

Freedom of religion or an attempt to create a united godly state?: Religious toleration in Cromwellian Scotland

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The religious historiography of the British Isles often focuses on the break from Rome, the various forms of reformation, the religious programmes of Charles I and James II, or the catholic and protestant martyrs during the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, respectively. Yet, the years following the civil war to the restoration have not received in any shape or form an adequate amount of attention. The religious historiography of the interregnum years often focuses on Cromwellian reforms in England, with only a small portion of historians exploring Cromwellian reforms in Scotland. Within this grouping of historians, debates have begun to arise concerning the purpose behind Cromwell's religious policies in Scotland. Some argue that Cromwell's attempts to implement religious toleration in Scotland, like that in England, were to provide all of God's elect the ability to practice their faith without persecution, while the union was a means to an end (Spurlock, 2007; Burns, 2018; Gribben, 2014). Others, particularly Blair Worden, argue that Cromwell's religious toleration policies were less of an attempt to enforce 'toleration' or 'liberty' but rather an attempt to create a united 'godly' state within the British Isles (Worden, 1984). To add to this debate, this paper will take a position similar to that of Blair Worden's, arguing that Cromwell's religious policies were mainly an attempt to create a united 'godly' state within the British Isles by promoting religious toleration. Furthermore, by examining Oliver Cromwell's religious reforms in England and Scotland, specifically his beliefs on anti-formalism and the attack on the Scottish Kirk, this paper will also argue that by creating a godly commonwealth of the British isles, Cromwell was attempting to secure providence for God's chosen elect.

The historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries examines religious toleration from a Whiggish perspective, positioning religious toleration within the origins of the enlightenment or the birthplace of modern liberalism (Collins, 2009). These arguments are

inherently anachronistic, correlating historical religious toleration as akin to that of modern freedom of religion, rather than placing it within its historical context. Recently, twenty-first century historians have attempted to fix these errors by placing religious toleration within its historical context through study of the practice of toleration (Walsham, 2006; Shagan, 2011). Twenty-first century works argue that previous historians have confused the meaning of religious toleration, freedom of religion, and liberty of conscience, leading to anachronistic conclusions. Primarily, religious toleration means to tolerate a belief or practice of faith which you deem to be incorrect, yet it did not offer rights to that person or that belief (Walsham, 2006). Freedom of religion, on the other hand, gives people the ability to practice any form of religious belief as part of their civil liberties. Liberty of conscience, similar to religious toleration, does not provide rights or liberty, but allows someone to choose their religious beliefs under the assumption that religion was a connection of someone's conscience with God, thus a matter of the self. Thus, each of these three concepts imply a different understanding of religious practices in the past and should be understood within its historical contexts.

The life story of Oliver Cromwell is well known by both historians and the public, given his position within a unique period of English history. Throughout the last years of the civil war, Oliver Cromwell, military leader of the New Model Army, rose to prominence becoming an influential member of the Rump parliament in 1649 and Lord Protector in 1653. From 1649 to 1658 Cromwell attempted to reform law, government, religion, and international relations (Mills, 2012; Dow, 1979). Cromwell's religious reforms, following the execution of Charles I in 1649, were highly antiformalistic, causing the structure of the national church to loosen and the abolition of ecclesiastical courts whose powers were transferred to the Rump parliament (Davis, 2003; Matthews, 1984). The Rump parliament of 1649 consisted of men with widely diverging

opinions on religious reform, with the multitude being of puritan or independent belief (Capp, 2012). These men, prior to the civil war, would have been considered puritan radicals, and according to Crawford Gribben would have looked to Presbyterianism in Scotland as the ideal (Gribben, 2009). Yet, unlike the Reformed church in Scotland, many of these Independents insisted that faith existed within the spirit, not the society (Capp, 2012; Worden, 1984). Thus, the theology of English Independents was similar to Presbyterianism with a distinct Puritan doctrine but denied the need for a national church, creating “a church of loose structure” (Capp, 2012, p. 98).

Cromwell’s own personal beliefs took those of the Rump parliament one step further. Cromwell insisted upon ‘liberty of conscience’ as a necessary policy to allow for all of God’s elect the ability to reach providence. The declaration entitled *An Act for relief of religious and peaceable peoples from the rigor of former acts of parliament in matters of religion* (1650) outlined the various changes to previous parliamentary acts, deeming that all acts under Elizabeth I referring to religious conformity were expelled (*An act for relief*, 1650). Cromwell believed that God’s chosen elect would be shown the correct path of worship through continuous preaching, praying, and study of scripture (Worden, 1984; Spurlock, 2007). His insistence upon the allowance of other protestant sects was not because he believed them to be correct or respected them, but because he believed that God would correct the chosen elect and destroy the remaining sects on judgement day (Worden, 1984; Davis, 2003). Thus, liberty of conscience allowed protestant sects to practice their faith without persecution, so long as they did not breach fundamental truths or reflect the practices of the papacy or prelacy (Worden, 1984; Capp, 2012).

As briefly noted above, Cromwell detested the use of hierarchical structures within a religious context, opting for the removal of rigid church structures and the destruction of

ecclesiastical courts. Cromwell believed that these formal structures, such as the Scottish kirk, divided God's chosen elect by forcing everyone to conform to a specific practice. He argued that "God would provide not through forms but through the hearts of men" (Davis, 2003, p. 160). Furthermore, due to predestination, there was no guarantee that one belief system was correct, thus formalism and national churches removed the ability to correct one's faith, if indeed the forced faith was incorrect. Furthermore, the lack of formalism and the rise of smaller religious sects led to the allowance and encouragement of lay preaching and gathered congregations, who were to govern themselves individually according to their covenant with God (Spurlock, 2007). Thus through a culmination of antiformalism and liberty of conscience, Cromwell and his followers opted for peace within the commonwealth of England by placing their trust in the hands of God.

Although Cromwell's policies appeared to many as desirable, not everyone was convinced (Little and Smith, 2007). Questions regarding the boundaries of blasphemy and heresy remained unanswered. Specifically, no direct conditions determined what made something blasphemous or heretical, nor did the allowance of self-governing congregations allow parliament any control in stopping or containing actions or beliefs deemed heretical (Capp, 2012). Ultimately, the bundle of Cromwell's religious policies was new and extreme for the period, and not everyone shared in Cromwell's hopes that it would allow the commonwealth to become a godly state, ready for the return of Christ on judgement day. Yet, Cromwell's religious policies would become extremely important and be used by many variations of religious thinkers through the 1650s to argue in favour of the invasion of Scotland and incorporation of Scotland into the Commonwealth.

In 1650, the New Model Army, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, invaded Scotland (Mackenzie, 2018). The pamphlet entitled *A Declaration of the army of England upon their march into Scotland (1650)* outlines the various reasons for invading Scotland as the breach of the Solemn League and Covenant, Scottish meddling in English affairs, and the preservation of God's glory and providence (*A declaration of the army, 1650*). The Solemn League and Covenant, signed by both the English Parliament and Scottish Covenanters in 1643, was meant to provide protection for the laws, constitutions, and customs of each kingdom while providing military success, continuing God's glory throughout the British isles through the establishment of a Presbyterian church in England and Ireland, and establishing a legal and constitutional settlement between the three kingdoms (Mackenzie, 2018; Gribben, 2009). Yet, the Duke of Hamilton's invasion of England in 1648 and the "wilful reject[ion] of all peaceable overtures" (Firth and Rait, 2005, p. 406) broke the Covenant and therefore meant England was no longer bound to uphold it (*A declaration of the army, 1650*). Furthermore, many English parliamentarians saw the second civil war as a fault of the Scots. They also argued for the invasion in religious terms, suggesting that the Duke of Hamilton's invasion and Scottish meddling in English affairs angered God, thus by invading they were acting on his behalf (*A declaration of the army, 1650*). Arguments for the invasion of Scotland to protect the security and liberties of the English state were also voiced; for example, parliament considered that the Scots' failure to apologize for their meddling "rendered it just and necessary for this commonwealth to send an army into that kingdom" (Firth and Rait, 2005, p. 406). Cromwell himself asserted that "they also took liberty to stir up the people to blood and arms and would have brought a war upon England, as hath been upon Scotland, had not God prevented it" (Abbott, 1939, pp. 337-338). The English also argued that they were helping the Scottish

Presbyterians reach their “true eschatological identity” (Gribben, 2014, p. 8) and saving the godly in Scotland (Gribben, 2009). Thus, the invasion was a cause from God, proven by English success at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650 (*A declaration of the army*, 1650).

In an attempt to refute English arguments in favour of the invasion, the Scottish Kirk promptly published multiple tracts warning the populace of the invasion and attempted to shape Scottish opinion (Spurlock, 2007). Within these publications, the Scottish Kirk declared itself to be the “champion of reformed religion, defending Protestantism against the sectaries and heretics who had overthrown the English church” (Spurlock, 2007, p. 13). In terms of the Solemn League and Covenant, the Kirk argued that the English had broken the Solemn League through the judicial execution of Charles I and the invasion of Scotland (Mackenzie, 2016; *Declaration of the committee*, 1650). Furthermore, they argued that they held no part in the Duke of Hamilton’s invasion, as they actively participated in squashing it (*Declaration of the committee*, 1650). Within letters to the English parliament, the Kirk warned that the invasion of Scotland and allowance of ‘toleration’ would uproot both the church and the state, angering God:

Cursed toleration as this will not only make everything in religion appear to be uncertain, rend the churches and disturb the state, and trample all ordinances, order and government under foot, and bring forth many blasphemies and abominations, but is like to banish religion and righteousness quite out of the land and at last make a hell upon earth.

(*Solemn testimony*, 1649, p. 8)

Furthermore, they argued that toleration of various doctrines went against the covenant, which was supposed to promote Presbyterianism, and allowed for the “opening a door to licentiousness and profanity” (*Scots declaration*, 1647, p. 5). Thus, to the Scots the English were the ones who

broke the Solemn League, and had turned their backs on God by allowing religious toleration and murdering his beloved servant, Charles I.

Overall, the invasion of Scotland allowed Cromwell to continue his personal crusade for a godly united state throughout the British isles by controlling the growth of religious reform in Scotland. A pamphlet entitled *A declaration of the parliament of the commonwealth of England concerning the settlement of Scotland (1652)* insists that the union between England and Scotland would create an island population in “whom the lord may delight to dwell” (*Declaration of the parliament, 1652, p. 3*). By 1654, Cromwell had forced the Scots into a union with the English Commonwealth, promoting his religious policies and imposing limitations upon the established Presbyterian Scottish Kirk (Firth and Rait, 2005). Between the invasion of Scotland in 1650 and the union of England and Scotland in 1654, Cromwell put into motion religious policies previously begun in England. Through these religious policies he wanted to “promote preaching of the Gospel there and to advance the power of true religion and holiness” (*Declaration of the parliament, 1652, p. 6*). On 16 December 1653 various policies were put in place by the commonwealth of England for Scotland and Ireland. A prominent stipulation within these policies outlines the religious policies thenceforth to be enforced in Scotland:

That the Christian religion, as contained in the scriptures, be held forth and recommended as the public profession of these nations; and that, as soon as may be, a provision, less subject to scruple and contention, and more certain than the present, be made for the encouragement and maintenance of able and painful teachers, for instructing the people and for discovery and confutation of error, heresy, and whatever is contrary to sound

doctrine: and that until such provision be made, the present maintenance shall not be taken away nor impeached. (Firth and Rait, 2005, p. 821)

This point is further clarified by another stipulation which declares that all members of sects believing in Jesus Christ have the right to practice their religion as long as they do not disturb the peace of others (Firth and Rait, 2005). Through these acts, religious toleration became an official policy in Scotland (Spurlock, 2007) and had Cromwell well on his way to creating a united godly state within the British isles.

In order to create his united godly state, Cromwell would need to gain control of the Scottish populace. The biggest obstacle standing in his way was the Scottish Kirk. The Scottish Kirk was built on Calvinist principles in doctrine, discipline, and worship but with a church governmental structure of Presbyterianism. The Kirk was run by elders and deacons who held various offices within the national church, while ministers were in charge of local parish education and religious practice (Langley, 2018). The Scottish Kirk relied heavily on its ‘covenanted’ status, hearkening back to the nation-wide signing of the 1639 Covenant to ensure that Presbyterianism would be maintained and the monarchy upheld (Spurlock, 2007). R. Scott Spurlock describes the Scottish covenanting understanding as, “obedience ensured blessing and protection for God’s people, while disobedience and sin brought divine punishment in order to restore the relationship” (Spurlock, 2007, p. 14). Thus, to create a godly state, Cromwell would have to limit the power of the Kirk, impose his religious policies, and win over the Scottish peoples.

Cromwell’s first act in Scotland was to impose religious toleration, or more specifically liberty of conscience, throughout the kingdom by delegitimizing the formal structure of the Scottish Kirk, limiting the powers of the Kirk, and encouraging public debate of doctrine. This is

not to say that Presbyterianism was looked down upon or not allowed. Cromwell and the Independents encouraged Presbyterians to continue their religious beliefs as allowed by the liberty of conscience, but the Scottish Kirk was restricted from forcing anyone to attend its sessions (Gribben, 2014). Using martial law, censorship of the press was enacted across Scotland, leaving the printing press in English hands (Spurlock, 2007). Cromwell used this to his advantage, publishing an assortment of arguments which delegitimized and attacked the structure and formalism of the Kirk. To delegitimize the Kirk, Cromwell spun the English invasion as “a battle between those who advocated religious freedom, toleration, and the preservation of Protestant diversity against the Scottish Kirk and establishment, seeking to impose a largely unwanted religious conformity of England in the form of a national presbyterian model of ecclesiastical government” (Spurlock, 2007, p. 13). He argued that the Scottish Kirk’s enforcement of one religious practice was unchristian and a rebuttal of the covenant (Spurlock, 2007). The practice of the Kirk, according to Cromwell, was prohibiting possible members of God’s elect the opportunity to receive God’s providence (Spurlock, 2007).

Cromwell’s minister John Owen also argued against the formalistic structure of the Kirk, insisting that the Kirk was destructive to God’s elect as their insistence and focus on a national church restricted people from reaching a connection with God (Owen, 1652). He argues that the church is all made up of men who cannot be trusted, for the church does not control or engage with God, rather everyone should engage with God directly to obtain his wisdom and his strength:

Cease putting confidence in Man, say he is a worm, and the son of man is but a worm, his breath is in his nostrils and wherein is he to be accounted of? This use doth the church makes of mercies. Some trust in horses, and some in chariots but we will remember the

name of the lord: we will not trust in parliaments or armies all flesh is grass. Let it have its weathering time and away; see no wisdom but the wisdom of God, no strength but the strength of God, no glory but his. (Owen, 1652, p. 21)

Furthermore, he also argued that the church cannot be a national institution which includes everyone, as only the elect are saved and thus only the elect can be a part of the true church (Spurlock, 2007). Thus, to Owen, one should not trust anyone but God, and the only way of ensuring the purity of the elect was through self-governing congregations (Spurlock, 2007).

A few Scottish tracts argued for religious toleration and union. The most influential of these was *The Dead-man's testament: or a letter written to all the saints of God in Scotland (1651)*, supposedly written by Thomas Wood prior to his death. The author argued that the Kirk as a national church is deceitful in regard to its members, ruling over them from a civil standpoint rather than a spiritual, with the elders manipulating the power of civil magistrates (Wood, 1651). In terms of liberty of conscience, the author argued that the Kirk did not trust the power of God to defend the truth so they forced the whole nation to become part of the church (Wood, 1651). He also argued that the Kirk does not act with separation between church and state, and thus restricts people's religious liberties through enforcement of church assembly (Wood, 1651). Whoever the author was, he was not alone in many of these assessments as other contemporaries would also point to the Kirk's abuse of civil magisterial power. The pamphlet *A Vindication of the declaration of the army of England (1650)* argues that "the carrying on of affairs by corrupt and carnal policies to the pursuit of self interests doth possess much the minds of the ruling party now in Scotland" (*Vindication*, 1650, p. 21). Meanwhile, other pamphlets took this insult one step further, outlining various similarities between the Kirk and the Papacy. These authors compared the absolute power of a national church and the Kirk's control of civil

magistrates to the Pope's attempt to control kings and emperors (*Old popery*, 1652; Wood, 1651). Even more insulting, however, was the comparison of ministers holding "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (*Old popery*, 1652, p. 8) to that of the Pope holding the keys of St. Peter (*Old popery*, 1652). Thus, not only was the formalism and structure of a national church an offense against God, it was also Catholic.

Aside from delegitimizing the Kirk's hierarchical structure, Cromwell also imposed limitations to the powers of the Kirk through his liberty of conscience policy. First and foremost, the Kirk was no longer allowed to force Scots to attend Kirk sessions, nor were they allowed to punish those who did not attend or who practiced other forms of Protestantism (*Vindication*, 1650). Kirk ministers were forced to follow the new religious policies and were punished or replaced if they failed to do so (Spurlock, 2007). Historian Ryan Burns provides an interesting means of examining the limitations imposed on the Kirk in regard to Scottish Catholics.

Although Catholics were not included within the religious practices allowed under the liberty of conscience policy, Burns argues that General Monck protected Catholics from the Scottish Kirk by issuing an order that barred Scots from harming Catholics (Burns, 2018). This is not to say that Catholics had the same opportunities to practice their faith, for they did not, but the Scottish Kirk no longer had the power to control or punish suspected Catholics. Monck's restrictions on the powers of the Kirk suggests that Cromwell and his generals were attempting to restrict the Kirk's power in all variations (Burns, 2018). The allowance for Catholics to be protected from the Kirk suggests that Cromwell's intentions were not directly inline with imposing religious toleration as some historians have suggested, but rather to control the Kirk and the Scottish populace. By controlling the Kirk, Cromwell could control the Scottish populace, enforce his policies, and create another commonwealth akin to that in England.

Another attempt to control the power and support of the Kirk was through encouraging and orchestrating public disputes of doctrine. Since Cromwell's religious policies allowed anyone the opportunity to preach or discuss religious doctrine publicly, lay preaching provided an influential resource for religious sects to dispute both the formal structures of the Scottish Kirk and various religious doctrines. Public disputes forced Kirk ministers to debate doctrine and practices of worship with those of other religious sects (Spurlock, 2007). These public disputes were not as popular in Scotland as in England, but they did allow for Cromwell's religious policies to reach illiterate northern communities (Spurlock, 2007). Furthermore, Cromwell also organized conferences, normally behind closed doors, for members of the Scottish Kirk to attend and debate their insistence upon a national church against the liberty of conscience policy (Mackenzie, 2016). Other members of the army took to public preaching or offerings of money and protection to gain the support of the Scots (Spurlock, 2007; Abbott, 1939). Furthermore, the allowance of the laity to preach publicly and religious toleration led to multiple public debates between Scottish Kirk ministers and members of protestant sects. R. Scott Spurlock suggests that many ministers of sects, particularly Baptists, would publicly debate with Scottish ministers to gain popular support (Spurlock, 2007). A Baptist English minister, James Brown, constantly offered to debate with Scottish ministers, debating with James Wood, Samuel Rutherford, and James Guthrie (Spurlock, 2007). Arguably, the most prominent of these debates are those between Brown and Guthrie. Throughout this debate, Brown continuously interrupts Guthrie, there were multiple issues surrounding topic and structure, as well as constant rebuttals lacking evidence. Furthermore, multiple times throughout this debate it is obvious that Brown is having a hard time putting his beliefs into words (Spurlock, 2007). Thus, not only does Brown's plan to win support backfire, he also embarrassed himself, rather than his opponent, supporting

kirk arguments that the laity should not preach. Ultimately, however, Cromwell's plans for enforcing religious toleration by delegitimizing the Kirk and its structures to win over the Scottish populace worked relatively well. By 1654, the Kirk had lost considerable power amongst the Scottish populace and remained relatively mute until the Restoration in 1660.

It would be incorrect to say that Oliver Cromwell's religious policies did not to some degree afford various Protestant sects the opportunity to expand their congregation, to engage in civil life, and to practice their religion safely. Yet, Cromwell believed that all of God's elect would eventually join in one religious practice, creating a godly state ready for Christ's second coming. Thus, Cromwell's religious policies were imposed with an end goal of creating a godly state. The conquest of both Ireland and Scotland and further enacting of Cromwell's religious policies within these kingdoms, specifically the attack on the Scottish Kirk, provides evidence that Cromwell hoped not only to make England but the whole of the British Isles into a godly state. Although the majority of acts and policies within the Interregnum would be undone by the Restoration of monarchy in 1660, various other states, such as New England, would look to Cromwell's policies and reforms in the hope of reproducing them. Thus, the complete union of the British Isles and attempt to create a godly state for Christ's second coming should be remembered and studied in detail for its uniqueness, significance, and lasting legacy.

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