

Religion and Democracy in the Puritan Revolution

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In the English Revolution fully articulated theories of political democracy were put forward by an organized political party—the Levellers—probably for the first time. In what used to be called “the Puritan Revolution,” all politics were expressed in religious terms. Oliver Cromwell sought guidance from the Lord in every political crisis; Charles I thought it was his religious duty to die rather than give up his royal prerogative; wild Quakers disrupted services of the state church wearing nothing but loincloths. Whether religious arguments were used to support or attack constituted authority, all thought that they were defending the true Christian religion—Charles I and his bishops, Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans, the extreme radical sects.

It is too facile to say that the seventeenth century was a more religious age than our own, which is the resort of some lazy historians. More relevant is that in the seventeenth century church and state were indissolubly linked. All English men and women were members of the Church of England whether they liked it or not. All had to attend their own parish church every Sunday, under penalty of fine. There they might have to sit through sermons preached by a parson in whose selection they had had no say, and whose theology or personality they might detest. It was also an offense to attend a church outside one’s own parish, even though the preaching there might be more congenial.

The seventeenth-century church had a monopoly of opinion forming, and performed functions that today have passed to other media. Church courts punished men and women for a wide variety of “sins” which would not be regarded as crimes today, such as extra-marital sex, working on saints’ days, failure to pay tithes (the 10 percent income tax which everyone was supposed to pay in order to maintain their parish priest). Church courts put men and women

on oath and asked questions designed to make them incriminate their friends and neighbors; sentences such as public penance or excommunication were imposed, which could mean the severing of all social, business, and legal relations with one's fellows. The church controlled education and censorship.

We live in a society in which the church is separated from the state, and consumers' choice has replaced religious monopoly: religion has become a one-day-a-week affair; one can choose to have no religion at all. But in the seventeenth century religion and politics were inevitably closely linked. The parson was probably the best educated man in the parish (apart possibly from the squire, who no doubt appointed him). He was trained to interpret the sacred text of the Bible, which was believed to contain all truth. To reject the state church was an act of political insubordination. Before 1640 religious sects were underground cells: many who could not accept the church emigrated (if they could afford to) to the Netherlands or America.

Control of the pulpit was a matter of political power, and was recognized as such. Charles I said that "the dependency of the church upon the crown is the *chiefest* support of regal authority" (my italics): "People are governed by the pulpit rather than by the sword in time of peace." The clergy read from the pulpit government handouts, and were often instructed on the position they were to take (or the silence they were to observe) on delicate political matters. They were described as "the King's spiritual militia." Just as today the first action of a revolutionary group would be to seize control of the broadcasting system, in the seventeenth century its most important action was to take control of the church.

Before 1640 the church was a prop of the social order. "No bishop, no King, no nobility" said James I—accurately enough, for the monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished precisely three years after the abolition of episcopacy in 1646. The patronage system ensured that almost all the clergy were conservative in outlook: they were appointed by local gentlemen, or by the King, or by bishops and other ecclesiastical bodies (deans and chapters, Oxford and Cambridge colleges). If a clergyman had received a higher education, it would have been at Oxford or Cambridge, where ecclesiastical control tried to ensure that he acquired no dangerous ideas. Episcopacy was defended on social grounds: "parity" (equality) in the church, men argued, might lead to parity in the state. The poet Edmund Waller in 1641 resisted popular attacks on the bishops because episcopacy was a "counter-scarp or outwork"; "if this assault of the people" overcame it, they might turn next to the rents and properties of landlords.

Mainline Puritans did not want parity. They wanted to change the government of the state church, to eliminate bishops (too closely dependent on the crown), and establish far more lay control over the church—by gentlemen and merchant oligarchies in the parishes, at the center by Parliament—the representative body elected by the men of property.

We should not think of seventeenth-century Puritans as gloomy killjoys. We should think rather of Oliver Cromwell, who said that religious intolerance was as bad as keeping all wine out of the country lest men should be drunk; of Milton, a great lover of music who urged Parliament to establish a national theater; of John Bunyan, who said that a teetotaler walked not after the spirit of God but after his own lusts. Mr. Veall, the latest historian of law reform in seventeenth-century England, believes that the 1640s and 1650s were decades of greater sexual freedom for ordinary people than any before or for a long time afterwards. When a Russian ambassador came to London in 1645, after the city had been under Puritan domination for four years, the two things which most caught his attention were the stained glass in church windows and the merry pealing of church bells. It was only after the defeat of the "Puritan Revolution," after 1660, that dissenters were excluded from national and local political life and from the universities and so inevitably became in-turned, provincial, sectarian, and "Puritan."

Puritanism then was mainly a political movement with a revolutionary ideology, though its ideas were expressed in religious idiom. Ever since Henry VIII's reformation had declared England's independence of Rome, protestantism and English patriotism had been closely linked. Puritans were the most anti-Catholic and therefore the most vociferously patriotic of all protestants. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* taught Englishmen to see the whole of history as a conflict between good and evil, Christ and Antichrist, with God's Englishmen on the side of Christ. More: Foxe emphasized that it was the humbler English people, yeomen and artisans, who had been the staunchest supporters of God's cause and the main victims of persecution in the reign of the Catholic Mary. Cromwell drew on this tradition in 1645 when he reported to the Speaker of the House of Commons on the victory of Naseby, the decisive battle of the Civil War. As he surveyed his troops before the fight, he said, he knew they were a "company of poor, ignorant men"; but he had "assurance of victory, because God would by things that are not bring to nought the things that are. . . . And God did it." Cromwell helped God a good deal, but such confidence that one was cooperating with divine purposes had a tremendous effect on morale. Islam and Marxism have given their adherents a similar confidence that history was on their side; it helps to make sense of a confusing world.

But such lines of thought proved to be dangerous. God could speak to the consciences of the lower classes as well as to their betters. For at least two and a half centuries before the Revolution of 1640 there had been underground heretical movements in England, whose adherents were at various times called Lollards, Anabaptists, Familists. When the government of Charles I and the bishops broke down in 1640, the ideas of these sectaries could suddenly be freely expressed, both verbally and in print. Church courts and the censorship no longer

operated. There was a fantastic outburst of discussion. What we call "religious toleration" meant that ordinary people no longer had to go to their parish church every Sunday. Instead, many of them formed their own discussion groups, meeting every Sunday not to listen to an upper-class parson but to talk themselves about what *they* were interested in, under the chairmanship of a so-called "mechanic preacher," someone who worked with his hands six days a week and took the chair at one of these discussion groups on the seventh. Women took part in congregational discussions and government; some women preached. No wonder the conservative Thomas Edwards thought religious toleration the worst of evils. But John Milton in *Areopagitica* hailed it ecstatically, with a genuine belief that uninhibited discussion would lead to the emergence of agreed truths.

The number of books and pamphlets collected by George Thomason rose from 22 in 1640 to 1,966 two years later; and he tried to collect them all. The number of newspapers rose from 0 in 1640 to 722 in 1645. A printing press was a small, cheap, and mobile piece of equipment; it was not yet monopolized by the rich. So for a few intoxicating years anything could be discussed, and most things were. A fierce anticlericalism proclaimed the equality of laymen with priests.

A millenarian political enthusiasm was abroad. Milton believed that Christ was "shortly expected King," whose coming would "end all earthly tyrannies." All protestants had long known that the Pope was Antichrist; now men identified Charles I and his supporters as agents of Antichrist. A royalist parson was shocked when he talked to Parliamentary prisoners who applied the ideas of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* to current politics. "What do you know," they asked him, "but this is the day of his [Antichrist's] ruin, and we are the men that must help to pull him down?" The clergyman explained in vain that Antichrist was in Rome, and that pulling him down was a job for kings, not for the common people. On the contrary, was the reply: Antichrist is here in England, and the Book of Revelation says the common people, the multitude, shall pull him down.

For centuries the person of the King, the Lord's anointed, had been sacrosanct. Yet in the forties Parliamentary preachers and propagandists were inciting ordinary people to fight against him, and to pay taxes and endure the hardships of civil war. By what right? If the King and his advisers were agents of Antichrist, it was a religious duty to resist them. Another line of argument was that even if the King were sovereign by legal and historical right, Parliament represented the people of England, and in the last resort the whole people was greater than any single man, even the King.

But this argument backfired. The Royalist Sir Robert Filmer had great fun pointing out that Parliament represented not the people but perhaps one in ten of the adult males. Therefore, he argued, Parliament could not be superior to the King. But when in 1645-1646 the Leveller party began to be organized in London, they gave a different twist to the argument. True, Parliament did not

represent the people of England. But it could be made to represent them—by extending the vote to all men, by enfranchising towns at present unrepresented in the House of Commons. Then the cause of Parliament would be justified—even more so if monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished and the Commons became the sole legislative assembly, responsible to “their masters, the people who chose them.”

So the arguments of the Parliamentary leaders were turned back against them. This became serious when military stalemate led to the Self-Denying Ordinance of 1645 and the foundation of the New Model Army. The effect of the Self-Denying Ordinance was to remove all peers from the commands in the Parliamentary Army which they had assumed as a right. The New Model Army, “in which there is not one lord,” as a Leveller proudly boasted, was drawn largely from the Army of the Eastern Association which Cromwell had built up on the principles of complete religious toleration, liberty of discussion, and the career open to the talents. Within a year the New Model had finally defeated the Royalists and captured the King. When Parliament proposed that this Army should disband without even having its wages paid, it mutinied and took the unprecedented step of electing “Agitators,” representatives of the rank and file, to an Army Council. The generals, perplexed and disapproving, but determined to preserve the unity of the Army, tagged along behind even when, on the Agitators’ orders, Cornet Joyce forcibly removed Charles I from the custody of Parliamentary commissioners. In the summer of 1647, again under pressure from the lower ranks, the Army moved on London and, in effect, seized political power.

In the famous Putney Debates of October–November 1647 we see the Army Council, composed of generals, representatives of junior officers, and Agitators, discussing what to do with power. The generals advocated a constitution very like that which was to be established after 1688, with the King subordinated to Parliament. The Agitators, supported by some officers, put forward the Leveller draft constitution, the “Agreement of the People,” which would have established a republic with a single chamber elected by manhood suffrage, or at least with a widely extended electorate. In the debates we can trace a curious amalgam of religious and secular motifs. When the debate got stuck, Cromwell would call for a prayer meeting. The Levellers argued that men had a natural right to the vote, and were badly rattled when General Ireton pointed out that by the same logic the poor might claim a natural right to equality of property. The Levellers represented mainly small proprietors, and had no wish to encourage communist ideas. But they could produce no more satisfactory reply than that the Bible said “Thou shalt not steal,” and thus sanctified property. But ultimately the Levellers were happier with fully secular arguments. John Wildman thought “it was not easily determinable what is sin by the light of nature.”

Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the much smaller group of "Diggers" or "True Levellers," received a divine message in a trance which told him to set up a communist community by cultivating the waste land near Cobham in Surrey. But in the pamphlets that he wrote to defend his ideas, he too verged on secularism. His allegorical use of the Bible almost destroyed the historical significance of the text. The incarnation, the resurrection, the second coming, the last judgment, were all treated as occurring within the hearts and consciences of believers. Christ and the devil were not to be found above the skies or below the earth, but "within a man, fighting against each other." Of the Biblical stories, Winstanley wrote "whether there were such outward things or no, it matters not much."

Winstanley tells us that he used the word "Reason" instead of the word God, by which he had been held in darkness. For him the second coming was not a descent of Christ from heaven but "the rising up of Christ in sons and daughters," the spreading of reason among all mankind. Reason ("or universal love") will "make mankind to be all of one heart and one mind," and will lead to agreement to establish a cooperative society. Heaven will be found here in this world, not in the afterlife, and "salvation, which is liberty and peace," will be won through community political action.

The orthodox had always stressed that since the fall of Adam the mass of mankind was incurably sinful. The Calvinist theology accepted by Puritans and most other clergymen of the Church of England assumed that the elect were a tiny minority. Perhaps 0.1 percent, thought the New England divine Thomas Shepard. The English Fifth Monarchist John Spittlehouse more generously put it at 25 percent. Bunyan wavered between 5 percent and 0.02 percent. It was therefore logical for Richard Baxter to write that "to plead for a democracy is to plead that the sovereignty may be put into the hands of rebels" against God. (The illogicality of the tacit assumption that it is the godly minority who now rule escaped such propagandists for the status quo.)

The doctrine of the sinfulness of the majority of men and women naturally appealed to an elite: it was less acceptable to the many when they had the opportunity to think about and discuss it. William Perkins and a host of early seventeenth-century divines bewailed the ignorance of the common people who "look to be saved by their good serving of God, and by their good deeds." They were, Perkins added, "enemies of Christ." English Anabaptists in the mid-sixteenth century had rejected original sin, and thought that "as when there was no sin, all things were common, so they ought now to be." The social conclusions were not always so directly drawn, but when the censorship broke down in the 1640s large numbers of people began to challenge the doctrine of predestination. The Leveller Richard Overton insisted that Christ died for all. The Leveller William Walwyn hoped that all men might be saved. The third of the Leveller leaders, John Lilburne, virtually

ignored the Fall. Sin lost its power as the great deterrent.

If men "believe sin, death and the curse to be abolished, they are abolished" declared Richard Towne in 1644, the year *Areopagitica* was published. Abiezer Coppe and Laurence Clarkson used this doctrine to justify the practice of free love, thus confirming the worst anticipations of conservatives. Winstanley and Richard Coppin were the first to proclaim in print, in 1648-49, that all mankind would be saved. Teachers of absolute predestination were defenders of inequality, declared the anonymous author of *Tyrannipocrit Discovered* (1649): "He that teacheth a partial God loveth partiality." All men had the grace to be saved if they only looked to God within themselves. Popular ideas were summed up in the Quaker doctrine of the inner light in all men and women, which transformed the protestant "priesthood of all believers" from an oligarchical to a democratic doctrine. The gentry accepted original sin, declared Samuel Fisher in 1653, but ordinary people rejected it. After he had become a Quaker, Fisher argued in a large and scholarly tome that the contradictions and inconsistencies of the Bible made it impossible to accept it as the inspired word of God: it was a book to be judged and criticized like any other. Some went further still. "Many thousands in these three nations," wrote John Reeve in 1656, "count the Scriptures mere inventions of wise men, to keep the simple in awe under their rulers."

Faced with such dangerous ideological tendencies, former Parliamentarians and former Royalists closed ranks, and in 1660 king, bishops, and sin were restored. Radical ideas were driven underground in a return to what some historians call "normality," by which I think they mean the restoration of censorship. The ideas did not of course disappear, though we get only chance references to them in the censored press. The possibility of a sinless society had been a dream of the heady 1640s, but the Quakers survived to bear witness to the divine spark in all men and women. The later seventeenth century saw a progressive decline in belief in hell and magic, whether black or religious. Less than a century after the English Revolution so unoriginal a thinker as Bolingbroke refused to impute predestination to damnation "to the all-perfect being." "Reason . . . in the breast of every Christian that can appeal to her tribunal" was against it.