RANTERS, QUAKERS AND REVOLUTION TODAY

[Note: the paper was drafted with a primarily Quaker readership in mind.]

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The present paper is an exercise in political theory and the history of ideas. My interests are primarily political and concern theology only when, from time to time, political theory takes a theological form. I explain this at the outset so that a reader who is primarily concerned with spiritual questions is not disappointed by what I say.

The politics which interest me is informal and of a grassroots kind. More specifically, it is Occupy-style politics – my reference being to the Occupy movement of 2011-2013. David Graeber's *The Democracy Project* (London: Allen Lane 2013) is, I think, the most challenging book-length study of Occupy's ideas. *The Democracy Project* is my starting point in the present piece.

At various points, Graeber refers to precursors of the Occupy movement. Occupy, he suggests, emerges from radical feminism, from Quakerism and from 'Native American traditions'; The 'antinuclear movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s' receives a mention.[1] Graeber's reference to Quakerism concerns me here.

In *The Democracy Project,* most of the precursors whom Graeber mentions have a twentieth century provenance. When he refers to the Quakers, whose origins are in the seventeenth century, his prose opens a deep well in time. When we peer into this well, what do we see?

The answer is that we see revolution.

What sort of revolution? Should we picture the revolution of the mid-seventeenth century as a successful 'bourgeois' revolution – 'successful' in that it launched British capitalism on its way? Or should we picture it as a failed popular revolution – 'failed' in that, by the end of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth, Britain was ruled

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1   D. Graeber *The Democracy Project* (London: Allen Lane) 2013 p. 195.

by a far-from-progressive social elite? The latter of these interpretations is the one that I favour. In the 1640s, church courts and the censorship underwent a 'breakdown'[2] - with the result that numerous currents of radical thought, many of which were apocalyptic, came to the fore.[3] When Graeber refers to Quakerism in his enumeration of Occupy's beginnings, it is as though he is restoring to seventeenth-century radicalism a voice. He reconnects Quaker thinking to its radical roots.

Such a re-connection faces a difficulty. As a matter of course, seventeenth-century thinkers adopted an idiom which may seem off-putting in the present day. The idiom is theological and, if we are to understand their positions, we must familiarise ourselves with theological claims. My paper attempts such a familiarisation. Only in my final paragraphs do I call in question seventeenth-century discussion's theological frame.

In a discussion of the controversial seventeenth-century Quaker James Nayler, Geoffrey Nuttall refers to Famlists and Seekers and Ranters as sects which may have formed Nayler's '*milieu*'.[4] It is the notion of a *milieu* of radical and uncensored thinking which concerns me here. A theological topic of concern to numerous radicals was God's grace. For many radicals of the period, God's grace was 'free' – in the sense that it was not confined to a selection of individuals (as some versions of Calvinism might maintain). Anyone – literally anyone – might be called to Christ. To be thus called was to undergo a transformation. For George Fox, the charismatic Quaker leader, for example, God's grace is *effective*: it has 'sufficiency' to bring the transformation into being.[5]

We must appreciate what this transformation means. We must note the depth which, for Quakers and other radicals, the transformation entailed. In doing so, we must note the extent to which Fox's theology was controversial. It renews a debate that was 'as old as Christian doctrine itself'.[6] The transformation of the individual bestows 'perfection'. How (it must be asked) is 'perfection' to be understood? To what notion of divine-human unity (or presence of God or Christ in the believer) does Foxian and seventeenth century perfectionism refer?[7] Richard G. Bailey has argued persuasively that 'Fox is telling us

2   C. Hill *The World Turned Upside Down* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1975) p. 23.
3   For the term *apocalyptic* , an explanatory note is required. Etymologically, an apocalypse is an unveiling – or a discovery, or a revelation. In present day English, the notions of apocalypse and armageddon are conflated – with disastrous and militaristic results. Abiezer Coppe, whom I quote in the present paper, was apocalyptic but far from militaristic. The same is true of William Blake, who picked up at the time of the French Revolution where the seventeenth-century radicals left off. If the seventeenth-century heritage is to be drawn upon, the elision of apocalypse and armaggeddon in present-day English must be set aside. The present piece employs the term 'apocalyptic' in an etymologically accurate sense.
4   G. Nuttall *James Nayler: A Fresh Approach* (London: Friends' Historical Society 1954) p. 2.
5   See G. Fox *The Journal* (London: Penguin Books 1998) p. 324. See also p. 417.
6   R. G. Bailey 'Was Seventeenth -century Quaker Christology Homogeneous?' in P. Dandelion, ed., *The Creation of Quaker Theory: insider Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2004) p. 68.
7   What (it may be asked) does a non-perfectionist theology look like? Scottish presbyterianism might be an answer. For Samuel Rutherford, writing in 1647, the 'good works' even of the regenerate remain 'polluted with sin' The regenerate (God's chosen people) are not 'without sin' (to use Coppe's term: Coppe in Smith p. 107.) although God, who is merciful, forgives them their sins (S. Rutherford *Rutherford's Catechism* (Edinburgh: Blue Banner Productions) p. 83.

that there is no distinction' – that is, no distinction in 'substance' – 'between Christ and the saints'.[8] Let us appreciate the force of what Fox (or Fox as interpreted by Bailey) claims: if there is *no distinction* between Christ and the human individual in whom grace operates, Christ is present – actually, substantially present – in the community of believers. If grace is 'free', in the sense that it is universal, human existence fulfills – well, *can* fulfill – an anarchistic dream.

At this point, let me glance forward in time. Quakers of the present day tend not to express their views by referring to 'perfection'. This said, a saying that is frequent amongst present-day Quakers – namely, that *there is that of God in everyone* - is an echo, however faint, of the theology of perfection that Fox and seventeenth-century radicals espoused.

What kind of human sense can be made of a perfectionist standpoint? A reader of seventeenth-century texts must bear in mind that, for the writers concerned, society and the individuals within it stood on the edge of a massive social and spiritual change. Abiezer Coppe, whom I shall take to speak for Ranterism in general, wrote of a 'free community'[9] - by which he meant a community of an anarchistic kind. For Coppe, the change in the direction of anarchism was imminent. In his own words: 'Never was there such a time since the world stood as now is'; 'It is but a very little time'; more succinctly stated, 'It's the last daies'.[10] The Ranters were famous or notorious for provocative actions: they praised free love, drank alcohol and advocated swearing 'i'th light, gloriously'.[11] Such actions can be regarded as performance art of, for example, a Surrealist or dada kind. The audience of a piece of performance art is challenged to respond in an enlightened or emancipated way. As Marcus Rediker has argued, the Quaker Benjamin Lay made masterful use or performance art or, as Rediker terms it, 'guerrilla theatre' to awaken the conscience of slave owning Quakers in Philadelphia.[12] For Ranters and for Quakers such as Lay, social and spiritual change were not just related. They were the same thing.

Here, I add a point to Rediker's excellent treatment of Lay. One of the circumstances that may have alarmed Philadelphians about Lay might have been that his actions reminded Quakers of their movements' Ranterish roots. In the polite and reactionary eighteenth century, the ghosts of Coppe and the Nayler of Bristol still walked. In the present day, groups such as Trident Ploughshares keep a valuable tradition alive.

At this point in my discussion, I break the rhythm of my historical or history-of-ideas treatment. I do so in order to present the idea of consensual democracy in a clear-cut

8   Ibid. p. 66. What Bailey refers to as Fox's '*not distinct* language' (ibid. pp. 67-68) is, I suggest, fundamental to the Quaker movement's beginning.
9   Coppe in N. Smith p. 96.
10 Coppe in Smith p. 110.
11 Coppe in Smith p. 92.
12 On 'guerrilla theatre' see M. Rediker *The Fearless Benjamin Lay* (London: Verso 2017) p. 61.

way. On this score, more than a historical issue or a point of nuance is at stake.

A note on democracy

Let me ask my reader to picture a group of individuals. These individuals, I stipulate, face a common situation. Let me add that the group wishes to respond to the situation in a democratic way.

How should this group proceed? One possibility is that they ask which course of action is favoured by most people. In order to identify the course of action, they hold a vote. Frequently, it is assumed that the procedure just described is the only procedure open to the group concerned. Majority voting is equated with democracy *per se*. However, there is an alternative. The group may ask: is there a course of action on which everyone present may agree?[13] (The agreement that I have in mind is ethical and political.) How might such a course of action be identified? The answer is: through discussion. Not just any sort of discussion is relevant. The discussion must be one where 'anyone who feels a proposal violates a fundamental principle shared by the group should have the opportunity to veto (block) that proposal'.[14] Here, Graeber's concern is with Occupations. His passages on this show what democracy *minus* majority voting might be.

At this point, a term may be introduced that gained currency in twentieth century debate. The term is *prefiguration*.[15] A radical group or movement that seeks to anticipate or embody the future at which it aims is a group or movement that adopts a prefigurative stance.[16] 'Be the change!' was a slogan that prefigurative radical movements employed. *The Democracy Project* stresses that the Occupy movement sought to be prefigurative in the sense outlined. The imminent or close-at-hand change for which mid-seventeenth century revolutionaries hoped was a source on which prefigurative actions could be launched.

For reasons of space, I cannot adequately explore the theme of prefiguration here.

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13 The term 'everyone present' requires discussion. What sort of 'presence' must be involved? Until recently literal or face-to-face was essential. Let us agree for the sake of argument that face-to-face presence is ideal. But is *electronic* presence sufficient, if consensual democracy to go forward? Here, I note that the current revolution in communications enlarges the scope of what participatory and consensual democracy can achieved.

14 *The Democracy Project* p. 211.

15 An influential twentieth-century invocation of prefiguration is: S. Rowbotham, L. Segal and H. Wainwright *Beyond the Fragments* (London: Merlin Press 1979) pp. 1979) pp. 132, 147. For a discussion that may or may not be of historical interest, see G. Brewer and . R. Gunn *The Politics of Organisation* (Edinburgh: First of May Publications 1980). Some more up-to-date comments are contained in R. Gunn and A. Wilding 'Hierarchy or Horizontalism – Critics of Occupy', published online by Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpress.com) on 17 February 2014.

16 In the Civil War period, in 1649, the practice of communism by the Diggers or True Levellers was an instance of prefigurative action.

Ranters and Quakers

In 1656, there occurred an event that is commonly seen as a parting of Ranterish and Quaker ways. In that year, James Nayler – not a Ranter but a leading Quaker – entered Bristol riding on a donkey in an intentionally Christ-like way. For this provocation, he was punished by the state. He was publicly tortured and, in consequence, became a broken man. We may note that, although his action at Bristol was dramatic, he had a point – and, perhaps a justification – that was theologically precise. If Christ's perfection was present in each believer, Christ and the historical individual named Nayler entered Bristol at the same time. Christ was tortured as a result. How, we must ask, were Ranters and Quakers related? As his *Journal* tells us, Fox encountered astern at numerous points in his life.[17] Not least because he was an abstemious individual, Fox and the Ranters did not see eye to eye. His response to events at Bristol was that Nayler "raised up a great darkness in the nation'.[18] At this point, we must be careful. Nowhere in his *Journal* does Fox present the undoubted difference in temperament between Ranters and himself as a difference in theological principle. Although Nayler's entrance into Bristol and the state's response to this piece of street theatre was traumatic for many Quakers, Fox championed a theology of perfection no less keenly after Nayler's action than before. In the *Journal, perfectionism continued as a red thread.* A theology of perfection is, I suggest, the 'badge' which marks out radical and uncensored thinking of the Civil War years. If this suggestion is followed, there is no question of his drifting into conformism as time passed.

A related point may be made regarding Fox's *Journal* as a whole. In his introduction to the Penguin edition, Nigel Smith observes: 'Fox dictated the *Journal* in the mid-1670s'[19] That is, he dictated it more than fifteen years after Charles II ascended to the English throne. Fox's emphasis on perfectionism continues not merely after the Nayler crisis but after the Civil Wars were concluded and the Commonwealth was at an end. What is remarkable about Fox is his faithfulness to radical (read here: perfectionist) thinking and his weddedness to uncensored and unconstrained ideas.

There is a disappointment here and I do not conceal it. There seems to me no doubt that a theology of perfection is the conceptual base on which consensual democracy and Quaker procedure rests. My claim is not that consensual democracy originated with the Quakers. (To the best of my knowledge, the Quakers made no such claim.) According to Ethan Mitchell, in his path-breaking 'Unanimous Decision-Making', the idea of such democracy may be traced back to the time of the sixteenth-century Peasants' War at least.[20] The disappointment is that a reader of the *Journal* looks in vain for a point

17 And the Ranters, see *Journal* pp. 63-7, 138, 149-50, i59, 176, 212, 271, 384, 343.
18 *Journal* p. 201.
19 *Journal* p. x.
20 E. Mitchell 'Participation in Unanimous Decision-Making: The New England Monthly Meetings of Friends' *Philica* (www.philica.com) 29 August 2006.

where, by the Quakers, the practice of consensual democracy (or unanimous decision-making) was taken on board. A tempting moment is when monthly meetings were instituted. Fox emphasises this moment. He tells us that, when he launched the idea of monthly meetings, he 'was moved' by 'the Lord God'.[21] But the *Journal* tells us nothing about how monthly meetings were conducted. If, borrowing a twentieth-century expression, monthly meetings were the equivalent of an 'ideal speech situation', a reader is left in the dark about what took place.[22] A reader looks in vain for a point in the development of Quakerism where, exactly, consensual democracy came to be.

My suggestion in the present paper is that consensual democracy was not a late addition to the Quaker movement. On the contrary, its roots lay in the commitment to perfection that Fox inherited from the Civil War years.

I have promised that, at the end of this short article, I shall drop the mask of the historian of ideas that I have so far worn. I shall offer thoughts about the theological idiom that Civil War radicals employed. My first thought is that the idiom is paradoxical. For the radicals, Coppe and Fox included, God was not a remote and other-wordly figure; humanity's relation to God was intimate and close and, so to say, everyday. In order to express this closeness, why employ a theological idiom? Why turn to theology where, regardless of theological doctrine, the notion of a '*beyond*' or a God who is other-worldly is never far away? To refer to the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, and to make a question out of one of his best-known passages, can theology avoid constructing 'not merely *a* world, but a world that is double, divided and self-opposed'?[23] Fox and Coppe, different though they were in temperament, opposed other-worldly religion and the doubling or self-division that it entailed.

My second thought about theology requires that I refer to an episode in my own life. In the 1970s, I was invited to take part in a debate on 'Is Christianity Credible?' in the Methodist journal *Epworth Review*. My task was to contribute a paper on Marxism and religious belief. When the debate appeared in book form, David Stacey, the editor, had this to stay: 'Richard Gunn writes as a Marxist rejecting Christian metaphysics root and branch and contending that all problems have to be solved in terms of man's autonomy.'[24] I am grateful for the term 'autonomy', written at a time when Marx tended to be seen in economic and base-and-superstructure terms alone. For the rest, I was astonished. I had not realised that my piece was written in so confrontational a way. As time passed, however, I grew into Stacey's words. My work as a political theorist has focused on human freedom and has set a theistic or theological perspective aside. I have never been dismayed by political theory that employs a theological framework although

21 *Journal* p 370.
22 I borrow the term 'ideal speech situation' from Jurgen Habermas 'Wahreheisttheorin' in H. Fahrenbach, ed., *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion* (Neske: Pfullingen 1973).
23 G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit,* translated by A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977) p. 295.
24 D. Stacey, ed., Introduction to *Is Christianity Credible? (London: Epworth Press 1981)* p. 3.

I have felt that this framework is not for me. It is fair to say that my interest in theological issues grows when themes concerning human autonomy are at stake.

I close by noting a point regarding my paper. Short though it is, it is a paper with two central figures: Fox and Coppe. Who is my hero? I offer no decision. My claim is that thought can remain radical (or 'perfectionist') in more than a single way.

Richard Gunn. September 2018.