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British Political Thought, 1500-1660: The Politics of the Post-Reformation

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Sarah Mortimer

The subject of Glenn Burgess's new book is an exciting one, and its author is well qualified to tackle it. Political thought is a lively and flourishing field within history, and Glenn Burgess has done much to promote it. Most recently, he has constructed a network of European scholars of political thought with Howell Lloyd, and together they edited the extremely valuable volume which resulted from these discussions, *European Political Thought 1450-1700: Religion, Law and Philosophy*.⁽¹⁾ Through this and other projects, Burgess has been keen to place religion at the heart of political thought, challenging the more secular approach pioneered by Quentin Skinner.⁽²⁾ In his earlier work, he has also drawn attention to the importance of common law within England, showing the ways in which it could strengthen consensus.⁽³⁾ Both these themes are richly developed in this new work as he discusses important and canonical texts in the history of political thought. Yet Burgess tends not to range beyond these themes, and he leaves out many of the contemporary concerns which also inspired extensive political reflection.

As Burgess's subtitle suggests, his focus is on the interaction between religion and politics after the momentous events of the Reformation. The introduction proposes that the work will be organised around two central concepts, 'confessional polity' and 'religious war' which will, he argues, be used to discuss the major political thinkers of the period. Alongside these we will find a cast of lesser figures whose inclusion is

designed, we are told, to illuminate further the leading lights of the period. In general, the introduction reinforces the message implicit in the title: this is a work of political thought, designed to emphasise and reinforce a growing consensus around the importance of religion in political thought. It provides a new guide to the major thinkers of the time, and one which takes seriously their religious concerns. This, indeed, is the most valuable aspect of the work, for Burgess shows convincingly that the major players in British political thought need to be understood within a religious, indeed a specifically post-Reformation, context.

At the core of the work lies Burgess' strong sense that religion was a seriously destabilising force in the post-Reformation world – and one that could not be ignored by any self-respecting political thinker. He suggests that the central problem of political thought in this period was religious, for every writer discussed here had to consider how their twin loyalties, to God and to their sovereign, related to each other. Some, Burgess shows, insisted that they must obey God before man and strove to erect godly societies, even in the face of official opposition. Others sought to harness religious passions to civil authority, reshaping both Protestant religion and civil philosophy in the process. Tudor humanism, to take one of Burgess's examples, was profoundly affected by the Reformation, especially as it took shape under Edward VI. Although religious problems have long remained at the margins of the study of political thought, Burgess makes a compelling case for their centrality. Indeed, it should no longer be possible to separate religion from political thinking in the early modern period.

Burgess describes the development of political thought by dividing the period covered into two sections. The first half of the book deals with the period between 1500 and 1640, the second with the English Revolution. The notion of a 'confessional polity' is Burgess' organising category in the first half, as he explores what this notion might have meant to contemporaries. This leads him to examine the broad themes of resistance, allegiance and ecclesiology, with reference to those writers whose texts are of particular intellectual value. Thomas More, Richard Hooker and the Marian resistance theorists are the subject of sustained analysis, although it is James I whose thought is explored in the greatest detail. In the second half, Burgess turns to the concept of religious war, especially as it was understood between 1642 and 1660. A wide range of tracts and pamphlets are discussed in this part, and the aims and ideas of their authors are sympathetically sketched. Some of these authors receive particularly sustained attention; the writing of Thomas Hobbes is the subject of an entire chapter. As this suggests, although Burgess does gesture towards broad themes, he is much more concerned to do justice to each individual thinker's own agenda, as set out in his (or occasionally her) own writing. What unites Burgess's treatment of these writers is his insistence that they cannot avoid religious problems, working as they are within the context of the post-Reformation polity.

Burgess' approach can be rewarding. His discussion of each thinker is unfailingly clear, and often highly sophisticated. It will be welcomed by students who want to make sense of the central players (and, to a lesser extent, the central issues) in early modern political thought. Because the discussion of each figure is almost self-contained, it is useful for those wishing to acquaint themselves with – or remind themselves of – particular authors and their place in British intellectual history. Yet Burgess could have done more to ensure that each chapter was more than just the sum of its parts, through longer and more rigorous exploration of the themes which exercise his many protagonists and through more sustained comparisons of the points which both unite and divide them. Although Burgess makes clear that particular concepts, like the confessional polity or the royal supremacy, were indeed contested, he leaves it to the reader to consider for himself just how fiercely that contest might have been fought.

For Burgess, early modern arguments were conducted within a broadly shared framework and he is anxious to highlight the extent to which his writers agreed. And yet, agreement is usually most obvious when the issue at stake is not religious war or the confessional polity, but the practical problems involved in ensuring that England has a Protestant (and preferably male) monarch who accepts the basic premises of the common law system. Indeed, Burgess is most concerned with the relationship between monarchical authority and English law – and with showing that this relationship need not be oppositional. The best example is the Union debates of 1604–10, where both James and his English subjects are willing to compromise in order to ensure that royal government can function in both England and Scotland. Burgess's discussion of the Union debates is a model of clarity, in which he uses the figures of James I and the Scottish lawyer Thomas Craig

to illustrate the issues at stake. The message he draws from these debates is that there was 'no inherent incompatibility' between strong views of royal authority and commitment to the common law; the theoretical bridges between divine right monarchy and common law are kept open under James (p. 164).

Burgess' discussion of the Stuarts is dominated by this rosy picture of compromise and consensus during the Union debates; the bitter disputes of the 1620s and 1630s are barely mentioned at all. Indeed, intellectual and political conflict are notably absent from the book as a whole, and the reader is left wondering how a civil war could possibly have occurred (and Burgess makes no attempt to explain this). Indeed, the years between the Union debates and the outbreak of civil war are covered in just 14 pages; Archbishop William Laud is mentioned only in passing and the Earl of Strafford only at his trial. Here Burgess' sympathy for 'Revisionist' explanations of the English Civil War, which play down the level of conflict in England, is clear. There is very little effort here to integrate post-revisionist accounts which have stressed the intellectual and religious divisions within English society from at least the 1620s. Nor is there any attempt to explain why Charles' policies might have aroused such passionate opposition. The political thought expressed during the civil war is, therefore, assumed to be a result of that war, rather than a contributing factor. His discussion of the pamphlets produced in these years is, however, often perceptive, especially his account of the Parliamentary attitude to religious war.

It is by setting English political thought within a purely English (and largely Parliamentary) setting, while divorcing it from political events, that Burgess can sustain such claims about consensus. As this suggests, the most striking feature of the work is its insularity. There is nothing about European political thought; neither France nor Spain even appear in the index. And yet, as J. H. Salmon first insisted in 1959, and has been widely acknowledged ever since, some of the most controversial ideas about political power and religious duties were explored and expressed on the continent, before being taken up by English authors.⁽⁴⁾ No British writer could ignore the French wars of religion in the late 16th century, nor the outpouring of works on resistance and on monarchical authority spawned by that conflict. From the early 1620s, moreover, the English political nation was deeply troubled by the events in Europe and particularly by the seizure of the Palatinate. Arguably, the greatest fault line in English political life 'and political thinking' concerned the means by which the Palatinate could be recovered. By isolating England and Scotland from the continent, Burgess cannot adequately explain the political or religious issues which exercised British writers. Burgess' reluctance to engage with the European context is troubling, and it can only be hoped that *British Political Thought* will not help to legitimize an Anglocentric approach to English or British intellectual history.

The writers which Burgess discusses are removed from their intellectual context, but they are also largely abstracted from their political context. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate the significance of these writers, or the relationship between their thought and the dramatic events of the early modern period. To take one example, Burgess provides an extensive (and characteristically clear) discussion of the Parliamentary propagandist Henry Parker, whom he describes as the 'clearest' and 'hardest' head' (p. 194). He implies that it is Parker's intellectual qualities which justify such attention, omitting any mention of Parker's strong connections to the Parliamentary leaders, like the Earl of Essex and Lord Saye and Sele. Yet Parker's role as spokesman for these grandees is important both in the genesis and the impact of his ideas. More generally, Burgess treats political thought as a subject, based around printed texts, which is quite separate from political action or engagement. He is not interested in the ideas which underlie the careers of the main players in early modern history unless, like James I, they happened to write treatises which found their way to the modern canon of political thought. The influence of this canon on Burgess' work is very clear.

British Political Thought is a work designed to fit into a modern conception of political thought; it is not an intellectual history of the early modern period. The focus is upon writers who are studied today within the canon of political thought, rather than upon writers who helped to shape the ideas and assumptions of their contemporaries. For this reason, Burgess does not discuss political culture or literature, although this would have enriched his argument. Ideas of what a confessional polity should look like, or what might constitute a 'religious war' were often explored outside the treatises and speeches which form the core of Burgess's

work. Some of the most intense and sophisticated reflection on England's religious and military destiny in the late sixteenth century took place in the circles around Sir Philip Sidney and then the 2nd Earl of Essex. Similarly, the genesis of a new idea of a 'patriot' in the 1620s, against the backdrop of confessional conflict in Europe, surely deserves inclusion in any study of the political thinking of the period – even if it were expressed in plays, newsbooks and brief pamphlets. New and often vastly conflicting views of the polity were being explored within English political culture and if they are omitted then our understanding of 'political thought' will be diminished.

As a clear and accessible guide to the main, canonical, figures in British political thought, Burgess's book is and will be of great value, particularly to students. Yet it will be most useful if read in conjunction with other works, including the excellent *European Political Thought 1450-1700*. Burgess has ensured that we can no longer study political thought without religion and he has integrated British religion into the canon with great success. But the work of broadening the scope of political thought has not been completed, and it is to be hoped that it will continue.

Notes

1. *European Political Thought 1450-1700: Religion, Law and Philosophy*, ed. Glenn Burgess and Howell Lloyd (New Haven, CT, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See in particular his *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution: An Introduction to English Political Thought 1603-1642* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. H. Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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