

Religious Comprehension in Scotland, 1689–1695

by BEN ROGERS
University of Dundee
E-mail: drbenrogers4@gmail.com

This article discusses how religious comprehension was promoted by the Scottish authorities after the revolution of 1688–9 to reach a compromise between the nation's two main religious groups: the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians. Unlike the failed attempt to enact comprehension in England in 1689, in Scotland five attempts were made from 1689 to 1694 to accommodate Episcopalians into the Church. The article argues that comprehension forced the Scots to confront the practical limits of their commitment to religious uniformity, and was central to their transition from a Reformed nation that cherished uniformity to one that begrudgingly accepted the existence of pluralism.

On 2 July 1689, James Gordon, the Episcopalian minister of Banchory-Devenick, petitioned the Scottish parliament on behalf of his coreligionists in the synod of Aberdeen. Parliament was debating an act to abolish episcopacy, several months after the collapse of the Catholic James VII's administration in the revolution of 1688–9. Presbyterian government in the Church was re-established in 1690, overturning thirty years of government by bishops. While the structure of the post-revolution Church of Scotland remained uncertain, Gordon's petition called for a general assembly of the Church so that 'ministers of differing persuasions in relatione to church government might be ordained to meet ... and make overtures of accomodation'.¹ These calls for an

CSPD = *Calendar of state papers, domestic series, of the reign of William and Mary*, ed. W. J. Hardy, London 1895–1927; *EUL* = Edinburgh University Library; *LPL* = Lambeth Palace Library, London; *NLS* = National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; *NRS* = National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh; *ODNB* = *Oxford dictionary of national biography*; *RPS* = *Records of the parliaments of Scotland to 1707*, ed. K. M. Brown and others, <<http://www.rps.ac.uk/>>; *SHR* = *Scottish Historical Review*

For helpful comments on drafts of this article, I am grateful to Alasdair Raffe, Julian Goodare, Clare Loughlin, Ivar McGrath and this JOURNAL'S anonymous reviewer.

¹ *RPS*, M1689/6/8.

‘accommodation’ reflected widespread desires to preserve uniformity within the Church of Scotland after the revolution through religious ‘comprehension’.

‘Comprehension’ was a form of ecclesiastical toleration that attempted to preserve uniformity within a nation’s established Church by accommodating different Protestant streams within it. Historians of early modern religion, notably Benjamin Kaplan, John Spurr and, most recently, Ashley Walsh, have defined comprehension as an attempt to mould a broad-based national Church through the modification of ecclesiological and doctrinal structures, so that Protestant Nonconformist ministers could be incorporated within the establishment fold.² First emerging as an idea in Reformed Protestant thought in the mid-seventeenth century,³ comprehension contrasted with civil protections granted to Nonconformists through a royal ‘indulgence’ or a legislated Toleration Act. These protections enabled ministers to worship outside the Church if they took out licences and accepted certain state oaths. However, such measures were contentious and were generally conceded by early modern governments only as a last resort. The legalisation of Protestant pluralism by indulgences or toleration challenged entrenched beliefs in religious uniformity that had existed across early modern society since the Reformation.⁴ Comprehension, by contrast, provided the authorities with a more irenic means of preserving uniformity within the national Church, maintaining the early modern norms of social cohesion that pluralism was seen to undermine. This article explores how religious comprehension was perceived, debated and implemented in Scotland, from the formal abolition of Episcopalian government in 1689 to the passage of the 1695 Act Concerning the Church. This phase of Scotland’s religious history provides important insights into the contested processes behind the development of comprehension as a national policy and its implementation in the localities.

Scotland was not alone in turning to comprehension as a potential solution to accommodate religious differences after the revolution. In England, a comprehension bill presented before parliament in March 1689 would

² J. Spurr, ‘The Church of England, comprehension and the toleration act of 1689’, *EHR* civ (1989), 927–46; A. Walsh, ‘The decline of comprehension in the Church of England, 1689–1750’, *Journal of British Studies* lxi (2022), 702–27.

³ B. J. Kaplan, *Divided by faith: religious conflict and the practice of toleration in early modern Europe*, Cambridge, MA 2007, 8–11.

⁴ See A. R. Murphy, ‘Early modern arguments for toleration’, in M. Sardoč (ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of toleration*, Cham 2022, 993–1007; M. van der Tol, J. Adenitire, C. Brown and E. S. Kempson (eds), *From toleration to religious freedom: cross-disciplinary perspectives*, Oxford 2021; N. D. Johnson and M. Koyama, *Persecution and toleration: the long road to religious freedom*, Cambridge 2019; and A. Walsham, *Charitable hatred: tolerance and intolerance in England, 1500–1700*, Manchester 2006.

have incorporated the bulk of England's moderate Presbyterian Nonconformists into the Church of England. A royal commission would also revise the 1662 Book of Common Prayer to accommodate Presbyterian objections to formal styles of worship.⁵ However, the bill failed due to High Church opposition in the House of Commons and later objections from the lower house of the Convocation of the Church of England. The subsequent enactment of the Toleration Act in May 1689 ended the Anglican monopoly on religious worship. As Ashley Walsh has shown, comprehension steadily declined thereafter as a viable option for dissenters.⁶ In Scotland, by contrast, five separate attempts were made to accommodate Episcopalians into the re-established Church. These were the Church Act, proposed to the Scottish parliament in 1689; the Act Ratifying the Confession of Faith and settling Presbyterian Church Government in 1690; the 'Church Union' proposed to the 1692 general assembly; the Act for Settling the Quiet and Peace of the Church in 1693; and the formula for entry implemented by the general assembly in 1694.

There were, moreover, important distinctions between English and Scottish conceptions of comprehension. In England, comprehension debates revolved around the nature of episcopal authority and the accommodation of different liturgical practices. The fall-out from the revolution of 1688–9 in Scotland gave debates there a different focus. On 7 June 1690 Scotland's parliament re-established Presbyterian government and the Westminster Confession of Faith, the orthodox Calvinist standards that had been agreed to at the Westminster Assembly in 1646, within the Church of Scotland.⁷ Consequently, comprehension in Scotland was centred on getting the nation's substantial Episcopalian minority to accept orthodox Calvinism and a Presbyterian Church.

Attempts to implement comprehension along these lines dominated Scottish ecclesiastical politics during the first half of the 1690s. The new government of William II & III, and the Presbyterian religious authorities, made sustained efforts to preserve uniform ecclesiastical structures, religious beliefs and common practices of worship between Presbyterians and Episcopalians as the nation's principal religious groups. This was necessary because, while most of southern Scotland had embraced Presbyterianism at the revolution, north of the river Tay many parishes

⁵ The commission's report argued that wearing the surplice, kneeling at communion and the sign of the cross be made optional: Spurr, 'The Church of England', 927–35.

⁶ See Walsh, 'The decline of comprehension', 702–10; R. Thomas, 'Comprehension and indulgence', in G. F. Nuttall and O. Chadwick (eds), *From uniformity to unity, 1662–1962*, London 1962, 191–253; and R. Stevens, *Protestant pluralism: the reception of the Toleration Act, 1689–1720*, Woodbridge 2018, 13–30.

⁷ RPS, 1690/4/43.

remained in Episcopalian hands. There were equally important political factors to consider. Parliament had abolished episcopacy due to the bishops' support for James VII, and most Episcopalians remained loyal to the exiled Stuarts. Consequently, fears of Jacobitism featured heavily in debates over comprehension, as the government tried to secure political loyalty among Episcopalian ministers through state oaths.⁸ Comprehension efforts in Scotland were also of profound interest to English politicians and churchmen, who feared that the strength of the re-established Presbyterian Church of Scotland could inspire Protestant Nonconformists to challenge the Church of England.⁹ Comprehension, then, was an important issue of religious and political debate in Scotland and beyond.

This article argues that comprehension forced Scots to confront the practical limits of their commitment to religious uniformity. In doing so, it seeks to recover the centrality of comprehension debates both to Scottish religious politics in the 1690s, and to Scotland's gradual, protracted transition from religious uniformity to religious pluralism. Although there have been some studies of comprehension in Scotland after 1690, the subject has not received significant scholarly attention. Most existing work on Scottish religion after 1690 has situated the topic within the realm of high politics. Jeffrey Stephen argued that William II was the driving force behind comprehension, an analysis based on political debates in Edinburgh and London.¹⁰ Tristram Clarke's doctoral thesis on the Scottish Episcopalians after 1688 took a similar approach, providing beneficial insights into the political machinations behind the various comprehension proposals, and the clerical and political networks that helped to broker their implementation.¹¹ As this article will demonstrate, however, it is equally important to consider the intellectual and social processes behind religious comprehension. What exactly comprehension should consist of was fiercely debated by Presbyterians and Episcopalians. Its implementation was attempted both through national settlements,

⁸ B. P. Lenman, 'The Scottish Episcopalian clergy and the ideology of Jacobitism', in E. Cruickshanks (ed.), *Ideology and conspiracy: aspects of Jacobitism, 1690–1759*, Edinburgh 1982, 36–48; C. A. Whatley, 'Reformed religion, regime change, Scottish Whigs and the struggle for the "soul" of Scotland, c. 1688–c. 1788', *SHR* xcii (2013), 66–99; A. Raffe, 'Scottish state oaths and the revolution of 1688–90', in S. Adams and J. Goodare (eds), *Scotland in the age of two revolutions*, Woodbridge 2014, 173–91.

⁹ English pamphlets that commented on Scotland include *The danger of the Church of England, from a general assembly of Covenanters in Scotland*, London 1690 (Wing D.179A), and *The present state and condition of the clergy, and Church of Scotland*, London 1690 (Wing P.3250A).

¹⁰ J. Stephen, *Defending the revolution: the Church of Scotland, 1689–1716*, Farnham 2013, ch. iii.

¹¹ T. N. Clarke, 'The Scottish Episcopalians, 1688–1720', unpubl. PhD diss. Edinburgh 1987, ch. ii.

and through locally negotiated comprehension arrangements between ministers and individual church courts.

Recent work has shown the value of incorporating intellectual, social and local perspectives into our understanding of early modern Scottish religion. Alasdair Raffe's study of religious arguments in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Scotland successfully traced the various intellectual shifts that underpinned Scotland's gradual transition to a more pluralist society by 1714.¹² Andrew Muirhead's recent investigation into the post-revolution presbyteries of Stirling and Dunblane has provided crucial local perspectives on lingering support for episcopacy after 1690, and the different types of coexistence between the two religious groups.¹³ This article builds on these approaches to provide a thorough examination of religious comprehension in Scotland after 1689, and its significance to understanding changes in post-revolution religion and society. It adopts a multi-faceted approach, with an in-depth investigation of the political manoeuvres behind the proposals for comprehension, alongside a detailed exploration of how comprehension was implemented in practice, something that is absent from existing scholarship. By emphasising the protracted and contested nature of the comprehension debates, the article challenges the idea put forward by Ryan Frace that Scots developed 'principled arguments' in favour of religious toleration as an intellectual reaction against the religious violence of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ It thus presents a more complete analysis of Scottish religious politics in the 1690s, shedding fresh light on an important topic that has not yet received such an investigation in the existing literature, and providing a case study on how religiously uniform nations transitioned into pluralist societies.

The article first sets out the context of Scotland's religious history, which had a lasting influence on clerical and lay responses to comprehension proposals. It then outlines the different positions on comprehension that existed in Scotland after the revolution, and how these affected the re-establishment of Presbyterianism in 1690. The ways in which comprehension changed after 1690 are then addressed, including an exploration of the attempt to secure a compromise settlement in 1692, before demonstrating how comprehension became inextricably connected with re-established Presbyterianism from 1693 onwards. The article then examines how comprehension was practised by the Church's courts and visitation

¹² A. Raffe, *The culture of controversy: religious arguments in Scotland, 1660–1714*, Woodbridge 2012.

¹³ A. T. N. Muirhead, *Scottish Presbyterianism re-established: the case of Stirling and Dunblane, 1687–1710*, Edinburgh 2021, 143–57.

¹⁴ R. K. Frace, 'The foundations of the Enlightenment: transformations in religious toleration, orthodoxy, and pluralism in early modern Scotland, 1660–1752', unpubl. PhD diss. Chicago 2005, 133–58.

commissions, showing how the political and intellectual debates over comprehension were manifested on the ground. The penultimate section shows how the failure of comprehension to preserve uniformity necessitated the passage of the Act Concerning the Church by parliament in 1695 to confine qualified Nonconformists to their parishes, while the conclusion assesses how the failure of comprehension shaped the development of religious pluralism in Scotland.

I

Early modern Scots cleaved to the principle of religious uniformity, but the century and a half after the Reformation of 1560 had witnessed repeated struggles to determine what that uniformity should look like. This attachment to uniformity stemmed from Scotland's religious history and the Presbyterian structure that was gradually erected in the Church after the Reformation. Scottish Protestants sought to establish a godly nation, implemented by a network of church courts that emphasised lay and ministerial cooperation. The general assembly legislated for the Church nationally, while lower courts such as district presbyteries dealt with matters of everyday administration. The success with which this structure was established meant that the vast majority of Scots adhered to the established Church. By 1581 thirteen presbyteries had been erected across Scotland. These were legally recognised under the 1592 'Golden Act', which also confirmed what was understood to be the monarch's pre-existing power to call general assemblies.¹⁵

The development of rival Protestant denominations was slower in Scotland in contrast to other reformed nations, notably England and the Dutch Republic.¹⁶ However, profound disagreements emerged over the nature of church government. The office of bishop was abolished in 1560, but from the 1580s James VI began to re-introduce episcopal authority into the Church. This process accelerated after James ascended the English throne in 1603, and by 1610 the full powers of diocesan bishops in Scotland had been restored. Bishops presided over church courts and dictated church policy. To Scots who believed in Presbyterian government, bishops represented an erastian encroachment upon the Church by the king, a heated point of contention throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁷ Liturgical reforms under James and Charles I were equally provocative.

¹⁵ RPS, 1581/10/20; 1592/4/26.

¹⁶ T. M. Safley, 'Multiconfessionalism: a brief introduction', in T. M. Safley (ed.), *A companion to multiconfessionalism in the early modern world*, Leiden 2011, 7–14.

¹⁷ A. R. MacDonald, *The Jacobean Kirk, 1567–1625: sovereignty, polity and liturgy*, Abingdon 1998, chs ii–vi; J. Buckroyd, *Church and State in Scotland, 1660–1681*, Edinburgh 1980, 47–56.

The Five Articles of Perth in 1618, for instance, introduced the practice of kneeling to receive communion. More controversial still was the imposition by Charles I in 1637 of the Scottish Book of Common Prayer, which many Scots regarded as an attempt to bring the Scottish Church closer to that of England.¹⁸ A coordinated opposition movement emerged, leading to the formulation and subscription of the National Covenant in 1638. Episcopacy was abolished the following year. In 1643, in conjunction with the Westminster parliament, Scotland adopted the Solemn League and Covenant, which aimed to extend Presbyterianism across England and Ireland.¹⁹

Aspirations to create a godly commonwealth based on Covenanting principles, however, faltered with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Episcopacy was reimposed above the Church's synods and presbyteries in 1662; the Covenants were outlawed that same year, alienating those who favoured Presbyterian government.²⁰ Presbyterian hostility to the Restoration settlement was exacerbated by the parallel restoration of lay patronage, which allowed parochial patrons to present a minister to a parish without the congregation's consent. Ministers had to receive a presentation from a patron, and receive a collation from a diocesan bishop, in order to retain their benefices.²¹ This led to the ejection of about 300 Presbyterians across 1661–3. Some of these ejected ministers preached to private conventicles, for which they were subjected to penal statutes in 1663 and 1670.²² A small number of Presbyterians who remained militantly committed to the Covenants staged armed uprisings in 1666 and 1679, but these were unsuccessful. Mainstream Presbyterians, by contrast, maintained a plausible commitment to the Covenants, but also accepted the terms of a royal indulgence issued in 1679 that enabled them to worship in authorised house conventicles.²³ By 1688, the only militant supporters of the Covenants were the United Societies, a group of dissenting Presbyterians who renounced their allegiance to Charles II and James VII as uncovenanted monarchs. They also refused to conform to the re-established Church after 1690 on the grounds that the revolution

¹⁸ For a recent exploration of this topic see L. James, *'This great firebrand': William Laud and Scotland, 1617–1645*, Woodbridge 2017, chs i, iv.

¹⁹ L. A. M. Stewart, *Rethinking the Scottish revolution: covenanted Scotland, 1637–1651*, Oxford 2016, chs i–v.

²⁰ A. Raffe, 'Presbyterian politics and the restoration of Scottish Episcopacy', in N. H. Keeble (ed.), *'Settling the peace of the Church': 1662 revisited*, Oxford 2014, 144–67.

²¹ *RPS*, 1662/5/15.

²² *RPS*, 1663/6/19; 1670/7/11.

²³ A. Raffe, 'Who were the "later Covenanters?"', in C. R. Langley (ed.), *The National Covenant in Scotland, 1638–1689*, Woodbridge 2020, 197–214; N. McIntyre, 'Conventicles: organising dissent in Restoration Scotland', *SHR* xcix (supplement) (2020), 429–53; I. B. Cowan, *The Scottish covenanters, 1660–1688*, London 1976, chs iv–vi.

settlement did not renew or explicitly endorse the Covenants.²⁴ While Presbyterians would have all agreed that Scotland was a ‘covenanted nation’, there were significant divisions over what this meant in practice.

Despite profound disagreements over church government, Scotland retained a largely uniform religious culture during the early seventeenth century. It is only after the Restoration that some historians have detected the emergence of more distinct Presbyterian and Episcopalian confessional cultures. Alasdair Raffe has argued that this divergence was driven by changes in attitudes to theology, worship and piety. While Presbyterians remained wedded to the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Episcopalians grew increasingly distant from these tenets. Some began instead to embrace Arminian theology, which held that God’s grace was available to all, and that salvation was determined by individual decisions to refuse or accept this grace. By 1688 such views had gained considerable traction among Episcopalians. Some also developed an interest in more formal styles of worship.²⁵ Presbyterians regarded such developments as heterodox innovations. The extent of confessional divergence at this point was not absolute. John Hintermaier suggests that Episcopalians often continued to share the same beliefs about worship as their Presbyterian counterparts. This is evident in the opposition of many Episcopalians to a remodelled Scottish liturgy mooted by some bishops during the 1660s and 1670s, particularly by Archbishop Alexander Burnet of Glasgow.²⁶ Nevertheless, by the time of the revolution it was increasingly difficult to find common ground between Presbyterians and Episcopalians. In southern Scotland at least, many people would have agreed with the statement made in the Claim of Right in 1689 that episcopacy was ‘a great and insupportable grievance’.²⁷

Despite these growing distinctions, both groups remained firmly committed to religious uniformity expressed through a single national Church. This, it was believed, was the only way to preserve both doctrinal harmony and social stability.²⁸ During the Restoration period, then,

²⁴ J. Walters, *The National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, 1660–1696*, Woodbridge 2022, 170–7; M. Jardine, ‘The United Societies: militancy, martyrdom and the Presbyterian movement in late-Restoration Scotland’, unpubl. PhD diss. Edinburgh 2009, 15–51.

²⁵ A. Raffe, ‘Presbyterians and Episcopalians: the formation of confessional cultures in Scotland, 1660–1715’, *EHR* cxxv (2010), 570–98.

²⁶ J. M. Hintermaier, ‘Liturgical reform during the Restoration: the untold story’, in A. I. Macinnes, P. Barton and K. German (eds), *Scottish liturgical traditions and religious politics: from reformers to Jacobites, 1546–1764*, Edinburgh 2021, 70–85.

²⁷ *RPS*, 1689/3/108; K. Bowie, *Public opinion in early modern Scotland, c.1560–1707*, Cambridge 2020, 187–95.

²⁸ C. Jackson, ‘The later Stuart Church as “national Church” in Scotland and Ireland’, in G. Tapsell (ed.), *The later Stuart Church, 1660–1714*, Manchester 2012, 127–49.

official policy towards religious differences varied between prosecution, accommodation and indulgence. Most prosecution efforts focused on the dissenting Presbyterians, though Scotland's small communities of Roman Catholics and Quakers were also affected by these laws.²⁹ Intense phases of prosecution occurred mostly after national crises. After the failed uprising at Bothwell Bridge in 1679, for example, the authorities prosecuted over 200 Presbyterian Nonconformists; contemporaries spoke bitterly of field meetings being violently suppressed by officials.³⁰ Consistent enforcement of the penal statutes against Nonconformists resulted in large-scale, but short-term, conformity. Scotland's policy-makers were painfully aware that Nonconformist worship would grow once these statutes were eased and that prosecution was not a long-term solution to preserve uniformity.³¹

Against this backdrop, an accommodation appeared to some Episcopalians to be a more judicious way to preserve uniformity. Episcopalian attempts to broker such a conciliation during the Restoration period, by virtue of the fact they were in government, would later influence their attitudes towards comprehension when they became the religious minority after 1689. One of the chief proponents of accommodation was Bishop Robert Leighton of Dunblane. In August 1670, Leighton attempted to negotiate an accommodation with the Presbyterian Nonconformists, aided by fellow Episcopalians Laurence Charteris, minister of Yester and future professor of divinity at Edinburgh, and Gilbert Burnet, then professor of divinity at Glasgow. Leighton's scheme proposed remodelled Church synods, the removal of the episcopal veto over synod decisions and would even have permitted Presbyterian ministers to make a declaration against episcopacy before they took their seats on the church courts.³²

Leighton hoped that this accommodation would preserve the Church of Scotland without compromising unity or uniformity. Indeed, it represented a significant departure from the coercive methods to induce conformity favoured by James Sharp, archbishop of St Andrews, and John Maitland,

²⁹ G. DesBrisay, 'Catholics, Quakers and religious persecution in Restoration Aberdeen', *Innes Review* xlvii (1996), 136–68; R. S. Spurlock, *Cromwell and Scotland: conquest and religion, 1650–1660*, Edinburgh 2007, 2–5.

³⁰ [Alexander Shields], *A hind let loose: or, An historical representation of the testimonies, of the Church of Scotland*, [Edinburgh] 1687 (Wing S.3431); C. Jackson, *Restoration Scotland, 1660–1690: royalist politics, religion and ideas*, Woodbridge 2003, ch. v.

³¹ G. M. Yould, 'The duke of Lauderdale's religious policy in Scotland, 1668–79: the failure of conciliation and the return to coercion', *Journal of Religious History* xi (1980), 248–68.

³² [Robert McWard], *The case of the accommodation lately proposed by the bishop of Dunblane, to the non-conforming ministers examined*, [Rotterdam] 1671 (Wing M.231), 14–15; M. Greig, 'Gilbert Burnet and the problem of non-conformity in Restoration Scotland and England', *Canadian Journal of History* xxxii (1997), 1–24.

duke of Lauderdale and Charles II's secretary of state for Scotland.³³ However, its implementation faced many obstacles. Presbyterian Nonconformists such as William Adair, who ministered in Ayr, distrusted Leighton, and their meetings frequently descended into arguments over ecclesiology. The accommodation ultimately failed due to Presbyterian opposition to the royal supremacy over the Church, which had been enacted in 1669.³⁴ As we will see, however, Charteris and other figures involved in the accommodation would go on to play a significant role in the Episcopalian push for comprehension in the early 1690s.

An alternative to accommodation came in the form of royal indulgences, issued in 1669 and 1672. These indulgences allowed Nonconformists to conduct licensed worship in their former parishes, or ones that were named by the privy council. Indulged ministers received an extension of the *de facto* toleration that Nonconformists experienced during times of stability.³⁵ For some Presbyterians an indulgence provided respite from the state's coercive actions, but many were unable to accept the terms of these indulgences, as they were granted by virtue of the royal supremacy over the Church. The indulgence of 1679, issued after the Bothwell Bridge uprising that year, was severely restricted in June 1680. The indulgences of 1669 and 1672 were not finally wound up until 1684 as part of a wider government crackdown on Presbyterianism.³⁶

The possibility of comprehension or an accommodation was later hindered by James VII's indulgences in 1687, which suspended the penal laws against Catholics and most Nonconformists. Mainstream Presbyterians used this opportunity to abandon the Restoration Church and successfully establish themselves as an alternative national Church. This enabled them to capitalise on the chaos at the revolution and offer Presbyterian government as a viable alternative to episcopacy.³⁷ Yet this did not mean abandoning the commitment to religious uniformity and a single national Church. Presbyterian views of schism in 1690 were conditioned by their experiences of the 1650s, when Presbyterians had split into separate 'Protester' and 'Resolutioner' factions.³⁸ As we will see, the

³³ M. Lee Jr., 'Dearest brother': *Lauderdale, Tweeddale and Scottish politics, 1660–1674*, Edinburgh 2010, 223–35; Raffe, *Culture of controversy*, 25.

³⁴ A. P. Carter, 'The Episcopal Church of Scotland, 1660–1685', unpubl. PhD diss. St Andrews 2019, 136–42; T. N. Clarke, 'Charteris, Laurence (c. 1625–1700)', *ODNB*, at <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5178>>.

³⁵ Kaplan, *Divided by faith*, 8–11; Walsham, *Charitable hatred*, 3–7.

³⁶ Carter, 'Episcopal Church', 136–68.

³⁷ A. Raffe, 'James VII's multiconfessional experiment and the Scottish revolution of 1688–89', *History* c (2015), 354–73.

³⁸ G. Donaldson, 'The emergence of schism in seventeenth-century Scotland', in D. Baker (ed.), *Schism, heresy and religious protest* (Studies in Church History ix, 1972), 277–94.

tension between this principle and the increasingly divergent Presbyterian and Episcopalian confessions that had developed after the Restoration significantly affected the implementation of comprehension after 1689.

II

On 4 April 1689 the president of Scotland's Court of Session, Sir James Dalrymple of Stair, advised George, earl of Melville and William's first secretary of state for Scotland, that a 'joynt comprehensio[n]e of all interests wer[e] the only best [way] which might in some measur[e] satisfie all parties'.³⁹ However, in early 1689 it was unclear how comprehension would be achieved. Hundreds of Episcopalian ministers had been ejected from their parishes by Presbyterian crowds in the winter of 1688–9. By late 1689, 193 other Episcopalians, mostly in southern Scotland, had been deprived of their benefices by the privy council for refusing to pray for William and Mary as monarchs.⁴⁰ The Claim of Right ensured that the Church would have a Presbyterian settlement, but two rival views emerged over how it should be structured. These can be called mono-confessionalism and modified Presbyterianism.

The mono-confessional programme, advocated by mainstream Presbyterian clergy and politicians from the outset of the revolution, was centred on the re-establishment of Presbyterian government and the Westminster Confession. Ministers were expected to accept Presbyterian government and subscribe the Confession to be received into the Church. This programme represented desires to persuade Episcopalians effectively to become Presbyterian. These desires were expressed through a language of comprehension that emphasised the reception of these ministers, by their making concessions, into the Church. There was wide mainstream Presbyterian support for this programme in the Convention of Estates, which was converted into a parliament in May 1689, and from numerous Presbyterian pamphleteers who railed against the Episcopal Church's 'Bloody and cruel way of Persecuting such as dissent'.⁴¹

Modified Presbyterianism, by contrast, was supported by William's government and had tentative approval from the Episcopalians. The

³⁹ *Leven and Melville papers: letters and state papers chiefly addressed to George earl of Melville, secretary of state for Scotland, 1689–1691*, Edinburgh 1843, 8.

⁴⁰ RPS, 1689/3/116; A. Raffe, *Scotland in revolution, 1685–1690*, Edinburgh 2018, 141.

⁴¹ [Gilbert Rule], *A true representation of Presbyterian church government*, Edinburgh 1690 (Wing R.2229), 9. See also *A brief and true account of the suffering of the Church of Scotland, occasioned by the Episcopalians since the year 1660*, London 1690 (Wing B.4533); Whatley, 'Reformed religion', 66–72.

concept emerged in early 1689 in response to two factors. First, the Scottish bishops' decision to reject William's authority forced the government to explore other options to accommodate the roughly 400 Episcopalian ministers who still retained their parishes after the revolution. Nevertheless, any attempt to accommodate these men depended on whatever compromise was reached between the government and the Presbyterians. Second, the failure of the English comprehension bill and the enactment of the Toleration Act in May 1689, which allowed Presbyterians, Baptists and Quakers to worship legally outside of the Church of England, provided a solution that could be adapted to Scotland to preserve uniformity.

The Episcopalian politician Sir George MacKenzie, Viscount Tarbat, offered such an approach in June 1689, in his *Memorial on the Church*. Tarbat proposed that separate Presbyterian and Episcopalian settlements should be created, operate independently of each other and use different doctrinal and ecclesiological standards. The Presbyterians could use the Westminster Confession and organise themselves around the Presbyterian structures that had been erected in 1592 or 1641. The Episcopalians could create a similar structure but would be permitted to use the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.⁴² Tarbat's proposal represented an innovative attempt to temper Scotland's religious divisions. However, it was not considered by parliament as the inclusion of the Articles would have exacerbated widespread Presbyterian hostility towards the Church of England. This hostility was made apparent on 22 July 1689, when parliament received a Presbyterian address calling for the re-establishment of the Westminster Confession and the establishment of visitation commissions to remove 'insufficient, negligent, scandalous, and erroneous Ministers'.⁴³ The Club, an organised parliamentary party whose members wanted further constitutional reforms, demanded that parliament accede to the demands in the address. They forced the lord high commissioner, William Douglas, duke of Hamilton, to concede the abolition of episcopacy and restore the 'Antediluvians' to the Church – the few remaining Presbyterian ministers who had been ejected in 1662. Their restoration ensured that any future religious settlement would have a solid Presbyterian basis.⁴⁴

The closest that Scotland came to a comprehension settlement resembling England's was the Church Act, moved unsuccessfully by Sir William Hamilton of Whitelaw on 31 July 1689. Hamilton proposed that the 1592 'Golden Act' be re-established, lay patronage be retained and that all acts favouring episcopacy be abolished. The Presbyterian ministers who had been ejected in 1662 and the Episcopalians who had been

⁴² *Leven and Melville papers*, 126–7.

⁴³ *RPS*, M1689/6/16.

⁴⁴ J. Halliday, 'The Club and the revolution in Scotland, 1688–90', *SHR* v (1966), 146–59; *RPS*, 1689/6/36.

deprived for refusing the 1681 Test would be restored.⁴⁵ The provision to restore the anti-Testers was the act's most interesting clause, as it was the first significant mention of a specific group that the authorities wanted to accommodate into the Church. The Test oath had been introduced in 1681 to secure the state and the hereditary succession against the entwined dangers of popery and Presbyterianism. It demanded that office-holders and ministers accept the oath of allegiance, the 1661 declaration acknowledging the king's prerogative, the 1662 declaration against the Covenants and the Scots Confession of 1560.⁴⁶ Anti-Tester ministers, led informally by Laurence Charteris (who was himself deprived from his position at Edinburgh in 1681), were a small group of Episcopalians who argued that the exalted role the Test gave to the royal supremacy contradicted Christ's headship of the Church, set out in the 1560 Scots Confession.⁴⁷ Hamilton hoped that the anti-Testers' objections would make them amenable to the Presbyterians. The act was the nearest Scotland came to a comprehension settlement that, like the English attempt in 1689, tried to reach a compromise on issues of ecclesiology and governance.

Many Episcopalians felt that a modified settlement was still feasible. However, the government's concession of a mono-confessional Church settlement in 1690 changed how comprehension was understood by the authorities. When parliament reconvened on 15 April Presbyterian concerns about 'insufficient, scandalous, and erroneous' ministers had been whipped up by numerous publications. Gilbert Rule, soon to be installed as principal at Edinburgh, argued forcefully in *A true representation of Presbyterian government* that the re-establishment of the Presbyterian standards would best achieve uniformity in the Church.⁴⁸ In response to these calls, Melville organised a parliamentary committee to draft the Act ratifying the Confession of Faith and settling Presbyterian church government. The committee included influential Presbyterian figures such as Sir James Steuart of Goodtrees, the former resistance theorist and future Lord Advocate. The resulting legislation was enacted on 7 June 1690. In accordance with Presbyterian demands from 1689, the Westminster Confession and the 1592 Act were re-established, the general assembly could reconvene and it was permitted to establish two visitation commissions to inspect parishes north and south of the river Tay.⁴⁹ These commissions would implement uniformity to answer the Presbyterians' demands and ensure that all ministers would conform to this mono-confessional agenda.

The re-establishment of Presbyterian government and the Westminster Confession within the Church of Scotland was not something that

⁴⁵ RPS, M1689/6/20.

⁴⁷ Raffe, *Culture of controversy*, 73–4.

⁴⁹ RPS, 1690/4/43.

⁴⁶ RPS, 1681/7/29.

⁴⁸ [Rule], *A true representation*, 6.

William welcomed. In an attempt to influence the legislation before it was enacted, the king had drafted comments that were likely influenced by his main advisors on Scotland, William Carstares and William Bentinck, earl of Portland.⁵⁰ The comments recommended that ministers accept Presbyterianism and the Westminster Confession as ‘the Standard of the Protestant religion in this Kingdom’, rather than as a statement of personal belief. His most controversial suggestion was to give the Episcopalians ‘the same Indulgence that Dissenters have in England’.⁵¹ This statement, according to Clarke, represented William’s hope for a dual settlement, similar to the comprehension and toleration bills that were proposed in England.⁵² It would have established a flexible Presbyterian settlement under which most Episcopalians could be accommodated. Legal toleration would then be offered to the Episcopalian minority who took the oath of allegiance. This final comment allegedly influenced John Livingstone, earl of Linlithgow, to propose an act on 6 June for ‘freedom to be given to the episcopal clergie’.⁵³ However, the king’s comments were ignored when parliament re-established Presbyterian government and the Westminster Confession the next day.

Many Episcopalians feared that the now Presbyterian religious authorities would harshly enforce uniformity. Anticipating the possibility of a wave of deprivations, the government arranged for parliament to repeal the civil penalties for sentences of excommunication.⁵⁴ Episcopalian anxieties were further heightened after the general assembly convened on 16 October 1690. The assembly’s membership was wholly Presbyterian and various measures it passed challenged Episcopalian scruples, notably the Fast Act, mandated to be observed on 8 January 1691, which stated that the Restoration settlement had sacrificed the ‘Church to the lusts and will of men’. The assembly also established visitation commissions and instructed them to receive ministers who would subscribe the Confession and submit to Presbyterian government.⁵⁵ This was the first formal declaration of how comprehension would be implemented. Episcopalians who still held benefices could be received into the Church, but only if they accepted the Presbyterians’ mono-confessional programme. Collectively, these measures ensured that the government’s hopes for a modified religious settlement were no longer feasible.

⁵⁰ D. Onnekink, ‘The earl of Portland and Scotland (1689–99): a re-evaluation of Williamite policy’, *SHR* lxxxv (2006), 231–45; T. N. Clarke, ‘Carstares [Carstairs], William (1649–1715)’, *ODNB*, at <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4777>>.

⁵¹ *Leven and Melville papers*, 337–8; L. K. J. Glassey, ‘William II and the settlement of religion in Scotland, 1688–90’, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* xlvii (1989), 317–29. ⁵² Clarke, ‘Scottish Episcopalians’, 79. ⁵³ *RPS*, M1690/4/21.

⁵⁴ *RPS*, 1690/4/119; Raffe, *Scotland in revolution*, 42.

⁵⁵ *Acts of the general assembly of the Church of Scotland, M.DC.XXXVIII.–M.DCCC.XLII*, Edinburgh 1843, 228–32.

III

Despite the failure to implement a settlement that accommodated Episcopalian views, the government still hoped to implement comprehension within the now Presbyterian Church. Tarbat, in a report submitted to the king on 1 January 1691, asked if it ‘May not please all, that the Minsters of the Northern provinces be *assumed*; and in the South only those few of the aforesaid four Presbyteries ... and no more be assumed at this time’.⁵⁶ William suspended the visitation commissions the following month, but the Commission of the North had not yet met, and the Commission of the South had only met once, on 21 January. It had deposed some Episcopalians from the ministry, but had also had some success when it received William Arrot, minister of Channelkirk, and John Menzies, minister of Coulter, into the Church.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the format for entry, in William’s view, was too strict and many Episcopalians thanked him for ‘putting a stop to unjust and unwarrantable procedures’.⁵⁸

The intrigues over comprehension are reflected in a series of letters that James Canaries, the Episcopalian lobbyist and former minister at Selkirk, wrote to Robert Wylie, the noted Presbyterian polemicist and minister of Hamilton, in late 1691. On 19 October Canaries argued that the 1690 Act required ‘another Act of Parliament to explaine it’. He maintained that it was scandalous for ‘an Episcopal Minister to turn Presbyterian’ but would consider ‘all proposals about ane union, yet I declare I think it impracticable’.⁵⁹ Canaries later stated that the Episcopalians were ‘content to sitt with you in Presbyteries, Synods and General Assemblies’, but questioned if the Presbyterians would ‘have declarations from us that must tye ourselves to the Presbyterian Government’. This, Canaries argued, was ‘not ane accommodation with us, but a total routing of us’.⁶⁰ These views were also discussed in government circles and by the close of 1691 there were moves to implement a comprehension settlement that worked within the requirements of the 1690 Act.

One government proposal from 1691, designed for the next parliamentary session, offered two conditions to receive Episcopalians into the Church. First, they would have to take the oath of allegiance and the

⁵⁶ LPL, MS 690, fo. 64r. A copy of the report was coded by Archbishop John Tillotson of Canterbury into his correspondence. For a decoded version of the report see T. Birch, *The life of the most reverend Dr John Tillotson, lord archbishop of Canterbury*, London 1753, 284.

⁵⁷ *The Melville’s, earl of Melville, and the Leslie’s, earls of Leven, by Sir William Fraser in three volumes*, Edinburgh 1890, ii. 51; NLS, Wodrow Octavo IV, fos 250v–251r.

⁵⁸ NRS, CH12/12/1970.

⁵⁹ James Canaries to Robert Wylie, 19 Oct. 1691, NLS, Wodrow Folio XXVI, fo. 311v.

⁶⁰ Canaries to Wylie, 14 Nov. 1691, *ibid.* fos 318v–319r.

assurance. The assurance, which was introduced to parliament in 1690 and imposed on ministers from 1693, was a subscribed acknowledgement that William and Mary's right to the throne was *de jure*. Second, Episcopalians would have to subscribe the Westminster Confession 'as the confession of their faith' and 'own the present church government in Scotland to be lawful'. The general assembly would then receive all Episcopalians who accepted these terms.⁶¹ Much of this proposal would eventually be implemented by parliament in 1693, but the government turned first to the general assembly to implement a comprehension settlement along these lines.

The 'Church Union' proposed to the general assembly in 1692 tried to accommodate the Episcopalians' scruples within the requirements of re-established Presbyterianism. It was planned at a conference at Lambeth Palace in London in late 1691 that was attended by John Dalrymple, James Johnston (later appointed joint-secretary with Dalrymple), Archbishop John Paterson of Glasgow, who still remained an influential figure despite the abolition of episcopacy, and Archbishop John Tillotson of Canterbury.⁶² The conference attendees drafted a formula for entry, and nominated Robert Ker, earl of Lothian, as commissioner to the assembly. Lothian was instructed to receive 180 ministers and dissolve the assembly within twenty days if this could not be achieved.⁶³ The formula for entry required ministers to accept Presbyterianism and the Westminster Confession as 'the doctrine of the protestant religion professed in this Kingdom' and William's letter to the assembly insisted that Episcopalian subscription of the formula 'clears the soundness of their principles'.⁶⁴

The assembly's members quickly identified two deficiencies in the formula. First, they insisted that the formula was unnecessary because the visitation commissions had received ministers into the Church before they were suspended. Second, the members objected to the formula's 'uncertain and generall termes'. They believed that the conditions the Episcopalians would have to accept gave no 'securitie off their soundness and sinceritie in religion'.⁶⁵ Some members proposed alternative formulas, such as requiring the Episcopalians to accept the Westminster Confession as 'the true doctrine of this and other reformed churches', but these proposals came to nothing.⁶⁶ The standoff intensified later that month when the assembly responded to two separate Episcopalian addresses. The first

⁶¹ *CSPD*, 1691–2, 50–2; Raffe, 'Scottish state oaths', 173–91.

⁶² 'The most memorable passages of the life and times of Mr J[ohn] B[ell] written by himself, 1706', ed. J. Stephen, *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society XIV*, Woodbridge 2010, 215.

⁶³ Clarke, 'Scottish Episcopalians', 18.

⁶⁴ *CSPD*, 1691–2, 93–4; T. Maxwell, 'The Church union attempt at the general assembly of 1692', in D. Shaw (ed.), *Reformation and revolution: essays presented to the Very Reverend Principal Emeritus Hugh Watt, D.D., D. Litt*, Edinburgh 1967, 243.

⁶⁵ NRS, GD40/14/21.

⁶⁶ NLS, Wodrow Quarto LXXIII, fos 44r–46r.

address was presented in late January by the anti-Testers James Craig and James Lundie. It also had the approval of Laurence Charteris, whose interest in the 'Church Union' was likely influenced by his previous involvement with Leighton's accommodation scheme in 1670. The addressing ministers stated that they would recognise William and Mary as *de facto* monarchs and accept Presbyterian government and the Westminster Confession as 'the standart [*sic*] of the Communion of this Church'.⁶⁷ Given that the address did not provide a thorough declaration in favour of Presbyterian government and the Westminster Confession, the assembly rejected it.

The attempt by some anti-Testers to be accommodated into the Church during the 1692 assembly provides an insight into the contested nature of comprehension during this period. Anti-Tester ministers were important because of the arguments that they presented to oppose the 1681 Test. Ryan Frace has suggested that this made the anti-Testers more likely than other Episcopalian ministers to be comprehended into the Church after 1689. The events of the 1692 assembly show that this was not the case, but anti-Testers were more likely to petition for comprehension.⁶⁸ This can be seen when Lundie, along with Thomas Wilkie, who was not an anti-Tester, successfully petitioned the presbytery of Edinburgh on 29 August 1692. Their petition differed from the address that Lundie had presented to the assembly earlier in the year. It stated that both men would accept the Westminster Confession as 'the true doctrine of this and other reformed Churches'.⁶⁹ The format under which Lundie and Wilkie were received into the Church reflected how the Presbyterians expected comprehension to be structured and, as we shall see, reflected the role that petitions played in the practice of comprehension in the localities.

The second address was presented to the assembly on 2 February by a delegation from Aberdeen. Headed by John Forbes and Robert Irvine, the delegation hoped to submit under the formula on behalf of the ministers in their area. After refusing a request from Lothian to amend their document, which was addressed to 'the General Assembly of the Presbyterians' rather than the Church of Scotland, when the delegation appeared before the assembly the negotiations broke down quickly. The moderator, William Crichton, questioned the delegation's request to submit on behalf of the ministers in Aberdeen and their request was referred to the committee of overtures. The delegates insisted that they would not 'submit to any test for their orthodoxy'.⁷⁰ In response, the committee requested that an explanation of the formula be drafted to avoid the

⁶⁷ NLS, MS 7036, fo. 40r; Clarke, 'Charteris, Laurence', *ODNB*, at <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5178>>.

⁶⁸ Frace, 'Foundations of the Enlightenment', 216–17.

⁶⁹ EUL, La. II/89, fo. 348r.

⁷⁰ 'Most memorable passages', 216.

accusation that they had refused to receive ministers into the Church.⁷¹ It was unclear whether this explanation was drafted, but the demand for one demonstrates that the Presbyterians expected such a declaration of orthodoxy within any comprehension settlement.

Faced with continued Presbyterian intransigence, Lothian dissolved the assembly, ending the possibility that comprehension could be implemented in a manner that balanced both sides' views. Differences over comprehension now became focused on how the terms of entry were phrased. The religious authorities expected any comprehension settlement to endorse the mono-confessional programme established in 1690. For Episcopalians, the 'Church Union' was the best opportunity for them to be accommodated into the Church. The fallout from this attempt at comprehension influenced the approach that William's government took when parliament reconvened in 1693.

The Act for Settling the Quiet and Peace of the Church, which was passed on 12 June 1693, differed from the 'Church Union' in two areas. First, no minister was to be received into the Church unless he took the oath of allegiance and subscribed the assurance. Second, ministers were individually required to accept Presbyterianism, subscribe the Westminster Confession, and 'own the doctrine therein contained to be the true doctrine'. A general assembly would implement these terms and ministers were to submit within thirty days after the assembly had risen.⁷² Prior to this act, parliament had already mandated that all ministers take oaths of allegiance and assurance by 20 June.⁷³ Carstares felt that the oath of allegiance alone was insufficient to exclude Jacobites and argued that the added imposition of the assurance on the ministers would ensure that 'room is not left for men to put their own private sense upon the allegiance'.⁷⁴

Responses to the act varied. Johnston reported to Gilbert Burnet, who had been raised to the bishopric of Salisbury, that only nine ministers had taken the oaths by 30 June and the planned general assembly was postponed until 1694.⁷⁵ Archbishop Tillotson argued that the legislation would 'not be a bill of comprehension, but of exclusion'. Writing to Portland in August, Tillotson disagreed with the act's phrasing of Presbyterianism as 'the only government of this church' and felt that the king would never

⁷¹ *Vindication of the address made by the Episcopal clergy to the general assembly of the Presbyterians anno MDCXCII*, Edinburgh 1704, 131.

⁷² RPS, 1693/4/89; Raffe, 'Scottish state oaths', 186.

⁷³ RPS, 1693/4/50.

⁷⁴ *State papers and letters addressed to William Carstares, confidential secretary to King William during the whole of his reign*, Edinburgh 1776, 171.

⁷⁵ James Johnston to Gilbert Burnet, 10 July 1693, Johnston letter book, NRS, SP3/1.

allow such a statute to be enacted.⁷⁶ Despite this, Presbyterian opinion favoured the new terms of comprehension. Wylie hoped that a ‘competent number’ of Episcopalians ‘may be received’.⁷⁷ However, differences emerged at another conference at Lambeth Palace on 3 March 1694, attended by Johnston, Lothian, Tillotson, John Carmichael, earl of Carmichael, and other English bishops. Tillotson and the bishops felt that an assembly would ‘little promote the Comprehension of the Episkopall Clergie’, but William called one shortly afterwards and appointed Carmichael as commissioner.⁷⁸

The visitation commissions were re-established by the assembly on 13 April 1694 and, in response to the events in 1692, no ministers were to submit on behalf of other ministers from a certain region. The assembly’s key measure was a new formula for entry. Unlike the 1692 formula, the Westminster Confession and Presbyterian government had to be accepted as ‘the true doctrine’, and ‘the only government of this Church’, respectively.⁷⁹ These requirements were harder for Episcopalians to accept as they represented an acknowledgement that they now adhered to the Presbyterians’ mono-confessional programme and exposed themselves, according to the Episcopalian polemicist William Strachan, to ‘more fatall consequences than we at present seem to be aware of’.⁸⁰ This reflected continued Episcopalian fears that they were more likely to be prosecuted than accommodated since, as the machinations behind comprehension demonstrated, Presbyterians would only accept ministers who adhered to their programme.

IV

The manoeuvres behind the various comprehension settlements showed the changing nature of how comprehension was understood at a political level. However, it is equally important to understand how it was implemented, and how ministers responded to the ideas of comprehension in circulation. Consequently, it is necessary to examine the locally negotiated comprehension arrangements reached between Episcopalians and church courts, and the national settlements implemented by the visitation

⁷⁶ John Tillotson to William Bentinck, earl of Portland, 1 Aug. 1693, letters of Archbishop Tillotson, LPL, ms 690, fo. 69r. This letter was also coded by Tillotson. For a decoded version see Birch, *John Tillotson*, 280.

⁷⁷ Wylie to Hamilton, 10 Dec. 1693, Hamilton correspondence, NRS, GD406/1/3866.

⁷⁸ Robert Ker, earl of Lothian to Lady Lothian, 12 Mar. 1694, Lothian correspondence, NRS, GD40/2/8/81.

⁷⁹ *Acts of the general assembly*, 239.
⁸⁰ [William Strachan], *Some remarks upon a late pamphlet, entituled, An answer to the Scots Presbyterian eloquence*, London 1694 (Wing S.5776), 6; Raffe, *Culture of controversy*, 156–8.

commissions. These have not been explored adequately in previous scholarship.⁸¹ Investigating the practice of comprehension provides a more complete analysis of Scottish religious politics in the 1690s and demonstrates the importance of negotiation in the preservation of social harmony.

Any Episcopalian who submitted himself to be received into the Church stated that he would accept Presbyterian government and subscribe the Westminster Confession. However, when an Episcopalian appeared before these judicatories, the members gave some recognition to this minister's views and engaged with him to see if he was suitable to be received. The demonstration of suitability was achieved using what Michael Braddick and John Walter have termed 'legitimizing language'. This involved weaker groups, like the Episcopalians, using negotiation to claim agency by negotiating within the parameters set by the 1690 Act re-establishing Presbyterianism.⁸² Under this practice, a minister submitted himself to a church court, usually the local presbytery, whose members determined if he should be received or rebuked. Ministers also submitted petitions to the church courts outlining why they wanted to be received. These petitions followed a standard pattern that tactfully used legitimizing language to endorse the Presbyterians' mono-confessional programme, thus enabling the petitioning ministers to be received into the Church. Like Wilkie and Lundie's petition to the presbytery of Edinburgh in 1692, most of the locally negotiated comprehension settlements that occurred between 1690 and 1694 followed this pattern. For example, on 18 May 1692 John Beaton and Dugald McPherson, both Episcopalian ministers on Skye, petitioned the synod of Argyll with documents that acknowledged their conformity with the 'evils of the late tymes'. Both men also denounced erastianism and 'other evils attending prelacie, or encroaching the liberty of presbyterian government'. These statements were welcomed by the synod and on 21 May both men were unanimously received into the Church.⁸³

In other cases, the extraction of concessions from a minister took more time. One such case was Laurence Charteris's negotiations with the presbytery of Haddington in 1692. Having endorsed the 'Church Union', soon after the 1692 assembly was dissolved Charteris approached the presbytery to be received into the Church. When questioned if he accepted the

⁸¹ Stephen surveyed how the visitation commissions progressed, but did not explore how other types of comprehension operated in the localities: *Defending the revolution*, 120–42.

⁸² See M. J. Braddick and J. Walter, 'Introduction: grids of power, order, hierarchy and subordination in early modern society', in M. J. Braddick and J. Walter (eds), *Negotiating power in early modern society: order, hierarchy and subordination in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge 2001, 1–42, and C. R. Langley, *Worship, civil war and community, 1638–1660*, London 2016, 31–2.

⁸³ Synod of Argyll, minutes, NRS, CH2/557/3, pp. 94–5.

re-established standards, Charteris responded that he would accept the Westminster Confession as ‘the publicke and avowed Confessione’ and would ‘publishe no opinions dissonant’. In an account of his dealings with the presbytery, Charteris stated that it was a ‘daring [and] presumptuous thing’ to impose terms that ‘may exclude pious [and] peaceable men’. He offered to submit to the presbytery if ‘unione may be obtained on Just and reasonable termes’. However, in the final paper that Charteris subscribed before he was received, he promised never to subvert Presbyterian government and accepted the Westminster Confession as the ‘true Doctrine of this and other reformed Churches’.⁸⁴ Charteris was received into the Church, but it is unclear what the presbytery said to get him to make these statements. Charteris’s interactions show that Episcopalians had to adopt specific types of legitimating language in order successfully to negotiate their reception into the Church.

The activities of the Commission of the North provide further insights into how comprehension as conceived at a national level was implemented, and objected to, in its mono-confessional format. During the commission’s first expedition to Aberdeen in March 1691, the commissioners convened in the tolbooth, where they were soon confronted by an Episcopalian delegation. The delegation insisted that they could not accept the Westminster Confession without ‘condemning those practices [and] principles which we judge to be lawful’, by which they presumably meant episcopacy. The commissioners’ response is not extant, but the fact that the tolbooth was thereafter surrounded by a crowd which drove out the commissioners suggests that they had rejected the queries.⁸⁵ The commission had greater success during its second expedition in the summer of 1694, when it received fourteen ministers into the Church, but there was still controversy. Prior to the commission’s arrival in Aberdeen, some Episcopalians in the area had met under the nominal leadership of James Gordon of Banchory-Devenick, who had petitioned parliament in 1689 for an accommodation. On 29 June Gordon led a delegation that presented the commissioners with a protestation. Citing the absence of Episcopalians from the previous three assemblies, the protestation argued that the commission could not claim ‘jurisdiction over a church wherein that church is not duly represented’. These ministers wanted to be received but could not accept the comprehension terms without ‘declaring all the acts of our ministerial function null and void’.⁸⁶ Angered by the protestation, the commissioners declared that it did ‘strick at the root of Presbyterian Government’. In response, the delegates appealed to the Crown and the next ‘orderly

⁸⁴ NLS, MS 7036, fos 44r–49r.

⁸⁵ NLS, Wodrow Folio XXXIV, fo. 85r.

⁸⁶ ‘Extracts from the manuscript collection of the Rev. Robert Wodrow, MDCV–MDCXCVII.’, in J. Stuart (ed.), *Miscellany of the Spalding Club II*, Aberdeen 1842, 163–4.

called *Generall Assembly* for protection, but were unsuccessful; the commission deprived Gordon from his parish.⁸⁷

Despite the Aberdeen protestation, the commission managed to implement its instructions, meeting with a number of Episcopalian ministers. Like the ministers who were received by a church court, most of the ministers whom the commissioners received submitted petitions to support their case. The petitions presented by William Garioch, William Johnston and William Thomson on 5 July 1694 were an effective exercise in clerical negotiation. Each of them stated that they accepted Presbyterian government and would subscribe the Westminster Confession. Garioch and Thomson stated that they had observed the 8 January 1691 fast and would subscribe the oaths. Johnston's petition stated that he did 'heartily consent to signe the terms [of] Comprehension'.⁸⁸ On 6 September, the commission of the north reported its proceedings to the privy council. Its report controversially stated that there were 'many Episcopall Clergie in the North who doe usurpe Ecclesiastick authority and keep their own meetings, wher[e] they licence preachers'.⁸⁹ This claim was probably based on organised Episcopalian opposition like the Aberdeen protestation. It is unclear whether the allegation of widespread defiance was strictly true. However, the expedition had shown that the authorities were aware of the growing problem of nonconformity and, crucially, that comprehension had not preserved religious uniformity.

Only sixty ministers were comprehended into the Church by the end of 1694. This figure is low, representing just 15 percent of the approximately 400 Episcopalians who had retained their parishes since the revolution.⁹⁰ Comprehension, then, was evidently unsuccessful, falling far short of what the authorities had hoped to achieve. As the idea became associated with the Presbyterians' mono-confessional programme, it alienated the many Episcopalians who would have preferred to conform under a more flexible arrangement.

V

The Act Concerning the Church, which was enacted on 16 June 1695, was designed to address this religious dilemma. By virtue of this act, any Episcopalian who had held a parish since the revolution, and who qualified by 1 September by taking the allegiance and the assurance, was given royal protection. Ministers who did not qualify faced the threat of

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 168.

⁸⁹ NRS, PC1/50, p. 5.

⁹⁰ This figure was calculated using two official lists of ministers who were received into the Church. See NLS, MS Adv. 32.3.6, fos 11r–46v; EUL, MS CHU 21.3, [unfoliated].

⁸⁸ NRS, CH1/2/2, fos 75r, 227r–228r, 235r.

deprivation and their parishes being declared vacant. The qualified men could minister in their parishes for the remainder of their lives, but were not required to sit on the district presbytery. They were not permitted to preach outside of their own parishes and would be prosecuted if they intruded upon neighbouring parishes.⁹¹

The Act Concerning the Church cannot be classified as a comprehension, because the qualified ministers were not entitled to subject themselves to any ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Nor were these ministers granted civil toleration, since they could not erect meeting houses outside of the Church. The legislation also limited the pluralism that parliament was willing to countenance, because it did not state whether the qualified ministers could use the English Book of Common Prayer. Considering that many Episcopalians adopted the liturgy after 1700, this was an ambiguity that would later undermine the Church's authority.⁹² Instead, the act's provisions resembled the indulgences that had been granted in 1669 and 1672. Like the indulgences, the act was designed as a temporary compromise that would relate to a specific group of ministers – Episcopalians who still held benefices. The authorities hoped that when the last of these qualified ministers died, and new men had been trained to replace them, then the Church would be fully Presbyterian.⁹³ Such legislation was necessary to address Scotland's heightened religious divisions, brought into sharp focus by the various attempts at comprehension. As the commission of the general assembly expressed to the king, the Church would not receive any minister that did 'adhere to [th]e [Aberdeen] protestation'.⁹⁴

The Act Concerning the Church contrasted with the harsh legislation passed during the parliamentary session in the summer of 1695 to bolster the Church's authority against religious dissent and deviancy. Worried by reports that some Episcopalians had intruded upon Presbyterian or vacant parishes, and the importation of deist books from England, parliament passed the Act Anent Irregular Baptism and Marriage and the Act Against Blasphemy on 28 June. These were followed by the Act against Intruding into Churches without a Legal Call, which banned intruders from holding a benefice for seven years.⁹⁵ Unlike previous religious settlements, the passage of the Act Concerning the Church on 16 July was uneventful. Johnston argued that 'the people in the North ...

⁹¹ RPS, 1695/5/186.

⁹² T. N. Clarke, 'Jurors and qualified clergy: adopting the liturgy at home and abroad', in Macinnes, Barton, and German, *Scottish liturgical traditions*, 126–37.

⁹³ Stephen, *Defending the revolution*, 146; Clarke, 'Scottish Episcopalians', 126–31.

⁹⁴ NLS, MS 9255, fo. 152r.

⁹⁵ RPS, 1695/4/117; 1695/5/118; 1695/5/155; M. F. Graham, *The blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: boundaries of belief on the eve of the Enlightenment*, Edinburgh 2008, 33–48.

provided they have Episcopal ministers will be satisfied'.⁹⁶ In short, the act would placate Episcopalians who were reluctant to accept the Presbyterians' definition of uniformity and provided the religious authorities with time to train ministers to take over the parishes.⁹⁷

Bernard MacKenzie's expedition through northern Scotland in the summer of 1695 shows how ministers responded to the act. MacKenzie was the Episcopalian minister of Tranent and a kinsman of Tarbat. He had signed the allegiance and assurance in November 1694 and was employed by Johnston, one of the primary supporters of the legislation, to persuade the Episcopalians to qualify under its terms.⁹⁸ It is likely that Johnston believed MacKenzie, as a qualified Episcopalian, would receive a warmer reception than a Presbyterian visitation commission. MacKenzie began his expedition on 9 August, concluding shortly after the deadline for taking the allegiance and assurance had passed on 1 September. During this time MacKenzie left Edinburgh with instructions from Johnston, visited parishes in Fife and Angus and eventually visited Montrose, Aberdeen, Elgin, Inverness, Chanonry, Nairn and Coull. Throughout his journey he engaged with local Episcopalian ministers as he passed through their parishes, sent letters to other ministers to encourage them to attend him, and held large meetings with resident Episcopalians to convince them to take the allegiance and the assurance. About halfway through his journey, when he reached Aberdeen, MacKenzie was joined by Johnston and the solicitor-general, Sir James Ogilvy. Their presence underlines the active role that key figures within William's government took both to guarantee the success of MacKenzie's expedition and to ensure that the Act Concerning the Church placated Scotland's religious divisions.⁹⁹

The expedition resulted in substantial Episcopalian qualifications and MacKenzie was awarded a pension in January 1697 for his efforts.¹⁰⁰ Ogilvy informed Carstares on 26 October that 116 had qualified under the act, while a slightly higher figure of 120 was reported to the new archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tenison.¹⁰¹ By collating this information with lists of qualified ministers drafted in 1701, and a list of ministers published by Daniel Defoe in his 1707 publication, *Presbyterian persecution examined*, it is possible to identify 155 Episcopalians who qualified under the Act

⁹⁶ LPL, MS 2020, fo. 23r.

⁹⁷ Muirhead, *Scottish Presbyterianism re-established*, 59–67.

⁹⁸ LPL, MS 806/1, fos 29r–36v.

⁹⁹ For a detailed examination of MacKenzie's expedition see B. Rogers, 'Religious comprehension and toleration in Scotland, 1689–1712', unpubl. PhD diss. Edinburgh 2019, 146–9.

¹⁰¹ *Carstares state papers*, 263; NRS, GD26/10/79.

¹⁰⁰ *CSPD*, 1697, 25.

Concerning the Church.¹⁰² This represented almost 40 per cent of ministers who were eligible to qualify. Significantly, as has been demonstrated, these ministers were regionally concentrated. Most of the qualified ministers were in the north-east, which had not experienced mass deprivations during the revolution and where the ministers had given Presbyterians the most trouble. Despite the fair rate of qualification, there were some objections. In November 1695, an address was presented to William by some qualified Episcopalians who argued that their unqualified colleagues were not ‘at peace with us on terms that (in conscience) we can agree to’.¹⁰³ Furthermore, the extent to which ministers adhered to the act varied. Some qualified ministers, like Robert Gordon at Clunie and George White at Maryculter, would later be deprived for intrusion and supporting the 1715 Jacobite rising.¹⁰⁴ Despite these instances, the act represented an effective compromise that maintained religious stability for the rest of the 1690s.

The Act Concerning the Church was an important step in Scotland’s move towards religious pluralism, representing an official acknowledgment that the nation no longer had a uniform religious culture. To preserve the Church’s national status, parliament enacted an alternative settlement that granted some of the requests the Episcopalians had sought, but broadly preserved the idea of a national Church. However, some younger Episcopalians, who were illegally ordained in the 1690s, and some older ones, would not accept the anomalous status that the Act Concerning the Church offered them, with many referring to the legislation as ‘Sinful terms of communion’.¹⁰⁵ Instead of preserving uniformity, the attempts at comprehension revealed the impossibility of a reconciliation between both religious groups and confirmed that pluralism was an undeniable feature of Scottish society.

VI

By 1695 it was apparent that comprehension had been unsuccessful in Scotland. Not enough Episcopalians were accommodated, and the Act

¹⁰² NLS, MS Adv. 32.3.6, fos 48v–71v; [Daniel Defoe], *Presbyterian persecution examined: with an essay on the nature and necessity of toleration in Scotland*, Edinburgh 1707, 34–8.

¹⁰³ NRS, GD26/10/80.

¹⁰⁴ NRS, PC1/52, p. 9; K. German, ‘The Episcopalian community in Aberdeen during the Jacobite period’, in Macinnes, Barton and German, *Scottish liturgical traditions*, 115–25.

¹⁰⁵ [George Brown], *Toleration defended: or, The letter from a gentleman to a member of parliament concerning toleration considered*, [Edinburgh] 1703, 15–16; [George Garden], *The case of the episcopal clergy, and those of the episcopal persuasion considered; As to granting them a toleration and indulgence*, [Edinburgh] 1703, 16.

Concerning the Church tacitly recognised ministers who worshipped outside of the Presbyterian fold. However, the debates over comprehension are essential to understanding Scotland's protracted move towards religious pluralism, providing important insights into the main manoeuvres behind the breakdown of uniformity within the Reformed tradition. The mono-confessional programme that the Presbyterians promoted after 1690, with its emphasis on accepting Presbyterian government and subscribing the Westminster Confession, contrasted with the flexible conformity that the Episcopalians wanted. Instead of preserving uniformity, the comprehension settlements that were implemented by the authorities, and the means by which comprehension was practised, caused both sides to become more entrenched in their views. This is evident from the politics behind the comprehension settlements in the early 1690s. Aside from the 'Church Union' in 1692, which was the closest that Scotland came to a religious compromise, the government gradually conceded a settlement that was wholly based on the Presbyterians' programme. In doing so, the likelihood of comprehending Episcopalians into the re-established Church became an increasingly distant possibility.

The absence of consideration for the Episcopalians' scruples was equally evident from how comprehension was practised in localities such as Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Argyll and Haddington, as any ministers who were received into the Church used language that legitimated the Presbyterians' programme as the only basis for uniformity. The Aberdeen protestation in 1694 underscored how many Episcopalians had become alienated irreversibly from this view; this division was underlined by the Act Concerning the Church, which confirmed that total religious uniformity was no longer feasible. Some no longer even regarded it as desirable. For younger Episcopalians who had not held benefices in the 1680s and, according to the Presbyterians, had been illegally ordained in the 1690s, this final breakdown of uniformity allowed them to envision themselves as a separate Church that should be legally tolerated. After Queen Anne's accession in 1702, these tolerationists moved the discourse away from comprehension towards Episcopalian toleration, which would eventually be enacted by the British parliament in 1712.¹⁰⁶

Scotland's experiences of comprehension demonstrate that religious uniformity had become a precarious concept by 1700. Instead of preserving unity, the attempts at comprehension exacerbated the nation's existing religious differences and demonstrated the limits of the established Church's authority over the entire Protestant community. By the start of the eighteenth century the Church of Scotland recognised, however

¹⁰⁶ B. Rogers, 'The House of Lords and religious toleration in Scotland: James Greenshields's appeal, 1709–11', in R. McKitterick, C. Methuen and A. Spicer (eds), *The Church and the law* (Studies in Church History lvi, 2020), 320–37.

begrudgingly, that a degree of religious pluralism was now an undeniable feature of Scottish society. The manoeuvres over comprehension, how it was practised and the gradual realisation of its shortcomings, were central to this transition. Far from a peripheral issue, religious comprehension forced Scots to confront the practical limits of their commitment to religious unity in an increasingly fragmented confessional environment.