

Cromwell & Religious Tolerance

by John Morrill

2004, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
Article (50+ pages) can be read in full at www.oxforddnb.com
with your Essex Library card number to login

Nothing caused Cromwell more pain or gradual disillusionment than his uphill struggle against the narrow-mindedness of a majority of MPs (and of his councillors) over the extension of religious liberty, especially given the continuing shrill demands for special privilege from so many of the sects. A comparison between his vision of 1653 and his nightmare of 1658 is especially poignant. He exhorted the nominated assembly to:

be faithful with the Saints; to be touched with them ... In my pilgrimage and some exercises I have had abroad, I did read that Scripture often in Isaiah 41:19 ... what would [God] do. To what end? That he might plant in the wilderness the cedar and the [acacia] tree, and the myrtle and palm tree together. To what end? That they might know and consider and understand together that the hand of the Lord hath done this. (Speeches, 22, 4 July 1653)

It was a vision of 'the various forms of godliness in this nation' respecting one another, learning from one another, growing together in trust and love.

Eighteen months later, reproving the first Protectorate parliament as he dissolved it, Cromwell said he had hoped that they would have

'upheld and given countenance to a Godly ministry, and yet would have given a just liberty to Godly men of different judgments'. Yet: is there not yet upon the spirit of men a strange itch? Nothing will satisfy them, unless they can put their finger upon their brethren's consciences, to pinch them there ... Is it ingenuous to ask liberty, and not to give it? What greater hypocrisy than for those who were oppressed by the bishops to become the greatest oppressors themselves so soon as their yoke was removed? (Speeches, 66-7, 22 Jan 1658)

And by January 1658 the irritation at the pinching of conscience had become something much more disturbing:

What is that which possesses every sect? What is it? That every sect may be uppermost ... we have an appetite to variety, to be not only making wounds, but as if we should see one making wounds in a man's side and would desire nothing more than to be groping and grovelling with his fingers in those wounds. This is what all men will be at ... They will be making wounds, and rending and tearing and making them wider than they are. (ibid., 180-81, 25 Jan 1658)