

The Decline of Comprehension in the Church of England, 1689–1750

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Abstract Following several attempts to fashion a broad-based national church from the Church of England by reforming the Act of Uniformity (1662), the failed Comprehension Bill that accompanied the Toleration Act (1689) was the final such proposal tabled in Parliament. Although historians have examined moments when comprehension reappeared in eighteenth-century confessional discourse, less attention has been paid to connecting these moments within England’s long Reformation and to explaining why the prospects for comprehension remained so dim. Its supporters claimed the Elizabethan *via media* in church and state to fashion a national church within a godly commonwealth by uniting Anglicans with “moderate” Dissenters. However, the High Church campaign against the practice of occasional conformity meant that comprehension ceased to be a viable political proposition by the time of the Tory landslide of 1710 and the passage of the Occasional Conformity Act (1711). The development of the culture of “free enquiry” among Dissenters further widened the gulf between them and the establishment, reinforcing the aspiration of the established church’s Whig leaders for harmonious coexistence rather than unity. Despite its failure as a political proposition, Whig churchmen and moderate Dissenters continued to idealize comprehension due to their (albeit loosening) Hookerian commitment to unity in church and state.

Over recent years, scholars have exposed the contingency of the implementation of the Toleration Act (1689). Approved hurriedly in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1688, it was more an act of limited parliamentary indulgence than toleration.¹ It ended for Trinitarian Dissenters the persecuting society of Restoration England by suspending most of the penal laws known as the Clarendon code.² The act’s Tory sponsor, Daniel Finch, second Earl of Nottingham, did not intend that it should provide for public worship among

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¹ Its name was An Act for Exempting their Majestyes Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the Penalties of certaine Laws, 1689, W. & M. 1, c. 18.

² Mark Goldie, “The Theory of Religious Intolerance in Restoration England,” in *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*, ed. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan Israel, and Nicholas Tyacke (Oxford, 1991), 331–68.

“moderate”³ Dissenters. Nottingham had paired the Toleration Bill with his Comprehension Bill to include Presbyterians and some Independents within the Church of England, leaving the Toleration Act for the sectarian few.⁴ Destabilized by more radical alternative proposals, Nottingham’s bill collapsed in Convocation.⁵ Although Nottingham’s had been the latest in a series of such parliamentary bills, including at least eight between 1667 and 1689, its failure meant that the implementation of the Toleration Act was fraught with ambiguity.⁶

As an alternative to the attempts of Charles II and James II to indulge Protestant Dissent and Roman Catholicism by suspending the penal laws through royal prerogative, supporters of comprehension—a broad-based national church that contained various shades of Protestant opinion and practice then excluded from it—proposed to reform the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England to bring into it as many English Protestants as possible. The policy implied amendments to the Act of Uniformity (1662), which mandated clergymen to declare their unfeigned assent and consent to the articles and to acknowledge the illegality of the Solemn League and Covenant (1643). Those roughly two thousand ministers whose “great exclusion”⁷ from the establishment had been confirmed by the Act of Uniformity opposed the three-and-a-half articles that touched on church government. They claimed that the Elizabethan church settlement had allowed ministers to subscribe only to the thirty-six articles that related to doctrine. They objected to the rubric for conducting services in the Book of Common Prayer (1662), including the signing of the cross, kneeling at the altar rail during the eucharist, and the use of the surplice instead of the Geneva gown. The Act of Uniformity mandated episcopal ordination, but for those Presbyterians who had not received it prior to the church settlement of 1646, this requirement was effectively a reordination. Even though Presbyterians were willing to accept a limited episcopal office and favored the so-called primitive episcopacy of James Ussher, archbishop of Armagh, they resented the implicit denial of the validity of their earlier ministry.⁸

³ The term *moderation* was bitterly contested during the party wars of 1688–1714 by Whigs, Tories, Dissenters, High Churchmen, and Low Churchmen. In this case, it refers to those Dissenters who wished to rejoin a national church rather than to worship independently.

⁴ Henry Horwitz, *Revolution Politics: The Career of Daniel Finch, Second Earl of Nottingham* (Cambridge, 1968), 87; John Spurr, “The Church of England, Comprehension and the Toleration Act of 1689,” *English Historical Review* 104, no. 413 (1989): 927–46.

⁵ Timothy Fawcett, ed., *The Liturgy of Comprehension, 1689: An Abortive Attempt to Revise the Book of Common Prayer* (Southend-on-Sea, 1973), 116, 120–21, 157. See George Every, *The High Church Party, 1688–1718* (London, 1956); G. V. Bennett, “King William III and the Episcopate,” in *Essays in Modern Church History: In Memory of Norman Sykes*, ed. G. V. Bennett and J. D. Walsh (London, 1966), 104–32, at 119–20; Mark Knights, “‘Meer Religion’ and the ‘Church State’ of Restoration England: The Impact and Ideology of James II’s Declaration of Indulgence,” in *A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration*, ed. Alan Houston and Steve Pincus (Cambridge, 2001), 41–70.

⁶ Ralph Stevens, *Protestant Pluralism: The Reception of the Toleration Act, 1689–1720* (Woodbridge, 2018). For previous comprehension bills, see Mark Goldie, *Roger Morrice and the Puritan Whigs* (Woodbridge, 2016), 238–46.

⁷ The “great exclusion” refers to the process by which roughly two thousand Puritans were deprived of their ministerial livings in the Church of England between 1660 and 1662.

⁸ Alan Ford, *James Ussher: Theology, History, and Politics in Early-Modern Ireland and England* (Oxford, 2007), 223–56.

Whereas Quakers, Baptists, and most Independents welcomed the toleration, the failure to secure a comprehension aggrieved Presbyterians, who had long cherished the ideal of a national church.⁹ The Toleration Act encouraged the process now known among sociologists of religion as denominationalization, since growing numbers of Presbyterians, making best use of the Toleration Act, set aside the aspiration for a comprehension.¹⁰ The persecutions of Restoration Anglicanism had schooled Presbyterians in the life of Dissent. While many leading dons (as they were widely known), such as Richard Baxter, dreamed of a godly national church, the younger generation of ducklings such as Vincent Alsop accepted their status as indulged Nonconformists.¹¹ In 1691, even Baxter wondered “whether God will ever raise up a Generation, that wearied with Divisions and the direful effects, and forced by some Prince of Piety or Interest, to consent to a healing Peace and Concord.”¹² Edmund Calamy became the figurehead of eighteenth-century moderate Nonconformity, and Dissenters developed their denominational identity through the histories of those like Calamy, Daniel Neal, and Samuel Palmer.¹³ In no less than his abridgement of Baxter’s *Life* (1702), Calamy declared that it was “to little purpose any longer to cherish such Expectations” of a comprehension.¹⁴

The life of eighteenth-century Dissent was notable less for the desire for a comprehension than for the campaign to repeal the Test Act (1673) and Corporation Act (1661), which required a sacramental test of all officers and members of corporations prior to their election. Daniel Defoe set the tone in 1705 by reminding Englishmen that the renewed Test Act of 1678 had been directed against Roman Catholics. It was a “most scandalous ingratitude,” he maintained, that Parliament should lump Presbyterians “in the same Class with the Introducers of *that Popery* they laid down their Lives to oppose.”¹⁵ The indemnity acts, the first of which was passed during the 1720s, but which were renewed every year between 1757 and 1867, merely lengthened the period during which a Dissenter might commune with the church to qualify for office.¹⁶ The practice of occasional conformity represented one solution. While

⁹ Henry Horwitz, *Parliament, Policy, and Politics in the Reign of William III* (Manchester, 1977), 25; Scott Sowerby, *Making Toleration: The repealers and the Glorious Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 253–54; John Coffey, “Church and State, 1550–1750: The Emergence of Dissent,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Nonconformity*, ed. Robert Pope (London, 2013), 47–74, at 63; Goldie, *Roger Morrice*, 148–93.

¹⁰ Norman Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker: Aspects of English Church History, 1660–1768* (Cambridge, 1959), 89; M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1978), 260, 270; B. R. White, “The Twilight of Puritanism in the Years before and after 1688,” in Grell, Israel, and Tyacke, *From Persecution to Toleration*, 307–30, at 310; David L. Wykes, “‘The Settling of Meetings and the Preaching of the Gospel’: The Development of the Dissenting Interest, 1690–1715,” *Journal of the United Reformed History Society* 5 (1992–94), 127–45; J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 2000), 81; William J. Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment: Orientalism, Religion and Politics in England and Its Empire, 1648–1715* (Cambridge, 2015), 253–54.

¹¹ Robert Beddard, “Vincent Alsop and the Emancipation of Restoration Dissent,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24, no. 2 (1973): 161–84.

¹² Richard Baxter, *Of National Churches* (London, 1691), 69.

¹³ J. T. Spivey, “Middle Way Men: Edmund Calamy and the Crisis of Moderate Nonconformity” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1986); John Seed, *Dissenting Histories: Religious Division and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England* (Edinburgh, 2008).

¹⁴ Edmund Calamy, *An Abridgement of Mr. Baxter’s History of his Life and Times* (London, 1702), xv.

¹⁵ Daniel Defoe, *The Parallel* (London, 1705), 3.

¹⁶ K. R. M. Short, “The English Indemnity Acts, 1726–1867,” *Church History* 42, no. 3 (1973): 366–76.

only sometimes taking Anglican sacraments then enabled Dissenters to qualify for public office, the practice also had roots in many Restoration Presbyterians' custom of partial conformity to express commitment to parish worship and to stay close to the establishment. After the Revolution, local practice often encouraged opposition to the Test and Corporation acts, which governed a minority of public offices and trusts. The Corporation Act did not automatically cover new bodies independent of the crown or its charters and commissions. Nor did the Test Act cover offices in these bodies. Dissenters could take and even monopolize offices in corporations like Plymouth and institutions including school boards and those related to manorial government. Despite the opposition of the High Church party, the Bristol Act (1718) confirmed the practice of the Bristol Poor Law Guardians to appoint officers without a religious test.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the denominationalization of Dissent, historians have observed moments when comprehension reappeared in eighteenth-century confessional discourse. Before the tide turned against the Whigs after 1697, there were attempts to move comprehension bills in Parliament.¹⁸ Gilbert Burnet, bishop of Salisbury, and Benjamin Hoadly, bishop of Bangor, remained sympathetic to it.¹⁹ During the 1730s, the Dissenting campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation acts prompted John Hough, bishop of Worcester, to suggest a comprehension to Edmund Gibson, bishop of London and widely known as Sir Robert Walpole's church minister.²⁰ During the late 1740s, Samuel Chandler and Philip Doddridge engaged with Anglican sympathizers, including John Jones, whose defense of comprehension in *Free and Candid Disquisitions Relating to the Church of England* (1749) provoked a controversy on the subject. They also held discussions with such leading bishops as Thomas Sherlock and Thomas Secker.²¹

Less attention has been paid to connecting these moments within the process of England's "long Reformation."²² Although comprehension emerged after 1662 as its proponents sought to reform the new Act of Uniformity, they preferred the more minimal requirements of the Elizabethan church settlement, and they claimed the tradition of the *via media* between Geneva and Rome. They praised

¹⁷ Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1994), 72–77.

¹⁸ Henry Horwitz, "Comprehension in the Later Seventeenth Century: A Postscript," *Church History* 34, no. 3 (1965): 342–48.

¹⁹ William Gibson, *The Church of England, 1688–1732: Unity and Accord* (London, 2001), 48–49, 182, 195–96; Gibson, *Enlightenment Prelate: Benjamin Hoadly, 1676–1761* (Cambridge, 2004), 14, 60–61, 72, 102.

²⁰ Richard Burgess Barlow, *Citizenship and Conscience: A Study in the Theory and Practice of Religious Toleration during the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1963), 57–97; Stephen Taylor, "Sir Robert Walpole, the Church of England, and the Quakers Tithing Bill of 1736," *Historical Journal* 28, no. 1 (1985): 51–77, at 68–69; James Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990), 51–58; Bradley, "The Public, Parliament and the Protestant Dissenting Deputies, 1732–40," *Parliamentary History* 24, no. 1 (2005): 71–90.

²¹ G. F. Nuttall, "Chandler, Doddridge and the Archbishop: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Ecumenism," *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 1, no. 2 (1973): 42–56; Stephen Taylor, "Church and State in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: The Newcastle Years, 1742–1762" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1987), 208–10.

²² Nicholas Tyacke, ed., *England's Long Reformation, 1500–1800* (London, 1998); Peter Marshall, "(Re) Defining the Reformation," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 564–86; Lucy Bates, "The Limits of Possibility in England's Long Reformation," *Historical Journal* 53, no. 4 (2010): 1049–70.

what they took to be the moderate episcopacy of two archbishops of Canterbury, Edmund Grindal (1576–1583) and George Abbott (1611–1633), and Archbishop Ussher against latter-day Laudians.²³ They adhered to the Hookerian formulation that “within this *Realm of England* . . . one society is both the *Church* and *Commonwealth*.”²⁴ As Puritans evolved into Whigs and cast the idea of godly magistracy anew, supporters of comprehension became less concerned with older Puritan aspirations to further reform than with fashioning a national church that enjoyed the support of as many English Protestants as possible. Like Anglicans, Presbyterians often associated separatism with enthusiasm, contrasting their learned, ordained ministry to sectarian preachers who claimed a calling by God, or maintained that they had been infused with the Holy Spirit. As Robert Ingram has shown, eighteenth-century confessional writers agonized over the relationship between the Reformation and the causes and consequences of the wars of religion of the 1640s.²⁵ Even as denominalization undermined the legacies of Puritan church discipline and the notion of a godly national church, Presbyterians and some Independents often felt closer to the establishment than to Nonconformists like Baptists and Quakers.

Nor have historians explained why the prospects of comprehension remained so dim. The history of eighteenth-century comprehension is a study in diminuendo. A centerpiece of Restoration debates about the church-state relationship that almost succeeded in 1689, its status evolved during the party wars of the 1690s and 1700s from a live political goal to an enduring ecclesiological ideal. Its prospects died with the Tory landslide of 1710 and the Occasional Conformity Act (1711). Even during those two decades, much of the evidence of support for comprehension comes from urban and metropolitan contexts where the boundaries between church and chapel were especially porous. There is scant evidence that lay Dissenters, more concerned with removing the sacramental test than reforming the Thirty-Nine Articles, considered the issue. In the aftermath of the party wars and influenced by histories like those of Calamy and Neal, Dissenting ministers strengthened their denominational identity and sensed that to commune with their persecutors would be to betray their heroic ancestors. The growth of the particular culture of free inquiry that attended the evolution toward Arian and Socinian theologies widened the gulf between Anglicanism and Dissent while dividing Dissenters, especially Presbyterians, from each other and blurring the boundaries of moderation. Whereas comprehension might have encompassed Presbyterians and those Independents who were willing to associate with them, the Toleration Act encouraged these denominations to campaign with others like the Baptists for further relief. The most significant initiatives were the Body of the Protestant Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations and the lay Protestant Dissenting Deputies, which developed during the 1720s and 1730s.²⁶ While comprehension retained its intellectual

²³ Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker*, 71–91; Roger Thomas, “Comprehension and Indulgence,” in *From Uniformity to Unity, 1662–1962*, ed. G. F. Nuttall and Owen Chadwick (London, 1962), 189–253; Walter G. Simon, “Comprehension in the Age of Charles II,” *Church History* 31, no. 4 (1962): 440–48.

²⁴ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, 3 vols. (Oxford, 2013), 3:96.

²⁵ Robert G. Ingram, *Reformation without End: Religion, Politics and the Past in Post-Revolutionary England* (Manchester, 2018).

²⁶ Bernard Lord Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies* (Cambridge, 1952).

appeal, the church's Whig leaders proved unwilling to risk further confessional controversy. They preferred the defensive relationship with Dissent that distinguished the church-Whig alliance crafted by Walpole and Gibson.

Four processes drove the decline of comprehension between the failure of Nottingham's scheme and the late 1740s. First, the complex post-Revolutionary religious landscape, especially the High Church campaign against occasional conformity, forced Whigs and latitudinarians like Burnet and Hoadly into a defensive effort to secure the toleration and to appeal to Dissenters to rejoin the unreformed establishment. Having been central to the occasional conformity controversy and the trial of Dr. Henry Sacheverell, comprehension ceased to be a viable political proposition with the Tory landslide of 1710 and the Occasional Conformity Act. Second, although the Hanoverian succession, anticlericalism of the Stanhope-Sunderland ministry, and Bangorian controversy prompted expectations of a comprehension, there is no evidence that the ministry might risk upending the uneasy relationship between Whigs and the church by pursuing one. Third, the development of the culture of free inquiry among Dissenters, which occasioned the Salters' Hall controversy (1719), signaled a shift in the demands of Dissent away from issues of form and worship toward doctrine. The aftershocks of the controversy reinforced the church's strategy of harmonious coexistence rather than institutional unity. Fourth, discussions for a comprehension during the late 1740s never resulted in serious proposals. Anglicans like Secker, who enjoyed cordial relations with moderate Dissenters like Chandler and Doddridge, were discussing an ideal, not a realistic policy. Although the attraction of comprehension remained strong, Chandler and Doddridge represented the closing act of old Dissent before the emergence of the rational or Enlightened Dissent of the late eighteenth century.

I

Between 1689 and 1714, comprehension remained a political goal of Whigs and latitudinarians, despite moderate Dissenters' increasing readiness to accept the toleration. In its international pose, comprehension signaled that the Church of England stood in unity with European Protestants. In a sermon preached before the new king in St. James's Chapel in 1715, William Wake, bishop of Lincoln, argued, "We should not only labour to establish a happy *Unity* among our selves at Home; but . . . as becomes a *People* professing its self the *Head* of the *Protestant Interest* . . . We should endeavour, yet farther, to unite all the *Reformed Churches*, and *States Abroad*."²⁷ During the same period, Scots, who had abolished episcopacy in the Claim of Right (1689) and reestablished Presbyterian government and the Westminster Confession in 1690, debated a comprehension with proposals either to enforce or exempt Presbyterianism and the Westminster Confession or to devise other forms of flexibility within the national church.²⁸

²⁷ William Wake, *A Sermon Preached Before the King in St. James's Chapel, Upon the First of August 1715* [. . .] (London, 1715), 22.

²⁸ Ben Rogers, "Religious Comprehension and Toleration in Scotland, 1689–1712" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2019).

Some within the establishment framed the Toleration Act as a staging post toward a comprehension. In response to Calamy's acceptance of parliamentary indulgence, Hoadly proclaimed himself to be one "who sincerely desire[s] a greater Union amongst *English Protestants* than we are yet arrived at."²⁹ In his prolific exposition of pastoral care, Burnet implied his support for comprehension in his claim that Low Churchmen "*think no human Constitution is so perfect, but that it may be made better*" and his statement that his goal was "the compleating of our Reformation, especially as to the Lives and Manners of Men."³⁰ "The Toleration, now granted," Burnet reflected in his *History of his Own Time*, it seemed "more necessary than formerly, to make the terms of Communion with the Church, as large as might be." He recalled a clerical party that "wished for a favourable opportunity of making such alterations, in some few Rites and Ceremonies, as might bring into the Church those, who were not at too great a distance from it; And I do freely own that I was of this number."³¹

Collaboration between Low Church Whigs and Dissenters followed regret that schism had deprived the Church of England of ministerial talent and the reality that the boundaries between the establishment and Dissent, particularly in the metropolis, were often porous.³² Whigs encouraged cooperation between Anglicans and Dissenters in civil society as part of the reformation of manners.³³ In part, such efforts formed a response to suspected deism and the sense that religious discipline was lax, especially in urban centers.³⁴ In 1691, Peter King, a cousin of John Locke and one of the prosecutors of Sacheverell in 1710, argued that where "Faith and Morals are attack'd and shaken, Atheism increases, Immorality prevails, and those damnable Heresies, which for many Ages have been silenced and abandoned, are now revived by Men of a corrupt Faith." Therefore, "the Necessity of an Union or Comprehension is manifest." The differences between Dissenters and Anglicans "are neither about Faith nor Manners," but "lesser Matters," which, "with the greatest ease in the World might be composed and settled, if managed by Men of Prudence and Moderation."³⁵

Presbyterians often shared these sentiments. In the preface to a posthumous collection of sermons by the minister Daniel Williams, published in 1738, the editor wrote of Williams's long-standing hope that "*God would in time bring all sober and moderate*

²⁹ Benjamin Hoadly, *The Reasonableness of Conformity to the Church of England* [. . .] (London, 1703), 1–2.

³⁰ Gilbert Burnet, "The Preface to the Third Edition" and "The Epistle Dedicatory," in *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care* [. . .], 4th ed. (London, 1713), unpaginated.

³¹ Gilbert Burnet, *Bishop Burnet's History of his Own Time*, 6 vols. ([The Hague], [1725]–1734), 4:11, 59–60.

³² Alasdair Raffé, "Presbyterians," in *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, vol. 2, *The Long Eighteenth Century, c. 1689–c. 1828*, ed. Andrew C. Thompson (Oxford, 2018), 12–29, at 18; Stephen Orchard, "Congregationalists," in Thompson, *Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting*, 2:30–53, at 30–33; Jennifer Farooq, *Preaching in Eighteenth-Century London* (Woodbridge, 2013), 20–38.

³³ Craig Rose, "The Origins and Ideals of the SPCK, 1699–1716," in *The Church of England, c.1689–c.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, ed. John Walsh, Colin Haydon, and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge, 1993), 172–90, at 174; Brent S. Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: The Church of England in an Age of Benevolence, 1680–1830* (New Haven, 2014).

³⁴ Richard H. Popkin, "The Deist Challenge," in Grell, Israel, and Tyacke, *From Persecution to Toleration*, 195–215.

³⁵ [Peter King], *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church* [. . .] (London, 1719), 169–70.

Protestants nearer together, and find some way of separating them more entirely from the loose and the violent.” The collection contained Williams’s sermon to the Society for the Reformation of Manners in 1698, in which he preached that “England can never be fixed happy in its religions, or civil concernments, but by an UNION between the moderate churchmen, and the moderate dissenters.”³⁶ Presbyterians’ comprehensive instincts made cooperation with other tolerated denominations harder. In 1691, John Howe initiated the Happy Union between London Presbyterians and Congregationalists with a Common Fund to support young ministers. It prompted pamphleteers to argue for a general Protestant union.³⁷ But within three years, the Happy Union had broken up.³⁸ Congregationalists had feared that Presbyterians were “for sacramental communion with the Church of England.”³⁹

However, the complex religious dynamics of the 1690s forced a subtle but significant shift in the Whig and latitudinarian position. In Presbyterians’ intention to stay close to the establishment, some Whigs suspected an older desire to suppress sectarianism. Sympathizers of comprehension like Locke, John Toland, and Robert Ferguson came to accept parliamentary indulgence on the grounds that Presbyterian adiaphorism signified inclusiveness only with Anglicans. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), Locke blamed “narrowness of Spirit on all sides” as “the principal Occasion of our Miseries and Confusions.” It was “neither Declarations of Indulgence, nor Acts of Comprehension, such as have yet been practised or projected amongst us, that can do the Work” of civil peace. Indulgence “will but palliate” and comprehension will “encrease our Evil.”⁴⁰ In 1699, Toland wrote that “Comprehension in all other places of the World has never bin any thing else but the Combination of a few Parties to fortify themselves, and to oppress all others.” It was better that “the National Church, being secur’d in her Worship and Emoluments, may not be allow’d to force others to her Communion; and that all Dissenters from it, being secur’d in their Liberty of Conscience, may not be permitted to meddle with the Riches or Power of the National Church.”⁴¹ Ferguson feared that once his brethren had gained “the Favour and Assistance of the *Latitudinarian Divines*,” they would “crush and subvert the Freedom of those among them that cannot come into the Terms of a *Comprehension*.”⁴²

As Whigs grew skeptical of comprehension, the possibility of Tory convergence with Dissent gives pause to consider a more concessive variety of post-Revolutionary Toryism. Sympathy for moderate Dissent was not the sole preserve of Whigs.

³⁶ Daniel Williams, *Practical Discourses on Several Important Subjects*, 2 vols. (London, 1738), 2:xxviii, 433.

³⁷ *A Brief History of Presbytery and Independency* [. . .] (London, 1691), 29; *Free Thoughts Occasioned by the Heads of Agreement* [. . .] (London, 1691), 26.

³⁸ H. Lismor Short, “Wales and the Ejection,” in *The Beginnings of Nonconformity: The Hibbert Lectures*, by Geoffrey F. Nuttall et al. (London, 1964), 78–96, at 91, <https://www.unitarian.org.uk/library/the-beginnings-of-nonconformity-hibbert-lectures/>.

³⁹ Richard Taylor, *A History of the Union Between the Presbyterian and Congregational Ministers* [. . .] (London, 1698), 3.

⁴⁰ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, ed. Mark Goldie (Indianapolis, 2010), 2. See also Jeffrey R. Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the Politics of Conscience* (Cambridge, 2020), 131, 268–69.

⁴¹ John Toland, *The Life of John Milton* [. . .] (London, 1699), 78–79.

⁴² Robert Ferguson, *A View of an Ecclesiastick* [. . .] (London, 1698), 51, 79.

Nottingham was a High Church Tory. The reformation of manners, especially the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, had High Church orientations. Tory supporters of the Blasphemy Act (1698) made themselves potential allies of Trinitarian Dissenters, which may help to explain the alliance between Presbyterians connected to the Harleyite interest and Tories during the late 1690s.⁴³ The High Church campaign against occasional conformity entrenched Tory enmity to Dissent and forced Whig latitudinarians into a rearguard defense of the toleration.

While the settlement of 1689 seemed insecure, latitudinarians reinforced it by charting a middle course between the present church establishment and Dissent. Encouraging Dissenters to return to the unreformed church and laying “the Obligations to Love and Peace, to Unity and Concord” were some of Burnet’s goals in *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*. Even though Dissenters had neglected their obligation under the laws of God and the gospel to unite the church, the establishment should work to win them. Anglican clergy must be “stricter in our Lives, more serious and constant in our Labours.” They might study “more effectually to Reform those of our Communion, than to rail at theirs.”⁴⁴ Despite his sympathy for Dissent, Hoadly argued that separation from the unreformed church remained unreasonable. Were his Dissenting audience to ask “the Enemies of this Church and Nation; (those whom it hath so gloriously and successfully opposed;) which way You should take to ruine both Church and Nation,” those enemies would reply, “the encouraging such a *separation*: and they may well be pleased that You think *separation* your duty in order to a *farther reformation*.”⁴⁵

The search for unity prompted a defensive turn in the latitudinarians’ position. In 1701, the Tory High Churchman Francis Atterbury prosecuted Burnet’s *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (1699) as “a platform laid for Comprehension.”⁴⁶ The offending passage was Burnet’s claim that “we in England differed only about Forms of Government and Worship, and about things of their own nature indifferent.” But High Church rhetoric obscured the niceties of Low Church arguments. Burnet had defended the Thirty-Nine Articles as “*Articles for Union and Peace*” among Christians who disagreed sincerely. While sympathizing with the conscientious reservations of moderate Dissenters, Burnet did not believe that separation was justifiable because matters of ritual were indifferent. The Thirty-Nine Articles were “a Standard of *Doctrine*” and subscription to them “amounts only to a general Compromise upon those Articles, that so there may be no disputing nor wrangling about them.” Even though “a man should differ in his Opinion from that which appears to be the clear sense of any of the Articles; yet he may with a good Conscience subscribe it.” The lay Christian “may esteem them to be of so little Importance to the chief design of Religion, that he may well hold Communion with those whom he thinks to be so mistaken.”⁴⁷

⁴³ D. W. Hayton, “Robert Harley’s ‘Middle Way’: The Puritan Heritage in Augustan Politics,” *British Library Journal* 15, no. 2 (1989): 158–72, at 168; Eloise Davies, “English Politics and the Blasphemy Act of 1698,” *English Historical Review* 135, no. 575 (2020): 804–35, at 819–20.

⁴⁴ Burnet, *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*, 181.

⁴⁵ Hoadly, *Reasonableness of Conformity*, 114.

⁴⁶ “Complaint of the Lower House of Convocation Against Burnet’s Exposition of the 39 Articles,” British Library, Add. MSS. 4238, fol. 58a.

⁴⁷ Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London, 1699), ix, 6.

Burnet thus fashioned a latitudinarian compromise that admonished Dissenters for their schism while holding out the possibility for future reform.

Once the Tories had made electoral gains between 1698 and 1702, the parliamentary assault on occasional conformity killed any prospect of a comprehension. Despite the Test and Corporation acts, the logic of comprehension was to allow, in the words of William III in 1689, “the Admission of all Protestants that are willing and able to serve” into public office.⁴⁸ Deeply controversial among Anglican churchmen as much as among Dissenters, there were routine attempts to outlaw occasional conformity before the Tories succeeded in 1711.⁴⁹ The pragmatic defense was that it laid a path for Dissenters into the unreformed establishment. It might lessen Presbyterian scruples about the Prayer Book and practices like kneeling for communion. Thomas Tenison, archbishop of Canterbury, described it as “*the Duty of all moderate Dissenters upon their own Principles*” and “*a likely Means to bring them over.*”⁵⁰ Simon Patrick, bishop of Ely, argued that it demonstrated the “conscientious sincerity” of the “very best of the nonconformists.”⁵¹ John Hooke, an Irish lawyer and one founder of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, who had moved from Nonconformity to Anglicanism, described the occasional conformist as one who declared himself “an enemy of separation” and “a Catholick Christian,” affirming the establishment “in all the Essentials of Christianity, tho’ he approves not of its impositions.”⁵²

While latitudinarians and Dissenters cast their High Church opponents as immoderate in their persecuting zeal, High Churchmen seized the label of moderation against hypocritical occasional conformists, Dissenting enthusiasts, and their Whiggish accomplices.⁵³ In 1704, obscuring Calamy’s position, Mary Astell attacked “those *Comprehensions* and *Uniting Projects*, which your *Moderation a Vertue*, your *Calamys* and other Dissenters are so full of.”⁵⁴ In 1705–06, William Baron took aim at “the pernicious Principles and Practises of that which the Dissenters among us have always followed, and so Factiously oppos’d, to our much more Orthodox Establishment.” Comprehension was “a New *Word* to promote an Old Design, the *Principles*, and *Projects* of *Puritanisme*, set out in a more modish Dress.”⁵⁵ The elevation of Tenison to the See of Canterbury offended figures like the Nonjuring diarist and antiquary Thomas Hearne, who called Tenison one of the “virulent enemies of

⁴⁸ William Cobbett, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, 36 vols. (London, 1806–1820), 5:184.

⁴⁹ John Flaningham, “The Occasional Conformity Controversy: Ideology and Party Politics, 1687–1711,” *Journal of British Studies* 17, no. 1 (1977): 38–62; Martin Greig, “Bishop Gilbert Burnet and the Latitudinarian Episcopal Opposition to the Occasional Conformity Bills, 1702–1704,” *Canadian Journal of History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 247–62; Gibson, *Enlightenment Prelate*, 60–72; Brent S. Sirota, “The Occasional Conformity Controversy, Moderation, and the Anglican Critique of Modernity, 1700–1714,” *Historical Journal* 57, no. 1 (2014): 81–105.

⁵⁰ *Memoirs of the Life and Times of the Most Reverend Father in God, Dr. Thomas Tennison* [. . .] (London, [1716?]), 103.

⁵¹ Alexander Taylor, ed., *The Works of Simon Patrick*, 9 vols. (Oxford, 1863), 9:554–55.

⁵² John Hooke, *Catholicism without Popery* [. . .] (London, 1704), 7.

⁵³ Mark Knights, “Occasional Conformity and the Representation of Dissent: Hypocrisy, Sincerity, Moderation and Zeal,” *Parliamentary History* 24, no. 1 (2005): 41–57.

⁵⁴ Mary Astell, *Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge, 1996), 104. See also [James Owen], *Moderation a Vertue* [. . .] (London, 1703).

⁵⁵ [William Baron], *An Historical Account of Comprehension, and Toleration* [. . .] (London, 1705–6), title page, 1.

the Church of England and universities, such as are for bringing in a Comprehension and establishing everything that makes for the Whigs and Presbyterians.”⁵⁶

The most notorious instance of the High Church attack on the Revolution settlement was the sermon of Sacheverell, *The Perils of False Brethren*, preached at St. Paul’s on 5 November 1709, and his subsequent impeachment in 1710, which provoked riots across England. Historians are apt to prioritize Sacheverell’s onslaught against the Toleration Act.⁵⁷ He also dedicated much of his sermon to criticizing “*Union, Comprehension, and Moderation*” as means for Nonconformists “*Getting Money, and Preferment.*” He distinguished “the *True Genuine Notion*” of the Church of England “in its *Establish’d Doctrine, Discipline, and Worship*” from “all Other Churches, and *Schismatics*, who would *Obtrude* on Us, a *Wild, Negative Idea* of a NATIONAL CHURCH.” Comprehension had been a “*Religious Trojan Horse*” to undermine the sacral constitution of the church.⁵⁸ Since the failure of Nottingham’s scheme, “What could not be gain’d by *Comprehension, and Toleration*, must be brought about by *Moderation, and Occasional Conformity.*”⁵⁹

As his prosecutors noted during his trial, Sacheverell’s argument involved the history of the Elizabethan church settlement. In damning the Dissenters, he had referred to “their first *Unhappy Plantation* in this Kingdom, by the Intercession of *That False Son* of the Church, *Bishop Grindall.*” Insofar as Elizabeth I had been “*Deluded* by that *Perfidious Prelate* to the *Toleration* of the *Genevan Discipline,*” she soon foresaw that “such an *Headstrong* and *Encroaching Monster*” would come to “*Endanger* the *Monarchy*, as well as the *Hierarchy,*” and she suppressed Presbyterianism and Puritanism.⁶⁰ Speaking for the prosecution, King noted that Sacheverell had wrongly argued that “queen Elizabeth was deluded by archbishop Grindall to the Toleration of the Genevan discipline.”⁶¹

Sacheverell’s argument prompted his prosecutors to rehearse the history of the church-state relationship since new Act of Uniformity. Alongside defending the actions of a High Church Tory, Nottingham, the prosecution claimed a Nonjuror, William Sancroft, for their cause. Although Sancroft supported a comprehension in the aftermath of the Revolution, he was deprived as archbishop of Canterbury in 1690 for refusing to swear allegiance to William and Mary. Spencer Cowper argued that, in Sacheverell’s sermon, “Comprehension and Toleration are represented as open Violence, Moderation and Occasional Conformity as secret Treachery, by which the Church may be blown up, tho’ it could not be pulled down by the violent means of Comprehension and Toleration.”⁶² Bishop Wake claimed that Sancroft had recalled “how utterly unprepared” churchmen had been in 1660 “to settle

⁵⁶ C. E. Doble et al., eds., *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1885–1921), 2:115.

⁵⁷ W. A. Speck, “The Current State of Sacheverell Scholarship,” *Parliamentary History* 31, no. 1 (2012): 16–27; Brian Cowan, “Introduction: Reading the Trial of Dr Sacheverell,” in *The State Trial of Henry Sacheverell*, ed. Brian Cowan (Malden, 2012), 1–34.

⁵⁸ Henry Sacheverell, *The Perils of False Brethren, Both in Church, and State* (London, 1710), 11, 16.

⁵⁹ T. B. Howell et al., eds., *Cobbett’s Complete Collection of State Trials*, 33 vols. (London, 1809–1826), 15:17.

⁶⁰ *Cobbett’s Complete Collection of State Trials*, 15:19.

⁶¹ *Cobbett’s Complete Collection of State Trials*, 15:135.

⁶² *Cobbett’s Complete Collection of State Trials*, 15:154.

many things to the advantage of the Church,” regretting “what a happy opportunity had been lost.”⁶³

The ferocity of the High Church attack contributed to the denominationalization of Dissent. In *Moderation a Vertue* (1703), James Owen, a Dissenting minister at Shrewsbury and a target of Astell’s pen, reflected that, had the most recent attempt to outlaw occasional conformity succeeded, “it would have erected a partition-wall between the Church and dissenters, and cut off all hope of accommodating differences between ’em, that there had been no further prospect of comprehension.” It would “probably have driven the moderate dissenters to a total separation.” Occasional conformists sought to qualify themselves for public office, but most did so out of conscience. It was more a continuation of Restoration Presbyterians’ habit of partial conformity than “a late Invention of crafty men to get into Places” because “Moderate *English Presbyterians* have all along declared against Total Separation, and practised *Occasional Conformity* without any Prospects of Temporal Advantage.”⁶⁴ But temporal advantage had been the problem. Whig churchmen and Dissenters like Owen found themselves defending occasional conformists from Dissenting as much as High Church charges of hypocrisy, insincerity, and abuse of the sacraments. In *The Sincerity of Dissenters* (1703), Daniel Defoe identified himself as a “strict” Dissenter against the “moderation” of men like Owen.⁶⁵ The occasional conformity controversy lent credence to those content to worship as indulged Nonconformists. In *A Defence of Moderate Nonconformity* (1703–1705), Calamy rehearsed the history of Nottingham’s scheme in response to the appeals of Whig churchmen like Hoadly and John Ollyffe to keep the flame alive. After 1689, “the Rising Generation, both of Ministers and People, among the Dissenters, determin’d Modestly and Thankfully to make use of the Liberty Granted; and to wait in the Use of it for that Happy Season, when the *Church*, or at least the *State*, shall come to be of another mind, and yield to that farther Reformation.” It was telling that William III “could in Thirteen Years make so little Advance towards that *Comprehension*, of which he was so earnestly desirous.”⁶⁶

It repays examining in detail the relationship between Calamy and Ollyffe to illustrate the success of the High Church campaign. The author of *An Essay Towards a Comprehension* (1701) and three subsequent pamphlets in defense of ministerial conformity, Ollyffe hoped to persuade Dissenters to commune with the unreformed establishment while seeking a future comprehension.⁶⁷ In response, Calamy appended his autobiography with a letter addressed from Ollyffe to the Presbyterian minister William Tong, in which Ollyffe had asked Tong to mediate between him and Calamy. Ollyffe rehearsed his case for the “peace of the Church, and unity among Christian brethren, who agree in all the substantials of Christian faith and practice,” and he included proposals for a comprehension that he had discussed with Howe. Ollyffe recited the history of the church and Dissent since the great ejection, granting that “the sense of the terms of Conformity, upon which the ejected Ministers went”

⁶³ *Cobbett’s Complete Collection of State Trials*, 15:504.

⁶⁴ [Owen], *Moderation a Vertue*, 30, 13–14.

⁶⁵ [Daniel Defoe], *The Sincerity of the Dissenters* [. . .] (London, 1703), 1, 3, 5, 17.

⁶⁶ Edmund Calamy, *A Defence of Moderate Nonconformity* [. . .], 3 vols. (London, 1703–1705), 1:31, 12–13.

⁶⁷ Calamy, *Defence of Moderate Nonconformity*, 1:3.

was “very hard.” Dissenters had “too great occasion to have those hard thoughts of conformity,” and they had acted “very conscientiously” in refusing to accept the terms of the Cavalier Parliament. But latitudinarian appeals to unite the church were “not intended in this controversy to be opposed by the moderate Nonconformists.” It was “very desirable that there should be a nearer conjunction of the moderate Conformists and Nonconformists, by a comprehension.”⁶⁸ Whig churchmen like Ollyffe argued on historical grounds in favor of unity and comprehension despite entrenching Dissenting denominationalization. For growing numbers of moderate Dissenters, the lessons of history and the party wars were that a comprehension was not only unviable but undesirable.

II

The anti-Catholicism that attended the Protestant succession and Jacobite rebellion in 1715 raised expectations that Whigs might implement a comprehension.⁶⁹ While it challenged the Whig establishment by offering a radical critique of it, Jacobitism threatened the security of Dissent by its association with Restoration ecclesiology.⁷⁰ Dissenters harnessed their extensive network of authors and printers to present themselves as a “model minority,” looking to leading Whigs to reward their Hanoverian loyalty.⁷¹ Calamy pointed out the electoral reality, especially in borough constituencies: “The Interest of Low-Church, consider’d as separate from the Dissenters, I take to be insufficient to secure the Government.”⁷² Tories and High Churchmen sensed that Whigs and Dissenters would not stop at repealing the Occasional Conformity Act and Schism Act (1714). During the general election of 1715, Atterbury warned that “the *Whigs* resolve, if they can procure a House of Commons to their Mind, to destroy the *Church of England*.” They would “introduce a general Comprehension, and blend up an Ecclesiastical *Babel* of all the Sects and Heresies.”⁷³

The Stanhope-Sunderland ministry (1717–1721) duly repaid the favor in part to Dissenters by repealing the Occasional Conformity and Schism acts in 1719. The anticlericalism of the ministry reinforced the impression that comprehension remained a goal of latitudinarian churchmanship. Toland felt confident to propose the revival of Nottingham’s scheme through “*convenient Alterations in the Liturgy, Ceremonies, and Canons, the correcting of Abuses in Ecclesiastical Courts*,” and reducing

⁶⁸ John Ollyffe to William Tong, n.d., in Edmund Calamy, *An Historical Account of My Own Life* [. . .], ed. John Towill Rutt, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1830), 2:537–59.

⁶⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, 2005), 11–54; Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester, 1993), 76–116.

⁷⁰ Paul K. Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688–1788* (Cambridge, 1989); Gabriel Glickman, *The English Catholic Community, 1688–1745: Politics, Culture and Ideology* (Woodbridge, 2009).

⁷¹ J. J. Caudle, “A Model Minority? The Dissenting Press and Political Broadcasting in the Georgian Revolution,” in *Negotiating Toleration: Dissent and the Hanoverian Succession*, ed. Nigel Aston and Benjamin Bankhurst (Oxford, 2019), 33–52.

⁷² D. E. [Edmund Calamy], *The Repeal of the Act Against Occasional Conformity, Consider’d* [. . .] (London, 1717), 18.

⁷³ [Francis Atterbury], *English Advice to the Freeholders of England* [. . .] (London, 1714), 19.

episcopal power, since England's "first Reformers, and the best of the Bishops," had acted only as "Supervisors or Moderators."⁷⁴ Defoe, satirizing "the perpetual Itch of the Priesthood to be inter-meddling in secular Affairs," claimed that the ministry might appoint an ecclesiastical commission to "compile a Liturgy, Articles, Canons, and other Ecclesiastical Constitutions, as may fit [c]lose to the Rule of Scripture, and leave no room for the Scruples or Exceptions of any rational Person of the soberer sort of either side, as to indifferent Things, which are therefore alterable."⁷⁵ In 1719, Defoe published *The Dumb Philosopher*, a story of a Cornish servingman, Dickory Cronke. Born dumb, he had gained the power of speech thanks to an episode of apoplexy before passing away and leaving a series of prophecies. Cronke's seventeenth prophecy was that in 1727, "Great Endeavours will be used about this time for a Comprehension in Religion, supported by crafty and designing Men, and a Party of mistaken Zealots." However, "as the Project is ill concerted, and will be worse managed, it will come to nothing."⁷⁶

Amid the Bangorian controversy, the suspension of Convocation in 1717 removed one obstacle to a comprehension, but there is no evidence that the ministry wished to pursue one. Its actions rather undermined the case for a comprehension by providing concessions to lay Dissenters. The "Act for Quieting and Establishing Corporations" (1718) allowed any person who had not taken Anglican sacraments to remain a member of a corporation unless challenged within six months of election or appointment. The "Act for Strengthening the Protestant Interest" (1719) enabled some affluent lay Dissenters to hold office in local government. Were it not for the controversy surrounding the Peerage Bill (1719) and the collapse of the South Sea Company in 1720, the ministry might have struck further at the Test and Corporation acts.⁷⁷ However, the ministry might then have divided the Whigs. It is worth recalling that Nottingham had formed an alliance with Whigs in 1711 to allow the Occasional Conformity Bill through the Lords in exchange for his motion to condemn the terms of the peace after the War of the Spanish Succession. Wake opposed repeal of the Occasional Conformity and Schism acts in 1719. George I backed removal of the sacramental provisions of the Test Act before he and Charles Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, realized that it would have alienated Whig and episcopal goodwill.⁷⁸ Walpole and Charles, Viscount Townshend, had by then split from the ministry, and the Prince of Wales, the future George II, proved unsympathetic to further reform.⁷⁹

The debate about comprehension was now a feature of confessional culture rather than legislative politics. The ministry's program proceeded at the same time as the

⁷⁴ [John Toland], *The State-Anatomy of Great Britain* [. . .] (London, 1717), 90, 23–24.

⁷⁵ [Daniel Defoe], *Considerations on the Present State of Affairs in Great-Britain* [. . .] (London, 1718), 11, 22.

⁷⁶ [Daniel Defoe], *The Dumb Philosopher* [. . .] (London, 1719), 56.

⁷⁷ G. M. Townend, "Religious Radicalism and Conservatism in the Whig Party under George I: The Repeal of the Occasional Conformity and Schism Acts," *Parliamentary History* 7, no. 1 (1988): 24–44; David L. Wykes, "Religious Dissent, the Church, and the Repeal of the Occasional Conformity and Schism Acts, 1714–19," in *Religion, Politics and Dissent, 1660–1832: Essays in Honour of James E. Bradley*, ed. R. D. Cornwall (London, 2010), 166–84; Brent S. Sirota, "The Backlash against Anglican Catholicity, 1709–18," in *The Hanoverian Succession in Great Britain and Its Empire*, ed. Brent S. Sirota and Allan Macinnes (Woodbridge, 2019), 78–81.

⁷⁸ Hannah Smith, *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 2006), 82–83.

⁷⁹ Andrew C. Thompson, *George II: King and Elector* (London, 2011), 49–50.

controversy provoked by Hoadly and his sermon preached to George I, *The Nature of the Kingdom, or Church, of Christ* (1717). Hoadly argued that Christ was the “Sole Law-giver to his Subjects, and Sole Judge, in matters relating to Salvation.”⁸⁰ Christ had left “no visible, humane Authority; no Vicegerents, who can be said properly to supply his Place; no Interpreters, upon whom his Subjects are absolutely to depend; no Judges over the Consciences or Religion of his People.” To apply temporal rewards and punishments in matters of conscience was “to act contrary to the Interests of True Religion.”⁸¹ Hoadly’s emphasis on the direct relationship between the lay Christian and Christ reduced the role of the visible church in the salvation of souls.⁸²

While undermining the Test and Corporation acts, the comprehensive implications of Hoadly’s position were obvious. If Christ had left no authority over the visible church, articles and creeds were human formularies that need not exclude any sincere Protestant. In response to the criticisms of Francis Hare, dean of Worcester, in *Church Authority Vindicated* (1719), Hoadly made this position explicit by protesting his establishmentarianism. Although the civil magistrate had no role in the care of true religion, “all Visible Churches ought to be orderly Societies” with some administered by the state.⁸³ He singled out the Church of England, however unreformed, for “its Excellency above any other.”⁸⁴ While indicating intellectual sympathy for comprehension, Hoadly was defending the latitudinarian compromise that had emerged during the 1690s. In *The Reasonableness of Conformity to the Church of England* (1703), which reappeared at the press in 1720, Hoadly had argued that scruples about forms of worship were insufficient to neglect the gospel duty to observe church unity. Whig churchmen sympathetic to Hoadly reiterated his position. Thomas Hayley, prebend of Chichester, argued that all should, “if possible, join together in Christian Communion.”⁸⁵ Samuel Bradford, recently elevated to the See of Carlisle, asked, “Why should any truly christian Church exclude from its communion, any such persons as we have reason to believe our Lord will not exclude from his heavenly Kingdom, according to the Terms of the Gospel?”⁸⁶ While these arguments implied support for comprehension, they also defended conformity to the unreformed church.

Lay Whig anticlericals saw the comprehensive logic of Hoadly’s sermon. The Bangorian controversy prompted Sir Richard Cocks, an idiosyncratic former country Whig member of Parliament loathed among Tory High Churchmen, to trumpet Hoadly’s call for “another reformation,” recommending statutes to prohibit genuflection at communion and to alter the procedure of ordination.⁸⁷ Dedicating his pamphlet to Nottingham, who would have been appalled at such an endorsement, Cocks argued, “nothing ought to be offered to me to comply with, or assent to, as an Article of Faith, but what is not only in the Sense, but in the Words also, in

⁸⁰ John Hoadly, ed., *The Works of Benjamin Hoadly*, 3 vols. (London, 1773), 2:409.

⁸¹ Hoadly, *Works of Benjamin Hoadly*, 2:404, 406–7.

⁸² Andrew Starkie, *The Church of England and the Bangorian Controversy* (Woodbridge, 2007).

⁸³ Hoadly, *Works of Benjamin Hoadly*, 2:898.

⁸⁴ Hoadly, 2:492.

⁸⁵ Thomas Hayley, *Mutual Charity, the Most Perfect Bond of Christian Unity* [. . .] (London, 1718), 7.

⁸⁶ Samuel Bradford, *The Nature of Christian Union* [. . .] (London, 1718), 25–26.

⁸⁷ Richard Cocks, *The Church of England Secur’d* [. . .] (London, 1719), 34–37.

which God has been pleased to reveal.” Cocks’s extreme Erastianism encouraged him to seek a church so comprehensive that it would render the Toleration Act irrelevant. “Remove these Errors, reject these Offences, take away these Priestcrafts,” he intoned, “and build your Church upon the Foundation of Truth and revealed Religion, and it will prove an Act of general Comprehension.” A truly national church would “destroy that odious Act of Toleration” because such a church “is, properly, the whole people of *England*, represented either in Person, or by their Representatives in Parliament.”⁸⁸ But Cocks was a maverick and no barometer of mainstream Whig opinion.

Although unsympathetic to the radically Erastian ecclesiology of Hoadly and his supporters, Gibson spoke for comprehension during the controversy. Gibson had long been invested in the cause, having served as Tenison’s chaplain and librarian. Privately, in 1715/16, Gibson offered to lend Wake a copy of the Prayer Book with amendments for a comprehension along with the notes of John Williams, bishop of Chichester, on the proceedings of William III’s ecclesiastical commission of 1689.⁸⁹ In the preface to the second of a series of four sermons printed in 1719, Gibson wrote that “*nothing can preserve our Succession in the Protestant Line, but Unanimity among those, who have ever appeared to be its fast Friends, in Deed, and not in Profession only.*” By unanimity, he meant “*the same that was Enforc’d as the best means of enlarging and strength’ning the Church, by no less Authority than that of Archbishop SANCROFT.*” While invoking a Nonjuror, Gibson also lamented “*how unhumanly*” Tillotson and Tenison had been “*treated, or rather persecuted . . . only for pursuing*” Sancroft’s policy.⁹⁰ Although a comprehension was no longer a realistic policy, its intellectual appeal remained strong to senior Whig churchmen.

III

It is striking that the arguments for comprehension between 1715 and 1721 came only from latitudinarians. While the anticlericalism that attended the Hanoverian succession, Stanhope-Sunderland ministry, and Bangorian controversy suggested that comprehension remained the aspiration of some Whig churchmen, Dissenters experienced no such impulse. Dissenters rather became embroiled in a Christological debate that further undermined the basis for comprehension. The growth of anti-Nicene heterodoxy had become increasingly concerning to the Church of England. The explicit Arianism of Samuel Clarke in *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) and the suspected Arianism of William Whiston risked destabilizing the establishment. Parallel trends among Dissenters erupted in February and March 1719 when around 150 ministers attended a series of meetings at Salters’ Hall, having met to lend their endorsement to advice that was to be sent to Exeter to provide guidance amid the heat of doctrinal difference about the Trinity among Dissenting ministers there.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Cocks, *Church of England Secur’d*, 13, 22, 38.

⁸⁹ Edmund Gibson to William Wake, 19 January 1715/16, Arch. W. Epist. 20, fol. 15, Christ Church Archives, Oxford.

⁹⁰ Edmund Gibson, *Four Sermons Upon Several Subjects* [. . .] (London, 1719), xv, xvi, xix.

⁹¹ Roger Thomas, “The Non-Subscription Controversy amongst Dissenters in 1719: The Salters’ Hall Debate,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 4, no. 2 (1953): 162–86; Thomas, “Presbyterians in Transition,” in

The debate engulfed London and Essex Dissenters, focusing on the issues of subscription to the Westminster Confession and the divinity of Christ. While non-subscribers opposed the principle of requiring ministers to endorse human formularies, subscribers suspected their motives. Thomas Bradbury, an Independent, remembered that non-subscribers gave “loud Complaints” that they had been misrepresented as anti-Trinitarians. Subscribers replied that “all Ground of Suspicion might be removed,” if they affirmed their faith in the Trinity by subscribing only to the First Article of the Church of England.⁹² Although the Toleration Act required Dissenting ministers to make a declaration in favor of the Trinity, Bradbury noted that “it was commonly insinuated, that many whom the Law had oblig’d to subscribe this Doctrine did not believe it.”⁹³ Bradbury’s alternative suggestion for a declaration in favor of the fourth and fifth clauses of the Westminster catechism met with the objection that it represented “a new and unwarrantable Regard to the *Catechism of the Assembly of Divines*.” Around sixty attendees, including Tong, Bradbury, and the Presbyterian John Barker, vacated the hall to sign a document that included the First Article of the Church of England and the fifth and sixth answers to the catechism of the Westminster Assembly.⁹⁴ Their withdrawal left those who remained to score a victory for nonsubscription.

A set piece in the long fragmentation of old Dissent, the Salters’ Hall controversy strained interdenominational relations and divided Presbyterians from each other. The debate blurred the identity of moderate Dissent as the fault lines ran through denominational groupings. By moving away from orthodox Christology, some Dissenters handed ammunition to their Anglican opponents. Charged John Potter, bishop of Oxford, to his diocesan clergy, “You cannot be ignorant what Attempts have lately been made, and are still daily farther advancing, to destroy some of the principal Doctrines, not of ours only, but of the Catholick Church in all Ages.” There had been efforts “to unite almost all other Sects of Christians, however they may differ from one another as to Opinion, in the same visible Communion.” Some Dissenters had “so far proceeded in this Scheme of general Comprehension, or rather Confusion, as to assert, that all sorts of Error, except those which immediately relate to Practice, are innocent and unblameable.”⁹⁵

Increasingly among Presbyterians and Independents, insistence upon liberty of conscience, sincerity, and free inquiry mandated against the imposition of any human formularies. By 1736, in his *History of Persecution*, Chandler himself entitled a closing section “*The imposing Subscriptions to Human Creeds unreasonable and pernicious*.”⁹⁶ Reciting the history of comprehension during the Restoration in *The History*

The English Presbyterians: From Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism, ed. C. G. Bolam et al. (London, 1968), 113–74; Jeremy Goring, “The Break-Up of Old Dissent,” in Bolam et al., *English Presbyterians*, 175–218.

⁹² Daniel Wilcox, *The Noble Stand* [. . .] (London, 1719), 6.

⁹³ Thomas Bradbury, *An Answer to the Reproaches Cast on Those Dissenting Ministers Who Subscribed their Belief of the Eternal Trinity* [. . .] (London, 1719), 6.

⁹⁴ Benjamin Grosvenor, *A New and Authentick Account of Several Things Done and Agreed Upon by the Dissenting Ministers Lately Assembled at Salters-Hall* [. . .] (London, 1719), 26.

⁹⁵ John Potter, *The Bishop of Oxford’s Charge to the Clergy of his Diocese, at his Triennial Visitation in July, 1719* (London, 1720), 4–5.

⁹⁶ Samuel Chandler, *The History of Persecution* [. . .] (London, 1736), 428.

of the *Test Act* (1732), Sherlock observed that “now, the Dissenters themselves have raised new Obstructions to this Work, or rather rendered all Attempts of that Kind impracticable.” Previous difficulties were “in Point of *Government* and in Point of *Worship*.” There had been no objections against “Subscriptions to Creeds and Articles . . . concerning the Faith of those who are to be employed in the Ministry.” Now, “unless they are gratified in some *Doctrinal* Points also, they must remain at a greater Distance from us than ever.” The logic of the Dissenters’ position was that “the Establishment of National Churches by Civil Authority is destructive of Liberty, and greatly injurious of Religion.”⁹⁷

The consequence of growing doctrinal distance between the establishment and Dissent was insistence on a defensive arrangement rather than canvassing for a comprehension that was no longer possible. Unusually combative and at risk of alienating episcopal opinion, the Stanhope-Sunderland ministry gave way to a church-Whig alliance brokered by Walpole and Gibson, who became bishop of London in 1723.⁹⁸ The centerpiece of this alliance was defense of the Toleration, Test, and Corporation acts. Meanwhile, Dissenters were increasingly concerned with the repeal of the Test and Corporation acts; by the 1730s, their concern had become an orchestrated campaign.⁹⁹ Walpole’s various attempted ecclesiastical reforms during the 1730s further strained relations, even though only one, the Mortmain Act (1736), reached the statute book.¹⁰⁰

The repeal campaign gave institutional encouragement to denominationalization. Between 1727 and 1732, the Body of the Protestant Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations and the lay Protestant Dissenting Deputies brought together Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists. Since the latter denomination had never been the target of any comprehension scheme, the new formation further blurred the boundaries of moderate Dissent. One of the chairs of the Dissenting Deputies, Benjamin Avery, also conducted the Dissenting periodical *The Old Whig: Or the Consistent Protestant*, which ran between 1735 and 1739. One of the periodical’s contributors argued that comprehension was less desirable than repeal of the Test and Corporation acts. Unity had been attempted “by contriving *general forms* and *ways* (not much unlike the device of *comprehension*, if I understand it aright) to which each party might subscribe.” But “this way God never blessed.” Efforts to design shared forms of worship had “set all kingdoms on fire.”¹⁰¹

Contributing to the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation acts, Neal, who had remained neutral at Salters’ Hall, strengthened denominational identity in his two-volume *History of New England* (1720) and his four-volume *History of the Puritans* (1732–38). In the first text, he wrote of the “Oppression and

⁹⁷ [Thomas Sherlock], *The History of the Test Act* [. . .] (London, 1732), 18–19.

⁹⁸ Stephen Taylor, “‘Dr. Codex’ and the Whig ‘Pope’: Edmund Gibson, Bishop of Lincoln and London, 1716–1748,” in *Lords of Parliament: Studies, 1714–1914*, ed. R. W. Davis (Stanford, 1995), 9–28.

⁹⁹ Andrew C. Thompson, “Popery, Politics, and Private Judgement in Early Hanoverian Britain,” *Historical Journal* 45, no. 2 (2002): 333–56; Thompson, “Contesting the Test Acts: Dissent, Parliament and the Public in the 1730s,” *Parliamentary History* 24, no. 1 (2005): 58–70; Bradley, “The Public, Parliament and the Protestant Dissenting Deputies.”

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, “Sir Robert Walpole, the Church of England, and the Quakers Tithe Bill”; Taylor, “Whigs, Tories and Anticlericalism: Ecclesiastical Courts Legislation in 1733,” *Parliamentary History* 19, no. 3 (2000), 329–55.

¹⁰¹ *The Old Whig: Or, the Consistent Protestant*, 2 vols. (London, 1739), 1:206–7.

Persecution” that had motivated the Puritan migrations to America.¹⁰² He composed the second text to “preserve the Memory of those great and good Men among the Reformers, for attempting a further Reformation of its Discipline and Ceremonies.” He sought to “account for the Rise and Progress of that Separation from that National Establishment which subsists to this Day.” He located the origins of the persecutions that bedeviled the life of Puritanism and Nonconformity with the settlement of the government of Elizabeth I, who “declared roundly, that she had fixed her Standard, and would have all her Subjects conform to it,” prompting the bishops to stiffen their resolve and to “become too severe against their Dissenting Brethren.”¹⁰³ Neal followed the earlier Presbyterian practice of charting the history of the *via media*, praising Grindal, Abbott, and Ussher as its episcopal exemplars. A “Divine of moderate Principles,” Grindal had, while in exile under Mary I, “imbibed the Principles of a further Reformation.” As primate, he “moved no faster in Courses of Severity against the *Puritans* than his Superiors obliged him.”¹⁰⁴ Abbott was “a Divine of good Learning, great Hospitality, and wonderful Moderation, shewing upon all Occasions an unwillingness to stretch the King’s Prerogative, or the Act of Uniformity, beyond what was constituent with Law, or necessary for the Peace of the Church.”¹⁰⁵ Ussher “embraced the middle Way between *Calvin* and *Arminius*” and was “one of the most moderate Prelates of his Age.”¹⁰⁶

However, Neal did not write his histories to fashion an eighteenth-century *via media*. He sought to vindicate the principles of Dissent. He terminated his history at the Revolution of 1688, which produced “the last fruitless Attempt for a *Comprehension*,” and “the ungrateful Return that these angry Churchmen made to those who had helped them in Distress!” He insisted “it ought to stand upon Record” that the Church of England had been saved “by Men of those very Principles for whose Satisfaction they would not move a Prince or abate a Ceremony.” In 1660, the Presbyterians had restored the king and church “without making any Terms for themselves.” In 1689, “the *Church* fled for Succour to a *Presbyterian Prince*, and was delivered by an Army of fourteen thousand *Hollanders* of the very same Principles with the *English* Dissenters.” But, reflected Neal, “how uncivilly those Troops were used afterwards, when they had done their Work, is too ungrateful a Piece of History to remember.”¹⁰⁷ The High Church reaction had been successful. Dissenters had been kept out of their church.

When, during the 1730s, some of the church’s leaders mooted a comprehension, they noted that the changing culture and priorities of Dissent had left it impracticable. Some suspected that Gibson remained sympathetic to comprehension. In the second of his *Pastoral Letters* to the diocese of London, Gibson composed a short and catholic profession of faith, although he did not recommend it as an alternative form of clerical subscription.¹⁰⁸ Chandler proclaimed that, on reading such “Forbearance in Things indifferent,” he imagined that Gibson had revealed his “Christian and

¹⁰² Daniel Neal, *The History of New England* [. . .], 2 vols. (London, 1720), 1:ii.

¹⁰³ Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans* [. . .], 4 vols. (London, 1732–1738), 1:iii, vi.

¹⁰⁴ Neal, *History of the Puritans*, 1:392, 394.

¹⁰⁵ Neal, 2:243.

¹⁰⁶ Neal, 4:146.

¹⁰⁷ Neal, 4:620.

¹⁰⁸ Edmund Gibson, *The Bishop of London’s Second Pastoral Letter* [. . .] (London, 1730), 22–23.

charitable Disposition to enter into Measures of a general Comprehension.” If “an Establishment was made upon your Lordship’s Foundation, upon such a fixed, certain, uniform Rule of Faith and Practice,” Chandler “did not know a single Dissenter in *England* that would be against it.”¹⁰⁹ In 1735, Bishop Hough, whose insistence on Protestant unity had been forged during his disputed election to the presidency of Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1687, wrote to Gibson to suggest that the time was right for a comprehension. Hough thought no “human establishment so sacred that nothing might be touched or altered in it.” The Toleration Act had been an accidental compromise mistakenly applied to moderate Dissenters. Hough asked, “Was such a liberty indulged with a design of keeping them in a state of separation?” He impressed upon Gibson “how dangerous their continuance in schism was to all the Reformed Churches, as well as to that of England, and how much it was their interest as well as ours to compromise and adjust matters amicably.”¹¹⁰

However, Gibson’s judgment was that a defensive alliance formed a more realistic strategy. He replied that he wished Nottingham had been successful, for “then, there was no meaning on any side but to mend and improve, and the Dissenters were in a disposition to be thankful for any concessions in their favour as a bounty on the part of the Church.” Since 1688, Dissenters had grown more prejudiced against the establishment. Hough had mistakenly supposed that “the Dissenters are now the same meek and moderate people that you knew them twenty or thirty years ago.” Gibson was unwilling to upend the church-Whig alliance now that Dissenters were attempting to make “a violent run” and “seem to think all is their own.”¹¹¹

Gibson would still less have favored a comprehension that signaled latitude toward deism.¹¹² While the church’s suspicion of deism might have emphasized the affinities between Anglicans and Trinitarian Dissenters, Gibson became preoccupied with campaigning against it. He served as patron to Whiggish defenders of orthodoxy like Daniel Waterland, who joined him in supporting William Webster and Richard Venn in their pro-establishment newspaper the *Weekly Miscellany*. Fear of deism partly occasioned Gibson’s series of *Pastoral Letters* in which he warned at once against lukewarmness and enthusiasm in religion. In a second, enlarged edition of the first letter, which had appeared in 1728, Gibson explained that he had written especially for the “great cities” of London and Westminster and rehearsed “rules and cautions, which are short and easy” for “sincere and unprejudiced Christians.” Observing the growth of “profaneness and impiety” among those “promoting atheism and infidelity,” he singled out those, like Toland, who professed a Protestant care for the establishment only to aim for its demise. Under “pretence of opposing the encroachments of popery, thereby to recommend himself to the unwary Protestant reader,” the deist “has laboured at once to set aside all Christian

¹⁰⁹ Samuel Chandler, *A Vindication of a Passage of the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London in His Second Pastoral Letter* [. . .] (London, 1734), 8–9, 37. But see also Thomas Johnson, *A Letter to Mr. Chandler in Vindication of a Passage in the Lord Bishop of London’s Second Pastoral Letter* (Cambridge, 1734), 3–5.

¹¹⁰ John Hough to Edmund Gibson, 14 June 1735, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, MS Eng. d.2405, fols. 58–59.

¹¹¹ Gibson to Hough, n.d., Bodleian Libraries, MS. Eng. d.2405, fols. 60–61.

¹¹² Ingram, *Reformation without End*, 25–43, 64–81.

ordinances, and the very being of a Christian ministry and a Christian church.”¹¹³ Rather than uniting Anglicans and moderate Dissenters, the church’s campaign against deism involved a Trinitarian rear-guard defense of the Thirty-Nine Articles. The priority was reinforcement, not revision, of the orthodox articles of faith.

From the late 1730s, the establishment also confronted the Methodist movement. Although initially intra-Anglican, Methodism rejected traditional parish structures in favor of field and lay preaching and voluntary societies. While, to Anglican clergy, Methodists seemed to be enthusiasts, their emphasis on affective heart religion set them apart from rational Dissenters’ culture of reason and free inquiry.¹¹⁴ Methodism left Anglicans less likely to countenance a comprehension that might have lent support to evangelical claims against their establishment. Gibson thought Methodists to be sectaries who failed to register themselves under the Toleration Act even though that legislation still did not permit open-air preaching. Methodist leaders would “act a far more consistent and uniform Part, if they would either renounce Communion [*sic*] with the Established Church, or oblige themselves and their Followers to have a greater Regard to the *Rules* and *Orders* of it.”¹¹⁵ Much like the anti-deist campaign, Methodism encouraged Anglican churchmen to defend rather than to reform their articles of faith.

IV

During the 1740s, Jacobitism and wars against Spain and France prompted renewed calls for moral reformation among Dissenters like Doddridge that suggested a closer alliance between church and Dissent. The War of the Austrian Succession and a possible French invasion provided a new foothold for Jacobitism, and in the autumn of 1745, Chandler composed a plea to “Awake, arise, arm yourselves, *Britons*, in Defence of your Protestant King, his Family, your Religion, and your Liberties.”¹¹⁶ He cast the defeat of the Jacobite Rebellion as a “national deliverance.”¹¹⁷ Doddridge published a hagiographic account of Colonel James Gardiner, killed at Prestonpans in the second Jacobite Rising: a virtuous Hanoverian, exemplar of moral reformation, and a former member of Calamy’s congregation in London.¹¹⁸

Whereas at the turn of the eighteenth century an alliance between church and Dissent might have been understood as a bridge toward a comprehension, it was now an alternative. Many Dissenters, led by the likes of Avery, who continued to chair the Dissenting Deputies until his death in 1764, used their loyalty to the Hanoverian state to bargain for further indemnity from the sacramental test.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Edmund Gibson, *Bishop Gibson’s First Pastoral Letter to the People of His Diocese* [. . .] (London, 1820), 2, 4.

¹¹⁴ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, 2005), 32–54.

¹¹⁵ [Edmund Gibson], *Observations upon the Conduct and Behaviour of a Certain Sect Usually Distinguished by the Name of Methodists*, 3rd ed. (London, 1744), 6.

¹¹⁶ Samuel Chandler, *Great-Britain’s Memorial Against the Pretender and Popery*, 7th ed. (London, 1745), 35.

¹¹⁷ Samuel Chandler, *National Deliverances Just Reasons for Publick Gratitude and Joy* [. . .] (London, 1746).

¹¹⁸ Philip Doddridge, *Some Remarkable Passages in the Life of Col. James Gardiner* [. . .] (London, 1747).

¹¹⁹ G. M. Ditchfield, “Changing Dissenting Perceptions of the Hanoverian Succession, 1714 to c.1765,” in Aston and Bankhurst, *Negotiating Toleration*, 53–75, at 66–68.

The cordiality of exchanges between Dissenters like Doddridge and leading bishops was more suggestive of a coalition than unity. Writing to Doddridge in 1743, Secker, an erstwhile attendee of the Dissenting academy at Gloucester, celebrated the civility of their literary exchanges.¹²⁰ Secker noted that “the Dissenters have done excellently of late years in the service of Christianity; and I hope our common welfare will make us chiefly attentive to our common interest, and unite us in a closer alliance.”¹²¹ In the context of the Protestant emergency of the mid-1740s, Secker’s language represented the Gibsonite position that, however desirable a comprehension might once have been, it was more realistic to seek harmonious cooperation.

Discussions between Chandler, Doddridge, and the bishops about a comprehension resulted in similar conclusions. In August 1748, Doddridge proposed to Thomas Herring, archbishop of Canterbury, “a Sort of a Medium between the present State & that of a perfect Co-alition.” Doddridge suggested no more than a compromise of “acknowledging our Churches as unshismatical by permitting the Clergy to officiate” and allowing “Dissenting Ministers occasionally to officiate in Churches.”¹²² In February 1747/48, Barker reported to Doddridge a meeting between Chandler, Sherlock, and Thomas Gooch, bishop of Norwich, which faltered on episcopal reordination. “Our Church,” Sherlock explained, “consists of 3 Parts, Doctrine, Discipline, & Ceremonies.” Ceremonies should be “left indifferent as they are agreed on all hands to be.” Discipline was “so bad that no one knows how or where to Mend it.” Chandler replied that the Athanasian Creed should be discarded and the articles of faith “must be expressd in Scripture words.” Gooch and Sherlock wished that “they were rid of that Creed & had no Objection to altering the Articles in Scripture Words.” Turning to episcopal reordination, Chandler explained that, while nobody would renounce a Presbyterian ordination, “if their Lordships Meant only to impose their hands on us, & by that rite recommend us to publicke service in their society or constitution, that perhaps Might be submitted to.” However, Barker believed that Chandler had given too much. It would represent “a virtual Renunciation of our Ordination which I apprehend not only as good but better than theirs.”¹²³

The reaction of Dissenters to these meetings demonstrated that, however much Barker, Chandler, and Doddridge had clung to the comprehensive ideal, it was no longer a possibility. After a meeting between Chandler, Herring, and Gooch in February 1748, Barker wrote of “some who seem mightily frighted att this affair.” Angry with Chandler, they shouted, “We Wont be comprehended—We Wo’nt be comprehended.” Barker believed that Dissenters were frustrated with Chandler because in discussing revisions to the articles of faith Chandler had said that it was “for others not himselfe he suggested this, his Conscience not being diseas’d by them as they

¹²⁰ Robert G. Ingram, *Religion, Reform and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century: Thomas Secker and the Church of England* (Woodbridge, 2007), 19–44.

¹²¹ Thomas Secker to Philip Doddridge, 29 September 1743, in *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John Nichols, 9 vols. (Cambridge, 2015), 3:484–85.

¹²² Doddridge to Mercy Doddridge, 4 August 1748, in *Calendar of the Correspondence of Philip Doddridge, D. D. (1702–51)*, ed. G. F. Nuttall (London, 1979), 281–82.

¹²³ John Barker to Doddridge, 2 February 1747/8, in *Calendar of the Correspondence of Philip Doddridge*, 266–67.

now stood, for He freely ownd himself a *Moderate Calvinist*.”¹²⁴ The finer points of revising the articles were problematic enough; Dissenting denominationalization had gone too far. Those, like Doddridge and Chandler, and the merchant and banker Samuel Fludyer, who had famously forsaken Dissent and risen through the establishment, found that Dissenting opinion had moved yet further from an establishmentarian frame of mind.

The vague aspiration for comprehension that distinguished the meetings between Chandler, Doddridge, and the bishops was connected to a wider press campaign involving two pamphlets and a series of replies. The first pamphlet, *Considerations on a Comprehension, or Union of Protestants* (1748), appeared anonymously and amounted to a history of comprehension since the Revolution. Its author claimed to be a member of the Church of England who hoped to fashion “an invincible Bulwark and Safeguard against *Popery* and the Pretender” by proposing standard reforms to the liturgy, Prayer Book, and church government.¹²⁵ Instead of arguing from theological precepts, the pamphleteer anthologized pro-comprehension speeches and pamphlets, including the arguments of William Nichols and Humphrey Prideaux in Convocation for Nottingham’s proposals in 1689 along with passages from Bishop White Kennett’s *History of England* (1719), Bradford, King, Sharp, Stillingfleet, and Tenison.¹²⁶ The pamphleteer dwelt on the impeachment of Sacheverell and Wake’s defense of comprehension in the Lords during the trial.¹²⁷ Referring to the Bangorian controversy, the pamphleteer cited Gibson’s intervention in *The Danger and Mischiefs of Popery* as evidence that Gibson “highly approves of a *Comprehension*.”¹²⁸ Likewise, the pamphleteer rehearsed the controversy that followed Gibson’s *Second Pastoral Letter*, taking Gibson’s profession of faith as the basis for a comprehension and noting Chandler’s support for it.¹²⁹

The pamphleteer was contradicting the Dissenters’ sense of their own history and their scruples about all forms of subscription. The pamphleteer sought to refute the arguments of Samuel Bourn, a Presbyterian minister who had embraced Arianism after Salters’ Hall, “a modern, furious, bigoted Zealot for Nonconformity,” and author of *A Vindication of the Principles and Practice of Protestant Dissenters* (1748).¹³⁰ In the style of Calamy and Neal, Bourn offered historic justifications for Nonconformity, casting union with the church as a betrayal of Dissent’s heroic ancestors. Reciting the history of the Reformation, he focused on the Elizabethan settlement when “the Terms of Conformity to the Church, and of Employment and Preferment in it, were made so intolerably severe” that “great Numbers of the most conscientious Ministers, disapproving them, were turned out of their Places, silenced, banished, imprisoned, and murdered for Conscience’s sake, and for

¹²⁴ Barker to Doddridge, 2 February 1747/8, 266–67.

¹²⁵ *Considerations on a Comprehension, or Union of Protestants* [. . .] (London, 1748), 2, 11, 13.

¹²⁶ *Considerations on a Comprehension*, 6–8, 19–21, 23–24. See also [King], *Enquiry*, 169–70; John Sharp, *Nineteen Sermons on Several Subjects* (London, 1734), 29–30; [White Kennett], *A Complete History of England* [. . .], 3 vols. (London, 1719), 3:588.

¹²⁷ *Considerations on a Comprehension*, 9–10. See also *State Trials*, 15:504–6.

¹²⁸ *Considerations on a Comprehension*, 7–8. See also Gibson, *Four Sermons*, xv–xx; Gibson, *Second Pastoral Letter*, 22–23, 27–28.

¹²⁹ *Considerations on a Comprehension*, 29. See also Gibson, *Second Pastoral Letter*, 22–23, 27–28; Chandler, *Vindication of a Passage of the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London*, 37.

¹³⁰ *Considerations on a Comprehension*, 1–2, 12.

opposing Church Tyranny and Foppery.” Bourn concluded his pamphlet by reflecting that Nonconformists stood against the imposition of all creeds. In language akin to that of Chandler in *The History of Persecution*, he wrote that “Subscriptions to human Articles of Faith” had been “the Plague and Shame of the Church” and “an Engine of Division and Contention” ever since the Council of Nicaea (AD 325).¹³¹

The second pro-comprehension pamphlet in the controversy, *Free and Candid Disquisitions Relating to the Church of England*, appeared in June 1749. Although published anonymously, its author was the Welsh clergyman John Jones, vicar at Alconbury in Cambridgeshire. Historians are familiar with Jones’s pamphlet because it became a resource in the campaign that culminated in the Feathers Tavern petition (1772), whose signatories sought the abolition of subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles in favor of a simple declaration of faith in the Bible.¹³² The appearance of *Free and Candid Disquisitions* prompted the Irish clergyman William Robertson, whom Theophilus Lindsey labeled the “Venerable father of Unitarian Nonconformity,” to resign his preferments.¹³³ Francis Blackburne, the leader of the anti-subscription campaign, defended Jones in a pamphlet of 1750 and in *The Confessional, or a Full and Free Inquiry into the Right, Utility, and Success of Establishing Confessions of Faith and Doctrine in Protestant Churches* (1766).¹³⁴

Alongside routine proposals to reform the Prayer Book, Act of Uniformity, and liturgy, Jones proposed the removal of subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles altogether as a requirement of ordination, which had “kept out many, even members of our own Church, that had both a desire and ability to do it eminent service.”¹³⁵ Although Jones did not endorse theological heterodoxy explicitly, his pamphlet coincided with the Arian writings of the likes of Robert Clayton, bishop of Clougher, and might have killed off any widening appeal of comprehension.¹³⁶ In his proposal to lift the requirement of subscription, Jones’s opponents, such as John White, Fellow of St. John’s College, Cambridge, saw a cloak for anti-Trinitarian heterodoxy.¹³⁷ The anonymous author of *A Scheme for a General Comprehension of All Parties in Religion* (1750) satirized Jones’s pamphlet by suggesting a committee to design a comprehension that, meeting at the Jewish synagogue in London, would

¹³¹ Samuel Bourn, *A Vindication of the Principles and Practice of Protestant Dissenters* [. . .] (London, 1748), 8, 25.

¹³² G. M. Ditchfield, “The Subscription Issue in British Parliamentary Politics, 1772–9,” *Parliamentary History* 7, no. 1 (1988): 45–80; A. M. C. Waterman, “A Cambridge ‘Via Media’ in Late Georgian Anglicanism,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42, no. 3 (1991): 419–36; Martin Fitzpatrick, “Latitudinarianism at the Parting of the Ways: A Suggestion,” in Walsh, Haydon, and Taylor, *Church of England*, 209–27; B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, 1998), 45–80; Joanna Innes, “Parliament and Church Reform: Off and on the Agenda,” in *Liberty, Property and Popular Politics: England and Scotland, 1688–1815*, ed. Gordon Pentland and Michael Davis (Edinburgh, 2015), 39–57.

¹³³ Thomas Belsham, ed., *Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey* (London, 1873), 105.

¹³⁴ Francis Blackburne, *Works, Theological and Miscellaneous* [. . .], 7 vols. (Cambridge, 1804), 2:170; 5:504.

¹³⁵ [John Jones], *Free and Candid Disquisitions Relating to the Church of England* [. . .] (London, 1749), 22, 197, at 168.

¹³⁶ Nigel Aston, “The Limits of Latitudinarianism: English Reactions to Bishop Clayton’s *An Essay on Spirit*,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 49, no. 3 (1998): 407–33, at 409–10, 428.

¹³⁷ John White, *Three Letters to a Gentleman Dissenting from the Church of England* (London, 1748); [John White], *Free and Impartial Considerations on the Free and Candid Disquisitions* [. . .] (London, 1751).

host Chandler, Whiston, George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, and representatives of the Moravians, New England Presbyterians, Pennsylvania Brethren, Scottish Presbyterians, and patriarchs of Moscow and Constantinople.¹³⁸

The controversy surrounding Jones's pamphlet demonstrated that any opportunity for a comprehension had long since passed. There is evidence that the bishops looked upon the pamphlet favorably. In addition to Sherlock, Edmund Law, archdeacon of Cleveland, and William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester, asked Jones for copies.¹³⁹ Doddridge claimed that "several of the Bishops endeavoured to have suppressd White's Third Letter as unfriendly to the Scheme of a Comprehension."¹⁴⁰ However, precious few believed that the prospects for a comprehension were serious. Warburton was confident that "not the least alteration will be made in the Ecclesiastical System." Those "at the head of affairs find it as much as they can do to govern things as they are, and they will never venture to set one part of the Clergy against another."¹⁴¹ Herring might once have wished "with all his heart" for comprehension "to Unite against Infidelity & Immorality which threatned Universal ruine," respecting "the piety learning & Moderation of Many Dissenters," and rejecting "the Impertinencies of Men thrusting their words into Articles instead of the words of God."¹⁴² In the end, however, as to "the Establishment," Herring would "stick by it till somebody shows me a Better & at the same time points out a clear method, how to bring it about in practice."¹⁴³

The policy of the church-Whig alliance had been to defend the Revolution settlement and not to court controversy by further reform. Herring believed that there was "no rest for the sole of our Feet, but by standing upon a good-naturd Establishment with a legal Toleration appendant."¹⁴⁴ Secker saw "not the least prospect" of a comprehension because "they who should be most concerned for it are most of them too little so." Among the others, "few that have influence think it can be worth while, either to take any pains, or spend any time, about matters of this nature." The anti-Nicene views of suspected deists and Dissenters meant that "too many judge the continuance of a separation useful to their particular schemes," including "the Enemies of Religion" who "are apt to consider the Dissenters as their Allies against the Established Church."¹⁴⁵ George Lyttleton, future Baron Lyttleton and chancellor of the Exchequer, had always been favorable to comprehension: no "man can wish better than I do to *uniting schemes*, but I have observed that Time, the great conciliator of unessential disputes, generally brings them about better

¹³⁸ *A Scheme for a General Comprehension of All Parties in Religion* [. . .] (London, 1750), 7–10, 13.

¹³⁹ John Nichols, ed., *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols. (Cambridge, 2014), 1:592–93.

¹⁴⁰ Doddridge to Samuel Clark, 1 March 1748/9, in Nuttall, *Correspondence of Doddridge*, 296.

¹⁴¹ William Warburton to Doddridge, 15 June 1750, in Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 1:835.

¹⁴² Barker to Doddridge, 2 February 1747/8, in Nuttall, *Correspondence of Doddridge*, 266.

¹⁴³ Thomas Herring to Philip York, Earl of Hardwicke, 18 July 1749, British Library, Add. MSS. 35598, fols. 419–20.

¹⁴⁴ Herring to Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle, 5 March 1751, British Library, Add. MSS. 32724, fol. 164.

¹⁴⁵ Secker to Doddridge, 29 September 1743, in Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, 3:485.

than any projector.” If “toleration continues, these things will do themselves.”¹⁴⁶ It was best “to go on as a quiet member of the Church of England.”¹⁴⁷

By the 1740s, comprehension remained an ecclesiological ideal even though it had long ceased to be a realistic policy. During the party wars of the 1690s and 1700s, the High Church campaign against occasional conformity had killed its prospects, reinforcing the denominationalization that had resulted from the persecutions of Restoration Anglicanism and the Toleration Act. The Dissenters’ sense of their history and the growth of the culture of reason and free inquiry among them had further undermined the Baxterian vision of a godly national church. Increasing numbers of Dissenting ministers questioned the Trinity. Many believed that the imposition of any article or creed was popish. Lay Dissenters were more concerned with indemnity from and repeal of the Test and Corporation acts. The Church of England prioritized the challenges of anti-Nicene heterodoxy, deism, irreligion, and Methodism, buttressing the very formularies that prevented a comprehension. Led by Gibson, the church-Whig alliance produced an uneasy but workable alternative policy in the defensive association between the establishment and Dissent rooted in the Toleration, Test, and Corporation acts. But the comprehensive ideal, the Hookerian centerpiece of England’s long Reformation after the establishment of the Restoration church-state, lingered on among those who hoped for the reformation of manners in a godly commonwealth.¹⁴⁸ Whether penning defenses either of the establishment or Nonconformity, England’s eighteenth-century confessional writers examined the legal, theological, and ecclesiological implications of the Elizabethan settlement in church and state. The light of comprehension flickered long into the eighteenth century. It dimmed as the agents of the Anglican confessional state rejected the Hookerian ideal of a uniform Christian commonwealth and brokered alliances with England’s indulged denominations.

¹⁴⁶ George Lyttelton to Doddridge, 12 January 1747/8, in *Memoirs and Correspondence of George, Lord Lyttelton, from 1734 to 1773*, ed. Robert Phillimore, 2 vols. (London, 1845), 1:389.

¹⁴⁷ Lyttelton to Doddridge, 20 November 1747, in Phillimore, *Memoirs and Correspondence of George, Lord Lyttelton*, 1:386.

¹⁴⁸ John Gascoigne, “The Unity of State and Church Challenged: Responses to Hooker from the Restoration to the Nineteenth-Century Age of Reform,” *Journal of Religious History* 21, no. 1 (1997): 60–79, at 63–68.