling day the country was invaded by a foreign army.

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Louis XIV of France was invading and threatening many small states including Holland. At the same time he was attempting to lead the Catholic Church in France away from allegiance to the Pope. This had led to an European alliance, with Papal approval, against France.

If James had joined the alliance he would have had to recall Parliament to authorize increased military taxation. In doing so he would be making himself subservient to its anti-liberty majority, so he maintained strict neutrality towards the coming European conflict.

William of Orange, the ruler of Holland and a leading figure in the Alliance, realised that if James was deposed, William's wife Mary, who was James' daughter, would become queen. This would give him control of the English army and large navy, thereby altering the balance of forces against France. In early 1688 he decided to invade England.

A small group of Whig army officers, whose private lives showed them not to be acting from religious motives, decided to betray their king and country. They plotted to disorganize the army at a critical moment so that it would not be able to repel William's Dutch army when it landed. Their plan was a success and James had to flee to France with his family.

Once all England had been occupied, William ordered the leaders of Parliament to make him king, and therefore commander of England's army and navy. His wife became queen and the Whigs were rewarded by being allowed to run the country as they wished, although not being permitted to establish a republican constitution.

The Whig support of Dutch and German kings, their acts of gross injustice to the ordinary people, and their personal corruption made them unpopular. Support for the Jacobites (James, his son and grandson) provided a serious threat to Whig rule for nearly 60 years. Once William's army returned home, only one thing prevented them being swept from power, the fear of having a Catholic (--- the heirs of James were Catholics) as king. So for three generations, Whig governments insistently depicted the Catholic Church as a tyrannical, power hungry, evil force, with Catholic kings acting accordingly. So for political, not religious, reasons this myth was engrained into English history books.

James was not a fool, nor a genius, not a bad man, nor a saint. He was an idealist of average intelligence unable to overcome the fears of his people and the skilful propaganda of his political opponents. He risked his throne, and lost it, because of the ideal of religious liberty. If he had denied this ideal, he could have been a rich and powerful king.

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JAMES II AND THE 'GLORIOUS REVOLUTION' providing further details, is available on the ChurchinHistory website

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