

Joseph Ivimey, Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century, and Anticatholicism in Dissenting Politics

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From the time of the late-seventeenth century, the Test and Corporation Acts effectively relegated religious non-conformists in England to a second-class status in the political life of the nation. The laws disqualified them from most municipal and crown offices, and prevented Roman Catholics from serving in Parliament as well. Following the Glorious Revolution, the Toleration Act of 1689 extended greater freedom of religious worship to most Protestant Dissenters, but did little to grant them civil or political equality. The accession of the Hanoverian monarchs brought even greater liberties to the Dissenters. Throughout the eighteenth century, annual indemnity acts ended the practical enforcement of the laws and opened up many political offices to Protestant Dissenters. However, the stigma they felt from the fact that the laws remained on the books eventually motivated many non-conformists to actively seek their repeal. Religious tests for office, and the broader question of religious liberty became central issues in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century British politics. The Act of Union in 1800 further intensified the debate by bringing the fate of Irish Catholic participation in the political nation to the forefront. Test Act repeal and Catholic Emancipation “dominated British domestic politics” in the decades between the French Revolution and the Reform Bill.¹

At the same time, the growth of evangelicalism transformed the political activism of Protestant Dissenters in important ways. In spite of a conventional wisdom that has long stressed the political quietism and conserv-

atism of evangelicals, the reality is that evangelical Dissenters engaged a variety of political issues on the national level during the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.² Not the least of these was religious liberty, spurred on especially by Lord Sidmouth's 1811 bill to regulate the licensing of dissenting ministers.³ The emergence of evangelicals as a political force also stirred controversy within Dissent over the issue of Catholic Emancipation. While Catholics had suffered similar, indeed greater, disabilities under the laws, Protestant Dissenters did not easily unite in support of their cause. Rational Dissenters, who had largely dominated political Dissent until the early-nineteenth century, were generally sympathetic to Catholic claims; however, many evangelical Dissenters remained strongly anti-Catholic. Throughout its history, Protestant Dissent had often been a people drawn together by the common principle of freedom of worship, but divided by issues of theology, religious practice, and politics. This was especially true regarding the question of Catholic political rights during the first three decades of the nineteenth century.

Anti-Catholicism had a long history within English Protestant Dissent. Virtually all Dissenters could agree upon various doctrinal and theological objections to Catholicism. Perceived superstitions and religious practices were also easily condemned. Throughout the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, however, the issue of Catholic participation in politics became increasingly complicated for Dissenters. This was due in part to shifting conceptions about the nature of the Test Acts themselves, as well as about the meaning of the principles of toleration and religious liberty in a more general sense.

The history of dissenting participation in the repeal and emancipation campaigns has focused primarily on the actions of various official organizations that represented the dissenting interest. Most of this story is told from the records and minute books of these groups: the Dissenting Deputies, the General Body of Dissenting Ministers, the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty, and the "United" committees formed out of representatives of these organizations. This essay looks to engage the history from a slightly different angle, considering the Catholic Emancipation con-

troversty through the Baptist minister Joseph Ivimey's treatment of the topic in his *Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century*. It argues that Ivimey's handling of religious toleration and Catholicism in the text represent an increasingly obsolete perspective. During the early-nineteenth century, the idea of a principled right to religious freedom became the important element of the campaigns against the Test and Corporation Acts. In his appreciation of religious toleration and outspoken anticatholicism, Ivimey found himself swimming against the tide of political and religious developments.

Dissenting agitation for the repeal of the Test Acts proceeded through various stages between the 1780s and the 1820s. The first campaign mobilized in the late 1780s under the direction of the Dissenting Deputies, and emerged as a major public debate during the early years of the French Revolution. Dissenters framed much of the debate around what they deemed as the divisive nature of the laws, and stressed the importance of establishing a broader Protestant national identity that would not be undermined by the continued symbolic exclusion of Dissenters.⁵ This argument essentially sought to reframe the meaning of the religious test from a policy intended to protect the establishment from nonconformists, Catholic or Protestant, to a policy that protected a unified Protestant nation from a Catholic threat.

By the early nineteenth century the terms of the debate were steadily shifting. Whereas throughout most of the eighteenth century few Dissenters questioned the legitimacy of excluding Catholics from political power, the growing importance of the more expansive concept of religious liberty made it increasingly difficult for Dissenters to adopt a public anti-Catholic stance. This trend toward an emphasis on religious liberty gained momentum during and after the controversy over Sidmouth's Bill of 1811. During the debate on the bill in the House of Lords, Earl Stanhope praised the "public spirit" that had arisen to defeat Sidmouth's efforts to regulate Dissenting preachers, and gave a rousing defense of religious liberty. He declared his "hatred for the name Toleration Act," because toleration was a "beggarly, narrow, and worthless word." He "hated" toleration because he "loved liberty."⁶ Similarly, protests against the religious tests on the part of leading Dissenters fre-

quently moved beyond advocating toleration for religious dissent, and based their arguments instead on the right of every man “to enjoy and profess his respective opinions, without being therefore subjected either to reproach or disabilities.”⁷ It is also worth noting that even the Dissenting organization whose members were most skeptical about supporting Catholic Emancipation, nevertheless called itself the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty, eschewing any reference to toleration.

As the thrust of arguments against religious tests moved away from “political expediency to religious principle” and “the necessity of free religious inquiry,” expressing outright opposition to Catholic Emancipation became a more difficult stance for the leaders of the repeal movement to take. Anticatholicism in Dissent became a primary “obstacle to the waging of a purposeful campaign for the repeal of Dissenting disabilities.”⁸ Dissenting leaders faced a delicate balancing act. How were they to advance the repeal campaign along the broad principle of religious liberty, without antagonizing or energizing the opposition of evangelicals with anti-Catholic views among their rank and file?⁹ They settled on a strategy of public support for a general repeal of religious tests, while carefully avoiding to explicitly comment on the consequences of such a repeal for Catholics. The declaration of the Dissenting Deputies in 1825 conveying their opposition to “the impolicy and injustice of every sort of penalty or disability civil or political for conscience sake”¹⁰ provides a good example. Such carefully crafted statements did not suit all Dissenters, however, and some congregations openly petitioned against the Catholic Emancipation bill moved during that year. The key dissenting organizations renounced them, and William Smith tried to paper over the controversy by assuring the parliamentary Whigs that most of the offending petitions came from Methodists and not Dissenters.¹¹

An important figure within this debate was the Baptist minister Joseph Ivimey, who was born in Hampshire in 1773. The son of a tailor, he was raised in an Arian household before shifting toward evangelicalism and receiving adult baptism in 1790. Like many converts to evangelicalism from an artisan class background, he began his ministry as an itinerant

preacher around 1794. Ivimey entered London dissenting circles in the early nineteenth century, becoming pastor of the Eagle Street Particular Baptist Church (Holborn) in 1804. He served as a member of the Baptist Missionary Society committee from 1812, and was also appointed the Society's secretary for Ireland in 1814. Ivimey was also an established author, best known for his four-volume *History of the English Baptists* and several works on John Bunyan. His interest in Bunyan no doubt inspired the writing of *Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century*.

In the midst of the ongoing debates over the Test Acts and Catholic Emancipation, Ivimey published the *Pilgrims* in 1827. He described the work as "a continuation of The Pilgrim's Progress, upon the plan projected by Mr. Bunyan."¹² It was an "allegorical history of Protestant Dissenters,"¹³ in which the author commented upon the development of Protestant Dissent from the time of the Glorious Revolution to the early nineteenth century. Like Bunyan's original, the story is told by the narrator [Ivimey] in the form of a dream focusing primarily on his encounters with various descendents of the major characters from Pilgrim's Progress who dwell in a town called Toleration.

During the early-nineteenth century debates over the religious tests, Ivimey was one of a handful of Dissenting ministers who spoke out against Catholic Emancipation. He believed that in advocating for the removal of their own disabilities, Dissenters should not give any appearance of supporting Catholic claims. He criticized a petition approved by the General Body of Dissenting Ministers in 1812-13 that called for a broad repeal of all religious tests, because he feared that it could be read as supporting emancipation. "I have not opposed the Roman Catholics," he wrote in a pamphlet defending his opposition to the petition at the meeting of the General Body, "But ... I most certainly will do nothing to promote their wishes."¹⁴ Aware that outright opposition to the Catholic cause might open Dissenters to charges of hypocrisy, he advocated for strict neutrality on the Catholic issue. Subsequent pamphlets also increasingly stressed what Ivimey saw as the resurgent political threat of popery in restoration Europe. In 1819 he described papal supremacy as "Dangerous to the Safety

of Protestant Governments,” and on the eve of emancipation in 1828 he declared Catholic Emancipation “a Question not of Religious Liberty, but Political Expediency.”¹⁵ Ivimey’s repeated focus upon the potential political dangers of Catholic Emancipation represented a concession to the shifting terms of the debate. As much of the Dissenting leadership, and their Whig allies in Parliament, increasingly framed the debate over the Test Acts in terms of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, theological or doctrinal arguments against Catholic Emancipation carried little weight. The changing terrain of the debate over religious tests forced Ivimey to retreat to the ground of political expediency to justify his opposition to Catholic claims.

Thus, it is instructive to look at how Ivimey deals with Catholicism in the *Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century*. A central part of the narrative relates Ivimey’s tour through the town of Toleration. In a series of encounters and conversations with various inhabitants of the town, he makes observations and commentary on the condition of all the different denominations that enjoy the protections of toleration. In due course he comes to consider Catholicism, symbolized by the figures of the “old man” and the “monster” as in Bunyan’s original texts.¹⁶ Ivimey takes up a conversation with Matthew, a Protestant minister and great-grandson of the original pilgrim Christian, about the position of Catholics within the town. Much of the discourse trades in common anti-Catholic stereotypes. Matthew discredits alleged Catholic “miracles” like transubstantiation, and condemns the sacrament of Confession, which he describes as the practice of “a sinful man (and some of them very sinful men), arrogating to himself the power to forgive others their sins.” There follows a long list of “strong delusions” and “lies” believed by Catholics including: “purgatory, and prayers for the dead, ... pardons and indulgences, ... adoring images ... and ‘abominable idolatries’ in regard to worshiping saints, angels, and relics.”¹⁷ Matthew concludes the conversation with a consideration of the various proofs that the Pope is the Antichrist. Given all that, Ivimey asks Matthew, “is it proper that such persons should be suffered to reside in the good town of Toleration?”¹⁸

Matthew's responses on this point reflect Ivimey's desire to walk a fine line between respecting the freedom of conscience regarding religious belief, while at the same time keeping in place restrictions on Catholic participation in political life. On the establishment of the Catholic presence in Toleration Matthew says that "a few years after" the journeys of Christian and his family, "the old man and the monster ... were seized by the magistrate, as endangering the welfare of the community and were sentenced to wear fetters forever, to prevent them from again doing mischief." This is likely a reference to the Test Act of 1678, which effectively excluded Catholics from Parliament. Thus secured from the dangers of papal tyranny, the inhabitants of the town, "who had not learned to render evil for evil," felt secure that they could allow the "old man" to "share in their privileges; although he had never, when he possessed power, granted toleration to others."¹⁹ Later in the conversation Matthew also says:

Considering that their living here related merely to their being at liberty to maintain and propagate, if they could, their religious sentiments, and not to their becoming magistrates and rulers in the land in general [they] ought not to be prevented from residing with us.

Catholic doctrines and practices, however false and misguided they might be, could be tolerated as long as the political threat of popery was properly kept in check. "We find them, as things are, very harmless neighbours" he concludes, "but we should tremble for our safety if the fetters were to be taken off the old man; especially if, instead of them, he could strut about in the alderman's ermine, or the mayor's chain."²⁰

The general position presented by Ivimey in *Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century* was a long standard line of argument on the Catholic question within Protestant Dissent. Opposition to Catholic Emancipation was justified on the grounds of political expediency. Catholics already enjoyed the benefits of religious toleration, but should be disqualified from political power. During the 1820s, however, while many evangelical Dissenters like Ivimey still held fast to this view, it was an increasingly difficult political argument to make. The language of parliamentary debates on the issue had

shifted strongly in favor of the much broader concept of religious liberty. Moreover, the very public support of Catholics for repeal of the Test Acts left Dissenters who opposed emancipation open to accusations of inconsistency.²¹ Ivimey's argument may not have entirely lost its currency, but as the debate over religious tests intensified it was more and more politically inconvenient.

Following Test Act repeal in 1828, the United Committee passed a final resolution that explicitly stated their "earnest desire for the entire abolition of all laws interfering with the rights of conscience and attaching civil disabilities to religious faith and worship."²² This clear, if not absolutely direct, endorsement of Catholic Emancipation by the leadership of political Dissent illustrates how Ivimey's views were increasingly out of touch with the prevailing terms of the debate. In the opening chapter of the *Pilgrims* Ivimey starts his journey on a road called "Free Enquiry."²³ However, rather than leading him to religious liberty, or complete freedom of conscience, the road takes him merely to the town of Toleration. Earl Stanhope might have called it "a beggarly, narrow, and worthless" name for a place. Early in his tour of the town Ivimey does give voice to this perspective in an encounter with a man he identifies as a "free thinking Christian." "What a pleasant town you live in Sir," says Ivimey, to which the man replies:

Ah Sir, perhaps so, but I cannot breathe in it comfortably: I detest the very name of the town in which I am compelled to reside! What! To be merely *allowed* to live here, by those who do not even *approve* of my principles! For any of my fellow-men to arrogate to themselves the right of *tolerating* the exercise of what is my birth-right, thus intimating they have also a right to deprive me of my citizenship if they think it expedient to do so! This, Sir, is a most *intolerable* burden!²⁴

All the same, Ivimey's support for the continued exclusion of Catholics from political life required that his discussion of the subject to be primarily framed within the more limited framework of toleration and not a broader

concept like liberty or freedom of conscience. It is significant that in the more than two hundred pages of *Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century*, the phrase "religious liberty" appears only once.

That lone reference itself, further illustrates the extent to which Ivimey's views no longer fit easily within the changing parameters of dissenting political thought during the Reform Era. Near the end of the book, he recounts a conversation with an elderly man named Nonconformist, a grandson of Great-Heart, the guide to Christiana and her family in the second book of *Pilgrim's Progress*. "I am persuaded," says Nonconformist while contemplating the future prospects of Dissent, "that while the inhabitants of Toleration continue to be the 'quiet in the land,' they will be preserved in tranquility, and enjoy civil and religious liberty."²⁵ Repeal of the Test Acts came with an expectation on the part of many in the Establishment that Dissenters would remain quiet and appreciative. The Anglican Josiah Pratt anticipated from the nonconformists a sense of "thankfulness for the quiet enjoyment" of their new status, and expressed shock when what came instead was a vocal "claim to be placed on equal footing with the Church."²⁶

The dramatic constitutional shifts of the late 1820s and early 1830s would bring Dissenters, and evangelical Dissenters especially, into politics in unprecedented numbers. Following repeal, emancipation, and the Reform Bill, an emboldened dissenting politics emerged, focused upon the issues of church rates, marriages and burials, and a variety of other grievances. By the mid-1830s, calls for the disestablishment of the Church of England became increasingly common, and intensely debated within Protestant Dissent. Ivimey died in 1834. During that same year, the Congregationalist minister Thomas Binney published a printed version of his sermon preached at the laying of the foundation stone of the New King's Weigh House Chapel. The sermon was a stinging critique of the concept of a religious establishment, and in the appendix attached to the printed edition Binney wrote:

It is with me a matter of deep, serious religious conviction, that the Established Church is a great national evil; that it is an obstacle to the progress of truth and godliness

in the land; that it destroys more souls than it saves; and that, therefore, its end is most devoutly to be wished upon by every lover of God and man.²⁷

As Ivimey passed away, it seems that the ideas he expressed in the *Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century* were passing with him. A new generation of Dissenters, defining political action in their own terms, would make sure that they no longer remained “the quiet in the land.”

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Notes

¹ R.W. Davis, “The Strategy of ‘Dissent’ in the Repeal Campaign, 1820-1828,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 38.4 (1966): 374.

² The general premise of the conservative impact of evangelical religion evolved from Elie Halévy’s seminal works on the history of Dissent. See Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People in 1815* (New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1987), and *The Birth of Methodism*, ed. Bernard Semmel (Chicago UP, 1971). This was reinforced by E.P. Thompson’s treatment of Methodism in *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963). The variety of works that engage and demonstrate the broad range of Dissenting political activities include: Richard W. Davis, *Dissent in Politics 1780-1830* (London: Epworth, 1971); G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain: 1832 to 1868* (Oxford UP, 1977); J.E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge UP, 1990); Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1999); Richard Floyd, *Religious Dissent and Political Modernization: Church, Chapel and Party in Nineteenth Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Michael A. Rutz, *The British Zion: Congregationalism, Politics, and Empire, 1790-1850* (Waco: Baylor UP, 2011).

³ Michael A. Rutz, “The Politicizing of Evangelical Dissent, 1811-1813,” *Parliamentary History* 20.2 (2001): 187-207.

⁴ See B.L. Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies* (Cambridge

UP, 1952) and Davis, *Dissent in Politics*.

⁵ This argument is nicely described in Peter W. Walker, "'A Free and Protestant People'? The Campaign for the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, 1786-1828," M. Phil Thesis, Oxford University (2010).

⁶ Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 20: col. 250, 21 May 1811.

⁷ William Smith, cited in Davis, "Strategy of 'Dissent,'" 380.

⁸ Davis, "Strategy of 'Dissent,'" 374-75.

⁹ The difficulty came in part from the increasingly staunch support for Catholic Emancipation among the Whigs. Opposition to Catholic claims that became too vocal, or too public, risked alienating the Dissenters' essential parliamentary allies in the campaign against the Test Acts.

¹⁰ Protestant Dissenting Deputies Minute Book, 6 (29 April 1825), Guildhall Library.

¹¹ A careful examination of the petitions shows that this claim was not true. Many of them clearly came from dissenting congregations, and were labeled as such. Smith, knowing that the Whig leadership was not well versed in the finer points of denominational differences among nonconformists, was nevertheless successfully able to obfuscate the origins of the petitions and disarm accusations of inconsistency on the issue. See Davis, "The Strategy of 'Dissent,'" 381-82.

¹² Joseph Ivimey, *Pilgrims of the Nineteenth Century; A Continuation of Pilgrims' Progress Upon the Plan Projected By Mr. Bunyan* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1827).

¹³ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, iv.

¹⁴ Joseph Ivimey, *Neutrality the Proper Ground for Protestant Dissenters Respecting the Roman Catholic Claims* (London: T. Smith, 1813), 14.

¹⁵ Joseph Ivimey, *The Supremacy of the Pope Contrary to Scripture, and Dangerous to the Safety of Protestant Governments* (London: Button and Son, 1819); *The Roman Catholic Claims a Question not of Religious Liberty, but of Political Expediency* (London: Wightman and Camp, 1828).

¹⁶ In the first book of *Pilgrim's Progress*, as Christian passes out of the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" he is accosted by an old man in a

cave shouting, “You will never mend until more of you be burnt,” and in the second book while Christiana’s family are in *Vanity Fair* a monster attacks the adults and children of the town from out of the woods. Both figures represent the Catholic Church.

¹⁷ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, 99-100.

¹⁸ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, 99.

¹⁹ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, 98.

²⁰ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, 100.

²¹ In early 1828, representatives from the Catholic Association reached out to the Dissenting Deputies to propose a joint meeting and public initiative against their shared disabilities. The Deputies firmly, but politely, refused. At the same time they issued a public statement denying any “inference that their acting separately and individually [from the Roman Catholics] proceeds from any hostility to the claims of that numerous and respectable body of petitioners.” See Davis, “The Strategy of ‘Dissent,’” 392.

²² Minute Book of Committees and Sub-Committees Concerning the Application to Parliament, 2 (15 December 1828); cited. in Walker, ““A Free and Protestant People?””

²³ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, 18.

²⁴ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, 73-74.

²⁵ Ivimey, *Pilgrims*, 202.

²⁶ See Michael Watts, *The Dissenters*, volume 2: *The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford UP, 1995): 454; also Walker, ““A Free And Protestant People?”” 102.

²⁷ Thomas Binney, *An address delivered on laying the first stone of the New King’s Weigh House* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1834), 34.

