



State democracy and church democracy

The Levellers and the Bible in the English Revolution



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Modern political values have religious sources, but these are easily overlooked. Contemporary political theory is a secularised discipline, making little or no reference to theology or sacred texts. This was not the case in early modernity. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as in the Middle Ages, political thinkers were preoccupied by questions of ecclesiastical as well as civil power; discussions about the church often spilled over into debates about the state. Medieval conciliarists maintained that the Catholic Church should be governed by councils not merely by popes, and their arguments were deployed by defenders of parliaments against monarchs. Accounts of church polity were expected to align with civil polity. English Presbyterians, who asserted that ecclesiastical power lay with local presbyters rather than with an episcopal hierarchy, were accused of undermining monarchy. As King James VI and I put it: 'No bishop, no king.' When the Puritan divine Richard Baxter visited the New Model Army in 1645, he was disturbed to hear the troops engaging in heated intellectual debates, arguing 'sometimes for State Democracy, and sometimes for Church Democracy'.¹

In these controversies about church and state, the Bible was frequently cited as a source of unimpeachable authority, albeit one whose political message was hotly disputed. To win a political argument, one needed to have Scripture on one's side. Two of the classic works of English political thought – Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and Locke's *Two Treatises* (1689) – devote half of their text to scriptural and theological reasoning. The Old Testament, with its primordial history,

its judicial laws, its political narrative, and its prophetic calls for social justice, loomed at least as large as the New Testament in Christian political reflection. Indeed, treatises on 'the Hebrew republic' formed one of the most important genres of political theory in seventeenth-century Europe.² Hardly surprising then, that when early moderns argued over democracy, they did it with Aristotle in one hand and the Bible in the other.

Democracy in the modern sense – one person, one vote – was not inconceivable in early modern Europe, but it was viewed as a dangerous idea. Aristotle had provided the standard taxonomy of political systems, and the forms into which they often degenerated: monarchy into tyranny, aristocracy into oligarchy, democracy into anarchy. Anarchy was deeply feared, and the carnage of the German Peasants War of 1525, unleashed by apocalyptic hopes inspired by Luther's Reformation, was a warning against empowering the people. English Puritans (who sought to reform the Elizabethan settlement) were often accused of fostering 'popularity', and 'democracy' was a smear word more than a noble ideal. Yet there was wide support for a 'mixed polity', combining elements of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. In church government, Presbyterians claimed to be balancing the claims of Christ as king, an aristocratic eldership, and the popular consent of local congregations.

Congregationalists and Baptists went further, establishing new congregations by a 'church covenant' between members, and holding meetings in which members (even women) voted. Sectarian

congregations often fostered lay preaching, even allowing artisans and tradesmen to proclaim the word, on the grounds that 'the Spirit's teaching' was of greater value than a university education. As the sociologist Max Weber recognised, English Puritanism 'created a popular religious intellectualism never found since', prompting ordinary men and women to master the biblical text, and to grapple with abstruse doctrinal disputes.³ In the City of London during the 1640s, the cobbler Samuel How memorised Scripture while mending shoes, and went head to head with learned Puritan clergy in a debate in the Nag's Head Tavern. The soapboiler Thomas Lambe established a Baptist congregation in Swan Alley on Coleman Street that became notorious for free-ranging discussions, in which anyone present could voice their opinion. There were even women preachers, like the formidable separatist Katherine Chidley.

This was the populist religious milieu which produced 'the Levellers' – a nickname they rejected, though one that stuck, because like 'Baptist' and 'Quaker' it captured a central feature of their movement. Keen supporters of the Parliamentary cause, the Levellers coalesced around a triumvirate of activist pamphleteers who organised mass petitions: John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn. Lilburne had acquired fame as a 'martyr' after suffering persecution under bishops. He and Overton were Baptists, and although Walwyn never separated from the parish churches, he frequently attended 'gathered churches'. All three championed 'liberty of conscience' and denied that the magistrate had any coercive power in matters of religion. The separatist congregations led by Lambe and Chidley were a key part of the Levellers' core support base.⁴

As the 1640s progressed, Lilburne and Overton came to believe that English liberties were threatened as much by the Parliamentarians in the Lords and Commons as by the King. In a series of manifestoes, they insisted that the power of government comes from the people, and must be subject in *An Arrow against all Tyrants* to strict limitations in recognition of the natural rights of citizens. By 1647 they were demanding a written constitution. As the historian David Wootton explains:

The Levellers are the first modern political movement organized around the idea of popular sovereignty. They are the first democrats who think in terms, not of participatory self-government within a city-state, but of representative government within a nation-state. They are the first who want a written constitution in order to protect the rights of citizens against the state. The first with a modern conception of which rights should be inalienable: the right to silence ... and to legal representation; the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of debate; the right to equality before the law and freedom of trade; the right to vote and, when faced with tyranny, to revolution. The Levellers are thus not

*merely the first modern democrats, but the first to seek to construct a liberal state.*⁵

In emphasising the modernity of Leveller values, historians run the risk of downplaying their pre-modern roots. The Levellers drew on various sources: Greek and Roman political thought, the classical republican tradition, natural law theory, English common law, the idea of 'the Norman Yoke', as well as recent declarations of Parliament and the New Model Army. Their experience of London politics was formative, for City politics permitted a remarkably wide participation in parochial affairs and Common Council elections. Yet the Levellers were also a religiously motivated reform movement, emerging from radical Protestant sects and steeped in the language and narrative of the Bible. Biblical texts adorned the title pages of some of their most important tracts, and biblical allusions peppered their arguments.⁶

This was no mere rhetoric. The Levellers read the Bible politically, as a book with a coherent message about power and its abuse. They found in biblical narrative a series of confrontations between vulnerable saints and powerful oppressors: Abel slaughtered by his brother Cain; the Children of Israel enslaved by Pharaoh's taskmasters; the Israelites trembling like grasshoppers before the giants of Canaan; Old Testament heroes stoned and sawn asunder; David taunted by the giant Goliath; Elijah facing the prophets of Baal; the psalmist surrounded by 'bulls of Bashan'; the exiles in Babylon ruled by Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar; Christ persecuted by Scribes, Pharisees and the temple authorities; the apostles assailed by mobs and priests; the witnesses of the book of Revelation martyred by the Beast. The Bible was history from below, viewed from the vantage point of the weak. As Walwyn explained, God did not choose the learned to be his 'Prophets and publishers of the Gospel; but Herds-men, Fisher-men, Tent-makers, Toll-gatherers, etc'. Christ himself, 'who thought it no robbery to be equal with God ... yet despised not to be esteemed the Son of a Carpenter.'⁷

The fact that the Bible was written by the marginalised, and that the incarnate Son of God had been a manual labourer, testified to the character of the God. For the Levellers, the God of the Bible sided with the poor and the downtrodden. In one of Lilburne's final tracts, his *Just Defence* (1653), he stated: 'I have been hunted like a Partridge upon the mountains ... but yet I know I have to deal with a gracious God.'⁸

Christians, like the God they worshipped, were to have a bias to the poor. Leveller writers never tired of citing the demands for social justice in the Hebrew prophets, the Gospels and the letter of James. Walwyn was 'exceeding in love with' the Epistle of James, and liked to cite his censure of the rich and his definition of 'pure religion and undefiled ... To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction' (James 1.27). Overton laid down a

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1. Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696), I, p. 53.
2. See Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
3. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenter Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), I: 514.
4. See John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* (London: Verso, 2016), chs. 2–4.
5. David Wootton, 'The Levellers', in John Dunn, ed., *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 71.
6. See Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1993), ch. 8; Andrew Bradstock, 'Digging, Levelling and Ranting: The Bible and the Civil War Sects', in Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, Rachel Willie, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c. 1530–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 25.
7. *The Writings of William Walwyn*, ed. Barbara Taft and J.R. McMichael (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 416, 418.
8. The title page bore a text that encapsulated his political theology: 'Job. 5.15. But he saveth the poor from the sword, from the mouth and from the hand of the mighty.'

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9. R Overton, *In An Arrow against all Tyrants*, see *The English Levellers*, ed. Andrew Sharp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 71.

10. *The English Levellers*, 31.

11. A.S.P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647-49) from the Clarke Manuscripts* (London: JM Dent, 1938), 367.

12. See C.H. Firth, ed., *The Clarke Papers: Selections from the Papers of William Clarke, Secretary to the Council of the Army, 1647-1649* ([1891]; London: Royal Historical Society, 1992), I: 226-406

13. *The English Levellers*, 103.

14. *The English Levellers*, 118.

15. A leading Brexiteer and author of *How We Invented Freedom and Why It Matters*.

challenge to his readers: 'Let not the greatest peers in the land be more respected with you than so many old bellows-menders, broom-men, cobblers, tinkers, or chimney-sweepers, who are all equally freeborn with the hugest men and loftiest Anakims in the land'.⁹ Anakims were the fearsome giants who populated the land of Canaan (Joshua 15.13), and Overton saw their successors in England's kings, lords, grandees, and generals. But in God's eyes, the mighty were on a level with cobblers (like Samuel How), or tinkers (like John Bunyan).

the Levellers represent a distinctly Christian tradition of political protest

In Leveller thought, the egalitarianism of biblical narrative was of a piece with the equality taught by natural law theory. As Lilburne explained, God had created man 'after His own image', enduing him with 'a rational soul'. Adam and Eve were the progenitors of 'every particular and individual man and woman that ever breathed in the world since; who are, and were by nature all equal and alike in power, dignity, authority and majesty – none of them having (by nature) any authority, dominion, or magisterial power, one over or above another'. Legitimate authority to govern was the product of mutual consent and voluntary contract, not a natural right of domination.¹⁰

Lilburne's emphasis on the fundamental equality of male and female was unusual, but it was reiterated in a remarkable 1649 petition of Leveller women: 'since we are assured of our creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ equal unto men, as also a proportionable share in the freedoms of this commonwealth, we cannot but wonder and grieve that we should appear so despicable in your eyes as to be thought unworthy to petition ... Have we not an equal interest with the men of this nation?'¹¹

While Leveller women demanded the right to petition, the movement did not push for female voting rights or office holding. Yet its arguments did come into play in one of the most famous political debates in English history, held at Putney in 1647. It was here that the Council of the New Model Army – together with Agitators (or agents) from its regiments, and some civilians – gathered to discuss a future political settlement. Recorded in shorthand by secretaries, the notes of the debate were only rediscovered in the late nineteenth century, allowing readers to eavesdrop on an extraordinary exchange.¹² Oliver Cromwell took the chair after a five hour prayer meeting. The most frequent speaker was his son-in-law Henry Ireton. He was alarmed by a proposal in *The Agreement of the People*, a Leveller-sponsored written constitution, which called for a redistribution of parliamentary seats according to population. He feared that this meant an extension

of the franchise, beyond property holders to those who had no 'stake' in the nation.

This provoked a startling statement by Colonel Thomas Rainsborowe, who spoke in favour of giving men without property the right to vote (whether in parliamentary elections or for a new written constitution): 'For really I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he; and ... I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government.'¹³

Rainsborowe's case rested on appeals to the rights of Englishmen and to natural law theory. He argued that that 'the gift of reason' was sufficient to qualify 'the poorest he' for the franchise. His case had emotional force because many unpropertied soldiers had risked their lives for the parliamentary cause. There was a religious logic at work too. Rainsborowe was a devout Puritan. He invoked Scripture when he declared that it was not right for the powerful to turn the majority of men into 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' (like the Gibeonites in Joshua 9.21).¹⁴ His defence of 'the poorest he' who had engaged for Parliament was informed by a biblical egalitarianism that insisted on the dignity of herdsmen, fishermen and carpenters.

In the 1640s, the Leveller agenda proved too radical for the commanders of the New Model Army. Lilburne and his comrades were instinctive protestors, quite unwilling to make the compromises required of those who govern. Before long, their writings were largely forgotten, gathering dust until rediscovered by a new generation of readers in the twentieth century, and celebrated by politicians like Tony Benn as pioneering statements of core democratic principles. In twenty-first century Britain, where fundamental constitutional issues are once again keenly debated, the Levellers are enjoying a new vogue. Jeremy Corbyn told the *New Statesman* that John Lilburne is the historical figure he most admires, while the Levellers have been praised as proto-libertarians by the Eurosceptic Tory MEP Daniel Hannan.¹⁵

What often gets forgotten in this contemporary appropriation of the past is the religious (and specifically biblical) component of Leveller thought. Yet the Levellers represent a distinctly Christian tradition of political protest, and might even be seen as pioneers of modern Christian human rights activism. The way they read the Bible as a critique of oppression has much in common with how Scripture was used in later movements, from abolitionism to the civil rights movement and liberation theology. In contrast to much contemporary right-wing populism, which seeks to exclude vulnerable minorities, Leveller populism was dedicated to protecting the rights of the weak in the face of the powerful. It spoke up for 'the poorest he', and sometimes for the poorest she too. If the Levellers can help us appreciate the religious sources of modern democracy, they might also help us to think about its uncertain future.