

## Headline

**Anxiety about ‘religious academies’ is nothing new; in some ways our forebears were more tolerant of ‘radical’ religion than we are**

## Key terms

Protestant, dissent, Dr Williams’s, academies, education, schools, regulation, Civil War, discrimination

## Summary

In the period between the Restoration and 1720 Protestant dissenting ministers faced persecution in England. Nonconformist academies were established principally in order to train candidates for ministry, but some also aimed to provide the young men with an education equivalent to that of the Anglican Oxford and Cambridge. Following the disorders of the Civil War and Interregnum and uncovering of conspiracies against the government, there were state efforts to suppress dissent and nonconformist education. These constituted a means of maintaining the Church of England’s monopoly in school and university education. The 1662 Act of Uniformity led to just over 2000 ministers and teachers refusing to conform to the Church of England and risking prosecution. The 1689 Act of Toleration then improved circumstances for dissenters, but left in place the restrictions on nonconformist teaching and the 1714 Schism Act initiated by the High Church party sought to exclude dissenters from teaching. However, it was repealed in 1719 and dissenters gradually achieved freedom to teach.

Doctoral student Mark Burden undertook to investigate dissenting academies, their tutors, courses and students during this turbulent period through archival and primary research at Dr Williams’s Library – the pre-eminent library for the study of Puritanism and English Protestant Dissent – under the joint supervision of Professor Isabel Rivers (Queen Mary, University of London) and Dr David Wykes, the library’s director, as part of the large-scale, collaborative and cross-disciplinary ‘Dissenting Academies Project.’ He looked at the structures, methods and content of courses taught including Logic, Physics, Moral Philosophy and the experiences of students including Daniel Defoe and Samuel Wesley. It appears that the term ‘academy’ was very broad – not all were primarily focused on academic development, there were also more pastoral concerns. The academies did not necessarily teach a modern or progressive curriculum quite distinct from Oxford or Cambridge’s, as assumed by early twentieth century historians and often since repeated, and Marxist historians’ representations of the 1680s dissenting academies as radical institutions are inadequate. Historically, attempts by the state to suppress religious minorities which possess significant public support have failed. Dissenters gained first relief from, and then repeal



*The attempt to prosecute Philip Dodderidge in 1733 for conducting his academy at Northampton without a license is generally considered to be the last of its kind*

of, the offending legislation in alliance with their Whig political allies. Mark is now working to produce an online biographical dictionary of the tutors and students involved.

## Impacts/Activities and Outcomes

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- The online biographical dictionary will be a unique resource drawing upon material which has rarely been consulted in the last century.
- Mark has written an article on academy tutor and Harvard philosopher Charles Morton for the *Dictionary of Early American Philosophers* and he will contribute two substantial chapters to the wider Dissenting Academies Project's major publication *A History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860* to be published by Cambridge University Press in 2011.
- He has also presented his work extensively, including as part of the Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies' 2010 Seminar Programme:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme\\_events/show/dissenting\\_studies\\_seminar\\_programme\\_jan\\_july\\_2010](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/dissenting_studies_seminar_programme_jan_july_2010).
- The fact that the studentship involved collaboration between Queen Mary, University of London and Dr Williams's Library gave Mark privileged access to extensive records and the opportunity to meet a range of scholars in an active research environment. It has contributed towards further grant applications to the British Academy, Leverhulme Trust and AHRC and partnership with the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History.
- Mark is now the foremost scholar of the intellectual life of the early dissenting academies.

## You might also be interested in...

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- Mark, David Wykes and Isabel discussing this research in a podcast produced for the Religion and Society Programme:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/dr\\_williams\\_s\\_library\\_discussion](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/dr_williams_s_library_discussion)
- Religion and Society Phase 2 Large Grant 'Dissenting academy libraries and their readers, 1720-1860' also led by Professor Isabel Rivers:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/projects/phase\\_two/large\\_research\\_projects](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_two/large_research_projects)
- The Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies:  
<http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/contact/index.html>
- Dr Williams's Library: <http://www.dwlib.co.uk/index.html>
- The International Association for the History of Religion: <http://www.iahr.dk/>



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



## Project Details

### Award Title

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**The dissenting academy and the control of education by the state, 1662-1751**

### Team

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**Principal Investigator:** Prof Isabel Rivers (QMUL)

**PhD Student:** Mark Burden (QMUL)

### University

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Queen Mary, University of London

### Research Partners

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Dr David L. Wykes (Director, Dr Williams's Library), Professor Knud Haakonssen and Dr Richard Whatmore (Sussex Centre for Intellectual History)

### Award Type

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Phase 1 Collaborative Studentship