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Badge of Intolerance

Archbishop William Sancroft and seven bishops were honored on a 17th-century medal for their refusal to support religious diversity.

RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY has a long and sordid history, and to this day it remains alive and well. It is spread verbally and through various forms of media, from ancient scrolls to Internet blogs and even medallic art. While medals promoting religious intolerance abound, this article focuses on a specimen related to an incident that occurred in 17th-century England during the reign of James II.

► **ARCHBISHOP WILLIAM SANCROFT** (obverse) and the six bishops (reverse) who supported his refusal to read the Declaration of Indulgence are pictured on a silver medal engraved by George Bower and issued in 1688. Henry Compton, bishop of London, was included on the reverse rendering (center), but was not imprisoned and is not shown in the painting at the left. Actual Size: 51mm

Centuries of Intolerance

Religious prejudice in England dates back as far as the reign of King Edward I, who, in 1290, ordered all Jews expelled from the country. This edict remained in force for almost 400 years, until Oliver Cromwell ruled the Commonwealth as Lord Protector (1653-58).

The long history of conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants can be traced to the Protestant Reformation, which German priest and theologian Martin Luther initiated in earnest in 1517. The contention between the two Christian denominations for control of the English mon-



archy started during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-47) and continued for more than a century. Unlike in France, where the dominant Catholics persecuted the Protestants, in England the Anglican Church gained the upper hand, resulting in harsh punishments for those who chose not to conform to the church's religious precepts.

Religion & The Monarchy

In 1509 Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon, the Catholic daughter of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. Their union was intended to solidify an alliance with Catholic Spain. Unfortunately, Catherine could not conceive the son Henry desired, and he determined to divorce her. The Pope, however, forbade the separation. Not easily deterred, Henry broke with the church in Rome in 1534 and established the Church of England, with himself as its head. Many Catholics who refused to acknowledge his "supremacy" were burned at the stake.

Upon Henry's death in 1547, Edward VI (Henry's son with his third wife, Jane Seymour) succeeded to the throne. Edward, a devout Protestant, died after six years of reign. He had willed the crown to Lady Jane Grey to exclude, unsuccessfully, his Catholic half sister, Mary I. (Mary, Henry's daughter with Catherine of Aragon, earned her appellation "Bloody Mary" by having many English Protestants slaughtered.)

Although allegiance to the Pope in Rome was irrevocably severed during Henry VIII's reign, England's more formal separation from Roman Catholicism took place during Elizabeth I's time on the throne. (Elizabeth was the daughter of Henry and his second wife, Anne Boleyn.) Under Elizabeth's auspices, a new branch

The English Parliament objected to Charles' effort to promote religious tolerance and compelled him to withdraw the Declaration.

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▲ **ENGLAND'S ACCEPTANCE OF CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS** usually depended on who was on the throne. Clockwise, from top left: Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, Elizabeth I, Charles II and James II.

of Western Christianity, called Anglicanism, developed. By the mid-17th century, the Church of England was independent of the Roman pontiff and comprised a distinct Christian tradition, with theologies, structures and forms of worship representing a middle ground between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Other religions were not tolerated by English bishops, who constituted the Church's hierarchy.

But, in 1672, Charles II of England joined France's Louis XIV in issuing the Declaration of Indulgence. This historic document suspended all penal laws against

Catholic recusants, that is, those who did not attend the Church of England, as well as Protestant dissenters who did not adhere to the Church's doctrine. The English Parliament objected to Charles' effort to promote religious tolerance and compelled him to withdraw the Declaration, replacing it with laws that required anyone entering public service in England to take the Anglican sacrament.

In 1687 Charles' successor, the openly Catholic James II, issued a new Declaration of Indulgence (also known as the Declaration for Liberty of Conscience). The revised law went even further than the one

issued by Charles II in that it exempted Catholics, Protestants, Unitarians, Jews, Muslims and people of any or no faith from penalties based on their religious (or nontheist) convictions. Furthermore, James required his country's bishops to read the document to their parishioners.

William Sancroft (1617-93), the 79th archbishop of Canterbury, took exception to the Declaration and penned a petition against its reading. Sancroft and six of his fellow bishops signed the petition. For this offense, they were confined to the Tower of London until they eventually were acquitted and released.

Honoring the Opposition

Several medals were issued in objection to the bishops' imprisonment. The example shown here, engraved by 17th-century medalist George Bower and titled "Archbishop Sancroft and the Seven Bishops," commemorates and supports the protest staged by William Sancroft, the six bishops and Henry Compton, the bishop of London.

Although James II's Declaration of Indulgence was designed to grant individuals a degree of religious tolerance, the medal promoted the opposite. Clergymen often wore this medal, and others like it, around their necks in support of the bishops, who were considered heroes. As the medal's edge inscription *SI FRACTUS ILLABATUR ORBIS IMPAUDOS FERIENT RUINÆ* ("If the Shattered Universe Were to Fall, the Ruins Would Strike Them Undismayed") suggests, they were unafraid of the penalties inflicted upon them by the Crown. A similar medal struck in Holland intimated that their imprisonment was a tribute, not a disgrace. Apparently then,

These convictions were made more succinct, though no less absolute, in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

as often is the case now, in some circles religious intolerance was worn as a badge of honor.

The Aftermath

Two important consequences of this incident deserve mention. First, in response to James II's issuance of the Declaration of Indulgence and his subsequent marriage to his second wife, the devoutly Catholic Mary of Modena, many turned against him. The Protestant Parliament aligned itself with James' Protestant daughter Mary (child of his first wife, Anne Hyde) and her husband, William of Orange, who jointly assumed the throne of England as William and Mary in the so-called Glorious Revolution. This, in turn, led to the 1701 Act of Settlement, which established the law, still on the books today, that only Protestants can succeed to the English throne.

Second, the 1687 Declaration of Indulgence clearly influenced the writers of the United States' Constitution. James' Declaration proclaimed "that we will protect and maintain the archbishops, bishops, and clergy, and all other our subjects of the Church of England, in the free exercise of their religion, as by law established, and in the quiet and full enjoyment of all their possessions, without any molestation or disturbance whatsoever." These convictions were made more succinct, though no less absolute, in the

First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Similarly, the Declaration of Indulgence eliminated the practices of swearing allegiance to the sovereign and requiring religious

either civil or military, under us or under our government.

These sentiments have their counterparts in Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, which states:

The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State

Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.

We clearly are indebted to James II, who issued his Declaration of Indulgence in 1687, exactly 100 years before our own Constitution was estab-

lished. And, in a perverse way, we should also be indebted to Archbishop Sancroft and the bishops whose demonstration of religious intolerance may have encouraged the framers of our own Constitution to codify into law words that would forever guaranty religious neutrality in the newly formed United States of America. ■

LEARN MORE...

If you enjoyed this article, you also might like to read Weiss' "Medallic History of Religious and Racial Intolerance" at bit.ly/h04x8Q.



▲ A 19TH-CENTURY PAINTING shows the bishops greeting the public after their acquittal on June 29, 1688.

tests for government office or employment by stating:

And forasmuch as we are desirous to have the benefit of the service of all our loving subjects...we do hereby further declare...that the oaths commonly called, *The Oaths of Supremacy and Allegiance*, and also the several tests and declarations...shall not at any time hereafter be required to be taken, declared, or subscribed by any person or persons whatsoever, who is or shall be employed in any office or place of trust