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Radical Religion in Cromwell?s England: A Concise History from the English Civil War to the End of the Commonwealth

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While the term ?radical? is an effective hook for his readers, its use in Andrew Bradstock?s *Radical Religion in Cromwell?s England* is in some ways problematic. In the introduction the author sets out his awareness of this fact, and the pressing need to identify criteria by which ?radical? may be determined, but sidesteps precisely defining the term himself. Instead he opts for ?the general framework used by previous studies, without seeking to debate its merits or weaknesses? (p. xxiv). This leads to a dilemma, because Bradstock adopts an undelineated definition of radical before arguing for a new way of understanding what motivated his subjects. Thus we are left with the question as to whether Bradstock?s thesis applies only to those arbitrarily defined as radicals or whether his thesis actually prompts us to redress the narrow definition that he accepted with little clarification. Perhaps this incoherence rests on Bradstock?s own personal attachment to the historiographical framework that he has adopted. His greatest debt, by his own admission, is to the influence of Christopher Hill. Yet Bradstock makes very few vital or critical references to the work of Hill. Why is this? The key rests in the author?s affinity with the work of Hill, whose seminal *The World Turned Upside Down* (1) offers the implied backbone for *Radical Religion in Cromwell?s England*. His attraction to Hill should not be surprising as the two have much in common, especially their well-espoused Socialist backgrounds. This provides them with similar underpinnings to their historical methodology. However, where the two differ in their interpretations of 17th-century radicalism is where they locate the root of

change and it is here that Bradstock?s book makes a significant contribution to the historiography of the period.

Bradstock happily follows Hill?s approach of centring the aim of ?radicalism? in the 17th century on social and political change. However, whereas Hill framed this in a Marxist historiographical tradition that identified the primary role of the socially and economically exploited in instituting hard-fought reform and the implementation of liberties based on the inherent principles that Marx and Hill would argue underpin socialism, Bradstock subtly but profoundly reorients the inspiration for change. Rather than a proto-Marxist revolution, Bradstock identifies Christianity as the radicalizing agent of change. In this interpretation, scriptural references in contemporary sources were not merely rhetorical tools or radical reinterpretations generated as a result of looking through a new ideological lens. Instead, Bradstock subtly argues throughout the book that it is in fact scripture itself that provided a radical lens for the subjects? reinterpreting of the world around them (perhaps with the exception of the Ranters). This is an important distinction made by Bradstock. Although Hill?s *The English Bible and the 17th Century Revolution* (2) explores the prominence of Biblical imagery in the thoughts of English people in an age of revolution, he stops short of identifying that imagery as causal to the revolution. Although it might be argued that Bradstock misses an important opportunity to either reappraise and concretely redefine ?radical? as something other than an ambiguous umbrella term for marginalized voices calling for change, Bradstock?s book serves to restore the primary role of religion to the political landscape of mid 17th-century England in a way that may stretch beyond the narrowly defined radicals. While he maintains much of the paradigm presented by Hill and other Marxist historians he profoundly repositions the source of change for the subjects addressed in the book.

Structuring a study of this kind is no small challenge and Bradstock adopts a framework that begins with the development of Baptist principles. This approach is significant as the formulation and growth of what might be labelled radicalism ? in the approach Bradstock takes ? is inherently rooted in ecclesiological constructions. While the Baptists did not espouse a unified political front, their awareness of being a gathered minority provided a seed bed for the development of a religiously motivated political and social dissent. After a useful chapter discussing the development of Baptist traditions, Bradstock develops the distinct ideological traditions that came to be identified as definable movements, while emphasizing throughout that these were often fluid and episodic in nature. It is, in essence, an argument reminiscent of Jonathan Scott?s assertion that the period was typified not by standardized movements, but rather by series of moments.(3) Moving from separated community, Bradstock addresses concepts of personal liberty, which since the Putney Debates in 1647, have become inextricably linked in the popular mind with the Levellers. Taking care not to overly normalize the likes of Robert Lilburne, Richard Overton, William Walwyn, John Wildman, the author manages to draw out the shared influence of biblical scripture in the formation of their ideas. Here Bradstock identifies the source of Leveller ideology to be theological. Lilburne, for instance, defined liberty in a rich linguistic tapestry woven from a combination of the Book of Genesis and the letters of St Paul. Similarly, Overton and Walwyn understood the rights of men to stem from God?s created order and the justification wrought by Christ?s sacrifice. Yet despite similar ideas, Bradstock refrains from calling the Levellers a unified movement. Nor were they, in his estimation, akin to a political party. Instead, perhaps much more significantly, they were individuals motivated through distinct yet analogous theological perspectives.

While Bradstock rightly raises the question proposed by Brian Manning as to whether the Levellers were driven by the pursuit of religious liberties for which political liberties were the means to that end or vice-a-versa, it is probably a question that cannot be uniformly answered for all that carried the Leveller banner. The crucial point is that for these individuals the two issues could not be neatly disentangled from one another. Even the most radical Levellers tended to couch their arguments in theological terms. John Wildman, for instance, claimed that, although the Bible fails to offer an ideal model for the secular state, he compelled his fellow Englishmen to accept that there is a social model and ?its the command of God that every man should seek the good of his neighbour? (p. 45).

From the Leveller pursuit of liberty, Bradstock turns to the Diggers (to whom this review will return) and the Ranters. Of all the movements studied in this book, the Ranters are to a certain extent the odd ones out.

While Bradstock can identify that some individuals did advocate Ranter perspectives it remains unclear to what extent they existed as a networked movement. Much more likely, they represented the bogeymen of the mid 17th-century. Like witches, they were a constructed reality that represented the antithesis of what settled Christian society espoused. Thus disentangling myth from fact is difficult. Those that did espouse the personal moral libertarianism of the Ranters, such as Lawrence Clarkson and Abiezer Coppe, did so based on either a denial of the existence of sin or a claim to personal divinity. They represented an inversion of the ecclesiastical and political orders and for that reason they had little chance of any widespread success and at best prospered for two or three years beginning in 1649. They primarily represented a sacrilegious antithesis to orthodoxy and lacked a systematic ideology. Interestingly it is this group, with the least rooted religious identity, that had the smallest impact on the political and social life of England. In his balanced approach to the Ranters, Bradstock provides very good guidance for discerning facts from fiction.

In contrast to the Ranters? short lived and limited influence, the Quakers represent one of the most significant movements of early modern England, not to mention Scotland, Ireland and the colonies. Besides their phenomenal growth from a small handful of gatherings in 1652 to an estimated 60,000 spread across the Atlantic world by 1660, the vibrancy of the Quaker movement wrought significant change and facilitated a strong social influence. Conviction of the presence of the Inner Light transformed the Quaker understanding of scripture. The belief that the Word spoken of in John 1, that created the world and inspired the biblical authors, was the same light the convinced Quaker recognized to be indwelling within themself allowed for considerable reinterpretations of scripture and new authoritative revelations. Women and children were allowed to preach, the need for a paid clergy was rejected ? and so too the paying of tithes ? and many traditional social norms and hierarchies were rejected. Yet such tumultuous changes brought occasional heavy and widespread persecution that was not helped by the Quaker propensity to interrupt church services, or re-enact Old Testament-style prophets? eccentricities such as going naked. However, the Friends were prepared for such tribulations, partly because the movement faced persecution almost from the outset and partly because their doctrine of the Inner Light provided an immediacy of spiritual support and sufficient flexibility to respond to changing circumstances. Such a great emphasis on the personal encounter with God could have become highly individualistic as it had with the Ranters and thus equally as short lived. For that reason, Bradstock follows H. Larry Ingle in asserting that perhaps George Fox?s greatest influence was not in his development of the doctrine of the Inner Light, but rather the unity, discipline and structure that allowed Friends to have a lasting, cohesive identity and influential voice, something many other sects failed to achieve. Quaker unity was demonstrated in their ability to produce numerous petitions and supplications to the state, organized at local, regional and national levels. Bradstock is unequivocal that the Quakers are the greatest success story of the radical religious movements discussed in this study. To some degree this success must rest in their strong rooting not simply in historical texts, but in their belief that the spirit that inspired the Christian scriptures continued to inspire them directly and guide their actions in the world. This vitality and the continued existence of the Quakers 350 years later represent the strongest case for Brandstock?s thesis that religious belief is socially and politically transformative.

The final two chapters address the Fifth Monarchists and Muggletonians. The Fifth Monarchists represented, as Bernard Capp put it, a ?pressure group? rather than a denomination or sect. Their adherents spanned religious movements, although many came from Baptist or Independent communities. They were individuals who had succumbed to apocalyptic expectations and expected Christ?s eminent reign to come in the wake of the world?s four great monarchies (Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman) falling as prophesied in Daniel 2. This expectation did much to encourage the course of events pursued by parliamentarians and the army, particularly up to the end of 1653, but also proved to be one of the most divisive factors in the failure of the Interregnum experiment. Cromwell benefitted in his meteoric rise from obscurity to becoming the leading figure in England by being lauded as a second Moses. However, when he took on the title of Lord Protector he fell foul of many who had participated in the Civil Wars on the grounds that there should be ?no King but Jesus?. The question debated among many with Fifth Monarchist leanings was how much human agency was required for bringing about the reign of Christ. Some felt little action was necessary, others went as far as advocating that to kill Cromwell was not murder, while still others attempted full scale rebellions; the last of which occurred under the leadership of Thomas Venner in 1661. Although some idealists continued to

espouse an imminent return of Christ even after Venner?s failure, by the 1680s the solidification of Restoration politics prior to the reign of James II made the possibility of establishing the Fifth Monarchy hardly conceivable and the momentum for apocalyptic expectation waned. As a product of an age of uncertainty and expectation, the Fifth Monarchists ultimately failed because they pursued a singular political aim (although not all agreed upon how this should be fulfilled) based on a narrow eschatological interpretation that left little room for redefining themselves once the Stuart political establishment had been restored. Bradstock?s assessment provides a solid introduction to the complex ways in which Fifth Monarchists interpreted the signs of the times. It is particularly good in its discussion of the relationship between Cromwell and the Barebones Parliament, as well as the changing perception of the Dutch among apocalyptically minded Englishmen.

Certainly the most unusual movement dealt with in Bradstock?s study are the Muggletonians. Heralding themselves as the Last Two Witnesses of Revelation 11, Lodowicke Muggleton and John Reeve claimed to be able to determine, and authoritatively declare, an individual's state of election. The two men also claimed the highest authority for interpreting the scriptures. The followers of Muggleton and Reeves were never numerous and they did not seek to win proselytes. They remained a largely informal movement that met on occasion in taverns and ale-houses rather than for formal programmed services. With the death of Muggleton, the last of the Two Witnesses, in 1698 the movement may have been expected to disintegrate, but remarkably it quietly persisted. By the 19th century the Muggletonians were believed to have become extinct. However, in 1974 an adherent was discovered as was the surviving Muggletonian library. The last known Muggletonian died in 1979. This perseverance probably owed greatly to the limited nature of their political claims and expectations.

Bradstock?s book provides a window into an important aspect of English history that, by his own admission, has sometimes been given too much emphasis by later appropriations of these legacies. Yet despite this, the influence of the movements discussed in this book persists in being deeply relevant to the story of England and the continuing development of the nation. Part of Bradstock?s motivation for writing the book must certainly resonate with his wider personal and research interests. He has been a highly productive author on the subjects of Liberation theology and social justice. Moreover, he is the former director of the Christian Socialist Movement. Without grandstanding, *Radical Religion in Cromwell?s England* highlights the socially transformative influences of Christian groups in an era in which much historiography has identified religion as having been socially destructive, stifling or merely a tool for state building. Bradstock reminds us of the danger of homogenizing the outworkings of religious belief or, perhaps even more importantly in an age of increasing Western secularization, marginalizing religion as something that is merely subject to external influences and lacking transformative power. He reminds us that to try to understand the history of 17th-century England without giving due credence to the arguments and sources used by the people themselves leaves us little room but to project our own methods and ideas into the past.

Where Bradstock falls short in his study is in his presentation of source material. He states a key motivation for the work was to make difficult to find texts easily available to the reader. While the passages he provides are useful, his lack of referencing is deeply problematic for the research student who would like to engage with the full texts. Often there is little indication of where Bradstock derives his material. When it is apparent for primary sources there is little indication of pagination. In this regard the book falls short and is found wanting. Yet despite this limitation, it is an important contribution to the historiography of the English Revolution. Bradstock?s emphasis on the scriptural foundations of not simply radical religious ideologies, but political as well, helps to redress decades of Marxist scholarship that both implicitly and explicitly has minimized the deep rooted theological foundations of early modern grass roots movements. He also shows the middle-class nature of participation, a fact that undercuts some Marxist arguments. Moreover, Bradstock demonstrates the significance of kingdom thinking in prophetic calls for change. While the apocalypticism of Daniel and Revelation is prevalent, particularly among Fifth Monarchists, and certainly set the tone during an age of expectation, a wide range of other Old Testament and New Testament sources shaped the worldviews of English dissenters. More importantly, Bradstock clearly demonstrates that the Diggers, sometimes identified as the early modern exemplars of proto-Marxism, were inspired in their occupation of

wasteland by the Genesis account of creation. Winstanley viewed the purpose of the created world to serve as ?a common treasury for all?. Beyond this basic biblical claim for the common use of land, his perspective was also soteriological and Christological. He held that human sinfulness, epitomized in private land ownership, brought a curse upon the earth evidenced by crop failures and social ills. The end of land holding, he believed, would lift the curse and bring about the incarnation of Christ in the community of the faithful. Thus for the Diggers, or ?True Levellers? as they preferred to be known, religious language was not mere rhetoric. Instead it was the bedrock of their worldview and the foundation of their expectations for a fundamental change in the social order and the restoration of the earth. In this regard *Radical Religion in Cromwell?s England* is not only a significant historiographical contribution, but a stark reminder of the socially and politically transformative power of religion.

Bradstock has without doubt offered an important survey. However, the question must be raised as to why the underlying premise that religious belief fundamentally inspired the action of those Bradstock has accepted as ?radicals? was not extended to other groups who acted with equal or even greater political influence. For example, why does he not offer brief chapters on Independents and Congregationalists? Even Presbyterians would fit into this model, particularly when the events in England during the period discussed were heavily influenced by Scottish Presbyterians? (self-ascribed) covenanted ambitions for importing their favoured form of church government into England. Here the answer is likely that Bradstock depends on Hill?s classification of these groups as ?acceptable? and therefore un-radical (p. xxv) (4) ? despite attempts to establish something akin to a theocracy in one form or another ? or to ignore them as being ?squierarchy? that sought only to replace the bourgeois landed elites rather than radically overturn the social order. Yet in the paradigm offered by Bradstock Presbyterians, Independents and Congregationalists, who shared as strong an ecclesiologically rooted identity as the Baptists and were equally radical in the aims they pursued, are overlooked. This is interesting, because the ambitions of these groups could be argued to have been the root causes of the English Revolution and the inspiration for a decade of governmental trial and error. It is precisely for these reasons that Bradstock?s study would have benefitted from providing a concrete definition of what he means by radical.

Notes

1. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, 1972).Back to (1)
2. Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London, 1992).Back to (2)
3. Jonathan Scott, ?The English Republican Imagination? in John Morrill, ed., *Revolution and Restoration: England in the 1650s* (London, 1992), p. 10.Back to (3)
4. Hill, (1992), pp. 196?7.Back to (4)

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