CHAPTER THREE

‘SHAM OF LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE’: HUGUENOTS AND THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION IN RESTORATION ENGLAND

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The history and experiences of French Huguenots formed a significant context for debates over the expansion of religious tolerance in Restoration England. Events in England during the 1670s and 1680s did not take place in isolation, but were shaped by the international conflict between Catholics and Protestants. In particular, the policies of Louis XIV that increased persecution of French Protestants heightened English anti-Catholic hysteria and provided plenty of material for anti-Catholic propagandists. In 1672 Charles II issued the Declaration of Indulgence, which sought to remove penalties against dissenters and Catholics.¹ The great fear for English Protestants was that Charles II, whom many feared was a secret Catholic, would use the ruse of gradually expanding religious toleration to reintroduce Catholicism in England. Tolerance, in the minds of many English Protestants, had become code for the betrayal and destruction of the English Reformation. While many Protestants feared that Charles was a secret Catholic, by the latter half of the 1670s there was no doubt about his younger brother James’s Catholicism. James, the heir to the throne, converted to Catholicism in 1668, married a Catholic in 1673, and then stopped attending Church of England services in 1676. His public declaration of Catholic belief came in 1673 when he refused to follow the requirements of the Test Act and, as a result, had to step down from his position as Lord High Admiral. The subsequent ‘Exclusion Crisis,’ which pitted Whigs, who sought a law barring James from inheriting the crown, and Tories, who supported James’s right to inherit the

¹ Toleration was viewed by Charles as a way of binding dissenters to the absolutist monarch. Brian Weiser has argued that Charles wanted ‘dissenters to see their freedom as a gift of grace, not of right, and to be aware that the free exercise of their religion relied solely on keeping in the good graces of the king.’ Brian Weiser, Charles II and the Politics of Access (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 72.
It came as no surprise that when James II ascended the throne in 1685 he renewed attempts to expand religious tolerance. James maintained, rather passionately at times, that his goal was not the destruction of English Protestantism, but rather religious freedom for his subjects. Seriously complicating James's professions of religious openness, however, was Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. It could not have come at a worse time for James and played a critical, though often overlooked, role in the rebellions against James and his eventual overthrow in 1688. The revocation dramatically increased persecution of Protestants, brought back memories of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and intensified the exodus of French Protestant refugees fleeing across Europe, with a contingent landing in England. In 1681 Louis used his *dragonnades*, or *dragonoons* as they were often called in England, to intimidate and harass Protestants who refused to convert to Catholicism. Following the formal revocation in 1685, Protestant schools and churches were confiscated. By 1686 a large portion of France's Protestants had been forced out of the country. It might seem that English Protestant anger regarding French intolerance would strengthen a commitment to religious tolerance in England. If English Protestants believed that intolerance was wrong in France and that Huguenots should be tolerated, should there not be an equal commitment to religious tolerance in England? However, the opposite proved to be the case and James II's Declaration of Indulgence in 1687 precipitated his overthrow the following year.

This chapter examines rhetorical arguments about Huguenots in English polemical religious texts from the 1670s and 1680s. Within these texts, English authors employed a well-developed anxiety of

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2 James did not proclaim this policy of toleration immediately upon taking the throne, but initially sought to assure Tories that he would not change the laws. When he did attempt to expand freedom of conscience two years later he was viewed as being untrustworthy. See John Miller, *James II* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 120. Steve Pincus has argued that James was never interested in real liberty of conscience. See notes 98–101 below.