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Introduction

Toleration, political theorists tell us, is a philosophy of government that asks people to get along with others who differ substantially in their backgrounds and preferences. In our day, such a goal, even if it seems attractive (and it may not be for everyone), is elusive. We are continually reminded, first of all, that the impulse to share the benefits of social life so widely – among persons racially, ethnically, sexually, and religiously diverse – is not always widely shared. Many political regimes have taken it upon themselves to suppress the activities of groups or sects whose beliefs they regard to be subversive of social stability; territorial wars inspired by racial, ethnic, or religious differences continue to define the climate of contemporary political life in many regions of the world. But even more perplexing may be the fact that even ostensibly tolerant societies exert a considerable level of suppression of and control over beliefs, dispositions, and expressions – a practice from which the theory of toleration apparently tries to extricate itself.[1] This is why much of our common experience of secular institutions shows that such institutions – even while they accept persons with different backgrounds and beliefs – also remain hostile to those who wish to express, or act upon, their affiliations openly. School districts in the United States, for example, regularly limit the expression of the very religious beliefs that they apparently tolerate. In India, the practice of ritual self-immolation or *sati* has been banned since 1829 in the interests of democratic freedom. In Turkey, ethnic Kurds have been sentenced to prison terms for publicly exposing sectarian differences or for criticizing secularism.

This book does not try to comment on any of today's practical puzzles of toleration – puzzles that require us to make vexing distinctions between other tolerant and intolerant governments or to make difficult decisions in our own communities about what can and cannot be tolerated in order to achieve the goal of toleration. Neither does it rigorously study, or adjudicate between, current theoretical views of the subject or

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present cases that such views attempt, correctly or incorrectly, to address. Instead, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing* provides something of a genealogy for such puzzles and theories. It takes the specific issue of *religious* toleration, an issue attracting increasingly heated debate throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as one of the Romantic period's most compelling occasions for exploring the extent of, and limits upon, the liberality of liberal government.[2] The central argument of this book is that much of the writing that emerged in this period is important not merely because it advocated specific kinds of beliefs or interests, but because it advocated a new way in which different beliefs could be *governed* under the auspices of tolerant institutions. Or, to put it another way, this book, rather than a study of political or religious beliefs, is a study of emergent beliefs about the *position* of beliefs in modern society more generally.

The four decades I study in this book witnessed some of the most intense and creative challenges to the authority of the confessional state – the monopoly of the Anglican church, enforced through oaths, tests, and penal laws, over all regions of British civil and political life. From the political writings of Jeremy Bentham to Lord Byron's *Cain: A Mystery*, the works I study in this book portrayed the conventional structure of establishment as a "tissue of imposture" (as Bentham put it). But these works also revealed established religion to be a spectacular political failure: an attempt to produce order that resulted in chaos, an attempt to establish legal control over regions of consciousness which continually eluded all legislation. In a joint enterprise of literary and political speculation, the discourse of toleration reimagined the lineaments of British government as a social entity that was both more permissive *and* more orderly – a nation-state that included and coordinated multiple, diverging beliefs and alliances within a set of accommodating institutional environments, from schools and workplaces to parliament and the church itself. Toleration emerged, in other words, neither as a naive commitment to individualism nor as an oppressive ideology. Rather, incommensurable and contentious beliefs provided writers of the day with the impetus to propose revised and expanded institutional organs of the state, which could assume the responsibility of coordinating a range of incompatible moral and religious doctrines and perspectives. Jeremy Bentham thus envisioned his schools, prisons, and "pauper management" schemes not merely as tools of "normalization" (as Michel Foucault has described them) but as the vital means through which individuals holding divergent beliefs might simultaneously gain social admission and achieve

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public recognition within the "connexions and dependencies of the several parts of the admirable whole."[3] Maria Edgeworth adopted a similar strategy in her fiction by showing how Irish Catholic culture could preserve and embellish its distinction precisely by being included in Britain's economy and British secular institutions. Even the late Wordsworth, well known for defending the established church in his later poetry, frequently regarded the ecclesiastical institution as a source of social value only because it served as a foundation for tolerant government. In *The Excursion*, a poem so frequently dismissed by critics as a piece of dry and sterile propaganda for orthodox Anglicanism, the church does not merely identify and exclude enemies from an ideal communion; it instead absorbs and protects even the most mutinous and recalcitrant subjects within the church-guided "powers of civil polity."[4]

As frequently as the topic of this book may bring it into contact with terms such as "liberal," "liberalism," and "liberality," I insist upon the particularity of the discourse of toleration, inherited from the writing of Milton and Locke and given further shape by writers from Joseph Priestley and George Dyer to William Godwin and Bentham. This is because of the distinctive challenges that religious belief posed (and still continues to pose) to philosophies of liberal government.[5] Religious toleration, so often confronting writers as the paradox of tolerating the intolerant, presented specific problems that required specific institutional remedies. Because I do not frame toleration as an issue that could be separated from an institutional construction of it, however, I offer an account of toleration that is somewhat different from that which is found amongst the works of political theorists who either support or criticize philosophies of liberalism. I have already said that I do not propose to offer a theory of toleration in this book, but I can still say more precisely how the historical work of this study supplements more abstract accounts of the subject. From differing and occasionally contending positions, writers such as Stanley Fish, Kirstie McClure, Robert Post, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor argue that toleration is only a version of – or is at least difficult to separate from – assimilation.[6] To tolerate others, they claim, we need to agree on the terms of toleration in advance; we therefore only tolerate others who share our own beliefs or perspectives.

What these arguments have in common is their commitment to framing toleration as a political value so pure that it is conveniently unreachable; they describe it as an ideal that seeks to be "neutral with regard to truth" (McClure) and that can therefore be criticized from a more skeptical or pragmatic position – one that shows how social arrangements

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are actually the product of "indoctrination" (Fish) or specific group interests.[7] I might add here that studies of "liberalism" in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing – by critics including Julie Ellison, William Jewett, and Celeste Langan – follow this line of reasoning by making liberalism look like a commitment to purely autonomous individualism and thus rather obviously like a political impossibility.[8] Generally speaking, a historical perspective on the issue shows that defenders of toleration seldom subscribed to unsophisticated commitments to abstract values of freedom or neutrality. More specifically, though, the focus of this book shows how the discourse of toleration elaborated towards the end of the eighteenth century promoted liberal inclusion not as mere permissiveness but as the foundation of institutional strength and security. Such strength and security, moreover, was viewed as the very means to achieve toleration – rather than as an embarrassing excrescence on an otherwise perfect utopia. The Romantic discourse of toleration pursued a seemingly inextricable dual commitment to individual freedom and the social organization and facilitation of that freedom.

The chapters that follow regularly engage with criticism of Romantic writing that has explicitly or implicitly addressed the issues at the center of this project; the main lines of the polemic are worth emphasizing here, though. I address a critical tradition – visible in the work of writers such as M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, and Geoffrey Hartman – that insists upon the context of Romantic poetry within the Christian tradition, and, more specifically, within the history of Protestant Dissent.[9] M. H. Abrams describes Romantic poetry as a "secularized form of devotional experience," an internalization and privatization of religion that allows the poet's "mind" to take over "the prerogatives of deity," a view carried forward into the late nineteenth century in J. Hillis Miller's Heideggerian account of the "disappearance of God."[10] My own view reorients this perspective on secularization and thus on the connection between "Romanticism" and the "secular." While very much about the "secular" innovations in British literary and cultural productions, this book regards the secular as a specific *institutional achievement* rather than an individual or psychological phenomenon or act of individual "devotion." Although I refer throughout the following chapters to "secular" institutions and "secular" government, then, I am arguing that secularization did not emerge as a change in individuals' beliefs, or a change in collective beliefs, but as a shift in the means through which distinct beliefs could be coordinated or organized under the auspices of more capacious and elaborate structures of government.

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Now it is precisely this dimension of my argument – a redefinition of Romantic writing by contextualizing it within accounts of the extent and limits of toleration – that aims to address more recent historical views of the Romantic period. These have tended to focus on the alliances that writers form with currents of religious or political radicalism or with hegemonic ideologies of one kind or another – whether those ideologies are defined as bourgeois, paternalistic, nationalistic, or imperialistic. I respond, first of all, to important work by critics such as Robert Ryan and Martin Priestman, who have examined the correlation between poetry and religious or anti-religious commitments during the Romantic period.[11] Other critics, such as Kevin Gilmartin, Steven Goldsmith, Ian McCalman, and Nicholas Roe, more consistently link religious beliefs with political and economic struggle; they reveal that the work of writers such as William Blake, Percy Shelley, and John Keats participate in trends of radical thinking promulgated through ventures (in writing and publishing) of figures such as Richard Carlile, Daniel Isaac Eaton, and William Hone.[12] Whether considering religious beliefs in the abstract or as connected to political movements, these critics provide nuanced readings of the relationships between literary works and specific group interests: how writers (as Kevin Binfield succinctly puts it) strive to form a "community of value" with a shared "core of belief and behavior."[13]

Second, though, I mean to respond to the line of critical discussion of the "nation" or "empire" in the work of Saree Makdisi, Michael Ragussis, Cannon Schmitt, and Katie Trumpener, to name a few.[14] As useful as this work may be in helping to move our attention from the issue of personal belief to large-scale social formations, it tends to read the organization of these larger entities as if such entities necessarily flattened out or erased identities within the nation's or empire's separate parts. These critics show, in other words, how the formation of a national or imperial public requires the erasure or suppression of separate publics. Romanticism, on these terms, can either be a support for or resistance to the "production of homogeneous abstract space and the attempt to paper over or incorporate heterogeneous and differential spaces and times."[15]

While this book speaks of the British "nation" and "empire," it shifts attention away from discussions of nationalism or imperialism: the collective search for an "essence and inner virtue of the community" or "collective self-consciousness" as nationalism is described by Gerald Newman.[16] Whereas views of Romantic religion, politics, nationalism, or imperialism emphasize either a private counterpublic or suppressive hegemonic

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public, I study the development of the nation-state in different terms – not defined according to the relatively homogeneous beliefs and alliances that it traditionally demanded, but according to altering technologies of social order that both permitted and encouraged heterogeneity and disagreement. This is not a book on "Romanticism and religion," then, and not a book on "the politics (or ideology) of Romanticism." Rather than attempting to identify the particular beliefs and alliances of individual writers, I show how these writers took an interest in the organization of those beliefs within the larger entity of Britain's secular institutions.

To some extent, this means that the writers on whom I concentrate differ from those that are featured in many other studies of the period. The work of Bentham, for example, is far more central in my argument than the work of Thomas Paine. Paine's writing (in the tradition of the French *philosophes* and British skeptics) was primarily concerned with religion's epistemological invalidity, and not necessarily as a force to be organized by the state. There is also no extended discussion of the work of William Blake, who (as many critics have successfully argued) more consistently maintained the energies of seventeenth-century agrarian radicals than the authors treated in this book.[17] Ultimately, however, these differences derive from a new perspective from which to view the interconnected commitments of a range of genres from nature lyrics to national tales, Gothic novels to historical dramas. In chapter 1, I demonstrate how the political and aesthetic imperatives of Britain's confessional state were defended, and how Romantic reformers from Priestley to Bentham opposed those imperatives by redescribing the aims and functions of civil government. Edmund Burke, I argue, provided a remarkably nuanced but problematic apology for the alliance of church and state. Established religion was such a traditional part of British national definition that it seemed natural, thus helping to preserve "the method of nature in the conduct of state."[18] At the same time, the church required a variety of artificial mechanisms – oaths, tests, and penal laws – in order to maintain its unassailable position. I show how reformers of the late eighteenth century pointed out, first of all, that the supposedly natural authority of the church suppressed the actual diversity of beliefs that existed within Britain's shores. But such arguments, most fully developed in the work of Jeremy Bentham, also surprisingly proposed that the artifice and tyranny of established religion could be counteracted by the still more powerful and vitalizing artifice of secular government. Although Bentham is frequently considered an enemy of Romanticism's emphasis on individual volition and imagination, I contend that his work is as

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crucial to understanding the writers of this period as the enthusiasm of his most overt admirers, including Leigh Hunt and Percy Shelley, would suggest. For in Bentham's plans for poor houses, hospitals, and schools – from the *Panopticon* papers (1791) to *Chrestomathia* (1815–16) – he modeled communities that could abridge the need for religious agreement: indeed, the goal of institutions was frequently described as "social cooperation" itself. At the same time, the intricately orchestrated exercises and employment in such institutions offered a system of "dependencies" so vital that the beliefs and dispositions of their members required communal inclusion in order to become visible and meaningful to others – or even to themselves. Bentham's most significant contribution to Romantic writing can be discerned in his simultaneous advocacy of an increased freedom of expression and a rigorous program of institutional reform as a creative way to manage and accentuate divergent beliefs and interests.

In chapter 2, I show how debates about religious toleration that I mention in the previous chapter – debates usually receiving scant attention by literary critics – frequently indulge in the sensational rhetoric of the Gothic novel. What makes this practice appropriate is that Gothic novels are not merely sensational but promote an intriguing social logic of their own. Although many recent accounts of the Gothic have viewed it as a champion or enemy of social conformity, I argue that the genre is better described as an attempt to identify and manage the adherents of diverse, incompatible beliefs. The Gothic presents monastic institutions as fascinating sources of danger, but not because the genre seeks to suppress Catholicism as a set of alien beliefs. Instead, even early examples of the genre by Horace Walpole and Clara Reeve frequently identify monasticism as a private and self-enclosed structure of confessional authority, visible in Britain itself, that the Gothic novel participates in dismantling and modifying. I focus on Ann Radcliffe's novels – beginning with *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) and in particular on *The Italian* (1797) – in order to demonstrate how the Gothic secularizes ecclesiastical authority rather than opposing or eliminating it, making the church counteract its own traditional confessional networks of power in order to provide a stable and inclusive source of social order. *The Italian*'s romantic heroes, Ellena and Vivaldi, are not only lovers but also lovers of justice, and they eventually become the beneficiaries of the tolerant administration of justice procured by the Inquisition itself. Although agents of the church persecute these characters throughout the novel for their blasphemy and recusancy, *The Italian* achieves a resolution by revising the Inquisition as a secular form of legal intervention that punishes persons for harmful

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actions rather than offensive beliefs, and that convicts murderous clerics rather than heretical heroes.

As much as writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth may have denigrated the popular genre of the Gothic, I demonstrate how they nevertheless return to its tolerant logic. In chapter 3, I show how Coleridge's early journal *The Watchman* (1796) argues against the authority of the state to command belief; his later work, although frequently deemed conservative by many critics, actually bears a closer resemblance to his early radicalism than to defenses of established religion by Burke and other eighteenth-century Anglican apologists. Coleridge does indeed declare in the 1790s that he has put aside his "baby trumpet of sedition,"[19] but his works from *The Friend* (1808–10) and the closely related *Lay Sermons* (1816, 1817) to *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1829) are far from traditional: indeed, they suggest that he understood his own defense of the church as a way of undermining the legacy of forced and falsified religious conformity. These commentaries on ecclesiastical government – further pursued in poems like "Religious Musings" and "Fears in Solitude" – defend the church only insofar as it upholds and cultivates dissent from any established code of belief. Coleridge repeatedly idealizes the religious climate of the reformation because of the "warmth and frequency of . . . religious controversies" and the "rank and value assigned to *polemic divinity*."[20] And he projects this into a revised mission for the national church, whose "clerisy" provides nonconformity with a new vitality while serving as a public "guide, guardian, and instructor."[21]

My discussion of Coleridge's writing suggests that his early arguments *against* established religion and his later arguments *for* it actually offer compatible perspectives on the relationship between secular government and religious belief. This aspect of Coleridge's work helps us to see an analogous convergence between the radically secular project of the "national tale" and the apparently more conservative support for the established church in Wordsworth's later work. Chapter 4 shows how the Irish national tale, as it was practiced by writers such as Lady Morgan and Maria Edgeworth, participates in the discourse of toleration by making fiction both intensify and organize differences in Catholic and Protestant beliefs and alliances. Although Irish Catholics were viewed as a potentially destabilizing *imperium in imperio* that might threaten the 1800 union of Britain and Ireland, the national tale – a genre frequently depicting the reconciliation of an Anglo-Irish landlord with his Irish tenants – makes Ireland into a distinctive member of an expanding

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Britain precisely by virtue of its inclusion in Britain's mutually supporting economic relations and secular institutions. Critics frequently read national tales as either advocates of national sentiment or collaborators in the imperialistic suppression of that sentiment; I contend, however, that novels such as Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809) and *The Absentee* (1812) subtly make local Irish "habits" and the "multiplicity of minute . . . details"[22] visible to the landlord – and to us as readers of fiction – only because of the landlord's attention to "business" and economic "affairs." The heroes of such novels are as notable for their strong attachments to Ireland as they are for their accommodation within the marketplace. I end this chapter by re-evaluating the relationship between national tales and Scott's historical novels. My account of the national tale's interest in the contours of tolerant government, rather than its interest in any straightforward celebration of nationalism, allows us to achieve a clearer view of the national tale's relation to the historical novel. As in *Old Mortality*, Scott's characters do not only express or value their personal beliefs. They must also negotiate a place for those beliefs within new structures of government that preserve and regulate them. Modern British institutions, submitting all religious communities to their rule, are thus said to commit "a rape upon the chastity of the church," since their goal is not to preserve a uniform religious chastity but to "tolerate all forms of religion which [are] consistent with the safety of the state."[23]

The aggressively secular perspective of the national tale – which led to complaints by many reviewers who faulted Edgeworth for her irreligion – complements rather than contradicts Wordsworth's view of the established church itself. Chapter 5 argues that the often-noted religious orthodoxy of Wordsworth's later writing does not hail the triumph of any particular doctrine as much as it discovers divergent beliefs to be assimilable within a pattern of actions that forms the recognizable basis of Britain's national community. *The Excursion* (1814), I argue, shows dissent to be an essential feature of this community. The recalcitrant character of the Solitary (a religious dissenter) does not merely act as a citizen in need of conversion. In fact, his separation from community makes him "pious beyond the intention of [his] thought": a suitable – perhaps even an ideal – subject of Britain's church-guided "powers of civil polity" (*The Excursion*, 4.1147–48). I show how this logic animates works that preceded *The Excursion*, such as *The Prelude* (1805), and those that followed it: *The Ecclesiastical Sonnets* (first published in 1822) and other poems displaying a similar preoccupation with the church. In these later works, religious establishment is not naturalized, as it is in Burke; nature is made to seem

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religious. The church in the landscape, a predominating image providing "rich bounties of constraint" ("The Pass of Kirkstone"), suggests that the church can be seen as a "frame of social being"[24] that minimizes – just like a landscape – its demands upon an individual consciousness.

In the last two chapters of this book, I discuss the continuing appeal of the Gothic novel's treatment of religion for writers of poetry and drama. In chapter 6, I argue that Byron and Keats capitalize on Gothic scenarios of religious violence and subterfuge; but this interest in contending beliefs – beliefs that seem socially and poetically destructive – actually expresses a profound confidence in poetry itself. The literary aims of both poets accompany a sympathy with religious tolerance, Byron arguing in parliament on behalf of Catholic Emancipation, and Keats declaring his contempt for parsons, who must be "a hypocrite to the Believer and a coward to the unbeliever."[25] And I contend that these opinions only begin to assert the more profound ways in which both authors view their poetry as literary instances of the logic of toleration. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron connects his ambition for poetry with the demise of the self-determining authority of religious beliefs. Decaying monuments attract the poet's notice precisely because of their ruin: they are not the representatives of any living and animating beliefs, but examples of "mouldering shrines" that are the homes of "shrinking Gods."[26] Keats makes *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Lamia* (1820) assert poetic power as a contrast to the dramas of belief and skepticism that they depict: contending prejudices seem conspicuously dead or hollow in relation to the poems that represent but also outlast those prejudices. Keats associates *Lamia*'s status as a literary work, for instance – a fictional "tale" inherited from Philostratus and Burton – with the palace and palace furniture that persists after Lamia "withers" and vanishes. He thus contrasts the durable fabric of his own imaginative work with the skeptical beliefs that might seek to undo its power.

I conclude this book in chapter 7 by returning full circle to the Gothic's methods of surveying, enclosing, and regulating the terrors of confessional uniformity. I examine a common practice on the Romantic stage that linked it to the Gothic novel: the practice of representing Inquisitorial politics for the consumption of a British audience. Lord John Russell's *Don Carlos* (1822), Shelley's *The Cenci* (1819), and Byron's *Cain* (1821) – a more disguised Inquisitorial drama – invite an audience to encounter the technology of confessional government, and conscript the audience as participants in the enclosure and regulation of that government. Russell's *Don Carlos*, although ignored by critics, provides a particularly compelling

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