

The Religious Beliefs of the Levellers

THE emergence of the Levellers began the most determined attempt in English history to give political expression to the doctrines of Law and of man which had characterised the Dissenting groups. In opposition to the Presbyterians and also, after the army debates at Putney had attempted to draw up a new form of government for England, expressed in "The Agreement of the People," to the Cromwellian party, they sought to translate the belief in man's spiritual liberty, a presupposition of Dissenting thought, into the assertion that all members of the state share equal rights and responsibilities. As the Separatists had maintained that members of the Church were subject to the same Law of God, so the Levellers held that all in the Commonwealth owe equal obedience to the Law of Nature and of the state. They attempted to establish politically a view of the individual's relationship with his society which had already found ecclesiastical expression in the gathered churches of the Nonconforming groups. Thus the movement cannot be properly understood except as it is seen in the setting of the religious life of the period, and to examine the social and political views of its leaders, without first considering their theological convictions, is to fail to appreciate the source and inspiration of their beliefs and actions.

Though most of the leaders of the Baptists and Independents dissociated themselves from the Levellers, many of whom found it impossible to subscribe to the theological beliefs expressed in the Confessions of the Dissenters, yet the Levellers are a Christian movement and seek to give expression to the teaching of Jesus, though, as M. A. Gibb in *John Lilburne the Leveller* (1947) points out, they looked for perfectionism in history and watered down the eschatological teaching of Christianity. William Walwyn, writing on behalf of John Lilburne, Richard Overton and Thomas Prince, leaders of the movement, who individually or collectively, are responsible for the majority of the Leveller Tracts, says, in 1649:—

"Whereas its said, we are Atheists and Antiscripturalists, we professe that we believe there is one eternall and omnipotent God, the Father and Preserver of all things in the world. To whose will and directions, written first in our hearts, and afterwards in his blessed Word, we ought to square our actions and conversations. And though we are not so str'ct upon the formall and Ceremonial part of his service, the method, manner, and personall injunction being not

so clearly made out unto us, nor the necessary requities which his Officers and Ministers ought to be furnished withall as yet appearing to some of us in any that pretend thereunto: yet for the manifestation of God's love in Christ, it is clearly assented unto by us: and the practicall and most reall part of Religion is as readily submitted unto by us, as being, in our apprehensions, the most eminent and the most excellent in the world, and as preceeding from no other but that God, who is Goodnesse itself: and we humbly desire his Goodnesse daily more and more to conform our hearts to a willing and sincere obedience thereunto."¹

Walwyn, by birth the grandson of a Bishop of Hereford and by occupation a member of the Company of Merchant Adventurers, had taken the Parliamentary side during the Civil War, but had, by 1646, lost his earlier hope that the Long Parliament would usher in an age of liberty and peace and had thrown in his lot with the Levellers, among whom he soon became prominent, even drawing up the Leveller Petition of March, 1647. In 1649 he was the subject of an attack from a number of Baptists led by William Kiffin, who, in the pamphlet, *Walwins Wiles*, charge him with atheism. In answer to this charge a friend of Walwyn tries to explain the antagonism which the sects felt for him and writes:

"The true ground of this bitterness of spirit against him may well be supposed to be, because he cannot associate with them into a Church-way, upon their grounds; as not knowing any persons to be so qualified as Ministers of the Gospel ought to be. . . . In the mean time he approves Congregational Assemblies for instructing the people, and for the consideration and right understanding of the Scriptures; as also for making every man in love with true piety and virtue, and to loath whatever is evil: but. . . . he can no more approve the Divine Authority and Saintship of the Independent Pastours then of others before them: and reckons that they are such but in pretence and show only."²

In the same year Walwyn, also in answer to *Walwins Wiles*, holds that the neglect by the Dissenting Churches of the essential and practical part of the Christian religion, which is to show charity to all, for all Christians are under an infinite obligation of love and thankfulness to God, is an ingratitude that astonishes him.³ Yet, in earlier years Walwyn's relationship with the sects, particularly the Baptists, had been cordial. In 1646 he writes:

"There is not anything I have observed that hath prevailed with me to disclaim the publike ministry, or the parochial congregations and I have yet some hopes to see them reduced into such a condition, as that all things thereunto belonging may, without difficulty, be justly

¹ "A Manifestation from Lieutenant Col. John Lilburn, Mr. William Walwyn, Mr. Thomas Prince, and Mr. Richard Overton (now Prisoners in the Tower of London) and others, commonly (though unjustly) stiled Levellers" 1649. Printed in Wolfe, Don M. *Leveller Manifestoes*, 1944 p. 393."

² B. N. *The Charity of Churchmen*, 1649.

³ Walwyn, William. *The Fountain of Slander Discovered*, 1649 p. 1

fied: but though I am not in fellowship with those good people you call sectaries, yet I joyne heart and hand with them in any thing I judge to be right, and tending to the publike good: and love them as heartily as those that are one with me in judgement."⁴

In answer to Edwards *Gangrena*, he speaks of the Dissenting Groups as those, "who from the beginning of these our troubles have continually, without repining, contributed their fleece for clothing, and their limbs and lives for nourishment, and strength, to preserve, not only their own liberties but the just liberties of this nation."⁵ Thus, Walwyn's sympathies with the Independents and Baptists is occasioned by his anticlericalism and by his political sympathies and, as first the Presbyterians and then the Independents assume power, so he becomes less favourably disposed towards them.

Walwyn accepts the belief, that is characteristic of the Puritan attitude to ecclesiastical matters, holding that the Word of God is the only unerring rule for the ministry and worship of the Church, for, whereas the best reformed Church in the world may be at fault, the Biblical pattern of the Church is the very mind of God. Yet he is greatly concerned with the problem of interpretation, a problem which the early Puritans and Separatists did not recognise to exist, believing the meaning of the Scriptures to be self-evident. He holds that Word of God can be interpreted only by the individual conscience, for no external authority is competent to impose on anyone anything that pertains to the world of the spirit. He was himself conscious of a religious vocation, which he sought to express in terms of human and divine love. His view of religion is epitomised in his words addressed to Thomas Edwards:

"O that truth and this my plain dealing might beget or awaken Conscience in you, and provoke you to cast off the works of darkness, and to put on the armour of light, and henceforth to walk honestly, and not in strife and envying, but to walk in love as Christ hath loved: nor is it meet you should esteeme your self a Christian, untill you find your soul possessed with the spirit of true Christian love, which doth no evil to his neighbour, and therefore is the fulfilling of the Law."⁶

The relationship between these theological views and the social problems of the day is developed by Walwyn in *The Power of Love*. In this work he condemns inequality of wealth, but adds that the communism of the early Church was voluntary, not coercive and so, could be introduced only by universal assent. Walwyn believed that, in all matters, disciples of Christ must be known by their love.

Richard Overton, another Leveller leader, spent his early years

⁴ Walwyn, W. *A Whisper in the Ear of Mr. Thomas Edwards*, 1646 p. 1.

⁵ Walwyn, W. *An Antidote Against Master Edwards*, 1646, p. 2.

⁶ Walwyn, W. *A Whisper in the Ear of Mr. Thomas Edwards*, p. 8.

in Holland, where he came in contact with Anabaptist and Baptist views. It is almost certain that he is the R.O. whose views are expressed in the title, *Mans Mortallitie or a Treatise wherein tis proved, both Theologically and Phylosophically that whole man (as a rational Creature) is a Compound wholly mortall, contrary to that common distinction of soule and body: And that the present going of the soule into Heaven or Hell is a meer Fiction: And that at the Resurrection is the beginning of our immortality, and then actuall Condemnation and Sa'vation, and not before* (1643). This work was heartily condemned at the time, especially by the Presbyterians of London. Yet Overton's contribution to the religious thought of his age does not lie within this strange work in which M. A. Gibb finds "evidence of a crude materialism in the scientific and biological discussion upon which Overton has embarked in his ambitious venture": rather should he be remembered for his attempt to reconcile his religious beliefs with his own rational outlook. The Law of God and of Nature is, for him, that which is essentially reasonable for, he writes, "Reason is the life of the Law."⁷ He develops this view when he says:

"All formes of Lawes and Governments may fall and passe away; but right Reason (the foundation of all justice and mercy to the creature) shall and will endure for ever; it is that by which in all our Actions wee must stand or fall, be justified or condemned; for neither Morality nor Divinity amongst men can or may transgress the limits of right reason . . . God is not a God of irrationality, and madnesse or tyranny: Therefore all his communications are reasonable and just, and what is so, is of God."⁸

Man is granted by God, natural and inalienable rights. All men are born, he believes, to "like propriety, liberty and freedom," and must be granted opportunity in the world to enjoy these innate rights.⁹ By 1649 Overton's attitude towards the sects has hardened into antagonism and when he reports that he has heard that "those painted Sepulchers of Independency" desire a treaty with the Levellers, he advises his friends, "touch pitch, and you shall be defiled, have nothing to do with them."¹⁰

The religious beliefs of John Lilburne, described by Dr. Schenk as "the most popular and most turbulent of the Leveller leaders," were nearer to those of the Baptists and Independents than were those of Walwyn and Overton. In his early years in London he had contact with the London Baptists and William Kiffin supplied the foreword to his *The Christian Mans Triall*, which he published in 1641. He tells us that while an apprentice in the wool trade

⁷ Overton, R., *A Defiance Against all Arbitrary Usupations*, 1646 p. 6.

⁸ Overton, R., *An Appeale from the Degenerate Representative Body*, 1647 (*Leveller Manifestoes*, p. 158).

⁹ Vide Overton, R., *An Arrow Against all Tyrants*, 1646.

¹⁰ Overton, R., *The Baiting of the Great Bull of Bashan*, 1649, p. 6.

he used to spend his time reading the Bible and *The Book of Martyrs*, together with the works of Luther, Calvin, Beza, Cartwright, Perkins, Molin, Burton, and Roger. This list of works enables us to appreciate the Puritanical setting of Lilburne's views. In 1646 he says of himself :

" The Lord being an almighty God, is able to bring to passe his owne determinions and counsels by his owne way and means, and in his owne due time, and he, in his wisdome hath so ordered it, that I, his poore servant should be counted worthy by him to have the honour and dignitie bestowed on me for to suffer for his cause and glory and to beare witness to the purity of his truth, and to oppose his grand and capital enemies, namely the man of sin and his chiefe servants and confederates, the Bishops, and their Priests and Deacons, who have for many hundred years together buried the truth and the wayes of God in oblivion, and trodden underfoot the holy citie and true Church of God."¹¹

Speaking of the Church itself, Lilburne uses the language that typifies the Puritan movement; Jesus is the only Priest, Prophet, King and Lawgiver of His Church and he holds, as against those who regarded the order and ministry of the Church as things indifferent that, " Jesus is as faithful in his house as Moses was in his Law."¹² In his work, *Rash Oathes Unwarrantable* (1647), he asks whether there can be any greater treason which can be committed by man than to disclaim the Law of Christ in ecclesiastical matters and to swear to follow any Pope, King or Parliament, as supreme governor in matters ecclesiastical or spiritual. These were views acceptable to the Dissenting group and Edwards could speak of him in *Gangrena* as " the darling of the sectaries." In theological matters, Lilburne's background was different from that of Overton and Walwyn. He was nurtured in the faith of the Calvinist, receiving in the early years of his protest the support of William Kiffin, the Baptist, and John Goodwin, the Independent, yet he, like the Puritans, as William Haller points out, finds a sense of freedom, rather than an experience of condemnation, in the doctrine of election. On the other hand, Overton and Walwyn reject utterly this doctrine and belong to a more humanistic tradition, finding it impossible to reconcile predestination with their view of man's natural freedom.

It is, of course, difficult to obtain direct evidence as to the religious beliefs of the rank and file of the Leveller Movement, but the language of the anonymous tracts and broadsheets, the petitions and agreements and, in particular, the debates of the Army at Putney, contain a terminology which was essentially that of the Sects. Many Baptists and Independents joined them and

¹¹ Lilburne, J., *Immocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, p. 1.

¹² Lilburne, J., *An Answer to Nine Arguments Written by T.B.* n.d.,

others supported the movement with moral and financial aid. Yet, by 1649, events alienated the sects from the Levellers. The author of the work, *The Vanitie of the Present Churches, and Uncertainty of their Preaching Discovered* (1649), a writer who is highly commended in *Walwyn's Just Defence*, writes of the Presbyterians and the Independents:

"it were much better for the Common wealth that all mens mindes were set at Liberty from these entanglements that so there might be an end of weangling about shaddows: for if men were once free from this bondage, they would by reading the Scriptures . . . soone come to be able to understand the intent and substantial scope thereof, and become substantiall Christians."¹³

He holds that the essential mark of the true Church is that there, "the very word of God is infallibly preached," and claims that neither the Independents nor other religious bodies in England exhibit that mark.¹⁴ Prof. Woodhouse holds that the aims of the Levellers are secular,¹⁵ yet this is true only in a limited sense. Their view of the state, and consequent desire to reform it, spring from a view of Natural Law which demands a religious setting. In the tract, *Vox Plebis* (1646), we read:

"That Republique which would keep it selfe from ruine, is above all other things to keep their Religion uncorrupted and their Lawes from violation. For as true Religion is the tie of the Conscience to obedience and observation of just Lawes (especially such as have their foundation in Divine Authority) so are good Lawes the civill sanctions or sinewes of a Common wealth, that bind all the members thereof together, by the execution of justice and piety, in a perpetual bond of peace and tranquility, so that, if either Religion be neglected, or the Lawes violated, the ruine of that Common wealth must needs be neere."

In 1649 Lilburne still holds that the true end of his political agitation is, "to knit the hearts together of all ingenuous men, in every faction or interest, that had but the least spark of a desire to do unto their neighbours as they would be done unto: Which Law is not only the prime Law of Nature, but also the strict command of the Law and Gospel."¹⁶

The whole of Leveller thought is dominated by their view of Law, and in this they show themselves the heirs of the traditions of the Separatists and Dissenters. In all political matters they are anxious that the positive Law of England shall reflect the moral Law of Nature, though, unlike many of the Sects, they do not identify this Law with the Mosaic Code, while readily acknowledg-

¹³ Haller, W. and Davies, G., *The Leveller Tracts*, 1944, p. 271.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁵ Vide *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Lilburne, J., *An Impeachment of High Treason Against Oliver Cromwell*, 1649, p. 21.

ing that it has its origin in the divine Will. This is well illustrated in *Vox Plebis*.

"As touching the liberty of our persons: That is founded not only in Divine Law, but in Nature also: and so protected by the municipall and known Lawes of this Kingdom. For as God created every man free in Adam, so by nature are all alike freemen born; and are since made free in grace by Christ: no guilt of the father being of sufficiency to deprive the child of this freedom. And although there was that wicked and unchristian-like custome of villany introduced by the Norman Conquerour, yet was it but a violent usurpation upon the Law of our Creation, Nature, and the ancient Lawes of this Kingdom, and is now, since the clearer light of the Gospel hath shined forth, by a necessary harmony of humane society, quite abolished, as a thing odious to God and man in this our Christian Common wealth."

All human affairs are subject to these three Laws, and by them every man is made responsible for advancing the good and happiness of the whole community and for preventing the growth of tyranny within the state, in place of true Christian magistracy. Every man is by Nature free, and all these Laws grant him, when this liberty is endangered, the right to use, "the most violent remedy at hand, light it where it will, or upon whom it will," for, the proposed "Agreement of the People," drawn up in 1647, holds "it is a firme Law and radicall principle in Nature, engraven in the tables of the heart by the finger of God in creation for every living, moving thing, wherein there is the breath of life, to defend, preserve, award and deliver it selfe from all things hurtfull, destructive and obnoxious thereto, to the utmost of its power."¹⁷ In this way, men who believed, with most Christian men in England at that time, that magistracy is God's ordinance, justified their attack upon the government of England and, particularly, on Oliver Cromwell.

The Leveller view, both of magistracy and the Church, is most clearly seen as we examine their beliefs concerning the relationship that should prevail between Church and state. They insist that the inward man, the life of the spirit, can never be made subject to human ordinance, but that in this realm God reigns alone. Walwyn uses words that might well be mistaken for the confession of a Baptist of the period: "God only persuades the heart: compulsion and enforcement may make a confused mass of dissembling hypocrites, not a Congregation of believers."¹⁸ After describing the nature of the new supreme Authority they would set up in England, the "Agreement of the People" makes it clear that they will not grant to that authority the power to make or continue in force any law which seeks to compel men in matters of faith and

¹⁷ *An Appeale From the Degenerate Representative Body (Leveller Manifestoes, p. 159.)*

¹⁸ Walwyn, W., *A Whisper in the Eare of Mr. Thomas Edwards, p. 5.*

religion, but that all men should be allowed to follow their consciences in the exercise of worship without molestation or persecution. Lilburne points out that many of the sects, and he refers particularly to the Presbyterians, desired toleration when they were themselves persecuted, but having seized power for themselves, are prepared to grant that same toleration to no others. If a magistrate has a legal right to judge affairs concerning a man's conscience, then it was wrong, on the part of all Protestants to condemn Mary and her Parliament for burning those whom they conscientiously considered to be heretics.¹⁹ In 1649 the Levellers say of their idea of reformation :

"It is intended that the Christian Religion be held forth and recommended as the publike profession in this Nation (which we desire may, by the grace of God be reformed to the greatest purity in Doctrine, Worship, and Discipline, according to the Word of God). The instructing of the People whereunto in a publike way (so it be not compulsive) as also the maintaining of able teachers for that end, and for the confutation or discovery of Heresie, Errour and whatever is contrary to sound Doctrine, is allowed to be provided for by our Representatives; the maintenance of which teachers may be out of a publike Treasury, and wee desire not by tithes, provided that Popery or Prelacy be not held forth as the publike way or profession in this nation."²⁰

This represents the attitude of the majority of the Levellers towards this matter, though they differed in their view of the limits to be set to religious liberty. While many follow the Army in believing that there were dangers in allowing Prelatists and Papists to hold state office, there were others who would offer to all the right to believe and practice what they would, in peace. Particularly significant in this connection is the tract, *No Papist nor Presbyterian*, which proposed the abolition of all disabilities that were suffered by either Nonconformist or Papist. The great problem of the Levellers was to resolve the tension between their belief that magistracy is a secular ordinance and that therefore there can be no intimate relationship between Church and state, and their, commonly held, assumption that human society being the creation of God, its government must assume certain responsibilities that are, by their very nature, religious.

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¹⁹ Vide Lilburne, J., *The Oppressed Mans Oppression Declared*, 1646, p. 34.

²⁰ *A Petition from His Excellency Thomas Lord Fairfax (Leveller Manifestoes p. 348.)*