CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GROUP IDENTITY AND OPINION AMONG THE HUGUENOT DIASPORA AND THE CHALLENGE OF PIERRE BAYLE’S TOLERATION THEORY (1685–1706)

Jonathan Israel

Europe having suffered severely from religious warfare and violence during the age of the Thirty Years’ War, it is scarcely surprising that the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth witnessed a debate on public toleration on a scale never before seen in the West. By the 1680s, toleration was being widely and frequently discussed in sermons, books, learned periodicals, academic disputations, ecclesiastical councils and in political assemblies. Yet, it is also striking that one particular religious and cultural community, the Huguenot diaspora, exiled from France following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), displayed a quite exceptional preoccupation with this question far beyond that of all the rest, turning it into a matter of public concern, to a greater extent and in a more emphatic manner than any other sector of European society.

Given that no other community of comparable size suffered anything like as much displacement and disruption, as well as psychological trauma, during the latter part of the seventeenth century (in western Europe), as did the Huguenot population of France, owing to Louis XIV’s intolerant policies, this is scarcely surprising. It is obvious enough why the question of toleration became a central concern of all sections of the Huguenot diaspora outside of France; and not least of that part of the Huguenot diaspora, congregating in the Netherlands where the majority of the exiled preachers, publishers, and teachers, Pierre Bayle among them, settled.

On one level toleration was a theme which bound together the Huguenot public everywhere as practically nothing else could, in a sense even more than the Reformed faith. For a by no means insignificant fringe of the Huguenot population in exile, including a proportion of its preachers, were not convinced Calvinists but openly or semi-covertly adhered to Arminian, Socinian, Deistic and other
currents of theological opinion which set them at odds with the Calvinist views and the beliefs of the main body of their group. Theologically, the Huguenots by the late seventeenth century were in fact a deeply divided community. On the other hand, resentment at the way Louis XIV had treated them, and abhorrence of persecution (at any rate of the French Reformed Churches) united more or less all Huguenots. The pain of a shared experience, which had caused such a deeply felt wrench, led to something like a shared commitment to the principle of toleration which historically proved to be one of the most decisive new cultural phenomena of the age. It was also one which had an immediate practical point to it despite the remoteness of any prospect of a return to France. For there was a distinct question mark over the status of the Huguenot churches in England prior to the Toleration Act of 1689, whilst in much of Germany, including the great commercial metropolis of Hamburg where hundreds of Huguenots settled, and the Scandinavian lands, Lutheran intolerance long continued to block the way to formal permission for the French Reformed to maintain their own public churches, and educational and welfare institutions.

A modicum of toleration seemed a desirable thing to practically all Huguenots, but it soon proved to be the case not just that toleration could take very different forms and come in very different varieties but that, intellectually, toleration was such a problematic issue that it was even capable of becoming a whole fresh source of division and recrimination in itself. Even if most of those who made up what might be termed Huguenot intellectual circles saw toleration as a positive good and the great bulk of the Huguenot public readily conformed to this view, it is remarkable and ironic that even in the Netherlands, still perhaps relatively the most tolerant country in Europe, toleration rapidly developed into a deeply troubling and destabilizing philosophical battle-ground. Difficulties arose because of the widely perceived need to discredit and marginalize the more comprehensive varieties of toleration theory, in particular that propagated by the most eloquent and forceful of all the Huguenot writers of the time – Pierre Bayle.

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