



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *History Workshop*, No. 17 (Spring, 1984), pp. 19-31

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288543>

Accessed: 15/06/2013 17:22

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God and the English Revolution*

by Christopher Hill

From way back in the 19th century, and still when I was at school, the 17th-century English Revolution used to be known as the Puritan Revolution. This name lost favour after Marx, Weber, Tawney and others taught us that religion was not a self-sufficient motivating factor, but was mixed up with economic and social matters, with the rise of capitalism. Yet even Marxists have been known to speak of Puritanism as the ideology of the English revolutionaries. God still has a role in the English Revolution. I want to look at the effects of God on this revolution, and its effects on God.

God was not only on the side of the Parliamentarians. There seem indeed to have been three gods – a trinity – at work during the Revolution. First there was the God who blessed the established order, any established order, but especially that of England. Kings and bishops ruled by divine right, the clergy had a divine right to collect 10% of their parishioners' income as tithes – so conservatives said. The existing hierarchical structure of society, the great chain of being which ran through nature and society and which Shakespeare stated – probably ironically – in *Troilus and Cressida*, was God-given and must be preserved. All change was bad and dangerous, because the mass of mankind was sinful, had been irredeemably sinful since the Fall of Adam. The state exists to prevent the horrors which sinful humanity – and especially the lower orders – would perpetrate if not held in by law and power.

The second God, the God of the Parliamentarians, was also in favour of order; but he stressed justice rather than mere existence *de facto*. The Hebrew prophets in the Bible denounced the injustices of rulers and called for reformation. But only certain kinds of change were permissible: reformation should go back to

* *Text of the lecture given at a plenary session of 'Religion and Society History Workshop', Friends House, London, 8 July 1983.*

Biblical models, to the primitive church of the New Testament. The Bible was used as litmus paper to test existing institutions. Were bishops to be found in the New Testament? If not, they should be abolished. This was a dangerously wide-ranging principle. Colonel Rainborough in 1647 found nothing in the Bible to justify the 40/- freeholder Parliamentary franchise. This did not lead him to reject Parliaments, but to call for manhood suffrage. Others, more conscious of the risks of uncritical application of the Bible to sinful 17th-century society, thought that change, however desirable, could be justified only if supported by the authority of the magistrate. Lesser magistrates might take the initiative if the sovereign did not, Dutch and French Calvinists thought. So they authorized revolt if supported by the respectable classes. Calvinists also found the protestant ethic in the Bible – thrift, sobriety, frugality, disciplined hard work, monogamy: a discipline which was especially necessary for the labouring classes, and which it was the duty of the magistrate to enforce lest social chaos should result.

But in the course of the Revolution some people found a third God, a God who – like the Holy Ghost – was to be found in every believer. And since it was difficult to ascertain who were true believers, this came to mean that God could be found in every man (and sometimes in every woman too). The full horrors of this doctrine were plumbed only in the sixteen-forties; but worshippers of the second, Calvinist, God were aware of the existence of this third deity, and from the first tried to safeguard against his emergence. The Bible after all said many very remarkable things, and untutored readers of it might draw very remarkable conclusions. Arise Evans, a Welshman, tells us of the impact that coming to London made on his thinking. 'Afore I looked upon the Scripture as a history of things that passed in other countries, pertaining to other persons; but now I looked upon it as a mystery to be opened at this time, belonging also to us'. In *Amos* and *Revelation* he found descriptions of what was happening in revolutionary England. In *Amos* 9.1 the Lord said 'smite the lintel of the door, that the posts may shake': Evans thought this could only refer to Speaker Lenthall.¹ But others used Biblical texts for more consciously subversive purposes.

The God within sometimes looked like a god of pure anarchy: there might be as many gods as there were men, Gerrard Winstanley came to recognize.² But this is something which developed fully only after the breakdown of all authority in the sixteen-forties, when lower-class sects of every heretical kind could meet and discuss freely: I shall return to it later.

There is of course nothing surprising in this many-facedness of God. Any state religion which survives for any length of time has to perform a multiplicity of roles: it has to console the down-trodden as well as to maintain the mighty in their seats. It has to persuade the rich to be charitable as well as the poor to be patient. Usually orthodox Christianity had interpreted the consolatory passages in the Scriptures as referring to an after-life. But this is sometimes difficult to square with the Biblical text. As the Bible became available in English after the Reformation, and as literacy sank down the social scale, so men and women began to take literally the more subversive texts of the Bible which their betters preferred to read allegorically.

But in the century before 1640 there had been some sort of consensus, at least among those who were able to express their views in print. John Foxe in his best-selling *Book of Martyrs* taught a view of history as a cosmic struggle between Christ and Antichrist, with God's Englishmen firmly on the side of right. England

was a chosen nation, which God continually intervened to protect. In 1588 he blew with his winds and the Spanish Armada was scattered; a century later the protestant wind wafted William of Orange safely over to England to replace the papist James II. Even the revolutionary Great Seal of the English Republic claimed that freedom had been 'by God's blessing restored'.

God punished individuals and societies for their misdeeds. 'The cause of plagues is sin', declared a preacher in 1577; 'and the cause of sin are plays. Therefore the cause of plagues are plays'.³ God's wrath would be visited on sinful societies. One reason for emigration to America in the sixteen-twenties and thirties, to which historians perhaps do not attach sufficient importance, was a desire to escape from the wrath to come. Thomas Cooper in 1615, dedicating a sermon to the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Sheriffs of London and the Commissioners for Plantations in Ireland and Virginia, reminded them of the need 'to provide some retiring place for yourselves if so be the Lord for our unthankfulness should spew us out'.⁴ Fourteen years later John Winthrop, first Governor of Massachusetts, was 'verily persuaded God will bring some heavy affliction upon this land, and that speedily'. 'As sure as God is God', said Thomas Hooker in 1631, 'God is going from England'.⁵ When Mrs Anne Hutchinson saw the barren inhospitality of New England, she tells us, her heart would have shaken if she 'had not a sure word that England should be destroyed'.⁶

One of the ways in which Parliaments of the 1620s had expressed implied criticism of Charles I's government was by calling for a fast in order to propitiate the God who was angry with his people's sins. During the civil war Fast Sermons preached to Parliament were used to whip up support for the Cause. So God regularly showed his approval and disapproval of human actions, particularly those of rulers. The problem was how to interpret the signs. For many, success seemed evidence of God's support, and failure witnessed to divine disapproval: though sometimes, confusingly, it was left to a tiny remnant of the faithful to preserve the truth in secret. Arguments of this type were naturally used when convenient by both sides as the fortunes of civil war swayed backwards and forwards between 1642 and 1645. But in retrospect Parliamentarians came to claim that it was God, not man, who called the Long Parliament in 1640; that God, not man, created the New Model Army and brought about the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649. The Fifth Monarchists Thomas Harrison and John Carew, the Quaker Isaac Pennington, all saw 'the finger of God' in England's deliverances; 'the Lord hath appeared in our days to do great things', declared the republican Edmund Ludlow. 'The God of the Parliament . . . hath gone with you', the Independent divine John Owen told Parliament in a sermon of June 1649, preached to celebrate the defeat of the Levellers. Oliver Cromwell believed that the Army had been 'called by God', and fiercely defended 'the revolutions of Christ himself', God's 'working of things from one period to another'. 'God hath done great and honourable things' by the agency of the Long Parliament, the Quaker Edward Burrough admitted; the Bristol Baptist Robert Purnell, the Fifth Monarchist John Tillinghast, the Independents Thomas Goodwin and John Cook, the Quaker George Bishop, all agreed.⁷

William Sedgwick, famous Army preacher, in December 1648 denounced the Army's intervention in politics, since it prevented a peaceful settlement with the King which he had hoped would reunite the country. But a few months later he completely reversed his position. The trial and execution of the King, the

establishment of the republic, the abolition of the House of Lords – these events overwhelmed him by their sheer magnitude. *Because* the Army's actions had been unique, unprecedented, they must have been inspired by God. The only problem, as Sedgwick saw it, was to bring this fact home to the generals so as to make them live up to their responsibility now that God 'is upon motion, marching us out of Egyptian darkness and bondage into a Canaan of rest and happiness'.⁸ We may compare Marvell's sense of Cromwell as 'the force of angry heaven's flame', which 'Tis madness to resist or blame'.⁹

The ultimate in divine intervention of course was the Second Coming, the end of the world, ushering in the millennium. Prophecies in *Daniel* and *Revelation* established that a great conflagration will mark the end of the world. Any Christian who takes these prophecies seriously must be anxious to ascertain when this holocaust will take place. I believe many Middle Western American Christians are to-day looking forward with relish to helping to expedite it by means of nuclear warfare.¹⁰ In the late 16th and early 17th centuries there seemed to be good reasons for supposing that the end of the world was imminent. Interpreting the Biblical prophecies was not left to cranks; it attracted the attention of serious historians, chronologists and mathematicians, from John Napier (inventor of logarithms, which speeded up his calculations of 666, the number of the Beast) to Sir Isaac Newton. By the early 17th century a certain agreement had been reached by these scholars, fixing on either the sixteen-fifties or the sixteen-nineties as the likely date for the end of the world. This was accepted by perfectly serious and sober people with no axes to grind. Thus when John Milton in 1641 spoke of Christ as 'shortly-expected King', he was probably thinking of the sixteen-fifties, though he may have extended the possibilities a decade or two.

For Milton the important thing about the Second Coming was that it would put 'an end to all earthly tyrannies', including that of Charles I. It involved political revolution. Here we come to a great divide. The orthodox view was that after the destruction of the world a new heaven and a new earth would be created, in which the elect would henceforth lead blissful and quite different lives: it was a totally other-worldly concept. Millenarians however interpreted the Biblical prophecies to mean that after Christ's Second Coming he would rule on *earth* for a thousand years (the millennium). Whether Christ would rule in person or through his saints was a question: the radicals tended to foresee a rule of the saints (i.e. themselves). One can see how such widely-held ideas could turn into theories justifying a dictatorship of the godly minority. 'The godly' indeed became almost a technical term, which sectaries applied to themselves and their enemies sometimes applied to them ironically. A train-band colonel in 1647, defending London from an expected attack by sectaries, was surprised to be ordered to fight against all 'malignants, sects and sectaries and all godly persons that shall come to oppose the City'. He protested that he hoped he was godly himself.¹¹

Millenarian ideas could lead to rejection of régimes which seemed to be excluding Jesus Christ from his proper authority. For many – like William Sedgwick – the execution of Charles I only made sense if it cleared the way for King Jesus. When the Army went to conquer Scotland in 1650 its watchword was 'No King but Jesus'. But only three years later the Fifth Monarchist Vavasor Powell had to tell his congregation to ask God 'Wilt thou have Oliver Cromwell or Jesus Christ to rule over us?'¹²

Millenarian ideas could also turn into a sort of revolutionary internationalism.

Hugh Peter told Parliament in December 1648 that 'this Army must root up monarchy, not only here but in France and other kingdoms round about'. Marvell foresaw Cromwell in this liberating role:

As Caesar he ere long to Gaul,
To Italy an Hannibal,
And to all states not free
Shall climacteric be.

In 1651 Admiral Blake, commanding the strongest fleet in the world, said on Spanish territory that monarchy was on the way out in France as well as England. He gave it ten years in Spain, a slower-moving country.¹³ John Rogers the Fifth Monarchist declared in 1653 'We are bound by the law of God to help our neighbours as well as ourselves, and so to aid the subjects of other princes that are either persecuted for true religion or oppressed under tyranny'. Part of the English Army should be sent to France or Holland, to conduct a revolutionary war. George Fox, founder of the Quakers, in 1659 rebuked the Army for not going to Spain, to overthrow the Inquisition. 'Never set up your standard until you come to Rome', he urged, in words that show he was not yet a pacifist.¹⁴

But God could also speak direct to private individuals. Lady Eleanor Davies, a slightly eccentric person, in 1633 prophesied that Charles I would come to a violent end. She was sent to Bedlam, but was taken more seriously after the King's execution.¹⁵ In the political freedom of the forties and fifties quite humble men and women could be entrusted by God with political messages. Gerrard Winstanley in the winter of 1648 heard a voice telling him to set up the communist colony whose necessity to solve England's economic problems he had long been working out.¹⁶ Three years later John Reeve was appointed one of God's Two Last Witnesses on earth, and he went on to found the sect later known as the Muggletonians, which lasted until 1979.¹⁷ God dictated reams of rather mediocre verse to Anna Trapnel. George Fox and John Bunyan received messages, as did innumerable less well-known characters.

The point I am making is that it was *natural* for perfectly normal people to hear God speaking to them: it was not, as it would be to-day, *prima facie* evidence of insanity. This followed indeed from what I earlier described as the third manifestation of God, the theological assumption that God dwells in all his saints, perhaps in all men and women. The Quakers became the best-known exponents of this theology, but it was widespread during the revolutionary decades. Gerrard Winstanley believed that God was the same thing as Reason; indeed he preferred the word Reason to God, because he had 'been held under darkness' by the word God.¹⁸ Reason, Winstanley thought, dictated that men and women should help one another, should co-operate, should indeed form communist communities for this purpose. So when Winstanley spoke of Christ rising in sons and daughters, he meant that he expected the spirit of Reason – i.e. co-operation – to rise in everybody and make them see the rationality of a communist society. The Second Coming was not Jesus Christ descending from the clouds but Reason rising in sons and daughters; and, Winstanley added, that was the only Second Coming there would ever be.¹⁹ So the logic of protestant heresy led to secularism.

Politics was invariably expressed in religious language and imagery. Winstanley used the stories of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, to express his class

analysis of society; the younger brother would overcome his oppressing elder brother. David and Goliath, Samson and the Philistines, were symbols of revolt against tyranny. Existing corrupt society was designated as Sodom, Egypt, Babylon. The Pope had been Antichrist for Foxe and most protestants, as he had been for Lollard heretics earlier. Winthrop hoped that New England would become a 'bulwark against the kingdom of Antichrist'.²⁰ The Parliamentary revolutionaries saw their royalist adversaries as 'the Antichristian faction'. The great Puritan preacher, Stephen Marshall, in a famous sermon preached to the House of Commons in February 1642, declared that 'many of the nobles, magistrates, knights and gentlemen, and persons of great quality, are arrant traitors and rebels against God'. What more desperate incitement to class war than that? 'The question in England', he said in 1644, 'is whether Christ or Antichrist shall be lord or king'. In the same year some Parliamentary soldiers claimed that they 'took up arms against Antichrist and popery'. They believed that 'the people, the multitude' would pull down the Whore of Babylon; 'we are the men that must help to pull her down'.²¹ Christopher Feake in 1646 saw 'in monarchy and aristocracy an enmity against Christ'.²² So of course they should be abolished if opportunity arose.

But soon Parliament itself was being called Antichristian, and the adjective was applied to Presbyterians in the 1640s, to Cromwell in the fifties. Any national church was naturally Antichristian, many sectaries asserted. Cromwell himself said it was Antichristian to distinguish between clergy and laity. Richard Overton and Henry Denne thought intolerance Antichristian: Baptists said the same of infant baptism. Bunyan put the social point more subtly by describing Antichrist as a gentleman.²³ For Winstanley covetousness, buying and selling, were Antichristian; property was the devil, Christ community. Jesus Christ was 'the true and faithful Leveller'.²⁴ There was a whole code of Biblical shorthand on which (among many others) Winstanley and Milton drew with great effect. Winstanley argued that all the Scripture prophecies 'concerning the calling of the Jews, the restoration of Israel and making of that people the inheritors of the whole earth' foretold 'this work of making the earth a common treasury' which the Diggers were carrying on.²⁵ Milton could not attack monarchy directly in *Paradise Lost*, since he was a marked man who had been lucky to escape execution in 1660; instead he merely recalled that monarchy had been founded by a rebel 'of proud ambitious heart', who

not content

With fair equality, fraternal state,
Will arrogate dominion undeserved
Over his brethren.²⁶

Milton did not even need to name Nimrod, whom Charles I had spoken of with approval: he could rely on his readers' Biblical knowledge.

During the Revolution God said unusually revolutionary things to and through his saints. Abiezer Coppe the Ranter, for instance, announced that God, 'that mighty Leveller' would 'overturn, overturn, overturn'. 'The neck of horrid pride' must be chopped off so that 'parity, equality, community' might establish 'universal love, universal peace and perfect freedom'. 'Thou hast many bags of money, and behold I (the Lord) come as a thief in the night, with my sword drawn in my

hand, and like a thief as I am – I say deliver your purse, deliver sirrah! deliver or I'll cut thy throat. . . . Deliver my money . . . to rogues, thieves, whores and cutpurses, who are flesh of thy flesh and every whit as good as thyself in mine eyes. . . . The plague of God is in your purses, barns, houses, horses, murrain will take your hogs (O ye fat swine of the earth) who shall shortly go to the knife. . . . Have all things common, or else the plague of God will rot and consume all that you have'.²⁷

George Foster had a vision of a man on a white horse who cut down those higher than the middle sort and raised up those that were lower, crying 'Equality, equality, equality. . . . I, the Lord of Hosts have done this. . . . I will . . . make the low and poor equal with the rich. . . . O rich men, . . . I will utterly destroy you'. For Foster as for Coppe and Winstanley God was 'that mighty Leveller'.²⁸ Lawrence Clarkson preached a new permissive morality. 'There is no such act as drunkennes, adultery and theft in God. . . . Sin hath its conception only in the imagination. . . . What act soever is done by thee in light and love, is light and lovely, though it be that act called adultery. . . . No matter what Scripture, saints or churches say, if that within thee do not condemn thee, thou shalt not be condemned'. 'Till you can lie with all women as one woman, and not judge it sin, you can do nothing but sin'. Coppe had a similar libertine theology. 'External kisses have been made the fiery chariot to mount me unto the bosom of . . . the King of Glory. . . . I can kiss and hug ladies, and love my neighbour's wife as myself, without sin'.²⁹

Radicals like Clement Wrighter and the Quaker Samuel Fisher argued that the Bible was not the infallible Word of God but a historical document to be studied and interpreted like any other. Some radicals rejected the immortality of the soul, heaven and hell. 'When men are gazing up to heaven', Winstanley argued, 'imagining a happiness or fearing a hell after they are dead, their eyes are put out, that they see not . . . what is to be done by them here on earth while they are living'.³⁰

One can understand that conservatives began to feel that freedom could go too far, that it was time to stop God communicating through the common people, or at least prevent his words being freely discussed, verbally and in print. Hence the restoration of the censorship in the 1650s, the suppression of Levellers, Diggers, Ranters and Fifth Monarchists. Hence the move to restore authority to the state church. Alderman Violet made the point succinctly in May 1650, reporting on the economic crisis to the Committee of the Mint: 'I propose as remedies, first, to settle able and godly ministers in all churches throughout the nation, that will teach the people to fear God, to obey their superiors and to live peaceably with each other – with a competent maintenance for all such ministers'.³¹ He had got his priorities right. Ten years later Richard Baxter justified the restoration of episcopacy in the interests of discipline.³²

One can see too why in the 1650s men desperately searched for certainty. There were so many rival accounts of God's wishes, so many differing interpretations of the Bible, that men sought either an infallible interpreter of God's will, or some other way of replacing the old certainties with a new consensus. The Church of England had collapsed, and no single church took its place. An infallible prophet or the infallible inner light were possible answers. But prophets died, and the inner light said different things to different people.

A more promising alternative was to look for secular solutions, for a science

of politics which would guide human action. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) argued that a ruler could claim the allegiance of his subjects only in so far as he could protect them. When Charles I was defeated in the civil war, he could no longer do this, and so subjects had a *duty* to switch their allegiance to the *de facto* power of the Commonwealth. Political obligation had nothing to do with claims by divine right; it was a question of fact: could the sovereign do his job of protecting his subjects? Hobbes similarly destroyed claims by any group to rule because God favoured them: the restoration of monarchy in 1660 in any case made nonsense of such arguments by Parliamentarians. So Hobbes undermined all theories of obligation based on the will of God. It is the beginning of modern secular political theory. Every individual has a right to his own ideas; no subject and no church can claim a right in God's name to subvert the *de facto* sovereign.

Five years later the republican James Harrington advanced his own science of politics – the idea that political structures depend on economic structures, that when the economic base changes the political superstructure (Harrington's word) must change too. The English Revolution, he argued, had witnessed a transfer of power to those who had amassed landed property in the century before 1640; no government could be stable which did not recognize their right to rule. The events of 1660–88 appeared to confirm Harrington's analysis, and hammered another nail into the coffin of religious theories of political obligation and resistance. 'A commonwealth is not made by man but by God', declared Harrington piously; but God acted through secondary causes, through the balance of property.³³

The return of Charles II in 1660 ended the Revolution by restoring monarchy to preside over the rule of the propertied. When men took stock, these secular theories seemed to make sense. Charles was proclaimed King by the grace of God, but everybody knew that God had needed earthly agents to get Charles restored. During the interregnum each party had claimed God on its side in the hour of victory; but each side had also had to rethink its position in the years of defeat. Either God was very unstable and erratic, or his ways were incomprehensible to mere human intelligence: better to leave him out of account altogether. This sceptical trend was strengthened by the alarm which the third God had caused, the God who existed within the consciousness of lower-class sectaries. So the keynote of upper-class thinking after 1660 is opposition to 'fanaticism', 'enthusiasm', to claims to inspiration, whether in literature or in religion and politics. The royalist Sir William Davenant described 'inspiration' as 'a dangerous word'.³⁴ Milton continued to be visited nightly by his Muse, but claims to literary inspiration fell out of fashion until they revived with romanticism after the French Revolution.

For those Parliamentarians who believed they had been fighting for God's Cause, the total defeat which the restoration implied was a shattering blow. 'The Lord had spit in their faces', Major-General Fleetwood wailed.³⁵ A condemned regicide found it difficult to answer the question, 'Have you not hard thoughts of God for this his strange providence towards you?'³⁶ Men had to stress the justice of an avenging God rather than his mercy. Clarkson heard men say that God was a devil and a tyrant.³⁷ 'God did seem to be more cruel than men', Lodowick Muggleton admitted. Milton was thus only one of a large number who found it necessary to justify the ways of God to men, to account for the apparent triumph of evil over good.³⁸ Unless the freedom of man's will could be established, Milton believed, there would be 'an outcry against divine justice'.³⁹ God was on trial, for

Traherne, Bunyan, Rochester and Dryden as well as in *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*.⁴⁰

It is a turning point in human thought. After 30 January 1649 kings never forgot that they had a joint in their necks. And God was never quite the same again after he had been put on trial in popular discussion. He withdrew into the Newtonian stratosphere. *The Decline of Hell* which Mr Walker has traced in the 17th century proceeded apace.⁴¹ Fasts and fast sermons faded out in the 1650s; an M.P. was laughed at for excessive quotation from the Bible.

After 1660 the restored Church of England was taken over by 'Latitudinarians', mostly former Puritans, who abandoned divine-right claims for bishops and tithes, and based them on the law of the land. The Latitudinarians played a prominent part in the newly-founded Royal Society, whose scientists also did much to talk down 'fanaticism' and 'enthusiasm' with their rejection of 'extremes', their stress on moderation, common sense, the English genius for compromise, etc., etc. But here too the intellectual climate favoured a secular science of politics, an empirical probabilism. Common sense of course led to intellectual muddles. Fellows of the Royal Society proclaimed a belief in witchcraft, based on the evidence of their senses and the authority of the Bible. 'No spirits, no God', said Henry More, later F.R.S.⁴² It was too bad that safeguarding the existence of God meant death for many lonely old women.

In the early fifties the Ranters had abolished sin. But history abolished the Ranters, and sin came back in strength after 1660. The Quakers, who had denounced the state clergy for preaching up sin, found a place for it in their post-restoration theology. The sinfulness of the mass of humanity had always been used to explain the wickedness of change. Even Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, explained the defeat of the Revolution by the sinfulness of the English people, who had failed to live up to the high ideals and aspirations put before them.

Dissenters, excluded from the state church, now formed a separate nation, huddled into their self-supported congregations, desperately concerned with survival in a hostile world. They were cut off from national political life and the national universities. Most of the sects followed the Quakers into pacifism and abstention from politics. Their God now presided over a provincial, stunted culture; he was no longer capable of transforming nations. The sects accepted that religion should not concern itself with high politics; the emphasis henceforth fell more on questions of conduct and personal morality, such as arose in the confusing growth of capitalist society with its new standards. The sects adapted themselves to this new world, becoming – to adapt Lenin's phrase – schools of capitalism. The nonconformist conscience was to revive as a political force only after the internalization of the work ethic had led many dissenters to prosper: but that was far ahead in 1660.

For those whose lack of property put them below the line which marked off 'the political nation', restoration of the familiar, consoling rituals of the traditional church may have been acceptable. Others no doubt just opted out. The strenuous virtue which Milton expected of the English people was no longer demanded. They lapsed into the traditional assumption that politics was for their betters: church and state, king and country, the royal touch to heal scrofula, monarchy as a spectacle now safely controlled by the propertied class.

1640 was the last national revolution whose driving ideology was religious. Milton left behind him a theological *summa*, the *De Doctrina Christiana*, which

was so heretical that it could not be published, even in Latin. When his literary executor tried after his death to publish it in the Netherlands, all the power of English diplomacy was exerted to prevent it. The confiscated manuscript lay among the State Papers until 1823. When it was published – on the orders of a King, translated by a bishop – the dynamite of the sixteen-sixties had become a damp squib. Since the American and French Revolutions revolutionary doctrines were no longer expressed in religious idiom; they did not need God.

What remained after 1660 was a secularized version of the myth of the chosen people, which Charles II still proclaimed.⁴³ From the days of Richard Hakluyt British imperialist expansion had neatly combined the glory of God with the profits of those who organized the expansion. ‘Look westward then’, cried Thomas Thorowgood in 1650; ‘there you may behold a rising sun of glory with riches and much honour, and not only for yourselves but for Christ’.⁴⁴ The conversion of the natives loomed large in company prospectuses, but never came to much when it was found to conflict with commercial profit.

The millenarian Thomas Goodwin wanted England to be ‘the top of nations’.⁴⁵ Fifth Monarchists supported commercial war against the Dutch. The republican James Harrington had advocated ‘a commonwealth for increase’. ‘The late appearances of God unto you’ were not ‘altogether for yourselves’. If ‘called in by an oppressed people’ (Scotland? Ireland? France?) England had a duty to respond. ‘If you add unto the propagation of civil liberty . . . the propagation of liberty of conscience, this empire, this patronage of the world, is the kingdom of Christ’.⁴⁶ Marvell had similar ideas, and Dryden in *Annus Mirabilis* put forward pseudo-millenarian predictions of a glorious imperial and trading future for London and England, with no religious overtones at all. This became common form.⁴⁷

Ireland – the first English colony – was a case in which the Cause of God got hopelessly mixed up with economic and strategic considerations. Most of the English revolutionaries believed that Charles I and Laud had been part of, or at least had connived at, an international Roman Catholic plot for the conquest of England and the subversion of protestantism. In this plot Ireland’s role was crucial. It was the open back-door to foreign Catholic invasion. Spanish troops had landed there in the fifteen-nineties, French troops landed there in the sixteen-nineties in an attempt to restore James II to the English throne. The Revolution of 1640 unleashed the Irish rebellion of 1641, which was soon headed by a Papal Nuncio. So the Cromwellian reconquest of Ireland seemed a necessary blow against Anti-christ, to prevent the restoration of monarchy by invasion through Ireland. The radicals, fiercely attacking Cromwell on internal matters, offered no real opposition to the conquest and enslavement of Ireland with a few notable exceptions, such as the Leveller, William Walwyn. The English republic, in Karl Marx’s pregnant words, ‘met shipwreck in Ireland’. ‘The English reaction in England had its roots . . . in the subjugation of Ireland’.⁴⁸ If ever God showed himself a conservative it was in thus using religion to mislead the radical revolutionaries.

So God played many parts in the English Revolution. First came the landslide of 1640–1, when suddenly the apparently all-powerful government of Charles and Laud found itself unable any longer to persecute the saints: and when by overwhelming majorities in Parliament the repressive machinery of the prerogative courts was swept away. When the King tried to resist, God raised up an army against him; when stalemate seemed likely to occur, God and Oliver Cromwell created the New Model Army. After the second great revolution of 1648–9 God

continued his favour by permitting the conquest of Ireland and Scotland, the Navigation Act of 1651 and the consequent aggressive commercial foreign policy – Dutch War, Spanish War, Dunkirk seized, piracy brought under control. In turn the events of 1660 came to seem as providential as the events of 1640–1 and 1648–9. But with a difference. In 1649 the Army had acted positively as God's instrument, had brutally but effectively shattered the image hitherto worshipped as divine; in 1660 it was the return of the traditional rulers that seemed providential.

Neither man's power nor policy had place; . . .

The astonished world saw 'twas the mighty work of heaven,⁴⁹

sang Sir Francis Fane. God had changed sides and was now overwhelmingly on the side of the establishment, as he had previously been on the side of shocking innovation: the restoration came in spite of rather than because of the royalists. Those who had been the instruments of the omnipotent God in 1648–9 were now revealed as impotent mortals, for whom the God of history had no more use.⁵⁰

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was an additional providence, another landslide like those of 1640 and 1660, another reassertion of the predetermined social order. It confirmed England's historical right to rule the world. Further confirmation came from the Industrial Revolution, another unplanned gift from heaven. The secular millenarian interpretation of England's manifest destiny was validated by these providential social transformations.

So where are we? In the 1640s the belief that men were fighting for God's Cause was a tremendous stimulus to morale. A popular slogan in the North said that 'God is a better lord than the Earl of Derby'. The theoretical duty of a feudal lord was to protect his underlings; what impressed them more was his ever-present power. If you lived in Lancashire or the Isle of Man it was difficult to think that there could be a greater power than the Earl of Derby. In the 1640s confidence in God's overlordship gave the Puritan citizens of Lancashire towns courage to resist even the Earl of Derby, who ultimately in 1651 was executed for 'treason and rebellion . . . in a town of his own,' Bolton.⁵¹ Yet in 1660 his son reappeared in Lancashire to wield his father's old authority: in the long run God had proved a weaker lord.

After 1660 a new ruling-class consensus formed, when God again presided over the established order. God = history = success = what happens. One conclusion we may perhaps draw is that any religion can serve any social purpose, because of the ambiguity of its basic texts. We should not think of protestantism as causing the rise of capitalism, but rather of protestantism and Puritanism being moulded by capitalist society to suit its needs. After 1660 God continued to offer consolation in the after life to those who were unhappy on earth. But between 1640 and 1660 God had also stimulated protest, rejection of an unjust society and its laws; he had legitimized movements for change. 'True religion and undefiled', said Winstanley, 'is to let everyone quietly have earth to manure, that they may live in peace and freedom in their labour'.⁵² Land for all might have been the basis for a different consensus.

How much of the radical tradition survived underground we do not know, for the censorship closed down again after 1660, and victors write history. At the end of *Samson Agonistes* Milton envisaged God's Cause as an undying phoenix; 'and though her body die, her fame survives,/ A secular bird, ages of lives'.⁵³ I do

not myself think that ideas like those of the radicals get totally forgotten: men were discussing Winstanley's writings in a Welsh valley in the 1790s⁵⁴ – an interesting time and an interesting place. But God the great Leveller, who wanted everything overturned, a God active to-day in Latin America, seems to have left England after the 17th-century Revolution; and not to have returned.

NOTES

- 1 Evans, *A Voice from Heaven to the Commonwealth of England* (1652), pp. 26–7, 33, 45, 74–5; *An Echo to the Voice from Heaven* (1653), p. 17, quoted in my *Change and Continuity in 17th-century England* (1974), pp. 59–60.
- 2 'No man shall be troubled for his judgment on practice in the things of his God', Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, Cambridge.
- 3 E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, Oxford, 1923, IV, p. 197; cf. R. Sibbes, *Complete Works*, Edinburgh, 1862–4, VI, pp. 153–4.
- 4 Thomas Cooper, *The Blessing of Japheth, Proving the Gathering in of the Gentiles and Finall Conversion of the Jewes* (1615), Sig. A 2–3.
- 5 P. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625*, Oxford, 1982, p. 283; E. S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: the Story of John Winthrop*, Boston 1958, p. 40.
- 6 Ed. D. D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638*, Wesleyan, 1968, p. 338.
- 7 I give evidence in my *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and some contemporaries* (1984), pp. 171–3, 319–21; ed. W. C. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Harvard, 1937–47, I, pp. 696–8, III, pp. 590–3.
- 8 *The Experience of Defeat*, pp. 102–5.
- 9 Marvell, *An Horatian Ode upon Cromwells Return from Ireland*.
- 10 See a forthcoming article by Richard H. Popkin, 'The Triumphant Apocalypse and the Catastrophic Apocalypse'.
- 11 Quoted in M. A. Gibb, *John Lilburne, the Leveller* (1947), p. 183.
- 12 Quoted in my *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 108, 158.
- 13 Quoted in my *Puritanism and Revolution* (Panther ed., 1969), pp. 133–4.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 146.
- 15 *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England*, p. 54.
- 16 See my *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley* (*Past and Present* Supplement, No. 5, 1978), pp. 20–3.
- 17 C. Hill, B. Reay and W. Lamont, *The World of the Muggletonians* (1983), pp. 23, 64.
- 18 *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley*, p. 8.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 29–32, 48; see also a debate on *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley in Past and Present*, No. 89 (1980), pp. 144–51.
- 20 Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
- 21 *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 79–82, 86.
- 22 T. Edwards, *Gangraena* (1646), III, p. 148.
- 23 *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 93–6, 108, 110, 121–3; Bunyan, *Works* (ed. G. Offor, 1860), II, p. 54.
- 24 *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley*, pp. 35, 37.
- 25 Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, p. 88.
- 26 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XII. 24–37.
- 27 *The World Turned Upside Down* (Penguin ed.), pp. 210–11.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 223–4.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 215, 315.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 259–68; Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, p. 353.
- 31 *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1650*, p. 180.
- 32 R. Baxter, *A Sermon of Repentance, Preached before the . . . House of Commons . . . April 30, 1660*, p. 45.
- 33 *The Experience of Defeat*, pp. 193–7.

- 34 Davenant, *Gondibert*, 1651 (ed. D. F. Gladish, Oxford, 1971), p. 22.
- 35 *Clarke Papers* (ed. C. H. Firth, Camden Soc.), IV, p. 220.
- 36 H. G. Tibbutt, *Colonel John Okey, 1606-1662* (Bedfordshire Historical Record Soc., XXXV, 1955), p. 154.
- 37 Clarkson, *Look about you* (1659), pp. 29-30.
- 38 *The Experience of Defeat*, pp. 307-9.
- 39 Milton, *Complete Prose Works* (Yale ed., 1953-82), VI, pp. 397-8.
- 40 *The Experience of Defeat*, p. 309; my *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977), pp. 351-2, 58-60.
- 41 D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, Chicago 1964, *passim*.
- 42 H. More, *An Antidote to Atheism* (1653, p. 164).
- 43 *The Experience of Defeat*, p. 248.
- 44 Thomas Thorowgood, *Jewes in America* (1650), Sig. c 3v.
- 45 *The Experience of Defeat*, p. 181.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 199; Harrington, *Political Works* (ed. J. G. A. Pocock, Cambridge, 1977), pp. 329-33.
- 47 M. McKeon, *Politics and Religion in Restoration England*, Harvard, 1975, pp. 63, 153, 174-5, 249, 268-81.
- 48 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondence, 1846-1895: A Selection* (ed. Dona Torr, 1934), pp. 279, 281; cf. p. 264.
- 49 Quoted by J. Sutherland, *English Literature in the Late Seventeenth Century*, Oxford 1969, p. 3.
- 50 *The Experience of Defeat*, pp. 321-3.
- 51 Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, ed. W. D. Macray, Oxford, 1888, V, p. 184.
- 52 *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley*, p. 28.
- 53 Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, lines 1706-7.
- 54 *The Experience of Defeat*, p. 42.

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