

# Christianity and Politics: The Case of

## Gerrard Winstanley

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### I

“For I tell you and your preachers, that Scripture which saith *The poor shall inherit the earth*, is really and materially to be fulfilled. For the earth is to be restored from the bondage of sword property, and it is to become a common treasury in reality to whole mankind; for this is the work of the true saviour to do, who is the true and faithful Leveller, even the spirit and power of universal love. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Thus wrote Gerrard Winstanley in 1650, about one year after the execution of Charles I. Sketching in the economic and political conditions of an earlier revolutionary period, Engels wrote in *The Peasant War in Germany*:

“Even the so-called religious wars of the sixteenth century involved primarily positive material class interests. Although the class struggles of the day were carried out under religious shibboleths, and though the interests, requirements, and demands of the various classes were concealed behind a religious screen, this changed nothing in the matter and is easily explained by the conditions of the time.”<sup>2</sup>

In a somewhat more cautious passage Christopher Hill says of Gerrard Winstanley that he

“was groping his way towards a humanist and materialist philosophy, in which there were no outward saviours, no heaven or hell or after life, but only men and women living in society. . . . Winstanley’s system of ideas could be rewritten in the language of secular deism; had he lived fifty years later he might have so expressed them . . . His thinking was struggling towards concepts which were more precisely if less poetically formulated by later, non-theological materialisms.”<sup>3</sup>

These passages provide the outlines of the agenda of this paper.

## II

First, a word or two about Engels. For Engels the struggles between Luther and the peasant leader Thomas Münzer, though conducted clearly enough in the language of religious polemic, were essentially political class struggles which both of them misread as theological. The theological misreading of the political is “easily explained by the conditions of the time”, including most obviously, the *de facto* pervasiveness of a religious culture in which “all social and political revolutionary doctrines were necessarily at the same time . . . theological heresies.”<sup>4</sup> It is only for this reason that, according to Engels, it seemed necessary to read the class struggles in Germany theologically, but this necessity had certain crucial effects on the way Münzer defined his revolutionary programme. His politics was incorrigibly eschatological, even chiliastic. Though a communist, his programme was less a platform of peasant demands formulated in relation to contemporary German historical possibilities than “the anticipation of communism *by fantasy*.”<sup>5</sup> Münzer, Engels says, sought

“a society in which there would be no class differences or private property and no state authority independent of or foreign to the members of that society. All the existing authorities, insofar as they refused to submit and join the revolution, were to be overthrown, all work and all property shared in common, and complete equality introduced.”<sup>6</sup>

But, Engels goes on to say, communism was not yet on the historical agenda in the sixteenth century. Consequently Münzer anticipated, in the form of a communist myth, a stage of social development which would become possible only on the basis of the achievements of the bourgeois revolution – being lead if somewhat uncertainly and still in religious terms by Luther – to which he was deeply *opposed*. And here Engels finds only paradox in the revolutionary demands of Münzer. A programme is not “revolutionary” simply because it demands communism, for this is to suppose that the political character of a programme is determined solely by the content of the ideas which it contains. What determines the political character of a programme as revolutionary, reformist or simply reactionary is the relation of the demands which it makes to the concrete possibilities of change made available by the economic and political and cultural conditions of the time. It is thus in the materiality of their relations with those conditions, not in the abstract content of those ideas that their political character is to be found. And, in relation to just such conditions in his own time, Engels believed that Münzer’s communist programme was materially reactionary, however much, in a formal sense, it was “revolutionary” in ideas.

Moreover, Engels believes that there is a specific link between the religious rhetoric in which Münzer couched his political demands and his failure to advert to the ways in which their material efficacy is governed by social and economic conditions. In fact he thought religious language was functional for<sup>7</sup> that failure to advert to those conditions and that in that functional character lay its ideological character. More about that later, but in the meantime let us note that the general thesis about religious language which Engels proposes is about what he identifies as a necessary connection between the “religious” way of looking at the world and the failure to see that world realistically – specifically the failure to recognise theological struggles for what they really are, namely misleading ways of reading class struggles. Moreover the root of that failure lies within the Christian’s own refusal to acknowledge the heteronomy of his own discourse in respect of those class struggles, in the persistent and fideistic belief in the autonomy of religious language with respect to the social, economic and political conditions of the world it speaks about.

Now Engel’s thesis about religious language is entirely *a priori*. As Maguire has put it

“Marx and Engels put religion on trial before a rather Kafkaesque tribunal: insofar as religion is sincerely religion, it is a set of abstract platitudes, at best useless, at worst harmful to the advancement of humanity; insofar as it says anything about the social and political reality of its time, it has ceased to be religion.”<sup>8</sup>

Either, Engels holds, Christianity is empirically, socially, practically empty, a tissue of tautologies in an abstract religiosity, or else, if it becomes politically committed to the class struggle, as with Münzer, it ceases to be Christianity, is at least crypto-reductionist and atheist. Admittedly, as an empirical generalisation this proposition would have some force and as such serves as a very proper warning to Christians: they are, as the evidence shows, in danger either of fetishising Christianity into the special religious language of an inbred religious community (as in fideism) or else of rejecting, in the name of revolutionary politics, any religious content to Christianity (as in some contemporary reductionisms). But to serve as a warning the point has to be an empirical proposition. Engels buys his certainty about this at the price of evacuating it of content: he makes the empirical point criterial. Hence, for Engels, you haven’t got Christianity at all unless you have this political vacuity. And that is why, in the end, he cannot take seriously the Christianity of any genuine revolutionary.

No Marxist ought to be committed to such an *a priori* doctrine. It is the sclerosis of explanatory theory. But my concern here is

not with rebutting the general proposition but rather, taking it in its prescriptive form, to ask whether Winstanley falls foul of it.

### III

Winstanley's programme is undoubtedly communist. Between the years 1648 and 1653 he wrote a series of pamphlets on behalf of the diminutive but energetic "Digger" movement, favouring a full-blooded anarcho-communism of a consistency and rigour which far outstrips that of the best minds in the near-related but essentially "bourgeois" Leveller movement. Winstanley, arguing in the name of the "poor oppressed people of England", called for the total abolition of private property, the wage relationship, of public religion, national law courts and university education and for a relatively sophisticated form of worker democracy. He foresaw clearly how a class of labourers forcibly set to work "for hire" necessarily produce and reproduce the conditions of their own oppression and he must be the first representative of labour to call for something like a general strike:

"This declares likewise to all Labourers, or such as are called poor people, that they shall not dare to work for hire, for any Landlord, or for any that is lifted up above others; for by their labours they have lifted up Tyrants and Tyranny; and by denying to labour for Hire, they shall pull them down again."<sup>9</sup>

Not only does Winstanley have a clear-eyed analysis of economic exploitation and of its class character, he has a clear picture also of the way in which the whole establishment of a society organises itself around a political ruling class in a complicity of mutual support. That class rule he calls the "Kingly power" and it is like a kind of sprawling social weed, the head of which was cut off with the execution of Charles I: but "Kingly power"

"hath many branches and great roots which must be grubbd up, before everyone can sing Sion's song in peace . . . there are Three Branches more of Kinglie power greater than the former (i.e. King Charles) that oppresses this land wonderfully; and these are the power of the Tithing Priests over the Tenths of our labours; and the power of the Lords of Mannors, holding the free use of the Commons, and wast land from the poor, and the intolerable oppression either of bad Laws, or of bad Judges corrupting good Lawes . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Winstanley's communism is unambiguous in its recognition of the class character of economic, political, legal and religious oppression and it is just on the point of the complicity of orthodox Christianity with secular forms of exploitation that Winstanley's analysis begins to converge upon Engels'.

In the first instance that complicity was, for Winstanley, a matter of the direct self-interest of the clergy, for whom he reserv-

ed some of his most savage ironies.

“The kingly power sets up a preaching clergy to draw the people by insinuating words to conform hereunto, and for their pains kingly power gives them the tithes; and when the kingly power hath any design to lift himself up any higher, then the clergy is to preach up that design . . . and then if people seem to deny tithes, then the kingly power by his laws doth force the people to pay them; so that there is a confederacy between the clergy and the great red dragon.”<sup>11</sup>

But Winstanley does not confine his criticism of religion to conventional, if particularly vivid, anti-clerical polemics. His onslaught is wholesale and radical. For traditional Christianity has a job to do at the very point in society where its alienations and oppressions are generated, whatever form these may have. That point is, for Winstanley, the point where the external oppressions of society are mediated to the individual member of it in a form in which they are misrecognised as being either of purely natural or else of supernatural origin. In fact it is not a matter primarily of the clergy “preaching up” the pretensions of “kingly power” – though Winstanley certainly thought they would do this – but a matter of the nature of the Christianity of his day itself.

For at the root of all social oppression is what Winstanley calls “imagination” which we could perhaps best translate as “self-deception”, for it is, in the first instance, a form of misrecognition of the self. “Imagination” is what makes a man identify himself in terms of his relations with objects outside himself and above all in his property relations with others. But property relations are essentially relations of competition, in turn competition breeds mutual fear and fear lies at the basis of all oppression, for

“This imagination fears where no fear is; he rises up to destroy others, for fear lest others destroy him, he will oppress others lest others oppress him; and fears he shall be in want hereafter: therefore he takes by violence that which others have laboured for.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus far Winstanley’s analysis looks like a kind of ironical Hobbism, but, unlike Hobbes, mutual fear is not the premiss but the product of a property owning society:

“I speak now in relation between the oppressors and the oppressed . . . I am assured that . . . the inward bondages of the mind, as covetousness, pride, hypocrisy, envy, sorrow, fears, desperation and madness are all occasioned by the outward bondage that one sort of people lay upon another.”<sup>13</sup>

Likewise “imagination” is not simply *personal* self-deceit. Rather, it has much of the character of what Marx and Engels later called by the name “ideology” for it functions at the level at which the

individual consciousness is mediated to the oppressive social system so as to find in it an acceptable, or at the very least an intelligible and necessary form of life. It is at once a product of a competitive and oppressive social system and a form of misrecognition of the self in relation to that system.

And it is just at this level that conventional Christianity performs not a primarily repressive, but a primarily ideological function. For Winstanley, Christianity, in the form of its central teachings and institutions, externalises and sets over against man all that is proper to him, and so alienates him. Everything in man is made into an object outside him to which Christianity then requires his willing and humble submission. Christianity teaches man to identify his own possessiveness, his own fears and deceits in the form not of the society he lives in but in the form of a personal devil. He is taught to identify his poverty and misery in the form of divine punishment and hell. Likewise, what for Winstanley was the historical hope of a revolutionary transformation of society was set apart from history in the form of a post-mortem heaven. And what was for Winstanley the "spirit of Christ, which is the spirit of universal community and freedom"<sup>14</sup> is made into the abstract individual person of Christ, who is appropriated by the oppressing clergy as a name for them to rule under. Even the name "God" has become a source of mystification, since it is made the name of an external object to which men must bow, in an affirmation of radical dependence.<sup>15</sup> In short, for Winstanley conventional Christianity is the quite primitive form of self-misidentification: it is the form of the loss of self and for that reason is the basis both of man's need to oppress and of his equal aptitude to submit to oppression.

Conventional Christianity, then, alienates man from himself and from his relation to the history which it is his proper business to control; or at least it is a social mechanism whereby the alienations of a market society are interiorised and endorsed. Consequently, until men rediscover and renew their solidarities in a kingless, priestless and propertyless communist world they cannot retrieve from its alienation the true significance of Christianity. But – and this is at last the crux of the matter – when men and women do rediscover those solidarities they will find no more significance in their Christianity than will in any case be found within those solidarities themselves.

#### IV

What, then, are we to make of the fact that the language in which Winstanley conducts this critique of politics and religion is suffused with Biblical allusion, metaphor and allegory? Is this merely to be "easily explained by the conditions of the time" and

otherwise ignored? Is Hill right in saying that it could all be rewritten in the language of later, non-theological materialisms? In short, is Winstanley nothing but a disguised theological reductionist?

I do not suppose that this question can be answered within the compass of a short paper and so I want to make a few comments about one aspect of Winstanley's reductionism, namely about its connection with his millenarianism. On one point I think Winstanley is to be defended unambiguously. Winstanley is surely right in his view that the coming of Christ is contingent upon – or perhaps rather is not materially to be distinguished from – the achievement of something like his vision of communist society. For here he is surely at one with the reductionism implicit in all Christianity according to which, ultimately, the coming of Christ is one and the same with the coming of “the Kingdom”, which, for all the feudalism of the metaphor, is what Winstanley meant by his communism. And Winstanley is surely right here too, that with the coming of the rule of “Reason” – with which property relations are utterly inconsistent – are abolished all priesthoods, sacraments, rituals and symbols, for in the New Jerusalem there is, significantly, no Church. I am sure that Winstanley would heartily have agreed with Marx that

“the religious reflex of the real world can . . . only . . . finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellow men and nature.”<sup>16</sup>

But what Winstanley lacks and Engels complains of, is any serious empirical-historical account of the struggle to achieve this end-state. This is why his anticipation of it is but ‘fantastic’, a symbol ungoverned by historical reference. To put it in another way, he has no account to give, in relation to the historical conditions of his time, of how that end-state is already present within those historical conditions.

Certainly Winstanley does affirm that that future communist society will be brought about by the agency not of the rich and powerful and articulate, but by the agency of the “poor oppressed people of England”.<sup>17</sup> But those “poor oppressed people” function within Winstanley's thought more as a moral category, as a pure symbol of an alternative society, a fact which leads him seriously to misjudge the revolutionary capabilities of the “poor oppressed”. For in Winstanley's day those people were not yet a class capable of revolutionary action, but only a relatively disorganised and marginalised, if statistically considerable proportion of the population.<sup>18</sup> For Marx and Engels it would be only on the back of later bourgeois developments – the development of the factory system, the forced mobilisation of redundant agricultural

labour into the cities, the extension of the wage relationship, the development of democratic ideas among industrial workers and many others besides – that Winstanley’s “poor oppressed people” would become anything like a revolutionary class. Winstanley’s political mistake was that of supposing that all he so perceptively saw foreshadowed negatively in the oppression of the poor in his time could be secured positively also in his time in the form of the agricultural commune. And this was, as Engels put it, nothing more than a “sally beyond the present and even the future” which was bound to be nothing but “violent and fantastic”.<sup>19</sup>

Now Engels thought that such political misreadings of history were the inevitable result of religious belief, for religious belief systematically de-historicises itself. And I am inclined to agree with this view of Winstanley. But there is no inevitability about this connection, since in Winstanley’s case the political mistake is governed by what we can see as a corresponding theological mistake, specifically in what we would today call his “eschatology”. What Winstanley demands, and clearly no adequate eschatology can deliver, is the full significance of Christ’s coming, fully available within history and now. Certainly, as we have seen, Winstanley did not believe that that significance is available now without reference to social, economic and political conditions, for, on the contrary, he believed that only in a communist society could that significance be emancipated from the irrationalities of “sword property”. But the demand that, as he put it, the “Christ-at-a-distance”<sup>20</sup> of unrealised eschatology, postponed to a post-mortem, even post-historical state, be brought back into his place within history, therefore led him to claim that communism could be achieved now and to ignore the dependence of that goal upon empirical agencies and conditions. Consequently the mistake in the politics neatly corresponds with the one-sidedness of his eschatology and, if Engels is right, is governed by it.

Clearly what is needed, both theologically and politically, is an eschatology capable of sustaining and accounting for the relations between two propositions: first, that the future, the end-state, can rewrite the present in its final form only *in the future*; and secondly, that a reference to that future is already inscribed in the historical vicissitudes of the present. If for no other reason this balance is needed to avoid the expedencies of a Leninism, whether political or theological, for which the moral force of the future lies entirely *in the future*, for it is the vicious doctrine according to which the future exerts no moral demands on the present, but only a casuistry of historical manipulation. Winstanley’s millenarianism rejects that Leninism in the form in which he knew it, in the form, that is, of the politico-religious power elite who played power-games



with the poor in the moral vacuum of history. What is needed, therefore, is an account of how that future makes moral demands upon our present behaviour of achieving it, of how our historical activity of effecting that future can be capable of symbolising what it effects. For only if historical action speaks with the same moral voice as does that end-state it purports to achieve is there any security against the doctrine that the purpose of achieving the end-state justifies any actions, whatever their moral quality, which can be thought to be means of achieving it. And as we know, only Stalinism is the historical product of this Leninism, in Church or in state.

At the theological level, then, Winstanley poses a reductionist, fully realised eschatology against the claims of an unrealised, fideistic Christianity which is at once devoid of political content and at the same time defenceless against political manipulation. He does so directly in political terms, insofar as he poses against a Christianity which has played into the hands of “kingly power” a Christianity whose significance is retrieved from the experiences of the poor and oppressed.

For Winstanley you cannot make sense of what Christians call the “kingdom” in terms of kings, but only in terms of your solidarity with those they oppress; you do not understand the power of God in terms of politicians, still less his omnipotence in terms of their tyrannies, but rather in the dispossession of those they rule. For Winstanley the Church is not to be understood on the model of the nation and its national security, but rather on analogy with the *diaspora* of the refugee. And, since he had many a harsh word for the academics – those “verbal professors of freedom”<sup>21</sup> as he called them – it is worth mentioning that, for Winstanley, it is not in their tight-lipped coherences that our model for religious language is to be found, but perhaps rather in our attempts at dialogue with the slack-mouthed incoherences of the spastic or with the impenetrable silences of autism.

Now Engels’ quarrel with all this is not in respect of its revolutionary fervour but in the fact that for Christians these signs of the future are de-historicised and so evacuated of reference to empirical revolutionary possibilities. Consequently the radicalism implicit in Christianity – which Engels acknowledges – is dissipated, it can never effect what it so richly symbolises. My complaint against Engels is that while he may – at best – have an empirical account of revolutionary agency, he leaves that history morally evacuated. So if Winstanley absolutises the moral demands of communism and lacks an account of historical agency, Engels absolutises history and lacks an account of moral agency.

It goes without saying that we need both. That is to say, we

need a more adequate eschatology than we have got, equally from the theological point of view and the political. It is far from being the case that Winstanley's thought was struggling towards the standpoint of later materialisms; rather it was struggling towards a more nuanced eschatology than any he was able to give. And I do not believe that we have made much advance on his position.

References to Winstanley's writings are either to *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. and introduction by G. H. Sabine, New York, 1941 and referred to as (S) or to *The Law of Freedom* and other writings, ed. and introduction by Christopher Hill, Harmondsworth 1973 and referred to as (CH).

- 1 *A New Year's Gift to the Parliament and the Army*, (CH), p 203.
- 2 Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, in Marx and Engels *On Religion* Moscow 1975, p 87.
- 3 C. Hill, *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley*, Past and Present Supplement 5, pp 56-57.
- 4 Engels, p 88.
- 5 Engels, p 91.
- 6 Engels, p 98.
- 7 Which is not to say that this effect was *intended* by anyone. The theory of ideology and of ideological functions has little in common with conspiracy theories.
- 8 "Gospel or Religious Language: Engels on the Peasant War", J. M. Maguire, *New Blackfriars*, August 1973, p 350.
- 9 *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (S), p 262.
- 10 *A New Year's Gift . . .* (CH) p 166.
- 11 *Op. cit.* p 200.
- 12 *Fire in the Bush*, (CH) p 226.
- 13 *The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, (CH) p 296.
- 14 *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*, (CH) p 88.
- 15 Cf. *Truth Lifting up its Head*, (S) p 112; *The New Law of Righteousness*, (S) p 163.
- 16 *Capital*, I, 1, i, iv, London 1970, p 79.
- 17 *A Declaration of the Poor Oppressed People of England*, (CH) p 99.
- 18 Cf. Appendix to *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, by C. B. MacPherson, Oxford 1963, for an estimate of the figures.
- 19 Engels, p 90.
- 20 *A Watchword to the City of London and the Army*, (CH) p 129.