

WHO WERE THE ENGLISH RADICALS?

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Some examples

'What do you understand about St. John's Apocalypse?' the friar asked [Jacob] the chandler. 'At what university did you study? At the loom, I suppose? For I understand that you were nothing but a poor weaver and chandler before you went around preaching and rebaptizing...I have attended the university of Louvain, and for long studied divinity, and yet I do not understand anything at all about St John's Apocalypse. This is a fact.' To which Jacob answered: Therefore Christ thanked his heavenly Father that he had revealed and made it known to babes and hid it from the wise of this world, as it is written in Matt.11:25.' 'Exactly!' the friar replied, 'God has revealed it to the weavers at the loom, to the cobblers on the bench, and to bellow-menders, lantern tinkers, scissors grinders, brass makers, thatchers and all sorts of riff-raff, and poor, filthy and lousy beggars. And to us ecclesiastics who have studied from our youth, night and day, God has concealed it' (Thieleman J. van Braght Martyrs Mirror (Scottsdale: Herald Press 1950).

Pelagius: a voice from the British margins

Pelagius was a British theologian whose emphasis on the practice of good works as part of their path to salvation brought him into conflict with Augustine (Letters 156, 157, see B.R. Rees *Pelagius*, 173). The treatise 'On Wealth' offers a potent critique of wealth and property. Wealth is seen as the result of covetousness and theft and is the cause of violence. It causes difference of status between rich and poor and masks from the rich the recognition of their equal humanity with the poor. The writer takes issue with those who try to spiritualise or even ignore the teaching of Jesus on wealth and property and rejects the notion that it is more important to have one's life straightened before giving away one's wealth. The rich are the ones who seek to pack the tribunals and ensure that their interests are preserved. Although it nowhere condemns private property, like other Christian writings of the period on wealth (and the practice of the monastic communities emerging at the same time), it points out the structural injustices which result from disparities of wealth and status in society as the change in personal life style.

Let none judge themselves to be Christian, unless they both follow the teaching of Christ and imitate his example. Do you consider those to be Christians by whose bread no hungry person is ever filled, by whose drink no thirsty person is refreshed, whose table no one knows, beneath whose roof neither stranger nor traveller comes at any time, with whose clothes no naked person is covered, by whose help no poor are sustained, whose good deed no one experiences, whose mercy no one knows, who imitate the good in no respect but rather mock and insult them and do not cease to persecute the poor?They are Christians who follow the way of Christ, who imitate Christ in all things ...who show compassion to all, who are not at all provoked by wrong done to them, who do not allow the poor to be oppressed in their presence, who help the wretched, who succour the needy, who mourn with the mourners, who feel another's pain as if it were their own, who are moved to tears by the tears of others, whose houses are common to all, whose doors are closed to no one, whose tables the poor know, whose food is offered to all, whose goodness all know and at whose hands no one experiences injury, who serve God day and night, who ponder and meditate upon God's commandments unceasingly, who are made poor in the eyes of the world, so that they may become rich before God, who are held to be without fame in the world so that they may appear renowned before God and the angels, who are seen to have no feigning or pretence in their hearts, whose souls are open and unspotted, whose consciences are faithful and pure, whose whole mind is on God, whose whole hope is in Christ, who desire heavenly things rather than earthly, who spurn human possessions so that they may be able to possess those that are divine. (On the Christian Life 14.1-2)

Gerrard Winstanley: the emergence of private property as the Fall of Adam in leafy Surrey

Between 1648 and 1652 Winstanley wrote tracts while he was actively involved in the 'Digger' colony he

helped to create on St George's Hill in Surrey. The Diggers had a vision, not just to improve the lot of the hungry and landless through the cultivation of the commons, but to create a communist, that is, moneyless and propertyless, society of the kind they believed had existed before the Fall. Diggers held the Earth to have been originally a 'common treasury' for all to share. The Fall they regarded as the practice of buying and selling land, which allowed some to become rich and others to starve. From the consequences of this Fall humanity stood in need of redemption. True freedom could not be enjoyed by all until the land was held again in common. The practice of 'digging' soon spread to many parts of the south and midlands, but the hostility of local landowners ensured no colonies survived for long, though it is arguable that, had the movement not been suppressed, the 'commonwealth' then being fashioned under Cromwell might have been more literally that.

. this Adam appears first in every man and woman; but he sits down in the chair of magistracy, in some above others; for though this climbing power of self-love be in all, yet it rises not to its height in all; but every one that gets an authority into his hands, tyrannizes over others; as many husbands, parents, masters, magistrates, that lives after the flesh, do carry themselves like oppressing Lords over such as are under them; not knowing that their wives, children, servants, subjects are their fellow creatures; and hath an equal privilege to share with them in the blessing of liberty.

Secondly, the first Adam is the wisdom and power of flesh broke out and sat down in the chair of rule and dominion, in one part of mankind over another. And this is the beginner of particular interest, buying and selling the earth from one particular hand to another, saying, This is mine, upholding this particular propriety by a law of government of his own making, and thereby restraining other fellow creatures from seeking nourishment from Mother earth. So that though a man was bred up in a Land, yet he must not work for himself where he would sit down; But from Adam; that is, for such a one that had bought part of the land, or came to it by inheritance of his deceased parents, and called it his own Land: So that he that he had no Land, was to work for these small wages, that called the Land theirs; and thereby some are lifted up into the chair of tyranny, and others trod under the foot-stool of misery, as if the earth were made for a few, not for all men.

For truly the common people by their labours, from the first rise of Adam, this particular interest upheld by the flesh's law to this day, they have lifted up their land-lords and others to rule in tyranny and oppression over them. And let all men say what they will, so long as such are Rulers as calls the Land theirs, upholding this particular propriety of Mine and Thine; the common people shall never have their liberty, nor the Land ever freed from troubles, oppressions and complainings; by reason whereof the Creator of all things is continually provoked. O though proud selfish governing Adam, in this Land called England! Know that the cries of the poor, whom thou layeth heavy oppressions upon is heard.

.... when the earth becomes a common treasury as it was in the beginning, and the King of Righteousness comes to rule in every one's heart, then he kills the first Adam; for covetousness thereby is killed. A man shall have meat, and drink and clothes by his labour in freedom, and what can be desired more in the earth. Pride and envy likewise is killed thereby, for every one shall look upon each other as equal in the creation; every man indeed being a perfect creation of himself. And so this second Adam Christ, the restorer causes the waters of life and liberty to run plentifully in and through the Creation, making the earth one store-house, and every man and woman to live in the law of Righteousness and peace as members of one household. (The New law of Righteousness)

These four powers are the four beasts, which Daniel saw rise up out of the sea... is the bulk and body of mankind ... for out of Mankind arises all that darkness and tyranny that oppresses itself... The first Beast which Daniel saw rise up out of the deceived heart of mankind, was like a lion; and had eagles' wings : And this is kingly power, which takes the sword, and makes way to rule over others thereby, dividing the creation, one part from another; setting up the conqueror to rule, making the conquered a slave; giving the earth to some, denying the Earth to others ... The second Beast was like a bear; And this is the power of selfish laws, which is full of covetousness ... the power of prisons.. the power of whipping, banishment, and confiscation of goods ... the power of hanging, pressing, burning, martyring take these three ribs out of

the mouth of the law, or Inns of Court trade, and that beast hath no power but dies The third Beast was like a leopard .. this is the thieving art of buying and selling the earth with the fruits one to another ... this beast had four wings : policy; hypocrisy; self-love and hardness of heart; for this beast is a true self-lover, to get the earth to himself, to lock it up in chests and barns, though others starve for want ... The fourth Beast is the imaginary clergy-power, which indeed is Judas; and this more terrible and dreadful than the rest ... When Christ the Anointing spirit rises up, and enlightens mankind, then in his light, they shall see the deceit and falsehood of this beast, that hath deceived all the world; and shall fall off from him, and leave him naked and bare; and if he will teach and rule, let him shew his power over the beasts; for the people will all look up to God, to be taught and governed by him (The Fire in the Bush).

Anne Wentworth: resisting Babylon in the married relationship

In the Revelation of Jesus Christ (c.1679) the Baptist Anne Wentworth protest against persecution by her husband, who, emboldened by certain ecclesiastical colleagues has falsely accused Anne. She was thrown out of her home by her husband and suffered the opprobrium attaching to such an eviction. She had been subjected to ‘cruel usage’ as well as the ‘bitter words’ of his ‘sharp tongue’. The language of the Apocalypse is here applied to this particular example of oppression. Anne is empowered in this situation by her conviction that Christ has spoken to her much as he did to John on Patmos. This is an extraordinary testimony to the rectitude of her experience of oppression and the way in which apocalyptic imagery has enabled this to happen.

Come all Saints, come sing and rejoice with me
 At Babylon's fall, and the glorious days, which ye shall see
 When the great Battle is fought, the day past, and all done,
 Then all Honour, Glory and Praise to God must be sung.
 Rejoice, ye Heavens and Prophets, for God avengeth your Cause
 That Babylon would have deprived you of by her unjust Laws.
 This is a great Mystery, who now can this read?
 And know it rightly, and in so narrow a path doth tread?
 Who is able to bear, to have whole Babylon come down?
 Who can endure to hear, that they are in Babylon?
 Who doth think, that in England is the painted Whore?
 Who did think, they should ever hear of me any more?
 When they sit as Queen, and say, they shall have no sorrow,
 I am raised up again, and freed from all their horror.
 When they thought, to put me in the Grave, & have me slain,
 I am raised up more strong, and brought to Life again.

.... I am reproached as a proud, wicked, deceived, deluded, lying Woman; a mad, melancholy, crack-brained, self willed, conceited Fool, and black Sinner, led by whimsies, notions, and knif-knafs of my own head; one that speaks blasphemy, not fit to take the Name of God in her mouth; an Heathen and Publican, a Fortune-teller, an Enthusiast, and the like much more, whereof I appeal to God, to judge: And then let all slanderers challenge their own words.....
 And as concerning my Husbands Behaviour towards me in this Case
 of the Lords, He the Lord will also judge betwixt Him and Me, and make known, whether I am an impudent Hussy, a disobedient Wife to him, one that run away from her Husband, and the like.
 Or whether He is the Man, that will not suffer me to live with him, that will not receive me into his Habitation, unless I deny the Lord, and his Message, and avow to be deluded by a lying Spirit.

And therefore he takes no care of me, nor once looks after me these almost two years. These things the Lord will judge and bring to light, that all People shall know, how He likes of their encouraging my Husband against me, in making me the Butt of their malice; but my Husband, they make the patient, meek Lamb, and strengthen him thus against the Lord. Therefore all that have done, and do so, shall feel the Rod of an angry God, as there is Hanserd Knowles with his Church, and Nehemiah Cocks, my Husbands Pastor, Thomas Hicks, William Dicks, Philip Barder, my Relations, and hundreds more, that have a hand in setting my Husband against me, so that he will not own me: And then they go on to blame and defame me, and say, that I am run away from him!

So far it is the will of God, that the World should know the true reason, why I must live alone and apart from my said Husband, which (as it will stand before God) is no other, but that I cannot deny the Testimony of Jesus, but keep the Commandments of God, being obedient to all his Wills. And this is the thing, the only thing, that makes my Husband and hundreds more, to be wroth with me, and endeavour to take away my good Name, in spreading abroad, that I keep Men company, and have my Rogues come to me, and live a scandalous life in an Alms-house. But as the Pharisees of old said of the Son of God, that he was a gluttonous man, a Wine-bibber, a Friend of Publicans and Sinners, and one that hath the Devil; and yet he bore it patiently: So shall I wait in patience, how the Lord Jesus doth love and like of their thus defaming me, which will be seen and known openly, for to be recorded to Generations to come.