

WHO WERE THE ENGLISH RADICALS?

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Christianity: radical and political

The Gospel of Jesus Christ of the arrival of the Reign of God, turns upside down the values of this age offers a radical and subversive challenge to the world, its powers and authorities. This subversive aspect of the nascent Christian movement was recognised by people in Thessalonica who, hearing that Christians were proclaiming another king Jesus and acting against the decrees of Caesar, accused them of 'turning the world upside down' (Acts 17.6)¹. Throughout Christian history (though more often at times of crisis and wider social upheaval) there have emerged writings which have reflected its values and engaged in searching critiques of the political order and have promoted change in social and economic relations, either by recommending or enacting equality of wealth, power, gender, or status. This collection of writings aims to include in one volume examples from various periods of Christian history. The material will be grouped chronologically with short introductions and explanatory notes. No attempt has been made to offer representatives from every century. There are gaps in the coverage particularly in the medieval period, though consultation suggests that the amount of relevant material from this period is probably small.

Ten years or more of study of individuals and groups whose views and stories infrequently feature in the major text books or only making a fleeting appearance have persuaded us that something needs to be done to redress the balance in the presentations of Christian political thought. The decision led to a period of consultation with friends and colleagues to whom we are indebted for information and advice and as a result of which we found ourselves faced with much more material than would be easily encompassed within the page of even a substantial book. From the start we have not found it easy to define exactly what we have been looking for, and have come the view that the answer to the question 'what do you mean by radical' is to give an account of the process of our collection. It started the life with a shared interest in the writings of Thomas Muentzer Gerrard Winstanley and the growing realisation that theirs were not lone voices testaments to a distinctive perspective among Christian writings. Back and forth in time we found ourselves stumbling across others who shared his sentiments. We realize that it is often easier to accumulate 'radical Christian writings' than to delimit exactly what they are (though some attempt will be made to suggest some general characteristics, below pp. xxx).

In our texts there is often an appeal to the roots: to Jesus and the early church as paradigms of what Christian polity and action should be about. Frequently, this is characterised by a critique of a false religion, which places institutions and rituals above the needs of people. A critique of inhumanity and a false religion are themes which emerge in one of the earliest texts to the most recent in the collection. Very occasionally there is also a more violent dimension of radicalism: being so much against received wisdom and institutions that it is necessary to uproot them, whether by violence or less catastrophic means. Our common interest has led us in the past to work on the life and work of Thomas Muentzer and Gerrard Winstanley. Their careers (or at least parts of them in Winstanley's case, as there is evidence that for most of the latter part of his life Winstanley lived has a conforming and relatively respectable member of southern English society) exemplify several features which are catalysts for our choice of material. Their sense of vocation is such that they believe that they are called, in an apocalyptic sense, to a form of preaching and activity, which is explicitly contrary to received wisdom and practice. In this the scriptures form a resource for them as they see their own activity in the light of the struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness (apocalyptic images, unsurprisingly, have a potent resonance for them). What one finds is not merely abstract reflection, therefore, but exposition of understandings which are

¹ The connection is brilliantly captured in the title of Christopher Hill's landmark book about the seventeenth century English radicals The World Turned Upside Down Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972.

based on the active engagement to see another kind of order at work in the world, the realisation of God's kingdom on earth. What impressed us was that again and again, similar themes and convictions emerged, suggesting to us that there was some kind of radical tradition. And yet the word tradition hardly adequately describes what is going on here. Even if historically connections can be made that sense of destiny and vocation often meant that there was little awareness on the part of many of the figures in this book of indebtedness to others. Of course, there are exceptions as when the radicals looked back to and used the ideas of Joachim of Fiore the Anabaptists created their sense of tradition they told their own story by relating it to the martyrologies of the early church in texts like the *Martyrs' Mirror* or the *Hutterite Chronicle*.

This is *not* a collection of writings about 'grassroots Christianity'. It is a collection of radical writings. In class terms few of the writings in this book are by people without formal education: Blake; Bunyan; and Sojourner Truth are just a few examples. A book of witnesses to Christianity 'from below' would have a very different feel to it. It would need to depend on oral testimony, given that many of those whose views would be represented would have not been able to write themselves (hence the importance here of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, which, in many ways, parallels what we have in the New Testament gospels, where the writings are about Jesus rather than by him).

Sources quoted in the book are not evenly spread throughout Christian history. The early medieval period is hardly represented at all. This is no reflection on the importance of the period for radical Christianity, as the extraordinary importance of monasticism testifies. In the middle of the third century monastic asceticism made its appearance in the desert of Egypt. This was the hermit-like existence, a way of life which threw into the sharpest possible relief the growing worldliness of the churches. Of great significance is the contribution of Pachomius, a younger contemporary of Antony, who established a settlement and attracted followers. There was an emphasis on manual work alternating with prayer and reflection and a common life. The solitary voices in the wilderness grew into an integral part of church and society prompting their own renewal movements in the later Middle Ages pioneered by people like Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi, who in their turn sought to recapture the original vision of Jesus. The various monastic rules are part of the necessary background to the many of the practices and beliefs to which the sources in the book bear witness².

Christianity has always been radical and political. The radicalism is characteristic of much in the New Testament writings as writers sought to explain the experience and convictions in relation to the roots of the tradition of which they were a part. Such an appeal to the roots of Christianity is something which is a feature of some of the figures covered in this book as they seek to appeal to or be inspired by the foundation texts of major ancestors in the faith, particularly the gospel stories of Jesus. The foundation narratives of Christianity tell of a man who fell foul of a colonial power and its surrogates and for well over two hundred years the religion developed in the shadow of a deep-seated ambivalence to empire. Its own rhetoric demanded allegiance to another commonwealth: Christian discipleship was not like joining a religious society whose demands were only temporary; it was all-consuming and utterly demanding. Conversion could be dramatic, a demanding and totally transforming experience. In the Epistle 1 To Donatus 3-4 Cyprian speaks of 'lying in darkness and gloomy night remote from truth. His experience of baptism echoes Paul's language in that he speaks of 'putting off the old humanity' and witnessing to the slow transformation of established habits of life. A previous style of life is questioned and abandoned. Cyprian writes of 'learning thrift' after a life of banquets and sumptuous feasts, of donning simple attire after being used to expensive clothes of glittering gold and purple. Conversion involved a different style of life with values at odds with mainstream culture. It meant belonging to a group where elite values and goods were widely shared and were the hallmark of the community: wisdom; religiosity; wealth and power which had been the preserve of the few were now available to all through the divine spirit.

² On this see e.g. P. Brown *The Body and Society*, R. Lane Fox *Pagans and Christians* London 1987, P. Rousseau *Pachomius. The Making of a Community in Fourth Century Egypt* University of California 1985 and D. Chitty *The Desert a City* Oxford 1966.

What is so striking about the New Testament texts is that they were written by people who had little or no political power with a vision of the world which was at odds with the prevailing ideology. Yet their counter-cultural stand did not mean that they ended up writing utopian tracts, which were far removed from their everyday reality. We may not like their apparent collusion with slavery or some of the less inclusive sentiments which seem to encourage the subordination of women, but there are enough indications of impatience with the status quo to suggest an expectation of a different kind of understanding of and way of living in the world.

Christians were a different sort of people, not from one particular race or background, committed to a different kind of life and culture, more often than not at odds with the wisdom of the age. It was thoroughly political, therefore, though doubtless never uniformly so. From the first those non-conformist instincts were strong and there has always been conflict between the radical demands of the teacher who lived the life of a mendicant and the more settled, predictable existence of those who sought some kind of accommodation with the powers that be. Nevertheless until the time of Constantine Christianity remained a different kind of culture or less at odds with the politics of the age. That is not to deny that once it became the religion of empire its cosmopolitan rhetoric could easily be used to serve rather different ends as it offered the social cement of a fragmenting empire. The radical slogan of Galatians 3.28, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female' has a rather different ring when it might serve as the vision of an inclusive, cosmopolitan empire.

From the very first Christianity's theological instincts were radical in the strict sense of that word. The Pauline reflection on the significance of Jesus Christ includes a comparison with the first human and the assertion that in the person of Christ there had been a complete reversal of the negative effects of a fallen creation. Similarly, in its approach to the religious tradition of which it was a part, early Christian writers took a radical approach and asserted that the very foundations of the religion had been changed and the traditions which had provided the resource for life were either questioned or relativised in the light of new wisdom.

Nowhere is the radicalism more evident than in the fourfold story of Jesus in the New Testament. Mark's gospel has become a favourite source for a radical Christian theology in recent biblical study³, though its story is essentially that of the other gospels too. Jesus bursts on margins of Israel's life coming from Galilee, not Jerusalem which becomes a place of rebellion. It is on the margins of 'normal' life that Jesus is to be found, near the sea, in the desert, in the country rather than the town. Religious life takes place in houses, which had become an alternatives space to what was believed to be the house of God, in Jerusalem, but in fact turned out to be 'a den of thieves' (11.17), and was destined for destruction. Such meetings of Jesus with his disciples foreshadowed the character of early Christian life in the small groups which met in houses throughout the Roman world to recall the memories of Jesus and seek to establish their different style of life⁴. In the gospel of Mark Jesus challenges convention (1.40; 2.23ff; 5.25; 7.19) and a culture of status and customary practice and institutions. While the disciples want to sit and rule just like the kings and mighty of the world Jesus offers a baptism of suffering (10.42f). An alternative perspective in the circle of disciples around Jesus : learning to be free of dominant ways of looking at the world (4.18; 8.28ff) characterised by the taking up a cross (8.34 cf. 10.42ff), a rebel's fate; suspicion of the priority given to family ties (3.31ff 3.20 and 6.1ff); the offers of a new family based on access, acceptance and common commitment to the divine will(10.29f; 3.31ff). In common with the other synoptic gospels Mark has a twofold account of Jesus dealing with and speaking of children (9.33ff; 10.13ff). Children do not have high social status. That Jesus should advance them as models for discipleship and put a child at the centre challenges contemporary culture.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the heart of a socio-economic complex of great importance for the Judean area and an ideological system of central importance for most Jews. Jesus leaves the precincts of

³ F. Belo A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark Maryknoll 1981; M. Clevenot Materialist Approaches to the Bible Maryknoll 1985; K. Wengst Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ London 1988.

⁴ W. Meeks The First Urban Christians New Haven : Yale UP 1983.

the Temple (13.1 cf. 14.58) and predicts its destruction). In the dire warnings which Jesus gives as the storm clouds gather around him all the disciples have to look forward to is costly martyrdom (v.9) and vindication by the Son of Man. This highly political term, derived from Dan. 7 in 13.26 and 14.62, and used throughout the gospel, is part of biblical political vocabulary. By asserting the triumph of the way of the Son of Man and the destruction of the beasts which represent the empires of the world and their representatives he offers a defiant assertion of the ultimate vindication of God's very different kind of polity on earth.

At the climax of Mark's story the apparent defeat of Jesus turns out to be the moment of his triumph. The destruction of the focus of the old order, take place when the veil is torn from top to bottom. This established the mystique of the Temple and created exclusion and uniqueness by hinting at the peculiar presence of God in that place. The destruction of that which divided meant the end of that mystique. The stark juxtaposition of death and rending at the climax of Mark's story is a radical rejection of the religious-political status quo, when the moment of defeat of a critic is the dynamic which impels the motor leading to the institution's collapse⁵.

In the story of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles Stephen represents one of the most radical voice in the New Testament. The powerful speech in Acts 7 suggests that the construction of the Temple marked an actual act of rebellion. In the context of Second Temple Judaism must have been seen as a monstrous act of sacrilege, making comprehensible the charges brought against Stephen according to Acts 6.14. The quotation of Solomon's words about the Most High not dwelling in houses made with hands precedes a ringing indictment of the 'stiff-necked people'. In early Christian reflection on Jesus' life and in their articulation of the worship of God the Temple, the sacred building played little part, except as ways of talking about the building of human community. It is the reign of God, the witness to the ways of God's justice and the hope of heaven on earth, anticipated in the common life of small groups of men, women and children who began to explore a variant way of being God's people. The individuals and groups who appear in the following pages are not those whose message is proclaimed and lived in fine buildings or elaborate liturgies. Indeed, such activity seemed to be at odds with what the heart of the Christian message was about. As was the case for much of the early church's existence, it was in homes and small spaces in which a group as a whole was the space for active agency of the divine spirit nowhere better exemplified than in the document of the Swiss Anabaptists, pp. xxx).

Christianity is about deed not words, famously exemplified by the words: faith by itself, if it has no words, is dead', echoed centuries later by the Digger Gerrard Winstanley: 'words and writings were all nothing and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost noting' (A Watch-Word to the City of London, and the Army).. The Letter of James has been unjustly neglected and famously derided by Luther as 'an epistle of straw'. In many ways parallels the stark critique of Babylon in the book of Revelation (chapters 18-19), both echoing as they do the strident words of prophets like Amos and the opening chapters of Isaiah. James emphasises characteristic features of Christian identity, however, in its emphasis on humility (1.9) and the need for the demonstration of faith in good works (2.18). The criticism of those who practise differentiation between individuals on the basis of class is held up to ridicule (2.1-7). There was a widespread universal tendency in early Christianity to question the limitation of elite goods to the rich, wise and mighty of the world. James' words 'Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him' (2.5) are as explicit a testimony as anywhere in the New Testament of the peculiar privilege granted to the poor to discern and inherit the Kingdom of God (similar to the remarkable words of Jesus in Matthew 11.25-27). Towards the end of the letter the writer returns to his critique of the rich with a stinging denunciation, owing much to the material in the Sermon on the Mount and echoing passages like Amos 2.6-8 and 5.10-19. Here we have that insight into the contemporary social evils which led to exploitation of day labourers and the enjoyment of the fruits of the earth by the few at the expense of the many (5.1-6).

⁵ See further Ched Myers Binding the Strong Man New York: Orbis 1988.

The Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, stands on its own as the prophetic text in the New Testament. This book has been a resource for different kinds of interpretation in the history of Christianity. On the one hand have been those who have pored over its images and tried to calculate the details of future history (usually making use of the other prophetic books of the Bible to). On the other Revelation has offered space for women as well as men to enable their vocations as visionaries and mystics to flourish. For women it has meant that they have been able to emerge as persons in their own right, in the midst of a society permeated with patriarchy. Prophets and the mystics have found in Revelation an inspiration to explore a ministry denied by much else in scripture and tradition⁶. Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen, like the radicals who turned to Revelation, found in this allusive text a licence to resist received religion and practice precisely because a canonical text opened a door for an experience of God which enabled them to transcend the boundaries imposed by what was conventionally possible. It is that kind of visionary inspiration, found in the call of Gerrard Winstanley (pp. xxx), in the prophetic vision of Anna Trapnel, and in the peculiar genius of William Blake.

The Apocalypse challenges the view that the world as we see it is all that matters because it reveals something hidden which will enable the readers to view their present situation from a completely different perspective, that of the Risen Christ. It is a text, which seeks to summon to a change of heart and life-style by resisting the power of Empire and the ethos of the age. Rev 13 and 17 bring out most clearly the, perhaps inevitably, demonic character of the state. Apocalyptic unveiling, drawing as it does on the prophetic symbolism of empire from Daniel, unmasks the reality of life where violence and oppression are the cornerstones of the might of an apparently benevolent empire. A passage like this is the cornerstone of the critique of empire throughout Christian history. Its radicalism is its concern to lay bare the roots of this oppression in the deep-seated conflict between good and evil.

John's vision of Babylon and the prophecy of its destruction in Rev 17-18 portray the consequences of a social order where everything revolves round the needs of an demanding society which makes itself the centre of the universe and preserves that position by force, ideology and demands for conformity. The beauty, sophistication and splendour of its culture may be great, but it is in a condition of death that the prophet exposes that reign of death while pointing to ways whereby new life can be lived. The ability to discern the reality of a society and culture 'calls for a mind with wisdom' (Rev 13.18; 17.9), which is more than merely astute observation of the way things are. Apocalypse is altogether more radical in that it gets to the root of things. Apocalyptic wisdom reveals the extent human delusion and what is needed to drag an uncomprehending humanity to begin to see things differently.

In many of the extracts which are contained in this book we shall consider those who have found in apocalyptic symbolism a tool which has enabled the oppressed to find and maintain a critical distance from an unjust world with the real prospect of a reign of justice, though we shall always need to remember that the apocalyptic symbols have served the needs of the politically powerful as well. In the late twentieth century the rhetoric of the 'evil empire' was as likely to be found in the corridors of economic and political power as in the grassroots Bible study groups of the Third World. What characterises radical appropriation of the book consists more in following John's visionary example than the detailed prognostications based on a minute exegesis of the book. The latter is more often characteristic of those who use the book as a source for predicting future history than an instrument for the contemporary critique of empire.

The identification of a radical strand within early Christianity should not lead us to suppose that early Christianity was either homogeneous in its radicalism or revolutionary in its activism. Of course, one can look at the pages of the New Testament and find in the synoptic gospels, the letter of James and the book of Revelation that indomitable, uncompromising spirit which set itself against the values of the present age. Such clear-cut counter-cultural strands are, as has already been suggested, a common feature of early Christian texts. Yet, as the Pauline letters indicate the new converts, particularly those in the

⁶ On women visionaries see S. Elm 'Virgins of God' The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity (Oxford : Oxford University Press) p. 32, and G. Jantzen Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1995.

urban environment of the cities of the Empire had to learn a degree of accommodation with the world as it was, without, somehow, abandoning the stark call to discipleship of the teacher from Nazareth. What is remarkable about the letters of Paul, however, is the way in which this Christian activists maintained the counter-cultural identity of these isolated groups by his travelling and writing, much as the Anabaptist leader Menno Simons was to do fifteen hundred years later. In another respect too consolidating Anabaptists like Menno Simons are inheritors of the Pauline radical spirit than Muentzer or even Winstanley. The strange thing about Paul is that the energetic innovator and founder of the Gentile church should have been the one who above all sowed the seeds of the acceptability of the world order as it is and passivity towards it. Nevertheless, as recent study as reminded us, there is at the heart of the emerging Christian identity a distinctive identity in which elite goods and privileges (wealth, power, holiness and knowledge) ceased merely to be the prerogative of an elite but were open to all within the common life of the Christian communities⁷. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in the history of Christianity many have often looked to the radical Paul as a basis for appeals for radical change as the examples of Augustine, Luther and Karl Barth indicate.

Excessive concentration on Paul's theological ideas detracts from Paul's activism, not least the task which occupied the last years of Paul's career: the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. The innovatory character of the project and the effort involved in organising a collection which then had to be taken hundreds of miles should not be lost sight of. The collection for the poor in Jerusalem has few obvious parallels in the ancient world. Whatever the extent to which Paul was prepared to relax laws which prevented the proper fellowship within the Body of Christ, the provision for the poor was something which had continuing validity. The problem with the collection is not so much that it is only occasionally alluded to (in fact it is mentioned in Romans 1 & 2 Cor as well as Galatians 2.10 and there is a parallel item of mutual support is noted in Philippians). Rather it is the very pragmatic nature in which it is apparently dealt with that renders it of lesser importance in discussions of Pauline theology. The lengthy discussion in 2 Cor. has the air of a piece of administration, which only serves to mask the importance of the whole enterprise. Yet closer examination reveals the centrality of this activity for Paul's theology. Not only does he justify it theologically: 'though' Christ was rich yet, for our sake he became poor' (2 Cor 8.9). But also he speaks of it as an act of grace (2 Cor 8.7). The collection was to be a channel of divine aid which was both a means of alleviating misery and also a demonstration of God's character. He speaks of it in terms which are reserved elsewhere in the Pauline Corpus for the proclamation of the Gospel itself (2 Cor 9.12 cf. Col. 1.24).

No one can deny that the New Testament has many contradictory strands. These are well represented in Luke-Acts. Familiar passages in Luke's gospel suggest a very different perspective from convention: the insignificant Mary and Jesus' birth in obscurity; John's social teaching 3.10ff; the anointing by the prostitute 7.36ff cf. Mk. 14.3ff; the women followers and supporters 8.2f; 13.10; 23.27; 23.49 & 55 Samaritans 10.25ff; 17.11; the concern with the 'prodigals' 15.1ff. All these in different ways 'flesh out' the manifesto which Luke's Jesus offers (once again peculiar to this gospel) in 4.16.

On the other hand other texts offer a rather different slant. Luke's version of the Last Supper includes sayings of Jesus at this point some of which are found only in this text and others with parallels in other gospels. One in particular is instructive. In his teaching on discipleship Mark has Jesus telling his disciples:

⁷ G. Theissen A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion London: SCM Press 1999 pp. 81-118.

Mark

You know that among the gentiles the recognised rulers lord it over their subjects, and the great make their authority felt. It shall not be so among you; among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For the son of man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Luke

Among the gentiles kings lord it over their subjects, and those in authority are given the title Benefactor. Not so with you: on the contrary, the greatest among you must bear himself like the youngest, the one who rules like one who serves. For who is greater - the one who sits at table or the servant who waits upon him? Surely the one who sits at table. Yet I am among you like a servant

A comparison of these two passages reveals that Mark has a general 'whoever wants to be first' whereas Luke has 'the greatest and 'the one who rules'. It has plausibly been suggested that unlike in Mark's community Luke knew that the Christians he was addressing included persons of relatively high standing in society. No longer is the Christian community consist of the poor Jewish Christians to whom Paul's churches sent their money and support. Like the church in Corinth there were some, perhaps even a significant number alongside those who were not powerful or of noble birth, who needed to understand their responsibilities as disciples of one who came to preach good news to the poor.

There are nods in the direction of accommodation, particularly in Acts. Ananias and Sapphira's sin is deceiving the Holy Spirit rather than refusal to share their property, perhaps a tacit move-away from the practice of the earliest church in Jerusalem. Zacchaeus does not have to sell all his goods. The ambiguity is no more evident than in chapter 16 where the utter repudiation of Mammon and the disparagement of Dives sit uneasily with assertions that one has to use the Mammon of unrighteousness in order to be considered worthy of heaven. According to Acts 10 the account of Cornelius' conversion leaves open the question of the character of life of the newly converted Gentile soldier. Quite a remarkable omission given that in the following century there was widespread doubt about whether a Christian signs up for military service⁸. Luke-Acts was probably written to churches which were relatively affluent. They had tasted of the good news of justification by faith and life in the Spirit and needed to be reminded that there was more to faith than mere religion, and most important of all Luke wanted them to take seriously 'the option for the poor'⁹.

Such tensions certainly exist both between the New Testament documents, and, in the case of some writings this attitude may exist within the same document. Such a tension between what was politically and theologically possible and what needed to be held onto, to be heeded whenever possible within the sever constraints posed by historical circumstances, is part of the story of Christian radicalism. Some were more inventive than others in the ways in which they dealt with this conundrum. There were martyrs who brooked no compromise or found there was no alternative but to die for their faith¹⁰. But there were those who sought the freedom within the status quo to pursue their goals, as we find particularly with the sixteenth century Familists (p. xxx). In many ways their ingenuity and their knack for survival bespeaks of that same divine spark that kept the faith alive in the early years of the Christian church. Such were ways to maintain the commitment to Christ's Kingdom in the midst of a political and economic order of an age which demanded compromise.

⁸ See e.g. M. Hornus *It is Not Lawful for Me To Fight*

⁹ P.L. Esler *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986.

¹⁰ D. Boyarin *Dying for God* University of California 1999.

Identifying the radical strands in Christian writings

Throughout Christian history there have emerged writings, which have engaged in searching critiques of the present political order and have promoted revolutionary change in social and economic relations, either by recommending or enacting equality of wealth, power, gender, or status. Criticism of wealth and power has been widespread in Christianity, and many more writings could have been included, not least from the patristic period. What distinguishes many of those that are contained here is the active promotion of radical alternative political orders, whether by violent or peaceful means rather than the reformation of the status quo.

The critique of false religion

Throughout many of these texts there is a heartfelt cry against acts of injustice and inhumanity, whether at an individual or societal level. This is often linked with a critique of a false religion in which the preservation of institutions and traditional rituals are elevated above the needs of people. The woes of Jesus (e.g. Matthew 23.23) against the pietists of his day for tithing mint and cummin but neglecting the weightier matters of the divine law are echoed in many of our pieces. The critique of inhumanity is linked with the perception of a false religion which maintains the status quo and is in danger of masking injustice. These are themes which emerge from the earliest text the most recent in the collection.

Hope for a New Order

Hope for a new world is hardly surprising. Nevertheless this hope differs quite markedly from the character of hope within other areas of Christian tradition. In many of our texts we are concerned with a hope for this world rather than some transcendent realm.

There emerge in Christian history a clear difference between those who mine their detail to be able to map out the narrative of the end of the world and those who are inspired by them to see their own visions and to offer their prophetic challenge to the communities of their day. The former tend to use them to point forward, the latter find their words an empowering conviction for the present moment of crisis, the Kairos. The coming reign of God is not merely an article of faith for the future but in some sense already present either in the life of the elect group, called to implement or proclaim, or as a phenomenon within the historical process which demands a response and interpretation, 'reading the signs of the times'. Paul's mission to the Gentiles, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, Muentzer's holy war against the impious, and Winstanley's communist experiment of digging all evince this same imperative to act to fulfil the hope for a new order in the present.

The present as the decisive moment in the divine purposes

There is the conviction that the present moment is one of utmost significance within the whole gamut of history. It is a time of crisis and a moment of opportunity. As a result commitment rather than detachment is necessary, and action (and in the some writers this may involve violence). This kind of attitude conditions the way apocalyptic and prophetic texts are interpreted and their hopes construed.

There is frequently a high premium placed on prophetic charisma, as the visionary or prophet sees things which contradict received wisdom and claim authority to take decisions and inaugurate actions of a highly controversial kind.

There is often an intense awareness of God's presence and a conviction that God or Christ indwells and empowers. The divine indwells the human as well as the process of human history and that there is often an intimacy of interaction between the human and the divine in enabling the understanding of Gods purposes to be known. This is often manifested in the doctrine of the Spirit and the conviction that the believer is closely identified with Christ, for example, in Paul's words in Galatians 2.20 'Not I but Christ in me'. In Muentzer's writings the indwelling of Christ in the elect is very important and it has often

been noted that Winstanley's use of doctrine exhibits that identification of central convictions with the life and experience of those who see themselves as the elect group.

The prophetic politics of equality

Early Christianity was dominated by the beliefs that the coming of God's reign on earth was imminent and that signs of that were already to be seen in the activity of the Christian communities, all of whom equally had tasted of the prophetic spirit. Acts 2.17 encapsulates this conviction; it was a verse which was to kindle the enthusiasm of later generations also:

And in the last days, it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and you sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

The reorganisation of status, relationships, wealth, knowledge and power in relations, among women as well as men, different races, were all part of a different ethos, an anticipation of a commonwealth which would be operative throughout the universe. To the extent that Christians began to implement these deep-seated convictions, they were not merely utopian dreamers but practitioners of the kingdom life amidst a political reality which militated against its fulfilment. Many of our texts bear witness to the practice of that hope not mere theorisation about it. That is true to the earliest Christian texts which bear witness to a movement which in the various facets of its social life promoted the democratisation of what had hitherto been elite privileges and values: holiness, knowledge, wealth, and power ceased to be the prerogatives of the few but, at least in theory and often in practice, were open to all those who shared the new life in Christ in the Spirit. The account of the conversion of Cyprian brings this to the fore and the critique of privilege and wealth found in the De Divitiis harks back to the uncomfortable sayings of Jesus with which the Christian church has always struggled and which were to be the source of much grief when Francis of Assisi was to insist that they form the bedrock of the rule of his new order, as the debates between the mainstream and spiritual Franciscans makes plain.

Use of Scripture

The author of the De Divitiis criticises those who use sophisticated scriptural interpretation to allow them to avoid the plain meaning of the text, for example by looking to the examples of wealthy men from the Old Testament in preference to the words and example of Christ: 'by every ingenious device and false interpretation of the law defend what they live they wish the commandments to harmonise with their lives and not the reverse'. Nevertheless we find a use of the tradition in which interpreters refuse to be content with the letter but pierces to the real meaning of the text. In the case of some writers this attitude may manifest itself as a rejection of the priority of Scripture and a subordination of it to the inner understanding which comes through the Spirit. The meaning of Scripture and the tradition is subordinated to experience of the Spirit and the emphasis is on experience as a prior 'text' which must condition the way in which Scripture and tradition are read.

There is a democratic, participative emphasis on the ability of all those open to the Spirit of God to understand the meaning of Scripture. This can come without access to the wisdom of the experts. As early Anabaptist testimony indicates (see below p. xxx), 1 Corinthians 14 is a passage which is an important witness not only to what went on but also how spontaneity and a participation in a spiritual discipline might be conducted. It is a chapter in which the validity of congregational openness to the Spirit and the need for discernment and mutual edification sits uneasily alongside clear, peremptory apostolic instruction. According to Acts 2 when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost it was about a promise of the spirit being poured out on to 'all flesh', not just apostles. Women as well as men, old as well as young would prophesy, a reason for the visionary and prophetic vocation to women demonstrated in several examples (pp. xxx).

At the Reformation writers like Erasmus and Tyndale both stressed the importance of ordinary people reading the Bible. They viewed this text as one that spoke to, and informed, people whether or not they had spent years studying it. In the basic ecclesial communities of contemporary Latin America the Bible has often been the means of enabling literacy. Through it people were taught to read, and that matches the way in which the Bible functioned in the early modern period in Britain. It was the tool of the education of ordinary people, enabling a Bunyan or a Blake to read, write and as important to reflect on the world in a way which enabled readers to glimpse something of the way of God.

In much of the interpretation we are not dealing with the kind of analytical exegesis which is typical of modern academic writing, in which the intention of the author and attention to the precise meaning of words and phrases predominate. Instead, it is a rather oblique relationship with the Scriptures in which the words become the catalyst for discernment of the divine way in the presence. It is, as some recent Brazilian popular educational material from Bahia puts it, 'enabling one to look at the world with new eyes'. The wisdom of experience is as much the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this results in the subordination of the written words to the prompting of the spirit within or to the light of experience (see pp. xxx). What counts then is not so much what it meant to Isaiah, Jesus or Paul but what the import these words may have in the circumstances of the present. In this regard Karl Barth is close to the view with the radicals, even if he writes the following in the light of the wrestling that must go on with the text: 'why should parallels drawn from the ancient world be of more value for our understanding of the epistle than the situation in which we ourselves actually are and to which we can therefore bear witness'¹¹.

The claim to be able to understand the scriptures without recourse to learned divines is a repeated theme throughout this collection. It is one which is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, going back to the words of Jesus and the remarkable testimony to spirit-inspired exegesis, standing in need of the insights of the learned, which is evident in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2. Patterns of biblical exegesis which have emerged in parts of Latin America over the last twenty years offer a more recent example of the way in which the practical faith of the non-professional reader can be resourced by a mode of reading of the scriptures which does not need (even if it was often supported by) sympathetic intellectuals¹².

The perspective on Scripture surveyed in this book has a long pedigree in Christian theology. It flowers in, for example, the mid-sixteenth century English writer, Gerrard Winstanley's, words, that ordinary people will have direct experience of God. Action will be the context of knowledge of the divine will. According to Liberation Theology understanding comes through action. Theology is the 'second act', paralleling Winstanley's words action is the life of all' priority is given to that inner prompting of God peculiarly derived from the experience of poverty and vulnerability which offers a glimpse of the mind of God. Scripture then acts as confirmation of that intuitive knowledge of God. In many radical movements in Christianity there is a stress on the immanence of God in the persons of the poor and as a catalyst for theology in history. From Paul's letter to the Galatians where the meaning of Scripture and the tradition is subordinated to experience of the Spirit to the use of the Bible in the basic ecclesial communities in late twentieth century Latin America the emphasis is on experience as a prior 'text' which must condition the way in which Scripture and tradition are read and the 'signs of the times' interpreted.

¹¹ K. Barth The Epistle to the Romans Oxford: Oxford University press 1933, p. 12.

¹² See Gerald West The Academy of the Poor Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999.