

## 2012 - 350 = 1662

*Talk for British IARF 2012 at Croydon on Saturday 19th May*

This year 2012 is the 350th anniversary of the so-called 'The Great Ejection' in 1662 of two thousand Puritan clergymen from Church of England: an occurrence which eventually led to the foundation of religious communities dissenting from the established church.

Following the collapse of the Cromwellian Commonwealth and the restoration of the Monarchy hopes were high for Puritan comprehension within a restored Church of England. But Puritan hopes were dashed. The so-called Cavileer Parliament ignored King Charles II's undertaking of religious comprehension and passed an Act of Uniformity more stringent and more demanding than its Elizabethan predecessor and which had allowed for high and low church differences - bowing or not bowing at the name of Jesus, kneeling or standing to receive communion, wearing or not wearing wedding rings. But this new Act demanded not just "unfeigned assent and consent" to all rites, ceremonies and articles of faith prescribed within a new edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* but also demanded re-ordination by a bishop for those clergy ordained by presbyters during the Commonwealth and disavowal of pledges made in good faith according to the Solemn League and Covenant. The Act of Uniformity - passed in May 1662 - required their agreement before the end of August - hence, on 'Black Bartholomew' Sunday 24th August 1662, they preached their farewell sermons and went out into the wilderness. For a significant number these requirements were more than in conscience they could accept; and as a result between 1660 and 1662, 2029 parish clergy, curates, ordained schoolteachers and college fellows are known to have been deprived of their livings.

What are we to conclude from these circumstances - the pivotal point of which was three hundred and fifty years ago on the 24th August 1662?

1. First, that the organisational unity of the Christian church - already shattered in mainland Europe by the ecclesiastical revolutions of Worms and Geneva named for Martin Luther and John Calvin; and in England by the dynastic and financial difficulties of King Henry 8th - had now been taken a stage further. Oddly, so far as England was concerned, the Catholic papacy had simply been replaced by a Tudor papacy, returned temporally under Queen Mary to the jurisdiction of Rome, but recovered and cannily managed under Queen Elizabeth. So might it have remained except that the Stuart monarchs totally mismanaged the situation. When Charles II returned after the Civil War a Parliament packed with high church cavileers passed legislation with which sincere Puritan clergy simply could not comply - as Roger Thomas expressed it 50 years ago:

The Law of the Land requires us to drive on the left of the road; this is conduct imposed upon us, but no one feels that it is an imposition or resents it as such - and this for two reasons, first that we easily see that it is eminently reasonable to have a rule of the road, though it is a matter of indifference whether it be left or right, and, second, that it is socially desirable that matters closely touching our mutual convenience should be authoritatively decided. But where diversity is harmless (whether I grow roses in my garden or dahlias) or where authority is being officious or even offensive to conscience (insisting for instance on my holding so many premium bonds) interference with my freedom is immediately felt as an imposition.

The requirements of the Act of Uniformity were regarded by Puritan clergy as impositions in matters of indifference; and the events which followed meant that the unity of the Church in England was shattered for good. The days of legitimate religious pluralism in England had arrived never to return. However, for those who look hard enough, the faded imprint of that collapsed unity may sometimes be seen in the trappings of monarchy and in the House of Lords.

2. Secondly, the events previous and subsequent to the Great Ejection and which led to the development of England's legitimised religious pluralism closely impacted upon the wider political life of England. In the 1680s the King having produced no heir caused widespread concern lest this 'closet' Catholic monarch, Charles 2nd, was succeeded by his 'open' Catholic brother James 7th. Whether one was 'high church' or 'low church' by the 1680s the English now quite definitely preferred their political independence from Rome. What to do about Catholic James and how to exclude him from the royal succession led to what became known as 'the Exclusion crisis' and eventually to the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 when, without a drop of blood being spilled, James was pushed aside in favour of his Protestant sister Mary and her husband Dutch William; and it is in these events where lies the origins of the Whig and Tory parties and the emergence of the British system of party politics and of Parliamentary democracy. So - not only does religious pluralism in Britain have its origins anchored in the ejection of 1662 so also does political democracy and the extraordinary situation unmatched, so far as I know, anywhere in the world that even now Her Majesty the Queen has not only a leader of her Government but also a leader of her Loyal Opposition - with, so far as I know, his salary and car paid for by the state.

Can you imagine Mr. Putin sanctioning paying the leader of his opposition?  
As Harry Lismer Short wrote in 1962 "Nonconformity in religion was a  
foundaton of political democracy."

3. Thirdly, only one ejected minister is actually know to have had Unitarian views. His name was John Cooper an 'ordained' Gloucester school teacher and a disciple of the Socinian John Biddle whose death just happens to have occurred in 1662. However, a significant number of churches which today self-identify as Unitarian do happen to have their beginnings in the events of 1662. This - despite the fact that when, in 1689, toleration arrived anti-Trinitarianism and Roman Catholicism were specifically excluded and about which the philosopher John Locke protested vigorously and eloquently in his *Letter on Toleration*. So how did they become Unitarian? The newly legalised Protestant Dissenting tradition developed in two main strands. In one strand the pews ruled - and, as we know, the pews prefer the comfortable and the familiar. In the other strand the pulpit ruled and the pulpit enjoys the challenging and the new. For the most part congregations which would later self-identify as Unitarian were congregations where the minister, chosen and supported by a group of sympathetic trustees, got away with 'theological murder' - the right of private judgement in the interpretation of scripture, the importance of rational inquiry as a moderator of blind faith, and above all the supremacy of conscience. These were ministers, who excluded from England's only two universities, were educated here and there in small private academies and foreign universities and for whom an appeal to reason as well as an appeal to scripture played a significant part in the development of their religious thought. They were ministers who in the pulpit would not to be covered by the conservative pews with the result that sometimes their congregations dwindled or divided or sometimes followed them becoming

liberal and subsequently Unitarian in their theology. So it is that Unitarians may rightly look to the ejected ministers as pioneers of their tradition since to quote Fred Kenworthy "they enshrined in their lives and witness their own enduring principle of a man's absolute faithfulness to conscience and conviction."

4. Fourthly and finally we need to ask about the function of dissent today. Should we continue to be religious dissenters in the tradition of 1662 and if so why and what for? In 1962 I attended my first Unitarian General Assembly and heard Harry Lismer Short give the Essex Hall lecture in the South Place Ethical Society at Red Lion Square, London and for which he got a lengthy standing ovation. Councillor Mrs. Eleanor Crosskey (Labour, Washwood Heath, Birmingham), I remember, immediately purchased 20 copies. I'm going to finish by reading two passages from that lecture entitled *Dissent and The Community*:

We and our churches [he said] today are facing a time of severe testing . . . nonconformity in religion was a foundation of political democracy . . . heresy in religion has been a foundation of intellectual freedom . . . No one can safely cut himself off from his world, to live in a little private world of his own. The dissenter continues to make his contribution. I want to ask what the contribution has been over the last three hundred years . . . What is its public function? We value what it means to ourselves; but what does it do for the world?

Great causes do not die because of opposition; usually, as in 1662, opposition is a stimulus. Nor do they die because of internal differences; often these arouse debate and emulation. They are more

likely to collapse because of inner weariness and a loss of contact with the main stream of life in the community. A church must not only preach to its already converted members a doctrine which they consider true; it must have an effective place in the wider world. It must have some contemporary relevance, some function in the social order, some contribution to make to the intellectual life of the time. Liberty is not permission to withdraw from the world's battles; we are not mere quietists.

A church cannot live merely by consuming its own ideas . . . As in the 18th century, and at other times in human history we need a new demythologisation, which will lift the elemental things of heart and mind out of a world-view which is in decay, and out them into the new setting. We should be among the people who are doing this – not just for our own comfort and guidance, but for the whole community. This is a public debate, and we must make our contribution, to teach and also to learn . . . I have suggested that the inner vitality of a church is related to the function of that church in the larger community. It lives by giving – if not in one way, then in another. If it is driven out of the public area, it may shrivel away. We know what our forefathers did in this direction; what is our public function today? [Short 493 words]

[1753 words]

