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How Dangerous, the Protestant Stranger?

Huguenots and the Formation of British Identity c. 1685-1715

The English Glorious Revolution in 1688 secured a Protestant settlement for the throne, and with King William’s wars began over a century of off-and-on fighting against the “popish tyranny” of France. These were not primarily wars of religion, but scholars from Linda Colley to John Brewer have shown how heavily they contributed to the modern British nation-state and its identity as a bastion of Protestant liberty. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, occurring as it did in 1685, contributed not a little to the context of the Glorious Revolution—and the resulting tension between international Protestant loyalties and the growing nationalism of the British.

The Huguenots, as French Calvinists, embodied the very paradox at the heart of this developing British national identity. They were victims of the French Catholic monarchical tyranny, and thus justified both the Glorious Revolution itself and the wars against the French. But they were still French, and, congregating in London, controlled some very lucrative elements of the merchant economy. Additionally, they were not part of the Church of England, and as dissenters, they challenged the limits of the nascent Act of Toleration. To what extent could these French strangers be incorporated into the civil society of the British nation? The answers to this question not only shed light both on British national identity but also demonstrate the manner in which the emerging political ideology of liberalism, with its commitment to party politics, promotion of trade, secularization and representative government, would develop in its English/British context. The Huguenots gave the English language the word “refugee” and thus also signal the beginning of the importance to liberal states of often defining legitimate immigrants as refugees.¹

The Glorious Revolution was the beginning of the direct English engagement with Louis XIV, and during the decades following 1688, the foundations for the on-going rule over Ireland were laid, as well as the Union with Scotland. The Act for the Naturalization of French Protestants was passed and then revoked. The height of party politics in the early eighteenth century and the development of the Bank of England and the first British empire, are all part of the decades following the Glorious Revolution and are inseparable those events and the establishment once and for all of a Protestant monarchy. I argue that the experience of making sense of the presence of the Huguenots among them was crucial to the debates around economics, religious identity and political parties at this time. As we have consistently discovered in modern liberal democracies, immigrants push us to articulate our ideals—for better and for worse. The lack of consensus regarding the place of the Huguenots provides a useful foil for the conflicting goals and identities of the British people at this time and allows us to see the complex process of the development of British liberalism.

How Protestant?

Historians such as Tony Claydon and Steven Pincus disagree regarding whether or not Protestant identity was paramount in the wars of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Certainly, supporters of William’s war in Britain seemed as likely to use the language of opposition to universal monarchy and economic interest as that of opposition to “popery.”²

But the Huguenots certainly pitched themselves to the heads of state as people who would help in forwarding the Protestant side of that conflict. Huguenots were part of the larger international Calvinist community and their long history of emigrating to Protestant states for refuge from persecution and maintaining ties between those immigrant communities gave them a strong sense of a Protestant network between states. Those who emigrated may have been more militantly committed to that Protestant identity and in many of their host countries they worked (sometimes with success) to promote a Protestant foreign policy, specifically targeted at Louis XIV.

When William wanted to ingratiate himself more with his new subjects, he put aside some of his Catholic officers and promoted Huguenots in their place. However, William’s army in 1688 included French Catholics as well as Huguenots, and the latter were also clearly willing to serve under Catholic officers and monarchs as well, and some even fought for James II against the Protestant Duke of Monmouth. Clearly, then, the Protestant nature of William’s wars was not monolithic, and the Huguenot community included those who would compromise as well as the militant anti-Catholics.

As the British responded to the increased number of French Protestants among them, they seem to have been most concerned with their religious position and their economic contribution (or competition). Certainly their status as victims of persecution allowed observers like Gilbert Burnet to self-righteously declare that even Roman Catholics in England did not think their situation was as bad as the Protestants in France. The Huguenots and their supporters were very skillful in continuing the high levels of emotional support for these victims by continuously releasing stories and memoirs of their persecution.

At the same time, the English state often cared more about how these refugees blended into the foreign policy of the state itself (i.e., war with France) and less about their religious affiliation. William had Catholic Hapsburg allies, after all. In the fight against Louis XIV, there were reasons for people of all faiths to join together—Louis himself and his foreign and domestic policies provided that. In a typically strongly-worded diatribe Daniel Defoe claimed that the French desire to exterminate the English was so strong that “English papists should find little better quarter than others.” The war was against Louis and his claims of universal monarchy, not against Catholicism or the papacy.

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3 Matthew Glozier. *The Huguenot Soldiers of William of Orange and the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688: The Lions of Judah.* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic, 2002), 38-41. This network was as much economic as it was military and religious.


6 Glozier, 83.


8 *Popish Treachery; or a Short and New Account of the Horrid Cruelties Exercised on the Protestants in France.* (London: by Richard Baldwin, 1689), Wing P2958; *An Account of the Sufferings and Dying Words of Several French Protestants under this present Persecution.* (London, 1699) Wing A396.


And it was a concern about that kind of ‘papist’ invasion of their nation, and its
equation with things French that caused concern among some of the English that the Huguenots
were pseudo-Catholics. This is why the Huguenots made constant attempts to remind their hosts
of their status as victims in this conflict with Louis XIV. The consistent insistence within the
French churches that their members reiterate their persecution stories, recant their forced
Catholic conversions where necessary and articulate their commitment to the true faith was
reinforced by their unwillingness to sponsor any of the French poor who were less than orthodox
in their Calvinism.11

Huguenots, then, while fighting alongside their British comrades in the war against
Louis and his allies, were able to access more complex elements of solidarity than simply
Protestantism. There were times when national identity and security were not made clear or
established by Protestantism alone. The economist Charles Davenant, even as he argued for a
greater political inclusion of the Huguenot immigrants, reminded his readers that “all things were
not secure, because Religion was out of danger.”12 The Huguenot presence helped the English
articulate that it was more than just Protestantism that they needed to be concerned about—there
was the despotism of universal monarchy. However, the immigrants also understood that the
opposition to the French monarch was made more emotional and strident when British citizens
were reminded of his persecutory ways. French Catholic despotism that persecuted—that was
the kind of ‘popery’ that they emphasized.

What liberties?

Huguenots were also noted for consistent statements of loyalty to monarchs—but it was a
loyalty which went along with a fairly republican form of government within the churches
themselves and a sense among observers that their social organization was almost democratic. In
the Refuge the Huguenot clergy were often battling against the intrusion of too much influence
or independence of the lay people. There was a constant inspection of beliefs, but this was
balanced against the understanding that the French immigrants were choosing to be part of the
community. The fairly extreme views of Pierre Jurieu, advocating for complete prosecution of
heresy and error, were consistently contended with by other Huguenot writers. Historian Bernard
Cottrett points out that these stranger churches were often the most clear about the ways in which
civil and religious authority were not the same.13 In the development of British liberalism, with
its established church and Act of Toleration, Huguenot tensions regarding orthodoxy and
toleration, the power of the clergy and loyalty to the state, both mirrored and contributed to the
national discussion regarding these issues.

In the Threadneedle Street church, for instance, wealthy entrepreneurs such as Thomas
Papillon set the tone for fundamental support of the English crown over and against Louis XIV.
Robin Gwynn’s study of this church reveals that it seems impossible to differentiate between its
members’ religious identification as persecuted Protestants and their economic commitments
and loyalty to the English crown.14 And yet, many Huguenots also found that they were able to
maintain what seemed often to be Whig sensibilities with loyalty to Tory governments, when

12 Davenant, 224.
necessary. Active in coffee houses and attempting to understand the party system, some Whig writers such as Rapin Thoyras and Emmanuel de Cize’ laid out the ideologies in a manner that associated Tories with the absolutism of Louis XIV. One of the most prolific of Huguenot political writers, Abel Boyer’s political economic publications placed him firmly in the camp of supporting the Whig party, the Bank of England, an expansive British identity and wars to promote international trade. And so the Huguenots consistently positioned themselves as loyal to the English state and helpful in expanding her wealth and trading relationships.

The political parties were taking advantage of the sympathy as well as the economic worries about the Huguenots to advance their own agenda. The Tory minister Harley tried to get them to sign declarations supporting the war against the French—apparently to undermine their support of the Whigs, since the latter were promoting the war. In general, it appears that Huguenots did consistently side with the Whigs, who were very aware of their role as the protectors of this community.

The Huguenots themselves, according to John Marshall’s masterful study, had shifted from a group advocating non-resistance as late as the 1680s to a community which supported the Glorious Revolution and its liberal ideals “Liberty has gained the point, and Arbitrary Power is generally condemn’d. The Rights of Subjects are clear’d up, and the Usurpations of Puissances are disapprov’d.”

What kind of economy?

Nancy Rothstein’s study of the Huguenot weavers in Canterbury and Spitalfields reveals the extent to which they worked hard to ingratiate themselves into the local community, forming business partnerships with English men and women— even marrying them. The wealthiest weavers did not reinvest in the trade, but invested their money in the Bank of England and the East India Company, like other wealthy Englishmen. The economic splits within the community can be seen as reflected in the way in which the wealthy were able to have individual acts of naturalization passed and to invest in the Bank. When weavers were excluded from the silk-weavers company in Spittlefields, it was both French and English petitioners who pleaded their case. Indeed, Huguenots seem to have consistently acted within their economic class, rather than simply as a faith community and this appears to have aided in their integration, making them seem less of a threat.

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16 Abel Boyer, An Address to the Nobility, Gentry, Merchants and Proprietors of the National Funds (London, 1711), 3-4.
17 Schwartz, The French Prophets, 56.
18 Schwartz, The French Prophets, 57.
21 Schwartz, The French Prophets, 57.
22 The Case of a Great Number of Silk-weavers, as well French Protestants as English…. (London: s.n., 1695) Wing (2nd ed.) C916.
Certainly the financial revolution owed a substantial amount to the liquid capital provided by leading Huguenot merchants. John Castaing, a Huguenot, was responsible for the early list of market prices in Government loans, ‘The Course of the Exchange’, from which evolved the Stock Exchange Official List” and the French church invested its own money in the Bank of England, starting in 1695. “Of the 1,200,000 (pounds) subscribed to the Bank of England in 1695, 123 newly arrived Huguenots provided 104,000” pounds—and at least a full 10% of the investors in the Bank were Huguenot immigrants or their children.24

Defoe, who was a great defender of the Huguenots, also articulated the idea that the primary goal of the state should be the increase of wealth, for which people were needed and that a larger British identity was crucial for that. “How much it is your concern to promote and extend trade manufactures, and a full employment to the people of Scotland—who are and ought now to be esteemed a part of yourselves, and who by increase of commerce would grow rich in produce?”25 And further, he contended that Ireland could be made profitable if there would be “a great inducement to foreigners to go and fill that country who would in time by marrying into English and Scotch families become British.”26 He was not alone. William Petty seems to have been especially thinking of the Huguenots when he argued in a tract published in 1690 that to “sell land to foreigners, increaseth both money and people, and consequently trade. Wherefore it is to be thought that when the laws denying strangers to purchase, and not permitting them to trade without paying extraordinary duties, were made; that then the public state of things and Interest of the nation were far different from what they are now.27”

John Locke and other Whig proprietors of the Carolina colonies very intentionally recruited Huguenots as a way of fulfilling the dual needs of international Protestantism and the mercantile interests of Britain. The peripatetic Huguenot Durand Dauphiné’s memoirs were written explicitly to encourage settlement in the colonies (although he preferred Virginia to Carolina, much to the chagrin of his sponsors).28 In general, Dauphiné’s gushing over the wealth and richness of Virginia led him to advocate that it was wide open for the refugees to cultivate and would replace their lost countryside quite effectively. This promotion of the sort of empire and extension of English commerce was exactly what the English were happiest about with regards to the Huguenot immigrants.

Moreover, Locke very consciously formulated a naturalization policy that was more contractual and voluntary than had been the case in England during the earlier part of the seventeenth century. Locke believed that these naturalized citizens would be “perfect Englishmen as those that have been here since William the Conquerers days & came over with him.” Then, sounding a bit like Defoe, he added “for tis hardly to be doubted but that most of even our Ancestors were Forainers.”29 The liberal Whigs, then, looked to the Huguenots, as secure partners in furthering their imperialist and mercantilist ideals.

24 Gwynn, Huguenot Heritage, 155, 156; Schwartz, The French Prophets, 60.
26 Defoe, Some Seasonable Queries. (London: s.n., 1697), 4. Wing (2nd ed.) S4609A. This is echoed by the Irish Protestant Richard Cox in Some thoughts on the bill depending before the right honourable the House of Lords... (Dublin: Printed by Joseph Ray, 1698), 12. Wing C6725.
How assimilated?

However, even their supporters acknowledged that there were concerns about how integrated the Huguenots were becoming. To the extent that they remained distinctly “French”, to that extent they were a threat. When they lived in large numbers together, it was disconcerting to the British who traveled through their streets that they often didn’t hear English spoken. Charles Davenant, whose economic theories encouraged immigration, suggested that they be scattered throughout the entire country, because “they may endanger the Government by being suffer’d to remain, such vast Numbers of ‘em, here in London, where they inhabit all together, at least 30000 Persons in two Quarters of the Town, without inter-marrying with the English, or learning our language, by which Means for several Years to come, they are in a way still to continue Foriegners, and perhaps may have a Foreign Interest and Foreign Inclinations.”

Historian John Brewer points out that “the Huguenot officer was a sufficiently familiar character to be parodied by Henry Fielding in Tom Jones as the soldier who had forgotten his native tongue but had also failed to acquire English.”

The churches and their leadership were quite aware of this and scolded their parishioners lest their deportment or excessive “Frenchness” alarm the neighbors. The consistory records in 1690 warned against any entertainment or frivolity which might “scandalize the English nation which it is so much in our interests not to offend, and cause our nation to be held in poor esteem by them, which could lessen their compassion towards our poor refugee brethren and stem the flow of their charity and alms.”

Clearly there were ambiguities in the process of ‘assimilation.’ Often it appears, as in the memoirs written by Isaac Dumond de Bostaquet, that the Huguenots attempted to build on the shared history of persecution and Protestantism rather than on changing to become English. The Huguenots didn’t want to lose their identity—they were, in this sense, a “conservative” immigrant group and tried to pass on their religious and cultural, and even political, identity to the next generation, while at the same time making themselves as minimally obnoxious as possible to the host culture. Shared Protestantism and the story telling of their persecution and forced migration helped to do this. They defined “Englishness” as Protestant culture rather than in some other ethnic characteristic.

The concerns about how and why to welcome refugees, either because they supported the essential characteristic of England—its Protestantism—or because it was simply the most civilized and humane thing to do, remain central to the paradox and core of Anglo-European liberal democracies today. After the passage of the 1709 Naturalization Act, Defoe encouraged

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the English to set aside their well-known xenophobia and to take on the identity of those who were a safe harbor for the persecuted:

Here’s an occasion to remove the scandal, to fill all Europe with a report of your generosity, and tell the world that the reproach Englishmen have so many ages laboured under has been a mere slander, or at least that the nation has reformed the vice, and contrary to the practice of their ancestors, are become the sanctuary and relief of the distressed foreigners.…. [Then] you will retrieve that reputation that you lost when the Dutch that came hither to bring over your deliverer, and indeed your deliverance ‘were paid, and cursed, and hurried home again’… Relieving these poor people, and opening your hands and hearts to them will stop the mouth of raillery and satire upon the nation….and be an eternal honor to the nation of Britain in the ages to come. The blessing of him that is ready to perish will come upon you.35

The freethinker and Locke aficionado, Matthew Tindale, made the argument for general toleration and a general naturalization by claiming that the basis of religion is “to supply the Wants of the Poor and Needy”—integrating his arguments regarding the power of government and the rights of citizens with advocacy for the Huguenots.36 The economist Charles Davenant gushed that “Liberty encourages Procreation, and not only keeps our own Inhabitants among us, but invites Strangers to come and live under the shelter of our Laws.”37 Liberty, then, was connected to bringing those who shared in the ideals of liberty and who were persecuted elsewhere. It was the right thing to do according to the basic claims of Christianity and for those who opposed tyranny.

Daniel Defoe’s work attempted to demonstrate that with proper education immigrants could develop the character needed to contribute to a rightly ordered society. “Bringing [the immigrants] into the privileges and immunities of Englishmen” would in time make them so.38 Another polemicist argued that the refugees “have on all occasions, shewed their Loyalty, Zeal and Affection, to the Present Government by supporting very cheerfully the Charges and Taxes of the Land and wearing Arms for the Defence of it.”39 Even though he supported a general naturalization, Davenant argued that first generation immigrants shouldn’t be able to vote, but that “from their Sons indeed there is less to fear, who by Birth and Nature may come to have the same Interest and Inclinations as the Natives.”40

Welcoming those who share the identity and values of the host country and who can add to its economic power seems obvious. Liberalism remains committed to seeing to the economic well-being of its citizens. Early in the formation of liberalism within England, however, tension arose between those who saw their essential quality as that of Protestantism and those who saw the attribute that set England apart from others as its humaneness.41 Both myths would

36 Tindale, 174.
38 Daniel Defoe, Some Seasonable Queries (London: s.n., 1697), 3. Wing S4609A; Olson, 487.
39 The Case of the French Protestants Refugees, settled in and about London, and in the English Plantations in America. (London: s.n., 1696), Wing (2nd ed.) C1080A
40 Davenant, 27.
41 Olson, 484, 485
eventually contribute in fundamental ways to the myth of liberalism, progress and Anglo-American exceptionalism.

The early eighteenth-century British nation(s) was just beginning to try to legitimize its power while also espousing an ideal of a sort of toleration. The modern liberal state espouses its liberalism and toleration often by restricting who is included within it, and who thus need the liberalism and toleration extended to them. Toleration requires accepting difference, but the desire for community often asks of us that our identities be singular and restrictive. These desires are in tension.\(^{42}\) The beginnings of the articulation of this tension in the early days of British liberalism were made possible by the confrontation with the Huguenot refugees. Gilbert Burnet came close to connecting these ideals with the fight against popish tyranny when he ended a dramatic narrative of the dangers of arbitrary popish governments by praying that God will bless “the happy Constitution of both Church and State among us, a secure and honorable Peace, a fullness of Plenty, and a freedom of Trade.”\(^{43}\)

**Conclusion**

Engaging with the Huguenots and the meaning their presence might have for British society required Englishmen to articulate their political ideas in more complex ways. Would they argue for a particularist English/Anglican identity? Or a more universal one that could include more than one ethnicity? The debate was not solved, and during times when wars were going badly, the succession seemed unsure or the economy was failing, the more narrow definition, the fear-filled position, could dominate. But always there were those arguing for a wider identity, for a Protestant unity that could transcend ethnicity, for a commitment to a liberty which encompassed Europe and the colonies as well as England.

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