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“Lessening the Pope’s Greatness”¹: Bishop Gilbert Burnet’s Seventeenth Century
Writing of the History of the Reformation in England

Lisa Clark Diller

In the midst of the profound political and religious transformation that characterized the Glorious Revolution in England in the 1680s and 1690s, Bishop Gilbert Burnet wrote his multi-volume *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*. Burnet was vital to the development of the settlement of church and state following the ascension of William and Mary to the throne of England, helping form the modern liberal nationalism that we associate with modernity. He is often seen as writing one of the first modern histories, one that had perspective, but which attempted to be evidence and source-based. However, it has been increasingly pointed out that in spite of his attempt to live up to the early Enlightenment ideas regarding evidence, he was also deeply providential.

This paper is part of a larger project analyzing this *History* to demonstrate how Burnet, who was indeed the quintessential Latitudinarian, in fact forces historians to re-think how tolerationist and liberal post-1688 Revolutionary Anglican leaders were. Here I assess Burnet’s treatment of the pope, individual clergy, and the official apparatus of the Roman Church to lay out what form a tolerationist Protestant might take 150 years after the Reformation began in England.

¹ Gilbert Burnet, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 3 vols. in 6 (Oxford, 1829 [orig. 1679–1715]), 1:435. This quote comes from Burnet’s assessment of the Council of Trent and the role of Councils in undermining the power of the pope by the bishops and other church leaders in strong Catholic states such as France and Spain. For Burnet a great deal of the Reformation was in the line of the Anglican one—national churches taking power under the authority of monarchs from the pope.

The church he wants to establish in England in the 1680s shared many of the same powers as the Roman Church had before the Reformation, but without what he considered to be the evil propensities for secular political power. Burnet uses the Roman church as a foil to celebrate what kind of good and continually reforming church he wants to help create under William and Mary. Here his arguments are based less on Scripture than on the way the history of the church played out. He does indeed have a very practical view of the Reformation, one that would not be unfamiliar to other Anglican apologists, but which might surprise historians who want to place him in a liberal Whiggish tradition.

Like most Protestant historians, Burnet blamed the church clergy for the need for a Reformation. He argued that it was the materialism, laziness, and what he called the “ignorance and ill manners” of the clergy that caused people in Germany and the Netherlands to accept the Reformation so quickly.² He was especially hard on the monasteries and convents for giving a bad name to the church.³ In fact, for Burnet, who remained all his life primarily worried about clerical reform and education, this lack of good shepherding on the part of the priests and monks was the biggest concern. He discussed it more than any other issue in his *History of the Reformation*, including the usual Protestant attacks on the Roman Church for its sacraments and salvation by works. In fact, the main issue he had with doctrines like purgatory and prayers for the dead was that it led to clerical abuse of wealth and inattentiveness to the spiritual needs of their

² Gilbert Burnet, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 3 vols. in 6 (Oxford, 1829 [orig. 1679–1715]), 1:61, 62, 43.

³ Burnet, 1:43.

flock. The latter was the thing that upset him—the former could have been left in place potentially if there had been no abuse.⁴

When he did criticize the Roman church for its doctrines and practice of the sacraments, it was primarily not for the heretical ideas involved or specifically the way the theology was formed, but how it impacted lay/clergy relations and godliness. For instance when he celebrated the bill under Edward VI clarifying the sacrament of the eucharist, he said it was important that it reformed the abuse of “the priest’s communicating alone.” Nothing was more corrupt for him in Roman worship than denying the cup to the laity.⁵ In his history regarding the debate about “real presence” of Christ in the sacrament, he highlighted John Frith as the most authoritative of the Reformers on this subject. Frith’s irenic attempt to allow for a range of beliefs on this subject tied in well with Burnet’s own concerns for a big tent church that focused on unity more than some sort of strict doctrinal purity.⁶

Burnet did have an occasional (possibly throw-away?) references to other traditional Protestant attacks on Roman practice such as denying the Scripture in the vernacular and clerical celibacy.⁷ And in an unsurprising fashion, he focused on the excessive punishment of heresy by the Roman church as one of the signs of its corruption. He celebrated England’s late foray into burning heretics and maintained no one should be burned for conscience sake.⁸ In fact, he maintained that this was the root of his disagreement about Rome: “If I have written sharply of any others that have been

⁴ Burnet, 1: 326-328.

⁵ Burnet, 2: 85, 128-132.

⁶ Burnet, 1: 342.

⁷ Burnet, 1: 323, 324, 388, 393, 394; 2:189, 190.

⁸ Burnet, 1: 47, 48, 64, 684; 2: 230

mentioned in this reign, it was the force of truth, and my abhorrence of their barbarous cruelties, that led me to it, more than my being of a contrary persuasion to them.”⁹ But he wasn’t entirely consistent in this, and sometimes argued that kings had the right to punish religious radicals who were infecting others, if not to actually burn them. His toleration had limits, at least as he laid out the history of the Reformation.

And it is in this role regarding the power of the king’s to punish heresy rather than the church, that Burnet looks odd to those who see him in the liberal tradition of toleration. In fact, he seemed quite positive regarding royal courts and argued that the reason only the king’s laws could be used to put people to death (rather than papal law) was because the English people complained they were being mistreated in religious courts. The laws bringing heresy under the power of the monarch, he stated were popular because “it was such an effectual limitation of the ecclesiastical power in one of the uneasiest parts of it.”¹⁰

The limits on the Protestant movement away from Rome as envisaged by many Anglican bishops are clear in Burnet’s *History*. As an Anglican, his neo-Laudian concern with the “beauty of holiness” meant that he wanted to retain a “decent splendor in the worship of God.”¹¹ This was true as well when he tried to explain how the eucharist should be celebrated. Writing in the midst of the Popish Plot when Dissenters seemed to be getting a higher hand, he defended the use of oil, the sign of the cross, specific liturgical language and vestments for priests. Catholic “abuses in the mass”, he admitted, “gave great advantages to those who intended to change it into a communion. But many,

⁹ Burnet, 2:742.

¹⁰ Burnet, 1: 298.

¹¹ Burnet, 1: 574.

instead of managing them prudently, made unseemly jests about them, and were carried by a lightness of temper to make songs and plays of the mass.”¹² He expressed impatience at those who said all kneeling was popish since “ours is... during the whole office; by which it is one continued act of worship,”¹³

The most surprising element of Burnet’s *History* to the modern reader expecting to hear more about how little power the church should have over life, the secularization of moral enforcement, and toleration of a wide range of beliefs, is Burnet’s insistence on the need to increase the power of the clergy to enforce public penance. Burnet regretted the loss of the church’s ability to enforce morality and punish scandalous behavior. The baby had been thrown out with the bathwater at the time of the Reformation. “All the ancient canons for the public penance of scandalous offenders are laid aside,” he lamented in his description of the outcome of the Edwardian reforms, “and our clergy are so little admitted to know or direct the lives and manners of their flocks, that many will scarce bear a reproof patiently from them.” In fact, he complained, “excommunication is now become a kind of secular sentence.”¹⁴ For Burnet, penitentiary canons were crucial and should be restored.¹⁵

In laying out the history of the church and the growth of what Protestants regarded as corruption, Burnet also described the development of aural confession and concludes that the development of secret penance was a bad thing for morality because it brought people under the secret power of a priest. Instead, he affirmed the ancient tradition of public confession, which, he said, brought “such rules as might be most

¹² Burnet, 2:87, 161.

¹³ Burnet, 2: 152

¹⁴ Burnet, 2: xiv.

¹⁵ Burnet, 2: 146, 147.

proper for curing these ill inclinations in them; and according to the several ranks of sins, the time and degrees of this penitence was proportioned.”¹⁶

In fact, he elaborated extensively on excommunication and penance and how those should function. “How far any of those things, chiefly the last about excommunication, may be yet brought into the church, I leave to the consultations of the governors of it, and of the two houses of parliament. It cannot be denied, that vice and immorality, together with much impiety, have overrun the nation; and though the charge of this is commonly cast on the clergy, who certainly have been in too man places wanting to their duty; yet on the other hand they have so little power, or none at all by law, to censure even the most public sins.”¹⁷ The Reformation had not gone far enough because too much power to discipline was taken away from the church. “This matter has yet wanted its chief force; for penitentiary canons have not been set up, and the government of the church is not yet brought into the hands of churchmen. So that in this point the reformation of the church wants some part of its finishing in the government and discipline of it.”¹⁸ So while he was willing to allow the state to decide exactly what civil penalties the clerical punishment of excommunication should have, he definitely thought the church had given up too much of its involvement in guiding godly life.

Burnet was deeply concern with Reform in the church, and while he was not at this point at the height of his church and political powers, he was already foreseeing a stronger role for the church in promoting good behavior. After the Glorious Revolution, in the 1690s, this would become known as the “Reformation of Manners,” popular with

¹⁶ Burnet, 2: 134.

¹⁷ Burnet, 2: 416.

¹⁸ Burnet, 2:814.

Anglicans and Dissenters alike. The focus here was not on doctrinal purity, but on an educated and involved clergy who helped their flock become more godly. Burnet's life was spent trying to mentor and inspire lower clergy to become more involved in hearing confession, preaching godliness, and educating their flock.

So Burnet was definitely using history in polemical ways, and not doing so as much with Scripture. This is especially clear when looking at how he handled the quintessential Protestant theology of salvation by faith. Partly because Burnet represented the anti-Calvinist (sometimes called Neo-Laudian) come back of the Anglican church, he seemed much less concerned with *sola fide* and the fixation on works than other historians of the Reformation might have been. He certainly didn't spend any time focusing on the problems with the Roman church's requirements of penance, works or allowance of indulgences. In the face of the Calvinist Dissenters in England, he focused much more on holy living and worried that too much discussion of grace might lead English Christians into immoral paths and slack living.

Most significantly for historians who see Burnet as either primarily concerned with toleration or as a Providentialist focusing on finding God's leading in history, in fact, the stand-out feature of his polemical history is the power of the church. Burnet has often been connected with the Erastian tradition that gave great power to the monarch over the church, but his *History* has grave implications for the challenges of the church in the Restoration period. While Burnet absolutely believed the king had powers over spiritual matters in the nation, the English church had liberties aside from the English monarch.¹⁹

¹⁹ Burnet, 1: 24-36, 287, 288.

His *History* was written before the heyday of the conflict over the powers of the church under Anne, but already we can see how complicated this polemical work was. He was insistent on the right of the lower clergy to sit in Parliament and participate in government.²⁰ “Now before the submission which the clergy made to king Henry, as the convocation gave the king great subsidies, so the whole business of religion lay within their sphere. But after the submission, they were cut off from meddling with it, except as they were authorized by the king; so that having now so little power left them, it is no wonder they desired to be put in the state they had been in before the convocation was separated from parliament; or at least that matters of religion should not be determined till they had been consulted and had reported their opinions and reasons. The extreme of raising the ecclesiastical power too high in the times of popery, had now produced another of depressing it too much.”²¹

Burnet was on the side of a wide church supported by the power of a godly monarch who did not let the Roman church or other foreign powers intervene in the development of Protestant discipleship, led by an educated, empowered and involved clergy. This emphasis on the sacraments, on the need for discipline and penance and even excommunication, does not line up nicely with his categorization by historians as a Latitudinarian opposed to High Church demands. Yes, he was committed to toleration and to allowing wide doctrinal interpretation, but make no mistake: he wanted a strong empowered church and a clergy who had all the means they needed to move the Reformation forward beyond its sixteenth century beginnings.

²⁰ Burnet, 2:97, 98.

²¹ Burnet, 2: 101, 102.

Burnet's church history shows how he traced God's leading in a state run, imperfect reform; but he also used the incompleteness of that reform to argue for a retention of church powers. The church should have no authority over secular matters, but Burnet broadened what should count as part of the spiritual arena in ways that surprised and perhaps upset his contemporaries. This is no modern liberal paradigm for a secular state tolerating pluralism and privatizing the practice of Christianity.

As someone who studies anti-Catholicism, I come to Burnet's life acutely aware of the ways in which he both fulfills the traditional role of ultra-Protestant apocalyptic study of "papists." But I am also struck by the differences in his conception of "Reformation" and the ways in which this was much more complex than knee-jerk anti-Catholicism would imply. Something fundamental had changed in English perceptions. Burnet helps give us a more nuanced understanding of what that was, and how it happened. And as someone who was profoundly motivated by reasons of faith, in ways that are sometimes incomprehensible to modern scholars, he is instructive. In our own political and social milieu, many are still looking for ways to combine and interest in the humane, in political rights, in collective action for good with a particular conception of the 'good life,' with a strong idea of what the human obligation to the divine might be. As we seek to live with those tensions, and to balance them with the rights-based political traditions that came out of the same time period, Gilbert Burnet provides the sort of complex narrative we need to grasp at some possible solutions.