**Why and with what effect did religious dissent and nonconformity increase 1625-88?**

**Introduction**

Religious radicalism has a long history that precedes the Stuart monarchs that be found within anticlericalism in general and theologist who emphasized the importance of the Bible over the established Church of England. The significance of dissenters and non-conformity was that they combined to grow throughout the period and that this in turn was to have important religious and political consequences that contributed to the decline of the Confessional State and toward the establishment of religious toleration. The reasons for their proliferation can be found in the mistakes made by their enemies within the Church of England who established narrow definitions of uniformity and the commitment of those who left the Church of England together with the level of support given by sympathisers through social and political organisations.

**1625-60**

Religious dissenters increased in the period 1625-40 because of narrow definitions of uniformity of Laud and because dissenters were encouraged in the period 1640-60. In the 1620s there was at least five Baptist churches in England with the total membership of 150 which indicated a small but well established tradition of Puritanism led by John Smyth. Added to this were those that were ejected as a consequence of Laudian reforms during which clerical ejections increased as did the number of dissenters who met outside the Church because of Lauds imposition of Catechism. Charles and Lauds fear of puritans is evident in the extensive use of the Prerogative Courts to punish dissent. Bostwick, Barton and Prynne we're all imprisoned and it is no coincidence that the opposition to Charles that emerged in the Long Parliament of 1640 were of Puritan persuasion including Pym and Hampden.

Presbyterianism also grew in the period after 1616 under the leadership of Henry Jacob who had established a Congregational Church in London in 1616 which ad grown to 28 such churches because of the Laudian reforms. The excitement of the Long Parliament encouraged further development and by 1642 there were about 1,000 separatists in London. The course of the war saw further development because of the breakdown of normal constraints in the Church of England and those areas sympathetic to Parliament. The relative freedom of the press after 1640 further stimulated radical religious thinking through radical preachers and the role of the New Model army. By 1647 when the quarrel between parliament and the New Model Army intensified the arguments for religious freedom and social change will well publicised.

By September 1658 Cromwell's efforts to balance freedom in religion and stability in society had achieved mixed results. The Quakers remained a threat, freedom granted to Independents, Congregationalists and Baptists had allowed them to become ordered and established setting up national organisations and specific Confessions of Faith to apply to all their members. The significance of this enabled them to withstand renewed persecution after the Restoration of 1660. Presbyterians had also worked within the church setting up voluntary organisations, although suspicions of religious radicalism had not abated. The core of separatism before 1616 lay in three groups the Congregationalists, the Baptist and the Quakers all of whom were dwarfed by the Presbyterians whose aim remained a reformed National Church and indeed were hostile to the sects. Presbyterian ministers John Shaw and Edward Bowles liaised with Fairfax and Monck to clear the way for Moncks March to London to prepare the way for the Restoration of the Monarchy

**1660-69**

In the period 1660-69 religious dissent increased because of narrow definitions of uniformity and it's support by individuals and organisations within the political nation. The Clarendon Code 1661 renewed the persecution of Puritans and was directed primarily against those who wanted to remain within the Church and had no desire to establish separatist congregations. Four Acts made up the Clarendon code, The Corporation Act, the Act of Uniformity, the Conventicle Article and the Five Mile Act and they were designed to impose uniformity and silence dissent. By 1669 it had largely failed as a strategy. John Shaw was eventually banned from Hull and ejected from the Church. Shaw's experience was repeated many times across the country. The worst suffering was evidenced by the Quakers. By 1662 the Quaker Act was enforced and many imprisoned for failure to swear an Oath of Allegiance. Baptist Preachers suffered a similar fate. Of 1800 Minister who left the Church, 1,000 were ejected in the summer of 1662. Many continued to meet in private houses despite the danger of arrest.

Buy 1669 the worst of the persecution was over for dissenters and a new network began to emerge amongst the presbyterians. in Richard Frankland founded an academy to provide an education for potential clergy and by 1689 over 100 new recruits had been added to the ranks of dissenting clergy. However this did not guarantee their survival as hostility remained as did internal conflicts between different dissenting groups.. The Quakers organisation was shattered but had begun to reorganize by 1669. By 1669 dissent had not only survived but begun to reorganise prompting Sheldon into a Second Conventicle Act of 1670 and a renewed onslaught but this had limited impact and sometimes offended the attitudes of many outside the ranks of dissenters. In 1672 Charles II suspended the Conventicle Act and other persecutory laws in a Declaration of Indulgence that would allow dissenters. Charles and Latitudinarians within the church and signifies the belief that some variation of religious views was both rational and sensible and that persecution was irrational and counterproductive including John Wilkins. Charles appointed a group of close advisors including Catholics Puritans and one atheist in order to challenge the High Church Anglicans and their parliamentary allies for control of religious policy towards dissent.

**1669-88**

During the period 1669 to 88 dissent increased because of a swing in the public mood away from uniformity and because of the failure of policies of persecution. By 1673 it was clear that Charles II had missed judged the mood of Parliament and together with a war against the Dutch and a financial crisis he withdrew his Declaration of Indulgence. However that year had enabled the dissenters to consolidate their gains since 1669 and laid the Foundations for further development including building meeting houses the formation of ministers associations and the development of training academies. In addition the Presbyterians took out a licence defining their ministry outside the National Church of England. Although the indulgence was withdrawn licences were not recalled until 1675 and Presbyterianism newly established. When persecution was renewed it implementation was patchy and intermittent because of a lack of desire amongst the political nation. From 1678-83 the impact of the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis cemented the alliance between the dissenters and their Whig allies in the corporate Boroughs and urban centres where both had survived and thrived.

Charles renewed his persecution 1683-86 and in many areas meetings of dissenters became problematic when Charles embarked on a recall of borough charters with the aim of gaining control of local administration and their MPs. However in 1686- 87 the persecution ceased and its failure was apparent at the speed in which dissenters reemerged, reconstituted their organisations and took up their spiritual life. The dissenting chapels were stronger and better organised and public opinion had shifted away from uniformity. This accounted for the survival of dissent along with a growing fear of the influence of Catholicism in Charles and James's administration.

**Conclusion**

Religious dissent survived because of the commitment of those who left the Church of England, the support given by sympathizers and the mistakes of those who sought to impose religious uniformity throughout the Stuart reigns. The result was increasing numbers of dissenters and especially presbyterianism, that provided a significant cause behind the Scottish Bishops Wars of 1638 and the English Civil wars that began in 1642.. The misjudgement of the Clarendon Code of the 1660’s in defining and creating a further recruiting ground for nonconformity was the most significant factor in their continued existence and explains how they were able quickly to reorganise and reconstitute themselves in the late 1660’s. Finally the decisions made by James II quickly removed any doubt about their survival since his decisions to extend toleration to Catholics provided a broad alliance of dissenters that formed a substantial basis of the opposition that was to result in Glorious Revolution and install the Protestant William and Mary on the throne.