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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN LILBURNE, RICHARD OVERTON AND WILLIAM WALWYN



A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Oxford

IWAN RUSSELL-JONES

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ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy
Michaelmas 1987

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN LILBURNE, RICHARD OVERTON AND WILLIAM WALWYN

In assessing the relationship between theology and politics in the writings of the three major Leveller pamphleteers of the 17th century, scholars have tended to search for, and focus upon, individual aspects of one or other of the Levellers' respective theological positions which they consider to have had democratic implications - as, for example, the notion of congregational church government, or a universalist understanding of salvation - which are then deemed to have been foundational to their political theories.

But this approach is too abstract. The development of the Leveller platform can best be understood if it is seen as the attempt to answer a question posed by the Presbyterian opponents of religious liberty, and in particular, by William Prynne. In effect, the question was this: how can a society avoid anarchy and continue to exist in any civilised form if the social cement of established religion is removed? Prynne asked this of the Independents and sectaries in civil war England in the belief that there could be no satisfactory answer.

Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn sought to provide one by appealing to principles drawn from the law of nature. The major influence on the development of their political thinking was the revolutionary theory of natural rights which underpinned Parliament's struggle against the King. Theology was but a secondary factor.

It was the fundamental secularity of the Levellers' approach which led to its rejection in 1649 by leading Independents and sectaries, whose own separatism was modified by millennialism and notions of 'godly rule'. Thus, while the Levellers' political platform developed as an attempt to translate into reality the separation of church and state that was at the heart of separatist ecclesiology, it failed because of the opposition of the very people whose ideas it was intended to reflect and embody.

ABSTRACT

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN LILBURNE, RICHARD OVERTON AND WILLIAM WALWYN

What role did religion play in the development of the political theories of the three major Leveller pamphleteers, John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn? This question has been answered in a number of different ways by 20th century scholars. But two basic approaches have emerged. The first sees a fusion between the orders of grace and nature taking place in the thinking of these writers such that they became able to apply categories that were formerly restricted to the gathered congregation and the 'Saints', to the community in general. Thus, according to this approach, the Levellers developed a relatively democratic political theory because they possessed a doctrine of universal salvation and viewed the whole of society as the elect of God (W.Haller, J.C.Davis). The second approach postulates a principle of segregation and analogy at work in Leveller thinking, making a strict separation between the orders of grace and nature. This ensured the retention of a Calvinistic doctrine of divine election while at the same time allowing theological categories to fulfil a political function by analogy from the church to society. It is claimed that, in this way, congregational democracy fathered political democracy (A.S.P.Woodhouse).

There are two problems common to both of these theories. The first is that they do not take seriously enough the theological and philosophical diversity among the Leveller pamphleteers; one approach makes Walwyn, the universalist, the model for all of them, the other

centres on Lilburne, the Calvinist. Both assume a degree of unity among them that simply did not exist. Secondly, they tend to view the question of the relationship between theology and politics in the Leveller writings in abstract terms, focussing on individual religious ideas which are deemed to have had democratic implications. Both approaches see the Leveller platform as the product of the transformation of Puritan theological categories. But this is to place too much emphasis on theology, and not enough on the historical context in which the ideas of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn actually developed. It is to overlook the possibility that other concepts not derived from Puritan theology may have played an important role in the development of their political theories.

John Lilburne's early pamphlets (1638-1645) display an intense spirituality, an emphasis on authentic Christian experience and discipline - particularly with respect to membership of a gathered congregation, which he saw as a sign of divine election - and a sense of the imminence of the return of Christ. He was concerned above all to defend the separatist view of the church, and to demonstrate what he conceived to be the errors of the Church of England. The idea that his political theory developed as the result of applying these religious categories to the whole of society cannot be accepted. Such an application would not have been the natural and logical extension of separatist beliefs, but, on the contrary, the complete denial of them. By regarding the whole of society as somehow elect, Lilburne would have been conceding to his opponents on a major issue. The whole point of his stand against Laudianism, and later, Presbyterianism, was that true believers, the elect, were distinct from the mass of the people and could not participate in an all-embracing national church, however reformed it might be. There is no evidence that Lilburne ever conceded on this point.

Nevertheless, there was an idea in Lilburne's early pamphlets that was of profound significance for the development of his political theory. This was the concept of the law of nature understood as the principle of self-preservation. Lilburne first employed it in 1638 before the Court of Star Chamber when he refused to take the *ex-officio* oath. He learned how to use this concept not through reading the legal theorists of the 1640s (Haller), or as the result of his friendship with William Walwyn (Davis), but under the influence of his hero John Bastwick, some of whose works he was responsible for illegally publishing in England. In Lilburne's thinking the law of nature was never understood in an 'antinomian' or universalistic sense, but had a thoroughly orthodox, Puritan pedigree.

Of the three Leveller pamphleteers under discussion in this thesis, William Walwyn was the one who made the most explicit link between theology and politics. Because of his use of terms such as 'antinomian' and 'free justification' to describe his position, his thought, both theological and political, is usually described in terms of the modification of Puritan dogma. But as he himself acknowledged, he had been reading 'humane' and non-Christian authors for many years prior to his rejection of Calvinistic theology. It would seem that his intellectual revolution of the late 1630s was, in fact, the end product of a long process in which the assumptions of Puritan theology were gradually undermined and replaced by a new religious outlook, one that proved strange and unacceptable to many of his contemporaries in 17th century England.

Walwyn appears to have been deeply influenced, in particular, by the ideas of the French Roman Catholic moralist, Michel de Montaigne. This can be clearly traced in his optimistic view of man and of nature. But it is also, perhaps, to be seen in the notes of fideism and scepticism which

characterised Walwyn's Christianity, and eventually provoked the full-scale attack on him in *Walwins Wiles* (1649).

Richard Overton is often described as a General Baptist, and his thinking tends to be understood in that light. But the evidence for his continued involvement with that particular sect during the 1640s is very slight. Nowhere in his writings did he express clearly his own convictions concerning the nature of the church, and it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where he stood on a number of important theological issues.

Some scholars regard *Mans Mortalitie* (1644),the pamphlet in which he argued a case for the mortality of the soul, as the product of an extremely rationalistic outlook, and see him as pointing the way forward to the deism of the 18th century. There are ideas in the pamphlet which do at first appear to be very unorthodox, such as the suggestion that the abode of Christ is in the sun. But these must be interpreted primarily in terms of the logic of Overton's Biblical arguments, rather than as indications of pantheism or heterodoxy. His mortalism is accurately to be seen in the first place as a recovery of elements within the Christian tradition, and not as an anticipation of later materialism. The soteriology of *Mans Mortalitie* was Arminian, and Overton does seem to have possessed a relatively optimistic view of man. This is reflected particularly in his understanding of the scope and potential of natural human reason. Nevertheless, by the standards of 17th century Puritanism, there was nothing essentially heretical about his rationalism. On the contrary, it seems to have reflected accurately an important strand of contemporary Christian thought.

The development of the Leveller platform can best be understood if it is seen as the attempt to answer a question posed by the Presbyterian

opponents of religious liberty, and in particular, by William Prynne, against whose ideas all three pamphleteers published tracts in 1645-1646. In its most acute form the question was this: how can a society avoid anarchy and continue to exist in any civilised form if the social cement of established religion is removed? Prynne believed that there was a vital link between magistracy in church and state: without religious uniformity, society would collapse. In his view, by encouraging fragmentation in the church, ecclesiastical Independency promoted fragmentation in society. He therefore challenged the advocates of separatism and religious toleration to face up to the political implications of their doctrine of the church.

William Walwyn was the first to respond to this specific challenge, and he was quickly followed by Richard Overton and John Lilburne. Despite a number of important differences in their theological and philosophical positions, each of them replied to Prynne in essentially similar fashion, claiming that society was founded upon a set of political principles which flowed from the nature of man himself, fundamental to which was the right to religious liberty. Three factors, which were common to each of their patterns of thought, combined to produce this approach. These were, a firm rejection of the coercive power of the civil magistrate in matters of faith, - and therefore a commitment to the principle of the separation of church and state - the possession of a clear concept of the law of nature understood in terms of the preservation of the person, and a knowledge of, and readiness to appeal to, the documents justifying the Parliamentary revolt.

The major influence on the development of the political ideas of the three men was the revolutionary theory of natural rights which underpinned Parliament's struggle against the King, and which, ironically, Prynne had promoted in his massive work, *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes*. This book provided a crash-course in radical political ideas,

from Aristotle through to the Huguenots and Grotius, and the Levellers made important use of it, together with other Parliamentary works, most notably, "The Book of Declarations" and Parker's *Observations*. Prynne was therefore doubly significant in the development of the Levellers' ideas: as well as being the Presbyterian enemy who challenged their thinking, and over against whom they defined themselves, he was also their unwilling ally, a leading exponent of Parliamentary sovereignty, who provided them with much of the material upon which their political theories were built.

The Levellers took concepts such as *Salus Populi* and the notion of political power as a trust from the people, and interpreted them in a way which the Parliamentary propagandists who had, in fact, first popularised and promoted these ideas in England, themselves found unacceptable. Nevertheless, Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn readily acknowledged the debt they owed even to their bitter enemy William Prynne. Indeed, they did not consider that they were proposing anything new. They never saw themselves as anything other than true Parliamentarians.

The fact that the Levellers were not entirely original in their political thinking but stood in a political and legal tradition stretching back to the Huguenots and beyond, may help to explain certain ambiguities and uncertainties in their political programme, as, for example, over the issue of the extent of the franchise they proposed. While they certainly modified that tradition, and, in the case of Overton and Lilburne, related the whole question of individual rights to the Biblical doctrine of man as made in the image of God, they were still very much a part of it and grappling with its legacy, particularly with respect to the nature of the relationship between the possession of property and political rights.

The doctrines of salvation and church government played little or no part in the development of the political theories of the three Leveller

pamphleteers. This was as true of Walwyn as it was of the other two. Theology was a secondary factor, for the whole object of the exercise was to demonstrate that society and government was founded upon natural principles. Their fundamental commitment to the separation of church and state, and their concept of a law of nature governing the life of man in the world, allowed them to deal with social issues solely according to political criteria based on the notion of the well-being of the people. Their approach deliberately sought to avoid any confusion of political and theological categories.

One might have expected, then, that this approach to political questions would have been extremely attractive to the Independents and sectaries precisely because of its insistence on the separation of church and state. However, the separatism of many of the radical churchmen was modified by their eschatology, and their belief in 'godly rule'. The result was an outlook not dissimilar to that of William Prynne, whose great concern was for Christian magistracy. Like him they were scandalised by the Levellers' whole framework of thought - especially Walwyn's fideism and scepticism - and not primarily by individual aspects of policy, such as the widening of the franchise.

Up to, and including the crucial period 1645-1647 during which his political theory developed, Lilburne shared the eschatology of the Saints, and their closely related doctrine of the gathered church; by 1649 he had rejected it, after having grasped its theocratic implications, which, in the light of his political principles, he now found unacceptable. Thus, while his theology did not greatly influence his political thinking, political ideas and activity did substantially affect his religious beliefs. Moreover, with his attention now firmly fixed on political issues and the natural order, he appears to have experienced, if not a loss of faith, then a deadening of his religious experience and vision. His

conversion to Quakerism in 1656 should be seen not as the rejection of his political activities of the previous decade, but as the recovery of a lost sense of Christian spirituality.

It was, therefore, the <u>secularity</u> of the Levellers - understood primarily in terms of their attempt to create a society founded on principles drawn from the law of nature - that was their distinctive contribution to the political debate in revolutionary England, and the reason for their ultimate failure.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION AND SURVEY

1. Questions

The temptation to understand the past largely in terms of the preoccupations of the present is an abiding problem in any historical study, and the study of the Levellers is certainly no exception. The interaction of past and present is, of course, both desirable and unavoidable, and the very growth of interest in the Leveller movement during the 20th century is no accident. As Christopher Hill has observed, "in the century of the common man, the Levellers have come into their own",[1] and left-wing historians like himself have largely been responsible for bringing this about.[2] But it was another Marxist scholar, C.B.Macpherson who first pointed out the difficulties of tracing the political ancestry of democracy and socialism back to the Levellers.[3] Although Macpherson's views have been challenged from a number of quarters,[4] he was surely right to stress that the Levellers must be understood primarily in the context of 17th century categories of thought.

The same tendency to anachronism also poses problems in the interpretation of the relationship between politics and theology in the writings of the three Leveller pamphleteers, John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn. Christian theology in the 20th century has

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1. C.Hill, Foreword to A.L.Morton, *Freedom in Arms*, London, 1975.
2. See, for example, C.Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Harmondsworth, 1975, ch.7; E.Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism*, London, 1930; A.L.Morton, *A People's History of England*, London, 1938; D.W.Petergorsky, *Left-wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, London, 1940; H.N.Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, ed. C.Hill, London, 1961; F.Brockway, *Britain's First Socialists*, London, 1980.
3. C.B.Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford, 1962, ch.3.
4. See below pp.209,210.

become increasingly concerned with specifically political questions, culminating, in the last twenty years or so, in the radical "theologies of liberation", which emphasise the inseparability of faith and politics. Authentic theology is said to be centrally concerned with the prevailing political realities, and with the struggle for justice in society. Traditional European ways of doing theology are criticised as other-worldly, and reactionary.[1]

Not surprisingly the Levellers are immediately appealing to present-day Christians sympathetic to this political understanding of theology, for here, at the heart of the English revolution was a group of people who were the products of a thoroughly 'religious' age and whose radical credentials were impeccable. In the context of the current theological climate, the temptation to explain their political activity simply as the outworking of a Biblical social concern is, therefore, great. Significantly, the editors of a recent collection of essays aimed at developing a British form of liberation theology included in it a contribution from Tony Benn on the political and theological legacy of the Levellers.[2]

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1. For the classic statement of this approach see G.Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, New York, 1973, pp.3-15.
2. T.Benn, "The Levellers and the English Democratic Tradition", in R.Ambler and D.Haslam, *Agenda for Prophets*, London, 1980, pp.49-60. Part of the reason why left-wing politicians like Benn are so interested in the Levellers is that they see them as proving that socialism is not a foreign, secular ideology, but deeply rooted in the Bible and the Christian traditions of England. Benn, pp.51,52, claims that "the Levellers drew many of their ideas and much of their inspiration from the Bible with its rich Jewish and Christian teaching. Critics of socialism often seek to dismiss socialism as being necessarily atheistical. But this is not true as far as British socialism is concerned...". In Eric Heffer's view, the Levellers prove that "socialism in Britain is not a foreign import, not an alien influence grafted on to the British people from outside. It is inherently British, in reality as British as the Union Jack or the hymn 'Abide with Me'" (Foreword to a new edition of E.Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism*, Nottingham, 1980). For a perceptive, if rather idiosyncratic assessment of the British Left's interest in the Levellers - John Lilburne is described as "the Reg Prentice of the English Revolution"! - see William Lamont's article, "Left let down by the Levellers" in *The Guardian*, 14th Nov.1983.

But, as with aspects of their political ideology, it is dangerous to impose a 20th century agenda on the 17th. The closer one looks at the Leveller pamphlets the more problematical the relationship between politics and theology in their thinking becomes. John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn were all, to a greater or lesser extent 'religious', at least by 20th century standards. Like virtually all of their contemporaries, they frequently quoted the Bible, used Biblical imagery and invoked the name of God in the course of their arguments. But when their pamphlets are set alongside those of both their enemies and their closest allies in the sectarian congregations, the Levellers' language and concerns, their analyses and proposed solutions, do sometimes appear startlingly different: they have a very 'secular' feel to them. Moreover, there are passages in each of their writings which resemble not so much an ex ercise in political theology as a flight from theology altogether.

So how are the Levellers to be understood? Is it right to regard them primarily as 17th century Christian radicals? Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn were very different men, whose ideas had distinctive theological and political characteristics. Part of the reason why scholars have had difficulty in assessing the relationship between politics and theology in their writings, as this introduction will attempt to show, is that it has often been assumed that they were basically a homogeneous group. The problems concerning the interpretation of their works are, therefore, best stated if the three men are dealt with separately.

(i) <u>John Lilburne</u>

John Lilburne was the most prolific of the Leveller pamphleteers and the first to appear in print. His writings fall into two distinct groups -

those of 1638-1645, and those of 1645 onwards.[1] The earliest tracts display an intense spirituality, a sense of the imminence of the return of Christ and an emphasis on authentic Christian experience and discipline. Lilburne was concerned above all to defend the separatist view of the church and to demonstrate what he conceived to be the errors of the Church of England.

His later tracts, beginning with *The Copy of a Letter... to a Friend* of July 1645 concentrate almost exclusively on constitutional and judicial concerns. There he sought to establish and safeguard within a constitution certain political rights; and theological and ecclesiastical issues, where they arose, appear to have been subordinate to this primary aim. Lilburne was now concerned with political matters. He appealed repeatedly to a concept of the law of nature, and to an assortment of political documents which he believed provided him with historical support for his case. Indeed, these elements give the characteristic flavour to his later writings.

The difference in tone and content between the two groups is striking, though there is a strongly autobiographical thrust to all his work. What caused this change? Did Lilburne cease to be a separatist in 1645, and did theology contribute in any way to his change of direction? Was his early theology transformed in some way by his political involvement, so that it became able to embrace a relatively democratic political theory? Did Christian thought and experience continue to play a significant role in moulding and directing his thought, and if it did, what was that role?

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1. *The Resurrection of John Lilburne*, 1656, which describes his conversion to Quakerism clearly falls into neither of these categories and must be treated separately. See below, ch.10.

(ii) Richard Overton

Richard Overton's pamphlets do not fall into any clearly defined pattern in the way that Lilburne's do. He published a number of satirical tracts in the early 1640s and went on writing this type of material, interspersed with other works, throughout the decade. Although he is usually described as a General Baptist nowhere in his writings did he express clearly his own convictions concerning the nature of the church.

Overton was the author of *Mans Mortalitie* (1644), one of the most theologically remarkable pamphlets of the civil war period, and most of the questions relating to the relationship of theology and politics in his writings are connected in one way or another with this. Because of its denial of the immortality of the soul some scholars have seen in Overton a lack of interest not just in ecclesiology but in theology as such, and he is charged with having created a basis for his policies outside and beyond the Christian tradition.

Bernstein describes him as "a representative of advanced rationalism among the Levellers", and claims that he was the first to combine

> systematic rationalism, or even materialism, with political and social radicalism in England.[1]

A.S.P.Woodhouse accuses Overton of

> a militant naturalism and a thinly veiled hostility to dogmatic religion.[2]

J.Frank claims that Overton's ideas drew on "a long tradition of scepticism" and pointed forward "through Hobbes to the materialism of Marx";[3] while G.L.Mosse links him with the beginnings of Deism.[4]

From where did he derive his ideas about the mortality of the soul?

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1. Bernstein, p.90.
2. A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, London, 1938, p.54.
3. J.Frank, *The Levellers: a History of the Writings of Three 17th Century Social Democrats*, Harvard, 1955.
4. G.L.Mosse, "Puritan Radicalism and the Enlightenment", in S.A.Burrell (ed.), *The Role of Religion in Modern European History*, New York, 1964, pp.75,76.

Was he influenced by General Baptist theology? Is there a link between the theological-philosophical thinking of *Mans Mortalitie* and his political theory? In short, was Overton a rationalist and a seculariser?

(iii) William Walwyn

Of the three Leveller pamphleteers, William Walwyn was the one who was the most consistently theological in his approach. He made it very clear that he was an "antinomian", and a believer in universal salvation, and he sought to make explicit connections between his theological understanding and his political principles. His favourite Bible passages were those which emphasised most strongly the fundamental link between faith and compassionate action on behalf of the oppressed. At first sight, the task of describing the relationship between theology and politics in his writings seems to be far easier than in those of Lilburne and Overton.

But this is to accept too easily the portrayal, offered by himself and his loyal friends, of Walwyn as the simple, Bible-believing Christian who only wanted to be faithful to the Gospel.[1] There are elements of extreme scepticism in his writings, suggestions of a radically humanistic perspective. His favourite authors were sceptics, debunkers, and theological reductionists. Walwyn was a man with bitter enemies who accused him of atheism, anti-scripturism, blasphemy and Jesuitry.[2] He attracted far more hostility than either Lilburne or Overton, and what his critics were most concerned to challenge was the reality of his Christian faith.

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1. See, *The Charity of Churchmen*, 1649, a defence of Walwyn by his son-in-law, Humphrey Brooke; also, J.Lilburne, *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649. Both of these pamphlets are reprinted in W.Haller & G.Davies, *The Leveller Tracts* (hereafter referred to as *H&D*), Mass., 1964. See pp.331 & 416.
2. See J.Bastwick, *A Just Defence of John Bastwick*, 1645, p.17; T.Edwards, *Gangraena*, Part i, 1646, p.96, and Part ii, p.26; *Walwins Wiles*, 1649, the joint attack on Walwyn signed by seven Independent and Baptist churchmen in *H&D*, p.299.

So, was Walwyn a sceptic? To what extent did the writings of the "humane" writers he favoured influence his own thinking? Did his political thinking really flow out of a simple Christian concern, or was there a hidden agenda? The straightforward question as far as Walwyn is concerned is, therefore, who is to be believed, his friends or his enemies?

2. Answers

There is at present no consensus among 20th century commentators on the nature of the relationship between politics and theology in the writings of these three 17th century Leveller pamphleteers, John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn. In his survey of the literature J.C.Davis claims that it is possible to distinguish three main approaches taken by scholars on this issue: one group sees religion as a primary influence on the Levellers, a second sees it as a secondary influence, and a third sees it as a variable factor within the movement, excercising more or less of an influence from time to time and from person to person.[1]

But, although Davis' groupings highlight the diversity of approach, his division is not particularly helpful because it masks some important similarities and differences between the scholars in the three groups. For example, although Davis places D.B.Robertson in the first category of seeing religion as a primary influence, Robertson nevertheless believed that, in order to construct their secular political programme, the Levellers had to develop "a broader understanding of the implications of faith";[2] and though W.Haller is placed in the second category, of seeing religion as a secondary influence, Haller clearly believed that religious doctrine and experience were the wellspring of Leveller theory.[3]

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1. J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in B.Manning, *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War*, London, 1973, pp.225,226.
2. D.B.Robertson, *The Religious Foundations of Leveller Democracy*, New York, 1951, p.122.
3. W.Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, New York, 1955, p.255.

The fact is that all of the scholars considered by Davis, and examined in this chapter - whether or not they agree that the Levellers themselves were secularly oriented - assume that, in one way or another, religion exercised an enormous influence upon them. A more productive way of assessing their various contributions to this debate is, therefore, to ask precisely how they understand the role that Christian thought and experience played in the development of the Levellers' ideas. Although there are a number of overlaps that will become clear, two basic approaches emerge. The first centres on the concept of the fusion of the orders of grace and nature, and the second, on the concept of their separation.

(i) Fusion

One of the most influential approaches to the relationship between theology and politics in the Leveller writings is that of William Haller, and if there is anything like a scholarly 'orthodoxy' on this issue then it is based upon his work.

Fundamentally, Haller believed that "antinomianism"[1] lay at the heart of Leveller thinking. Antinomianism is a difficult concept to pin down because it is the label given both to a theological doctrine and an ethical stance, and the two are not necessarily linked.[2] Haller employed the term in its theological sense to describe a doctrine that stressed the free grace of God in salvation at the expense of law and human endeavour. He understood it to imply a complete breakdown in the categories of grace and nature. Put simply, his view was that, under the influence of antinomianism, the Levellers transformed religious ideas into political

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1. W.Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, Columbia, 1938, p.205.
2. For a good discussion of the confusion that the term caused in civil war England see R.S.Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord*, Edinburgh, 1985, pp.176-182. See also, G.Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History*, London, 1951.

ideas by ignoring any qualifications on the operation of grace in the world.

Haller saw Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn primarily as the products of Puritan individualism; they were men who for years had been encouraged to believe that

> God's favour was vouchsafed equally to all, and that every man until the day of his death must be presumed capable of becoming a saint if he was not one already.[1]

Their ideology, he maintained, was the product of "beliefs they had derived from the pulpit";[2] in particular, they took the doctrine of election and applied it to the whole of society, so that the community as such was now regarded as the people of God. Thus

> the people to whom Christ was now said to have given sovereignty over his church were not simply those who came within the limits of that term as defined by the assembly, but they included all men... [3]

In this way, Haller believed, Puritanism undercut its own elitism.[4]

Haller's theory sits most easily with William Walwyn,[5] the one Leveller who was explicitly committed to antinomianism. More controversially, however, he also applied it to John Lilburne and Richard Overton. Under the influence of "Baptist enthusiasm and mysticism",[6] he claimed, Lilburne gradually came to view grace as all-embracing; he transferred his own sense of election to the community as a whole, and his individual quest for salvation was thus transformed into the political struggle for social change:

> the end sought was not personal conversion but the general good. The struggle of Christ's redeemed ones became a struggle for the redemption of the state. The holy community, the New Jerusalem, came to be conceived rather as a going community of free citizens than a

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1. W.Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, p.205.
2. W.Haller, *Liberty and Reformation*, p.255.
3. ibid. p.287. 4. This approach is shared by a number of scholars. See for example Robertson, p.14; Frank, p.3.
5. See ibid. p.163.
6. Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, p.273.

withdrawn, though visible congregation of the elect.'

Haller maintained that Lilburne moved from Puritan saint to Leveller politician through the discovery, sometime in the early 1640s, of the idea of the law of nature in the works of legal theorists like Sir Edward Coke and Henry Parker. This idea, it is claimed, confirmed what he had already found to be true in his own experience:

> Lilburne could not help taking for granted that the two laws, of grace and of nature, flowed together in the hearts of the people, who were presumed all of them, to be God's elect, and in whom, therefore, natural reason spoke with all the authority of inner grace.[2]

By the same process, Haller contended, Richard Overton translated a doctrine he had learnt from the General Baptists into political terms:

> Overton transposed the heresy of free justification into the metaphysics of popular revolution, identifying Christian liberty with natural, the elect of God with the common people, the privileges of the Saints with the rights of man.[3]

According to Haller's theory then, all of the Levellers believed in universal salvation, and not Walwyn alone. Each of them fused the orders of grace and of nature, and arrived at a democratic political theory by simply applying doctrines concerning salvation and the Christian community to the English nation as a whole.

An influential variation on this theory, but one that is nowhere developed at length is the idea that the Levellers, and Lilburne in particular, became politically involved because their eschatology

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1. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation*, p.271. Cf. D.M.Himbury, "The Religious Beliefs of the Levellers", *Baptist Quarterly*, vol.33, p.269: "the Levellers 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... 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 Nonconformist groups". See also P.Zagorin, *A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution*, London, 1965, p.13.
2. *H&D*, pp.42,43.
3. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation*, p.176.

broadened out over the years, and was transformed into a social optimism.'

The view that fusion is the key to interpretation of the Levellers is taken up and developed by J.C.Davis. Davis claims that the relationship between Leveller religion and politics can only be fully understood if it is grasped that

> in most important respects, the Levellers never distinguished between natural and divine law.[2]

He attempts to draw a clear distinction between his own theory and that of Haller, whom he criticises strongly because of Haller's view that the Levellers were primarily a secular group. Haller saw the Levellers' method as at least pointing in a secular direction, whereas Davis thinks that it was produced and sustained by a thoroughly Christian concern for justice and "practical" faith.[3] But this must not be allowed to obscure the fact that Davis' understanding of the process by which the Levellers arrived at their political theory is almost identical to that of Haller, for Davis too places central importance on the role of the doctrines of antinomianism and universal salvation in their thinking.[4]

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1. See for example, Robertson, p.47: "the great sense of expectancy evident in the sects at the meeting of the Long Parliament was not lost on the Levellers... From beginning to end Lilburne and his fellow-Leveller writers spoke of what the people had expected of Parliament, the army and of Cromwell. If their thinking was not millenarian in the technical sense, it was apocalyptic in a socio-political sense". See also W.Schenk, *The Concern for Social Justice in the Puritan Revolution*, London, 1948, pp.56,57. A.L.Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p.128, claims that the Levellers gave the Joachimist belief in the dawn of a new age "a secular twist" by insisting that "a completely new society had to be constructed on a democratic basis". For a discussion of Lilburne and the Everlasting Gospel see below, pp.39-42.
2. Davis, p.227.
3. ibid. 227ff, 234ff. The importance in the thinking of the Levellers of 'practical Christianity' over against a concern with election and doctrinal matters, is also stressed by B.Manning, "The Levellers and Religion", in McGregor & Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, Oxford 1984, pp.68,69.
4. For some reason Davis does not appear to recognise Haller's emphasis on antinomianism.

Davis maintains that each of the Leveller pamphleteers held these doctrines, and that under their influence they came to believe that both natural law and divine law were universally applicable. For antinomians and universalists,

> natural and divine law became indistinguishable. Since all men were saved, divine law, God's law made known to the elect, became the universal prescript. Thus natural law and divine law had to be seen as complementary, or rather as mutually inclusive, since both applied to all men.[1]

In this process, Davis claims, Walwyn's influence was crucial:

> the development of Lilburne's use of natural law argument illustrates well the influence of Walwyn's ideas, and the antinomian, free grace views behind them, upon the general course of Leveller thinking.[2]

He argues that, after having been strongly opposed to the use of principles based on the law of nature in his early writings, Lilburne was eventually persuaded to appeal to it only in the mid 1640s by William Walwyn (not, as Haller claimed, after reading the legal theorists).[3]

In Davis' view, therefore, the Levellers, under the intellectual and theological leadership of William Walwyn made antinomianism and universalism the bedrock of their political theory. The presence of Christian beliefs such as these thus enabled them to avoid secularism.[4]

The antinomian theory highlights the danger of making one of the Leveller leaders the model for all of them. What Ivan Roots has observed in the context of the political ideas of the Levellers, might also be applied to their theological ideas: scholars have often failed to emphasise "what an eclectic lot they were".[5] Davis has based virtually the

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1. Davis, p.231.
2. ibid.
3. ibid. p.232.
4. ibid. p.230.
5. I.Roots, Preface to a new edition of A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, Chicago, 1974

whole of his theory on the theology of William Walwyn. Both he and Haller assume that, at some point, Lilburne and Overton became antinomians and universalists. But neither of them offer any convincing evidence to support this view.

Haller's theory does not explain adequately how the Lilburne of the early pamphlets relates to the Lilburne of the Leveller period. Lilburne's early theology, as chapter two will attempt to show, was sectarian, elitist and anti-universalist: his opposition to the Church of England was precisely that it was all-inclusive and embraced the whole nation. To have suddenly changed his position on this vastly important principle of separatism for which he had been prepared to suffer in the late 1630s, would have meant a gigantic upheaval in his basic theology. There is no sign of it in his writings. On the contrary, there is good evidence to suppose that he retained much of his early sectarian theology during the crucial period 1645-1647 when his political theory was developing (see chapter seven).

Davis is wrong in suggesting that Lilburne was opposed to argument from natural law in his early pamphlets. As will be seen, Lilburne appealed to it in his own defence before Star Chamber as early as 1638, and, significantly, his understanding of the concept was essentially the same as that which he employed so often from 1645 onwards. Moreover, as will also be demonstrated, this understanding was derived neither from Walwyn nor the legal theorists, but his old Puritan hero, John Bastwick.

Fundamentally, the claims of both Haller and Davis rest on a certain view of the use of the law of nature in the Leveller writings. They consider that because Lilburne and Overton, in particular, often failed to distinguish between the law of God and the law of nature, and used the terms interchangeably and ambiguously, that this is evidence of antinomian and universalist theology - the fusion of nature and grace. What they have

both failed to notice is that this confusion of language and resultant imprecision is, in fact, also a characteristic feature of orthodox Puritan usage of the concept. It certainly does not demand an antinomian interpretation.

This thesis raises serious doubts about key elements in the theories of Haller and Davies concerning the relationship between theology and politics in the writings of the Levellers. A different solution must be found, one that takes seriously both the individual histories and ideas of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn, and the basis on which they were able to cooperate within the Leveller movement.

(ii) Segregation and Analogy

A.S.P.Woodhouse was one of the first scholars to pay serious attention to the development of the Levellers' ideas and the role that religion played within it, and, in many ways, his analysis is still the best and most convincing. Woodhouse argued that the Levellers' ideas were the product of one of two types of political stance that emerged among the sectaries of the Great Rebellion. The first type, which in the 1650s produced the Fifth Monarchy movement, was basically autocratic and millennial, and emphasised the privileges of the elect; the second, which gave rise to the Leveller movement, was "democratic in tendency and ultimately secular in aim".[1] He maintained that the Levellers were able to avoid the elitism of the Fifth Monarchists - which sprang from their shared predestinarian, elitist theology - and arrive at a democratic standpoint, because they developed a theory of "segregation" and "analogy". By the principle of segregation "a clear-cut and consistent distinction" could be made between the order of grace and that of nature, the church and the state; and then by the principle of analogy, categories

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1. A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, London, 1938, p.18.

taken from the order of grace could be applied to the order of nature.[1] This thesis will take issue with Woodhouse over the second part of his theory - the existence of a principle of analogy in the thinking of the Leveller pamphleteers, and, support and confirm the first part of it, at least as far as Lilburne and Overton are concerned.

Woodhouse saw these principles at work most clearly in the Levellers' use of the idea of the law of nature. He rightly pointed out that this concept was "no way peculiar to Puritan thought", and had in fact been spelt out very clearly by Puritan theologians like William Ames.[2]. According to Woodhouse's theory, a strict application of the segregational principle meant that the law of the New Testament was applicable only to the church, and the Leveller, therefore, had to look elsewhere for guidance in political affairs:

> by the principles of his *religious* thinking (he) was thrown back wholly upon the law of nature in the civil sphere.[3]

By analogy with the order of grace, the law of nature

> can take its place as the fundamental law for the state not less certainly than the law of Christ as the fundamental law for the church. With this vast authority, with these potentialities, and with a new freedom from reference to anything beyond itself, the law of nature becomes the foundation of the Levellers' political creed and their final court of appeal.[4]

Woodhouse believed that by means of these principles of segregation and analogy the Levellers were able to use sectarian theology to build an egalitarian political theory, while allowing that theology to remain intact; the message of the Gospel did not have to change, nor the fundamental limitation of its benefits to those within the company of faith be abandoned. Therefore, although he saw Levellerism as essentially secular, he did not believe that the adoption of Leveller ideas

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1. ibid. p.84.
2. ibid. pp.87,88.
3. ibid. p.87.
4. ibid. p.92.

necessarily entailed a departure from sectarian belief.

Another important analogy that Woodhouse believed was of tremendous significance to the Levellers was that from church government to secular government - "behind the idea of a free state lay the model of a free church"[1] - and a number of scholars who do not share his fundamental approach have also put forward this thesis. D.B.Robertson has claimed that the sectarian view of church government found its "counterpart" in the Levellers' democratic political theory;[2] J.Frank argues that congregational democracy helped to "father" Leveller democracy;[3] and J.W.Gough maintains that the Levellers' "immediate source of inspiration" for their *Agreement of the People* was "the common sectarian notion of a church covenant, which they thus transferred to the political sphere".[4]

Few scholars, however, have followed Woodhouse's overall interpretation of the relationship between politics and theology in the writings of the Levellers. Despite his views on the influence of sectarian church government, Robertson, contends that

> there was nothing so self-conscious and rationalistic about Leveller procedure as "a principle of segregation" and a "principle of analogy"... Of course, analogy (from religion to the state) cannot be denied... (but) the practise of drawing "analogies" hardly represents anything like a logical procedure followed by the minds of early 17th century English Christians in general who fought and wrote and wrangled for justice, equality and "rights".[5]

J.C.Davis goes even further and claims that there is

> very little real evidence for any process of segregation and analogy in Leveller thought and even less direct evidence for the inspiration of congregational organisation.[6]

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1. ibid. p.72.
2. D.B.Robertson, *The Religious Foundations of Leveller Democracy*, New York, 1951, p.29.
3. J.Frank, *The Levellers: a History of the Writings of Three 17th Century Social Democrats*, Harvard, 1951, p.4.
4. J.W.Gough, *The Social Contract: a Critical Study of its Development*, Oxford, 1957, p.96.
5. Robertson, p.11.
6. Davis, p.226.

It would seem that Davis is right in his view of the influence of congregational government. Although it is a very obvious analogy and parallel of the democratic state, nowhere did the Levellers consciously make use of it. While it is, of course, possible that the church model could have affected them unconsciously, the very fact that they never turned to it is itself evidence of the presence in their thinking of a very powerful principle of segregation: they were not prepared to link church and society in this way.

It is therefore suprising that Davis should be so dismissive of Woodhouse's basic theory concerning the segregation of grace and nature and the use of the law of nature as the central authority in civil society, for there is, in fact, good evidence in the writings of John Lilburne and Richard Overton to support it. It will be one of the main objectives of this thesis to present it.

Indirect support for Woodhouse' theory is provided by M.Tolmie in his study of 17th century London separatism. He argues that the Levellers

> shared with Baptists and separatists the principle of the complete separation of church and state,

and that for a considerable period between 1646 and 1649 they won substantial support among London sectaries precisely because religious liberty was central to their political programme. But

> they went beyond the sectaries in accepting the secular state as a legitimate sphere of moral action in its own right, and they attempted to find principles of natural equity appropriate for political action in a secular state.

Tolmie believes that the Levellers were, in fact, expressing politically a distinction that was at the heart of separatist theology. They, nevertheless, failed to win and maintain the support of the sectaries because the sectaries

> could not free themselves from lingering aspirations for a Christian magistrate and for "righteousness" in a Christian society.[1]

In Tolmie's view, then, the Levellers were faithful to the principle of segregation, and therefore, to an important theological principle within separatism, while their sectarian contemporaries betrayed it.[2]

Further backing for Woodhouse's interpretation of the Levellers' use of the Puritan idea of natural law has come in an unpublished dissertation by F.W.Bridger. Bridger has argued convincingly that the concept of natural law found in the collective Leveller publications of the late 1640s governed Leveller ideology and was "rooted in Puritan theology".[3] On the basis of this he claims that there is

> a *prima facie* case as far as the Levellers were concerned for setting the Revolution in a theological, as well as a socio-economic, and political context.[4]

Bridger's work underlines the fact that Woodhouse was essentially right concerning his view of the background to the use by some of the Levellers of the natural law concept. The major problem with Bridger's thesis is that, in its anxiety to establish the Christian credentials of the Levellers, it almost entirely overlooks the possibility that other concepts not derived from Puritan theology may have played an important role in the development of their political theories. It will be argued in this thesis that the impact of the natural rights tradition which was mediated to them through the writings of the Parliamentary propagandists of the early 1640s was extensive.

Despite these points in favour of Woodhouse's theory, there are a number of weaknesses. The fact that not all the Levellers were sectarians

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1. M.Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints*, Cambridge, 1977, p.144.
2. ibid. pp.185,187.
3. F.W.Bridger, *Theology and Politics in the English Revolution 1640-1660*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, Bristol University, 1980, p.15.
4. ibid. p.94.

appears not to have influenced his views substantially, and he made little distinction between the ideas of the three main leaders of the movement. He was prepared to accept that alongside the principles of segregation and analogy there may have been some elements of rationalism, and a "weakening of dogma" which helped them to develop a democratic theory. But he did not believe that this weakening was "very widespread"; Walwyn and Overton, whom he considered more likely to have been prone to this were "very influential" but "less typical than a Leveller like Lilburne".[1] Woodhouse provided no evidence to support this view, but it obviously suited his theory well to concentrate on the one man who was clearly committed to a separatist ecclesiology and an elitist theology.

Woodhouse's theory manifestly fails to embrace William Walwyn, who was neither a sectarian nor a theological elitist.[2] But even if it is granted that it has much to contribute to an understanding of the thought of John Lilburne, in particular, it still begs an important question. While the principles of segregation and analogy may in theory have allowed for the development of democratic ideas out of sectarianism without the necessity of any fundamental changes in sectarian theology, is this what actually happened in the case of Lilburne? Did his theology remain unchanged despite the use of this radical secular principle in the political domain? It is a question that Woodhouse did not really consider, and neither do Tolmie and Bridger. They are content to point to the theological background out of which aspects of Leveller thought emerged.

This highlights a general problem in the debate over the relationship between theology and politics in the Leveller writings.

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1. ibid. p.84.
2. J.Frank, *The Levellers: a History of the Writings of Three 17th Century Social Democrats*, Harvard, 1955, p.31, observes that "Walwyn practised to a conspicuously small degree that separation of the holy and the secular which Woodhouse finds characteristic of Interregnum radicalism".

Questions have tended to be framed in terms of the influence of theology on politics, as, for example, whether that influence was primary or secondary. But this is to place too much emphasis on origins and starting points, and not enough on the unfolding of events. Influences are not all in one direction, and little attention has been paid to the possibility that political involvement may also have shaped and modified their theologies and affected their religious experience. It will be argued in this thesis that as their political theories developed this is precisely what happened in the cases of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn: their religious thinking, to a greater or lesser extent, moved in a markedly 'secular' direction.

The danger of making one of the Leveller leaders the model for all of them has been seen in both the theories of Woodhouse and J.C.Davis. By concentrating on Lilburne, Woodhouse has failed to understand Walwyn; and by focussing on Walwyn, Davis has misinterpreted Lilburne. However, each of the Leveller pamphleteers under consideration in this thesis brought their own very different theological and intellectual ideas to bear on the great political and social problems of the 1640s, and the contribution of each of them deserves serious attention. In certain respects, those differences were never resolved: there was no one Leveller theological position, neither was there one comprehensive Leveller understanding of the law of nature. An important objective of this thesis will, therefore, be to stress the distinctive political and theological features within the writings of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn. With this in view, chapters two, three and four will examine the ideas of each man prior to 1645.

The ideas of the Levellers, however, cannot be considered apart from the context in which they were developed. It has often been observed that

the Leveller movement grew out of the fight for religious liberty during the mid 1640s. Davis has rightly pointed out that

> the constitutional proposals of the Levellers were... in part derived from their fear that, without some such arrangements, freedom of conscience could not be guaranteed.[1]

But in explaining the rise of Leveller theory, too much emphasis has been placed on the notion of safeguarding the specific right of religious liberty. The real impact of the toleration debates has largely been ignored.

It is a central conviction of this thesis that the Leveller platform can best be understood if it is seen as the answer to a question posed by the Puritan enemies of religious liberty, and, in particular, by William Prynne. In its most acute form the question was this: how can a society avoid anarchy and continue to exist in any civilised form if the social cement of established religion is removed? Prynne asked this question of the Independents and sectaries in civil war England in the belief that there could be no satisfactory answer. Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn sought to provide one, and it is primarily in this light that the development of their political and theological ideas must be seen. It will be argued that there was no substantial growing together in theological outlook: what united the Leveller leaders and led to their continued cooperation was a shared desire, provoked by the attacks of Prynne, to construct a free society founded upon principles drawn from the law of nature, a concept which they, nevertheless, understood in significantly different ways.

The importance of Prynne's relationship with the Levellers, and his objections to their ideas has tended to be overlooked, despite the fact that in 1645, a crucial year with respect to the emergence of sectarian radicalism, Lilburne, Walwyn and Overton all published pamphlets in

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1. Davis, p.249.

response to his anti-tolerationist tracts. The reasons for his opposition to religious liberty and the nature of his challenge to the Levellers will therefore be examined in chapter five. Chapters six, seven and eight will attempt to show how the political and religious thinking of the three pamphleteers developed in response to this challenge.

It has already been noted that the relationship between politics and theology cannot be one in which the influences are all in one direction. It will be argued that the political and theological struggles and controversies of the 1640s left their mark on Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn, pushing them in a direction which, in the view of their contemporaries, though not necesarily of 20th century observers, was godless and unchristian. The increasing secularity of the Levellers, particularly with respect to their lack of eschatology and firm ecclesiology, and the impact of this on their relationship with the sects will be examined in chapter nine. It will be argued that the Levellers' break with the sectaries in 1649 was not due primarily to the fact that the Levellers' political theory was regarded as too radical, but that in important respects their theology was also suspect.

Chapter Two

THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN LILBURNE'S EARLY PAMPHLETS

To a much greater extent than either William Walwyn or Richard Overton, John Lilburne was prone to autobiography. As J.S.Morrill has observed, the vast majority of his pamphlets were, in one way or another, "self-advertisments".[1] Lilburne was forever bringing his grievances to the public notice, and complaining of some new injustice visited upon him. Whatever the immediate reason for the publication of a pamphlet might have been, he invariably took the opportunity to tell his own story, and this has made the biographer's task much easier.[2] Ironically, however, this mass of detail concerning the events of Lilburne's life has tended to deflect attention away from his ideas. While scholars have been busy recounting the tale of his trial before Star Chamber, and his subsequent period of imprisonment, important themes from his early writings, which have great significance for the development of his theology and political theory, have been ignored. This chapter will examine Lilburne's pamphlets of the late 1630s, paying particular attention to the theology that he epoused at this time, especially his doctrines of the church and of the last times. It will also show that the law of nature was no new discovery that he made in the 1640s, but a concept that he was already employing, at the height of his separatist fervour in 1638.

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1. J.S.Morrill, article on John Lilburne in R.L.Greaves & R.Zaller (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the 17th Century* (here after referred to as *BDBR*), 3 vols., Brighton, 1982.
2. Two works - *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, and *The Just Defence of John Lilburne*, 1653 (both in *H&D*) - are especially useful, because Lilburne deliberately set out in both to give a blow-by-blow account of his struggles for justice, beginning in 1638. For modern biographies, see M.A.Gibb, *John Lilburne the Leveller*, London, 1949, and P.Gregg, *Free-Born John*, London, 1961.

1. Early Influences

From early adulthood John Lilburne found himself moving in radical Puritan and separatist circles. In 1629, when he was about fourteen years old, his father sent him to London to be apprenticed to Thomas Hewson, a cloth merchant,[1] and through belonging to Hewson's household he was brought into contact with leading London dissidents. The people whom he met during this period were to have a profound effect on the development of his theological and political thinking.

One of his earliest friends was Edmund Rosier, who, according to Lilburne, was "conversant at my masters house from the beginning of my coming to him".[2] Rosier later became the minister of a separatist congregation of which, at some stage, Lilburne was a member.[3] By the end of the 1640s, however, this close relationship between them had evaporated, for Rosier was one of the Independent and Baptist signatories to *Walwins Wiles*, a bitter attack on William Walwyn and the whole of the Leveller movement.

William Kiffin, another future Baptist leader and signatory to *Walwins Wiles*, also became a firm friend of his during this period, though some time after his friendship with Rosier had begun.[4] Lilburne may even

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1. *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D pp.403,404. Little is known of Hewson other than that he was a Puritan merchant with some radical friends. See M.Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints*, Cambridge, 1977, pp.36,44.
2. ibid. p.404.
3. ibid. p.401. Rosier is another radical about whom little is known. He seems to have been a prominent separatist leader, for in 1644 he took part in discussions with Independent churchmen including Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Jeremiah Burroughes and Sidrach Simpson, over the question of infant baptism; and in the late 1640s he was a member of the London Common Council. But Lilburne's testimony is the only direct source of information concerning the existence of Rosier's congregation. See Tolmie, pp.36,66,68; article on Rosier by R.L.Greaves in *BDBR*.
4. Lilburne stated in 1649 that he had walked "many yeares in fellowship" (H&D p.401) with Rosier and Kiffin, "although the first of them and I have been familiar together for almost twenty years" (H&D p.402). In the same pamphlet, Lilburne declared that his motivations had been well known to

have been a member of Kiffin's group of fellow apprentices which met together regularly to pray and study the Bible.[1]

In 1636 Edmund Rosier introduced Lilburne to the anti-prelatical pamphleteer, John Bastwick, who at the time was a prisoner in the Gatehouse.[2] Bastwick was a physician who had published a number of attacks on the Laudian church, and who, together with William Prynne, another fierce opponent of the church establishment, was destined to have his ears shorn on the order of Star Chamber. Lilburne also became acquainted with Prynne during this period and visited both men frequently. Later, in the 1640s they became his bitter enemies. But as he was willing to acknowledge, even in 1646, at this stage he very much wanted to identify with them and their cause, accounting it his duty

> to do William Prynne and Dr.Bastwick all the free offices of love and service that lay in my power, during all the time that I conceived they stood either for God, goodness and justice".[3]

Lilburne declared that he had been ready to lay down his life for Bastwick,[4] and in 1638 he came very close to doing so when he was severely punished by order of Star Chamber for illegally printing a number of Bastwick's books in Holland and smuggling them into England.[5] Among the

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both of them "for these twelve or thirteen years together" (H&D p.402), suggesting that his association with Kiffin began somewhere around 1636. Lilburne described Kiffin as once having been his "servant" (H&D p.401). It is not clear what he meant by this, since it is most unlikely that Kiffin was his employee. W.Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* 1938, p.275, suggests that Lilburne was referring to the assistance that Kiffin may have given him during his first term of imprisonment, and this seems to be the most likely explanation. Kiffin did, in fact write a foreword to the 1641 edition of *The Christian Mans Triall*, and probably gave practical help of other kinds, just as he did when Lilburne was again in trouble in the 1650s (see, e.g. *Lt.Col.John Lilburne his Apologeticall Narration*, 1652, pp.59-61).

1. See W,Kiffin, *Remarkable Passages in the Life of William Kiffin*, ed. W.Orme, 1823, pp.11,12.
2. H&D p.404.
3. *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, p.7.
4. H&D p.404.
5. Lilburne published his accounts of his arrest, trial and subsequent sufferings at the hands of Star Chamber in *The Christian Mans Triall*, 1638, and *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638.

books was *The Letany*, an attack on the bishops as enemies of God, which had recently been written in prison at the instigation of 85 year-old John Wharton, Lilburne's co-defendant.[1]

The important influence of Bastwick upon Lilburne has never been properly acknowledged. Bastwick himself, with a characteristic lack of modesty, claimed to have been

> the best master and instructor that ever he had for matters of controversy and religion, so that next unto God he owes his greatest skill to me, who was a good tutor to him".[2]

There is every reason to accept his claim. As his publisher, Lilburne was steeped in Bastwick's literary style and his political and theological ideas. He cited "the noble Dr." in his early pamphlets more than any other author.[3] Stylistically, Bastwick appears to have passed on to Lilburne his own delight in quoting precedents and appealing to Parliamentary laws and statutes,[4] and his ability to dramatise his sufferings at the hands of oppressive government.[5] More profoundly, perhaps, the common themes that run through Bastwick's works, namely, opposition to prelacy,[6], temporal judgement on the nation for disobedience to God in ecclesiastical affairs,[7] loyalty to the king despite the alleged treachery of the

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1. *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.23. Lilburne listed the other books that he was accused of printing as *The Answer to Sir John Bancks*, *An Answer unto Certain Objections*, and *The Vanity and Impiety of the Old Letany* (See *The Christian Mans Triall*, 1638, pp.9,10). While he confessed that he had read these books, he denied the allegations against him (*A Worke...*, 1638, p.24). But it is unlikely that he was telling the truth. In 1645 Bastwick (*Just Defence*, p.13), who admittedly by then was no supporter of his, claimed that Lilburne had asked him for permission to print and distribute the *Letany*, and that he was motivated largely by the prospect of financial gain. Two of his accomplices - John Chilliburn and Edmond Chillington - betrayed him (H&D pp.404, 405). Even if he did not carry out the work himself, he must have been deeply implicated in the scheme.
2. J.Bastwick, *The Just Defence of John Bastwick*, 1645, pp.14,15.
3. See, e.g., *The Christian Mans Triall*, 1638, pp.2,7,9,10; *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, pp.12,14,15,24,26; *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, pp.20,25,34; *Come Out of Her My People*, 1639, pp.13,33.
4. See, e.g., J.Bastwick, *The Answer to Sir John Bancks*, 1637, pp.2,13; *The Second Part of the Letany*, 1637, p.26.
5. See, e.g., *The Letany*, 1637, p.26.
6. *The Answer to Sir John Bancks*, 1637, p.19; *The Letany*, 1637, p.2.
7. *The Letany*, pp.13,14; *The Vanity and Impiety of the Old Letany*, p.24.

bishops,[1] and the bishops' barbaric abuse of the law,[2] left their mark on Lilburne's whole view of society. What is striking about these pamphlets, and of particular significance as far as the development of Lilburne's later political ideas are concerned, is the frequency with which Bastwick used arguments based on the law of nature to support his case.[3]. The fact that Bastwick was finally interested in reform of the established church, whereas Lilburne called for separation from it, must not be allowed to obscure the fact that his influence on Lilburne in the late 1630s was extensive.

In 1649, Lilburne listed Foxe, Luther, Calvin, Beza, Cartwright, Perkins, Molins and Burton as authors whom he had read while still an apprentice in the 1630s.[4] Significantly, he made no mention of Bastwick. Of these, Foxe's *Booke of Martyrs* probably made the greatest impression on him, for throughout his life the heroic reformers and martyrs described there seem to have been a source of inspiration to him.[5] Unfortunately, apart from this and a reference to Cartwright's *Defence against Bishop Whitgift*,[6] he gave no indication which works of theirs he had actually read. On the whole his writings provide little evidence that he had assimilated much in the way of 'heavyweight' theology, and it could well be that, especially in view of the absence of Bastwick, this list says

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1. e.g., *The Answer to Sir John Bancks*, pp.25,28; *The Letany*, p.3; *An Answer unto Certaine Objections*, p.26.
2. e.g., *The Answer to Sir John Bancks*, pp.25,28; *The Letany*, pp.12,14.
3. See below p.44ff.
4. *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, H&D p.404.
5. See *The Poore Mans Cry*, 1639, p.5. His description of his punishment at the hands of Star Chamber in 1638 could have come straight out of Foxe: at the first lash of the whip he apparently cried out "Blessed be Thy name O Lord my God, that hast counted me worthy to suffer for Thy glorious names sake",and to well-wishers who lined his route, he said, "I rest not in my own strength, but I fight under the banner of my great and mighty captain, the Lord Jesus Christ, who hath conquered all his enemies... " (*A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.5). In 1653 he likened his own experiences to those of Hus, Wycliffe and the Marian Martyrs (*The Just Defence of John Lilburne*, H&D p.452).
6. *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1638, p.25.

more about the kind of authors with whom Lilburne wished to be associated in 1649 than it does about the extent of his early theological education.

However, two other works by authors not included in this list do seem to have had an important influence upon his early writings. These were Henry Barrow's *Platform* (1593), and the anonymous *A Licht for the Ignorant* (1638).[1] Although he did not cite them extensively, close examination of these documents shows that they were of great help to him in making his own case for separatism. As will be seen, together with the writings of John Bastwick, they played a major role in the development of his early theological and political thinking.

2. Ecclesiology and Soteriology

Although Lilburne had certainly been mixing with people like Hewson and Rosier, and reading at least some Puritan literature from the beginning of his apprenticeship in 1629, he did not consider himself to be a truly converted Christian until sometime in 1636.[2] It was then that he came to know God as his

> loving and reconciled father that had particularly washed and clensed my soul with the precious bloud of Jesus Christ, and had caused the grace of God to appear in my soul... [3]

It may well be that this experience was connected with his becoming a committed separatist, though by his own account there does seem to have been a delay between his adoption of separatist principles and the actual practice of them. In 1638 he claimed that although he had separatist convictions, he had not been in any of their congregations, and had read

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1. See *The Copy of a Letter...*, 1638, p.14, and *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.29; *The Poore Mans Cry*, 1639, p.14. The importance of these works as sources for Lilburne's separatist ideas was first pointed out by P.Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon*, Toronto, 1978, p.174, n.91.
2. *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.402.
3. ibid. pp.402,403.

only a few of their books.[1] It is possible that he had arrived at separatist conclusions simply as the result of conversations with friends like Rosier and Kiffin. But since the whole point of separatism was that one should belong to a gathered congregation, Lilburne was being rather inconsistent, to say the least. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that he was out of the country, certainly for part of 1637, and in prison immediately after that. Whether or not Lilburne was only a "quasi-separatist" [2] prior to his clash with the authorities, there can be no argument about where he stood shortly thereafter.

In one of his very earliest pamphlets, *A Worke of the Beast* (1638), in which he described his punishment at the hands of Star Chamber, Lilburne advocated total separation from the national church:

> as you love your own soules and look for the immortal crown of happiness in the world to come, look that you withdraw yourselves from that Antichristian power and slavery that you are now under, even as God himselfe hath commanded and injoyned you in Rev.18,4 saying, Come out of her my people that you be not partaker of her sinnes, and that you receive not her plagues, for her sinnes have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities.[3]

He claimed that after years of living under the "slavish power" of the national church, God's people were now being called to "withdraw their obedience and subjection from it".[4]

In *The Copy of a Letter... to one of his Special Friends* of November 1638, Lilburne explained that the alternative to belonging to the state church was membership of a separate congregation. He advised his friend to walk in the ways of Christ by becoming

> a citizen of Gods holy city and a visible member of his incorporated body, to worship him in Syon, the beauty of holines, the place of his promised preference, according

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1. See *The Copy of a Letter*, Nov.11th 1638, p.16, printed at the end of *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, and *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, p.23, written in 1639, but not published until 1645.
2. M.Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints*, Cambridge, 1977, p.36.
3. *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.29.
4. ibid.

> to his lawes and ordinances, in an visible church, for that is the place in which the Lord doth dwell, and which he hath desired to dwell in, where he hath promised to be found, and where the promised increase of grace is to be had.[1]

Visible membership of a visible church was a matter of vital concern to Lilburne at this stage, and in 1639, in *An Answeare to Nine Arguments of T.B.*,[2] he went on to outline what constituted a visible church. He maintained that a true, visible church was "a company of believers who are washed in the blood of Christ" and who had freely consented to "enter into that heavenly and holy state, city or kingdome... and by the Power of Christ to become a constituted or Politique Body or Corporation"; because they had promised to follow Christ faithfully and obediently, they became a church which now had power

> to cast out offenders... to chuse, elect and ordaine her own officers... and to receive in believers... to keep out wicked persons... and to reprove and admonish her own officers... or do herself any spiritual good or exclude from herself any evill she feares.[3]

A true church, then, according to Lilburne, was made up of voluntary, truly Christian members anxious to obey all of Christ's commands; it had the right to choose its own leaders, excercise discipline over its members, and include or exclude whom it chose.

As against his antagonist, T.B., who had claimed that the Church of England was a true church because through it the people of England came within the sound of the voice and call of God to repentance, Lilburne

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1. *The Copy of a Letter...*, 1638, p.16.
2. T.B. has not been identified.
3. *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.28. Cf. Henry Barrow, *Platforme*, 1593, Letter to Mr.Wood (unpaginated). Barrow stated that the true church was a communion and fellowship of righteous men and women" who had separated from the evil people of the world. Membership was open only to "such as by faith and repentance have washed away the guilt of their sinnes in the blood of the Lamb, and are born anew by the seed of the Word and by a willing Covenant made with the Lord... are under his government and scepter of grace and so doe lead godly and Christian lives". This kind of language would, of course, have been common in separatist circles. See G.F.Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, Oxford 1957, p.131ff.

argued that

> the true visible church of Christ under the Gospell doeth not consist of all sorts and kinds of people to whom the Word of God is preached, but only to such persons who by their outward conversation may be judged to be true believers.[1]

The Church of England was made up of all kinds of "wicked persons" which proved it to be "an Antichristian church, and one of the nationall citties that is under the government of the Beast".[2] Lilburne denied that true worship took place within the Church of England, because, as far as he was concerned, true worship could only be produced by a true church:

> true worship doth not prove a company of people to be a true visible church of Christ, for they must be a true visible church before they tender and offer up any publicke worship... therefore true worship doth not prove a true church, but rather a true church proves true worship.[3]

Lilburne's description of the church as a "Polytique Body or Corporation"[4] echoed that found in the anonymous *A Licht for the Ignorant* (1638), in which Christian believers were likened to the subjects of an earthly king.

A Licht had made the analogy that just as earthly subjects made cities and corporations, so, when the Lord's people joined together, "the churches of the Saints become bodies pollitique";[5] churches, too, like cities had "proper and distinct officers", each with their various functions;[6] these officers were elected by the particular congregation, and there were five categories, namely, Pastors, teachers, elders, deacons and widows.[7].

Lilburne's view of the ministry coincided with this. He stated that

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1. *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.11.
2. ibid. p.27.
3. ibid. p.24.
4. ibid. p.28.
5. *A Licht for the Ignorant*, 1638, p.11.
6. ibid. p.8.
7. ibid. pp.8,16.

ministers must be "members of an incorporated or constituted city, body or visible church", and that they were only to be chosen from among the congregation if they possessed the gifts and qualities laid down in the first epistle to Timothy and the epistle to Titus.[1] The law of Christ, he maintained, clearly commanded that there were to be only five officers in the church "who are to be permanent, officiating in personall presence and being for the freedom of his church".[2]

Lilburne's understanding of the church as an incorporated body was central to his criticism of the Church of England. In his view, that church proved it was false by the very fact that it remained a national church when Jesus Christ had abolished such in the New Testament;[3] far from being a voluntary gathering of believers, it actually compelled everyone, irrespective of their faith and obedience to God, to belong to it. This was proof to Lilburne that the Church of England was Antichristian and "under the government of the Beast"; for the Beast

> is said to compel all... both rich and poor, high and low, bond and free to become his servants and subjects and to worship him according to his lawes, and whatsoever will not shall not live neither in peace nor quietness.[4]

Freedom was of central importance in Lilburne's doctrine of the church - freedom for people to worship God in the way that they considered to be right, and freedom to elect church officers. With his use of terms such as "incorporated city" and "polytique body" to describe the relatively democratic gathered congregation, it is easy to see how Lilburne might have gone on to apply this concept of church liberty to the

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1. *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.13.
2. ibid.p.21. Lilburne, too, specified these officers of the church as pastors, teachers, elders, deacons, widows.
3. ibid. p.37.
4. ibid.p.28. The connection between coercion and Antichrist had also been made in *A Licht*. p.15. That pamphlet contrasted the power of grace, the power which drew the saints into the true church, with the power excercised by the false church, which "compells all in all nations, will they, nill they, have they faith or no, conscience or no conscience".

whole of society. But it must not too quickly be assumed either that he did so, or that in doing so he would, therefore, confuse church and state, and equated civil liberty with the liberty of the sons and daughters of God.

A Licht for the Ignorant actually drew parallels between the secular state and the true church. It did this in order to show how they had both been appointed by God, and to contrast them favourably with the false church, "the hellish state of the Beast".[1] Both the civil state and the true church had "a kingly state or power pollitique"; in both cases that power came from God, although in the civil state it was mediated through kings and those in authority, whereas in the church, Christ Himself reigned. Both of them had books and charters "to declare their minds to their subjects" - the church had the Scriptures, and the state had statutes, acts of Parliament and charters.[2] The author of *A Licht* was not reading from the nature of the church into the nature of the state. Rather, he was drawing parallels between two legitimate states that were essentially different and independent.

Lilburne, influenced by this analysis, also came to regard the civil state as fundamentally autonomous, and governed by it own peculiar law - the law of nature. Prior to 1645 his pamphlets were characterised by a typical separatist concern, or even obsession, for the structure of the true church, its organisation and laws. In "the making of a true church", he wrote in 1639, "there must not only be true matter, but also a true forme";[3] the true church had to accord in every detail with the will of God as it was revealed in the Scriptures. In later years he approached the form of the civil state, its laws and practices, with the same seriousness with which he had dealt with the church. The fundamentalist mentality that

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1. *A Licht for the Ignorant*, 1638, p.4.
2. ibid. p.5.
3. *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.24.

he shared with so many others in the seventeenth century led him to study the statute books, Magna Carta and the legal histories in order to establish the one true pattern of the political and legal structures of the state. Lilburne firmly believed that the pattern of the true church was laid down in Scripture. He became just as convinced that the pattern of the civil state was to be found in its own "texts" - the declared laws of the land, its charters, and the law of nature itself.

For Lilburne, as for all separatists, the true church was composed of true believers. But how was a true believer to be identified, and where did this leave people who remained part of the Church of England? As someone who accepted the doctrine of divine election, Lilburne knew that he could not exclude the possibility of there being true believers in the state church. He acknowledged that God had "a people or an elect number in spirituall Babylon, yea in the kingdom of the Beast" who would be saved.[1] His belief in the sovereignty of God forced him to admit that there was no absolute link between visible righteousness and election: the eternal counsels of God were mysterious. Nevertheless, in his view, God's people who stayed within the national church were disobedient servants who were putting themselves at great risk:

> I say it is the duty of all Gods elect and chosen ones that is yet in the whorish bosome of the Church of England or in any part of Antichrists regiment to separate away from it and come out of it least God plague them for staying there".[2]

A close connection between soteriology and ecclesiology seems to have been characteristic of Lilburne's thinking in the early years. Since for him a true church was made up of true believers, one of the most important ways of identifying true believers was by their membership of a gathered congregation. He was keen to remind his readers that salvation

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1. *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.22.
2. ibid. See also *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.29.

was no easy business, and that they must be prepared to struggle and suffer if they were to attain it. If they wanted the comforts of the "spirituall and hidden truths" of God, they must "bestow some labour for the getting of them, and... must search diligently" before finding them:[1]

> if you will have Christ sit downe and reckon before ever you make profession of him, what hee wil cost you, lest when you come to the triall, you dishonour him, and if you be not willing and contented with all, and let all goe for his sake, you are not worthy of him.[2]

Those who were disobedient to God in some aspect of the Christian life, Lilburne claimed, particularly those who stayed within the Church of England, would suffer God's judgement and wrath: unless they withdrew from that "spirituall and Antichristian bondage", he warned, the Lord would "cause his plagues and the fierceness of his wrath to seize both upon your bodies and soules".[3]

Despite his acknowledgement in theory that there might be true believers in the state church, practically Lilburne made separatism a sign of election. The visible church, as he understood it, was "the place where the Lord doth dwell", and visible membership of it was necessary for growth in grace. Outside of this "city" God was "dreadfull and terrible", visiting plagues and wrath upon the people.[4]

It was apparently common in separatist circles from the sixteenth century onwards to link soteriology and ecclesiology in this way. According to S.Brachlow, for the separatist Richard Harrison, "ecclesiology comprised the sum and substance of the second commandment of the Decalogue", and those who worshipped in any way other than that they believed was prescribed in the Scriptures sinned against this commandment; only membership of the true church could bring real assurance of

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1. *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.28.
2. ibid. p.32.
3. ibid. p.29.
4. *The Copy of a Letter*, 1638, p.16.

salvation.[1] John Smyth, who defined saints as "men separated from all known syn, practising the whole will of God known unto them", maintained that only such people, visible saints, should be allowed into membership of true churches.[2]

Henry Barrow also taught that God's grace was conditional on obedience in church matters. For him, Christ was the law-giver of the New Covenant, and to ignore the ordinances that he had laid down for his church was idolatry; individual sanctification was useless unless it was accompanied by biblical churchmanship.[3] In his *Platforme* Barrow had stated that the problem with the established churches was precisely that they were not a "communion of saints called and severed from the world" but consisted of all kinds of men. Their members had not been won over by the preaching of the Gospel, nor had they ever made a "willing covenant... to walk uprightly before the Lord", but were wicked persons who had no choice but to belong to the church.[4] He, too, conceded, however, that there was little doubt that God did have "many pretious and elect vessels among them" whom it was not his place to judge even though he could not consider them to be obedient servants.[5] But despite this somewhat grudging concession, for all practical purposes he associated the elect with membership of a visible congregation.

According to these separatists, then, although the will of God could not be fully known with regard to election, obedience to the known will of God was a reliable indication of salvation. Visible saintliness combined with membership of a visible church demonstrated the presence of true faith. By entering into membership of the gathered church they

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1. S.Brachlow, *Puritan Theology and Radical Churchmen in pre-Revolutionary England*, unpublished D.Phil thesis, Oxford 1978, p.120.
2. ibid. p.136
3. ibid.pp. 121,123.
4. H.Barrow, *Platforme*, 1593, Letter to Mr.Wood.
5. L.H.Carlson (Ed.), *The Writings of Henry Barrow*, London 1962, vol.1, p.197.

believed that one was entering into true covenant with God.

Lilburne's pamphlets prior to 1645 demonstrate that he stood firmly within the separatist tradition. The suggestion that his democratic political theory developed as the result of applying religious categories, formerly used in the context of the sect, to the whole of society, must be rejected. Such an application would not have been the logical extension of separatist beliefs, but on the contrary, the complete denial of them. By regarding the whole of society as somehow elect, Lilburne would have been conceding to his opponents on a major issue. The whole point of his stand against Laudianism and later, Presbyterianism, was that true believers, the elect, were distinct from the mass of the people and could not participate in an all-embracing national church, however reformed it might be. Now it is of course theoretically possible that Lilburne did, in fact, concede on this point, and that after 1645 he employed separatist ideas in a way that completely overturned his commitment to separatist theology. But, as will be seen in chapter seven, there is no evidence that he did so.

3. Eschatology

Lilburne placed the struggle between the true and the false church, the concern that was central to his early writings, very firmly in an eschatological context. References to the Book of Revelation are scattered liberally through his work, and he used them particularly to reveal to his readers what he saw to be the reality of the Church of England and the Church of Rome. It was clear to him that the leaders of these churches were the very enemies of God, foretold in that Book, who would rise up in the last days to blind men to the truth; the "Beast", who had derived his authority from the devil, and after whom the whole world followed (Rev.13), was none other than "the Pope or Roman state or government";

the "Locusts out of the Bottomlesse Pit" who had been given power to hurt and torment men (Rev.9:1-11), included the bishops among their number. Lilburne argued that, since the English bishops were, on their own admission, "lineally descended from His Holinesse (or Impiousnesse) of Rome", the whole structure of the Church of England was Antichristian and to be with-drawn from.[1]

Clearly, as many people found in the seventeenth century, the Book of Revelation was a wonderful source of propaganda material, and the mere use of it in a polemical context was not necessarily the product of eschatological fervour. But in Lilburne's early writings there does appear to have been a strong and genuine sense of the imminence of the return of Jesus Christ and of the final judgement. In 1638 he advised a friend that "the great storm... is shortly to come and rise on all the world that worshippeth the Beast", and God was even now pouring out the sixth, and penultimate vial of His wrath.[2] In pamphlets of 1639 he wrote that the day of God's justice was "almost come" and that the downfall of Antichrist's kingdom "doth happen apace";[3] and in a poorly composed poem he declared that the downfall of God's enemies was at hand.[4] Even in January 1645, in his letter to William Prynne, he was still warning that "the time is not long" before Christ would come to judge the world.[5] In another letter of the same year he seemed to glory in the belief that the Lord would soon come to vindicate him against his enemies, and punish them for their crimes:

> I am confident that God will make good what he hath said, which is,that he will punish the world for their evill and the wicked for their iniquity, and he will cause the

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1. *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.26.
2. *The Copy of a Letter... to One of His Special Friends*,1638, p.16.
3. *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.41; *Come Out of Her My People*, 1639, p.17.
4. The poem was published at the end of *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*,1639, p.44.
5. *A Copie of a Letter... to William Prynne*, p.5.

> Arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtinesse of the terrible, for behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruell both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land of wickednesse desolate: and to destroy the sinners thereof out of it.[1]

There was, however, very little speculation concerning the precise pattern of the final events of history in any of his pamphlets, simply a conviction that he was living in the midst of those events. Where he did speculate, it was neither learned nor remarkable. For example, he discussed the meaning of the forty two months, the length of Antichrist's reign, in the eleventh chapter of Revelation, and concluded that it represented 1260 years, rather than 1260 days, since "it is impossible that Antichrist should doe all these strange things in so short a time". But although he clearly implied that this period was drawing to an end he gave no indication as to when he thought it had begun.[2]

Lilburne contrasted the situation in his own day with that during the time of the Marian martyrs, who were members of the national church. He did not criticise them for remaining within it, but justified his own call to separate on two grounds. Firstly, he claimed, the established church had deteriorated since the days of the martyrs, and secondly, God had revealed a greater measure of truth to the saints of the present day:

> now the great city Rome is much more fallen and discovered than it was: and now a third Angell hath proclaimed it with a loud voice having his commission from God so to do that seeing now the Booke is opened, and the truth of the everlasting Gospell is preached and light is now brought into the world: so that now, after all this, a man worship the Beast and his Image or receive in his right hand or in his forehead his marke, the same shall drinke of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his Indignation, and he shall be tormented with Fire and Brimstone in the presence of the Angels and in the presence of the Lamb.[3]

Lilburne claimed that the conflict with the Beast had become much more

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1. *The Copy of a Letter... to a Friend*, July 25th, 1645, p.9.
2. *Come Out of Her My People*, 1639, p.17.
3. An Answeare to Nine Arguments, 1639, p. 34

intense and polarised than in previous generations: new light and understanding about the nature of the church of Rome had broken into the world.

Lilburne's use of the term "everlasting Gospell" in this eschatological context is, at first sight, rather startling. As M.Reeves has shown, the term had a highly specific and explosive meaning for mystics and revolutionaries in the Joachimist tradition in the late Middle Ages.[1] Joachim of Fiore (c.1135-1202) looked forward to the dawning of a new age, an age of brotherhood and great spiritual enlightenment when each individual would be indwelt by the Spirit, thus making the Gospel a reality throughout human society.[2] The Everlasting Gospel for Joachimists meant the manifestation of God's Spirit in all flesh.

Joachim became the focus for many different ideas of a prophetic nature, and in the latter part of the Middle Ages there was a considerable corpus of pseudo-Joachimist writings which excercised a significant influence on popular thought. Joachimist prophecies were widely disseminated in England in the fourteenth century,[3] and they were known to Wyclif and the Lollards.[4] Ideas to do with the third age of the Spirit and the Everlasting Gospel were also known and propagated in England in the

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1. M.Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford 1969, esp.pp.1-20.Joachim postulated three ages in history, each of which corresponded to one member of the Trinity. He believed that history reflected the nature of the Godhead: as the first stage, that of the Old Testament, had been characterised by God the Father, and the second, that of the New Testament, by God the Son, so the new age would be that of the Spirit. Joachim taught that the seven seals mentioned in the Book of Revelation were seven stages in the redemption of the world, the sixth being the one through which the world was presently passing. Some Franciscan followers of Joachim, led by Gerard of Borgo san Donino saw the revolutionary implications of his system and actually proclaimed that the seventh stage, the third age of the Spirit, had arrived ;now that the "everlasting Gospel" was a reality, there was no further role for the church in God's plan.(see pp.59-61, 187-190). See also G.Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 1967, pp.71-82.
2. Reeves, p.19.
3. Reeves, p.82.
4. ibid. pp.83, 474.

1640s. Ephraim Pagitt, the heresiographer, claimed that the doctrine was taught by Henry Niclaes and the Familists.[1] Thomas Edwards stated that some sectaries in London held to the Everlasting Gospel, and he condemned those who suggested that there was "a salvation that shall be revealed in the last times which was not known to the Apostles themselves".[2] Joachite ideas abounded in the writings of Jacob Boehme which were published in English during the 1640s by Giles Calvert, the radical publisher.[3] Winstanley himself wrote that the authority of the Scriptures would cease "when the Lord... who is the everlasting Gospell, doth manifest himself to rule in the flesh of sonnes and daughters".[4] The army chaplains, Saltmarsh, Collier and Erbury all apparently held aspects of the doctrine for a time, as did Lodwick Muggleton, and the Ranters, Coppe and Clar kson.[5]

It is, of course, possible that these ideas were widespread enough in the late 1630s for Lilburne to have become familiar with them, either through sermons, pamphlets or discussions. But the mere use of the term "everlasting gospel" is not in itself proof of a Joachimist outlook. It is, after all, a Biblical expression (Rev.14:6), capable of being used entirely unself-consciously, without any Joachimist connotations, by a conservative like John Bastwick.[6]

For the Joachimists the "everlasting gospel" described the situation in which there was universal recognition of, and obedience to, the Spirit

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1. E.Pagitt, *Heresiography*, 1645, p.77. Niclaes, Pagitt claimed, "maketh every one of his family of love to be Christ; yea and God, and himself God and Christ in a more excellent manner, saying that he is godded with God and co-deified with him, and that God is hominified with him. These horrible blasphemies with divers others, doth this H.N. and his familie teach to be the Everlasting Gospel".
2. T.Edwards, *Gangraena*, 1646, part 1, pp.34,28.
3. A.L.Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, p.127.
4. G.Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up its Head*, 1649, in Sabine, p.122.
5. L.F.Solt, *Saints in Arms*, Stanford, 1959, p.73; Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, pp.128-129, 139, and *The Everlasting Gospel*, 1958, pp.39,40; C.Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p.148.
6. J.Bastwick, *The Storming of the Anabaptists Garrisons*, 1647, p.13.

of God. Lilburne, however, used it in this particular passage to show how the Word of God threw into sharp relief the basic conflicts and divisions of history. It demonstrated how the truth of God, which was by now abundantly clear, highlighted the evil and falsehood of the Beast. The passage was, in fact, simply a free rendering of Revelation 14, in which Lilburne substituted the church of Rome for Babylon, the great enemy of God and the Saints.

At this stage, Lilburne appears to have been more interested in God's judgement of the world than in what was to be established in the new age. Much of the time he employed the apocalypse as a polemical device in order to threaten or cajole his enemies. He focussed attention primarily on the event of God's intervention in history, rather than on what was to follow from it.

Lilburne's eschatology, however, was not very sophisticated, and there is little sign that he had studied the subject in any depth, or systematically thought it through. It is possible that he was influenced by the theories of Thomas Brightman, who had also argued that Antichrist's reign was to last 1260 years, beginning in the time of Constantine.[1] But if Lilburne had read detailed expositions of the Book of Revelation, or elaborate chronologies of the history of salvation, his pamphlets show little evidence of it. His use of Scriptural texts tended towards simple identifications, such as the Pope with Antichrist, or the bishops with locusts. He contributed nothing profound or original.

Given the circles in which he moved, it is likely that Lilburne would have been exposed to apocalyptic and millenarian ideas on many occasions. But the direct source of many of Lilburne's eschatological ideas was probably, *A Licht for the Ignorant*, which was not even primarily

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1. See V.N.Olsen, *John Foxe and the Elizabethan Church*, London, 1973, p.77.

concerned with the last things. *A Licht* quoted Revelation extensively and centred its critique of the Church of England on its links with the Roman church, and therefore, from its perspective, with the Beast itself. Like Lilburne it associated the locusts with the servants of the false church, and calculated the length of Antichrist's reign in the same way.[1] The pamphlet also sounded a note of expectancy. "The time approacheth and is near", it claimed, when the officers of the false church "shall be consumed with the breath of his mouth and brightnesse of his coming".[2] It did not speculate on the date of the return of Christ, but again like Lilburne, stated simply that it would be soon.

What is found in both *A Licht* and Lilburne's early writings is the general conviction that the final battle of history between the Lamb and the Beast, prophesied in the Book of Revelation, was now reaching its climax, and that in this conflict the gathered churches had a specific role to play.

In *The Copie of a Letter...* (1638), Lilburne stated that if people wanted to escape the wrath of God which was gathering in intensity, they ought to leave the Church of England and join a "visible" church. God, he believed, was even now pouring out the sixth vial of His wrath (Rev.16.12-15), and in order to be safe they would have to become separatists:

> if you would be hid from the plague and sheltered in spirituall peaceable security from the great storm that is shortly come and rise on all the world that worshippeth the Beast... then now obey Gods command in separating from all false and Antichristian assemblies... and enter into this his chamber and shut the door of it

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1. *A Licht for the Ignorant*, 1638, p.5. In terms very similar to those used by Lilburne it stated that Antichrist "hath power to continue 42 moneths... that is 1260 dayes... counting each day for a year (as the Lord doth in Num.14.34 and Ezek.4.6) it is 1260 yeares that is the length or time of his Reigne, that one and the same time which Christs kingdome under the name of the holie city shall be trod under foot".
2. ibid. p.17.

upon you.'

The rise of the gathered congregations was, in his view, a pointer to the final events of history. They were, at the same time, major participants in the conflict, and, paradoxically, the place of security and refuge.

The Lilburne of the early writings shared this outlook with many other Independents and separatists. For them, too, the gathered congregation was a condition and a sign of the coming rule of Christ. It was central to their eschatological hope, and in chapter nine it will be argued that it was the absence of this outlook in the later thinking of Lilburne and the other Leveller leaders that had much to do with their failure to maintain the support of the separatist leadership.

What can be said here is that there is no evidence to support the hypothesis that Lilburne's political radicalism was somehow the product of a broadened and heightened eschatological expectation.[2] On the contrary, there is evidence that eschatology became less, not more, important to him as time went on. The sense of the imminent end of all things gave way to a much vaguer belief in God's involvement in human affairs in mercy and judgement.

4. The Law of Nature and the Principle of Segregation

The importance of the concept of the law of nature in Lilburne's later political theory is plain to anyone who studies his pamphlets

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1. *The Copie of a Letter...*, 1638, p.16. Cf. *A Licht*, 1638, p.10: "The subjects of the kingdome of darkness are all the Inhabitants of the earth... This is the state and kingdome of darkness with which the Devill hath deluded all nations, from which all Gods people and servants are bound in duty to separate, that so they may be free from that wrath of God which shall fall upon the Kingdome of the Beast to the Ruine and overthrow thereof".

2. This is the claim made by P.Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon*, Toronto 1978, p.176. Christianson's suggestions concerning the importance of eschatology in Lilburne's early writings are sound, and supported by this thesis. But he offers no evidence to support his theory about Lilburne's later career.

published after 1645. But how, and at what point did the idea enter into his thinking? This is a vital question, with great significance for a proper understanding of the relationship between politics and theology in his writings. W.Haller claims that Lilburne appealed to natural law under the influence of the legal theorists, St.German, Parker and Coke.[1] He then goes on to argue that following the discovery of the idea, Lilburne confused divine law with natural law; he abandoned the elitist theology of the sect, and began to regard the whole of mankind as elect.[2] J.C.Davis maintains that it was William Walwyn who taught Lilburne to appeal to natural law.[3] Davis, however, sees the effect of this in similar terms to Haller: Lilburne adopted an antinomian theology which paved the way for a democratic political theory.[4] Neither of these views is correct.

The concept of the law of nature was not a new idea that suddenly appeared in his thinking in the mid 1640s, for it was present alongside his separatist theology in his earliest writings. He appears to have learned how to use it under the influence of the thoroughly Calvinistic John Bastwick.

Bastwick used the idea repeatedly in his attacks on Popery and Laudianism. "The very light of nature and unanswerable reason", he claimed, showed that the bishops of Rome could not be superior to other bishops, or "presbyters" as he preferred to call them:

> it is evident and manifest that where there is an equality and parity amongst men, there the one doth not exceed the other in power and Dominion.[5]

Elsewhere, Bastwick argued against the bishops' view that the Scriptures ought to be interpreted through the Fathers of the church by using the

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1. H&D pp.41-46.
2. ibid. pp.42-43.
3. J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in B.Manning, *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War*, London, 1973, p.232.
4. ibid.p.233.
5. J.Bastwick, *An Answer to Sir John Bancks*, 1636, p.2.

analogy of nature. In nature, he claimed, all things have their own recognisable properties and functions - "there is no naturall thing but will prove and show itself what it is and declare its own nature". If nature thus needed no interpreter, and "the Proclamations and edicts of Kings and Princes doe sufficiently without either marginall notes or annotations declare of themselves that they came from imperiall authority", then, Bastwick maintained, the Word of God should by no means be regarded as "inferior to all natural artificiall and humane things".[1] He was claiming, in other words, that the Scriptures were recognisable as the Word of God and capable of being understood as such without the mediation or explanation of men.

Bastwick also used nature as an independent source of authority apart from Scriptural revelation, and he was quite prepared to employ the concept in support of his theology and ecclesiology. His most significant use of the idea was in connection with the English legal system, and in particular, the *ex-officio* oath. He argued that this oath was "against the Law of Nature, the Law of Nations, the Law of God and the Law of the Land". It contravened the law of nature and the law of the land "for by neither is any man forced to accuse and condemne himself". Bastwick pointed out that "a learned lawyer" had recently proved the *ex-officio* oath to be contrary to English law,[2] and he claimed that even pagan rulers did not allow such oaths - "Trajan the Emperour would not have his subjects oppressed with it as thinking it a cruelty insufferable". The Romans brought accuser and accused face to face and "condemned no man but

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1. ibid. p.13
2. ibid. p.28. This was almost certainly a reference to Nicholas Fuller, a radical M.P. and lawyer who, earlier in the century under James I had published *The Argument of Nicholas Fuller*, 1607, which had challenged the legal procedures of the High Commission. In it he defended the right of two men, Thomas Lad and Richard Mansell, to refuse to swear the ex-officio oath. See C.Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, 1964, pp.349,350; article on Fuller by S.Hanft in *BDBR*.

by sufficient witnesses". The practice of the heathens was, therefore, in Bastwick's view, in line with the Word of God, which taught that oaths lead a man to accuse and condemn himself, a "horrible injustice and want of wisedome and judgement".

Bastwick argued that

> an oath by Gods own appointment is to be the end of all controversy and the conclusion of it, and where this end is not an oath, it is not to swear according to Gods own appointment, but sinfully. Now the ex-officio oath is not such an oath, for that is the beginning of all molestation and strife, mischief and wicked debate.

In using oaths which even the pagans had refused to use, the bishops ignored the law of God and of nature, and set a devilish trap in order to "molest the dear servants of God and the kings best and loyallest subjects".[1]

Bastwick clearly had a great deal of faith in the ability of pagans to obey the law of nature and to act morally and justly. The bishops, in his view, were far more wicked than the pagans and barbarians, who would "blush at their impiety and cruelty" were they to learn of it.[2] Pagan emperors, he claimed, had never denied protection and liberty to "poore Christians";[3] their judges were always "full of compassion", and never reviled or abused prisoners who were brought before them.[4]

This idealisation of pagan morality and of natural law was characteristic of Puritan thought in the 17th century. P.Miller, has pointed out that Puritans were very keen to show "the inherent similarity of the law of Nature with the Gospell", and willing to heap shame upon fellow Christians by declaring that "even the heathens knew this or the Romans acknowledged that".[5] For them, natural law demonstrated two

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1. ibid.
2. J.Bastwick, *The Letany*, 1636, p.14.
3. J.Bastwick, *An Answer to Sir John Bancks*, 1636, p.2.
4. ibid. p.25.
5. P.Miller, *The New England Mind: the 17th Century*, 1963, p.98.

important points. First, it showed that despite the fall of man, the image of God had not been completely obliterated; the natural law was the dimly apprehended law of God.[1] Secondly, it made plain that every human being was morally accountable to God, for the very light that a man had received via his reason was enough to condemn him.[2] Puritans like the highly orthodox William Ames, who dwelt at length on the meaning of the law of nature in his book *Conscience* (1639) certainly did not believe in the autononomy of natural law. Because of his belief in the sovereignty of God, Ames saw it as having a divine origin just as surely as had the revealed law of the Scriptures. For him, it was simply the Moral Law of God as grasped by human reason.[3]

But while, in theory, Puritans may have understood natural law to have been inextricably linked to divine law, practically speaking, by stressing the extent of natural agreement on basic moral principles, it removed the discussion of morality from a directly theological or ecclesiastical context. It became possible to judge the action of rulers and governments on a purely rational basis. Ames himself argued that

> Civil Law, inasmuch as it is right, is derived from the law of nature; for that is not law which is not just and right...[4]

The idea of natural law clearly had enormous political potential.

In the writings of John Bastwick there emerged a theory of man without grace, ignorant of Christian revelation, who, nevertheless, was capable of being guided by nature and reason so that he behaved in a civilised, orderly and just manner. The laws of the land and of nature

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1. ibid. p.185.
2. ibid. p.216.
3. See W.Ames, *Conscience*, 1639, in Woodhouse, p.190. Ames, p.187, stated that "the right natural, or natural law is the same which usually is called the eternal law. But it is called eternal in relation to God, as it is from eternity in him. It is called natural as it is engrafted and imprinted in the nature of man by the God of nature".
4. ibid. p.189.

were understood to reveal and support the law of God.' The implication of Bastwick's position is that there is an authority independent of Scripture to which appeal can be made and from which principles of government and administration can be obtained.

This aspect of Bastwick's thought had a great influence on John Lilburne. From 1645 onwards, Lilburne argued consistently that the law of England ought to conform to natural law, indeed, the concept was at the very heart of Leveller ideology. But long before that time, Lilburne had already employed the idea in his criticism of oppressive government,

In 1638 Lilburne appeared before Star Chamber to answer charges connected with the illegal printing and publishing of Bastwick's books, and at the hearing he refused to take the *ex-officio oath.*[2] This particular oath required defendants to swear to answer allegations against them before they knew the nature of those allegations.[3] In his account of the proceedings in *The Christian Mans Triall* (1638), Lilburne claimed that because he was a young man he did not understand the oath and wanted it to be explained to him first.[4] But he obviously did realise that the oath was a means of incriminating himself because he then went on to ask for the evidence against him to be presented to the court, and finally, to object to the oath altogether on the grounds that there was no Biblical warrant for it.[5] His claim of ignorance was nonsense, for he had already read Bastwick's argument against the oath in his *Information*, one of the

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1. ibid. p.2.
2. John Wharton, Lilburne's co-defendant, had already been imprisoned eight times by other courts for refusing to swear this oath, and he refused it again on this occasion because he saw it as a means of deceiving and perjuring ordinary citizens (*The Christian Mans Triall*, pp.9,14).
3. For a discussion of the ex-officio oath see B.P.Levack, *The Civil Lawyers in England 1603-1641*, Oxford, 1973, pp.150-151.
4. *The Christian Mans Triall*, 1637, p.6.
5. ibid. pp.8,14.

books that he had published and smuggled into England.[1]

Lilburne stated in *A Worke of the Beast* (1638), that the *ex-officio* oath was against not simply the law of the land - "as Master Nicholas Fuller in his Argument doth prove" - but also the Petition of Right, and the law of God:

> for that law requires no man to accuse himself, but if anything be laid to his charge, there must come two or three witnesses at the least to prove it.

Furthermore, it contravened "the very law of Nature". Nature, he claimed,

> is alwaies a preserver of itselfe and not a destroyer. But if a man takes this wicked oath, he destroyes and undoes himself as daily experience doth witness.[2]

Lilburne was saying here that human beings have basic rights and duties with respect to the preservation of their lives; they are, by the very nature of things, committed to the protection and continuation of their own existence. He regarded the practice of forcing defendants to give evidence against themselves as contrary to this fundamental law of nature, and therefore refused to cooperate in what he saw as his own destruction.

It is not simply the mere presence of a concept of the law of nature so early in Lilburne's writings that is important to note here, but also the content of that concept. For the idea of the preservation of the person was later to become the principle on which his justification of opposition to tyranny was based, and to which he appealed in support of legal reform, religious toleration and democratic rights.[3] Here, in a pamphlet of 1638 is evidence of the very same "proprietorial" qualities that C.B.Macpherson finds so characteristic of 17th century individualism, and of the Levellers in particular.[4] Self-preservation is integrally

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1. See above pp.25,26.
2. J.Lilburne, *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.25.
3. See ch.7 below.
4. C.B.Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford, 1969, ch.3. Macpherson's views on the nature of Leveller individualism have been challenged by a number of scholars. But his basic point that self-propriety is a key aspect of Leveller thought stands. See below pp.208-210.

linked to self-propriety.

This principle of self-preservation was a time bomb in Lilburne's thought, awaiting the right situation in which to explode. It was a secular truth, a non-religious foundation on which he found it possible to build a political structure, and it came straight from the writings of his Puritan hero. Apart from naming Fuller, and adding the Petition of Right as an authority, Lilburne's argument was identical to that of John Bastwick.

Bastwick's belief in the inherent reasonableness of pagan government and its preferability to the rule of the bishops was also echoed in Lilburne's writings. In 1638 Lilburne claimed that his own treatment at the hands of the bishops was worse than that of St.Paul by the Romans; for they did not "put him to an oath to accuse himselfe, but suffered him to make the best defence he could for himselfe";[1] England's laws were "worse and more cruell than the lawes of the Pagans and Heathen Romans were", for they condemned noone without witnesses.[2] Similarly, in *Come Out of Her My People* (1639), he claimed that the pagans had never inflicted such cruelty on St.Paul as had the prelates on himself, Bastwick, Burton and Prynne, despite the fact that those pagans had "nothing but the light of nature to guide them in the waies of God".[3] Throughout the 1640s he contrasted his own treatment at the hands of English courts, with the supposed just and humane legal practices of the Romans in classical times.[4]

Right from his very early days as a pamphleteer Lilburne learned to make a theoretical distinction between the ecclesiastical establishment and the civil authorities. In *The Poore Mans Cry* (1639) he expressed the

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1. ibid. p.21.
2. ibid. p.22.
3. *Come Out of Her My People*, 1639, pp.29,31. A similar points was made in *The Poore Mans Cry*, 1639, p.4.
4. See, eg., *The Copy of a Letter... to a Friend*, 1645, p.7; *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, p.7; *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, p.6; *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.402.

conviction that the prelates were entirely responsible for his sufferings, since the temporal powers would never allow such a terrible miscarriage of justice. He was sure that

> neither the King nor the Temporall Lords of his majesties council do know of it. For it is not possible if they did that they would suffer it, considering how much it is against nature to excercise cruelty upon any creatures, much less on man who carries Gods own image.[1]

He believed that the bishops conspired to keep their bloody deeds a secret from the King, "for they wel know that if it should be known how many they make away in prison by hard usage, they would smart for it".[2] He was of the opinion at this stage that the King, as a secular, natural man, would be guided by the law of nature and act reasonably.

In *Come out of Her My People*, (1639), Lilburne called on people actively to resist and disobey the bishops, but to cooperate and honour the secular powers. On the basis of the thirteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans he stated that "the Kings authority is from God, and if I should disobey it, I should disobey God and break his command". The difference between the bishops and the King, in his view, was not that one was always wrong and the other right, but that one was a diabolical power, and the other ordained by God. Even if the King's commands were contrary to the will of God

> yet will I submit my body to them and suffer cheerfully without any grudging anything they shall inflict upon me, for I doe hold it unlawfull for any of Gods people in their greatest oppression by the magistrate to rebell or to take up any temporall armes against them... but only to pray and make use of Gods two-edged sword.[3]

In these early writings Lilburne's critique of the state was rather naive and unsophisticated. In later years he came to see the evil

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1. *The Poore Mans Cry*, 1639, p.6.
2. ibid.p.8.
3. *Come Out of Her My People*, 1639, p.14.

potential of the secular powers, and he did, in fact take up arms against the King. But what is important to note here is that, from the start, Lilburne made a vital distinction between the functions of church and state, and that even though his view of the secular powers was rather idealised, he possessed a yardstick with which to measure the behaviour of any kind of human authority in the concept of the law of nature. In these two concepts - the division of church and state, and the law of self-preservation - Lilburne already possessed two elements that were vital to the development of his characteristic political theory. These ideas were present during his quintessentially separatist period, and, far from being incompatible with his theology - requiring either its transformation or abandonment - were, in fact, integral to it. His ideas coexisted quite happily.

Chapter Three

WILLIAM WALWYN'S PATH TO POLITICS

The task of describing the theological factors at work in the development of William Walwyn's political theory is more difficult than it at first appears. Walwyn himself made an explicit link between his religion and his political activity in one of his pamphlets when he explained that his belief in the free grace of God had led him on to a greater concern for the public good.[1] But his explanation ought not to be accepted too easily. If John Lilburne was a rather crude exponent of the art of self-publicity, Walwyn was a subtle and readable expert. He was a good writer, who knew how to present himself in a favourable and attractive light. Most of the information that he provided concerning himself was offered in the context of his controversies first with Thomas Edwards in 1646, and then with the sectaries in 1649.[2] On both occasions he was defending himself against charges of scepticism and unbelief, and the whole purpose of the excercise was to demonstrate the seriousness and sincerity of his Christian faith.

Questions must be asked about the extent to which Walwyn's thinking had been influenced by ideas which were, by the standards of 17th century Puritan theology, humanistic and unchristian. For according to a broad range of opinion among his contemporaries, that influence was considerable; and while John Bastwick's judgement that Walwyn was "bankrupt of all goodness" and "a knave from his mothers womb"[3] can be set aside as the product of sheer prejudice, Thomas Edwards' claim that he

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1. *A Whisper in the Eare of Mr. Thomas Edwards*, 1646, in W. Haller, *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Rvolution*, New York 1934, vol.3, p.323.
2. See *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D, pp.351-398.
3. J. Bastwick, *A Just Defence of John Bastwick*, 1645, p.17.

was a denier of Scripture and a man "full of mental reservations"[1] cannot. Edwards' portrayal of Walwyn was backed by evidence gathered from a number of different sources,[2] and it was further endorsed in 1649 by the sectarian authors of *Walwins Wiles*,[3] men who had observed Walwyn at close quarters. It will be argued here and in chapter six that when Walwyn's writings are studied in the light of the authors whom he admired and quoted, the allegations of his theological opponents, particularly with respect to the nature of his religious beliefs, were, in many respects, well-founded. This chapter will examine Walwyn's path into politics and the theological and intellectual influences that contributed to the development of his political outlook.

1. Sources

Walwyn's writings, unlike those of John Lilburne, are not packed with citations of other authors and books, and this makes identification of the influences upon him at any point much more difficult. It is possible, though unlikely, that his family excercised a continuing influence upon him. His mother, who was still alive in 1649 when he was forty nine, was the daughter of Herbert Westfaling, a former bishop of Hereford.[4] But Bishop Westfaling, who at least in the early part of his career was well known for his enthusiasm for the conversion of Roman Catholic recusants died shortly after Walwyn's birth,[5] so he could

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1. T.Edwards, *Gangraena*, 1646, Part ii, p.26.
2. ibid. pp.26-28.
3. They were William Kiffin, David Lordell, John Price, Richard Arnald, Edmund Rosier, Henry Foster, Henry Burnet. *Walwins Wiles*, 1649, is in H&D pp.286-317. *Wiles*, H&D p.299, claimed that Walwyn was a "crafty and subtle" deceiver of men, an "artificiall and great Imposter", who undermined peoples' trust in the Scriptures and thus led them to their spiritual and moral downfall.
4. An outline of Walwyn's life was provided by his friend and son-in law, Humphrey Brooke, in *The Charity of Churchmen*, 1649, in H&D p.344. The article on Walwyn by C.H.Firth in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter referred to as *DNB*), Oxford, 1908, contains useful information about Walwyn's family background.
5. See the article on Westfaling in *DNB*.

have had no direct influence upon him. All but one of Westfaling's writings were in Latin[1], which language Walwyn claimed not to understand.[2] Although Walwyn remained faithful to his parish church throughout the 1640s, he did not share his grandfather's churchmanship. The reason why Walwyn never joined the ranks of the sectaries,[3] despite his spirited defence of their right to worship in their own way, was not so much that he possessed an alternative ecclesiology to theirs, as that he possessed no ecclesiology at all.[4].

Walwyn gave an extremely important - because rare - account of the scope of his reading in his *Just Defence* of 1649. As the title suggests, he was on the defensive in this pamphlet against the attack that had been launched upon him in the pages of *Walwins Wiles* (1649). The authors of *Wiles* had claimed, in particular, that he placed inordinate emphasis on "moral Writers", and ignored the Scriptures.[5] In response to this charge, Walwyn admitted that he had been reading "humane" authors for twenty years - that is, since 1629 - and saw no reason to "repent" of it. He stated, however, that he had always used them "in their due place", and that during all that time he had continued to be

> very studious... in the Scriptures and other divine authors, as some of Mr.Perkins works, Mr.Downhams divinity, I had, as it were, without book, also Doctor Halls meditations and vowes, and his heaven upon earth,

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1. The exception was *A Treatise of Reformation in Religion*, 1582. If he had read it, Walwyn made no mention of it.
2. See *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D p.363. Walwyn admitted, however, that he did know some "common proverbs as are more familar in Latine then in English", and sometimes employed them for their "pertinency". Indeed, on the very same page he made use of one of his favourites - *unum necessarium* - to refer to the central truth of the Gospel.
3. See *A Whisper in the Eare of Mr.Thomas Edwards*, 1646, in W.Haller, *Tracts on Liberty*, vol.3, p.325; *The Compassionate Samaritane*, 1644, p.3; *Good Counsell to All*, 1644, pp.91,92; *A Helpe to the Right Understanding*, 1645, p.6.
4. Brooke, H&D p.337, suggested that a major cause of the bitterness that the sectaries felt towards him in the late 1640s was that "he cannot associate into a Church way, upon their grounds; as not knowing any persons to be so quallified as Ministers of the Gospel ought to be".
5. *Walwins Wiles*, 1649, in H&D p.297.

> and those peeces annexed to Mr.Hookers Ecclesiasticall pollicy (sic); hearing and reading continually; using Seneca, Plutarchs Lives, and Charon of humane wisdom, as things of recreation, wherein I was both pleased and profited".[1]

He liked Lucian "very well",[2] and was quite happy to admit that he had been reading Montaigne for years.[3] In fact, he went on to quote from four of Montaigne's *Essays* later in the pamphlet.[4] He also mentioned a number of other works, including "Luthers Christian Liberty",[5] and Thucydides' *History*.[6]

In the light of this reading list, how is Walwyn to be understood? 20th century commentators are divided on the question of the extent of Walwyn's secularism. A.S.P.Woodhouse describes Walwyn as a rationalist and a seculariser, one who

> adapts (sometimes out of all recognition) such parts of Puritan doctrine as he can use, while undermining, rather than openly assailing the rest.[7]

In Haller's view, Walwyn was "a secular vernacular humanist" attached to

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1. H&D p.362. Richard Hooker's book was also referred to in the anonymous *The Humble Petition of the Brownists*, 1641, p.6, which is often attributed to Walwyn, in support of the view that toleration ought to granted to the Roman Catholic Church . There, as here, it was referred to wrongly as Hooker's "Ecclesiasticall Policy". This, together with the proposals for wide-ranging toleration tends to support Walwyn's authorship of the pamphlet.
2. ibid. Elsewhere in the pamphlet (H&D p.334) he indicated that he had read Lucian's *Dialogues*, which he would have read in Francis Hick's translation of 1634.
3. ibid. p.364.
4. The four essays were "An Apologie of Raimond Sebond" (see H&D pp.364,365); "Of the Cannibals" (H&D p.365); "Of Profit and Honesty" (H&D p.366); and "Of the Parcimony of our Forefathers" (H&D p.366). Walwyn would have read Montaigne's *Essays* in J.Florio's translation of 1632.
5. H&D p.368.
6. ibid. The other works were, "*The Benefits of Christs Death, Freemans meditations, and... Christs Councell to Laodicea*", (H&D p.368), none of which it has been possible to identify; there was a passing reference to the *Pulpitt incendiary* (H&D p.362); a work by Sir Edward Coke, probably his *Institutes* (H&D p.386); a "*Life of Mahomet*" (H&D p.388); John Goodwin's *Hagiomastix* (H&D p.354), and *A Candle to Light the Sun*, probably also by Goodwin (H&D p.355)
7. A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, London, 1938, p.55.

"no close communion of saints or persuasion whatsoever".[1] Nevertheless, like Woodhouse, he maintains that Walwyn was the product of his immediate religious context, that is, the London Puritanism of the 1620s and 1630s:

> Walwyn's thinking took its primary impulse and direction from the Puritan pulpit itself... The development of his thinking (however) showed how unstable a compound of ideas Puritan doctrine was proving in the circumstances to be.[2]

Haller argues that Walwyn's inclusion in his reading list of the authors Perkins and Downham, two pillars of Puritan orthodoxy, was an honest pointer to the significant influence of their ideas upon him: he simply ignored the judgemental aspect of their books, and their stress on double predestination, and concentrated instead on their emphasis upon the grace of God in salvation. Haller claims that Walwyn thus arrived at his theologically suspect position by developing a characteristically Puritan theme.[3]

J.Frank sees Walwyn in less secular terms. He states that

> the core of Walwyn's philosophy and the key to his political activities was his religion, his personal attitude towards God.[4]

As far as Frank is concerned, the "prophane" authors whom Walwyn had read - Seneca, Montaigne, etc., - did not play a formative role in his development. Rather, they were quoted in his works merely because they supported ideas about man's essential goodness which he had already derived from the New Testament.[5]

L.Mulligan has strongly criticised the view that Walwyn was a secularist, and maintains that this is an anachronistic way of interpreting him. Following J.C.Davis, she stresses the importance of Walwyn's religious experience, and attempts to

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1. W.Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, New York, 1963, p.284.
2. ibid. p.263.
3. ibid. p.139.
4. J.Frank, *The Levellers*, Mass., 1955, p.31.
5. ibid. pp.36,37.

> put the allegedly most secular Leveller leader into his intellectual environment, and to present him as closer to the Puritan Saint than more proleptical interpretations have placed him.[1]

Mulligan rejects the view that the "classical and humanist" authors Walwyn had read were at all influential in his thinking:

> there is... little evidence for linking his classical reading with his political stances or with his ethical principles.[2]

So, while asserting Walwyn's essential religious commitment, Mulligan, like Woodhouse, Haller and Frank, sees his development in terms of "the modification of Protestant dogma".[3]

Whether Walwyn is seen, then, as a rationalist and secularist, or as a deeply religious thinker, two connected assumptions tend to be made by 20th century commentators. The first is that Walwyn's thought is the product of the internal transformation of Protestant or Puritan theology: he took notions such as free justification and modified them to produce his characteristic ideas. The second is that the classical and Renaissance writers whom he acknowledged reading were not a significant influence upon him: they possibly buttressed views, such as primitivism, that he already held, but apart from that, their contribution was minimal. The first assumption is actually based on the second. It is because scholars have for the most part chosen to ignore the "humane" authors, that they have been able to interpret Walwyn's thought almost entirely in terms of the development or transformation of Puritan theology.

Clearly all these scholars are right in stressing that Walwyn must be understood in terms of his context, and it would be wrong to suggest that the religious atmosphere in which he moved did not influence him deeply. The very language that he used to describe his own position -

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1. L.Mulligan, "The Religious Roots of William Walwyn's Radicalism", *The Journal of Religious History*, vol.12, no.2 1982, p.179.
2. ibid. pp.173-174.
3. ibid. p.179.

"antinomian", "free justification" - was part of the common religious currency. But this chapter, and chapter six will attempt to reassess Walwyn's writings in the light of his acknowledged sources. It will be argued that the influence upon him of non-Puritan writers was, in fact, extremely significant, and that this, in large measure, explains the disapproval and hostility which his ideas provoked among his contemporaries. This is certainly not to claim that Walwyn moved outside of the ranks of the Christian church, but rather that, through his reading he became exposed to another, and very different, way of thinking about Christianity than that prevalent in 17th century England.

Walwyn's reading list must be treated with some caution simply because he was trying to present himself in a favourable light in this pamphlet. The "humane" authors can be taken at face value because he had nothing to gain by mentioning them - although it was, of course, in his interests to refer to them only for their recreational value, which he did. But it is highly unlikely that his inclusion of Perkins and Downham was an authentic endorsement of their ideas, as Haller claims. Walwyn did not specify which of William Perkins' works he had read, and it is pointless to speculate. For, as he himself was well aware, both Perkins and John Downham were pillars of the Puritan tradition and propounded exactly the kind of theology which, as will be seen, he despised. The main reason for their inclusion is likely to have been a hope on Walwyn's part that their presence would lend orthodoxy and respectability to an otherwise suspect list. But it will be argued that he owed a far greater debt to the Roman Catholic Montaigne, for example, than to any of the best-selling Puritan authors, for the truth was that he was far from being orthodox.

2. Universalism

Walwyn traced the distinctiveness of his own outlook back to a period in his life that he considered to have been of crucial importance. In 1646, in the context of his war-of-words with the Presbyterian heresiographer, Thomas Edwards, he explained that some time prior to 1640 ("before this Parliament"), he experienced a spiritual crisis that disturbed him greatly.[1] The crisis arose out of an inability to square his actions with what his conscience recommended. He read various books in the hope that these would enlighten and comfort him, but he found

> much disconsolation therein, great uncertainty, and at last, extreme affliction of mind, the law and the gospel fighting for victory in me.[2]

As a result of his spiritual unease, Walwyn was led to study the Bible thoroughly for himself, and it was through this, he claimed, that he found his release:

> the Scriptures were taken in more singly and void of glosse to my assistance, by the clear light whereof, I saw the enemies I feared vanquished which wrought a real thankfulness in me towards Christ which increased with the increasings of faith.[3]

In a later pamphlet Walwyn described the discovery that had freed him from his sense of guilt as

> that part of doctrine (called then, Antinomian) of free justification by Christ alone.

He had come to believe that he was acceptable to God not on the basis of his works but of what Christ had accomplished. The doctrine brought peace to his troubled mind, and he now felt

> at much more ease and freedom than others who were entangled with those yokes of bondage, unto which Sermons and Doctrines mixt of Law and Gospel do subject distressed consciences.[4]

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1. *A Whisper in the Eare of Mr. Thomas Edwards*, 1646, in Haller, *Tracts on Liberty*, vol.3, p.323.
2. ibid.
3. ibid. pp.323,324.
4. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D p.361.

It might be supposed that in rejecting any notion of salvation by merit or good works Walwyn was on firm Protestant ground.[1] But as becomes clear in *The Power of Love*, a pamphlet of 1643, his rejection of the efficacy of works was not accompanied by a corresponding stress on the necessity of faith. He ruled out any kind of human activity, including that of faith, in the process of justification.

In this tract, Walwyn maintained that the desire to contribute to one's own salvation, whether by "labour, industry, study... (or) watching",[2] flew in the face of the Bible's rejection of any form of human self-justification.[3] He stressed the enormity of man's predicament - his lostness and helplessness - but only in order to demonstrate the extent of God's love, as he understood it:

> I have presented this woeful condition of all mankind under the law thus sadly and truly, because I find generally men do not seriously consider the bottomlesse depth of the misery from which they are redeemed... [4]

As far as Walwyn was concerned, human striving after salvation was useless and pointless: useless because it could achieve nothing, and pointless because man had already been rescued from his plight. He, therefore, believed in the lostness of man, not as a present, objective reality, but as a state from which man had already been redeemed. "Your feares, nor sinnes, nor doubtings", he told his readers,

> cannot alter that condition which Christ hath procured for you, for though the sting of death be sinne, and the strength of sinne be the law, yet thanks be unto God, for he hath given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.[5]

Nothing, in Walwyn's view, could make void Christ's redemption of men, not

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1. For example, Martin Luther in his *Treatise Touching the Libertie of a Christian*, 1579, one of the books that Walwyn had read (see H&D p.368), stressed that works "availe nothing", and that "fayth onely by the meere mercy of God through Christ Jesus in his Word, doth make worthy, and sufficiently justifie and save the person" (pp.12,52).
2. *The Power of Love*, 1649, pp.8,9.
3. ibid. pp.16,17.
4. ibid. p.20.
5. ibid. p.25.

even their failure to respond to Him. Faith was not a condition of salvation:

> the work of Christ does not depend upon your believing, and though you should not believe, yet he is faithful and cannot deny himself to be your redeemer, your peace-maker, your Saviour.[1]

Walwyn's soteriology was certainly very radical and stood totally opposed to the theological orthodoxy of his day. In rejecting a Calvinist doctrine of election, he did not even turn to the main "heretical" alternative, Arminianism, and adopt a doctrine that promised salvation to all those who believed. He went much further than this. The quotation from St.Paul's Epistle to Titus (2:11,12) that appeared at the beginning of *The Power of Love* was chosen very carefully -

> the grace (or love) of God that bringeth salvation unto all men hath appeared,

- for it proclaimed quite simply, and without any qualifications, the view of salvation to which he subscribed. He believed that God loved the whole of humanity, and that "while we were yet without strength" (Roms.5:6), He had acted in Christ for the redemption of all.[2] Walwyn was a universalist whose doctrine of free justification had no limitations or restrictions built into it; salvation was a universal reality that embraced every human being, whether they were conscious of it or not, whether they were believers or unbelievers.

In 1649 Walwyn's enemies accused him of denying that there was a hell.[3] Although there is no such denial of the doctrine in any of his pamphlets, there can be little doubt that it would have been thought of as a necessary implication of his universalism. His friend Humphrey Brooke confirmed that Walwyn's thinking had once moved in this direction, but claimed that, having made a thorough reexamination of the Scriptures,

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1. ibid. p.32.
2. ibid. p.25.
3. *Walwins Wiles*, 1649, in H&D pp.296,297.

Walwyn was now convinced of "another Hell succeeding judgement".[1]

Walwyn's universalism, carrying with it the explicit promise of salvation for all, and the implicit assurance of damnation for none, could not be regarded neutrally by his contemporaries. There was a widespread belief in the seventeenth century that if the doctrine of hell were to be removed, or undermined, men would feel free to act in whatever way they pleased; if they were not threatened with the fires of hell, they would not see the need for religion or morality, government or law.[2] D.P.Walker has shown that there were even a small number of intellectuals in the seventeenth century who, for this reason, held to a double theory of truth: in private they denied the existence of hell, but because they had a low view of the moral fibre of the masses, and thought that society would break down if there was no threat of punishment, they continued to preach the doctrine in public.[3] A universalist vision was considered to have worrying moral and social ramifications.

What was the cause of Walwyn's spiritual and intellectual turmoil of the late 1630s that produced this theological outlook? Mulligan claims that Walwyn's crisis was the reaction <u>against</u> the humanist authors he had been reading: it was their ideas which had led to his "disconsolation... great uncertainty and... extreme affliction of mind", and driven him to search the Scriptures.[4] This is not the case. As *A Whisper* and *Walwyns*

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1. H.Brooke, *The Charity of Churchmen*, 1649, in H&D p.335. In view of Brooke's testimony, one is, perhaps, obliged to give Walwyn the benefit of the doubt on this matter. But such a change in thinking about the reality of hell would also have entailed some considerable modification of his universalist understanding of salvation. Nothing in his later writings suggests that there was such.
2. Walwyn referred to the role that the idea played in his society when he stated in *The Power of Love*, 1643, p.41, that "the politicians of this world would have religious men to be fooles, not to resist, by no meanes, lest you receive damnation".
3. D.P.Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, 1964, p.5ff. For a survey of 17th century views about hell, see C.Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Harmondsworth, 1975, pp.170-183.
4. L.Mulligan, article on Walwyn in *BDBR*.

Just Defence made perfectly clear, it was the religious writers and preachers, the Puritan propagators of those "Doctrines mixt of Law and Gospel" who were at the root of the problem; Perkins, Downham and their like, were the culprits, not Montaigne and Charron.

In one sense, Walwyn's experience cannot have been unusual, because the very aim of much Puritan preaching was to provoke a crisis in which the individual would finally throw him or her self on the mercy of God. What is unusual is that Walwyn did not throw himself on that mercy: he questioned the whole theological process which had produced his situation, namely, the emphasis on the need to do something about one's salvation.

It is extremely important to note that, as far as Walwyn was concerned, his experience of liberation came not from a subjective feeling of election or salvation, but from a new understanding of the doctrine of justification. He felt himself to be freed not because he had experienced the Holy Spirit stirring within him for the first time, but because he believed he had now grasped the truth about the human condition. He did not regard this incident in his life primarily as a conversion experience, but as the adoption of a new theological outlook: his status before God had not changed, only his understanding of the meaning and extent of God's intention in salvation.

Walwyn's "crisis" was, in fact, a revolt against the whole of Calvinistic theology, and not simply its doctrine of salvation. As becomes clear in *The Power of Love*, fundamentally he rejected the orthodox doctrine of man, with its concept of human depravity, and instead adopted an optimistic anthropology. Since Walwyn had been reading "humane" authors for years prior to this,[1] it is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that his intellectual revolution of the late 1630s was the end product of a long process in which the assumptions of Puritan theology were gradually

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1. See above p.56.

undermined and replaced by humanistic ideas. When the extent of Michel de Montaigne's influence on Walwyn's view of man is understood, this suggestion becomes a probability.

3. The Nature of Man

In *The Power of Love* (1643), the pamphlet in which he spelt out his radical doctrine of salvation, Walwyn drew heavily on the ideas of the French Roman Catholic moralist and sceptic, Michel de Montaigne, as expressed in his famous essay, "Of Cannibals". Walwyn did not acknowledge his dependence on Montaigne, but his theory of primitive society was identical to that of Montaigne, and his language, very similar. He used the cannibals, just as Montaigne did, to criticise the church and society of his own day. In 1649 he made explicit use of the same essay to attack his sectarian critics.[1] It was packed with assumptions about man that were completely opposed to the prevailing theological orthodoxy.

In "Of Cannibals" Montaigne had attempted to describe the manners and mores of primitive society. His account was based on descriptions of a Brazilian tribe given to him by French explorers who had encountered them on their travels. The impression that he gained of these people was extremely favourable, to say the least.[2] From what he heard he did not believe there was anything especially barbarous about them, and was not prepared to write them off as "savages". Indeed, he thought that the term was actually more applicable to the European scene than to the cannibals:

> they are even savage as we shall call those fruits wilde, which nature of herself, and of her ordinary progresse hath produced: whereas indeed, they are those which ourselves have altered by our artificiall devices and diverted from their common order, we should rather term savage.

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1. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, H&D p.365.
2. J.C.Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society*, Cambridge 1981, p.23, describes "Of Cannibals" as "perhaps the best known early modern version of the Arcadian vision".

In the cannibals, "the true and most profitable vertues" were "most lively and vigorous", whereas his own society had, as he put it, "bastardized" them, "applying them to the pleasure of our corrupted state".[1]

For Montaigne, the purity of the cannibals highlighted the sinfulness of the way of life he knew. But although he could use a word like "corrupt" to describe French society, he did not have a radical concept of human fallenness. He understood sin in terms of "Art" - human behaviour that was superfluous to the natural order. It was a construct added to nature rather than the irrevocable destruction of it, and he saw no reason why "Art" should "gain the point of honour of our great and puissant Mother Nature". Wherever Nature's purity shone "she makes our vaine and frivolous enterprises wonderfully ashamed".[2]

In the cannibals of Brazil, Montaigne saw the triumph of obedience to nature over obsession with "Art". They were close to their "originall naturalitie", and he saw in their primitive society, not poverty of knowledge, but riches of ignorance. Behaviour that appeared to Europeans to be barbarous turned out to be truly human:

> It is a nation... that hath no kinde of traffike, no knowledge of Letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politike superioritie; no use of service, of riches or of povertie; no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupation, but idle; no respect of kindred, but common, no apparell but naturall, no manuring of lands, no use of wine, corn or mettle. The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason,

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1. M.de Montaigne, *Essayes*, transl. J.Florio, 1632, pp.101,102. Pierre de Charron, another 16th century French Roman Catholic, whose *Of Humane Wisdome* (1630) Walwyn had read also held to a primitivist theory very similar to that of Montaigne. Cf. Charron, p.272: "all goodnesse is naturall; vices unnaturall; it is one and the same thing to live blessedly and according to nature: understanding by nature that equity and universall reason which shineth in us, which containeth and hatcheth in it the seeds of all vertues, probitie, justice, and is the matrix from whence all good and excellent lawes doe spring and flowe".
2. ibid. p.102. For Charron, too, evil was that which disturbed the natural order, and it sprang from what he called "Imagination": "The Imagination ia a thing very strong and powerful, it is it that makes all the stirre, all the clatter, yea the perturbation of the world proceeds from it" (p.68).

> dissimulations, covetuousness, envie, detraction and pardon were never heard amongst them.[1]

Here was the absence of "Art" at every level of society - domestic, economic, political and moral. These people did not strive after land and possessions but contented themselves with

> that naturall libertie and fruitfulnesse, which without labouring toyle, doth in such plenteous abundance furnish them with all necessary things... They are yet in that happy estate as they desire no more than what their naturall necessities direct them: whatsoever is beyond it is to them superfluous.[2]

This was a society at peace with itself and its environment, and so as far as Montaigne was concerned, the cannibals were not to be sneered at by Christian Europe, but emulated.

Montaigne's appealing vision of mankind in its primitive state found its way into *The Power of Love*, where Walwyn used it to criticise what he saw as the superficiality and sophistication of his own day.

Protesting against the supposed obsession of his contemporaries with riches, novelties and obscure doctrines, Walwyn maintained that everything that was needed for human life had already been provided by the hand of nature:

> it is evident (though it be little regarded or considered, the more is the pity) that in naturall things whatsoever are necessary for the use of mankinde, the use of them is to be understood without study or difficulty.

Nature's provisions, he claimed, were all

> ready at hand or easily to be had: a blessing that God hath afforded to every man, insomuch that there is no part of the habitable world, but yeeldes sufficient of useful things for a comfortable sustentation of the inhabitants, as experience testifieth in all places.[3]

In the beginning, God had made man

> naturally a rational creature, judging rightly of all things, and desiring only what was necessary, and so

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1. ibid.
2. ibid. p.104
3. *The Power of Love*, 1643, pp.1,2.

> being exempt from all labour and care of obtaining things superfluous, he passed his days with aboundance of delight and contentment.[1]

Walwyn, following Montaigne, understood that the world as God had originally made it was a paradise where human desire and natural provision complemented each other perfectly. Nature provided all that man needed, and man only desired that which was there in abundance. Conflict with nature or with other men was unknown.

In the context of revolutionary England in the 1640s, Walwyn could not but be aware of the serious disjuncture between the world as it was, and the world as God had intended it to be. But in his view, the only thing to have changed was man himself. Nature provided what it had always provided, but man's desires were now different. Instead of accepting the simple provisions of nature he had "sought out many inventions"[2] which were the cause of his alienation and discontent. "Inventions of superfluous subtilties and artificiall things" now cluttered the world and became the preoccupation of man. Among these "inventions" Walwyn included not only such things as manners, dress and commodities, but also ideas, especially religious ideas. In personal matters as well as political and social, in legal as well as spiritual affairs, men always strained to make things more difficult. Walwyn spelt out his own doctrine of universal salvation - a doctrine which he considered to be simple and completely Biblical - in response to this obscurantism,

> for as in naturall things I am fully assured there is nothing of necessary use but what is easily understood and even ready at hand.[3]

As has already been noted in the case of Montaigne, this

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1. ibid. p.2.
2. ibid. It is clear that what Walwyn meant by "invention" was exactly the same as that which Montaigne termed "Art". It described the same tendency to abandon and despise nature which he considered to be at the root of the human problem.
3. ibid. p.10.

understanding of sin as "Art" or "Invention", did not involve a radical view of human fallenness, of man as incapable of reform by man himself: there was still the possibility of a return to the natural order. Sin was regarded as that which was superfluous to the good life, an unnecessary addition to man's make-up, rather than the irretrievable loss of a fundamental element of his nature.

When account is taken of Walwyn's universalist soteriology it becomes clear that his doctrine of sin was far removed from that of his Calvinist contemporaries. Indeed, they would not have recognised it as a doctrine of sin at all. For Walwyn did not believe that man was alienated from God - God's saving work had already dealt with that problem for all men - nor did he believe that man was deeply alienated from his neighbour and his society, for such problems as there were were capable of being overcome by a return to the simplicity of nature.

Through Montaigne's essays, especially "Of Cannibals", Walwyn had come to believe that "heathen and meere naturall men" could live together in peace and contentment, and that despite the fact that they lacked knowledge of Christ, they had learnt real wisdom, virtue and civility.[1] *The Power of Love* was, in effect, a call to imitate such men, and return to nature in all things. It was a statement of his faith in the moral potential of man. It was this new vision of man, more than any subjective experience of the grace of God that revolutionised Walwyn's thinking in the late 1630s.

Walwyn's universalism and his doctrine of man, based, as they were, on the premiss that the human condition was far from hopeless in itself, were bound up with each other. The development of each was deeply influenced by his reading of Michel de Montaigne who deliberately avoided theological questions and focussed his attention on the sphere of nature

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1. ibid. pp.5,6. This was exactly the thrust of the passages that he quoted from Montaigne in *Walwyns Just Defence* in 1649. See H&D pp.364-367.

and reason.[1] Ethics were his major preoccupation, and most of his essays were concerned with the search for a practical moral code according to which all men could live.

Common to many of the works of the authors cited in Walwyn's reading list of 1649, both Christian and non-Christian, was this same desire to develop a system of ethics that would create a sane, harmonious society. It was, for example, the central concern of Seneca, who taught that "mans chiefest good... is to do all things according to nature's will".[2] Similarly, and very much under the spell of Seneca, Joseph Hall attempted to spell out a simple rule of life based on nature and Christianity.[3] Pierre de Charron set out in his *Of Humane Wisdome* (1630) to develop a coherent system of morality that could be derived from nature alone.[4] Under the influence of these writers, and particularly that of Montaigne, morality became the central concern of William Walwyn's Christianity.

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1. Montaigne very deliberately avoided theological questions by recourse to fideism. The possible influence of his fideism and scepticism on Walwyn will be examined in chapter 6.
2. Seneca, *Epistles*, transl.Thomas Lodge, 1613, p.278. For the appeal of the Stoic school of philosophy to thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, see Q.Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 1978, vol.2, p.277.
3. In his *Meditations and Vowes*, 1606, Dedicatory Epistle, Hall complained that "though the world is furnished with other writings even to saciety and surfet, yet of those which reduce Christianity to practise there is... scarcity enough". He undertook in *Heaven upon Earth*, Dedicatory Epistle, to teach men "how to be happy in this life", and in this task he claimed to have "followed Seneca and gone beyond him", for "never any Heathen wrote more divinely, never any Philosopher more probably" (p.3).
4. Charron argued, *Of Humane Wisdome*, 1630,pp.v,vi that whereas "Divinity" was important with respect to salvation and eternity, there was a pressing need for a form of wisdom to govern the life of man in society. He quite openly wanted it to be based on "philosophie", a "more ancient" discipline than theology, more rational and persuasive. R.H.Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, 1979, p.59, comments that, in fact, "Charron's work represents one of the important steps in the separation of ethics from religion as an independent philosophical discipline".

4. The Centrality of Ethics

As has been seen, the term that Walwyn himself chose to describe his doctrine of salvation was "antinomian". The term literally means "against law", and, in the positive sense in which he used it, referred to the rejection of legalistic attempts, based on human pride, to please God, and the acceptance of salvation solely on the basis of God's grace. His was a particularly radical form of antinomianism since, because of his rejection of a Calvinistic doctrine of salvation, it referred to the freedom of all men, and not just the elect, from the rigours of the law.

But the term was also used in a pejorative sense by the opponents of this brand of theology to highlight what they considered to be its dangerous "lawless" implications; it was felt that here was a doctrine that severed the connection between religion and ethics.[1] As far as Walwyn was concerned, the very opposite was true. He believed that his doctrine of free justification was the only authentic basis of Christian living. In *The Power of Love* he claimed that the story of God's all-embracing love for man in Christ was bound to produce a heartfelt response in man, one of gratitude and love, rather than of fear and duty:

> me thinkes these and the like considerations should be powerful in your minds, that your spirits should even burn within you, until you found out some way to express your thankfulnesse for so great so infinite love.[2]

Since God was love, he argued, "love makes man God-like". Love produced forgiveness, not hatred, sharing, not selfishness, humility, not haughtiness.[3] It made man to be of one mind, and, asked Walwyn, "what can be too strong for men united in love?".[4] True Christianity

> hates and abhorres tyranny, oppression, perjury, cruelty,

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1. It was precisely this charge that Walwyn sought to counter in *Good Counsell to All*, 1644; see pp.81,82.
2. *The Power of Love*, 1643, p.36.
3. ibid. pp.37,38.
4. ibid. p.40.

> deceit and all kinds of filthinesse,

and true Christians were

> the most impartiall and severe punishers thereof and all kinde of wickednesse of any man whatsoever.[1]

It was the love of God alone, Walwyn believed, that inspired man and motivated him to practise true religion.

In *Good Counsell to All* (1644), he denied that Antinomians such as himself encouraged licentiousness, and claimed that there was "no Scripture more frequent in their mouthes" than the verse from the Epistle to Titus that he had quoted at the beginning of *The Power of Love*,[2] a verse in which the graciousness of God, and the call to moral integrity were seen as inseparable:

> The love of God bringing salvation to all men hath appeared, teaching us to deny all ungodlinesse and worldly lusts, and to live righteously and godly and soberly in this present world.[3]

The verse's importance to Walwyn is underlined by the fact that he used it again in 1649 to summarise what he regarded as the essential message of the Apostles.[4]

Far from being incidental to Walwyn's religion, ethics were, as he himself insisted against his critics, the vital element in it. But they were what might be called social and political ethics, rather than personal ones. He was far more concerned with justice than with purity. This is made clear in *A Parable* of 1646, in a passage which encapsulates the whole of his theological approach. Echoing the words of Christ as recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew (25:31-46) Walwyn argued that it was the duty of Christians to love other people in the same way that they had been loved by God:

> hath he so loved as to give an offering and sacrifice for

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1. ibid. p.41.
2. See above, p.63.
3. *Good Counsell to All*, 1644, pp.81,82.
4. *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*, 1649, in H&D p.266.

> you, then ye ought to walk in love as Christ hath loved; would you know how you should manifest your love to Christ? Love will set before you the sick, the naked, the aged and impotent, it will lead you to prisons and houses of distresse, and show you the captives, the widdowes and fatherlesse children, and it will assure you that in as much as you ministered to the necessities of these, you have done it unto him, but if you have this worlds goods and suffer these or any of these to lack, there is not the love of God in you.[1]

Actions such as these were, for Walwyn, the very touch-stone of Christianity. In a pamphlet of 1647, he described "feeding the hungry, cloathing the naked, visiting the sick, the Fatherlesse, the Widowes and Prisoners" as the heart of "pure and undefiled religion",[2] a reference, of course, to the Epistle of James (1:27, 2:14-17), which defined true faith in these terms.

This was a favourite Bible passage of his, and he returned to it frequently, particularly in *The Vanitie of the Present Churches* (1649).[3] For example, he suggested that were his understanding of religion - "those short necessary truths" - to be adopted, the result would be a change in behaviour and values:

> we should soon become practicall Christians; and take more pleasure in Feeding the hungry, cloathing the naked, visiting and comforting of the sicke, releeving the aged, weake and impotent; in delivering of Prisoners, supporting of poore families, or in freeing a Common wealth from all Tyrants, oppressors and deceivers... thereby manifesting our universal love to all mankind, without respect of persons, Opinions, Societies or Churches.[4]

If Christians strove after these things, he maintained, then they "might possibly deserve the name of Saints". But to apply the title to themselves simply because they were Presbyterians or Independents, Brownists or

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1. *A Parable or Consultation of Physitians upon Master Edwards*, 1646, p.14.
2. *A Still and Soft Voyce*, 1647, in Wolfe, p.369.
3. *Walwins Wiles*, 1649, in H&D p.297, actually accused him of mocking prayer and worship and of saying that there was "no other Religion but that which the Apostle James speaks of".
4. *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*, 1649, in H&D p.272.

Anabaptists, because they were "of this or that opinion, or this or that forme of Worship" was "meer pride and vanity of mind". "One mercifull tender hearted compassionate act", done for the sake of Christ, contributed far more to the "making of a true Saint" than all the ecclesiological preoccupations and pious practices of men.[1]

According to Walwyn, then, true religion was not concerned with details of doctrine, obedience to the law, or religious experience, but with ethics. As has been seen, he did outline a very simple theological structure, from which his ethical teaching flowed, and with which it was entirely compatible. But he reduced the dogmatic content of faith to an absolute minimum, and, with respect to salvation, understood there to be no conditions attached whatsoever, either by way of faith or morality. Apart from asserting the importance of his doctrine of free justification, theology as it concerned his contemporaries played almost no part in his writings. Not only did he show no interest in questions concerning church order and forms of ministry, by the end of the 1640s he was openly antagonistic towards those who were preoccupied with the ecclesiological issue. For him, actions were far more important than beliefs, and could, in fact, be discussed and considered quite separately from theology. For as Montaigne had demonstrated, the cannibals could teach the Christians a thing or two when it came to morals and decency.

It is interesting that Walwyn should have regarded the "freeing a Common wealth" as also a direct manifestation of "pure and undefiled religion". It indicates clearly that his concept of service to God and other men certainly was not individualistic, but was capable of becoming overtly political. Ethical and even political considerations were absolutely central to Walwyn's understanding of religion.

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1. ibid. For other examples of his use of James' understanding of "pure and undefiled religion, see also H&D pp.263,266; *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D p.382.

5. Political Influences

In *A Whisper in the Eare of Mr.Thomas Edwards* (1646), the pamphlet in which he wrote of his adoption of the doctrine of free justification, Walwyn sought to show how his new theological outlook had led to a desire to influence social and political affairs. It contains valuable information concerning the development of his political thinking.

Walwyn claimed that as a result of the thankfulness which he felt towards God, once he understood that salvation was entirely of grace, he set himself

> daily more and more to do his will, and that in a more publick way then formerly.[1]

According to him, the first result of this, soon after the calling of the Long Parliament in 1640, was an attempt with others to bring about the "reformation" of his parish of St.James, Garlick Hithe. He did not elaborate on what this involved,[2] but it is likely that it had to do primarily with practical considerations, rather than major questions of theology. After this he turned to wider political issues:

> our next indeavours were for the whole ward, wherein after much labour we so prevailed that the well affected

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1. *A Whisper* , 1646, in Haller, *Tracts on Liberty*, vol.3 p.324.
2. The *Parish Register of St.James Garlick Hithe, 1535-1693*, in the Guildhall Library, may well provide some indication of the scope of the "reformation" mentioned in *A Whisper*. Between January 1636 and February 1640 Walwyn took part in a series of vestry meetings that were concerned almost exclusively with the repair of the church buildings, and the means of financing this project. There was widespread concern that "our parish church hath been in great decay lately insomuch that our parishioners have been compelled thereby to wander abroad to other parishes for want of our own church", and the minister and church wardens were urged to rectify the situation (6th Jan. and 26th Feb.1646). On the first of January 1640, he was chosen to sit on a committee of twelve men to investigate the church's financial position, and also, together with six others, to audit the accounts of the outgoing churchwarden and the overseers for the poor. At the next meeting held on the eighth of February 1640, Walwyn acted as the spokesman for the committee of investigation and accused the minister, Edward Marbury, of fixing the rent of one of the church properties at too high a level, and of owing the parish money. There is no record of Walwyn having taken part in any of the vestry meetings after this date.

> carried the choice of Alderman and common council-man, and all other offices in the ward.

Again, Walwyn was not specific either with regard to the date of this activity, or precisely what was at stake.[1] But whatever it was, he and his associates evidently met with some success.

There is no record of Walwyn ever having been an elected representative of his ward, but it is clear that by 1642, he was actively involved in promoting the parliamentary cause. In *Some Considerations* of November that year he defended the rebellion on the grounds that Parliament was acting in the name and for the sake of the whole nation:

> the end of the Parliaments consultations and actions is to free the kingdome (the care whereof is to them by the kingdome committed) from all those heavy tyrannies and oppresions which for many years against expresse Laws and cautions to the contrary, have surrounded and overwhelmed the kingdome.[2]

Furthermore, in the same year he was also a member of an important political committee in the City of London.[3] The committee was established at the instigation of a group of London radicals who wanted to make the City an enthusiastic and effective supporter of Parliament in its struggle with the King. It was empowered to levy and collect taxes on behalf of Parliament in each parish.[4] In April 1643 the City radicals succeeded in establishing a militia committee to raise and finance troops for the parliamentary forces which met at the Salters' Hall.[5] Walwyn was also

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1. C.Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, 1964, p.436, explains that Walwyn was probably involved in an attempt to wrest power from the "oligarchies" who tried to control ward elections by meeting beforehand to decide on a candidate.
2. This unsigned pamphlet, which was an attempt to overcome divisions between "the Protestant and the Puritan" (title page) in the anti-royalist camp, is generally taken to be by Walwyn. I agree, for two reasons: 1. The pamphlet's emphasis on the importance of religious liberty, and its concern to effect a real unity based on love and toleration is characteristic of Walwyn; 2. it contains clear echoes of Walwyn's doctrine of free justification (see p.10).
3. See V.Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution*, 1961, p.253.
4. ibid. pp.252,253.
5. ibid. p.260.

actively involved in the work of this committee.[1]

On March 30th 1643, this same group of radicals presented a petition to Common Council [2] and Walwyn disclosed in *A Whisper* that he had also participated in this:

> my next public businesse was with many others in a Remonstrance to the Common Counsell to move the Parliament to confirme certain infallible maximes of free government: wherein the power of Parliament was plainely distinguished from the Kings office, so plainly, that had it taken effect, few men after due consideration thereof would through error of judgement have taken part against the Parliament, or have befriended arbitrary power, as too many did for want of light.[3]

This document was later published in July 1643 under the title *Remonstrans Redivivus*. It was drawn up by Richard Shute, Sir David Watkins and Randall Mainwaring,[4] but it is clear from Walwyn's enthusiastic assessment of it in 1646 that he regarded it as embodying basic principles to which he subscribed. *Remonstrans Redivivus* is therefore an important document for understanding the development of Walwyn's political thinking.

The Remonstrance listed ten "convincing truths and resolutions" for the consideration of the Council, all of which it deemed to be "undoubted fundamentalls of our Government".[5] But the whole pamphlet was, in effect, an exposition of the first of these, which stated that "the Safety of the People is the Supreme Law". This, it asserted, was

> the foundation and end of all just Government, even of Parliaments themselves, which alone are in this Kingdome ordained to be Judges of and punishers for the safety of the commonwealth;

Parliament was limited by no considerations other than "the safety and freedome of the people".[6]

In the view of the authors of the Remonstrance, the source of

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1. *A Whisper*, in Haller, vol.3, p.324.
2. Pearl, p.260.
3. *A Whisper*, in Haller, vol.3, p.324.
4. Pearl, p.260.
5. *Remonstrans Redivivus*, 1643, p.6.
6. ibid. p.4.

political sovereignty was the people, who had then entrusted it to Parliament:

> originally the supreme power being in the whole people, Parliaments were by them constituted to manage the same for the preservation and well-being of the commonwealth: so as properly in the Parliaments of England acting for the same doth the supreme power reside.[1]

Magistracy was also the creation of the people, and at no point could it be an independent power; rather it was

> a matter of trust onely for the good of the people and to be regulated by the supreame power. It being most agreeable to reason that those who by the consent of all are intrusted with the making of Laws, should direct those that are to put the same in execution.[2]

The Remonstrance maintained that Parliament alone had the right to make and impose laws, dissolve Parliaments, and transact "the great affaires of peace and warre"; it was "unjust, arbitrary and tyrannical" for anyone else to do these things.[3] Running through the whole document was the theme of the accountability of magistrates and officers of the kingdom - including, and especially, the King - to Parliament, which itself existed solely for the good of the people.

Remonstrans Redivivus was certainly not original in its ideological content. In fact, it drew on a body of ideas that had been expounded upon and developed by Parliamentarians such as John Pym, Henry Parker and William Prynne.

In order to justify their challenge to the King's authority effectively, the Parliamentarians were forced to appeal to a theory of natural rights which saw "the People" as a whole, rather than any divinely appointed ruler, as the ultimate source of political authority. According to what has been called this "ascending" theory of politics,[4] the people

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1. ibid.
2. ibid. p.5.
3. ibid. pp.5,6.
4. See W.Ullmann, *Law and Politics in the Middle Ages*, 1975, p.28. For an account of the development of this approach to natural rights in the 1640s, see R.Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, Cambridge, 1981, ch.7.

of a society conferred authority upwards onto kings and magistrates and voluntarily submitted themselves to them for their own well-being; government was, therefore, a trust, a creation of the people, and as such, did not have authority to pursue policies that were against the people's interests. The central argument of the Parliamentarians was summed up in the slogan *Salus Populi, Suprema Lex* - the safety of the people is the highest law.

At the impeachment of the Earl of Strafford, one of the King's closest advisers, in April 1641, John Pym said of *Salus Populi* that

> all lawes are derived from this as its fountaine, and end here as its proper center;[1]

without this as its focal point, government lost its legitimacy:

> take away the Kings protection from the people, and you take away the peoples allegiance to the King.[2]

Pym claimed that Strafford had done precisely this; he had acted

> against the end of government, for the end of government is to preserve men in their estates, lives and liberties...[3]

An Exact Collection of All Remonstrances, Declarations, Votes, commonly known as Parliaments "Book of Declarations", which was published in 1642, also made use of this concept. In a famous passage it argued that Parliament was justified in resisting the King in the same way that soldiers who were ordered to turn their cannon on themselves had every right to disobey their General: their own safety was a higher law than the command of a superior officer.[4]

Henry Parker developed the same theme in his influential *Observations upon Some of His Majesties Late Answers and Expresses*, (July

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1. J.Pym, *Speech to the Lords in Parliament*, 1641, p.2.
2. ibid.
3. ibid. p.6.
4. *An Exact Collection etc.*, 1642, p.150.

1642). He wrote that

> the transcendent αχμn of all Politiques, the paramount Law that shall give Law to all humane lawes whatsoever... is Salus Populi.[1]

He argued that although the political power that was originally "inherent in the people"[2] had been conferred upon the King, the rights of the people had not been alienated entirely, nor was that power irretrieveable:

> to the most absolute Empire in the world, this condition is most naturall and necessary, That the safetie of the people is to be valued above any right of his, as much as the end is to be preferred before the meanes; it is not just nor possible for any nation so to inslave itself, and to resigne its interest to the will of one Lord, as that the Lord may destroy it without injury, and yet to have no right to preserve itselfe.[3]

Having established what was the end for which government existed, Parker was then able to go on to claim that the subjects of the King retained the right of self-defence. According to "the supreme of all Lawes", "necessarie defence" and "naturall preservation" could not be denied to the people.[4]

Of all the Parliamentarians, William Prynne did the most to demonstrate the long history that lay behind these ideas in his enormous four-part treatise, *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes*, (1643). Prynne produced a mass of evidence from many different sources in his attempt to prove Parliament's right to disobey the King. As a work of literature, it had little to be said for it. But as an introduction to the social and political theories of a whole host of thinkers, Protestant and Catholic, it was a mine of information. He quoted extensively, and often with very little comment of his own, from the works of scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, Grotius, George Buchanan, and the Huguenots, and central

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1. H.Parker, *Observations upon some of His Majesties late Answers and Expresses*, 1642, p.3.
2. ibid. p.1.
3. ibid. p.8.
4. ibid. p.20.

to his argument was the concept of the law of nature understood as the "safety" of the people. *Salus Populi* was, he maintained

> not onely the Suprema Lex, but principall end for which all royall power was instituted by God and man and to which it must submit in case it becomes incompatible or inconsistent with the public weale or safety.[1]

He quoted Salamonius to show that the people, and not their rulers, were the original and continuing source of political power,[2] and Aquinas to show that kings were obliged to govern in accordance with the fundamental principle that had led the people to incorporate as a nation in the first place, namely, their well-being.[3] Prynne, like Parker, claimed that people had a natural right to resist oppression,[4] and he stated that it was not treasonable to defend oneself against the King, even if it meant killing him in the process.[5] He quoted an extremely long passage from the Huguenot pamphlet, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* in support of this principle,[6] and the authority of Grotius was cited to show that

> a necessarie defensive warre... to preserve the State, Church, Republike, Fredomes, Lives, Chastities, Estates, Lawes, Liberties, Religion from unjust violence

was, and always had been "lawfull by the Law of Nature".[7] Time and again in Prynne's book the concept of the law of nature was linked with the preservation of "Lawes, Liberties and Estates", and this was the major justification that he offered for resistance to the King.

The language of *Remonstrans Redivivus* echoed that of Parker's *Observations* at many points, and it actually cited Prynne's *Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* and the *Book of Declarations* in support of its main

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1. W.Prynne, *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes*, 1643, pt.1 p.40. Prynne's political ideas will be examined in greater detail in chapter five.
2. ibid. p.100.
3. ibid. p.38.
4. ibid. pt.iii p.4.
5. ibid. p.14.
6. ibid. pt.iv p.170.
7. ibid. pt.iii pp.47,48.

argument concerning *Salus Populi*.[1] William Walwyn would, therefore, have been aware of these books, and in the unlikely event that he had not read them, would have had a very good idea of their political content.

Of the three Leveller leaders, Walwyn was the first to employ the concept of the law of nature - nature as a preserver of itself - in a political context. It is possible that it was he who alerted John Lilburne to the importance of these works by the Parliamentarians, especially that of William Prynne, for by the middle of 1645, Lilburne was beginning to make extensive use of them.[2] Ironically, however, Walwyn first employed the idea of *Salus Populi* in one of his own pamphlets of 1644 in order to defend the principle of religious liberty against the attacks of its opponents, prominent among them being none other than William Prynne.

As a result of his spiritual and intellectual crisis of the late 1630s, in which he cut himself loose from Calvinistic theology, ethics - personal, social and political - became William Walwyn's primary concern. Under the influence of Montaigne, Charron and the other "humane" writers, he came to place a high value on man's natural potential. In *The Power of Love* of 1643, he proclaimed that a solution to the problems facing English society was, in fact, to be found in nature. The Parliamentary theorists, with their principle of *Salus Populi* derived from the law of nature, seemed to him to be saying exactly the same thing. It was this desire to order society according to natural law that was to form the basis of his alliance with John Lilburne and Richard Overton, despite the fact that his theological outlook was very different to theirs.

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1. *Remonstrans Redivivus*, 1643, p.6.
2. See below, chapter 7.

Chapter Four

RICHARD OVERTON'S MORTALISM

Richard Overton is the most shadowy, and also, the most controversial of the three Leveller pamphleteers under consideration in this thesis. Unlike John Lilburne and William Walwyn he did not provide readers of his pamphlets with details of his private life or of his career prior to the mid-1640s. Nor were his enemies much help in this respect. In 1649 the sectarian authors of *Walwins Wiles* themselves knew little about him, and what they did know, they did not like; they made a deliberate decision not to dignify him with their criticism.[1]

The lack of hard information about Overton is well illustrated by M.Gimelfarb-Brack's article on him in the *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the 17th Century*, in which "may have", "probably", and "apparently", qualify virtually every statement concerning his life prior to 1646; this, despite the fact that Gimelfarb-Brack herself has clearly left few stones unturned in her search for more details about the man she has made the subject of a major study.[2]

Given the profundity of this historical gloom, it is hardly surprising that the small amount that is known about him has fuelled a good deal of speculation, and caused not a little confusion.

It is known that at some point he signed the confession of faith of

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1. *Walwins Wiles*, 1649, in H&D p.288: "As for Mr.Richard Overton we know him not but by his Pen, the complexion whereof hath quit our desires of any further acquaintance with him".
2. M.Gimelfarb-Brack, *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite, Justice: Le Vie et L'Oeuvre de Richard Overton, Niveleur*, Berne, 1979. Brack has uncovered a number of men named Richard Overton who were alive in England in the middle of the 17th century. But she has not found it possible to make a definite link between the pamphleteer of the 1640s and any one of these (see Brack, Appendix 2).

a General Baptist congregation in the Netherlands.[1] But when did he sign it, and, more importantly as far as his involvement with the Levellers was concerned, did General Baptist theology contribute significantly to the development of his political theory? It is also known that in the early 1640s Overton wrote a number of satirical tracts[2] and a remarkable apology for mortalism. But what kind of thinking produced *Mans Mortalitie* (1643)? Was Overton a rationalist and an early materialist, as some scholars have maintained,[3] and must his Leveller activities be seen in this light?

In this chapter and in chapter eight it will be argued that it is wrong to interpret Overton's thought either in terms of a development out of General Baptist theology, or of a materialistic and areligious philosophy; while there were, indeed, rationalistic elements in his thinking, he did not attempt to undermine Christian doctrine or deny the existence of a supernatural order. These chapters will seek to show that Overton's political thinking developed in much the same way as that of John Lilburne, that is, by a strict separation of the orders of grace and of nature, and the application of the concept of the law of nature to social and political questions.

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1. B.Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, Bunyan Library 1862-1864, vol.1 pp.254-256, contains an English translation of the Latin confession. For the original version see C.Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, Cambridge 1912, vol.2 pp.216-218.
2. *Articles of High Treason Exhibited against Cheapside Crosse*, 1642; *New Lambeth Fayre*, 1642. It has been argued convincingly that a large number of anonymous satirical tracts of the period 1641-1643 are also attributable to Overton. See D.M.Wolfe, "Unsigned Pamphlets of Richard Overton", *Huntington Quarterly Library* 21 1958, pp.167-201; Gimelfarb-Brack, pp.337-436.
3. E.Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism*, Nottingham 1980, p.90; A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, London 1938, p.54; J.Frank, *The Levellers*, Harvard 1955, pp.40,41; G.L.Mosse, "Puritan Radicalism and the Enlightenment", in S.A.Burrell (ed.), *The Role of Religion in Modern European History*, New York 1964, pp.75,76. See above, p.5.

1. Ecclesiology

Richard Overton's confession of faith was discovered in Amsterdam among other documents which were dated about 1615.[1] Most scholars have assumed that Overton signed the confession in 1615, having spent the early part of his life in Holland as a member of a community of English separatist refugees.[2] This view may well be correct. The major problem with it, however, is that the document is not dated, and there is no certain indication as to which community in Holland it was addressed.[3]

In her study of Overton's life and work, Gimelfarb-Brack has made an impressive case for rejecting the traditional view, and dating the signing of the confession in the early 1640s. Her argument is cumulative, and, because of the lack of evidence, much of it is incapable of rising above the level of speculation.[4] But she provides one piece of evidence which makes a later date extremely likely.

Gimelfarb-Brack points out that in 1631 a Richard Overton entered Cambridge University, and while there acted in a play at Queens' College. There is no record of his graduating. An anonymous satirical pamphlet of the early 1640s that has been attributed to Overton discloses that the

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1. B.Evans, p.254.
2. See, for example, Burrage, vol.1 p.243; C.H.Firth's article on Overton in *DNB*; H.N.Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, Nottingham, 1976, p.49; G.E.Aylmer, *The Levellers in the English Revolution*, London 1975, p.18.
3. Burrage, vol.1 p.243, suggests that Overton belonged to a congregation led by Leonard Busher, one of three groups into which the original congregation of John Smyth is said to have split by 1611. But Burrage offers no evidence to support this. What may have prompted his suggestion is that in 1614 Busher published a pamphlet called *Religions Peace: or A Plea for Liberty of Conscience*, which displayed the kind of tolerationist spirit found in Overton's writings.
4. For example, Brack's argument that Overton's tracts of the 1640s bear witness to the energy, impetuousity and iconoclasm of youth, and cannot have been the work of a fifty or sixty year old (p.3); her suggestion that, since Overton's signature on the confession closely resembles that on one of his letters of 1654, it is likely that he signed the confession only a matter of years, rather than decades, before the letter (p.87); her inference that, because she has found no record of Overton's having been a part of the community in Amsterdam in the early part of the 17th century, he was not there at the time (p.87).

author "might have been a scholar had he not run away from Cambridge". In view of the fact that many of his pamphlets are dramatically and theatrically oriented, Brack suggests that Overton the student actor was Overton the Leveller, and that he was born, therefore, somewhere around 1615, thus ruling out the early date for the signing of the confession.[1]

This does seem to be a reasonable inference to make from the evidence, although it is far from the level of proof. But if Overton did not sign the confession in 1615, when did he sign it? Brack's main and most debat able contention is that his writings of 1643 onwards are in marked contrast to those of 1641-1642, and display a clear General Baptist theology. Her claim rests largely on the assumption that *Mans Mortalitie* of 1644 must have been written by a member of this Arminian sect. She argues that Overton was converted to a General Baptist faith in 1642, and that he signed the confession of faith at that time.[2]

The evidence for this is slim indeed. No other scholar has observed the clear theological distinction that Brack claims there to be between Overton's pamphlets written before and after 1643. The truth is that at the moment there is so little information that it is impossible to say when Overton signed the confession of faith.

Nevertheless, despite her novel theory on the dating of the confession, Brack is by no means alone in believing that Overton's writings and political ideas were heavily influenced by a General Baptist faith. J.Frank,[3] and N.T.Burns[4] follow W.Haller[5] in assuming that Overton

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1. Brack, pp.5,6. The pamphlet was *Mercuries Message Defended*, 1641. See also M.Heinemann, "Popular Drama and Leveller Style", in M.Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes*, London 1978, pp.69,70. Heinemann also believes that the student actor and the radical pamphleteer were one and the same. Overton's satirical pamphlets were, in her view, heavily influenced by the theatre and popular drama, and they demand that the author had quite extensive knowledge and experience of the stage.
2. Brack, pp.87-89.
3. Frank, pp.43,83-84.
4. N.T.Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton*, Harvard 1972, p.162.
5. W. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation* , p.196. See above p.10.

translated General Baptist teaching on free justification and congregational democracy into political terms. M.Tolmie maintains that Overton's mortalism, in particular, identifies him as a General Baptist.[1]

Brack is right in suggesting that Overton's early writings are theologically unremarkable. His two signed pamphlets dating from 1642 were certainly radical and iconoclastic, and clearly the product of an enthusiastic and whole-hearted critic of the established church. They mercilessly attacked Popery and Laudianism, which as far as Overton was concerned, were one and the same. *Articles of High Treason* was written partially in rhyming verse and purported to be a conversation between Master Papist and Master Newes in which Newes explained that Cheapside Crosse had been destroyed because it had attempted "to seduce his majesties liege subjects from the true Protestant religion, to the Romish Catholike faith".[2] In *New Lambeth Fayre*, he spun a tale, highlighting the close links he believed there to be between Rome and Canterbury, in which the Pope was forced to hold a fair at Lambeth in order to raise money to ransom the bishops from the Tower.[3]

Many of the unsigned pamphlets also dwelt on the theme of the Antichristian corruption of the Church of England.[4] But apart from the quality of his satire, and his literary style,[5] there was nothing particularly remarkable, either theologically or politically about any of his writings of this period. His work must be seen in the context of the widespread opposition to, and condemnation of, the Laudian church, that

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1. M.Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints*, Cambridge 1977, p.82.
2. *Articles of High Treason*, 1642, p.3.
3. *New Lambeth Fayre*, 1642.
4. For example, Mercuries Message, 1641, "proved" that Archbishop Laud was the Beast of Revelation by adding up the numerical value of the letters of his name to 666; *Canterburies Will*,1641, pretended to give an account of Laud's last will and testament in which Laud confessed to Popery and finally admitted that the Pope was indeed the Antichrist.
5. See M.Heinemann, "Popular Drama and Leveller Style", in M.Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes*, 1978, pp.69-92.

was often expressed in apocalyptic terms.[1] Like many other opponents of Laudianism he combined an intense patriotism with an equally intense opposition to the ecclesiastical establishment and the supposed inroads of Roman Catholicism.

But if Overton's early pamphlets do not contain any well-defined doctrine of the church, neither do those written after 1643. His Marpriest satires of 1645-1646 came the closest to dealing with ecclesiology.[2] It is clear from them that he was opposed to the practices of the established church. He called on the Presbyterians to "renounce the ordinance of Tythes",[3] tithes being, in his view, nothing more than "pious theft";[4] he argued that God's intention was that the church should care for the poor by means of "voluntary contribution",[5] and that a Christian minister ought to support himself "by the labour of his hands".[6] However, Overton shared these ideas with many other religious radicals of his time, and there is nothing about them that is characteristically General Baptist.

In *Martins Echo* Overton announced that if his satirical target, Sir Simon Synod, was prepared to renounce what he regarded as his oppressive ways, then he (Martin Marpriest) would

> freely ingage his life and fortunes for honest mild Presbytery, without any grutch or heart-burnings for by-past injuries.

Overton appears, at this stage at least, to have been more interested in denouncing "Synodicall, Classicall Presbyterian predominancy",[7] than in

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1. C.Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth Century England*, 1971, p.62, points out that after the break with Rome in the sixteenth century, it was almost the official teaching of the Church of England to identify the Pope with Antichrist. See also G.F.Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, Oxford 1957, pp.56-61.
2. For a study of the literary style of the Marpriest tracts, and their relationship with the Marprelate pamphlets of the 16th century, see N.Smith, "Richard Overton's Marpriest Tracts: Towards a History of Leveller Style", *Prose Studies*, 1986, vol.9 no.2, pp.39-66.
3. *Martins Echo*, 1645, p.4.
4. *The Ordinance for Tythes Dismounted*, 1645, p.22.
5. ibid. p.21.
6. ibid. p.23.
7. *Martins Echo*, 1645, p.5.

stating the case for any particular brand of churchmanship. It may well be that Overton was uncertain in his own mind as to what did constitute a true church, and, like the Seekers, was awaiting fresh revelation. This is the impression that is given in *Divine Observations* (Jan.1646), in which Overton claimed that the intolerance of the Presbyterians suppressed the growth of knowledge in religious matters. "By faire and equall Reasonings and tryall of Doctrines", he maintained,

> light would daily break forth and encrease, as common experience doth witnesse.[1]

There is, then, a notable absence of a General Baptist ecclesiology in Overton's writings. Moreover, the view that certain elements of his thought are distinctively General Baptist is itself very much open to question. Mortalism, in particular, is not the touch-stone that it is sometimes made out to be. While it is true that Overton took part in a debate on this subject at Thomas Lambe's General Baptist church in Bel Alley,[2] Lambe himself did not hold the doctrine.[3] Of the 17th century mortalists listed by N.T.Burns, only Overton is thought to have had any connection with the General Baptists.[4] As will be seen, there is little evidence within *Mans Mortalitie* of General Baptist or Anabaptist influence.

Radical ideas were not the sole property of General Baptists: John Goodwin was an Arminian, Roger Williams advocated religious toleration, and John Milton was a mortalist. It is clear that at some stage of his career, Richard Overton was a General Baptist, though whether he was still active among them during the later 1640s is quite uncertain.[5] But

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1. *Divine Observations*, 1646, p.11.
2. T.Edwards, *Gangraena*, 1646, Part ii pp.17,18.
3. ibid. p.18.
4. Burns, p.149.
5. Tolmie, pp.82,83, has pointed out that a number of religious radicals, as, for example, William Walwyn's friend, Clement Wrighter, passed through General Baptist churches on their way out into the unstructured fringe groups.

whenever it was that Overton signed his confession of faith, there is no simple relationship between the doctrines or tradition that he committed himself to then and his pamphleteering during the 1640s.

2. *Mans Mortalitie*

In 1644, Richard Overton published a pamphlet called *Mans Mortalitie* that was truly remarkable. It dealt in a serious manner with a theological-philosophical topic rather than with an issue of immediate political or ecclesiastical concern, and stood in marked contrast to anything that he had written before, and, indeed, to anything that came later. He described it on the title page as

> a treatise wherein tis proved both theologically and philosophically that whole man (as a rational creature) is a compound wholly mortal, contrary to that common distinction of soul and body; and that the present going of the soul into heaven or hell is a mere fiction; and that at the resurrection is the beginning of our immortality, and the actual condemnation and salvation, not before.[1]

Overton was certainly not the first Christian to put forward such a thesis. The church historian Eusebius recorded that in the third century a synod was summoned in Arabia to deal with a group who were teaching that

> at the end of our life here the human soul dies for a time along with our bodies and perishes with them; later when one day the resurrection comes it will return them to life.[2]

In the fourth century the African apologist, Arnobius, taught that hope in Christ was the only basis for immortality, since the soul was not immortal

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1. *Mans Mortalitie*, 1644, Title page.
2. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 1965, p.272. Two of the critics of *Mans Mortalitie* made reference to this. The author of *The Prerogative of Man*, 1645, p.2, maintained that "the old and despicable heresy which this obscure author now labours to resuscitate and to conjure up was raised in Arabia", and he suggested that those who now advocated mortalism be called "wilde Arabians". A.Ross in *The Philosophicall Touchstone*, 1645, pp. 122,123, called mortalists "Arabian Pigmies" who would never be able to destroy "the strong Fort and citadell of every good Christian in his afflictions", namely, belief in the immortality of the soul.

by nature.[1] There were various reappearences of mortalism in the Middle Ages, but it was not officially condemned by the Catholic church until 1513.[2] During the Reformation the doctrine of soul-sleep, or psychopannychism, was held by a number of Anabaptist groups, and Luther himself tended towards this view.[3] Mortalism was given its most developed expression in the sixteenth century by Fausto Socinus, who believed in the actual death of the soul rather that its sleep until the resurrection.[4] It has been claimed that by the seventeenth century mortalism was a popular heresy in England.[5] But since the evidence for this seems to rest to a large extent on the existence of *Mans Mortalitie*, and the activities of Overton, this view must be treated with some scepticism.

The publication of *Mans Mortalitie* in January 1644 certainly provoked a strong reaction. On the 26th of August, 1644, the House of Commons, responding to a petition from the Stationers' Company, condemned the ideas in it as dangerous heresy, and ordered it, together with John Milton's tract on divorce, to be suppressed. It is clear that one of the main reasons why mortalism was considered to be so dangerous was that it was thought to undermine respect for law and authority and to remove the basis of morality.[6] Two replies to *Mans Mortalitie* published in the following year both maintained that there was a fundamental link between virtue and belief in heaven and hell, and that mortalism would therefore lead to anarchy. Ross voiced this fear most succinctly:

> Let there be but way given to this doctrine of the Sadducees, we must bid farewell to lawes and civility,

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1. See H.Fisch's introduction to a new edition of *Mans Mortalitie*, 1968, p.xix; and the article on Arnobius in J.D.Douglas (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Exeter 1974.
2. Fisch, p.xx.
3. G.H.Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, London 1962, p.104. Williams, (p.580) points out, however, that Calvin was so disturbed by the influence of this teaching that he wrote a whole book against it.
4. ibid. pp.750-752.
5. N.T.Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton*, 1972, p.3.
6. Mortalism was therefore seen in much the same terms as the denial of hell. See above, p.64.

> nay to Religion and Christianity... Admit but such Lucretian doctrine, you may shake hands with heaven and hell.'

The seriousness of the response to the tract reflected Overton's own seriousness of approach to the subject. In it he set out to prove that the soul did not have a separate existence of its own, but that, like the body, it was subject to death. He was concerned not so much with what happened to the individual after death - although that, of course, came into the discussion - but with a theological understanding of what man was and how he was constituted. What was contained in the pamphlet was a doctrine of the wholeness and unity of man, and not merely a consideration of the sleep or death of the soul.

At the start of *Mans Mortalitie* Overton proclaimed the wholeness of man both in judgement and in salvation. He argued that when Adam, the first man, transgressed, his whole being came under the judgement of God, and consequently, "whole man was lyable to Death by sinne";[2] death reduced man ("this *productio Entis ex Non-ente*") to nothing, and he returned to the earth from whence he came.[3] Overton believed, therefore, that, as a result of the Fall, man in his entirety had become mortal and completely subject to death. He felt that it was absurd to suggest that the body alone died while the soul lived on to be punished in hell, for this would mean that the body was punished more than the soul:

> the principall or efficient cause deepest in the Transgression was lesse punished than the Instrumentall, the Body being but the Soules instrument whereby it acts and moves; as if a magistrate should hang the Hatchet and spare the man that beat a mans braines out with it... [4]

Hope of eternal life, Overton argued, was not founded on the immortality of the soul, but on being made alive in Christ.[5]

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1. A.Ross, *The Philosphicall Touchstone*, 1645, p.123; see also *The Prerogative of Man*, 1645, p.33.
2. *Mans Mortalitie*, p.2.
3. ibid. p.2.
4. ibid. p.3.
5. ibid. p.2.

He devoted much of the tract to consideration of the Scriptural teaching on the unity of man,[1] but he also marshalled "Natural Reasons" to prove his point. He used ideas taken from contemporary medicine to prove that anything that was of elementary composition - a "Temperature" - was "mortall and transetory", and "subject to intention and remission". Overton maintained that all of man's faculties, including reason, were "temperatures", since they could be "augmented by learning.... lessened by negligence... and quite nullified by madnesse";[2] therefore, man as a whole was subject to death and decay.

The crux of Overton's natural and philosophical argument was that man's physical functions and parts were indissolubly linked to his understanding and senses, or in other words, to his soul. Man, he stated

> is but a creature whose severall parts and members are endowed with proper natures or Faculties, each subservient to other, to make him a living, Rationall creature.[3]

He believed that it was impossible to separate faculties from physical members, for "separation cannot be without destruction of both";[4] without the human body there was no soul, without the soul there was no human being:

> their Being is in this union, and their union is in this Being; so that take away Forme, and Matter ceaseth; take away Matter and Forme ceaseth; destruction unius est interritum alterius. The Forme is the Forme of the Matter, the Matter of the Forme; neither of themselves, but each by other, and both together make one Being.[5]

There is no way of knowing exactly what prompted Overton to publish *Mans Mortalitie*, or how he came to his mortalist convictions. Fisch suggests that he was influenced by continental Socinianism.[6] This is

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1. See, e.g., pp.4-7, 16-32, 41-43.
2. ibid. p.9.
3. ibid. p.10.
4. ibid. p.11.
5. ibid.
6. Fisch, p.xx.

possible, especially since Overton spent some time in the Netherlands. The pamphlet itself provides no direct evidence of Socinian influence, but that proves nothing one way or the other: had Overton been indebted to a group whose name was synonymous with heresy it would hardly have been in his interest to declare it.

Overton quoted from the works of a number of philosophers and theologians on the nature of the soul, including Aristotle, Plato, Athanasius and Augustine.[1] He made extensive use of the medical ideas of Ambrose Parey, while disagreeing with him philosophically.[2] It is not unreasonable to suggest that Overton may have arrived at his mortalist position through grappling with the ideas of the authors of the books it is known that he did read. He was clearly a well-educated and highly intelligent man who seems to have been capable of original and courageous thinking. When two of the works, in particular, that he cited on a number of occasions are examined in detail, it becomes possible to see how they may have set him on the path to mortalism. They were George Wither's introduction to and translation of Nemesius' work, *The Nature of Man* (1636),[3] and Henry Woolnor's, *The True Originall of the Soule* (1641),[4] neither of which was expressly mortalist. Both gave clear accounts of the anthropological theories of classical philosophers and church fathers on the nature of man.

George Wither's introduction to *The Nature of Man* by Nemesius, a Syrian bishop of the fifth century, made important points about the nature of sin and salvation which appear to have impressed Overton. Wither (1588-1667), a poet and pamphleteer, believed that the doctrine of the Fall had been seriously misunderstood, and that the effects of man's sin were

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1. See *Mans Mortalitie*, pp.9-11.
2. See for example pp.8,10,14.
3. See for example pp.3,11. W.Haller, *Liberty and Reformation*, p.177, first suggested that this may have been an important influence on Overton.
4. See for example pp.15,33.

really less disastrous than was usually supposed. He claimed that, although man had lost his well-being in the Garden, he did not lose his natural being, "nor those faculties which make us capable of being renewed by special grace when it should be tendered unto us". He maintained that God's mercy prevented man from losing his rationality, and that sin did not, therefore, essentially affect his faculties. In consequence, he thought it possible for a man to lose far more through his own actions than through the Fall, for "by the first sin we lost indeed our light, but not our eyes". People became corrupt and depraved, he argued, not because of the Fall, but when they rejected Christ, the Light of the World; having seen him with their eyes, they turned away and forfeited their natural faculties.

Wither saw that he might be accused of elevating nature above grace, and he begged his readers not to misunderstand his ideas on the relationship between the two orders. He explained it thus:

> whatever is ascribed to man as being primarily in him by nature is acknowledged to be the gracious gift of God. That which is affirmed to be left in him since the Fall is confessed to have been justly forfeited and yet preserved in him by the free grace of God.[1]

In other words, according to Wither, nature could not be said to be independent of grace, for that which was truly human and natural existed only by God's grace; man may have lost the gift of immortality at the Fall, but he had not lost the gracious gift of his natural capacities - particularly his rationality - or the possibility of salvation. Wither was anxious to assert the supremacy of grace: only if men actually rejected the gift of eternal life offered to them in Christ were they condemned.

Overton took issue with Nemesius himself on a number of points.[2] But he appears to have been very much in tune with the ideas of George Wither.

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1. G.Wither, Introduction to Nemesius' *The Nature of Man*, 1636, unpaginated.
2. See, for example, *Mans Mortalitie*, p.3, where he questioned Nemesius' view of the body as but the instrument of the soul.

Overton, too, viewed the Fall as an event in which man in his entirety came under judgement, and, similarly, he believed that its effects were limited. According to Overton, the penalty of sin was that man suffers death, not that man is incapable of being truly human in the natural sphere. Salvation, for him, had to do with immortality and the future life of the whole man. Overton believed that all men were free to choose Christ and receive salvation, and that only if they actually rejected Christ were they condemned to hell:

> condemnation in Hell is not properly, but remotely the reward of Adams Fall; for properly condemnation is the wages of infidelity or unbeliefe in Christ as salvation is of beliefe; so that none can be condemned into Hell but such as are actually guilty of refusing of Christ.

Overton argued that, just as immortality could not be passed on from parents to children in the way that physical death was, neither could the child be eternally punished for the parent's sin - "his condemnation shall be of himself".[1] For Overton, as for Wither, the consequence of the Fall was mortality, and while man needed the special grace of salvation to obtain immortality, he had not fallen utterly in terms of his life in the world.

Henry Woolnor actually set out in his book to show that the soul was not generated naturally by man, nor on the other hand, supernaturally by God. He based his whole argument on two principles - "that the soule is immortall, and that all men have sinned".[2] Because of his belief in the soul's intrinsic immortality, Woolnor would not allow that it was generated by man.[3] But because of his belief in man's sinfulness, neither would he allow that the soul came directly from God.[4] He maintained that "whole persons sinned in Adam", and he considered it wrong to deal with

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1. ibid. p.4.
2. H.Woolnor, *The True Originall of the Soule*, 1641, p.5.
3. ibid. p.36.
4. ibid. p.39.

the body and soul separately, and suggest that the former was generated by man and the latter by God.[1] In order to sail between this "Scylla and Charibidis", and take due account of both the immortality of the soul and the sinfulness of man, Woolnor argued that the soul was propagated partly by man and partly by God,[2] "God having so much in it as to make it immortall, and man so much as to make it sinfull".[3] Nevertheless, he believed that it was impossible to make any kind of separation of the various parts of man and to isolate which came from God and which from man; for the Scriptures always spoke of "the generation of the whole man".[4]

Despite his explicit stress on the immortality of the soul, Woolnor's argument did point implicitly in the direction of mortalism. His insistence that the whole of man was sinful and fallen led him to deny that the soul was the direct creation of God, and to undermine any arguments that would tend to support a dualistic point of view. He resolved the dilemma of the soul's sinfulness and its immortality by postulating an origin for it that was part human, part divine. But while his argument for the wholeness of man was convincing, his argument for the dual origin of the soul was not. It would not have taken much for an interested reader like Overton to develop Woolnor's strong arguments a step further, and ignore the weaker ones.

It is not possible to say with certainty that the ideas of Wither and Woolnor were, in fact, formative in the development of Richard Overton's mortalism. But there are enough correspondences and similarities in his approach and theirs to suggest that their works are likely to have provided the intellectual stimulation that led to the writing of *Mans Mortalitie*. It is not necessary to explain his approach in

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1. ibid. p.43.
2. ibid. p.46.
3. ibid. p.47.
4. ibid. p.48

terms of highly speculative theories concerning his General Baptist commitment, or the influence of Socinian ideas.

As far as the general style and approach of Overton's writings is concerned, *Mans Mortalitie* is in a class of its own. He wrote nothing else quite like it. But this does not mean, however, that the ideas expressed in that work bore no relationship to the development of his political thought. On a very general level, his mortalism allowed him to view man in unitary terms, and to approach social and political life without recourse to religious categories.[1] What is more, Overton himself actually made a specific link between mortalism and political theory in another of his writings of the following year.

In *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution* (1645) Overton dramatised the argument for toleration by personifying the ideas involved in the debate and putting persecution on trial. Among the various prosecution witnesses called to give evidence, "Gospell" produced a very theological argument for liberty of conscience. Gospell maintained that Persecution had no right to punish people for their beliefs and could not claim Old Testament authority for doing so;[2] he conceded that the Kings of Israel had power under the old covenant to persecute, but claimed that "their supremacy was but for a time" until Christ established the new covenant. Whereas under the old covenant the penalty for sin was "temporal death", under the new it was "the death of the New or spirituall man in the life to come" - everlasting death following the resurrection. Overton was here using the same idea that he had elaborated in *Mans Mortalitie*, namely that the result of the Fall was mortality, and the penalty for refusing Christ commitment to Hell following the resurrection.

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1. This is to reject the view of W.Schenk that "there is... no connection between Overton's metaphysical speculation (ie. his mortalism) and his political views" (*The Concern for Social Justice in the Puritan Revolution*, 1948, p.36).
2. *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution*, 1645, pp.26,27.

Gospell continued his argument by pointing out that man no longer lived under the old covenant, but under the sole rule and authority of Jesus Christ: the blessings and curses of the new covenant were His prerogative, not that of Kings and temporal rulers:

> as the Resurrection cannot possibly be but by Christ, so the penaltie cannot possibly be by other; it is out of the sphear of this world, therefore out of the Power of the Princes of this world, as they cannot be mediatours of the New Testament, so they cannot be punishers therein.

Overton's argument was, therefore, that temporal rulers who had power under the old covenant which was characterised by mortality, had no power under the new covenant which was characterised by resurrection: "to punish the offenders therein is to attempt the throne of Christ". He did not deny that men were still mortal:

> the condition of the Gospel is not to us as the condition of Innocency was to Adam, a condition in this present state of this present state, as his was to him, to wit, the condition of immortality in immortality; but ours a condition in present mortality of future immortality.

But, in his judgement, this did not mean that the old rules still applied; for although the new humanity was "not actuall till the Resurrection", people were "to live as if we were raised again",[1] and so persecution was incompatible with the new covenant. Overton saw no continuing tension in human society betweeen the old covenant and the new, between law and gospel. In his view, with respect to religious persecution, all men came under the administration of the new covenant, even though not all would receive its intended gift of eternal life.

This method of argument, tortuous at times though it might be, well illustrates the fact that there was no great gulf, but actually, a close link between Overton's theology and his political and social theory. Mortalism was integrated into the rest of his thinking, and he did not feel it incongruous to appeal to the concept in a tract on toleration.

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1. ibid.

Bernstein regarded Overton's doctrine of immortality after the resurrection as merely a "last concession" to the supernatural in an otherwise materialistic pamphlet, made only to forestall the charge of crass atheism.[1] D.Masson believed that the idea had no connection with Overton's main argument:

> were it not for the appended concession of a Resurrection, or New Creation, and an immortality somehow to ensue thence, the doctrine of the tract might be described as out and out materialism. Possibly, in spite of the concession, this is what the author meant to drive at.[2]

Similarly, Christopher Hill claims that Overton was "pretty perfunctory about the resurrection", and that his interest was "mainly in the events of this life".[3]

All of these scholars have failed to see that far from being a "concession", Overton's belief in the resurrection was absolutely central to his whole argument. Bernstein, Masson and Hill are united with Overton's 17th century critics, though for different reasons, in regarding *Mans Mortalitie* as profoundly irreligious and unchristian: his contemporaries feared that it would pave the way for immorality and social disorder; recent historians see it as paving the way for rationalism and deism. However, this is a complete misunderstanding of the pamphlet. Overton's mortalism is accurately to be seen in the first place as a recovery and restatement of elements within the Christian tradition, rather than an anticipation of later materialism.

Like the rest of his generation, Overton was steeped in the language

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1. E.Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism*, 1980, p.91.
2. D.Masson, *The Life of Milton*, London 1873, vol.3, p.157
3. C.Hill, "Irreligion in the 'Puritan' Revolution", in McGregor and Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, Oxford 1984, p.201. It would seem extremely dangerous to assume, as does Hill, that protests against the prevailing orthodoxy, such as mortalism and antinomianism, were signs of "positive irreligion" (p.209) in the English Revolution. They may have been thoroughly Biblical in content and inspiration, as appears to have been the case with *Mans Mortalitie*.

and ideas of the Bible, and there are something approaching 250 Biblical references - an average of eight a page - in this work. *Mans Mortalitie* appears to be a protest against what he considered to be dualism and a call to a more unitary and Biblical anthropology. Fisch makes the valid observation that it represents a recovery of "original Hebraic doctrine".[1] The work expressed Overton's belief in the wholeness of man, and whatever may be said of certain other aspects of his thought, this at least had its roots deep in Biblical teaching. *Mans Mortalitie* was much more than a tract on the nature of the soul. It had a strong soteriological thrust, emphasising, as it did, that justification was free to all men,[2] and that hope of salvation lay in Christ rather than in any intrinsic human qualities. Moreover, it dealt with the nature and extent of sin, demonstrating that, in Overton's view, the Fall had to do with man's supernatural destiny, and had not radically affected his natural relationships: he believed that all men were able to excercise, and be guided by their reason.

It can, therefore be reasonably argued that behind the philosophical arguments of the tract, Overton was seeking to express what he believed to be a truly Christian understanding of man and the world. His stress on the wholeness of man before God led to a great emphasis on the here-and-now, and may have opened up for him the notion of political activity as a legitimate sphere of Christian obedience and worship. But this particular form of 'worldliness' certainly did not involve a rejection of transcendence or anything like it in Overton's thinking.

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1. Fisch, p.xvi.
2. While Overton did possess a much more "comprehensive" understanding of grace than his Calvinistic contemporaries, he clearly was not a universalist or an Antinomian in the sense that Walwyn was, as J.C.Davis suggests ("The Levellers and Christianity" in Manning, p.230).

There is, however, one point in the pamphlet where the distinction between nature and grace appears to break down completely, and where Overton's thinking does, indeed, seem to be extremely unorthodox and heretical. This is his discussion of the physical abode of Christ, which he located in the sun.[1] Fisch maintains that at this point Overton was unconsciously reverting to "the ancient religion of Mithraism", and identifying the ancient divinity, Helios, with the second person of the Trinity.[2] He points out that this identification was "an important ingredient in the thinking of a number of leading sixteenth century philosophers, notably Ficino, Bruno and Copernicus", and suggests that "an obvious source" for Overton was Robert Fludd who channelled such ideas into England.[3]

Fisch does have a point. One of Fludd's few pamphlets in English, his *Answer unto Mr.Foster* (1631), contained a passage which bears some similarity to the passage under consideration in *Mans Mortalitie*. Fludd believed that fire was an elementary power "proceeding radically from God who animateth it". He argued that men acknowledge the divinity of fire when with the apostle they say, "In God wee live, move and have our being".[4] Jerome had said, rightly in Fludd's view, that God had

> put his Tabernacle in the sunne, from whence, by a perpetuall and never dying motion, hee sendeth forth life and multiplication to every member and creature of the great world.

Fludd maintained that the sun animated and gave life to everything by filling the whole world, including the blood of man, with the elemental fire. He concluded that this "Holy Spirit of discipline filleth the whole world".[5]

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1. *Mans Mortalitie*, pp.26-29.
2. Fisch, p.91(note).
3. ibid. See also Gimelfarb-Brack, pp.105-110.
4. R.Fludd, *Dr.Fludd's Answer unto Mr.Foster*, 1631, p.32.
5. ibid. p.65.

Fludd was not primarily a mystic, but a man who sought to understand the laws of the universe. What seem like exotic, magical ideas to twentieth century minds, were part and parcel of his scientific outlook. He believed that he had found the key to things in the element of fire, but he went beyond physical observation and experimentation to speculate about God's relationship to the elements. Contemporaries who would have shared similar scientific ideas nevertheless criticised him for falling into pantheism.[1]

Overton, too, saw life as being closely bound up, with fire and light: where there was no light there could be no being.[2] But Overton certainly was not a pantheist or Mithraist. Fisch has failed to understand the thrust of Overton's argument in this passage, and the very reason for its inclusion.

In order to show that there was no immortality until after the resurrection, Overton had to argue that neither hell nor paradise existed as yet: both were "but in *posse*, not in *esse* till the Resurrection".[3] There was no place of immortality until God created the new heaven and the new earth.[4] But once he had taken this line, Overton was faced with a problem. What had happened to those people who, according to the Bible, had been received bodily into the heavens - Enoch, Elijah and Christ Himself? Whither had they gone if there was no place of immortality? Overton came to the conclusion that Christ's glorified body, because He was still a creature, must be "in some certaine place of the creation" - "for there is no beyond, without it place or being is impossible". The location that he suggested for the abode of Christ was the sun:

> without doubt he must be in... the most excellent peece of the whole creation, the epitome of Gods power,

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1. Article on Fludd in *DNB*.
2. *Mans Mortalitie*, p.29.
3. ibid. p.19.
4. ibid. p.23.

> conveyour of life, growth, strength and being to everie creature under Heaven.'

Overton then went on, in terms similar to those used by Fludd, to make a close association between the life-giving influence of the sun, and the creative and preserving power of God:

> fitly... may it (the sun) be called the right hand of God, by which through Christ in him we live, move and have our being: for it is that which reflecteth the brightnesse, glory and power of the Creatour upon the creatures mortall; his glory must of necessitie be the light, else light could not be, therefore it must be by reflection, else would it be too glorious for mortall eyes, we could not see it and live; for this light is but his shaddow, which the sun as a glasse casteth upon the creatures... [2]

Although Overton believed that the sun had a very exalted role, he did not regard it as divine, he did not identify it with God Himself. The whole point of his argument was that the exalted Christ had to be somewhere within the creation. The sun, for him, was part of the created order; it was the highest part of creation because it reflected something of God's glory and God's light on to the world. But like everything else in creation it was bound to be destroyed to make way for the new heaven and the new earth.[3] Overton recalled the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews that the heavenly city "shall have no need of the sun nor moon, but the glory of God shall inlighten it".[4] He was not guilty of confusing the Creator with the creation. His clear intention was not to indulge in pantheistic speculation, but to strengthen his case for the mortality of the soul.

It is possible that Overton had read Fludd's writings, though there is no evidence of this. A more likely source of his ideas concerning the sun was *The Personall Reigne of Christ upon Earth*, (1642) by John Archer

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1. ibid. p.27.
2. ibid.
3. ibid. pp.27,28.
4. ibid. p.28.

which he certainly had read.[1]

Archer too believed in the bodily presence of Christ in the universe, and his continued rule over it. According to him, Christ was not in heaven, but in Paradise, "the "Region or element of fire, where the sunne and starres are".[2] Archer did not dwell on this idea, and his sole concern was with the location of Paradise, rather than any kind of pantheistic theorising. Neither Archer nor Overton moved on from locating Christ's presence in the sun to equating Him with it. It may have been only a small step to take, but neither of them did take it. The ideas may seem rather quaint to twentieth century readers, but both of them merely introduced it in their writings to aid them in their serious theological discussion of other matters.

Mans Mortalitie was Overton's protest against dualism of a particular kind, according to which man's soul and body were not thoroughly interdependent, the soul being more "essential" to man than his body. But it must not be thought that Overton was radically monistic in his outlook, breaking down all distinctions between the spiritual and the physical, the supernatural and the natural. There remained a vital distinction in his thought both between God and His creation, and the redeemed and unredeemed.

W.Haller and J.C.Davis appear to believe that because Overton wrote that not all unbelievers would be condemned to hell, he also held that all those who were not would be saved.[3] This was not Overton's position. The soteriology of *Mans Mortalitie* was Arminian, but it was not universalist. He did, indeed, argue that only such as actually refused Christ would be

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1. See p.21, where Overton actually referred to Archer's book in the context of his discussion of the location of hell.
2. J.Archer, *The Personall Reigne of Christ upon Earth*, 1642, p.25.
3. W.Haller, *Liberty and Reformation*, 1963, pp.178,281; Davis, p.230, n.26.

condemned to hell. But he also stated that only those who put their faith in Christ would be raised to eternal life. For him, man's natural condition after Adam was one of mortality. Only the faithful were to receive immortality in heaven, and only the hard-hearted immortality in hell. The rest were clearly to die.

The basic thrust of Overton's mortalist tract was that the soul becomes immortal by grace and is not so by nature. Although he rejected anthropological dualism , he retained the distinction between God and man, the here, and the here-after. He avoided both a universalist soteriology and a pantheistic mysticism.

Chapter Five

WILLIAM PRYNNE AND THE CONCERN FOR CHRISTIAN MAGISTRACY

From the early days of the civil war, John Lilburne, William Walwyn and Richard Overton were all involved in one way or another in promoting the Parliamentary cause. Overton, with his attacks on prelacy and the Laudian regime, Walwyn with his political activity in London, and Lilburne with his commission in Lord Brooke's regiment, belonged to a broad anti-royalist coalition that embraced a deceptively wide range of political and theological opinion. The coalition was united, however, only in opposition, and in 1644 it began to disintegrate when important and previously hidden or half-hidden differences among the constituent groups over what precisely should replace the old system of church government came to the surface. Central to the often bitter debate between them was the question of the degree of religious liberty that ought to be allowed within English society.

It has been rightly noted that the political ideas of Lilburne, Walwyn and Overton developed and were sharpened in the context of this debate about toleration.[1] But the process by which this occurred has not been properly understood. J.C.Davis argues that "an accretion of political and legal attitudes" gathered round their central commitment to religious freedom as they gradually realised that, in order to defend it, other freedoms would also have to be established:

> the constitutional proposals of the Levellers were thus in part derived from their fear that, without some such arrangements, freedom of conscience could not be guaranteed.[2]

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1. See for example, J.Frank, *The Levellers*, Harvard 1955, p.248; J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in B.Manning (ed.), *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War*, London 1973, p.247; J.S.Morrill, article on John Lilburne in *BDBR*.
2. Davis, pp.248, 249.

It will be argued in this chapter and in chapters six, seven and eight that Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn did not move gradually from a commitment to religious liberty to the championing of wider political liberties, nor did their political theories grow out of a realisation that religious liberty could only become a reality and be safeguarded if it was surrounded by a whole framework of liberties. This is to ignore their recognition of the secular implications of their respective religious positions, evident as early as 1644 in the writings of William Walwyn, and shortly thereafter in those of John Lilburne and Richard Overton.

This chapter will seek to demonstrate that as soon as the debate about religious toleration began in earnest among the Parliamentarians, its advocates were called upon by its opponents to show how society could possibly hold together if the buttress of established religion were to be removed. Realising that what was at stake in the ecclesiological debate was not simply the understanding of the church, but of society as such, the Presbyterian critics of Independency, most notably, William Prynne, in effect challenged the religious radicals to produce a convincing secular theory of politics and society.

This is precisely what Lilburne, Walwyn and Overton sought to provide, and they did so by building on a common feature of their thought, namely, the concept of the law of nature as the foundation of morality and order within human society. Thus, William Prynne was a vitally important figure in the political development of the three pamphleteers, for he was one of the first to grasp the secular implications of Independent and sectarian ecclesiology, and to focus attention on them. He was doubly significant in that, as well as being the Presbyterian enemy over against whom they defined themselves, he was also their unwilling ally, a leading exponent of Parliamentary sovereignty, who provided them with much of the material upon which their secular political theory was built.

Prynne's relationship with John Lilburne dated from the time in the late 1630s when Lilburne took it upon himself to visit the imprisoned Puritan opponents of Archbishop Laud.[1] During this period, and on into the early 1640s, Lilburne held him in the highest esteem as a great hero of the Christian faith, a man to be followed and emulated. In 1641, Lilburne consulted the famous lawyer on legal matters connected with his brewery business,[2] and there seems to have been a degree of friendship between the two. By the middle of the decade the idea was circulating, apparently encouraged by Lilburne himself, that his legal theories were derived from Prynne, whom, it was claimed, he had once served as an assistant. Prynne dismissed this idea contemptuously, as though such a close relationship could never have existed;[3] but this was in 1645, by which time he and Lilburne had quarrelled bitterly over the question of church government,[4] and his emotions may have got the better of his memory.

Whether or not Lilburne was as close to Prynne as had been claimed, it is undeniable that Prynne's constitutional ideas ex ercised a continuing influence over him. He cited Prynne's massive justification of the Parliamentary revolt, *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes* (1643), in support of his own theories, in a number of pamphlets written after the rift between the two men had taken place.[5] In *The Oppressed Mans Oppression Declared*, of 1647, he claimed that his own political doctrine was no different to that propounded by Prynne four

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1. See above, p.25.
2. W.Prynne, *The Lyar Confounded*, 1645, p.13.
3. ibid. pp.3: "His mistaken Law (embraced by his disciples as infallible oracles) hath deceived many poor silly souls, and is conceived to have been learned from myselfe (whose servant heretofore and now he is generally cryed up to have been, when as I blesse God, I never entertained him in my service; nor any such turbulent, factious, cross-graind peece as he shewes himself)" (p.3).
4. See next section.
5. See *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, Oct. 1645, postscript; *Innocency and Truth Justified*, Jan.1646, p.11; *The Just Mans Justification*, June 1646, p.15.

years earlier.[1]

Prynne's influence also extended to the other Leveller pamphleteers. William Walwyn was certainly familiar with the political content of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* and had probably read it;[2] Richard Overton was familiar with it, at least, in 1645 and quoted it approvingly in a pamphlet of 1646.[3] Prynne played a significant role in the emergence of the Leveller movement, both in terms of the influence of his constitutional ideas and of his critique of Independency, and so demands not a "marginal" reference, but a chapter to himself.

1. *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*

Central to virtually all of Prynne's writings was a concern for true Christian government in England. He was deeply influenced by John Foxe's vision of a Christian empire governed by godly kings and magistrates, and his political theory was completely geared towards translating this vision into reality. Prynne was an Erastian. His view of the relationship between church and state was determined by his desire to see the Christian ruler encouraging the reformation of religion and morality throughout society. He wanted to put the civil power to work for godly and ethical ends, and he saw the church as the servant of the state in this respect.

This was why, in the late 1630s, Prynne had insisted that the Laudian bishops were *jure humano* rather than *jure divino*: they received their authority from the crown, and were not independent of it; their *jure divino* claim involved "setting up a Papall and Episcopall exploded usurped Jurisdiction, Independent on, and underived from the Imperiall Crowne".[4] According to Prynne, the church should be subservient to the Christian

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1. *The Oppressed Mans Oppression Declared*, Jan.1647, pp.23,29. See below p.170.
2. See above, pp.82,83.
3. *A Defiance against All Arbitrary Usurpations*, Aug.1646, p.16.
4. Quoted in W.Lamont, *Marginal Prynne*, London 1963, p.17.

emperor; it was the responsibility of "Civill Government" to decide which form of church structure was most appropriate to the particular national situation and the task of promoting Christian society there.[1] His commitment to Presbyterianism was by no means absolute. He simply saw it as the form of church government best suited to the conditions prevailing in England. What was of supreme importance, as far as he was concerned, was that the church should whole-heartedly support

> the Parliaments Legislative and Christian Magistrates coercive power to suppress and punish all obstinate Hereticks, Schismatics, Seducers, Blasphemers.[2]

Prynne's Erastianism was certainly not a cynical device intended to ensure spiritual backing for the status quo whatever that might happen to be. It sprang from a deep desire for the proper Christianisation of the state, and for the benefits of the gospel, as he saw them, to be extended to all in society.

Prynne also followed Foxe in his abhorrence of all that he considered to be popish. In his view, the Laudian bishops were guilty not simply of attempting to be independent of the crown, but of encouraging popish doctrines and practices. Indeed, he believed that popery was the real cause of the civil war in England.[3] Prynne was not scandalised by the extent of the King's power, but by the fact that that power was not being used for its rightful purpose, and was in danger of being placed at the disposal of the Pope. It was this fear of popery which, above all, led him to counsel resistance against the King in such works as *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* (1643).

But despite the enormous effort that Prynne must have exerted in

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1. See W.Prynne, *Twelve Considerable Serious Questions*, 1644, pp.2,3.
2. W.Prynne, *The Sword of Christian Magistracy*, 1647, p.iii.
3. Lamont, p.108, observes that Prynne "minimises the part played by a constitutional opposition to an arbitrary King, in favour of emphasis upon a Protestant oposition to a Papist influenced King... Because Prynne sees the civil war as essentially a quarrel about religion, he can describe 'Religion and Justice' as the 'real cause' of the Parliament fight".

terms of research and documentation in the attempt to prove his case, he was not interested in the sovereignty of Parliament as a political end in itself. As his biographer, William Lamont, points out,

> sovereignty was not for Prynne the solution, because constitutional deadlock was not for Prynne the problem.[1]

His one concern was to reestablish a Christian state which was firmly anti-papal and committed to the maintenance of godliness and order. For him, the sovereignty of Parliament was only a means to that end. His approach to the problems of state, then, was dominated by his view of Christian magistracy and his anti-popery.

This is not to say, however, that *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* was not an extremely radical document. It most emphatically was. But the implications of some of the ideas in it went way beyond anything that Prynne could have intended. Much of the book consisted of long, undigested quotes from a wide range of scholars to prove the validity of revolt against tyranny, and while Prynne may not have had any real interest in, or grasp of political theories of sovereignty and natural rights, many of the authors he cited certainly did.

Prynne published his book, at the behest of Parliament, in four parts in 1643. In the first part he attempted to prove that the people, and not their rulers, were the source of political power. He described Parliament as "the representative Body of the whole Kingdome", which was "in some respects of greater power and authority than the King", and he maintained that the law was superior to the King, so that

> if the King shall be without a bridle, that is, without Law, THEY OUGHT TO IMPOSE A BRIDLE ON HIM.[2]

Prynne quoted a number of authorities to the effect that rulers had been "originally created by and for" the people, and were, therefore, their

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1. Lamont, p.116.
2. W.Prynne, *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes*, 1643, pt.i p.5.

servants.[1] Thomas Aquinas was called upon to show that a king was subject to, and not above, the law, precisely because rulers received their commission from the people.[2] On the basis of this, Prynne argued that legislation could not be enacted which did not have the consent of the people represented by Parliament.[3]

This theme was developed by Prynne in the second and third parts of his book. He claimed that, not only the King, but all the officers of state

> were elected by the people who prescribed them Lawes, Oathes, and had power to question, to punish, remove and censure them when they offended.[4]

According to "the Law of Nature" it was the right and duty of the people to defend themselves and their property against the assaults of their enemies, even when these included their kings and rulers:

> the originall compact and mutuall stipulation of every member of any Republicke, state or society of men for mutuall defence one of another upon all occasions... made at their first association and incorporated into a Republicke, State, Kingdome, Nation",

committed them to the defence of themselves and of one another.[5] "The Peoples Safety" was "the Supremest Law".[6]

Finally, in the fourth part of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, Prynne attempted to outline the principles which justified revolution, and

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1. ibid. p.35. One of the works quoted was *The Mirrour of Justices*, written in the 13th century by Andrew Horne. It was reprinted in 1646, and referred to by John Lilburne in *The Oppressed Mans Oppression Declared*, 1647 (p.4), and *A Defiance to Tyrants*, 1648 (p.5).
2. ibid. p.38: "such a king of a kingdome politique is made and ordained for the defence of the laws of his subjects and of their bodies and goods whereunto he receiveth power of his people so that he cannot governe his people by any other law".
3. ibid. p.47: "admit the King should propound any Lawes to his people... yet these lawes would no wayes oblige them unless they voluntarily consented and submitted to them in Parliament; and the sole reason why our Acts of Parliament binde the Subjects in former times, and at this day, is not because the King willed them but because the people gave their generall consents unto them in Parliament".
4. ibid. pt.ii p.46.
5. ibid. pt.iii p.13.
6. ibid. p.14.

here he leant heavily on Huguenot writings such as *Franco-Gallia*, by Francois Hotman, *De Jure Magistratus in Subditos*, and *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, both by Theodore Beza. Prynne published an extremely long extract from this latter work to support the principle that when rulers became "perjured Tyrants", the people were "thereby absolved from their allegiance and obedience to them".[1] *Vindiciae* stated that "fealty extorted by force" was against the law of nature. Nothing could be more repugnant to nature than that the people should enslave or slay themselves, or, "which is verily the same thing", allow the prince to do it for them. There was a

> mutuall obligation between the King and the people which whether it be only civill or naturall, tacit or in expresse words, can be taken away by no agreements, violated by no Law, rescinded by no force.[2]

The King had been ordained by God to protect his people and "to governe them according unto equity and reason"; but if he oppressed them, they were to regard him as a tyrant, and were, "according unto Law and Reason", not bound to acknowledge him as their prince.[3] Tyranny was to be resisted, *Vindiciae* maintained, because it was the chief of all crimes:

> A Tyrant subverts the Republike, makes a prey of all, lyeth in wait for the life of all, violates faith to all, contemnes all the Religion of a sacred oath.[4]

Tyranny, then, according to the view put forward in *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, was a violation of the law of nature: it undermined the fabric of society and made peaceful coexistence impossible.

It is highly significant that Prynne should have quoted so frequently from Huguenot writings. The French Calvinistic Protestants of the latter half of the 16th century, under pressure from the Catholic majority, had themselves been compelled to produce a revolutionary ideology which justified resistance to tyranny. However, as Quentin

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1. ibid. pt.iv p.170.
2. ibid. p.175.
3. ibid. p.177.
4. ibid. p.191.

Skinner points out, the Huguenot political theory was based more on the theology of their Catholic opponents than it was on Lutheran or Calvinistic ideas.[1]

The Huguenots rejected the Protestant idea that, as a remedy for sin, God had placed all men in subjection to divinely ordained rulers. Instead they argued that "the original and fundamental condition of the people must be one of natural liberty".[2] Developing a natural law theory derived from the scholastic theologians, they maintained that the people were not made for their rulers, but their rulers for the people. All men were

> free by nature, born to hate servitude and desirous of commanding rather than yeelding obedience,

and they had only chosen rulers for the better ordering of their affairs.[3] Magistrates had been appointed solely for "the safety, the welfare and the conservation of the people".[4] Liberty was a natural right, "a priviledge of nature" which noone had the right to withdraw from the people.

Skinner observes that with the Huguenots, Protestant political theory passed across "a crucial conceptual divide" away from a religious theory of resistance - faithfulness in upholding the covenant and the laws of God - to

> a fully political theory of revolution, founded on a recognisably modern, secularised thesis about the natural rights and sovereignty of the people.[5]

Given the extent to which Prynne allowed his authorities to speak for themselves in *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, the question of whether he himself possessed any real theory of sovereignty and natural rights is almost immaterial. On page after page he faithfully conveyed to his readers political ideas that were based on an appeal to the law of

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1. Q.Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge 1978, vol.2 pp.320,321.
2. ibid. p.320.
3. Philippe de Mornay, quoted in Skinner, p.327.
4. ibid.
5. ibid. p.338.

nature. Whatever his intention may have been, his book provided a crash-course in radical political theory. When Lilburne and Overton quoted from it in their pamphlets of 1645 onwards, they did so not merely to score points against William Prynne, but because his work had truly played an important role in their political education, and contained ideas to which they were wholeheartedly committed. Above all, it underlined the social significance of the law of nature. While Prynne may have been, by that time, their most bitter opponent, he had also provided them with their greatest store of intellectual ammunition.[1]

2. <u>The Scandal of Independency</u>

The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments was intended to strengthen and consolidate support for the Parliamentary cause. But shortly after its publication in 1643, the anti-royalist coalition began to fragment. This had much to do with the gathering of the Westminster Assembly and the task of creating a new pattern of church government.

By the beginning of 1644, the Independent divines within the Assembly feared the imposition in England of a coercive Presbyterian system along Scottish lines. In January, five of them - Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughes and William Bridge - published *An Apologeticall Narration*, which was an appeal to Parliament against the Presbyterian proposals, and for a moderate degree of religious toleration. The authors distanced themselves from the sectaries, and made clear their dislike of the very term "Independencie" because of its

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1. D.M.Wolfe, in his *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution*, (New York 1954), is one of the few scholars to have noticed this: "before Lilburne and Overton projected themselves into secular controversy, the premises of their initial assumptions had appeared in the works of William Prynne... In the heavy pages of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes*, Prynne anticipated most the Leveller heresies that he was later to reject". (p.4).

overtones of political radicalism and anti-authoritarianism:

> That proud and insolent title of Independencie was affixed unto us, as our claim; the very sound of which conveys to all mens apprehensions the challenge of an exemption of all churches from subjection and dependence, or rather a trumpet of defiance against what ever Power, Spirituall or Civill, which we doe abhor and detest.[1]

They claimed to represent

> a middle way betwixt that which is falsely charged on us, Brownisme, and that which is the contention of these times, the authoritative Presbyteriall Government in all the subordinations and proceedings of it.[2]

An Apologeticall Narration created deep divisions within the Assembly,[3] and from that time on, the lines became progressively more sharply drawn between those who desired a uniform church system, and those who advocated a greater degree of congregational autonomy.

By September 1644 William Prynne was openly hostile to the Independents and sectaries (between whom he made no distinction), and his animosity was fuelled by the unlicensed publication of material emanating from these groups, which he believed to be subversive of religion and authority. In *Twelve Considerable Serious Questions Touching Church Government* (Sept.1644) he lamented

> the dangerous increase of many Anabaptisticall, Antinomian, Hereticall, Atheisticall opinions, as of the soules mortality, divorce at pleasure,

and singled out Roger Williams' "late dangerous Licentious Booke", *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644) for special mention.[4] Williams'

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1. *An Apologeticall Narration*, 1644, p.23.
2. ibid. p.24.
3. For an account of the events leading up to the publication of *An Apologeticall Narration*, and the storm it provoked, see R.S.Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord*, Edinburgh 1985, p.206ff, 230ff. Paul observes that "there was an immediate reaction to this Independent *apologia* from the rest of the Westminster divines, and especially from the Scots who recognised it was a direct attempt to undermine the uniformity in religion promised in the Solemn League and Covenant". It was seen as "a declaration of ecclesiastical war" (p.207).
4. W.Prynne, *Twelve Considerable Serious Questions Touching Church Government*, Sept.1644, p.7.

treatise on toleration, Overton's on mortalism and Milton's on divorce were commonly grouped together in this way by Presbyterians in 1644 and cited as evidence of the dangers of religious liberty.[1]

Independency now became the main target of Prynne's writings, because he saw it as threatening the very thing that he held most dear, which was the Christianisation of the state under a godly government. Two further tracts which he published in 1644 expressed this concern,[2] and in *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood* (Jan.1645) he called for the suppression of the Independents, and for a much more authoritarian form of church government.

John Lilburne, who at this time was still in the army, immediately replied to *Truth Triumphing* in his *Copy of a Letter... to William Prynne* (Jan.1645), which was the beginning of a series of pamphlets in which he specifically sought to counter Prynne's attacks.[3] William Walwyn responded to Prynne quite independently in *A Helpe to the Right Understanding of a Discourse concerning Independency* (1645), and throughout 1645 and into 1646, Richard Overton mercilessly satirised the likes of Prynne and other advocates of coercive Presbyterianism in his Marpriest tracts.

By mid-1645 Prynne was directing his anger at John Lilburne and Richard Overton, in particular, because he regarded them as leading spokesmen of the Independents. This is apparent in his pamphlet called *A Fresh Discovery of Some Prodigious New Wandring-Blasing-Stars and Firebrands* (July/August 1645), in which he attempted to provide proof of what he maintained was an "avowed confederacy among some furious

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1. See W,Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, New York 1955, pp.124ff,134ff.
2. These were, *Independency Examined, Unmasked, Refuted*, and *A Full Reply* (Oct.)
3. The other tracts were, *The Reasons of Lt.Col.John Lilburne sending his Letter to Mr.Prin*, June 1645; *The Copy of a Letter... to a Friend* July 1645; *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, October 1645; *Innocency and Truth Justified*, January 1646.

Ringleaders of these Independent sectaries" against Parliament and the Assembly.[1] He cited numerous passages from Lilburne's open letter to himself as evidence of Independent sedition,[2] and claimed that Lilburne had chaired a subversive meeting at the Windmill Tavern at which ways of dissolving the Assembly of Divines, in order to "prevent the setling of any Church-government" had been discussed.[3] He also cited passages from *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution*, *Martins Echo*, *The Nativity of Sir John Presbyter*, and *A Sacred Decretal*, though he was, at this stage, unaware of the identity of their author.[4] In a pamphlet of 1647 he referred sarcastically to the seditious pamphlets of "Saint" Lilburne and "Saint" Overton.[5] Clearly, in his view they were prominent and influential mouthpieces of the Independents' point of view.

Prynne's criticism of the Independents in his pamphlets of 1644-1647 was remarkably consistent. It rested on three points.

Firstly, he alleged that their theology was un-Christian and irresponsible in seeking to restrict worship and the sacraments to "visible" saints. "The very title of Independency" was, he claimed,

> altogether improper for any man or Christian as such, who is, normally as a man, spiritually as a Christian, a sociable, dependent creature, needing both the communion and assistance of other persons, Nations, churches.

Independents were pharisaical and proud in that they considered themselves

> so transcendently holy, sanctified and religious above others, that they esteeme them altogether unworthy of, yea, wholy exclude them from their communion and church-society.[6]

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1. W.Prynne, *A Fresh Discovery of Some Prodigious New-Wandering Blasing Stars and Firebrands*, 1645, Epistle Dedicatory.
2. See e.g. pp.3,7,9,16.
3. ibid.p.17.
4. See e.g.the Epistle Dedicatory, pp.8,9,10-13,16. In his *Totall and Final Demands* of 1647, Prynne noted the similarity between these anonymous pamphlets and Overton's acknowledged works. He maintained that Overton's demands for the dissolution of the Assembly of Divines, abolition of parish churches and tithes, were all part of the protest against any kind of authority save that of "commoners elected by the Army" (p.5).
5. W.Prynne, *The Sword of Christian Magistracy*, 1647, p.iii.
6. W.Prynne, *A Fresh Discovery*, 1645, pp.29,30.

Prynne believed that the Independent practice of excluding people from the sacraments was both unbiblical and deeply intolerant: it was contrary to Christ's example, "who allowed Judas, though a Traitor, to take the last supper", and it displayed

> a more transcendent strain of tyrannical usurpation over the soules, the consciences of Christians and ordinances of God himself, then ever our most domineering Lordly Prelates excercised, or any Presbyterians have hitherto pretended to lay claim unto. If this proceed not from a domineering spirit, and be not an excessive Lording of it over the Lords inheritance, yea over Christ himself in this ordinance, I propose I am much mistaken.[1]

The attitude of Independents toward the ministry and worship of the Church of England was, Prynne claimed, "schismaticall, uncharitable and un-Christian", and as evidence of this he cited Lilburne's *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, whose ideas were, he maintained, "seconded by most Independents in their late pamphlets". He was very sceptical of their plea for toleration;

> though they proclaim Liberty of conscience to all Sects and Religions whatsoever, yet they have so harsh an opinion of Presbyterians, and all others who submit not to their Independent modell, that they esteem them no better then Heathens, Infidels, unbelievers.

He did not believe that if this faction ever obtained power they would be in the least bit tolerant of those who disagreed with them.[2]

Prynne wanted an inclusive church rather than an exclusive sect, for only by ministering to the mass of the population did he believe it possible to promote godliness and righteousness in society. In his opinion it was more charitable to have an all-embracing church with the limitations and restrictions which that implied, than to have religious toleration and a fragmented church, which might perhaps be to the advantage of a small number of people, but which excluded those - the majority - who were not judged to be "saints" from the benefits of the

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1. W.Prynne, *Independency Examined*, 1644, p.9.
2. *A Fresh Discovery*, 1645, pp.30,31.

gospel.

Secondly, Prynne attacked the Independents because they did not recognise or repect the right and duty of the state to determine the form of church government. The problem with the Independents, as far as he was concerned, was precisely that they were not prepared to submit to authority; they lacked humility and had no sense of their own limitations. Instead of being guided in church mattters by the views of

> the most eminent, religious, learned, grave, zealous, wisest Peeres and Commons of this Realme... assisted with the advice judgement of an Assembly of the most orthodox, pious, consciencous, learned ministers in our church specially selected for this purpose,

they paid heed to

> one or two Independent ministers, with five or six of their illiterate, impolitick, and perchance, inconsiderate members... assembled in a private conventicle.[1]

He enquired why, if they were so much in favour of church democracy, they were not prepared to submit to the views of the majority on the form of church government that the nation should have; if the people had delegated authority to Members of Parliament to deal with civil matters, why could they not do the same in church matters.[2]

In *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood* (1645), Prynne piled precedent upon precedent to show that churches could not and should not be independent, but must be subservient to the civil authorities. He argued that Independent churchmanship necessarily involved denying the "lawfull Authority" of the civil magistrate.[3]. In *A Fresh Discovery* (1645) Prynne repeatedly referred to Richard Overton's satirical writings - *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution*, *Martins Echo*, *A Sacred Decretal*, and *The Nativity of Sir John Presbyter* - to show the contempt in which the

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1. *Independency Examined*, 1644, pp.3,4.
2. ibid. p.4. Prynne made the same point in *A Full Reply*, Oct.1644, pp.23,24.
3. W.Prynne, *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood* 1645, p.1.

Assembly of Divines was held by the "Independent sectaries".[1] These pamphlets, he maintained, contained

> divers seditious scandalous, libellous passages against the authority and jurisdiction of Parliaments, Synods and temporall magistrates in generall, in Ecclesiasticall affaires.[2]

In pamphlets of 1647 he claimed that the Levellers despised and reviled all such authority,[3] and he suggested that, in this respect, their crime was as great, if not greater than that of his old enemy Archbishop Laud, who had been executed for undermining the authority of true religion in England; were not Lilburne and Overton:

> more openly, professedly and transcendently guilty then Canterbury, of undermining, subverting our established Religion, church, laws, Government, but especially the Rights, Privileges, Ordinances, and proceedings of Parliament?[4]

Clearly in Prynne's opinion the Levellers posed at least an equal threat and ought to be dealt with in the same way. To him, the lack of deference of Independents in general to the state on the issue of church government, was indicative of their attitude to authority as such.

This point is closely connected with the third element of Prynne's attack on the Independents, indeed, one that underpinned all that he wrote about Independency, namely the belief that it promoted anarchy in church and state. He claimed that such churchmanship would undermine not only all "Ecclesiasticall" but "all civill publike kinds of Government", and lead people to prescribe laws for themselves as they saw fit.[5] He was convinced that fragmentation in the church would produce fragmentation in society:

> if the husband be a great stickler for Episcopacy, and members of a Prelaticall church; the wife a fierce zealot for Independency, and a member of such a congregation; the children or servants stout champions for Presbytery and members of such assemblies, what confusion, distraction, implacable contestations, schismes, tumults

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1. *A Fresh Discovery*, 1645, pp.17-25.
2. ibid.p.3.
3. W.Prynne, *The Levellers Levelled to the Very Ground*, 1647, p.1.
4. W.Prynne, *The Sword of Christian Magistracy*, 1647, pp.x,xi.
5. *Twelve Considerable Serious Questions*, 1644, p.3.

> their Licentiousnesse (for I cannot stile it Freedome of Conscience) would soon inevitably engender in all Families, Villages, Cities, Counties, Kingdomes, to their utter ruine and desolation.[1]

Ecclesiastical lawlessness would lead to civil lawlessness as people claimed the right to "erect what civill forme of government they please"; it would "turn... the world itself, quite upside down", and "Anarchy would be the result.[2]

Independency, as far as Prynne was concerned, was, by its very nature, "destructive to all Christian and humane society"; by its abandonment of the parish system and a national church it would "bring in meere Ataxy and confusion among us".[3] Unless they were restrained "this froward, libellous generation of Independent sectaries" would

> sodainly involve us in the Germane, Anabaptisticall distractions, insolencies, warres and desolations.[4]

In the political proposals of John Lilburne and Richard Overton, in particular, Prynne saw his nightmare of Independency coming to pass. They attacked the government's right to regulate printing,[5] they were opposed to the ordinance for tythes,[6] and they criticised the National Covenant that had been prescribed by Parliament.[7] He was appalled in 1647 at the Levellers' proposal to abolish the House of Lords, and to make the House of Commons "the ONELY SOVERAIGNE POWER OF THIS KINGDOME". "These Lilburnists and Levellers", he complained, had completely set aside the Biblical command to be subject to the ruling authorities:

> this Doctrine now is little less than Heresie, and meere Arbitrary Tyranny, in the opinion of a New Generation of Levellers, and seditious sectaries, sprung up among us since the warres; the very persons of whom Peter prophecyed in the latter times (II Peter 2:11); who despise Dominion; presumptuous, selfe-willed, they are not afraid to speake evill of Dignitaries, and the things

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1. *Independency Examined*, 1644, p.5.
2. ibid.p.6.
3. *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood*, 1645, Epistle to the Reader.
4. *A Fresh Discovery*, 1645, p.15.
5. ibid. p.7.
6. ibid. p.9.
7. ibid.pp.15,16.

that they understand not... '

Just as he had in 1645, with reference to the Independents generally, Prynne raised the spectre of Anabaptism to warn people of the threat posed by the Levellers. It was their aim, he claimed,

> to set up either a new John of Leyden of their own creation, or introduce a popular Tyranny and Anarchy which suits best with their principles and the Peoples Freedom.[2]

Likening the Independents and the Levellers to the German Anabaptists was no mere name-calling or scare-tactics on Prynne's part. He genuinely believed that there was an intimate connection between magistracy in church and state: remove one and the other would collapse. He was convinced that those who advocated the separation of church and state called into question the very basis of civil society.

Prynne was by no means alone in this. Other influential critics of Independency made exactly the same point. John Bastwick in his *Just Defence* and *Independency Not Gods Ordinance*, both published in 1645, argued that religious liberty ran counter to the interests of society. Taking issue with *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution* (1645) he maintained that toleration had, in fact, been "the cause of all these miserable distractions and troubles" now besetting the land.[3] Lilburne

> with his preaching up his new Doctrine of Separation hath done more hurt to the soules and bodies of the people then all the good he is ever able to do,[4]

because those ideas tended to anarchy and the destruction of all authority.[5] Independency produced "inevitable confusion".[6] In 1647 he claimed that Independency was "distructive to the government of church and state".[7]

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1. W.Prynne. *The Levellers Levelled to the Very Ground*, 1647, pp.2,3.
2. W.Prynne, *Totall and Finall Demands*, 1647, p.4.
3. J.Bastwick, *Independency Not Gods Ordinance*, 1645, Part ii, Preface.
4. J.Bastwick, *A Just Defence of John Bastwick*, 1645, p.32.
5. ibid. p.22.
6. ibid. p.40.
7. J.Bastwick, *The Storming of the Anabaptists Garrisons*, 1647, p.13.

One of Thomas Edwards' main objectives in publishing his *Gangraena* in 1646 was to show how inimical sectarianism was to Christianity and government itself. By gathering together eye-witness accounts of the supposed excesses of the sectaries, he sought to paint a picture of a society on the edge of the abyss. Many of his stories confirmed almost exactly the fears that William Prynne had already expressed, as in the case of "Mr.Y.",

> who related that in his family there were but four persons, himself, his wife, a man and a maid servant, and saith he, we are of several churches and ways; I am of the Church of England, my wife was of one Mr.Jessey's church, but she is fallen off from that church (as many others have) and is now of none, doubting whether there be any church or no upon the earth... [1]

The whole of *Gangraena* was a highly popular and effective presentation of the idea that Independency and sectarianism necessarily led to moral decay and social disintegration.

Under this kind of pressure from the Presbyterians, and particularly in 1644 and 1645, from William Prynne; John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn were forced to confront the very serious question of the relationship of religion to society. As far as Prynne was concerned, it was fundamental, for it was that which ensured order and morality in society. To take religion out of the hands of the civil magistrate, and make it a matter of personal choice and conviction was, in his view, sheer irresponsibility, because in such circumstances, society would simply disintegrate. In essence Prynne's question, which he thought unanswerable, was this: if a radical separation was to be made between church and state, what guarantee was there that society could continue to exist at all? It was very much in the context of this critique of Independency and religious toleration that the political theories of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn emerged.

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1. T.Edwards, *Gangraena*, 1646, Part i p.89.

Chapter Six

WALWYN AND THE GOOD OF THE PEOPLE

Throughout the 1640s Walwyn was a strong champion of the cause of religious liberty, and the majority of his pamplets were devoted to this issue. Why was he so committed to this principle? For a separatist like John Lilburne, whatever else may have been bound up with it, toleration was, above all, a matter of survival. It sprang, in the first place, not from support for an abstract ideal, but from a struggle with the authorities for existence in which he, as a separatist, was inevitably involved. But Walwyn was not a separatist, had bever been one, and, as far as it is possible to tell from his writings, never intended to become one. To put it crudely, what was in it for him?

This question must be addressed before proceeding to examine Walwyn's political response to the challenge thrown down by Prynne and the anti-tolerationists. For it is only as the assumptions underlying Walwyn's commitment to religious liberty are laid bare that his vision of man and society can be properly understood.

Among both his natural enemies and allies Walwyn had a reputation as an unbelieving man. According to Thomas Edwards, at an informal meeting held in the latter part of 1645 to discuss the issue of religious toleration, Walwyn, aided and abetted by his close friend Clement Wrighter, challenged the Presbyterians present to prove that the Bible was the Word of God.[1] In 1646, Walwyn failed to gain support among

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1. T.Edwards, *Gangraena*, 1646, Part i pp.83,84. If Edwards is to be believed, Clement Wrighter himself was a notorious sceptic: he was "an arch heretic and fearful apostate, an old wolf and subtle man. This man about 7 or 8 years ago fell off from the communion of our churches to Independency and Brownism... from that he fell to Anabaptism and

Independents for a petition concerning toleration because, at the meeting held to discuss the matter, it was alleged that he was "an atheist and denier of Scriptures".[1]

One of the main allegations made against Walwyn by the Independent and sectarian authors of *Walwins Wiles* in 1649 was that he was a sceptic who used every opportunity to subvert the faith of good Christian people. They claimed that he would enter into close relationships with people with the sole intention of "undermining their principles of Religion"; he would, by subtle means, lead them to doubt "the great mysteries of Life", and the central doctrines of the Christian faith; they would be encouraged to regard these things as "meer fantasms, ridiculous, irrational, ayry, vain, empty notions"; he was fond of posing such questions as

> How can you prove the Scriptures to be the Word of God? What security have you concerning the divine authority of the Scriptures, and consequently the articles of your belief, and the grounds of your faith, but from the testimony of men? What better grounds have you to beleeve the Scriptures came from God, then the Turks have for their Alcharon, or the Jewes for their Talmud?

Walwins Wiles depicted him going from church to church, criticising ministers, and pointing out contradictions and discrepancies in their doctrines.[2] It was claimed that Walwyn valued pagan and "moral" writers more than he did the Bible.[3] His intention at all times, and by all means was to "wound the credit and authority of Religion".[4]

Obviously, this picture of Walwyn was based on the testimony of his

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Arminianism, and to mortalism, holding the soul mortal... After that he fell to be a Seeker and is now an Anti-scripturist, a Questionist and a Skeptic, and I fear an Atheist" (Part i p.82). He was for a short time a member of Thomas Lambe's General Baptist congregation (M.Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints*, pp.76,77). By 1657, when he wrote *Fides Divina*, Wrighter was claiming that the Bible could not be infallible because it held many errors and contradictions (C.Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p.265).

1. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, H&D pp.352,353.
2. *Walwins Wiles*, H&D pp.294,295.
3. ibid. pp.296,297.
4. ibid. p.300.

enemies, and whether Presbyterian, Independent or sectarian, it was to their advantage to blacken his character in every way. But after account has been taken of the probable presence of exaggerations and falsehoods, there does appear to have been a strong element of truth to their claims. From what is known of his library and reading,[1] he certainly had been influenced by sceptical authors. He was fond of reading Lucian, for example,[2] who was accused by his own contemporaries in the second century A.D. of being an atheist and blasphemer because he questioned and poked fun at many of their dearly held beliefs about the gods.[3] Moreover, as will be seen, some of Walwyn's most important arguments for toleration betray a marked degree of scepticism.

When all this has been acknowledged, however, it must be said that from the evidence of Walwyn's pamphlets it would seem that his scepticism was very different to the type of which he stood accused. On his own testimony, he was far from being a complete unbeliever, and while his position may have been unacceptable to the great majority of his contemporaries, from a 20th century perspective, at least, his writings do appear to have been characterised by genuinely Christian concerns. Alongside the sceptical elements was a consistent emphasis on what he considered to be the great evangelical truths of the Christian faith. What role, then, did scepticism play in Walwyn's writings, and what was the relationship between these apparently contradictory aspects of his thought?

This chapter will seek to demonstrate that the basic thrust of

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1. See above pp.56,57.
2. See above p.57. *Walwins Wiles* accused him of saying that Lucian's *Dialogues* contained "more wit" than all of the Bible (H&D p.296).
3. See, for example *Certaine Select Dialogues of Lucian*, 1634, p.25, where he ridiculed the accepted ways of winning the gods' approval. C.Robinson, *Lucian and His Influence in Europe*, 1979, pp.166,167, points out that Erasmus found Lucian's scepticism and satirical style to be of great help in highlighting the moral and spiritual decadence of sixteenth century Europe.

Walwyn's theological and philosophical thinking is best understood if it is compared with, and seen in the light of, the writings of Michel de Montaigne and Pierre de Charron, two authors who appeared in his reading list of 1649, and whose influence upon his understanding of man and society has already been noted in chapter three. It will be argued that, as in the case of the two French Catholics, Walwyn's scepticism was a protest against an excessive trust in human reason which he believed was the cause of many of the conflicts and divisions of England in the 1640s; like them, he sought to establish a basis for peace and cooperation by means of a fideistic understanding of Christianity.

1. Scepticism and Fideism

(i) Montaigne and Charron.

Michel de Montaigne and Pierre de Charron wrote and worked out their ideas against a background not unlike that of England in the 1640s. 16th century France was wracked by civil war and theological controversy caused by the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation had posed severe theological and intellectual problems, particularly in relation to epistemolgy: how could God be known, and how was it possible to establish the truth of religious propositions? It also raised in acute form the allied issue of authority, which had such important social and political ramifications: where did authority really lie - if it was in the Scriptures, as both Protestant and Catholic believed, who was to interpret them, the Church, or the individual believer?

Montaigne and Charron confronted these basic questions and sought practical answers that would halt the fragmentation of their society, and lead to harmony and cohesion.

Montaigne took as his starting point the Pyrrhonist assumption that human reason was not competent to discover absolute truth of any kind, and especially truth about God.[1] He agreed with Pyrrho of Elis and his followers that reason and the senses simply could not be relied upon to prove the existence of God. In his extremely important essay called "The Apology for Raimond Sebond", which Walwyn quoted in 1649, and had, apparently, first read many years before then,[2] Montaigne made a decisive distinction between faith and reason, and argued that there was no necessary link between them. Christians, he stated, "wrong themselves much in that they ground their beleefe upon humane reasons",[3] for, "the opinion of wisdom is the plague of man".[4] Human reason was unavoidably affected by the human condition:

> All things produced by our owne discourse and sufficiencie, as well true as false, are subject to uncertaintie and disputation. It is for the punishment of our temeritie, and instruction of our miserie and incapacitie, that God caused the trouble, downefall and confusion of Babells Tower... [5]

Like Montaigne, Pierre de Charron in his *Of Humane Wisdom* was very conscious of the limits of reason. He believed that truth would not allow itself to be "gotten and handled, much lesse to be possessed by any humane spirit". He was deeply suspicious of those who made large claims in this respect, for although "we are borne to search the Truth, to possess it belongeth to a higher and greater power".[6]

The uncertainty of life and the limitations of human reason led Montaigne and Charron to the conclusion that faith could not have a

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1. See R.H.Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, 1979, p.47ff.
2. See H&D pp.364,365; and above, p.57. For the significance of this essay in Montaigne's work, see D.M.Frame, *Montaigne's Essais: A Study*, 1969, p.25.
3. Michel de Montaigne, *Essayes*, transl. J.Florio, 1632, p.243.
4. ibid. p.272.
5. ibid. p.311.
6. P.Charron, *Of Humane Wisdome*, 1630, p.62.

rational basis. But although radical scepticism was the point of departure for both of these writers, for neither was it the basis of complete unbelief. Rather, scepticism became allied with fideism to provide what they hoped would be an important defence of Roman Catholicism against the Reformation. Fideism, while denying the efficacy of reason in matters of faith, nevertheless accepted that knowledge of the truth might be obtained by other means.[1] In the case of Montaigne and Charron, that other means was the Roman Catholic Church itself.

Precisely because of his belief in the inadequacies of human reason, Montaigne counselled submission to the authority of the church, for the church was the means by which God had chosen to reveal Himself and protect His truth. This was God's prerogative, in Montaigne's opinion and there could be no argument, for "it onely belongs to God to know himselfe and interpret his own workes". Faith was not obtained through a rational quest, but was "a gift proceeding from the liberality of others";

> it is not by our discourse or understanding that we have received our religion, it is by forreine authority and commandment.[2]

Montaigne's declared aim was not to cast doubt on the Catholic faith, but to put it outside of the scope of controversy and debate. As D.M.Frame observes, his scepticism was intended "to set faith and the authority of the church beyond the reach of man's presumptuous and fallible reason".[3] The effect of his system was to create two entirely separate spheres, that

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1. See R.H.Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, 1979, p.xix.
2. "An Apology for Raimond Sebond", *Essayes*, p.279. Montaigne added that it was "more by the meanes of our ignorance, than of our skill, that we are wise in heavenly knowledge... Let us adde nothing of our own unto it, but obedience and subjection".
3. D.M.Frame, *Montaigne's Essais*, p.69. Frame, p.71, points out that "many of his religious attitudes were sharpened... by his opposition to Protestantism, not only as as enemy of law and order, but also doctrinally for an excessive, presumptuous trust in the reason of the individual believer".

of grace and that of nature. While he may have been genuinely concerned to protect the Catholic faith, it is also true to say that, having thus dealt with it and its detractors, he actually concentrated his attention on the sphere of nature and reason. Having solved the problems of epistemology and authority to his own satisfaction, he devoted most of his essays to the search for a practical moral code according to which all men could live. He avoided theological issues and laid great stress on ethics. In this way, social and political questions became, in Montaigne's thought, largely independent of theology. There was, thus an almost explicit secularism in his outlook which was, ironically, the product of his own defence of the church.[1]

(ii) William Walwyn.

In the midst of the disintegration of his own society in the 1640s, Walwyn, adopting a similar approach to that of Montaigne and Charron, attempted to create a basis for harmony and cohesion by effecting a fundamental change in men's understanding of the Christian faith and of the world they lived in.

Walwyn began the 1640s by defending the rights of a very wide range of groups, from Roman Catholics through to Socinians and Brownists, to worship God in the way that they saw fit[2], and he ended the decade by

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1. Charron took exactly the same line, seeing fideism, with its humble acceptance of the truth, rather than arrogant dispute over it, as the way to bring peace to a divided society. See, for example, *Of Humane Wisdome*, p.31: "we must with a sweet submission submit ourselves to that which the Catholic Church in all times hath universally held and holdeth, and not intangling ourselves with novelties or selected and particular opinions". Joseph Hall, another of the authors on Walwyn's reading list (see H&D p.362), also attempted to avoid doctrinal differences and theological speculation by minimising the role of reason in religion. In his *Meditations and Vowes*, 1606, p.140, Hall stated that, "God cannot endure a Logician. In his schoole, he is the best scholler that reasons least and assents most. In divine things what I may I will conceive: the rest I will believe and admire. Not a curious head, but a credulous and plaine heart is accepted with God".
2. *The Humble Petition of the Brownists*, 1641, p.3.

denouncing the spiritual arrogance of that very same range of groups.[1] Far from signifying a dramatic change in his thinking, both of these actions flowed, in part, out of a refusal to accept that anyone could have a monopoly on the truth, or know, with absolute certainty that their view was the right one. He was not willing to commit himself to any rigid body of theological, and especially ecclesiological, ideas.

Fundamentally, Walwyn's argument for toleration rested on two principles, both of which betrayed something of a sceptical approach to religious questions. They appeared alongside each other in *The Compassionate Samaritane* of 1644, his reply to what he saw as the treachery of the Independent authors of *An Apologeticall Narration.*[2]

The first of Walwyn's arguments for toleration rested on an acceptance that people's beliefs were sincerely held and that it was impossible to alter them by threats or punishment:

> whatsoever a mans reason doth conclude to be true or false, to be agreeable to Gods word, that same to that man is his opinion or judgement, and so man is by his own reason necessitated to be of that mind he is...

Walwyn believed that however people arrived at their particular standpoint, they could not choose to be other than of the opinion their reason told them was correct. Where a necessity of this sort was involved

> there ought to be no punishment, for punishment is the recompense of voluntary actions, therefore, no man ought to be punished for his judgements. [3]

Disagreement, even over the interpretation of Scripture, was always a possibility, in his view, for in the honest excercise of their reason

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1. *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*, 1649, H&D pp.257-260.
2. See next section.
3. *The Compassionate Samaritane*, 1644, pp.6,7. Cf. *The Humble Petition of the Brownists*, 1641, p.2: "there is no man that professeth a Religion, but is in conscience perswaded that to be the best wherein to save his soule, and can give no doubt some reason, yea, and alledge some authority out of the Word of God for it, which is an argument that not his will, but his Judgement is convinced, and therefore holds it unreasonable to be forced to follow other mens Judgements, and not his owne... "; also *A Still and Soft Voice*, 1647, in D.M.Wolfe, *Milton in the Puritan Revolution*, p.372.

people could be led to quite different conclusions. True error, he maintained, lay not in holding to what was false, but in professing a belief which one's conscience indicated was false.[1] It was in this sense that he understood the Biblical statement that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).[2]

The scepticism implicit in this first argument was made explicit in the second. Walwyn argued that freedom of religion ought to be allowed because of

> the uncertainty of knowledge in this life: no man, nor no sort of man can presume an unerring spirit.[3]

He reasoned that since church leaders, synods and national assemblies had all been wrong on important theological points in the past, there were no grounds for thinking that those of the present could avoid similar error, and they should, therefore, renounce coercion:

> one sort of men are not to compell another, since this hazard is run thereby, that he who is in errour may be the constrainer of him who is in the truth.[4]

Walwyn did not believe that the truth could be known absolutely, or that theological positions could be held without doubt.

In 1645 he told William Prynne that "no condition of men in our dayes have an infallibility of judgement";[5] in 1646 he reminded Thomas Edwards "how disputable all the parts of Divinitie are amongst the most learned";[6] and in 1649 he warned the various Christian groupings of "the infinite evils which comes to the world by this false supposition and assumption" that they had a monopoly on the truth.[7] Walwyn would not

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1. *The Compassionate Samaritane*, p.43.
2. ibid. See also *Good Counsell to All*, 1644, p.84; *A Prediction of Mr.Tho.Edwards His Conversion*, 1646, pp.3,4.
3. *The Compassionate Samaritane*, pp.10,11.
4. ibid. p.11.
5. *A Helpe to the Right Understanding*, 1645, in W.Haller, *Tracts on Liberty*, vol.3, p.196.
6. *A Prediction*, 1646, p.4.
7. *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*, 1649, in H&D p.258.

accept that the truth was as clear and straightforward as many of its self-appointed champions supposed it to be. He was committed to the principle of religious toleration precisely because he was sceptical of anyone's claim to be in full possession of it.

Walwyn's outlook was, of course, by no means unique in Protestant circles, and belonged in a radical tradition dating right back to the time of the Reformation itself. At times his arguments closely resemble those of Sebastian Castellio, a colleague and critic of John Calvin, who objected strongly to the burning of Servetus. Castellio complained that the many things in the Scriptures were

> given obscurely and often in enigmas and inscrutable questions, which have been in dispute for more than a thousand years without any agreement.[1]

He objected to the spilling of blood over matters that were so uncertain. According to Bainton, he was of the opinion that "we simply do not know enough to persecute".[2]

Walwyn's contemporary and long-standing acquaintance, John Goodwin, seems to have shared some of Walwyn's caution with regard to claims to possession of the truth. In 1644 he warned that

> many who possibly for the present may conceive and think, and that with much confidence, that they fight for God, when the truth comes to an unpartiall and perfect scanning, will be found to have fought against him,[3]

and in 1647, in his *Hagiomastix*, he protested against the whole notion of religious coercion on the grounds that there were too many uncertainties, even within the Scriptures themselves, to provide a firm basis for civil prosecution. When Walwyn was accused by members of Goodwin's church in 1649 of denying the Scriptures, Walwyn pointed out that their own minister had been accused of the same.[4]

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1. Quoted in R.H.Bainton, *Studies on the Reformation*, London 1964, p.151.
2. Bainton, p.168. On Castellio's views on toleration see also G.H.Williams, *The Radical Reformation*,, London 1962, pp.627-630.
3. J.Goodwin, *θεομαχια*, 1644, p.12.
4. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D pp.354,355.

Nevertheless, Walwyn's scepticism with respect to the Christian doctrine of the church was certainly unacceptable in Goodwin's circle,[1] and his attack on the competence of reason in matters of relgious belief was both more explicit, and more radical than that of the Independent divine.

As with the French Catholics, Montaigne and Charron, William Walwyn's scepticism went hand in hand with elements of fideism. Fideism formed an important part of his argument against coercive Presbyterianism in *A Prediction of Mr.Tho.Edwards his Conversion* of 1646. In the pamphlet Walwyn criticised Edwards for advocating the use of law and force to control the beliefs of men. Edwards, he stated

> must needs know that only things naturall and rationall are properly subject unto government.

Matters which belonged to the supernatural order, however,

> such as in Religion, are distinguished by the titule of things divine; such as the benefit and use thereof could never have been perceived by the light of nature and reason.

Walwyn here made a clear distinction between the modes of knowledge operative in the natural and the supernatural orders. In his judgement, government had jurisdiction over civil matters, but not spiritual, precisely because what was known spiritually was not the product of a rational discovery which one could expect all men to make in the same way. Edwards ought to know that

> such things are not liable to any compulsive government, but that therein everyone ought to be fully persuaded in their own minds... [2]

Faith, according to Walwyn, was separate and distinct from reason, and could not be controlled in the same way as other human activities. It was not the end result of a rational process.

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1. See below, p.230.
2. W.Walwyn, *A Prediction of Mr.Tho.Edwards his Conversion*, 1646, pp.3,4.

In *A Still and Soft Voice* (1647), Walwyn made an explicit link between scepticism and fideism. His questioning attitude, he declared, was not intended to undermine religion, but to lead believers to the right kind of faith. He claimed that he had never denied that there was a God, or that the Scriptures were the Word of God, but only "opposed insufficient arguments produced to prove them such". Since he believed that neither of these things could possibly be proved by "natural argument or reason", attacking rationalistic arguments could only be a service to the faith.[1] Drawing on the Old Testament story of Elijah at Horeb, he likened such arguments to "the mighty strong wind, the Earth quake and fire"[2] - spectacular but ineffective.

In contrast to this, Walwyn claimed that his own faith was founded on the testimony of the Scriptures themselves, on what he described as

> an irresistable power that from within them (like unto the soft voyce wherein God was) hath pierced my judgement and affection in such sort that with abundance of joy and gladnesse I believe, and in believing hath that Peace which passeth all utterance or expression.[3]

As far as Walwyn was concerned, faith was based on divine authority expressed through the Scriptures and could not spring out of human knowledge and ability to discover the truth.

The central theme of *The Vanitie of the Present Churches* (1649) was, in fact, the absolute authority of the Bible over against the opinions and doctrines of religious leaders. In it Walwyn asserted that noone had

> any understanding at all of such divine or heavenly things as bring peace of Conscience and joy in the Holy-ghost, by any other way or meanes, but onely and solely by the Scriptures.[4]

He attacked religious leaders of all kinds - "the Pope and his Clergy", "the bishops", "the Presbyters", "the Independents" and those who claimed

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1. Wolfe, pp.370,371.
2. ibid. p.372.
3. ibid. p.371.
4. H&D p.256.

to depend upon "the inward suggestion of the Spirit"[1] - because, according to him, regarded their own opinions as God's truth. In consequence,

> the world abounds with such variety of opinions, concerning life and salvation, that many a sincere heart, seeking for peace and rest therein, is kept in perpetuall suspense and doubtfulnesse... [2]

Walwyn's response to this bewildering plurality of religion was to stress the authority of the Bible. "In our times", he claimed, "we have no Preacher of the Gospel but the Scriptures".[3] Whereas the preachers gave only "a bastard scholasticke knowledge", which served "to make men proud, wrangling Sophisters and Disputers",[4], the Bible was the source of "that unum necessarium", the one truth that man needed.[5]

Like Montaigne and Charron, then, Walwyn abandoned what he considered to be convoluted theological disputes, and attempts to apply human reason to questions of faith, and accepted Christianity on entirely different grounds. But whereas for the Frenchmen faith was accepted on the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, in Walwyn's case it was mediated through the Scriptures. His version of fideism, because of its Biblical emphasis, was, therefore, distinctly Protestant. But what use did Walwyn actually make of the Bible?

L.Mulligan, in an article which, in the words of its title, attempts to demonstrate "the religious roots of William Walwyn's radicalism" has argued that

> Walwyn's stress on the primacy of the Scriptures as the only authority on which religious truths must be based puts him in the traditi on of Puritan orthodoxy.[6]

She claims that

> although the Spirit was crucial for understanding the Scriptures, orthodox Calvinists never moved beyond the Word, and this view Walwyn shared.[7]

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1. ibid. pp.257-259.
2. ibid. p.258.
3. ibid. p.261.
4. ibid. p.263.
5. ibid. p.262.
6. L.Mulligan, "The Religious Roots of William Walwyn's Radicalism", *The Journal of Religious History*, vol.12, no.2, 1982, p.165.
7. ibid.

In her view, what distinguished Walwyn's approach from that of his contemporaries was a certain balance: he understood the reading of the Word of God to be "an activity requiring the excercise of reason and inspiration conjoined", and consequently he awaited illumination "while poring over the text". By emphasising both the spirit and the letter, she argues,

> he was able to discard the heavy irrationalities of the mystic sects while avoiding the heavy pedantries of the established ministers.[1]

However, this view must be rejected for two reasons. Firstly, while rightly seeing the elevated position awarded to the Bible by Walwyn as characteristically Puritan, Mulligan has largely ignored the use to which he put it and his attitude to large sections of the text. Secondly, Walwyn did not, in fact, advocate reading the text in the way that she claims he did.

Walwyn was extremely selective in his use of passages from the Bible, and deliberately so. For, as he was well aware, the Bible could be used to support many different ideas, and he held out little hope that people would come to one mind through closer study of it. There were plenty of difficult passages in Old and New Testaments, and it had to be acknowledged that "very many things exceed our understandings";[2] there was indeed teaching on the ministry and government of the church,

> but not so plainely exprest as to leave the Conscientious without dispute, and difference thereupon".[3]

In view of the problematic nature of much of the Bible, Walwyn believed that it was important to concentrate instead on what he considered to be its central and sufficient message, namely that of "free Justification by Christ alone".[4] It was his interpretation of the Bible - his understanding

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1. ibid. p.167.
2. H+D p.267.
3. ibid. p.268.
4. ibid. p.262.

of what constituted the most important Christian doctrine - that concerned Walwyn, and not any assertion of its truth and relevance in all its parts.

Using a parable of Jesus, he likened the Bible as a whole to the field bought by a merchant, and the message of free justification to "the Jewell" which was buried in it.[1] Although the Bible was informative, telling as it did of the history of God's dealings with men from the beginning of time, "that which principally concerneth us" was the "one universall Doctrine" preached by the Apostles,[2] and he summarised it in this way:

> that the same Jesus whom the Jewes crucified, was Lord and Christ: That he is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the sins of the whole world, That it is the bloud of Christ which cleanseth us from all sinne, That his love is so exceeding towards us, that even when we were enemies, Christ dyed for us.[3]

Walwyn believed that this doctrine was plainly proclaimed in the Bible. There was no need to await illumination. In fact, his constant complaint throughout *The Vanitie of the Present Churches* was that all the religious groups prided themselves on their possession of the Spirit, but failed to heed the clear and simple message of Christ in the Scriptures.[4]

In effect Walwyn wanted to stress the final authority of <u>his</u> interpretation of one strand of Biblical thought, and set the rest to one side as interesting, but inessential. He did believe that there was a central, definitive message in the Bible which could be heard and accepted by all serious-minded people, but it was based on a very small selection

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1. ibid. p.268.
2. ibid. pp.265,266.
3. ibid. p.266. Richard Hooker was also concerned to cut through unnecessary doctrines which obscured the truth, and effect a return to what he believed to be the core of the Gospel message. Compare Walwyn's summary here with that in Hooker's "A Discourse of Justification", one of the "peeces annexed" to *The Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Polity*, 1617, that Walwyn stated that he had read: "we care for no knowledge in the world but this, That man hath sinned and God hath suffered; that God hath made himselfe the sonne of man, and that men are made the righteousness of God" (p.38).
4. See, for example, H&D pp.261, 266, 273.

of texts. His view left the Scriptures with nothing to say, for example, on what to many Puritans was the crucial issue of the day, namely, the ministry and order of the Christian church.[1] His scepticism combined with his fideism to produce an extreme minimalist approach to the Bible and the Christian faith as a whole.

It is apparent that Walwyn's commitment to religious liberty was closely related to his scepticism and fideism. It sprang not simply out of a Christian concern for those who were being persecuted, but from a deep-seated conviction that toleration was the only suitable response to the radical uncertainties of the human condition. Together with an emphasis on what he considered to be the fundamentals of the Christian faith, he saw it as the only way to bring peace to a divided society.

2. <u>The Foundation of Civil Society</u>

(i) Salus Populi

In the summer (June/July) of 1644 William Walwyn published *The Compassionate Samaritane* as a direct response to *An Apologeticall Narration* which had appeared the previous January. It addressed the whole question of religious toleration, and the various objections to it that were currently being voiced, both by the Independent authors of *An Apologeticall Narration* and the Presbyterian Divines within the Westminster Assembly. Although the tract appeared some time before William

Prynne's first public attack on Independency (*Twelve Considerable Serious*

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1. It is interesting to note that a contemporary critic of Walwyn, the anonymous author of *Church Levellers or Vanity of Vanities* (1649), believed that *The Vanitie of the Present Churches* was the work of a Catholic propagandist precisely because of what have been identified here as its fideistic elements. It suggested that the emphasis on the simplicity and all-sufficiency of Scripture was merely a trick in order to bring in the authoritative interpretation of the church of Rome (p.8). Walwyn's view that "very many things exceed our understandings" (H&D p.267) was condemned because it paved the way for "some infallible Judge to umpire all our differences" (pp.12,13).

Questions, Sept.1644), it anticipated many of the points that he was later to make. Indeed, it is possible that Walwyn may even have had Prynne in mind at certain points.[1]

Walwyn explained that he had begun to read *An Apologeticall Narration* in the hope that it would contain "generall reasons" that would have "justified all the Separation".[2] Instead he found that it put forward reasons why the Independent authors differed from the Separatists, and why they alone should be tolerated; its argument for toleration was "grounded... upon a Remonstrance of the nearnesse between them and the Presbyterian", and the Separatists were "left in the lurch".[3]

An Apologeticall Narration was, in Walwyn's view, merely a piece of special pleading, and the product of "selfe love".[4] Against this approach, he argued that it was important to establish religious liberty for everyone "of what Opinion soever"; "common freedom" was the right of everyone as long as it was not "prejudiciall to the Common".[5] He set out to show that

> 'tis the principall interest of the Commonwealth, that Authority should have equall respect, and afford protection to all peaceable good men alike, notwithstanding their difference of opinion, that all men may be encouraged to be alike serviceable thereunto.[6]

The keynote of the pamphlet was, in fact, the idea that both the safety of the state and of the individual were dependent upon religious toleration. "The Safety of the People" had, of course, been the central theme of the

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1. See for example *The Compassionate Samaritane*, 1644, p.45, where Walwyn remarked on the fact that some of the chief advocates of the suppression of the separatists had themselves been the victims of recent intolerance: "A man would think that those people that so lately were the sufferers, the noyse of whose exclamations against such courses, is scarce yet out of the peoples eares, that they should not so soone thinke of being the Tyrants". Prynne was, of course, even then engaged in the prosecution of his old enemy Archbishop Laud.
2. ibid. p.1.
3. ibid. pp.2,3.
4. ibid. p.4.
5. ibid. p.5.
6. ibid. p.6

Remonstrance that Walwyn had helped to promote in 1643,[1] and at points in *The Compassionate Samaritane*, as this section will show, the Remonstrance's influence can be clearly seen.

After putting his philosophical and theological case for toleration (which has already been examined in the first section of this chapter), Walwyn went on to deal with two important political objections to toleration, namely that it bred "division and disturbance" within society,[2] and that it encouraged people who held opinions "directly destructive to the Common-wealth".[3] In both cases Walwyn's argument was underpinned by the notion of the safety of the people.

Against the first of these objections Walwyn argued that

> the diversity of mens judgements is not the occasion of division, because the word division hath reference to a falling off from the Common cause.[4]

What Walwyn meant by this was that civil strife was not caused by religious differences at all, but by political disaffection; it occured when groups of people were no longer committed to "the Common cause" of safety and freedom for all. As proof that religious diversity was not the problem, Walwyn cited the example of England's prosperous neighbour, Holland. There, he claimed, it was "more than evident" that

> the severall wayes of our brethren in matters of Religion hinder not, but that they may live peaceably one amongst another, and the Spaniard will witnesse for them that they unite sufficiently in the defence of their common liberties and opposition of their common enemies.[5]

The point here was that, in Holland, everyone, regardless of their religious faith had rallied to defend their country and their way of life against an aggressor.

In Walwyn's view, the English separatists' "affections to the

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1. See above p.77ff.
2. ibid. p.44.
3. ibid. p.65.
4. ibid. p.45.
5. ibid. p.46.

Publike weale" were beyond question, despite many "provocations and incitements",[1] and he could see no reason why they should not be granted full religious liberty. As far as he was concerned, the only limits on toleration were political: unless a man's opinions were "dangerous to the State",[2] he ought to be allowed to hold and express them freely. Religious pluralism did not mean social fragmentation.

The second political objection that Walwyn dealt with was the charge that some of the separatist groups, noteably, the "Anabaptists", were opponents of "Civill government" as such.[3] The "Divines", he maintained, sought to make the Anabaptists "odious to the people" by encouraging the belief that they were

> the harbourers of such an opinion as would dissolve all societie, and bring into confusion the state.[4]

Walwyn could have attempted to answer this allegation with an exposition of the separatists' theological understanding of the state, complete with proof texts and reassurances concerning their belief in the divine ordering of society. Instead, he responded in political terms, pointing to their support for the Parliamentary struggle against "tyranny",[5] and giving what he claimed was a summary of their political convictions. In fact, whoever else the summary may or may not have represented,[6] this was primarily Walwyn's own political manifesto. It was virtually a point by point restatement of the principles of government outlined in *Remonstrans Redivivus*.

Walwyn's summary began, as did the Remonstrance of 1643, with the declaration that the foundation of all government was the principle of

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1. ibid. pp.45,46.
2. ibid. p.5.
3. ibid. p.65.
4. ibid. pp.66,67.
5. ibid. p.66.
6. *The Confession of Faith of those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabapt ists* (1644), provides little proof that as a group they were wholehearted supporters of the Parliamentary cause. It was content simply to assert their support for magistracy as "an ordinance of God set up by God for the punishment of evil doers", and their willingness to obey and defend government and law (see Articles 48 & 49).

Salus Populi:

> the end of making Governments is the Peoples quiet and safety, and... whatsoever doth not conduce thereto is tyranny or oppression and not government.[1]

It went on to assert that the people were "the makers and reformers" of the government of England, wherein "Parliament is the supreme power";[2] the King and "all other Officers of the Common-wealth" were "accountable" to Parliament,[3] which alone had the right to make and repeal laws;[4] Parliament was to regulate its own calling and dissolution, [5] and the King was duty bound to sign the Bills it passed;[6] to it alone belonged

> the disposall of Shipping, Forts, Magazines, and all other the Kingdomes strengths, both by Sea and Land: The making of peace and war, the pressing of souldiers, the raising of monie for the preserving or regaining the safety or freedome of the people, which for any other person to doe is treasonable.[7]

To Walwyn, this political credo was evidence of the sectaries' loyalty to

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1. ibid. p.67. Cf. *Remonstrans*, 1643, p.4: "1. ...the Safety of the People is the Supreme Law; and is the foundation and end of all just Government".
2. ibid. p.68. Cf. *Remonstrans*, p.4: "2. ...originally the supreme power being in the whole people, Parliaments were by them constituted to manage the same for the preservation and well-being of the Common-wealth: so as properly in the Parliaments of England acting for the same doth the supreme power reside".
3. ibid. Cf. *Remonstrans*, p.5: "4. ...all Magistrates and Officers of the Kingdome are accomptible to the Parliament, for that otherwise the safety and freedome of the people would not be sufficiently provided for".
4. ibid. Cf. *Remonstrans*, p.5: "5. ...the King (though the chief Magistrate or Officer of the Kingdome) doth not personally judge in any Court, nor can of right interpose his personall command or judgement against the proceedings thereof".
5. ibid. Cf. *Remonstrans*, pp.5,6: "6. ...the calling of Parliaments never was (of right) arbitrary at the Kings will, but a trust annext to his Office: And of duty to be called every yeare according to Statutes... 8. ...the dissolving of Parliaments is also a matter of forme belonging to the Kings Office, and not left arbitrary to be dissolved at his pleasure without consent of both Houses".
6. ibid. Cf. *Remonstrans*, p.5: "7. ...the usage of passing Bills of right and justice in Parliament by the King, is but matter of forme annext to his Office and not left to his will".
7. ibid. p.69. Cf. *Remonstrans*, p.6: "to Parliaments for the Kingdomes safety doe justly appertaine the strength of the Kingdome, the disposing of our persons, propriety of our estates, and the transacting of the great affaires of peace and warre, wherein the Kingdome is concerned, which for any other person or counsell to assume or imploy otherwise then in the Kingdomes right, and for its safety, is unjust, arbitrary and tyrannicall".

the Nation. He went on to argue that because the sectaries were "of well affected mindes and peaceable dispositions", they had merited "a faire respect from the State" and had the right to

> the quiet enjoyment of themselves as they are men, and the ordinances of Christ as they are Christians.[1]

In his view, the sectaries, simply by virtue of being men, had certain rights and responsibilities within society; their political rights were in no way dependent upon their religious beliefs.

Presumably there were many Independents and sectaries who would have accepted Walwyn's precis of *Remonstrans Redivivus* as a reasonable summary of their own views. It contained nothing that had not already been claimed by Pym and Parker, the great champions of the Parliamentary cause. But the extent to which Walwyn spoke with authority on their behalf in *The Compassionate Samaritane* is immaterial. The real significance of the pamphlet lay in the fact that he made use of this body of political ideas in the context of the debate about religious toleration. In effect, Walwyn was arguing that good citizenship, rather than adherence to an established church was the criterion for toleration.

In response to the charge that the sectaries were promoters of anarchy he produced not a theological defence of their position but evidence of their adherence to the "Common cause", which he defined in purely secular terms. Walwyn was making the point once more that religious uniformity was not the foundation of social life. As far as he was concerned, the important factor in the health of the nation was agreement on, and commitment to, the fundamental political principles of safety and freedom.

As will be seen in the next section, Walwyn gave the principle of *Salus Populi* a new and radical interpretation which the Parliamentary

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1. ibid. p.74.

theorists of the early 1640s certainly would not have accepted. But this must not be allowed to obscure the fact that Walwyn's political theory, which he believed provided the basis for religious liberty within the context of a well-ordered society, was rooted in the official ideology of Parliament's revolt against the King. There is no evidence that it developed out of Antinomianism, or was dependent on the application of sectarian notions of church democracy to society at large. In fact, the language and ideas of the revolution, as summarised by *Remonstrans Redivivus* remained central to his thinking during the period of his involvement with John Lilburne and Richard Overton in the Leveller movement.

In *Englands Lamentable Slaverie* (Oct.1645), his first pamphlet to be published after his association with Lilburne had begun,[1] Walwyn commended the idea of the safety of the people to Lilburne as the highest political principle. While he praised Lilburne for challenging the actions of Parliament in the name of the great legal documents of the Nation, he observed that Magna Carta was

> but a part of the peoples rights and liberties, being no more but what with much striving and fighting, was by the blood of our Ancestors, wrestled out of the pawes of those Kings, who by force had conquered the Nation...[2]

The real ground for appeal against Parliament was, he suggested, the very authority on which Parliament was founded, namely "the good, safetie and freedome" of the people who had chosen them.[3]

Three months later in *A Word in Season* (Jan.1646) Walwyn declared that "the safetie and weale of the People" was, on Parliament's own admission, "the end of the Primitive Institution of all Government";[4]

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1. Walwyn's relationship with Lilburne will be examined in chapter 7.
2. *Englands Lamentable Slaverie*, 1645, in G.E.Aylmer, *The Levellers in the English Revolution*, London 1975, p.66.
3. ibid. p.65.
4. *A Word in Season*, 1646, p.10.

nothing could be done in the Nation

> but by the Authority of those whom the People themselves doe chuse for Parliament: and intrust as their commissioners with full and compleat power for their good.[1]

Walwyn considered the principle of *Salus Populi* to be the fundamental issue of the civil war. From 1647 onwards he became increasingly disillusioned, first with Parliament, and then with the Army leaders because he believed that they had abandoned it.

The idea of the safety of the people as the "just cause" of the war ran through a number of Walwyn's pamphlets from this period. In *The Poore Wise Mans Admonition* (June 1647), written after Parliament's burning of the Levellers' *Large Petition*, he informed Parliament that the "just cause" of "publike safety" that had originally justified their revolt against the King would now "also justifie the Army against them".[2] In *The Bloody Project* of 1648, he complained that the civil war had become nothing but an unprincipled "Quarrell" with "no just cause declared"; if they continued to

> pervert the end for which they received their power, to wit, the Nations safety,

the people would be forced to rise up against both Parliament and the Army.[3]

Walwyn believed that the principles for which he was fighting were exactly those with which Parliament had entered the civil war and which he had promoted in *Remonstrans Redivivus*. Responding to the accusation in 1649 that he was a trouble-maker, and against all government, he replied that he had only ever opposed authority "to insist for such just things as

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1. ibid. p.4.
2. *The Poore Wise Mans Admonition*, June 1647, in A.L.Morton, *Freedom in Arms*, London 1975, p.132.
3. *The Bloody Project*, Aug.1648, in Morton, p.178. See also *The English Souldiers Standard*, April 1649, in Morton, p.235: "you must note that it is those just ends, the rights and liberties of the people, that only can acquit you from being murtherers in all you have done".

were promised",[1] and for him, the "promise" that Parliament would govern according to the principle of *Salus Populi* was always central to these.

(ii) The Principle of Self-Preservation

In February 1645 Walwyn replied to William Prynne's attacks on religious liberty in *A Helpe to the Right Understanding of a Discourse concerning Independency.*[2] In this pamphlet he employed the political principle of Salus Populi in a radically individualistic way to support the whole notion of toleration.

Prynne had argued that Parliament, as the supreme power in the nation, had the right to legislate in matters of church government and religious observance; the Independents were, therefore, obliged to submit to it.[3] Against this argument, Walwyn appealed to the very principle which Parliament and Prynne himself had made use of only a matter of months previously to justify their revolt against the King. Walwyn reminded the author of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* that

> the People of a Nation in chusing of a Parliament cannot confer more then that power which was justly in themselves: the plaine rule being this: That which a man may not voluntarily binde himselfe to doe, or to forbear to doe, without sinne: That he cannot entrust or refer unto the ordering of any other Whatsoever (be it Parliament, Generall Councels or Nationall Assemblies:)[4]

Walwyn was here employing the idea, propagated by Parker, Prynne, Pym and "The Book of Declarations", that noone could entrust to their rulers a power to destroy them, for the powers, prerogatives and privileges of government were always limited by the highest law, which was the safety of

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1. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, H&D p.357.
2. Walwyn did not specify which of Prynne's works he had in mind. It may have been *Independency Examined* (Oct.1644) or the newly published *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood* (Jan.1645). It does not really matter which it was since Prynne was quite consistent in his critique of Independency (see above p.120ff).
3. See above p.122.
4. *A Helpe to the Right Understanding of a Discourse Concerning Independency*, 1645, p.4.

the people.[1] But whereas they understood the concept almost exclusively in corporate, and national terms, Walwyn gave it a much wider individualistic application. He went on to assert that religious coercion also involved a form of self-destruction; it forced people to act contrary to that which their consciences recommended, which was "wilfull sin". He concluded, therefore, that

> no man can refer matters of Religion to any others regulation. And what cannot be given, cannot be received:... as a particular man cannot be robbed of that which he never had; so neither can a Parliament, or any other just Authority be violated in, or deprived of a power which cannot be entrusted to them.[2]

Walwyn's point was that since a coercive power in religious affairs was, by very definition, detrimental to the safety of the people, the Independents could not be accused of flouting Parliament's authority. Parliament had never been entrusted with such authority in the first place.

Central to Walwyn's understanding of the principle of *Salus Populi* was the idea that all men are by nature committed to the preservation of their lives and liberties. As he put it a year later in *A Word in Season*,

> no man hateth his owne flesh, but loveth and cherisheth it; and... naturally, every man seeketh his own good.[3]

This was exactly the same idea to which John Lilburne had appealed in 1638 when he refused to take the ex-officio oath in Star Chamber. Nature, he had claimed then, "is alwaies a preserver of itselfe and not a destroyer".[4] So although Walwyn did not speak in terms of the law of nature, he shared with Lilburne a vision of human rights rooted in the universal duty of self-preservation. For him *Salus Populi* was the law of

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1. See above p.80ff.
2. *A Helpe*, p.4.
3. *A Word in Season*, May 1646, p.1.
4. J.Lilburne, *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.25. See above p.50.

nature.

Walwyn was the first of the Leveller pamphleteers to use this idea in support of individual political and religious, rather than purely legal, rights. John Lilburne and Richard Overton began to do so shortly thereafter, and it is possible that they did so consciously following the lead that Walwyn had given in *A Helpe*.[1]

However, Walwyn does appear to have differed from the other two pamphleteers, particularly Lilburne, in the way in which he understood the relationship between the law of nature and human nature. As will be seen, Lilburne set the law of nature in the theological context of the Fall: it was God's provision for man in a sinful world, and their emphasis was very much on the preservative aspect of law. Walwyn's vision of society owed more to Montaigne's humanism than to Calvinism, and he did not have a radical concept of sin.[2] Consequently, for him, the law of nature was seen in more optimistic terms as a God-given pattern for the good life. This difference did not get in the way of cooperation between the three men. But Walwyn was regarded by some of his contemporaries as the most politically radical of the Levellers, and his hopeful view of man may have been the reason for this.[3]

Walwyn's optimistic vision of society can be seen in his description of the role of government in *A Helpe*. He claimed that

> It hath been the wisedome of all judicious Patriots to

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1. See below chapters 7 & 8.
2. See above pp.69,70.
3. *Walwins Wiles* (1649) accused him of being a Leveller in the literal sense of the word, that is, one who sought to destroy all differences of wealth and status among men. He is alleged to have said that it was "an inequitable thing... for one man to have thousands and another want bread... the pleasure of God is that all men should have enough" (H&D p.301). The Levellers, Walwyn among them, strongly denied that they were in favour of this kind of levelling (see *The Humble Petition*, Sept. 1648 [H&D p.153] and *A Manifestation*, 1649 [H&D pp.279,280]). The establishment of 'community' was never one of Walwyn's political objectives. But as is clear from *The Power of Love* (1643), and even *A Manifestation*, he thought that the sharing of possessions was a worthy ideal, and a practical possibility if everyone participated willingly in it.

> frame such laws and government as all peaceable well-minded people might deliver to live under; binding from all things palpably vitious by the greatest punishments, and proposing of rewards and incouragements to all public vertue: but in things where every man ought to be fully perswaded in his particular minde of the lawfulnesse and unlawfulnesse thereof; there to leave every man to the guidance of his own judgement.

Where this approach was followed, he maintained,

> there all things flourish, for thither will resort all sorts of ingenious free-born minds: such commonwealths abound with all things either necessary or delightful.[1]

There are clear echoes here of Montaigne, and the Arcadian vision contained in Walwyn's earlier pamphlet, *The Power of Love* (1643).[2] Because he thought that society was made up, for the most part, of reasonable, fair-minded people, Walwyn saw the necessity only for a basic minimum of law; large areas of human life could be removed from government control and left to the regulation of individual consciences; peaceful coexistence was possible, as was universal prosperity.

William Prynne's belief that religious liberty would lead to "the encreasing of erronious opinions and disturbance to the state", was, according to Walwyn, simply "mistaken":

> admit any mans judgement be so misinformed, as to beleeve there is no sinne: if this man now upon this government should take away another mans goods, or commit murder or adultery; the Law is open, and he is to be punished as a malefactor, and so for all crimes that any mans judgement may mislead him unto.[3]

In Walwyn's view, religion was not a vital factor in the maintenance of social order. He believed that the civil law was quite capable of deterring wrong-doing and punishing those few people who were unwise enough to commit crimes.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Walwyn did not consider human

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1. *A Helpe*, p.7.
2. See above p.66ff..
3. *A Helpe*, p.8.

society to be a massive holding operation in the face of the anarchic tendencies of individual men. He believed in the innate goodness of man and was a minimalist in his view of government.[1] But the fact that he was a minimalist does not mean that he was an anarchist, or anything like it. In his view, as has been seen, the fundamental principles on which society was founded had been spelt out by the Parliamentarians in the early 1640s, and he was committed to these.

A Helpe to the Right Understanding demonstrates that Walwyn's political theory was not a hybrid of theology and politics. Although he was an Antinomian and a universalist, his political ideas did not develop out of the application of religious categories to civil society. In fact, they were based on the separation of religion and society, faith and reason. While he may not have been convinced by the theological case for separatism - in the sense that he saw no clear Biblical evidence to support any one particular form of church government - philosophically and politically, he was committed to the separation of church and state. His scepticism led him to forsake any notion of coercion in religious matters and to seek secular principles of government.

Walwyn's political theory was based largely on ideas that were part of the current political coinage. In particular, he took the notion of *Salus Populi*, which was central to the theory of government developed by the Parliamentarians, and pushed it in an increasingly individualistic and democratic direction. Having seen the radical potential implicit in the idea, he employed it against the Parliamentary theorist, William Prynne, to argue the case for toleration as a natural, political right.

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1. There appears to have been at least some truth to the claims made concerning his view of government and authority in *Walwins Wiles* (1649). *Wiles* alleged that, on being challenged that community of possessions would destroy all government, Walwyn had replied that "then there would be less need of Government, for then there would be no theeves, no covetuous persons, no deceiving and abusing of one another and so no need of government" (H&D pp.302,303).

Chapter Seven

LILBURNE AND THE PRINCIPLE OF SEGREGATION

In mid-1645 the tone and content of John Lilburne's pamphlets changed significantly. Only ten months separated the publication of his *Copie of a Letter... to Mr.William Prynne* (Jan.1645) and *Englands Birth-Right Justified* (Oct.1645) yet their approach was very different. While the former was characterised by the kind of theological argument and Biblical imagery found in his pamphlets of the late 1630s, the latter was marked by legal and political concerns and spoke the language of the constitutional theorists.

This chapter will argue that the shift in focus from theology to politics that took place in Lilburne's writings during 1645 was integrally connected with his dispute with Prynne over the question of religious toleration, and his resultant clashes with Parliament. It will seek to show that, in order to assert the rights of separatists in general, and his own in particular, against the anti-tolerationist onslaught of the Presbyterians, Lilburne deliberately began to appeal to ideas of natural right that had recently been used to justify Parliament's revolt against the King, and which were themselves based upon a concept of the law of nature that he had first employed seven years earlier in *A Worke of the Beast* (1638). This new approach did not signify either a loss of interest in separatist theology, or the adoption of antinomianism and universalism, but the attempt to translate the separation of church and state, a theological principle to which he had long been committed, into a political reality. His political philosophy, it will be argued, rested upon a clear distinction in his theology between the order of grace and that of nature.

1. From Theology to Politics

When William Prynne published *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood* in January 1645, John Lilburne was still serving in the Parliamentary forces under the Earl of Manchester. By this stage, Lilburne was already very familiar with the language and ideas of the revolution. Even before his enlistment, he had read many of the documents issued by Parliament in its own defence,[1] and as early as 1643 he was apparently expressing himself in terms characteristic of his later political pamphlets.[2] Nevertheless, his defence of the idea of religious toleration in *A Copie of a Letter...* (Jan.1645), which followed hot on the heels of *Truth Triumphing*, was almost entirely theological in nature.

Lilburne's main contention in *A Copy of a Letter* was that the Biblical pattern for church government was the independent congregation and that kings and rulers had no authority to interfere in matters of religion.[3] The kingdom of Christ, he maintained, was not like "the church of the Jews" with its "ordinances, Lawes, Rights and Ceremonies"; the race and the nation were no longer the "type" of it, for this was a kingdom that Christ had "set up in the world amongst his Saints, where visibly and spiritually hee governeth, ruleth and dwelleth".[4] He argued that it was the "designe" of Antichrist to join "the Ecclesiastical and Civil State together",[5] and that Prynne himself, insofar as he wanted the church to be governed by the temporal powers, was guilty of furthering it.[6] The

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1. See *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D pp.406,407.
2. ibid. p.407. When he was offered lucrative employment in London after his release from captivity in Royalist Oxford, he scorned it, explaining to his wife - according to his recollection of 1649 - that "I must rather fight (though it were) for 8 pence a day, till I see the liberties and peace of England setled, then set me down in a rich place for mine own advantage, in the midst of so many grand distractions of my native Country as then possessed it".
3. *A Copie of a Letter... to Mr.William Prynne*, 1645, pp.3,4.
4. ibid. p.3.
5. ibid.p.4.
6. ibid.p.6.

tone of *A Copy of a Letter* and the view of the church put forward within it was completely in keeping with the separatist theology of his earlier pamphlets.[1] If anything, Lilburne's separatism had become even more clearly defined, and this was probably due to the fact that, whereas in the late 1630s his ecclesiology was largely theoretical,[2] by 1645 he was, and presumably had been for some time, a member of a separatist congregation. Some years later he explained that he had published his letter to Prynne out of a sense of duty to God "and safety to my self and my brethren", Edmund Rosier being at that time his "pastor or teacher".[3] Lilburne's demand for religious toleration in *A Copy of a Letter* was firmly based on his theological commitment to the separation of church and state.

At the end of April 1645 Lilburne left the army because he was unwilling to sign the Solemn League and Covenant.[4] Returning to London he discovered

> so great a defection in the Parliament from their first Principles, as made me resolve never to engage further with them, until they repented and returned.[5]

He immediately became involved with other London radicals in their efforts to support and intensify the struggle against the King.

It was at this time that Lilburne became acquainted with William Walwyn. On May 31st Lilburne attended a large meeting at the Windmill Tavern held "to consider something for the good of the City and kingdom" after the defeat of the Parliamentary forces at Leicester.[6] Walwyn may

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1. Cf. *The Copy of a Letter... to One of His Special Friends*, 1638, p.16; *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, pp.11,37,38; *Come Out of Her My People*, 1639, pp.3,4. See above p.29ff.
2. In 1638 he wrote that he was not a member of a separatist congregation and had read only a few of their books. See above pp.28,29.
3. *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.408. For Rosier's relationship with Lilburne see above pp.24,25.
4. *Innocency and Truth Justified*, Jan.1646, p.49.
5. *The Just Defence of John Lilburne*, 1653, in H&D p.456.
6. See *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, p.4.

also may have been present.[1] They both belonged to a small group, among whose number were John Goodwin, Henry Burton and Hugh Peter, which, in the early summer of 1645 began to meet regularly to discuss the political situation.[2] On the 19th of July 1645 Lilburne, Walwyn and others went together to the House of Commons to lobby M.Ps.[3] Lilburne, who had already aroused the wrath of the Presbyterians by the illegal printing of his letter to William Prynne,[4] was arrested after his former hero, John Bastwick, who was in the vicinity, reported hearing him slander the Speaker, William Lenthall.[5] He was subsequently charged with subversion and imprisoned for three months.[6]

In the speech that he made in his own defence at the hearing, an account of which he published in *The Copy of a Letter... to a Friend* (25th July 1645), the beginnings of a much more political response to the criticisms of Prynne and his fellow Presbyterians are to be seen. Lilburne moved away from a theological defence of himself and the sectaries, and began to insist on their rights not merely as "saints" and members of Christ's kingdom, but as citizens of England.

Over against the Presbyterian attacks on Independency, Lilburne declared his resolve to

> stand fast in the Liberty and freedome wherewith Magna Carta and the Petition of Right, and Severall Acts made this present Parliament... hath made me free, and not to be intangled againe with any yoke of Bondage that shall be hung about my neck by any kind of Tyrant, by what name or Title soever he be dignified or distinguished...[7]

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1. The Windmill was at this time a meeting place for London radicals, and Walwyn was a regular attender. See *A Whisper*, 1646, in Haller, *Tracts on Liberty*,, vol.3, p.326.
2. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D p.351.
3. *A Just Defence of John Bastwick*, 1645, p.3.
4. Lilburne appeared before the Parliamentary Committee for Examinations twice in May and June of 1645 to answer charges concerning the illegal printing of his letter to Prynne. He published his defence of this action in *The Reasons of Lt.Col.Lilburnes sending his letter to Mr.Prin*, June, 1645. See *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.408.
5. *A Just Defence of John Bastwick*, p.3.
6. *The Copy of a Letter... to a Friend*, July 1645, pp.1,2.
7. ibid. p.10.

Parliament's treatment of him, he protested, contradicted all the principles for which he had fought in the civil war:

> I am a freeman, yea a freeborn denizen of England, and I have been in the field with my sword in my hand to adventure my life and my blood against tyrants for the preservation of my just freedom, and by virtue of my being a freeman (I conceive) I have as true right to all the privileges that do belong to a freeman as the greatest man in England whatsoever he be, whether Lord or commoner, and the ground and foundation of my freedom I build upon the Grand Charter of England.[1]

Lilburne was now placing religious liberty in the context of the political rights and freedoms for which he had been fighting in the civil war. He was arguing that the freedom to worship God in his own way was a fundamental right to which he, simply by virtue of being a citizen, was entitled.

It would seem that the change of approach heralded by *The Copy of a Letter* was a quite conscious and deliberate move on Lilburne's part. Looking back on these events eight years later in *The Just Defence of John Lilburne* he saw a clear distinction between a theological approach to the question of religious toleration and a political one. He recalled that "as soon as the Controversie about liberty of Conscience began", he had occasion "to appear with my pen in its just defence, against my *quondam* fellow-sufferer Mr.Pryn". He had argued then that it was a liberty

> due not onely according to the Word of God, which I effectually proved, but also due by the fundamental Laws of the Land, which provide that no man be questioned, or molested, or put to answer for any thing, but wherein he materially violates the person, goods, or good name of another.

Lilburne, it appears, also believed that, in 1645, this political approach to the issue, which he felt to be absolutely basic, had had a certain novelty:

> ...however strange the defence thereof then appeared, time hath proved that it is a liberty which no conscientious man or woman can spare, being such, as

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1. ibid. p.2. See also *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, pp.13,14.

> without which every one is lyable to molestation and persecution, though he live never so honestly, peaceably and agreeable to the Laws of the Land.'

He now saw religious liberty as inextricably linked with liberty as such.

From July 1645 onwards, Lilburne appealed increasingly in his writings to the political principles - particularly that of the safety of the people - championed by Parliament in the early 1640s, as the basis for a tolerant, free and just society. But what brought about this change of approach? *The Just Defence of John Lilburne* (1653) offers no clues. But by the time that he wrote *Englands Birth-Right Justified* (Oct.1645) he had certainly read William Walwyn's *A Helpe to the Right Understanding*, of the previous February, the pamphlet in which Walwyn had countered the anti-tolerationist arguments of William Prynne by appealing to the theory of *Salus Populi.*[2] Lilburne commended it warmly as the work of a "true principl'd commonwealths man".[3] The two men knew each other at this stage and may well have discussed their ideas at some length. So to what extent did Lilburne's relationship with Walwyn influence the development of his thinking in 1645?

J.C.Davis has claimed that Walwyn's influence on Lilburne was extensive, both politically and theologically. He maintains that it was, in fact, Walwyn who "taught Lilburne to use natural law argument",[4] and that Walwyn's antinomianism, with its "identification of nature and grace" moulded Lilburne's concept of the law of nature.[5] It has already been

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1. *The Just Defence of John Lilburne*, 1653, in H&D p.457.
2. See above p.150ff. *Englands Lamentable Slaverie* (Oct.1645), in which Walwyn explicitly called on Lilburne to appeal to natural law rather than historical documents (see above p. 148), appeared shortly after the publication of *Englands Birth-Right* but was evidently written before Walwyn had seen it. Walwyn's tract was a response not to *Englands Birth-Right*, in which, as will be seen, Lilburne did appeal to the law of nature, but to *A Copy of a Letter* (July 1645) in which Magna Carta and the Petition of Right had played a far more prominent role.
3. *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, p.37.
4. J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in B.Manning, *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War*, London 1973, p.232.
5. ibid. p.233.

shown in chapter three that Lilburne employed natural law argument as early as 1638, and that he did so very much under the influence of John Bastwick's Calvinistic theology.[1] Davis concedes that Lilburne did use the concept prior to 1645, but maintains that he saw it only as "a minimal requirement".[2]

Against Davis' interpretation, it will be argued in the next two sections first, that the idea of the law of nature as the principle of self-preservation, which Lilburne employed in 1638, was, in fact, fundamental to the Parliamentary justification of revolt against the King, and that Lilburne recognised it as such; and secondly, that after 1645, his theological understanding of the law of nature did not change - he continued to use the idea within the framework of a Calvinistic doctrine of man, and did not adopt an antinomian theology.

This is not to say, however, that Walwyn had no influence whatsoever on Lilburne. While he may not have "taught" Lilburne to appeal to natural law in quite the way that Davis suggests, it may well have been Walwyn who first demonstrated to Lilburne the value of arguing for religious toleration on the basis of Parliament's own declared principles. For, as will be seen, while he did not use the phrase, at the heart of Lilburne's argument in *Englands Birth-Right Justified* was the same appeal to the principle of *Salus Populi* that Walwyn had already made the central feature of his approach. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Lilburne found this approach appealing, and was able to adopt it so easily as his own, because he already shared with the Parliamentarian theorists who expounded the doctrine of *Salus Populi* in the early 1640s the same concept of the law of nature that underpinned their work.

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1. See above pp.44-51.
2. Davis p.232.

2. Equity and the Law of Nature

Englands Birth-Right Justified (Oct.1645) developed the theme of the speech which Lilburne had made before the House of Commons the previous July and which he had recounted in *The Copy of a Letter*. It set out to assert the rights of individual citizens over against "all Arbitrary Usurpation, whether Regall or Parliamentary".[1] The pamphlet began with a long quote from *An Exact Collection of All Remonstrances, Declarations, Votes, etc.* (1642) - the Parliamentary "Book of Declarations" - which dealt with the extremely important issue of the legality of Parliament's action in wresting control of the militia from the King.[2] In effect, the passage addressed one of the fundamental questions of the civil war, namely, the nature and location of political authority.

The argument of the passage centred on a distinction between the "equitable" and the "literal" sense of law. While it acknowledged that the King was "intrusted by Law with the militia", this was purely, it claimed,

> for the good and preservation of the Republicke against Forraine Invasions or domesticke rebellions. For it cannot be supposed that the Parliament would ever by Law intrust the King with the militia against themselves or the Common-wealth, that intrusts them to provide for their weale, not for their woe.

If the letter of the law did not reflect the "equity" of it, "that is, the publicke good", then Parliament was free to disobey the law: the commanded could ignore the commander if his orders were not in their interests. All law, therefore, had to be interpreted in terms of equity:

> for the Law taken abstract from its originall reason and end is made a shell without a kernell, a shadow without substance and a body without a soul. It is the execution of Laws according to their equity and reason, which... is the spirit that gives life to Authority the Letter kills.

Equity, it was stated, did not even need to be expressed in any one

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1. *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, Title Page.
2. *An Exact Collection of All Remonstrances, Declarations, Votes*, 1642, p.150. See *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, pp.1,2.

particular law, since it was

> naturally implyed and supposed in all Laws that are not meerly Imperiall from that Analogie which all bodies Politick hold with the Naturall; whence all Government and Governours borrow a proportionable respect.

The quote from "The Book of Declarations" went on to explain that this analogy with nature meant that no people would ever willingly participate in a process that brought about their own destruction:

> when the militia of an Army is committed to the Generall, it is not with any expresse condition that he shall not turne the mouths of his cannons against his owne souldiers, for that is so naturally and necessarily implied that its needless to be expressed, insomuch as if he did attempt or command such a thing against the nature of his trust and place, it did, ipso facto, estate the Army in a right of disobedience, except we thinke that obedience binds men to cut their owne throates.[1]

In this passage, then, equity was equated with both *Salus Populi* - "the publicke good" - and the natural law of self-preservation. They were all simply different terms which expressed the fundamental principle of social and political realationships.

In 1638 Lilburne himself had appealed to the same "Analogie" with nature in justification of his refusal to take the ex-officio oath in Star Chamber that Parliament was now using to justify revolt against the King. Like Parliament, he also saw nature as "alwaies a preserver of itselfe and not a destroyer".[2] The idea was, therefore, far from new to him. But in "The Book of Declarations" the concept was given a much wider legal and political application. In its discussion of the control of the militia, Parliament was proclaiming that all law governing the life of society had to be interpreted equitably according to the natural law of self-

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1. *An Exact Collection...* quoted in *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, pp.1,2. Henry Parker in his *Observations upon some of His Majesties late Answers and Expresses*, 1642, p.4, used this same parable of a general and his troops to justify the Parliamentary revolt.
2. *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.25. See above p.50. Lilburne also used the same application of the concept of law of nature in *Englands Birth-Right*, p.7.

preservation; equity, the safety of the people, was the fundamental principle of government.

Lilburne regarded this exposition of the notion of equity as it affected the prerogatives of the King to be a vitally important statement of Parliamentary principle, and he made great use of it in his later writings.[1] He considered it to be significant precisely because of the inter-relationship that it declared there to be between law, politics and nature.

Lilburne saw that, according to this principle of equity, tyrannical government of any kind, and not simply that of the King, was "unlawfull". Coercion and oppression, even when practised by Parliament, were a complete denial of the very purpose of government:

> it cannot be imagined that ever the people would be so sottish as to give such a power to those whom they choose for their servants; for this were to give them a power to provide for their woe but not for their weal, which is contrary to their own foregoing maxime.[2]

He believed that there were limitations on government precisely because it held its power as a trust from the people. If it did not act "for their weal" it lost its authority to govern. He did not accept that any law passed by Parliament had to be obeyed. Parliament, like the King, had to act not just according to its declared laws, but according to <u>the</u> law - law that was in the very nature of things.

In the concept of equity - or, the law of nature, the safety of the people - Lilburne had discovered an important critical tool which could be employed in the assessment of any aspect of state policy, and he used it throughout *Englands Birth-Right Justified* to protest, for example, against

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1. See, for example, *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, p.57; *The Free Mans Freedom Vindicated*, 1646, p.6; *The Outcryes of Oppressed Commons*, 1647, p.18; *Rash Oaths Unwarrantable*, 1647, p.6; *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.407.
2. *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, p.4.

monopolies,[1] the legal system,[2] tithes[3] and the control of preaching.[4] It was a vital weapon in his battle against William Prynne and coercive Presbyterianism.

J.C.Davis claims that

> the Levellers recurrent emphasis on equity illustrates a fusion of divine and natural law taking place in their thinking under the influence of antinomianism and in particular William Walwyn's exposition of it.[5]

Lilburne's use of the concept of equity in *Englands Birth-Right*, he maintains, was untypical of the way that he generally used it; in the pamphlet equity was employed in "a quasi-juridical sense as the spirit rather than the letter of the law, as those general principles of justice by which the execution of the law should be moderated";[6] whereas "elsewhere... and more typically", he and the other Levellers used it "in the general sense of what is fair and right" and saw the pursuit of equity as "a religious obligation".[7]

This, however, is to misunderstand the thrust of the quote from "The Book of Declarations" in *Englands Birth-Right* and its continued importance in Lilburne's thinking thereafter. There may well have been fluctuations from time to time, and differences of emphasis among the Levellers' in their view of the relationship between law, historical precedent and natural principles.[8] But there was a fundamental consistency

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1. ibid. p.9.
2. ibid. p.35.
3. ibid. p.13.
4. ibid. pp.8,41.
5. Davis, p.233.
6. ibid. p.227.
7. ibid. pp.228,229. As evidence of the antinomian current of Leveller thought Davis points out (p.228) that equity was frequently linked with the Golden Rule in their writings. It will be argued in the next section that, for Lilburne, the Golden Rule was primarily a summary of the law of nature, and did not carry with it any necessary soteriological implications.
8. For a good discussion of the complexity of this relationship in the thinking of the Levellers, see R.B.Seaberg, "The Norman Conquest and the Common Law: the Levellers and the Argument from Continuity", *The Historical Journal*, 24, 1981, pp.791-806. See also, J.G.A.Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, Bath, 1974, pp.125-127; C.Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, London, 1962, pp.75-82.

in their use of the concept of equity. Lilburne, and indeed, Richard Overton and William Walwyn, following Parliament's interpretation, understood equity in terms of the political principle of *Salus Populi* and the natural law of self-preservation.[1]

The beauty of this whole approach to politics, as far as Lilburne was concerned, was its impeccably Parliamentary pedigree. He took full advantage of the fact that Prynne himself was one of the foremost propagators of the idea that political power resided

> not in the Emperours and Kings... but in their Kingdomes, Senates, Parliaments, People, who had not only power to restrain but censure and remove the Emperours and Princes for their tyranny and misgovernment.

In the Postscript to *Englands Birth-Right Justified* Lilburne cited sixteen passages from *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* in support of his own political position.[2] He found ample material in it to uphold his conviction that, according to the law of nature itself, government existed for, and was given legitimacy by its pursuit of, the good of the people.

In *Innocency and Truth Justified* (Jan.1646), which was Lilburne's next pamphlet, he made use of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* to criticise Prynne and Parliament itself, with repect to his own treatment at their hands. Lilburne pointed out that Prynne had argued in his great tome that Kings,

> even by Pauls Doctrine in Romans 13, ought to be subject to the higher power and Jurisdiction of their

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1. See, for example, J.Lilburne, *The Charters of London*, Dec.1646, p.4: "the people by themselves, or their legal commissions chosen by them for that end, may make a Law or Lawes to governe themselves... and ought not in the least to receive a Law from them, or any of them, whom they have set over themselves, for no other end in the world, but for their better being, and meerely with Justice, equity and righteousnesse, to execute the Laws that they made themselves, and betrusted them with, as the publique executors or dispensors of". See also, R.Overton, *An Arrow Against All Tyrants*, Oct.1646, in G.E.Aylmer, *The Levellers in the English Revolution*, London 1975, p.70; W.Walwyn, *The Poore Wise-mans Admonition*, June 1647, in A.L.Morton, *Freedom in Arms*, London 1975, p.132.
2. *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, Postscript. The citations were all from the Appendix to *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, 1643.

Parliaments, the Lawes and Statutes of their Realmes.

Citizens were to be protected from injury to their persons or property by law:

> if Kings injuriously take away the lands, goods, or imprison the persons of any particular subjects, the Law gives every one a particular remedy against them by way of Action or Petition of Right. If then every private subject may have redresse, much more the whole Kingdome... against their Soveraignes which oppresse them.

Lilburne now took this argument a step further and applied it to every representative of government. If the King was "subject to the Law, and accountable to the People", he reasoned, "then a single Parliaments man... needs must be the same". Parliament as a whole

> must and ought to be subject to the knowne law, and cannot in justice punish a free man contrary thereunto.[1]

Lilburne accused Parliament of acting "contrary to the trust reposed in them by the whole kingdome" which they themselves had declared in "The Book of Declarations" was "to provide for the weale of the people, but not for their woe".[2] He drove this point home by paraphrasing, and quoting at length from Henry Parker's *Observations upon Some of His Majesties Late Answers and Expreses* (1642) in which the notion of government as a trust was central.[3] According to this work, Lilburne maintained,

> Power is but secondary and derivative in Princes... the fountaine and efficient cause is the people... For my part I say it is contrary to nature, and the end of trust, that the trusted should doe him that trust a mischiefe.[4]

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1. *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, p.11.
2. ibid. p.57.
3. See for example *Observations upon Some of His Majesties Late Answers and Expresses*, 1642, p.20: "since it is unnaturall for any Nation to give away its own proprietie in itselfe absolutely, and to subject itselfe to a condition of servilitie below men, because this is contrary to the Supreme of all Lawes, wee must not think that it can stand with the intent of any trust, that necessarie defence should be barred, and naturall preservation denyed to any people". For a discussion of Parker's political theory, see R.Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, Cambridge 1979, pp.145-147; J.W.Allen, *English Political Thought 1603-1644*, New York 1967, pp.426-435.
4. *Innocency and Truth Justified*, p.57. See Parker, p.1.

The fundamental basis of all "politiques", "the paramount Law that shall give law to all humane Lawyers whatsoever... is the safety of the people".[1]

Innocency and Truth was, in part, a reply to Prynne's *A Fresh Discovery* (1645), in which Prynne had accused Lilburne and the "Independent sectaries" of plotting against Parliament.[2] By his appeal to *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* and other constitutional authorities,[3] Lilburne was turning the tables on the Presbyterians. In effect he was arguing that Prynne and his faction had abandoned the principles upon which Parliament had rebelled against the King, and that he (Lilburne) and the sectaries were now their true guardians.

One of the main fears of the anti-tolerationists was that Independency would lead to social fragmentation.[4] They believed that religion was the cement that held society together, and that if the state did not take steps to enforce religious practices, anarchy would be the result. Lilburne's emphasis on law, which is a recurring theme in virtually all his writings from *Englands Birth-Right* (Oct.1645) onwards, must be understood in this context.

In *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* (Oct.1646), Lilburne explained his own concept of law by quoting again from the Parliamentary "Book of Declarations". On this occasion he chose a passage from the speech John Pym had made at the trial of the Earl of Strafford in April 1641.[5]

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1. ibid. p.58. See Parker, p.3. For Parker's views on *Salus Populi* see above pp.80,81.
2. W.Prynne, *A Fresh Discovery*, 1645, Epistle Dedicatory. See above pp.119,120.
3. Apart from Parker's *Observations* and "The Book of Declarations", Lilburne also made use for the first time of Sir Edward Coke's *Institutes of the Lawes of England*, Part ii, 1642 (see *Innocency and Truth* pp.60-62), and Christopher St.German's *A Dialogue in English between a Doctor of Divinity and a Student of the Laws of England*, 1638 edition (p.62. See below p.174ff.).
4. See above pp.123-126.
5. *An Exact Collection...*, 1642, p.140.

The law, Pym had stated,

> is the safeguard, the custody of all private interests: your honours, your lives, your liberties and estates are all in the keeping of the Law: and without this, every man hath a like right to anything.

Law preserved society from anarchy by putting limits on man, and differentiating between good and evil, just and unjust. "If you take away the Law", Pym warned,

> all things will fall into confusion; every man will become a law unto himself: which in the depraved condition of human nature must needs produce many great enormities: Lust will become a law, and envy will become a law, covetuousness and ambition will become lawes: and what dictates, what decisions such Lawes will produce, may easily be discerned...[1]

Lilburne quoted this same passage a year later, again in the context of allegations that he was a man who was "altogether for Anarchy and Confusion".[2]

Lilburne was here using Pym to combat Prynne. Prynne believed that all things would fall into confusion without religion; Lilburne, appealing to one of the architects of the Parliamentary revolt, asserted that <u>law</u>, not religion was society's defence against anarchy. Of course, as has already been seen, this emphasis on law did not imply an acceptance of anything that happened to be on the statute books, or the mere will of Kings and Parliaments. For Lilburne the law which ensured a peaceful and well-ordered society was that which was equitable and founded on the law of nature.

Lilburne saw his own political activity simply as an attempt to reconstruct the government of England according to Parliament's declared principles. In January 1647, responding to the allegation made in *Gangraena* that his goal was to set up a "Utopian Anarchy" and overthrow

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1. Quoted in *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, 1646, p.39.
2. *The Grand Plea of Lt.Col.John Lilburne*, Oct.1647, pp.5,19.

the government,' Lilburne asked Thomas Edwards to consider

> whether in the Parliaments own publick declarations, in Mr.Prinns Soveraigne power of Parliaments... and in other Presbyterian books, licensed by publike authority, and others sold without controule, there be no more said to justifie and maintain that which Gangraena calles Utopian Anarchy, then in any bookes whatsoever published by those he calles sectaries.[2]

He claimed that, as far as *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* was concerned,

> I never read more of that Doctrine (in any Book in all my life) that Gangraena so much condemnes in me etc., than in that very Book which is licensed by Mr.White, a member of the House of Commons, and in his dayes, as stiffe a Presbyterian as Gangraena himself.[3]

When allowance is made for a certain amount of hyperbole and political point-scoring, Lilburne was essentially telling the truth in *The Oppressed Mans Oppression Declared*. The pamphlet contained more than twenty citations of passages from all four books of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* which, with some justice, he claimed supported his viewpoint.[4] His own political theory was not the product of the sectarian theology or practise. It had developed out of ideas that were central to the Parliamentary revolt. Lilburne never saw himself as anything other than a true Parliamentarian.

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1. *The Oppressed Mans Oppression Declared*, Jan.1647, p.23.
2. ibid. pp.23,24.
3. ibid. p.29.
4. ibid. Lilburne cited, for example, a passage from the third part of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* pp.13,14, in which Prynne argued that, according to the "Law of Nature", it was the right and duty of the people to defend themselves and their property against the assaults of their enemies, even when these included kings and rulers; "the Subjects are obleiged, by the self-same reason, law, equity, especially upon the Parliaments command, to Arm themselves to defend their Native Country, Kingdome, against... forraigne and domesticke Forces, and the King himselfe, if he joyne with them"; "the Peoples Safety being the Supremest Law". Prynne's book was, in fact, packed with extremely radical political ideas like these (see above p.113ff.) and Lilburne had, by this time clearly studied it all in some detail.

3. The Theological Basis of Natural Law

Lilburne based his political theory on the concept of the law of nature. But he was able to focus on nature in this way because of his separatist doctrine of the church and his Christian understanding of man and society. He gave an account of his theological position in two extremely important writings of 1646. In postscripts to *The Free Mans Freedom Vindicated* (June) and *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* (October), Lilburne outlined what he believed to have been the origins of human society and the laws which God had ordained for its governance. That Lilburne should have felt the need to express himself in this way in 1646 was perfectly understandable. For him, the issues raised by the civil war were, at root, theological and philosophical, and, like Henry Parker before him, he instinctively set his discussion of the basic principles of human relationships in the context of the Biblical drama of creation.[1] Indeed, in many ways, Lilburne's postscripts of 1646 resemble nothing so much as theological reflections on some of the ideas put forward by Parker and the other Parliamentarians.

The argument in both pamphlets was essentially the same, although *Londons Liberty* gave the fuller account. Centring his argument on the notion of God as Creator rather than that of God as Redeemer, he claimed that the rights of man were ultimately rooted in the will of God who had implanted them in nature. For Lilburne, there was no conflict between a natural law approach and a revelational approach. In his view, it was precisely because the world and all men had been created by God that there were natural rights and principles which could be apprehended by all men, irrespective of whether or not they were Christians.

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1. See Henry Parker, *Observations upon Some of His Majesties late Answers and Expresses*, 1642, p.13: "Man being depraved by the fall of Adam, grew so untame and uncivill a creature, that the Law of God written in his breast was not sufficient to restraine him from mischiefe, or to make him sociable, and therefore without some magistracy to provide new orders... and to execute acording to justice, no society could be upheld".

(i) The Image of God.

In *The Free Mans Freedom* Lilburne explained that God "the absolute Soveraign Lord and King of all things in heaven and earth, the original fountain and cause of all causes", having created the world, had made man "after his own image" and given him sovereignty over the rest of creation. Adam and Eve were "the earthly original fountain" of every human being since then; their offspring were all by nature equal,

> none of them having by nature any authority, dominion or magisterial power, one over or above another.

Such authority or power as there was in the world, Lilburne maintained, came

> merely by institution or donation, that is to say, by mutual consent and agreement or consent, given, derived or assumed by mutual consent and agreement, for the good, benefit, and comfort of each other, and not for the mischief, hurt or damage of any.[1]

Central to Lilburne's understanding of man as the image of God, were the notions of reason and of individual liberty. He believed that the divine image in man, that which marked him out from the other creatures as the pinnacle of God's creation, "principally consisteth in his reason and understanding"; man's original condition was "the perfection of reason"; reason was the divine attribute which enabled man to understand and value his God-given role as "Lord over the earth".[2] In a later pamphlet he explained that it was men's enjoyment of their "naturall Liberties and Freedomes", which made them

> to differ from bruit and savadge Beasts which were never created with reason, and understand that glorious Image, that God made man in, and so made him Lord over all the creatures in the world beside himself.[3]

But Lilburne was insistent that that lordship did not extend "over the

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1. *The Free Mans Freedom Vindicated*, June 1646, Postscript.
2. *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, Oct.1646, p.17,18.
3. *The Charters of London*, Dec.1646, p.36.

individuals of mankind".[1] Since all men were made in the Image of God, liberty was the right of all men; it could only be limited with the consent of the individual and precluded domination over other individuals. He claimed that it was

> unnaturall, irrationall, sinfull, wicked and unjust, for any man or men whatsoever, to part with so much of their power

as would enable any officers of government "to destroy and undoe them therewith".[2] It was equally wrong for any man

> to appropriate and assume unto himselfe, a power, authority and jurisdiction, to rule, govern, or raign over any sort of men in the world without their free consent.[3]

Whoever did so was assuming the power of God Himself, "which was the sin of the Devils".[4]

For Lilburne, then, the preservation of one's life and liberty was a fundamental law of human existence having been instituted by God at the creation of man. It was, indeed, the law of nature. He went on to explain that, if it was unnatural for a man to "mischiefe, rob, spoyle, or in any was destroy" himself, so too was it evil to do these things to anyone else.[5] God, he maintained, had given

> no Lordship or soveraignty to any of Adams Posterity by will and Prerogative, to rule over his Brethren-men;

rather, He had

> ingraved by nature in the soule of man, this goulden and everlasting principle, to doe to another, as he would have another to do to him.[6]

That Lilburne should have identified the Golden Rule, taught by Christ Himself (Matthew 7:12) with the law of nature is taken by J.C.Davis

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1. *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, 1646, p.17.
2. ibid. p.11.
3. ibid. pp.11,12.
4. ibid. p.12.
5. ibid. pp.34,35.
6. ibid. p.17.

as further evidence of the fusion of divine and natural law in his thinking and of the influence of Walwyn's antinomianism and universalism upon him.' But is this interpretation correct?

Lilburne first equated the Golden Rule with the law of nature in *Innocency and Truth Justified*[2] after reading *The Dialogue in English between a Doctor of Divinity and a Student of the Laws of England*, a book on the theory of law by the Tudor lawyer, Christopher St.German, which made the same connection and also linked the idea of the law of nature to the doctrine of the Image of God. *Innocency and Truth* also happened to be the first of Lilburne's pamphlets to make reference to this work, and he quoted the pertinent passage from *The Dialogue* in support of his own argument.[3] Although William Walwyn had indeed himself referred to the Golden Rule in *A Helpe to the Right Understanding* (Feb.1645),[4] Lilburne's use of the concept betrays the primary influence of St.German, not that of his antinomian friend.

St.German, following Thomas Aquinas,[5] made a fourfold division of law. He described it as comprising the "Law Eternal", from which all other laws were derived, the law of nature, or reason, the law of God and the law of man. According to St.German, the law of nature or reason "pertaineth only to creatures reasonable, that is man, which is created in the image of God"; it was binding "amongst Jews and Gentiles as amongst Christian men" because it was

> written in the heart of every man, teaching him what is to be done, and what is to be fled, and because it is written in the heart, therefore it may not be put away, nor is it ever changeable by no diversitie of place nor

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1. Davis, p.233. See also B.Manning, "The Levellers and Religion", in McGregor and Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, Oxford 1984, pp.71,72.
2. *Innocency and Truth Justified*, Jan.1646, p.6.
3. ibid. p.62.
4. *A Helpe to the Right Understanding of a Discourse Concerning Independency*, Feb.1645, p.3.
5. See F.L.Baumer, "Christopher St.German: the Political Philosophy of a Tudor Lawyer", in *The American Historical Review*, 42, 1937, p.639.

> times. And therefore against this Law, prescription, Statute nor custome may not prevail.

This law taught, amongst other things, St.German maintained, "that thou shalt do to another, that thou wouldest another shall do to thee".[1] St.German's division of law makes it quite clear that he did not equate the law of nature with the law of God. While both were derived from the "Law Eternal", the law of nature was universally applicable, whereas the law of God was revealed only to Christians.

Lilburne's approach was essentially the same as that outlined in *The Dialogue*. It is certainly true that he understood the natural law to be rooted in the will of God. He saw it, in fact, as God's gracious provision for man. In this sense, of course, there was a certain "fusion" of the law of God and of nature in his theology. But, as has already been pointed out in chapter two, it is a mistake to assume that in the 17th century, to speak of God and the law of nature in the same sentence was proof of an unorthodox theology, let alone of universalism.[2] For anyone who took the sovereignty of God seriously, as Puritans certainly wished to do, it was impossible to view the law of nature as somehow autonomous. Its source was God just as surely as was the revealed law of the Scriptures. For Puritans, natural law <u>was</u> the dimly apprehended Biblical law of God; its very existence bore eloquent testimony to the fact that men were originally made in the image of God and still carried within them fragmentary knowledge of His will.

Lilburne's use of the law of nature did not signify a departure from this Puritan theological framework. The Puritan theologian, William Ames, who was far from being a universalist, himself identified the law of nature with the Golden Rule in his book *Conscience* (1639): the Rule was,

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1. *The Dialogue in English between a Doctor of Divinity and a Student of the Laws of England*, 1638 edition, p.4.
2. See above, p.47ff.

he maintained, a precept both "natural, and indeed divine".[1] This was St.German's position, and it was also Lilburne's. Elsewhere in *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* Lilburne explained that the Golden Rule was

> an unalterable Law established by God, before Moses Law, and under his Law; and also established by Christ, the just and righteous Prince of Peace, under the Gospel.[2]

According to Lilburne the Golden Rule preceded the Gospel. While Christ restored this law to "its first perfection" in His Saints,[3] from the very beginning it had been given to all men by God in nature and was still valid though only imperfectly grasped and obeyed. So although he understood the law of nature in terms of God's creative and sustaining grace, Lilburne did not equate it with the gracious work of God in the believer, the writing of His law upon the heart. Davis' view must therefore be rejected.[4]

Lilburne believed, then, that man had been originally created in a state of liberty and equality in which such political authority as there was sprang from the will and consent of the people, and was not imposed upon them. Rulers only had as much power as the people had given them for their own well-being. There was a close link in his thinking between the Image of God, and the law of nature. Because man had been made in the Image of God, he bore a dignity and status which was not to be abused. The law of nature was intended above all to preserve that Image, that humanity. The exploitation and oppression of man was ruled out on the basis of what God had made him and declared him to be in nature.

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1. W.Ames, *Conscience*, in A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, London 1938, p.188. He went on to explain that the rule was only applicable insofar as "we truly and considerately wish good unto ourselves".
2. *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, pp.34,35.
3. ibid. p.18.
4. So, too, must that of William Haller, who argued (H&D pp.42,43) that Lilburne ignored St.German's distinctions and "could not help taking for granted that the two laws of grace and of nature, flowed together in the hearts of all the people".

(ii) The Fall.

Lilburne acknowledged that the Fall had changed this original happy state of harmony, and had brought tyranny into human society: Adam had sought "to be like his Creator",[1] Cain had killed his brother, and the result was that now men desired to dominate and excercise a God-like lordship over each other.[2] Man had become "tyrannical and beastly in his principles and actions" and was accursed before God.[3]

However, Lilburne continued, God had taken "mercy of Mankind in some measure", and had instituted "a perpetuall, morall, unchangeable and everlasting Law" which limited the effect of man's sinfulness in human society. This law stated that

> whosoever he was, that would be so beastly, bearish and woolvish, as to fall upon his neighbour, brother or friend, taking away his life and blood from him; God ordaines and expresly saith he shall lose his life, without mercy or compassion for so doing.[4]

Lilburne believed that this law was still in operation. In his view, God had set limits on man's sinfulness, and restrained the violence that had been let loose in human society.

He provided the Biblical support for this view in *The Just Mans Justification* (June 1646), in which he cited "the morall and undispensable Law of God" that had been declared to Noah (Genesis 9:5,6):

> whoso shed mans blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the Image of God made he man.

Lilburne pointed out that this law had been given "long before that ever the Jewes were a Nation or had any Ceremoniall Law given unto them".[5] It was, in fact, the original law of nature which had been modified and strengthened to meet the needs of a fallen society.

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1. *The Free Mans Freedom Vindicated*, p.12.
2. ibid. *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, p.17.
3. ibid. p.18.
4. ibid.
5. *The Just Mans Justification*, June 1646, p.10.

What Lilburne was saying, both here and in his postscript to *Londons Liberty*, was that, whereas before the Fall men had not oppressed one another because they were not inclined to, now they had to be restrained from violence by the threat of retribution. God had instituted this law to check the escalation of violence and limit the effects of man's sin.

It is important to note, however, that Lilburne was not saying that men had lost their rights as creatures made in the image of God, or that the original principle of government by consent and agreement had gone by the board. Rather, he was suggesting that these things now had to be protected and reinforced by law. If anything, the principle of government by consent had become even more important because of the readiness of men to take advantage of their fellows. In this fallen society it was vital to be able to exclude others from encroachments upon one's own life, liberty and property.

Further on in the postscript to *Londons Liberty* Lilburne wrote that it was the discovery of the rights guaranteed to them by this law of nature which preserved men from living "in beastlinesse, by devouring one another". By defending these rights men ensured that "the trusted", that is, the rulers, who had been "made great and potent, by a power conferred upon them", could not "therewith... Lord it, domineer over, and destroy by their Prerogative-will and pleasure, the Betrusters"; they were also able

> to maintain the liberties and privileges established in a Land, by Law, against the incroaching, usurpations of some great and mighty Nimrods of the world

who would seek to oppress others.[1]

It seems clear then that for Lilburne, political rights founded upon the law of nature, which itself had been given by God, had to do primarily with limiting the tyrannous impulse involved in the ex ercise of power,

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1. *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, 1646, p.19.

and with ensuring that "the trusted" really and truly acted for the good and safety of "the betrusters". In Lilburne's thinking, the law of nature dealt with the social consequences of the Fall of man. It was a sign of God's mercy in political terms.

A number of scholars have suggested that, in order to develop a democratic political theory, the Levellers as a group jettisoned the Calvinistic doctrine of man, with its emphasis on sin and depravity, and adopted a supposedly "optimistic" outlook.[1] As far as Lilburne is concerned, it is true that in *Englands Birth-Right Justified* (1645) he had declared that the nation was plagued by "many lawyers", and agreed with Walwyn that everyone would be better off without them.[2] But this should be interpreted primarily in terms of Lilburne's attack on William Prynne, rather than as a statement of belief in human perfectibility.

In fact, the assumption that man is a sinner was central to Lilburne's approach to social questions. John Pym's view of law, which he quoted in *Londons Liberty*,[3] summarised his own position: given "the depraved condition of human nature", a society without law would become prey to "Lust", "Envy", "Covetousnesse" and "Ambition". He, too, believed that law was "the safeguard... of all private interest", the custodian of men's "Lives, Liberties and estates";[4] where there were no laws to safeguard these things, liberty was impossible and "confusion" the only outcome.

In *The Grand Plea of Lt.Col.John Lilburne* (Oct.1647) Lilburne declared that he preferred to "live under a very harsh law" where he knew

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1. See for example, J.Frank, *The Levellers*, Harvard, 1955, p.246; D.B.Robertson, *The Religious Foundations of Leveller Democracy*, New York, 1951, pp.95,96; D.M.Wolfe, *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution*, New York, 1944, pp.36,37.
2. *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, p.37.
3. See above pp.168,169.
4. *An Exact Collection of All Remonstrances, Declarations, Votes*, 1643, p140, quoted in *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, 1646, p.39.

what was required of him, than under a benevolent, arbitrary government led by "godly" men. For, under such government, he explained,

> I am not then under law (which all men that ever God created ought to be) but under will and power, by which (by reason of mans corruption, who here hath no perfection, but are subject to actuall backsliding and degenerating) I am lyable and in danger every houre to be destroyed at the pleasure of him that is stronger in power than I.[1]

He made a similar point in *The Lawes Funeral* (May 1648) which was an account of his defence before the Judges of the King's Bench on the 8th of May 1648, where he stood accused of plotting against the government. Lilburne complained that despite its many promises, Parliament had not established justice in the land. After having been forced on many ccasions to answer charges before Parliamentary committees, however, he confessed to the court that he was

> not a little glad that I stand before you at this Barre of Justice, which is bounded by the law (where I never was before).[2]

Lilburne's fear of arbitrariness and unbridled power, an ever present theme in his writings, flowed from his belief in the fallenness of man. His high view of law went hand in hand with a strong doctrine of sin. As far as he was concerned, the law existed to curb the excesses of fallen human nature, and to preserve the rights of individuals in the face of the greed and malice of their fellow-men. Lilburne's political career should be seen, not as an excercise in sectarian "perfectibilitarianism",[3] but as an attempt, to rid society of what, rightly or wrongly, he considered to be arbitrary and tyrannical government, and of which he felt himself to be the perpetual victim.

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1. *The Grand Plea of Lt.Col.John Lilburne*, Oct.1647, p.19.
2. *The Lawes Funerall*, May 1648, p.5.
3. Robertson, p.96.

(iii) The Principle of Segregation.

Thus far, the Fall has been considered largely in terms of its social and political ramifications. However, Lilburne believed that there were also spiritual consequences of sin, since the Fall had to do fundamentally with a break in relationship between man and God. Adam deserved to suffer for what he had done; but instead of condemning him to "everlasting destruction and ruin" God in His mercy had dealt with man's rebellion by sending "the promised Messiah".[1]

Lilburne argued in *Londons Liberty* that Christ had come to restore and repair the loss which man had suffered at the Fall; He had come to preach love for God and love for neighbour, and to renew man, "after the Image of him that created him".[2] He had come not to "destroy morality, civility, justice and right reason" but to restore it to its "first perfection, beauty, splendour and glory".[3]

Crucially, however, Lilburne was not fusing the order of grace and the order of nature here. He was not saying that Christ's advent had solved the social problem, only that Christ had saved man from the ultimate consequences of his sin, namely, eternal damnation. He did not equate political solutions with Christian salvation. Nor did he view salvation as some kind of general process that Christ had instituted which included the whole of mankind. As in his pamphlets of the late 1630s, he understood it as something which was restricted to the saints. It was they who had "put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man";

it was the saints who were called upon not only

> to doe good unto each other, but as much as in them lyes,
> to doe good unto all the Sons of Adam.

It was precisely this matter of doing good to all men with which Lilburne

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1. *The Free Mans Freedom*, 1646, p.12.
2. *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered*, 1646, p.19.
3. ibid. p.18.

was concerned in his political writings. He did not equate it with bringing them salvation, and he knew that they were not all his brothers and sisters in Christ. Nevertheless, he believed that

> the greatest good that I know of, that any man can do unto the sons of men beside the discovery of the knowledge of Christ, and the benefits and priviledges that are to be injoyed by him; is rationally to discover the privilege that is the Right, Due and Propriety of all the Sons of Adam, as men: that so they may not live in beastlinesse, by devouring one another.[1]

Political enlightenment, for Lilburne, was not the same as "the discovery of the knowledge of Christ"; salvation was one thing, politics and the business of living safely and decently in the world was quite another. Not all men enjoyed "the benefits and privileges" of a relationship with Christ, but all could be treated "as men", each with rights and liberties which were to be safeguarded and respected in the world.

Rash Oaths Unwarrantable of May 1647 demonstrates that this principle of separation was not a short-term hangover from his "religious" days, but that he continued to use it during the period of his most intense political activity with the Levellers.

In this pamphlet Lilburne took issue with the view that the King was the supreme governor of the realm in all matters, spiritual as well as temporal. He argued that the King had nothing whatsoever to do with spiritual issues, because Jesus Christ had been appointed by God to be "the perfect Law-maker and Law-giver, unto his visible church on earth under the Gospell". Thus there was

> no room at all left for Kings, Parliaments or any other power on earth to adde to or detract from what he by the eternally and everlasting assignement of his Father was to doe in that particular.

He maintained that it was a denial of Christ's authority to establish "in the spirituall church" the laws or dictates of "any earthly power

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1. ibid. p.19.

whatsoever". If Christ was king of a man's soul it seemed clear to Lilburne that it was treason against him to swear that any human leader, whether spiritual or temporal, was "Supreme Governour" in all things, "spirituall or ecclesiasticall". Christ was the

> King of Saints... unto whom all power in Heaven and Earth was to be committed to make absolute, perfect, spirituall Lawes, unalterable, unchangeable by any King, Parliaments, or Potentats whatsoever.

He argued that if Kings, Parliaments or magistrates had any say at all in the "spirituall House, City or Church of Christ on earth" it was by virtue of their sainthood rather than their office. The "inward" man was the exclusive domain of God. It was

> as much his single due without competitors, as the obedience and subjection of the body, outward man, and estate is the right and due of Caesars, Kings, Parliaments or Potentats.[1]

Here is seen a clear distinction between, and separation of, the natural and supernatural order, the prerogative of man and the prerogative of God. Lilburne believed that spiritual matters were no concern of Caesar. But Caesar did have his rights and responsibilities: the "outward" man certainly was subject to political authority. Lilburne's activities as a Leveller were concerned with the domain of Caesar, inquiring into, and seeking to establish, what were the conditions under which the nation might be most safely governed and the rights of man protected. He treated the natural sphere on its own terms, primarily by referring to the law of nature which, he claimed, had been ordained by God for the very purpose of ordering man's life in the world.

It is quite clear from this that Lilburne's political thinking was founded upon a real distinction between the natural order and the order of salvation. He was able to develop his political theory because he kept the

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1. *Rash Oaths Unwarrantable*, May 1647, p.15.

orders distinct, and treated them each on their own terms. He neither made analogies from the sphere of grace to the sphere of nature,[1] nor did he equate the two orders.[2]

The theological view of man presented by Lilburne especially in his postscripts to *The Free Mans Freedom* and *Londons Liberty in Chains Discovered* of 1646 is of crucial importance in understanding the relationship between theology and politics in Lilburne's writings. J.C.Davis has rightly criticised C.B.Macpherson's thesis concerning the Levellers' concept of self-propriety[3] for focussing too narrowly on the question of the ownership of property, and almost entirely ignoring the Christian and moral dimension of their thinking.[4] As this chapter has shown, Lilburne did indeed define man primarily in theological terms: the doctrines of the Image of God and the Fall did inform his political theory. But, as has also been seen, the development of that theory must be understood in terms of his concept of the law of nature and set in the context of his separatist ecclesiology, and Calvinistic doctrine of salvation.

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1. Cf. A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, London 1938, pp.69,84. See above p.15.
2. Cf. W.Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution*, New York 1955, p.287. See above pp.9,10.
3. C.B.Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford, 1962, ch.3, esp.pp.142-145. Macpherson's theory will be dealt with in the next chapter.
4. Davis, pp.242ff.

Chapter Eight

OVERTON AND THE PRINCIPLES OF REASON

It is not possible to say precisely when Richard Overton's association with John Lilburne and William Walwyn began. Certainly by April 1645 he had read "that most famous peece called *The Compassionate Samaritane*", which he described as " a most exact model of rationality".[1] In the first half of 1646 he was cooperating with William Larner in the printing of John Lilburne's work,[2] and in July of that year he published two pamphlets strongly supportive of Lilburne who had recently been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment by the House of Lords.[3] But there is no record of his having participated in 1645 in the kind of political activities in which Lilburne and Walwyn were involved.[4]

At whatever stage the three men did become personally acquainted, however, there were important similarities in their emerging patterns of thought. The first two sections of this chapter will seek to show that, as in the case of Lilburne and Walwyn, Overton's political theory developed out of his commitment to religious toleration; in his story, as in theirs, William Prynne played a highly ambiguous role, as the ideologue of religious coercion over against whom toleration was defended, and as the author of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, the source of many radical political ideas; moreover, like them, Overton possessed an understanding of nature as the repository of important principles by which the life of man in the world might be governed.

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1. *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution*, April 1645, p.32.
2. See the article on William Larner by R.L.Greaves in *BDBR*
3. These were, *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens*, July 1646, and *An Alarum to the House of Lords*, July 1646.
4. See above p.158.

But it will be argued that there were also differences between Overton and the other two pamphleteers on points of theology and of political philosophy. These centred mainly on his view of the role played by reason in the life of man.

The final section of the chapter will deal with the concept of self-propriety as it is found in the writings of Overton and Lilburne in particular, and examine the way it related to other aspects of their thought, notably, their theory of the law of nature, and their Christian view of man as the image of God. It will be argued that their understanding of the relationship between property and natural rights was confused and ambiguous largely because of their failure or apparent inability to grapple at this point with the political tradition out of which their whole theory developed.

1. Reason and Revelation

(i) God's Word and God's Works.

It has already been seen in chapter four that it is a great mistake to view *Mans Mortalitie* (1644) as a materialist or atheistic tract, as some scholars have done. Overton's mortalism was founded upon certain convictions concerning the unitary nature of man which had their roots deep in Biblical teaching. Nevertheless, however, there was a profoundly rationalistic element at work in vital aspects of his thought, moulding his approach to both theological and political questions. This rationalism was not the type which attacked or rejected religious belief altogether. Rather, while accepting the truths of revealed religion, it allowed more and more scope for the ex ercise of human reason.

Overton believed that there was, and had to be, a real compatibility between reason and religion. In *Mans Mortalitie* he argued that religious

belief could not be irrational or non-sensical, for that were "to make no distinction between Reason and Madnesse". He claimed that no-one was bound to believe anything "for which there is no sense or reason". In fact, he maintained, Christianity was rational:

> we find in Scripture and in Nature sufficient to convince our Reasons that there is but one God, and he that one whom we worship, though our Reasons are not able fully to comprehend him; so much of him wee know, as our Reasons is able to containe.[1]

Overton was of the firm opinion that while reason had its limitations, and certainly was not able to plumb the depths of religion, religion had to accord with reason. He stated that it "shall be no Article of my Beliefe" to accept that for which there was no evidence and of which there could be no rational knowledge.[2] His trust in the powers of human reason appear to have increased as the 1640s progressed.

In all probability the precise nature of Overton's belief in the complementarity of reason and religion would have been much easier to demonstrate had one of his pamphlets survived the upheavals of mid-17th century England. In 1649 when he was arrested by Lt.Col.Axtel, his house was ransacked and many of his books and papers were taken away. Among these were his "meditations upon the works of Creation intituled, Gods Word confirmed by his Workes", wherein he

> endeavoured the probation of a God, a creation, a state of Innocencie, a Fall, a Resurrection, a Restorer, a Day of Judgement etc. barely from the consideration of things visible and created.[3]

This rationalistic frame of mind, evidenced in the title of the lost pamphlet, can, no doubt, be explained partly in terms of a relatively optimistic view of man, which many of his contemporaries would not have

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1. *Mans Mortalitie*, p.16.
2. ibid. Cf. H.Woolnor, *The True Originall of the Soule*, 1641, p.287: reason, he wrote, "teacheth not to beleeve anything for which wee have no reason, Scripture, nor experience".
3. Overton's narrative in *A Picture of the Counsel of State*, 1649, in H&D p.216.

shared. As has been seen, in *Mans Mortalitie* he outlined a limited doctrine of the Fall according to which sin affected only man's future salvation and left life in the world relatively untouched.[1] He believed that man was still capable of ordering his life in the world by the ex ercise of his reason.

But this explanation is only partial, and tends to suggest that Overton's outlook was rather more unusual for his time than it was. In fact, his rationalism was far more in keeping with the intellectual climate of the 17th century than has often been acknowledged. Perry Miller has pointed out that despite a heavy emphasis on the depravity of man, much Puritan thinking itself held reason in high regard and placed great emphasis on the moral and intellectual faculties of fallen men. He observes that "the frequency with which the preachers insisted upon an inherent rationality of man is truly startling".[2] Indeed, he claims that

> one of the most pronounced and widespread characteristics of Puritan thought in the 17th century is the constantly increasing emphasis put upon the remains of God's image in fallen men. It made what seems a concerted effort to salvage as much as possible from the rubbish heap;

the remainders of the image of God in man were seen in his ability to make "theoretical and practical judgements",[3] and in the knowledge of morality.[4]

Overton was certainly not alone in the seventeenth century in suggesting that there was a clear testimony to God in the created order. Some orthodox Puritans of the time fought against the anti-intellectualism of religious radicals by asserting the neccessary interdependence of

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1. See above pp.97
2. P.Miller, *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century*, 1963, p.84.
3. ibid. p.186.
4. ibid. p.185. This accords well with what has already been observed concerning the Calvinist John Bastwick's view of natural morality. See above p.45ff.

religion and knowledge.[1] Henry Woolnor, in *The True Originall of the Soule*, maintained that God revealed things in two ways, "either by his Word or by his works".[2] He claimed that God's Word and Works agreed, for "what he hath spoken in his Word, the same he has wrought in the world".[3] Furthermore, "many things that that are not mentioned in the Word are yet manifest in the works of God".[4] Woolnor gave natural revelation a very elevated position. Whereas he described the Scriptures as "the Word of grace", he described nature as "the ordinary voice of God".[5] There was no suggestion here that the Scriptures were untrue or irrelevant. But there was a clear tendency towards viewing nature and reason as spheres of revelation independent of the Scriptures and equally legitimate.

The astrologers of the seventeenth century, as they attempted to explain historical and personal events on the basis of natural laws, saw their efforts as complementary to those of the theologians. For they, too, believed that God could be understood by His works, and the movements of the stars and heavenly bodies were precisely that. In the highly popular almanacs of the time, astrology was variously defined as a system of "Natural Theology", "a way to know the most high God", and "the alphabet of divinity".[6] A late sixteenth century introduction to astrology claimed that the will of God was "most plainelie set forth as in a table in his celestiall creatures", and it was the task of astrology to explain it.[7]

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1. ibid. p.82. Miller quotes, for example, the Puritan Edward Reynolds (1658) who emphasised that "there is a knowledge of God natural in and by his works: and a knowledge supernatural by revelation out of the Word: and though this be the principal, yet the other is not to be undervalued".
2. Woolnor, p.7.
3. ibid. p.3.
4. ibid. p.7.
5. ibid. p.286.
6. B.Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press*, 1979, p.142.
7. C.Dariot, *A Breefe and Most Easie Introduction to the Astrologicall Judgement of the Starres*, 1591, Dedicatory Epistle by F.Wither, p.iii. Wither also stated that although the Scriptures were to be preferred before all other sources of knowledge, nevertheless, it was not to be accounted "the least or smallest point of Divinitie to know God truly in his workes and creatures"(p.ii). In the consideration of the nature and

Some Calvinistic preachers of the 1630s and 1640s were fierce opponents of astrology, but according to K.Thomas, many people of the time found no problem reconciling their faith with the practice of astrology, and the astrologers themselves certainly did not believe that they were posing a pagan threat:

> None of the leading astrologers seem to have been star-worshippers. They represent almost every shade of religious opinion from Roman Catholic to Quaker.[1]

Astrology was, therefore, seen by many people not as a metaphysical rival to Christian faith, but the scientific exposition of it. This is an important point as far as Overton is concerned because it is known that at least one point in his life he took the claims of astrology quite seriously. In April 1648 he wrote a letter to William Lilly, the famous London astrologer, seeking his counsel with regard to his involvement with the radicals in the army.[2] He asked Lilly to tell him

> whether by joining with the agents of the private soldiery of the army for the redemption of common right and freedom to the land and removal of oppressions from the people, my endeavours shall be prosperous or no.[3]

One of Overton's pamphlets of 1645 shows that he was familiar with astrological terms and concepts, although that knowledge may have been superficial. *The Nativity of Sir John Presbyter* was a satire in the form of a horoscope in which astrology was used to ridicule the Presbyterian establishment. Overton listed the names of various astrologers and astronomers whose opinions he claimed to have consulted, but these did

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influences of the heavenly bodies "wee shall straightway bee brought to the understanding and knowledge how that God hath planted and placed in them a law of reigment or rule, by whom as by his instruments and second causes he will rule and governe this inferiour Orbe" (p.iii).

1. K.Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 1971, p.383. On the Calvinistic opponents of astrology, Thomas comments that "it was the very writers who came closest in their own beliefs to the notion of an implacable destiny who were the most easily offended by the fatalism of astrology" (p.370).
2. See Thomas, pp.313,373.
3. Overton to Lilly, Bodleian Library, shelfmark: Ashm.420, att. to f.267.

not play an important part in the pamphlet.[1] Overton could easily have obtained his knowledge of astrology from the almanacs of the period,[2] or from popular guides such as the one by Dariot.[3]

Of Overton's letter to Lilly, Keith Thomas comments that

> there is no stronger testimony to the appeal of astrological advice in the mid-17th century than this request by one of the most sophisticated and "rationalist" of contemporary thinkers.[4]

The point is, however, that Overton may well have been attracted to astrology precisely because of his rationalism, rather than in spite of it. If the astrologers claimed to base their study on the "works" of God, then it would be strange if the author of a pamphlet on the subject of God's Word and works had not given it serious consideration.

Although *Gods Word Confirmed by His Workes* has not survived, there is, perhaps, an example of how Overton might have approached the matter in *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*, an anonymous work of 1647 that was probably the product of cooperation between Overton and John Lilburne.[5] The tract began with an account of the political results of the Fall, and proceeded to demonstrate how all men were, or ought to be, governed by the law of God, "which in great part is ingraven in Nature and demonstrated by

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1. *The Nativity of Sir John Presbyter*, 1645, Title page. He listed "Ptolomey, Haly, Hermes, Albumazar, Sconor, Tasnier, Regiomontanus, Guido, Bonatus, Keplar, Galileus, with other learned Mathematicians as well Antient as Moderne". He also included the names of various Hebrew demons, indicating that he possibly had some knowledge of Jewish mystical traditions, such as Cabbalah (pp.6,7).
2. Capp, p.23, estimates that by the 1660s one in three households purchased an almanac.
3. See above, p.189 n7.
4. Thomas, p.313.
5. Because of the presence of characteristic Lilburnean passages and themes, this pamphlet is often attributed to Lilburne alone. But the style and presentation of other sections are certainly unlike anything by Lilburne, and strongly suggest the involvement of someone else. The passage in question suggests that Overton had a hand in it. See also H.N.Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, (ed.C.Hill), 1976, p.140 n.28.

Reason".[1] The author of *Regall Tyrannie* then tried to explain exactly how the Ten Commandments could be deduced from nature.

As far as the first table of the law was concerned - man's duty to God - he maintained that it all flowed from "the instinct in Nature that there is a God or a mighty incomprehensible power"; because men knew that there was a God, it was "rationall that we should not make Gods unto ourselves", and "rationall that he only should be worshipped".[2] With respect to the third and fourth commandments, "reason dictates unto me that I should speak reverently and honourably of him", and it was "rationall I should set some time apart to do him homage and service".[3]

Having thus dealt with the first part of the law, he then dealt with the rest of it - man's duty to his fellows - under the heading of the Golden Rule:

> Reason telleth me in the negative that it is but just that I should not doe that unto another which I would not have another doe to me; but that in the affirmative I should doe as I would be done unto.

This, he claimed, was "the marrow of the whole second table of Gods law, from whence all laws amongst men ought to have their derivation".[4] In other words, since nature taught a man to protect himself against theft, murder or adultery, implicit in that was the commandment not to inflict such things on others. Overton, if he was in fact the author, believed that men could, and did, know the will of God simply because they were men. In what, in any event, might be described as a classic statement of his approach, he wrote that the laws of men in society flowed from "their will and mind founded upon the Law of God, ingraven in nature and

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1. *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*, 1647, p.9. This whole section was, in fact, a word for word reproduction of the theological postscript to Lilburne's *The Free Mans Freedom*, June 1646, pp.11,12.
2. ibid.
3. ibid. p.10.
4. ibid. The political dimensions of Overton's rationalism will be discussed in the next section. For a discussion of the role played by the Golden Rule in the writings of the Leveller pamphleteers, see above p.173f

demonstrated by reason".[1]

Regall Tyrannie Discovered only attempted to demonstrate the law of God from nature, something which most of Overton's contemporaries would not have regarded as particularly remarkable.[2] The lost pamphlet, if its title is to be believed, went much further than this and attempted to show the truths of the Gospel itself from nature. This was not an approach that commended itself to William Walwyn. Walwyn, too, placed great emphasis on the merits of human reason. But as far as religious belief was concerned, he saw its value in demonstrating the weakness, rather than affirming the truth, of theological positions. Reason, for him, fulfilled an important sceptical function, but it could not convince anyone of the truth of the Gospel. In *A Still and Soft Voyce* (April 1647) he rejected "natural argument" as a way to evoke faith: God, through the Scriptures was His own witness.[3] It is very unlikely that Walwyn had Overton in mind when he wrote this pamphlet. Its main target was probably Independents and sectaries within the John Price circle who were accusing him of "atheism".[4] This does, nevertheless, illustrate the diversity of theological approach within the Leveller leadership, and the danger of treating them, in this respect at least, as a homogeneous group.

Precisely how Overton would have gone about demonstrating the truth of the Gospel "barely from the consideration of things visible and created" is hard to envisage. Such an attempt would have been fraught with theological pitfalls, particularly with respect to the fusion of the orders of grace and of nature; the potential for the development of extremely unorthodox ideas was great. But in the absence of *Gods Word*

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1. ibid. p.11.
2. Miller, p.185, shows that for seventeenth century Puritans, the Ten Commandments constituted the law of nature. "Blurred though the laws of nature might be" because of human sin, "Puritans could never give over trying to spell them out".
3. *A Still and Soft Voyce*, 1647, in D.M.Wolfe, *Milton in the Puritan Revolution*, London 1963, pp.371,372. See above p.138.
4. H&D p.353.

Confirmed by His Workes, and based on what has been seen of his approach to theological questions in extant pamphlets, it must be recognised that, by the standards of 17th century Puritanism, there was nothing inherently and essentially heretical about Overton's rationalism. It could be argued, to the contrary, that it reflected accurately an important strand of contemporary Christian thought.

(ii) The Separation of the Orders.

Overton's whole scheme of thought, in fact, rested on a clear distinction between the natural order, and the order of salvation. For him, society was not "the invisible church made visible".[1] This becomes clear in his discussion of the role of "magistracy" in *An Appeale from the Degenerate Representative Body the Commons of England*, which he wrote while imprisoned for his illegal publishing activities in July 1647.

Magistracy, he explained was an institution for the good of society. It did not exist to protect or promote any particular group, but was

> an ordinance amongst men and for men, that all may have an humane subsistence and safety to live as men amongst men.[2]

There were definite limits to the magistrate's authority, however: "matters of conscience or opinion about Religion or Worship" were none of its business. Overton's choice of words to describe the role of government is highly significant. As he stated repeatedly in the passage, things "humane", rather than things "spirituall" were its concern. He himself stressed that this was a vital point to grasp for a proper understanding of the relationship between nature and grace:

> this is the true distinction for matter of subjection, betwixt God and Caesar... what is Gods we must in the first place give unto God, and what is Caesars, in the

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1. Davis, p.233.
2. *An Appeale from the Degenerate Body the Commons of England*, July 1647, in D.M.Wolfe, *Leveller Manifestoes*, New York 1944, p.180.

> second place, freely and readily we must give unto Caesar.

The "inward" man was God's prerogative, Overton stated, whereas the "outward" man was man's prerogative:

> God is the immediate Lord over the inward and mediately over the outward, and though immediate thereover, yet by Deputation or Commission from him who is thus both over the one and the other.

Overton did not believe, then, that the realm of grace and that of nature were entirely unrelated, for God was still Lord over both realms, despite the fact that authority had been delegated to man in the natural. Nevertheless, the natural was not to encroach upon the religious: Caesar was not to play the part of God.

But just as vitally, he maintained, neither was the religious to undermine the natural. While Christ had rejected religious coercion and refused to take up the sword "for the promulgation and settlement of his doctrine", this did not mean, in Overton's view, that <u>all</u> recourse to the sword was therefore wrong. "Defensive force", he argued, was necessary in the political sphere in order to

> maintaine our naturall humane being and subsistence upon earth; ...the contrary doctrine [i.e. pacifism] would tend to the utter confusion of humanity, the depopulation of Nations, Kingdomes and Countries.[1]

"Spirituall" warfare, he continued, demanded "spirituall" weapons, whereas "humane" warfare demanded "naturall" weapons:

> neither the one nor the other in their distinctive propriety and administration is distructive or contradictory one to another, but both may properly meet and stand together in one individuall without the least incroachment or prejudice to each others propriety.[2]

This passage is very similar to another in a pamphlet published by John Lilburne the previous May,[3] which also distinguished between the "inward"

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1. ibid. p.181.
2. ibid. p.182.
3. *Rash Oaths Unwarrantable*, May 1646, p.15. See above p.183.

and the "outward" man. By introducing the terms "spirituall" and "humane", Overton made his point even more clearly.

The distinction between the two orders is to be seen again in one of Overton's writings of 1649, indicating that, in this fundamental respect, his ideas remained unchanged during his years of involvement with the other Levellers. In his section of *A Picture of the Counsel of State*, he argued that his own religious beliefs and personal morality had no bearing on the political activities in which he had been involved. As far as his "personal sins and transgressions" were concerned, he would have to answer to God for them; but as for his behaviour as a citizen,

> that all men have cognisance of, because it concerns their own particular lives, livelihoods and beings,

and they had every right to judge him accordingly. Because of his belief in the separation of the orders, the issue, for him, was straightforward:

> the businesse is not how great a sinner I am but how faithful and real to the commonwealth; that's the only matter concerneth my neighbour and whereof my neighbour is only... to take notice; and for my personal sins that are not of civil cognisance or wrong unto him, to leave them to God whose judgement is righteous and just.[1]

For Overton, the distinction between nature and grace was a real, and also a tidy one. He appears to have seen no complex inter-relationship between them, no tension and conflict such as characterises Lutheran notions of the two kingdoms. If anything, his concept came closer to a Thomist understanding - grace as a superstructure added to nature.

There is one point in his pamphlets, however, where, at first sight, the distinction appears to have broken down altogether. In *An Arrow against all Tyrants* (1646), he claimed that God had given certain rights to all men and noone had the right to take them away from him. Every man was by nature

> a King, Priest and Prophet in his own natural circuit and

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1. *A Picture of the Counsel of State*, April 1649, in H&D p.231.

> compasse whereof no second may partake but by deputation, commission and free consent from him whose natural right and freedom it is.[1]

Overton clearly drew here on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to describe the rights of all men within society. In the same way that separatists affirmed the right of believers to choose their own leaders and determine their own form of worship and ministry, Overton now argued that all citizens had similar rights with regard to their political leaders and form of government. A.S.P.Woodhouse maintains that

> this is virtually a statement of the doctrines of Christian liberty and equality with 'man' written over the word 'believer' and 'nature' written over the word 'grace'.[2]

There is some truth in this. But despite the rationalist tendency that has been observed in Overton's writings, it must not be assumed that he thereby transformed the Christian doctrine into a secular political theory and emptied it of its specifically Christian content. His rationalism was not of that kind. In this instance, Overton borrowed the imagery of the priesthood of all believers and applied it politically. It was the analogy that the doctrine provided, and not its secular reinterpretation that concerned him.

The contention that the Levellers never segregated grace and nature[3] is as false in Overton's case as it is in Lilburne's. It is true that Overton saw God as Lord over both spheres, and that he believed grace and nature to be complementary, but that is not the same thing. It is possible to believe both that God's intentions for society are to some extent revealed through nature, and that man requires grace over and above this in order to be saved; the law of nature, because it is planted in the

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1. *An Arrow against all Tyrants*, 1646, p.4.
2. A.S.P.Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, 1938, p.69.
3. See J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in Manning, p.226.

world by God may also in some senses be said to be the law of God, but that does not mean that the order of nature and the order of salvation are identical. Overton appears to have conceived of nature as a relatively autonomous sphere, established by God, within which man as man was able to live harmoniously and lawfully without the necessary assistance of religion. Grace, as far as he was concerned, had to do with the recovery of immortality, and that was an individual matter between a man and God. It had little social significance.

It is entirely unreasonable to accept the view that in his thought there is "a militant naturalism and a thinly veiled hostility to dogmatic religion".[1] Naturalism there certainly was, but it does not appear to have despised doctrinal theology. *Mans Mortalitie* was a highly theological document, and it was Overton's declared purpose in *Gods Word confirmed by his Workes*, the pamphlet that was destroyed, to show the truth of "dogmatic religion" by appealing to nature. As will be seen, it is true that as the 1640s progressed his extant writings centered less on what might be termed "religious" concerns - in particular, the argument for religious toleration - and more on social and political issues discussed in the framework of natural rights. However, he did not deny salvation, and he continued to understand God to be the creator and preserver of nature. What he did, in effect, was to relegate the manifestation of God's 'special' grace to the end of history, when He would judge men and raise the faithful to eternal life, and to concentrate his own thinking on the role that 'ordinary' grace, operative in nature, might play in governing the life of man in the world. It is only in this sense that Overton can be called a rationalist, and possibly linked with "the beginnings of Deism".[2] What is to be observed in his writings is not the rejection of religion,

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1. Woodhouse, p.54; cf. J.Frank, *The Levellers*, Harvard, 1955, pp.40,41.
2. ibid; G.L.Mosse, "Puritan Radicalism and the Enlightenment", in S.A.Burrell (ed.), *The Role of Religion in Modern European Thought*, New York 1964, pp.75,76.

but a shift in the focus of his attention away from the church and theology to society and politics.

2. Reason and Natural Rights

(i) *The Arraignement of Mr. Persecution.*

Overton's political theory, like those of Walwyn and Lilburne, developed in close association with his concern for religious toleration. Between April 1645 and January 1646 he wrote six satirical tracts all targeted against the Divines of the Westminster Assembly and coercive Presbyterianism.[1] Because of the style that he had adopted, which relied on the personification of ideas, Overton did not, on the whole, specify at any one time whose views he was attacking:[2] "Sir John Presbyter" and "Sir Simon Synod", two of his central characters, were intended to be representative of a whole way of thinking. But in *The Arraignement* he sarcastically described William Prynne and Thomas Edwards as "mighty champions" of the Assembly,[3] so there can be little mystery as to who he had in mind.

In all six tracts, Overton concentrated mainly on theological arguments for toleration, and in this respect the influence of Roger Williams' *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, which Overton acknowledged he had read, may have been significant.[4] But in *The Arraignement of*

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1. These were, *The Arraignement of Mr. Persecution*, April, 1645; *A Sacred Decretall*, June 1645; *Martins Echo*, June 1645; *The Nativity of Sir John Presbyter*, July 1645; *The Ordinance for Tythes Dismounted*, Dec. 1645; *Divine Observations*, Jan. 1646.
2. *Divine Observations*, Jan. 1646, was a specific response to *A Letter of the Ministers of the City of London... against Toleration*, Jan. 1646.
3. *The Arraignement of Mr. Persecution*, 1645, p. 18.
4. ibid. p. 32. See for example, *The Arraignement*, p. 4: Christ "chargeth his householders the Kings of the Earth, to let the Tares and Wheat grow together in the Field of the World till the Harvest the Day of Judgement". Cf. *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 1644, p. 1: "Christ commandeth that the Tares and Wheat... should be let alone in the world, and not plucked up till the Harvest, which is the end of the world". Also cf. *The Arraignement*, p. 22, 23, and *The Bloudy Tenent*, 1644, p. ii.

Mr. Persecution, which was the first, and in many ways, the best and most effective of his Marpriest tracts, he also approached the issue from a political perspective. The pamphlet contained a number of ideas, not ably that of *Salus Populi*, which were foundational to the political theory spelt out in his later writings.

By this time (April 1645) Overton had certainly read *The Compassionate Samaritane* (1644),[1] the tract in which Walwyn began to make a political case for toleration.[2] But it does not appear to have influenced his political thinking in any obvious way. It was in *A Helpe to the Right Understanding*, published only a matter of weeks before *The Arraignement*, that Walwyn first appealed directly to the principle of "the Safety of the People" against the practise of coercion, and there is no indication that Overton had read it. It seems wise, therefore, to assume that he arrived at his position independently of William Walwyn.

Apart from the Biblical and theological "witnesses" who were called on to testify against Persecution in *The Arraignement*, the court also heard evidence of an overtly political nature from the likes of "Mr. Power of Parliaments", "Mr. Publique-good", "Mr. State-Policie" and "Mr. Light of Nature". From the way in which Overton dealt with these characters and the clarity with which he expressed the ideas he put into their mouths he was obviously well-acquainted with the ideological defence of the Parliamentary revolt. It is likely that he had read, or was, at least familiar with Prynne's *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*.

One of the first witnesses called for the prosecution was "Mr. Power of Parliaments" who stated that

> persecution for conscience is inconsistent with the soveraignty of kingdomes, for it divideth their Powers one against another, and in themselves occasioneth murmurings... which in time breake forth into

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1. ibid. p.32.
2. See above p.144ff.

> Conspiracies, Rebellions, Insurrections etc, as well to the prejudice of Soveraignty as to the ruine of the Subject.

Persecution was simply the result of "Ecclesiasticke usurpation"; it undermined "the power of majestracy" and played right into the hands of the Papists who were always anxious to exploit the weaknesses of the kingdom.[1]

"Mr.Power of Parliaments" appears to have been none other than the author of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* himself. Overton here cleverly combined three characteristic themes of Prynne's book - Parliamentary sovereignty, Erastianism and anti-popery - and used them to condemn the kind of coercive approach to the religious life of the nation which Prynne advocated. Moreover, in highlighting the subversive threat posed by Persecution, Overton, through his "witness", effectively countered the charge, made by Prynne the previous January in *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood*, that it was the Independents who were the principal enemies of the nation.[2]

The theme of the safety of the people was central to the testimony of a number of characters in *The Arraignement*. "Mr.Publique-good" maintained that Persecution was treasonable since it struck at the roots of government "whose proper end is that all may lead a Quiet and Peaceable life under the publique Protection";[3] "Politicke Power" warned that Persecution must be "cut off lest the whole politique body perish", for, by hounding "well-minded men" and protecting the wicked, it had perverted "Salus Populi, the safety of the people" which was "the Soveraigne Law or

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1. ibid. p.4. Cf. *The Compassionate Samaritane*, 1644, pp.20,21. Walwyn maintained that "two Governments in one Commonwealth" - the "Ecclesiasticall" and the "Civill" - were incompatible with "the peoples safety", and that government by the divines was "too hazardous for the State".
2. *Truth Triumphing over Falsehood*, Jan.1645, Epistle to the Reader. See above p.124.
3. *The Arraignement*, p.5.

fundamental constitution of Civill Government";[1] "Mr.State-Policie" called for a comprehensive toleration so that people of every religion "might all enjoy their publike safety to the general enlargement and strengthening of politike power".[2]

In *The Arraignement* Overton was employing the same tactic - that of claiming religious liberty as a natural right according to Parliament's own principles - that Walwyn had already employed in *A Helpe to the Right Understanding* (Feb.1645), and to which Lilburne later turned in *Englands Birth-Right Justified* (Oct.1645). This should not necessarily be taken as evidence that they were borrowing ideas from each other. It would not be particularly surprising if the tactic had suggested itself independently to the three men. For the contrast between Prynne, author of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* and promulgator of *Salus Populi*, and Prynne, the scourge of Independency and proponent of religious coercion, was, indeed, striking.

"Tactic", however, is perhaps the wrong word to describe Overton's use of Parliamentary ideas, for it suggests that this was mere manoeuvring on his part. In fact it represented a significant development in his own thinking so that he could argue for toleration, and a whole range of other "rights" on the basis of what were, for the supporters of Parliament, fundamental political principles. As will be seen in the next section, Overton's own political theory, which he began to elaborate upon in his pamphlets of mid-1646 onwards, was founded upon a radical, individualistic exposition of the principle of *Salus Populi* and the concept of natural law that lay behind it.

Overton employed an argument for religious liberty based on natural

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1. ibid. p.27.
2. ibid. p.29.

law in *The Arraignement*. Prynne and others were at that time arguing that toleration bred all kinds of impiety and immorality, and would finally destroy society altogether.[1] Overton responded to this by calling on evidence from "Mr.Light of Nature". Toleration would not lead to lawlessness, this witness claimed, because nature, which "teaches the most ignorant", had written certain laws of "modesty and civility... in the hearts of all men naturally"; any "publike Transgressions" that did occur in a tolerant society fell "under the restraint and correction of the magestrate, whose power is over the things of Nature". The duty of government was "to maintaine the peace", and ensure that people were not "openly licentious, prophane and blaphemous, contrary to common sense, reason and humanity".[2] In other words, according to Overton, it was nature, not religion, which guaranteed the continuance of civil society: men did not need to be coerced into civilised and sociable behaviour because, by nature, they were already so inclined.

It is interesting to note that when Lilburne responded to this very same point made by Prynne, he took a very different approach. Rather than suggesting that society was founded upon the intrinsic goodness of man, as Overton appears to have done here, he stressed the role of law in human relationships.[3] This highlights an important difference in theological outlook between the two men. Overton seems to have understood the law of nature, and indeed man himself, in rather more optimistic terms than Lilburne. Although Lilburne also saw the law of nature as the basis of political society, the source of principles governing the life of man in the world, for him it was very definitely the law of a fallen world; while it was aimed at the preservation of persons and their rights, it functioned according to the retributive terms of the Noahic covenant -

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1. *Independency Examined*, 1644, p.5. See above pp.123ff.
2. *The Arraignement*, pp.32,33.
3. See above pp.168f.

"whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen.9:6) - that is, on the basis of fear and self-interest.[1] It is significant that, whereas in his theological postscripts of 1646 Lilburne deliberately discussed the law of nature in the context of the doctrine of the Fall, nowhere did Overton do so,[2] even though, as will be seen, he did make reference to the doctrine of man as the image of God. Lilburne's concept of the law of nature was certainly compatible with a Calvinistic doctrine of human depravity. Overton's theory rested upon a belief in the innate decency of man.

(ii) The Principles of Reason.

Overton gave perhaps the clearest account of his political philosophy in *An Appeale from the Degenerate Representative Body the Commons of England*. This was written during his imprisonment in July 1647, in the aftermath of the burning of the March Petition of the Levellers, and was an attempt to justify his opposition to Parliament, which he believed no longer had authority to govern. Beginning with the presupposition that "nothing which is against Reason is lawful",[3] he went on to outline four principles of reason which he considered to be fundamental to the life of the individual and of the nation.

Before examining these principles, however, it might be thought that, because Overton capitalised the spelling of "reason" he therefore held to some mystical concept such as that found in Winstanley's writings, who used "Reason" as a synonym for God.[4] But this would be a mistake.

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1. See above pp.177ff.
2. The section on the Fall in *Regall Tyrannie Discovered* was, as has been pointed out, Lilburne's work. See above, p.192 n.1.
3. *An Appeale from the Degenerate Representative Body the Commons of England*, July 1647, in D.M.Wolfe, *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution*, New York 1944, p.159.
4. See, for example, *Truth Lifting up its Head above Scandals*, 1648, in G.H.Sabine (ed.), *The Works of Gerard Winstanley*, New York 1941, pp.104, 105: "Reason is that living power of light that is in all things... he is

Overton appears to have understood reason in two closely related senses. In the sense that he employed it in *An Appeale* it was identical with nature itself, a law from which principles to govern the life of man in the world could be extracted. But like Lilburne, he also understood reason to be a human faculty, an integral aspect of the divine image in man; it was that which marked men out from the beasts, and enabled them to "discern" the extent to which "God by nature hath made them free",[1] and to grasp "the naturall propriety" that was theirs as "sons of Adam".[2] The two ways of using the term had a single point of reference, namely the preservation, the "safety" of the person. Reason, for Overton, was essentially a moral and political category. Despite the great importance that he attached to it, it had no mystical overtones.

By the time that he wrote *An Appeale*, Overton had most definitely read and acknowledged *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*,[3] Parker's *Observations*[4] and "The Book of Declarations"[5], and there is no question (as there was in *The Arraignement*) that he had studied their ideas in detail. Each of the four principles of reason outlined in the pamphlet betrayed the debt he owed to the Parliamentary propagandists.

According to Overton's first principle, every living thing must preserve and deliver itself from all that would tend to its hurt or destruction. It was, he claimed, "an undoubted principle of reason", engraved in the heart by "the finger of God" that a man should

> by all rationall and just means... save, defend, and deliver himself from all oppression, violence and cruelty whatsoever.[6]

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the Lord our righteousness"; "the Spirit Reason, which I call God, the Maker and Ruler of all things, is that spirituall power that guids all mens reasoning in right order and to a right end".

1. *A Defiance Against All Arbitrary Usurpations*, Aug.1646, p.2.
2. *An Arrow against all Tyrants*, Oct.1646, in Aylmer, p.70.
3. See *A Defiance Against All Arbitrary Usurpations*, Aug.1646, p.16.
4. See *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*, Jan.1647, p.41. Overton described Parker's observations as "most excellent".
5. See *The Commoners Complaint*, Feb.1647, p.6.
6. Wolfe, p.160.

This was the principle to which he had appealed the previous November, when, after appearing before a House of Commons committee, he had refused to walk to Newgate prison and had to be dragged.[1] It has already been seen that for him, the natural law of self-preservation was divinely ordained and synonymous with the Golden Rule.[2] In his view, resistance to tyranny was, therefore, "an inherent principle of nature concording with the commandment of God".[3] Prynne accepted this principle, and had justified the rebellion against the King on this basis. It was the theme of the third part of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments.*[4] Overton was now using it against Parliament itself.[5]

Overton's second principle stated that "Necessity is a law above all lawes". It was on this basis, he maintained, that the Netherlands had opposed the Spanish, and the Scots and the English had at various times rebelled against tyrannical rulers. Necessity justified "the taking up of unusuall and unexemplary courses for publique and particular deliverances".[6] Elsewhere, Overton had already claimed support from "The Book of Declarations" for the idea that precedent was not a prerequisite of political action.[7] Prynne quoted long extracts from Grotius' *De Iure Belli et Pacis* to prove that "Extreame Necessity is exempted from all law".[8]

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1. See *The Commoners Complaint*, Feb.1647, p.4.
2. *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*, Jan.1647, p.10. See above p.192.
3. Wolfe, p.177.
4. See, for example, *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, 1643, iii pp.4, 21,47. See above pp.114.
5. Overton put this succinctly in *An Arrow Against All Tyrants*, Oct.1646, in Aylmer, p.70: "the edge of your own arguments against the King... may be turned upon yourselves, for if for the safety of the people, he might in equity be opposed by you in his tyranies oppressions & cruelties, even so may you, by the same rule of right reason, be opposed by the people in generall, in the like cases of distruction and ruine by you upon them, for the safety of the people is the Soveraigne Law, to which all men must become subject".
6. Wolfe, p.160.
7. *The Commoners Complaint*, Feb.1647, p.6.
8. *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, iii pp.48,49: "This is the most approved above all Lawes... All means are honest of preserving safety".

The third principle of reason put forward by Overton in *An Appeale* was that "the Equity of the Law is superiour to the Letter":

> if the Law should comptroule and overthrow the equity, it is to be comptrouled and overthrown itself, and the equity to be preserved as the thing only legally obligatory and binding.[1]

As in the case of Lilburne,[2] Overton's concept of equity and the language he used to describe it, was taken almost entirely from "The Book of Declarations".[3]

Overton's final principle asserted that "all betrusted powers, if forfeit, fall into the hands of the betrusters as their proper centre". Political authority, in his view, flowed from "the people, the body represented", and if it was abused it returned into their hands.[4] This was Overton's radical interpretation of the Parliamentary theory of government put forward by Henry Parker, for example, in his *Observations*. This had been quoted from approvingly in *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*:

> Power is originally inherent in the people, and it is nothing else but that might and vigour which such and such a society of men contains in itself, and when by such and such a law of common consent and agreement it is derived into such and such hands, God confirms the law, and so man is the free and voluntary author, the law is the instrument, and God is the establisher of both.[5]

Parker also described political power as a recoverable "trust", which the people had vested in the King.[6] The difference between him and the Levellers, as Tuck has pointed out, is that, fundamentally, Parker understood the rights of "the people" in terms of the collective rights of society as a whole, whereas the Levellers understood them primarily in

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1. Wolfe, p.161.
2. See above p.162ff.
3. *An Exact Collection...* , 1643, p.150. Cf. *The Commoners Complaint*, Feb.1647, p.6.
4. Wolfe, p.162.
5. *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*, Jan.1647, pp.40,41. See H.Parker, *Observations upon some of his Majesties late Answers and Expresses*, 1642, p.1.
6. *Observations*, p.20.

terms of individual rights.[1] The point is, however, that Overton's theory was clearly a development out of this Parliamentary theory. It was not the product of sectarian ideas of church democracy.

In the final analysis, Overton's four principles of reason were reduc able to one: the preservation, and the well-being of the person. It was a principle that he had first grasped and applied in the context of the struggle for individual religious liberty. But its implications, once understood in this individualistic sense were wide ranging. The political proposals of the Levellers, whether they were for the reform of the electoral system, the law courts, trade or the prisons, were an attempt to make this the central principle of government.

3. Possessive Individualism

The precise nature of the Levellers' individualism, and its implications for the extent of the franchise they proposed has been the subject of extensive debate ever since the publication of C.B.Macpherson's book, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism.*[2] Macpherson rightly drew attention to the proprietorial quality of the Levellers' thought as expressed particularly in Overton's *An Arrow against all Tyrants* and *An Appeale*. He observed that for them it was the right to the enjoyment of themselves and their possessions, and the right to exclude others from them which made men human:

> it was on this concept of man's essence as freedom, and freedom as the active proprietorship of one's person and capacities, that the Levellers grounded all their claims for specific rights, civil, religious, economic and political.[3]

This much, it would seem, is incontrovertible. Self-propriety was a

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1. R.Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, Cambridge 1979, pp.146-151.
2. C.B.Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford 1962.
3. ibid. p.142.

fundamental element of the thinking of the three pamphleteers under consideration in this thesis. Macpherson went on from there, however, to argue that, as far as the Levellers were concerned, it was the ownership of material goods which indicated that one's natural property had not been alienated; servants and alms-takers, who were excluded from the franchise proposed in the Levellers third and final version of *An Agreement of the People*,[1] were deemed to have alienated their natural rights as a result of entering a wage contract, and to have been unable to play a full part in the community:

> having lost the property in their own labour [they] could be assumed to have no property in land or capital. They therefore had no interest in either the primary or the equally necessary secondary function of government.[2]

According to Macpherson, then, the Levellers were far from being democrats in the modern sense of the word. For they believed that once property was alienated, whether it was labour or material goods, civil rights were forfeit.

Aspects of Macpherson's theory have been challenged by a number of different scholars. It has been suggested that he did not take seriously enough the universal thrust of Leveller pronouncements on the rights of the people,[3] nor the possibility that they were practical politicians who were prepared to compromise;[4] that he focussed too narrowly on the views of only one of the Levellers, and overestimated the homogeneity of the group;[5] that he did not take into account the extent to which their ideas were rooted "deep in the traditional political structure" where there was

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1. *An Agreement of the Free People of England*, May 1649, in H&D p.321.
2. Macpherson, pp.151,145.
3. A.L.Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, London 1970, pp.197-219.
4. J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Democracy", *P&P*, 40 1968, pp.174-180; C.Thompson, "Maximillian Petty and the Putney Debate on the Franchise", *P&P*, 88 1980.
5. D.E.Brewster & R.Howell, "Reconsidering the Levellers: the Evidence of the Moderate", *P&P*, 46 1970, pp.68-86.

already a surprisingly wide degree of participation in local government;[1] and that in emphasising the Levellers' individualism, he failed to recognise the communal dimension of their thought.[2]

One of the most effective criticisms of Macpherson's central theory concerning the concept of propriety in Leveller thought, however, has focussed on the theological dimension of their ideas. J.C.Davis in his article "The Levellers and Christianity"[3] argues that the Levellers did not define self-propriety in material and economic terms, but in moral and religious terms:

> the Levellers saw man primarily as a moral entity or agency and... their view of self-propriety was conditioned by this... For them a man's property in himself was a limited property, over which he could excercise only a limited control the function of which was a moral and religious stewardship.[4]

Davis points out that the Levellers believed that in certain respects a man's rights over his own person were limited: he could not do harm to himself, or delegate such a responsibility to others.[5] As Overton explained after refusing to walk to Newgate prison, "no man shall be his own Butcher or Executioner".[6] Furthermore, Davis maintains, the Levellers saw self-propriety in theological terms: it was "God-given, a trust to be excercised with traditional Christian stewardship".[7]

This point is taken up by F.W.Bridger, who argues that the Levellers' "governing concepts" were theological,[8] and that their concept of self-propriety must be understood specifically in the context of the

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1. K.Thomas, "The Levellers and the Franchise", in G.E.Aylmer (ed.), *The Interregnum*, London 1972, pp.57-78.
2. I.Hampsher-Monk, "The Political Theory of the Levellers: Putney, Property and Prof.Macpherson", *Political Studies*, 24 1976.
3. J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in B.Manning (ed.), *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War*, London 1973, pp.225-250.
4. ibid. p.242.
5. ibid. p.243.
6. *The Commoners Complaint*, Feb.1647, p.5.
7. Davis, p.245.
8. F.W.Bridger, *Theology and Politics in the English Revolution 1640-1660*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Bristol University, 1980, p.96.

Puritan doctrine of the *imago dei*. Over against Macpherson, he maintains that "the question of material property was strictly irrelevant within Leveller terms", because, for them, human rights were bound up with the possession of the divine image in which all men were made.[1]

In certain respects the findings of this thesis tend to support Davis' and Bridger's views on this issue. Given the primitivistic vision of William Walwyn, for example, and the ethical thrust of his Christianity, it is highly unlikely - almost inconceivable - that he posited an integral link between political rights and the ownership of property. Moreover, both Lilburne and Overton did indeed root their concepts of the law of nature, equity and reason in the Christian doctrine of the image of God, thus apparently setting aside any economic qualifications and making political rights universally applicable. As G.E.Aylmer, commenting on Lilburne's theological postscript to *Londons Lilberty in Chains Discovered* (1646), has put it:

> it is hard to see how - either logically or morally - these rights can be denied to anyone, at least anyone adult and in their right mind, be they male or female, rich or poor, lord or servant.[2]

As far as the Levellers' most concise and comprehensive summaries of their own positions are concerned - Lilburne's postscripts, Overton's *Arrow* and *Appeale* - the evidence certainly does seem to point strongly against acceptance of Macpherson's theory.

The problem is, however, that there are also passages in some of their other pamphlets - quite apart from the exclusion clauses in the various versions of the *Agreement* - which do suggest the presence of the kind of concept of self-propriety described by Macpherson: an emphasis on property as essential to liberty, and a belief that rights are not inalienable.

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1. ibid. p.160.
2. G.E.Aylmer, *The Levellers in the English Revolution*, p.71.

That the writings of the Levellers may have contained traces of "possessive individualism" and concepts which fell somewhat short of a fully developed democratic theory of inalienable rights, should not, in itself, be surprising. As this thesis has attempted to show, their political theory was not entirely original, nor was it derived directly from their theology: they did not construct a political philosophy *ex-nihilo*, nor did they simply sit down with their Bibles and extract a theory of government from its pages. Rather, the Levellers were the inheritors of a political tradition, based on natural rights, which was mediated to them through the works of the Parliamentary propagandists of the early 1640s; and in that tradition the possession of property was understood to be fundamental to the existence of political society.

It has been noted in the previous chapter that Lilburne quoted approvingly on a number of occasions from John Pym's speech at the trial of the Earl of Strafford.[1] This is important because the speech employed the same kind of proprietorial theory that Macpherson ascribes to the Levellers. Pym defined law as

> the safeguard, the custody of all private interest: your Honours, your Lives, your Liberties and estates are all in the keeping of the Law; without this every man hath a like right to any thing...[2]

The very purpose of government was "to preserve men in their Estates, to secure them in their Lives and Liberties".[3] The connection between liberty and property could hardly have been stated more clearly. In Pym's view, law was intended to preserve both. Where there were no laws to safeguard property, liberty was impossible and "confusion" the only outcome.[4]

In the fourth part of *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments* (1643) political rights were discussed primarily in terms of the preservation of

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1. See above, pp.169.
2. *The Declaration of John Pym*, 1641, pp.5.
3. ibid. p.11.
4. ibid. p.4.

men's "Liberties, Lawes, Lives and Estates", that phrase being repeated almost like an incantation. Prynne argued that kings and rulers had "no absolute power over the lives, liberties, goods, estates" of their subjects,[1] but were duty bound according to their covenants with the people to protect them. He quoted at length from three Huguenot works in support of his case.[2]

The Huguenots based their political theory on the assumption that human societies had been established in order to preserve individual rights, chief among these being property rights. They endorsed the scholastic belief that political structures became necessary when the concepts of *meum* and *tuum* first entered the world, and quarrels over property began to arise.[3] According to Skinner, the fundamental justification of government, in the view of the Huguenots, lay

> in its capacity to preserve the natural rights of its citizens, in particular their untrammeled enjoyment of their lives, liberties and estates.[4]

Lilburne, in particular, was steeped in the language and concepts of this political tradition, and he employed the slogan connecting life, freedom and property many times in his writings. A clear link between liberty and property underpinned Lilburne's long-running protest against monopolies. This protest was a consistent feature of the Leveller petitions and Agreements,[5] and of virtually all of his writings. In *The Charters of London* (Dec.1646) he explained that he was opposed to monopolies because, "contrary to the light of nature", they robbed a man

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1. *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments*, 1643, iv. p.162.
2. ibid. p.170. These were Hotman's *Franco-Gallia*, and Beza's *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, and *De Jure Magistratus in Subditos*.
3. See Q.Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge 1978, vol.2 pp.327,328.
4. ibid. p.329.
5. See for example, *The Humble Petition of Many Thousands*, March 1647, in A.L.Morton, *Freedom in Arms*, London 1975, p.97; *The Humble Petition of Divers Wel Affected Persons*, September 1648, in Morton, p.191; *An Agreement of the Free People of England*, May 1649, in Morton, p.273.

of his "right". Reason, he maintained,

> being the fountain of honest Lawes, gives to every man propriety and liberty: propriety of interest, freedome of enjoyment and improvement to his own advantage: from that propriety take away freedoms, and a considerable part is gone.

Lilburne argued that there was little difference between depriving a man of his right to trade freely, and robbing him of his possessions. If the monopolists could do the one, why should they not do the other as well?

> we see it by experience, that those who have bereft us of our liberty have made bold with our propriety: and indeed, if Prerogative may take away the one; why not the other (from the same principle)?[1]

For Lilburne this was far more than a mere economic issue. It involved a fundamental principle of law and society. By putting absolute power in matters of trade in the hands of the monopolists, the small tradesman, such as himself, was deprived of that which was rightfully his by the law of nature, namely, freedom to enjoy and dispose of his possessions.

In 1645 he warned Parliament of the immense danger of governing by "unlimited" privilege and prerogative, rather than by law:

> take away the declared, unrepealed Law, and then where is *Meum* and *Tuum*, and Libertie and Propertie.[2]

In a pamphlet of 1647 he replied to the allegation that he was out to destroy "all law and propriety" by first quoting from Pym's speech,[3] and later stating that

> my principles and the constant, visible and publique Declarations thereof fully declares... that I am for *meum* and *tuum*, liberty and property.[4]

Lilburne seems to have genuinely believed that freedom and possessions were inextricably linked, and that property rights were fundamental to

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1. *The Charters of London*, Dec.1646.
2. *Englands Birth-Right Justified*, 1645, p.3.
3. *The Grand Plea of Lt.Col.John Lilburne*, 1647, p.5.
4. ibid. p.19.

political society. Overton appears to have agreed with him.[1]

Despite setting his political theory in the context of the doctrine of the *imago dei*, Overton appears to have believed that it was nevertheless still possible for a man to alienate his rights. In *Regall Tyrannie Discovered* (Jan.1647) it was argued that if a King or other "intrusted power" abused his position "to the destruction of his impowerers", he forfeited his power. This is a familiar, and unremarkable argument within the Levellers' writings when applied to those in authority. But here it was also applied it to those who ignored the demand of the law of nature to preserve and defend their own lives:

> whosoever rejects it [the instinct of nature] and doth not use it hath obliterated the Principles of Nature in himselfe and degenerated into a habit worse than a beast, and becomes felonious to himselfe and guilty of his own blood.[2]

The inference seems to have been that these too, like the delinquent rulers, had forfeited their rights. In another pamphlet, Overton described people of this kind as "bestiallized in their understandings", "degenerated from being men", "unnaturall and inhumane to themselves".[3] Now this does not necessarily mean that he considered such people to have alienated their rights permanently; and indeed the tract seems to indicate that he believed their situation to be redeemable. But it does demonstrate that the relationship between his doctrine of the image of God and his theory of natural rights is not as straightforward as, for instance, Bridger suggests.

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1. *An Arrow against all Tyrants*, 1646, in Aylmer, p.68: "for every one as he is himselfe, so he hath a selfe propriety, else he could not be himselfe, and on this no second may presume to deprive any of, without manifest violation and affront to the very principles of nature, and of the Rules of equity and justice between man and man; mine and thine cannot be except this be... ".
2. *Regall Tyrannie Discovered*, 1647, p.59.
3. *A Defiance Against All Arbitrary Usurpations*, Aug.1646, pp.2,3.

It would, therefore, seem unwise to reject Macpherson's theory altogether. Although the logic of the main thrust of the Levellers' arguments may, most of the time, point in the direction of inalienable rights and universal suffrage, it has to be conceded that at some points in their pamphlets there are statements which are, at the very least, ambiguous and inconsistent: aspects of their thinking are hard to reconcile with a radical widening of the franchise.

This can, perhaps, be explained by the fact that their ideas developed out of an already existing political tradition which, to a great extent, furnished them with the language and the raw material for the construction of their characteristic theory. While, as has been seen, they certainly modified that tradition, interpreting it in a new and individualistic fashion, they were - Lilburne probably more than the others - still very much a part of it and grappling with its legacy. It may well be that confusion among 20th century students of the Levellers over the extent of the franchise proposed in *An Agreement of the People* accurately reflects the confusion and imprecision in the thinking of its 17th century authors. Lilburne and Overton cannot be said to have come to terms in any of their pamphlets with the implications of the view of property they had inherited. To this extent, therefore, it is possible to see both the democratic passages in their writings and the exclusion clause in the franchise as representative of Leveller thought.

Chapter Nine

THE LEVELLERS AND THE SAINTS

In the preceding chapters it has been argued that the ideas of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn developed in such a way that their political theories and their theological beliefs concerning salvation were relatively insulated from each other. Their fundamental commitment to the separation of church and state and their concept of a law of nature governing the life of man in the world, allowed them to deal with social issues solely according to political criteria based on the notion of the well-being of the people. While their approach certainly arose out of the struggle for religious toleration - a struggle which was, for Lilburne and Overton at least, of great theological importance - it avoided any confusion of political and theological categories.

But the fact that this approach may have avoided the confusion of categories does not mean that the ideas of the Leveller pamphleteers were so compartmentalised that they had no influence on each other whatsoever. This chapter will argue that in one vitally important respect the theological position of John Lilburne, in particular, did change significantly as a result of their political activities. This change had to do with his growing uncertainty concerning both the theological significance of membership of the gathered congregations, and the form of the true church. It led to his moving profoundly out of step with many of the Levellers' natural allies among the radical churchmen.

One might have expected that the Levellers' approach to political questions would have been extremely attractive to the sectaries precisely because of its insistence on the separation of church and state. But as this chapter will seek to demonstrate, the separatism of the Levellers'

critics was modified by their eschatology, their belief in 'godly rule' and their sense of Protestant solidarity in the face of the perceived Catholic threat. It was the absence of this outlook among the Levellers which in large measure explains why the leadership of the Independent and Baptist churches in London denounced them as a group in 1649. In their view, the Levellers' political proposals were dangerous and profoundly antichristian.

1. The Saints and the Millennium

(i) The Gathered Congregation.

Millenarianism, understood as the belief in the imminent establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, played an important part in the political developments of mid-17th century England. The Fifth Monarchy Movement, which flourished after the eclipse of the Levellers, is the most well-known of the millenarian movements in the English Revolution. But it was only the most extreme form of millenarian and apocalyptic expectation that was rife at the time. It has been convincingly argued by a number of scholars that these were not "late and peripheral heresies" in the rise of Puritanism, but beliefs which even the most orthodox of churchmen adhered to in one form or another.[1]

Not all the eschatological speculation and excitement was explicitly millenarian.[2] Many people "simply believed that Christ would come and

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1. J.F.Wilson, *Pulpit in Parliament*, Princeton, 1969, p.231. See also, for example, B.W.Ball, *A Great Expectation*, Leiden, 1975, pp.1,2; Tai Liu, *Discord in Zion*, The Hague, 1973, pp.3,4. For the history of millennial thought in England from the time of the Reformation, see for example, R.Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse*, Bristol, 1978; P.Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon*, Toronto, 1978; K.R.Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain*, London, 1979; V.N.Olsen, *John Foxe and the Elizabethan Church*, London, 1973.
2. B.S.Capp estimates that about 70% of the leading Puritan ministers and pamphleteers were millenarians (*The Fifth Monarchy Men*, London, 1972, p.38); B.W.Ball puts the percentage below a half (p.181).

rule",[1] while among the millenarians, opinion could be divided over the role that was to be played by the Saints in the establishment and government of God's Kingdom. But although it was only a small minority who participated in the Fifth Monarchy Movement and who believed that the Kingdom was to be founded by the Saints, these extremists clearly stood "within the line of millenarian development".[2] W.Lamont argues that it was, in fact, this very kind of mentality which led to the success of the New Model Army and the establishment of the Commonwealth, an outlook which Cromwell had to discourage when faced with the realities of government.[3]

J.F.Wilson makes a distinction between two kinds of eschatology represented in the sermons preached before the Long Parliament in the 1640s. The first he calls "prophetic" eschatology, which drew its inspiration from the message of the Old Testament prophets. It was a declaration of "Israel's responsibility in the present for a conditionally open future",[4] and it was characterised by a continual call to repentance, and a gradualist view of God's action in transforming society.[5] This would have been William Prynne's outlook.

The second type Wilson calls "apocalyptic" eschatology, and it developed as "a proclamation of hope in Israel's darkest hours".[6] This was characterised by a much greater impatience with the present, and a revolutionary, rather than a reformist, approach to the social order.[7]

Wilson argues that the Presbyterian divines, while they may for a time have sympathised with the more radical position, basically took the prophetic approach. He maintains that it was the Independent preachers who were particularly associated with the apocalyptic outlook, and that their

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1. Ball, p.181.
2. Capp, p.45.
3. W.M.Lamont, *Godly Rule*, London, 1969, p.106.
4. Wilson, p.199.
5. ibid. pp.206,207.
6. ibid. p.219.
7. ibid. pp.200,208.

expectations of the advent of Christ's Kingdom were closely linked with their views on church government.[1] The apocalyptic approach was

> expressed politically and ecclesiologically as an option - Independency - which was as vague and inclusive a designation as its theological expression suggests it might have been... The founding of 'gathered' churches by the Independents... must be understood fundamentally as a specific anticipation of the broader reign of Christ.[2]

This being the case, the significance of the debate between the Presbyterians and the Independents in the 1640s lay not simply in the different forms of church government that they proposed, but in the meaning which they attached to those forms. For the Independents, the gathered congregation was a condition and a sign of the rule of Christ. It was central to their eschatological hope.

This point is taken up and developed by Tai Liu. He states that

> Independency as a church form was not just a principle of religious toleration or liberty, but an application in church polity of the millenarian perceptions of the Independent divines in regard to the nature of the Kingdom of Christ in the coming millennium.[3]

Likewise M.Tolmie maintains that

> the gathering of the Independent churches was sustained by the deeply held conviction that the act of entering a congregation of visible Saints was to enter Christ's 'Kingdom', not in a metaphorical, but in a literal sense.[4]

One of the best examples of the kind of attitude that these scholars have in mind is to be found in *A Glimpse of Sions Glory*. Published in 1641 with a foreword by John Lilburne's close friend, William Kiffin, the unsigned pamphlet is widely thought to have been the work of Thomas Goodwin. The main thrust of *A Glimpse* was the call for the establishment of independent congregations.[5] Stressing the need to acknowledge the

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1. ibid. pp.223,229.
2. ibid. p.229.
3. Tai Liu, p.8.
4. M.Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints*, Cambridge, 1979, p.85.
5. *A Glimpse of Sions Glory*, 1641, p.11.

Kingship of Christ, it declared that that Kingship would be fulfilled in an earthly, rather than a heavenly Kingdom, when Christ would reign with His Saints a thousand years.[1] The pamphlet linked the coming of the Kingdom with the congregational form of church government: "the communion of Saints and independency of congregations God will honour".[2] As Kiffin put it in his introduction, Christ had given power in His church

> not to a Hierarchy, neither to a Nationall Presbytery, but to a company of Saints in a congregationall way. Now these truths strike directly at Antichrist... [3]

Three of Thomas Goodwin's sermons on the theme of the millennium, which were delivered during the 1640s, were published, probably without his permission, by Fifth Monarchists in 1654 and 1655,[4] But even if such ideas did not necessarily lead to the extreme social and political conclusions of the Fifth Monarchist movement, they did contribute to rising expectations among Puritans. As Tolmie observes,

> the Saint could... enter Christ's Kingdom immediately and on this earth, not in a future life or a future millennial age.[5]

Goodwin and other radical churchmen like him were not saying that the millennium had actually arrived, but they did encourage people to believe that they were furthering the cause of Christ's Kingdom, and acting as God's instruments, through their membership of gathered congregations.

The political outlook of the Independents and sectaries was, therefore, in large measure the product of their soteriology and their eschatology combined. They came to believe that only the Saints, those who were assured of their salvation and obedient to Christ in terms of their membership of a "visible" church, should bear rule. Their doctrine of election combined with their millennialism to produce an elitist political

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1. ibid. p.14.
2. ibid. p.33.
3. ibid. Prefatory Epistle.
4. Wilson, p.226.
5. Tolmie, p.85.

theory. The coming to power in 1649 of an army led by "godly" men, fellow Saints, did much to encourage this outlook.

(ii) The Rule of the Godly.

As early as the autumn of 1647 an anonymous pamphlet called *A Declaration by Congregationall Societies in and about the City of London* sought to distance the sectaries from the Levellers on the issue of respect for authority. Against the background of Leveller petitioning of Parliament and agitation among the rank and file in the army, it sought to assure the government that the sectaries were not social and political radicals. Among the authors of this document (who made themselves known in 1651) were John Simpson and Christopher Feake, later to become leaders of the Fifth Monarchist movement, and the Particular Baptists, William Kiffin and Hanserd Knollys.[1] In line with the Levellers, the authors did uphold the principle of the separation of church and state,[2] and they did argue that the civil powers were "not to act but in their own proper spheare".[3] At the same time, however, they felt it necessary to voice their support for the institution of magistracy, and specifically, for Christian magistracy. While they conceded that this "Ordinance of God" was to be respected whatever the magistrate's religious beliefs, they declared their preference for rulers who "feare the Lord", because they would be

> more readie to protect godly men (who generally are the hatred of the world) and to propagate the Gospell in their territories.[4]

In April 1649, only days after Lilburne, Overton, Prince and Walwyn had been arrested and sent to the Tower for their opposition to the new

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1. Tolmie, p.171.
2. *A Declaration by Congregationall Societies in and about the City of London as well as those commonly called Anabaptists*, Nov.1647, p.5.
3. ibid. p.6.
4. ibid. p.8.

regime, a delegation of Particular Baptists, led by William Kiffin presented a petition to the House of Commons denouncing the activities and views of the Levellers, particularly as expressed in *The Second Part of Englands New Chaines Discovered*, which had been read out in their congregations by Leveller agents the previous Sunday. They expressed the fear that their own position, already much maligned because of "the headiness of some unruly men formerly in Germany called Anabaptists", would be "made odious" as a result of this,[1] and assured the Commons that

> our meetings are not at all to intermeddle with the ordering or altering Civill Government (which we humbly and submissively leave unto the Supreame Power) but solely for the advancement of the Gospel.[2]

Nevertheless, this petition, like its predecessor of 1647, called on government to enact godly legislation.

The Particular Baptist petition was followed within the month by *Walwins Wiles*, a full-scale attack on the leadership and principles of the Leveller movement. Signed by seven prominent Independent and Baptist churchmen - including, once more, William Kiffin, and Edmund Rosier, Lilburne's former pastor - the tract was probably written by John Price, a member of John Goodwin's church who, with others of his congregation, had apparently been gathering information to use against Walwyn since 1646.[3]

In an earlier pamphlet Price had already argued that those who opposed the army leadership, either from inside or without, were doing the work of Satan.[4] He described the army as "the Lords battle-axe, and arm of salvation to this Kingdome",[5] and suggested that there had been no clearer sign of God's handiwork in the world "since the comming of Christ", than their defeat of the King.[6]

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1. *The Humble Petition and Representation of Several Churches of God in London, commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists*, April 1649, p.4.
2. ibid. p.5.
3. See *Walwyns Just Defence*, in H&D pp.352,353.
4. J.Price, *Clerico-Classicum*, 1648, Epistle Dedicatory.
5. ibid. p.8.
6. ibid. p.46.

Now, in *Walwins Wiles*, Price and his fellow authors made it very clear that one of the major criticisms that the radical churchmen had of the Levellers was that, by their opposition to the actions of the army leaders, they were hindering the work of God in the government of England. They claimed that the army had been hammered

> by the hand of the Spirit upon the anvil of Truth into a blessed battle-ax, compleatly aptified for the hand of God unto the breaking in pieces the envious enemies of his Son and his Saints, according to the predict counsel of his holy Word.

Price and the others clearly regarded the army in an eschatological light as the instrument of God's judgement and the champion of Christ in the spiritual war with the Devil. They informed its leaders that

> the Antichristian whore is filld with fears that you are the men commission'd by God to execute upon her the Judgement written, to stain her glory and spoil her beauty, to dash her bastards brains against the stones and to give her blood for blood to drink.

They encouraged the army to continue steadfastly in its God-appointed mission:

> the Lord that raised you and called you to his foot (Is.41:2) gave the Nations before you, making you rulers over Kings and Princes, giving them as dust to your sword, and as driven stubble to your bow... [1]

It was in the context of the opposition of Christ to Antichrist - "Samson" to "this whorish Dalilah" - that the authors of *Walwins Wiles* placed the activities of Walwyn and the other Levellers. They believed that the Levellers were corrupting and dividing the Saints, and they implored the army leaders not to make any concessions to such representatives of Antichrist.[2] The promoters of *An Agreement of the People* were felt to be undermining the work of God's chosen servants in England.

Moreover, God's work in England was not their only concern. An important aspect of the criticism of the Levellers in *Walwins Wiles*

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1. *Walwins Wiles*, 1649, in H&D pp.286,287.
2. ibid. pp.288,289.

focussed on their attitude to policy in Ireland. It was alleged that they were against "the happy and hopeful relief" of the "poor Protestants" of Ireland, on the grounds that "the Irish Natives" had as much right to liberty of conscience as Englishmen.[1] John Price and the other authors clearly found it hard to conceive how any sincere Christian, such as they considered Lilburne and Prince - but not Walwyn and Overton - at one time to have been, could be against intervening in Ireland:

> can you... bear the thoughts of so many thousand Protestants (amongst whom, who can tell how many faithful servants of God) murdered and massacred without any inquisition made for their blood?[2]

In Ireland, as well as in England, the army was, in their view, the instrument of God's justice. *Walwins Wiles* ended by asking Lilburne and Prince whether, in the light of the course they were now pursuing, they had not "quitted the tents of Israel, and struk hands with the Philistins". It warned them of the dire consequences of doing so: "for all they that hate Sion shall be turned backward and perish".[3]

So these leaders of Independent and Baptist churches, who were theoretically committed to the separation of church and state, were critical of the Levellers because they did not acknowledge that the new political establishment in England was divinely sanctioned. The radical churchmen were in, what was for them, the strange position of making a theological defence of the political and military *status quo.*

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1. ibid. The clearest statement of the Levellers' views on Ireland was in *The English Souldiers Standard* (April 1649), published shortly after the imprisonment of the four Leveller leaders, and just over two weeks before *Walwins Wiles*. Written probably by Walwyn, it called on the soldiers to consider "to what end you should hazard your lives against the Irish: have you not been fighting these seven years in England for Rights and Liberties, that you are yet deluded of? and that too, when as none can hinder you of them but your own Officers, under whom you have fought? and will you go on stil to kil, slay and murther men, to make them as absolute Lords and Masters over Ireland as you have made them over England?" (in Morton, *Freedom in Arms*, pp.238,239).
2. ibid. p.315.
3. ibid. pp.315,316.

This is further illustrated by the case of Price's minister, John Goodwin. Goodwin was, in many ways, very close to the Levellers in theological and political outlook. He was a firm believer in religious toleration, and the withholding from the civil magistrate of any coercive power in matters of belief;[1] at the Whitehall Debates in December 1648, he sided with the proponents of wide-ranging religious liberty against Commissary-General Henry Ireton.[2] On occasion he used the concept of the law of nature in a similar way to John Lilburne.[3] But Goodwin also appears to have been deeply influenced by millennialism. In 1643 he described the fight against the King as part of the battle against Antichrist; he urged the Saints to join in this struggle, for it was divinely ordained that

> Christians of ordinary rank and qualitie... shall be most active and have the principal hand in executing the judgements of God upon the whore... [4]

In early 1649, apparently completely insensitive to the Levellers' demands for constitutional government, he defended the army's purge of Parliament on the grounds that it was, as the title of his pamphlet put it, a case of *Right and Might Well Met*. William Walwyn accused him of confusing "the power of the Sword" with "the power of God" simply so that the Saints, "meaning no body but yourselves", might "judge and rule the earth".[5]

Hugh Peter was another Independent divine who, having once worked closely with Lilburne and Walwyn,[6] made clear his theological and ideological differences with them in 1649. These differences had been implicit from the start, but they did not become fully explicit until the faction whose cause they had all at one time promoted achieved political

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1. See for example, J.Goodwin, *Theomachia, or the Grand Imprudence of Men running the hazard of Fighting against God*, 1644, pp.11,12.
2. *The Whitehall Debates*, 1649, in Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, pp.156-159.
3. ibid. p.168; *Right and Might Well Met*, 1649, in Woodhouse, pp.216,217.
4. J.Goodwin, *Anti-Cavalierisme, or Truth Pleading as well the necessity, as the Lawfulness of this present War*, 1643, pp.31,32.
5. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D p.372.
6. ibid. p.351.

power.

Peter believed that the decisive factor in political matters was good men rather than good laws. In 1646 he stated that "it is certain good men may save a Nation, when good Lawes cannot".[1] He made the same point in *A Word for the Armie* of 1647,[2] and he called on the men of arms to

> consider whether the Lord hath not pointed out his worke unto us, viz. putting righteous men into places of trust, making way thereunto, as if the fulfilling of the many prophecies and the expectation of the just were now to be answered.[3]

Democracy for its own sake held no interest for Hugh Peter. He believed that if good men had the opportunity to change things - even if that meant imposing their will by force - then they ought to take it. He was present at the purging of Parliament by Col.Pride in December 1648, and when challenged to reveal by what authority MPs were being imprisoned and excluded from the House, Peter unashamedly replied, "by the power of the sword".[4] As far as he was concerned, the act had been performed by godly men in obedience to God. Like Goodwin he believed that, in this case, right and might were indeed well met. What was important to him, over and above any political theorising, was that prophecy was <u>now</u> being fulfilled: godly men were at that very time bringing the work of God in England to fruition.

The difference between this approach and that of the Levellers emerged clearly in a conversation between Hugh Peter and the imprisoned John Lilburne in May 1649. Lilburne complained of his illegal and arbitrary treatment at the hands of Cromwell and the army leaders, and suggested that

> if this be the fruits of their Saintship and religion, I

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1. H.Peter, *Mr.Peters Message*, 1645, p.2.
2. H.Peter, *A Word for the Armie*, 1647, p.10.
3. ibid. p.14.
4. R.P.Stearns, *The Strenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter 1598-1660*, Urbana 1954, p.326.

> do assure you, the Divel is as good, if not a better Saint: for he believes and trembles, which is more than I think they do.[1]

Peter, sceptical of Lilburne's continual appeals to the law of nature and the law of the land, challenged him to define exactly what law meant in the troubled times through which the nation was passing. Lilburne obliged by quoting from John Pym's speech at the trial of the Earl of Strafford, a favourite passage of his; to which Peter responded with the rather brutal observation that

> there is no law in this nation but the sword and what it gives, neither was there any law or government in the world but what the sword gave and set up.[2]

But brutal though it might appear, Hugh Peter's view of politics was dominated by his belief in the goodness of the Saints, and their millennial calling to reign with Christ. As his biographer, R.P.Stearns, observes, his political philosophy grew out of the conviction that

> there were visible Saints in the world, that they would overthrow evil and chain the devil, and that they would inherit the earth.[3]

Like many of his fellow churchmen, Peter's vision of society was essentially theocratic, and he had little time for the Levellers' secular political programme.

John Canne, later to become a Fifth Monarchist, was another Independent critic of the Levellers who was, at least in theory, very much against the coercive power of the civil authorities in matters of religious belief.[4] Prior to his attack on the Levellers in *The Discoverer* (June 1649), he had protested against the National Covenant proposed by the Presbyterians on the grounds that there was no "greater impediment

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1. J.Lilburne, *A Discourse Betwixt Lt.Col.J.Lilburne... and Mr.Hugh Peter*, May 1649, p.3.
2. *A Discourse...* , pp.4,5.
3. Stearns, p.264.
4. J.Canne, *The Snare is Broken*, 1649, p.28.

unto the coming of God's Kingdom" than the refusal to allow "churches to be gathered and constituted according to the pattern of the New Testament".[1] Yet he was severely critical of the Levellers precisely because of the strict separation they made between church and state:

> that they are Atheists and Antiscripturists, or little better: men who regard not God, neither the Scriptures, nor any religion, it may be clearly seene by *The Agreement of the People*... Amongst all their Proposals and Articles (which are thirty at least) there is not one thing proposed for the holding forth and furtherance of Gods publicke worship and service. Now who knowes not and beleeves (except an Atheist) that Religion and the feare of God preserves the societie of men among themselves.[2]

For Canne, as, one suspects, for many of the Particular Baptists, religious liberty was primarily a right that belonged to the Saints. He could not envisage a society in which the mass of the people were free to choose for themselves.

The Independents and sectaries who dissociated themselves from the Levellers in 1649 were excited at the prospect of the Saints bearing rule in England. In the light of the tremendous spiritual possibilities opened up and heralded by the triumph of the army, they regarded the Levellers' attempt to create a society founded on secular political principles as irresponsible and ungodly. Their own commitment to the separation of church and state was thus modified by their millennialism. Because of the extraordinary times in which they believed themselves to be living, the notion of godly rule triumphed over a strict separatism.

The result was an outlook not dissimilar to that of William Prynne, whose great concern was for Christian magistracy. Indeed, the truth of the matter was that, in terms of their vision of society, the radical churchmen had more in common with Prynne, the great critic of

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1. ibid. p.43.
2. J.Canne, *The Discoverer*, 1649, p.10.

Independency, than they did with the Levellers. Like him they were scandalised by the Levellers' whole framework of thought - their secularity - and not simply by individual issues of policy, such as the widening of the franchise.

There is great irony in this. The Levellers' political theory developed in response to Prynne's onslaught against the concept of religious toleration, and as an attempt to translate into political terms the separation of church and state that was at the heart of Independent ecclesiology. It failed because of the opposition of the very people whose ideas it was intended to reflect and embody.

2. <u>The Rejection of Theocracy</u>

(i) William Walwyn.

Walwyn's whole pattern of thought seems to have lacked any kind of eschatological dimension, and he was far from being fertile ground for theocratic and millenarian ideas. Despite his activities in promoting the cause of religious liberty, and his many contacts among the radical churchmen, he never became a member of a gathered congregation. Indeed, he was openly sceptical of the kind of teaching received in them. He was a long-standing critic of John Goodwin's sermons and books - much to the dismay of his acquaintances among Goodwin's flock - and was thought not to have "a good opinion of Churches".[1] This is certainly borne out in the pages of *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*(April 1649)[2], which was an

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1. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D p.393.
2. This tract was published anonymously. But although Walwyn did not acknowledge it as his own he did suggest that readers turned to it if they wanted to pursue the matter of the meaning of true religion (H&D p.382). The implication was that the ideas expressed in it were his own. Haller (H&D p.252) points out that the work resembles Walwyn's *A Still and Soft Voyce* (1647) except for what he claims was "the uncharacteristic use of Latin at one or two points". However, Walwyn himself stated that he was familiar with Latin proverbs and used them occasionally (H&D p.363). One

astonishing attack on organized religion as such, and on the gathered congregations in particular. It expressed the opinion that, with respect to the ministry and ordinances of the Christian church, "we must confesse wee are at a losse in these things".[1] This agnosticism was one of the major causes of the friction between Walwyn and John Price which resulted in the publication of *Walwins Wiles*.[2]

Throughout the 1640s the central and consistent emphasis of Walwyn's writings was on ethics over against doctrinal disputation and speculation.[3] Frequently in his two pamphlets of 1649 that were directed at his antagonists among the Independents and Baptists - *The Vanitie of the Present Churches* and *Walwyns Just Defence* - he juxtaposed what he considered to be their obsession with obscure theological questions, with the plain and incontrovertible Christian obligation to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless and free the oppressed.[4] In his view, for people to claim the title of "Saint" simply because they were "of this or that opinion, or of this or that forme of Worship" was "meer pride and vanity of mind":

> the best of these put altogether, amount not to so much, towards the making of a true Saint, as one mercifull tender hearted compassionate act for Christs sake doth.[5]

The Independents' suspicion of Walwyn went back at least as far as the

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of the phrases found in *Vanitie - unum necessarium* (H&D p.262) - was used in his *Just Defence* in exactly the same context to describe the importance of the doctrine of free justification in Christian belief (H&D p.363).

1. H&D p.268. Walwyn acknowledged that there was teaching on "the ordering and regulating of Churches" in the Bible, but it was "not so plainly exprest as to leave the conscientious without dispute and difference thereupon: nor so collected into any one Book as to convince, that God now under the Gospel, so exactly enjoyned Church Government, as he did under the Law".
2. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, H&D pp.391-394.
3. The centrality of ethics in Walwyn's thinking is discussed above, pp. 12f
4. See for example, *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*, April 1649, in H&D pp.263, 266-267, 272; *Walwyns Just Defence*, June 1649, in H&D pp.381,382.
5. *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*, H&D p.272.

birth of the Leveller movement in 1646,[1] and probably further. While they may have welcomed his support in the mid-1640s when the battle for religious liberty was at its height, he can never have been a close ally. He was always unacceptable to them precisely because of his scepticism concerning the nature of the church, and of what constituted a Saint. They grasped the fact that his political outlook was profoundly secular and opposed to godly rule. Insofar as the other Leveller leaders gradually came to adopt this outlook, the fate of the movement was sealed from the very beginning.

(ii) Richard Overton.

It is almost impossible to ascertain what kind of eschatology, if any, Richard Overton possessed before his activities with the Levellers began. Because of the satirical style he adopted which involved the personification of ideas, it is hard to know which passages represented his own views, and which were there simply to reinforce his main argument. Some of his writings of the early 1640s used apocalyptic imagery to satirise and condemn the Laudian regime,[2] but eschatology appears to have been incidental to his central concerns. However, in *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution* (1645) he did employ an argument, which he developed at some length, that had important eschatological implications.

"Liberty of Conscience" accused "Mr.Persecution" of holding back the fulfilment of God's purposes because of his intolerance towards the Jews. Persecution was reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul that "blindness will be upon the Jews until the fulness of the Gentiles come in, and then all Israel will be saved" (Rom.11:25,26); and yet, it was argued, harassment and exclusion "hindreth their salvation and deliverance".

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1. H&D p.353.
2. See above p.88,89.

"Liberty of Conscience" concluded that it was now only Persecution that kept the Jews from Christ.[1] Is it possible that Overton himself seriously expected the imminent conversion of the Jews and the arrival of the millennium?

In the 1650s Overton made contact with continental Jews in order to discover their attitude towards a possible return to England. But he does not appear to have been motivated by millenarian concerns. Like the Royalist, Sir Marmaduke Langdale, with whom he corresponded, he seems to have been primarily interested in their financial power and the political possibilities they presented in undermining Cromwell's regime.[2] Eschatology did not play a part in this episode.

Belief in the conversion of the Jews prior to the dawn of the millennium was a common feature of 17th century Puritan thought.[3] John Archer professed it,[4] and one of Roger Williams' arguments for religious toleration was based upon it.[5] Overton had read both of their works, but it is unlikely that he shared a millennial hope. Millennialism played no part in *Mans Mortalitie*, where the emphasis was very much on 'the Day of Judgement' and the resurrection of the dead. The two were not necessarily incompatible, but if Overton had held such a belief, given the subject matter of *Mans Mortalitie* one might have expected it to have been given some prominence.

It may well be that in *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution* Overton was simply employing an argument that was well-known and carried some weight in order to make his overall case for toleration. If he did possess

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1. *The Arraignement of Mr.Persecution*, 1645, pp.12,13.
2. See Overton's correspondance with Langdale in *The Nicholas Papers*, vol.3, July 1655-Dec.1656, Camden Society, New Series, 1897, especially pp.44 & 95.
3. G.F.Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, Oxford 1957, pp.143-146; D.S.Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England 1603-1655*, Oxford 1982.
4. J.Archer, *The Personall Reigne of Christ upon Earth*, 1642, p.47.
5. R.Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 1644, p.ii.

a genuine desire for the conversion of the Jews linked to an intense eschatological expectation, then his later pamphlets showed no further sign of it. They were characterised if anything by a distinct lack of eschatological fervour.

What is certain is that by 1649 Overton shared Walwyn's contempt for the Saints and their understanding of their own role in history. When he was arrested in March of that year the commanding officer was Lt.Col.Daniel Axtel, "a man highly pretending to religion",[1] who happened to belong to William Kiffins' Particular Baptist church.[2] Axtel's methods were insensitive, if not downright brutal, destroying or removing many of Overton's most treasured books and writings - including the unfinished *Gods Word confirmed by his Workes* - and casting aspersions on the morals of the whole household. Overton saw Axtel not as an aberration, a 'black sheep' of an otherwise godly group of people, but as a representative figure, an embodiment of the spirit of the age. He described this member of Kiffin's flock as

> one of the (mock-) Saints in season, now judgeing the Earth, inspired with providence and opportunities at pleasure of their own invention as quick and as nimble as an Hocas Spocas, or a fiend in a Juglers Box, they are not flesh and bloud as are the wicked, they are all spirituall, all heavenly... [3]

Making use of their "Counterfeit Dialect", the language of the Bible which he believed that Axtel and his fellow churchmen had hijacked, Overton poked fun at the eschatological role that they had allotted themselves: he portrayed them

> chanting their Halelujaes of victory over the people, having put all principalities and powers under their feet, and the Kingdom and dominion and the greatness of the Kingdom is theirs, and all Dominions, even all the people shall serve and obey them... and now these men of Jerusalem... those painted Sepulchres of Sion... have

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1. *The Picture of the Councel of State*, in Morton, p.199.
2. ibid. p.219.
3. ibid. p.204.

> brought their seasons to perfection, even to the Season of Seasons, now to rest themselves in the large and full enjoyment of the creature for a time, two times and half a time... [1]

Overton saw these "new-Saints Millitant"[2] as hypocrites and enemies of freedom. In his estimation, Axtel's behaviour in arresting him was but the natural product of government that was based not on law, but on "ambition and will".[3]

(iii) John Lilburne.

In June 1649, responding to the allegation in *Walwins Wiles* that he had been "deluded and drawn aside" from the paths of godliness, Lilburne claimed that two of the signatories to this attack on the Levellers in fact knew better:

> I am confident there is no two men in England that know me, whose consciences are more perswaded of the falsity of that their own assertion in every particular then Mr.Rozer, and Master Kiffin are.

He maintained that his actions and beliefs over the years had been quite consistent. He had never

> forsaken nor changed my principles from better to worse the space of one hour, from the day of Gods sweet and fatherly discovering, and distinct, and assured making known of his eternall, everlasting and unchangable loving kindnesse in the Lord Jesus unto my soul, to this day...[4]

As far as Lilburne was concerned, there was nothing to warrant the charges levelled against him by his old friend, William Kiffin, and his former pastor, Edmund Rosier. He did not believe that his Christian experience and theological principles had changed significantly since the time of his conversion in 1636. But was this true?

An important clue is found in *A Manifestation* which appeared under

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1. ibid. p.205.
2. ibid. p.206.
3. ibid. p.205.
4. *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.402.

the name of the four imprisoned Leveller leaders in April 1649. The pamphlet bears all the hall-marks of Walwyn's work, and *Walwins Wiles* claimed he was indeed its author. Walwyn pointed out, however, that "all our four heads and hands were nigh equally employed"[1] in its composition, so it can certainly be taken as an authentic expression of the views of Lilburne, Overton and Thomas Prince as well as of Walwyn.

A Manifestation set out to vindicate the Levellers against "the many aspersions cast upon them to render them odious to the World and unserviceable to the Commonwealth".[2] In response to the accusation that they were "Atheists and Antiscripturists" it contained what amounted to a Leveller confession of faith :

> we beleeve there is one eternall and omnipotent God, the Author and Preserver of all things in the world... And though we are not so strict 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 requisites which his Officers and Ministers ought to be furnished withall as yet appearing to us in any that pretend thereunto: yet for the manifestation of Gods love in Christ, it is clearly assented unto by us.[3]

That Walwyn should have voiced his doubts concerning the nature and form of the true church is hardly surprising. But that John Lilburne should also have signed this statement of ecclesiological uncertainty is quite remarkable. For the whole thrust of his argument in pamphlets such as *An Answeare to Nine Arguments* (1639) and *A Copie of a Letter... to William Prynne* (1645) was that the pattern for the ministry and worship of the church of Jesus Christ was clearly laid out in the Scriptures.[4] He had criticised both the prelatists and the Presbyterians precisely because, in his view, they deliberately disobeyed the "laws" of Christ pertaining to

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1. *Walwyns Just Defence*, 1649, in H&D p.370.
2. *A Manifestation* in H&D p.277.
3. ibid. p.281.
4. See for example, *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, pp.28,29; *A Copie of a Letter... to William Prynne*, 1645, pp.3,4. See above, p.30ff.

the government of the church. Yet here he was in 1649 declaring with Walwyn and the others that "the method, manner and personall injunction" of the "formall and Ceremonial part" of the service of God were "not so clearly made out" to him.

In the light of what has been seen concerning the eschatological significance which the Independents attached to the form of the visible church, this was a most important change in Lilburne's thought which had great implications for his understanding of God's activity in the world. So when did it happen, and what brought it about?

This is very difficult to pinpoint, and any suggestions must be tentative. But what can be said with some certainty is that it was not the change in his theological outlook which paved the way for the development of his political theory. On the contrary, it appears to have been the logic of his political ideas, together with a growing realisation of the direction in which his fellow Independents were moving under the influence of their shared eschatology which gradually forced a change in his own theological outlook.

In January 1646 Lilburne addressed *Innocency and Truth Justified* to

> all the Lambs Redeemed ones standing on the Mount Sion, having their Fathers name written on their foreheads, ready to doe his will and mind and to follow him wheresoever he goes, not loving their lives unto the death... [1]

The pamphlet was, in part a reply to Prynne's attack on the Independents and sectaries in *A Fresh Discovery*, and it contained all the major themes of his characteristic political theory. Nevertheless, Lilburne stated that his intention in publishing it was to encourage

> the Saints to incounter with difficulties in the cause and quarrell of their Lord and Master, and not to be afraid of bonds nor imprisonments.[2]

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1. *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646, p.3.
2. ibid. p.4.

Lilburne was here using the term "Saint" in the same way that he had used it in earlier pamphlets, that is, to describe someone who had separated from the established church and entered a gathered congregation.[1]

It is significant that at the end of this pamphlet Lilburne printed *The Copy of a Letter... to One of His Special Friends* which had been written in 1638. The letter described the spiritual blessings that he had received in prison, and his experience of the presence of God. He advised his friend to become

> a citizen of Gods holy city, and a visible member of his incorporated body, to worship him in Syon, the beauty of holiness, the place of his promised preference, according to his lawes and ordinances, in a visible church, for that is the place in which the Lord doth dwell... where he hath promised to be found, and where the promised increase of grace is to be had...

The letter was characterised by the same strong sense of the imminence of the return of Jesus Christ and the final fulfilment of God's purposes that was found throughout Lilburne's early writings.[2] Furthermore, it underlined the eschatological significance of the gathered congregation:

> if you would be hid from the plague and sheltered in spirituall peaceable security from the great storm that is shortly to come and rise on all the world that worshippeth the Beast... then now obey Gods command in separating from all antichristian Assemblies... and enter into this his chamber and shut the door of it upon you.[3]

The fact that Lilburne decided to publish this letter in 1646 demonstrates that at this point he still identified strongly with the Saints both with respect to his eschatology, and his doctrine of the church.

The sectaries too, it would seem, still regarded him as very much one of them. When he was imprisoned in 1645, the Calvinistic Baptist pastor, Hanserd Knollys was said by 'Gangraena' Edwards to have prayed

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1. See for example, *A Worke of the Beast*, 1638, p.29; *An Answeare to Nine Arguments*, 1639, p.11.
2. See above. p.37ff.
3. *The Copy of a Letter... to One of His Special Friends*, Nov.1638, p.16, printed at the end of *Innocency and Truth Justified*, 1646.

with his congregation,

> Lord, bring thy servant Lilburne out of prison, and honour him Lord, for he hath honoured thee.[1]

At about the same time, many of the radical churchmen of Southwark apparently met together to consider nominating him as their M.P.[2] In 1646, Edwards described him as "the darling of the sectaries".[3]

In *Rash Oaths Unwarrantable* of May 1647 Lilburne discussed the church in terms almost identical to those he had used in his early separatist writings. He could still speak of Christ as "the perfect Law-maker and Law-giver unto his visible church on earth under the Gospel", and refer to membership of the "spirituall House, City or Church of Christ" as "Saintship".[4] But it is important to note that eschatology played no part in this pamphlet. The gathered congregation was no longer discussed in millennial terms. Indeed, after January 1646 none of his pamphlets show the slightest interest in the final events of history.

This is certainly not to say that Lilburne stopped believing in God, or that he now divorced God from the realm of history altogether. Elsewhere in *Rash Oaths Unwarrantable*, for example, he warned of God's vengeance upon Parliament for betraying its trust from the people.[5] This kind of language obviously came easily to men of the 17th century, whether they were authoritarians in government, or dissidents and malcontents. It may often have been more of a rhetorical device than a deep-seated belief that God would intervene in any decisive way. But in this particular case Lilburne went on to give a concrete example of the kind of thing that he meant, telling how God had visited "the most rememberable vengeance" - a crushing military defeat - upon the Hungarian nation after they had

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1. T.Edwards, *Gangraena*, Part 1, 1646, p.40.
2. ibid. p.53.
3. ibid. p.96.
4. *Rash Oaths Unwarrantable*, May 1647, p.15.
5. ibid. p.10.

broken a treaty with the Turks.' This was a warning to Parliament that God was able to punish men using the most unlikely means, in this case, a heathen nation.

But while Lilburne's faith apparently remained real enough, beginning in 1646 his way of talking about God underwent a change which reflected his own struggles and preoccupations. Increasingly in these later pamphlets, instead of the King who was waiting to take full possession of his Kingdom, God was either referred to as the Judge before whom all men were accountable, or as the old and trusted personal friend, the source of comfort and inspiration. This change appears to have followed on from his political activity rather than to have been the cause of it.

In *The Free Mans Freedom Vindicated* (June 1646), which was a protest against his imprisonment by the House of Lords, Lilburne explained that he had "imbarqued" all that he had in the world "in this one vessel cal'd the good Ship of good Hope, sayling in the troublesome Seas of England", because he wished to reach that

> long desired Port, called the safe injoyment of Englands liberties and freedomes, the direct roade tending thereunto, is the path of Justice, without the sayling in which roade, it is forever impossible to arrive there.[2]

The political objectives on which Lilburne set his sights in 1645 and 1646 were entirely limited and earth-bound, intended to govern man's life in an, as yet, unredeemed world. As they began to dominate his thinking, so he gradually lost his triumphalist view of history and any idea of upward progress. His theology now became characterised by a much more static view which took for granted the continuing sinfulness of the human condition.

Lilburne's repeated clashes with authority and subsequent periods of

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1. ibid. pp.11,12. Lilburne's acknowledged source for this story was Adam Islip, *The History of the Turks*, 4th edition, 1631.
2. *The Free Mans Freedom Vindicated*, June 1646, p.1.

imprisonment, with all the suffering and privation that entailed, may also have contributed to this change of outlook. In *An Anatomy of the Lords Tyranny* (Nov.1646), written at a time when he seems to have been at a very low point, both emotionally and physically, he protested at the intention of the Lieutenant of the Tower to prevent his wife from visiting him there:

> my wife is all the earthly comfort that now in this world I have left unto me, and she is that meet help that the wise God of Heaven and Earth from the beginning hath instituted and ordained for me, frail and weak man, in my pilgrimage and valley of teares here below.[1]

He may have been driven to articulate such a dark view of human existence simply because of his immediate circumstances. But whatever the reason, this passage was not written by an excited millenarian.

From a religious point of view, Lilburne's hope now appears to have centred more on a heaven succeeding death than on the advent of an earthly millennium. In April 1647, when he was fearful of what to say before a committee of the House of Commons, in case they were intent on setting a trap for him, he explained how he had turned to his "old and faithful councellor the Lord Jehovah", and asked for guidance. His prayer was answered and he felt God entering his soul "with a mighty power", giving him the confidence to face anything, even death itself:

> I without doubt know he hath in store for me a crown of eternall glory in the kingdom of glory.[2]

A major cause of the change in Lilburne's eschatology appears to have been a growing realisation of the political implications of Independent millenarianism. By the autumn of 1647 he was completely disillusioned with Cromwell and the leadership of the army. This was partly due, no doubt to a sense of personal betrayal at being allowed to

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1. *An Anatomy of the Lords Tyranny*, Nov.1646, pp.16,17.
2. *The Resolved Mans Resolution*, April 1647, pp.2,23.

remain in prison for months after the army had marched into London the previous August. But it was more than that. In *The Grand Plea of Lt.Col.John Lilburne* (Oct.1647) he stated that his reputation was now very low in Cromwell's circle, and that he was thought of as a man who was "altogether for Anarchy and confusion", and "wanted no government at all in the Kingdome". He complained that this was far from the truth: what he had always been against was arbitrary government of any kind, even when it was "excercised by the godlyest, justest or choisest men that ever the earth bred".[1] Lilburne was implying that this was exactly what the Independents had in mind. His quarrel with Cromwell essentially revolved around the issue of 'godly rule'. Lilburne believed that political power was a trust from the people, and he refused to accept the qualifications of any who sought to excercise political authority that was not founded on this principle.

This interpretation of Lilburne's pamphlet is confirmed by Thomas Prince's *The Silken Independents Snare Broken* of June 1649, which was his reply to "the seven Independent authors" of *Walwins Wiles*. Prince maintained that neither he nor Lilburne had been taken aback by the attitude of this group towards them, but had been aware of it for some time. He claimed that they had told some of that "Faction" at least 22 months before then - that is, in August of 1647 - that

> they carried on a New-England Design: That, under pretence of Religion, our Laws, Liberties, and many mens lives should all lie at your mercy, if once you compassed your desires.[2]

This was what Lilburne was driving at in *The Grand Plea*. He was afraid, as was Prince, that the Independents and sectaries were in favour of the establishment of some kind of theocracy in England along the lines of that in New England. Their fears may have been confirmed by the knowledge that,

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1. *The Grand Plea of Lt.Col.John Lilburne*, Oct.1647, p.19.
2. T.Prince, *The Silken Independents Snare Broken*, June 1649, p.2.

prior to the civil war, Hugh Peter, "the grand Journey- or Hackney-man of the Army"[1] had been an outspoken advocate of religious uniformity against toleration in Massachusetts.[2] Lilburne found himself alienated from many of his former friends because, with the other Levellers, he had by now become primarily interested in secular political liberties rather than the promotion of a particular theological viewpoint. He was totally opposed to any attempt at instituting a regime of the Saints.

As the rift between the Levellers and the Independents and Baptists increased, culminating in the acrimonious exchanges of the Spring of 1649, so Lilburne's abandonment of the eschatological beliefs that he had earlier espoused became complete. He no longer expected the imminent end of all things, nor did he attach any special political or eschatological significance to membership of the gathered church. Indeed, as the Leveller 'confession' in *A Manifestation* (April 1649) demonstrated, he became uncertain even about the form of the true church.[3] By June 1649 the gathered congregations of London, "either Independent or Anabaptisticall" were only "pretended Churches of God" in his eyes, "fit for nothing but the indignation of God, and the peoples wrath".[4]

Lilburne was not as faithful to his old principles as he claimed in *Legall Fundamentall Liberties* (June 1649). His beliefs certainly did change over the years, and those changes were profound. They centred, however, on his eschatology, rather than his soteriology. As far as the development of his political ideas are concerned, in the final analysis he avoided the elitism of the Independents and other sectaries not by the

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1. J.Lilburne, *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.417.
2. R.S.Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord*, Edinburgh, 1985, p.126.
3. See above p.236.
4. *Legall Fundamentall Liberties*, 1649, in H&D p.428.

adoption of antinomianism and universalism, as J.C.Davis has suggested,[1] but by a two-fold rejection of their millennialism and doctrine of the 'true' church. That rejection was not the premiss of his political theory and practice, but the product of it.

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1. J.C.Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in Manning, p.226.

Chapter Ten

CONCLUSION

Scholarly assessment of the relationship between theology and politics in the writings of John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn has often been unnecessarily complicated by dealing with their ideas in abstraction instead of examining them in the light of the immediate historical context in which they developed. Scholars have tended to search for, and focus upon, individual aspects of one or other of the Levellers' respective theological positions which they consider to have had democratic implications - as, for example, the notion of congregational church government or a universalist understanding of salvation - which are then deemed to have been foundational to their political theories. But apart from its unavoidable subjectivity and imprecision - is a universalist soteriology necessarily more congenial to the growth of political democracy than a doctrine of divine election? - this approach simply does not fit the facts. There is no evidence that *An Agreement of the People* was in any sense based on a model of congregational democracy, or that, particularly in the decisive period, 1645-1647, Lilburne the Calvinist and Overton the Arminian shared Walwyn's universalism. The approach rides rough-shod over the form that particular Christian doctrines actually took in the Leveller writings, and the inherent unlikelihood, as in the case of Lilburne's understanding of the gathered church, of their being transformed willy-nilly into political doctrines. Moreover, it assumes a degree of theological unity among the three Leveller pamphleteers that did not exist.

In an article on the methodological weaknesses of many current approaches to the whole question of the relationship between religion and politics in 17th century England, C.H.George has observed that

> since the Russian Revolution, dozens of scholars have convinced themselves that Calvinism was a kind of Leninism, a source of subversive activism, and an inspiration to republican and democratic ideas...

He accuses scholars such as William Haller and A.S.P.Woodhouse of "alchemistic tricks", in that they attempt to "transmute the base stuff of Puritan piety into the gold of egalitarianism, individual liberty and tolerance".[1] As far as the ideas of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn are concerned, the findings of this thesis strongly support George's argument at this point. The explanation of the development of Leveller political ideas in terms of the transformation of Puritan theological categories, whether by way of analogy,[2] secular reinterpretation[3] or universalistic application,[4] simply is not credible.

In fact, the doctrines of salvation and church government played little or no part in the development of the political theories of the three Leveller pamphleteers. This was as true of William Walwyn, the universalist, as it was of the other two.

The precise context in which their theories took shape and were formulated was the debate with the Presbyterians in the mid-1640s, concerning religious toleration. Their thinking was challenged and sharpened in particular by the onslaught of William Prynne against the whole idea of Independency. Prynne believed that there was a vital link between magistracy in church and state: without religious uniformity, society would collapse. In effect, he called on the advocates of

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1. C.H.George, "Puritanism as History and Historiography", *P&P*, 41 1968, pp.77-104.
2. Woodhouse, p.92. See above p.15.
3. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation*, p.271. See above pp.9,10.
4. Davis, p.231. See above pp.11,12.

toleration to face up to the secular implications of their doctrine of the church.

William Walwyn was the first to respond to this specific challenge, and he was quickly followed by Richard Overton and John Lilburne. Despite their differing theological positions, each of them replied to Prynne in essentially similar fashion, claiming that society was founded upon a set of political principles which flowed from the nature of man himself, fundamental to which was the right to religious liberty. Three factors, which were common to each of their patterns of thought, combined to produce this approach. These were, a firm rejection of the coercive power of the civil magistrate in matters of faith - and, therefore a commitment to the principle of the separation of church and state - the possession of a clear concept of the law of nature, understood in terms of the preservation of the person, and a knowledge of, and readiness to appeal to, the documents justifying the Parliamentary revolt.

Of course, their commitment to toleration, and their notions of the law of nature, did, to a greater or lesser extent, have a theological basis. But with respect to the development of their political ideas, theology was a secondary factor. The major influence upon them was the revolutionary theory of natural rights which underpinned Parliament's struggle against the King, and which found clear expression in Henry Parker's *Observations* and William Prynne's *The Soveraigne Power of Parliaments and Kingdomes*. This theory had little to do with the theology or political thought of John Calvin. It is traceable back through the Huguenots to Catholic scholasticism, and beyond it, to "the Roman law traditions of radical constitutionalism".[1] While the Levellers may have interpreted this theory in an increasingly individualistic fashion, and

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1. Q.Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*,, Cambridge 1978, vol.2, p.320. See above pp.115,116.

employed it in a way in which the Parliamentary propagandists found unacceptable, their approach was, nevertheless, based quite openly and unashamedly upon it.

The Levellers found this approach attractive precisely because of its secularity. It established religious liberty as a fundamental natural right, and demonstrated that the coherence of society was not dependent upon religious uniformity. This was a theory which was intended from the outset to dove-tail perfectly with the separatist vision of the Independents. It was designed to meet the needs of an increasingly, and - by the terms of their own arguments for religious toleration - inevitably, pluralist society.

The term 'secularity' is here used specifically to refer to the separation of church and state, and government by non-theocratic political principles. It is not meant in this instance to imply any antagonistic or sceptical attitude on the part of the Leveller pamphleteers to religion as such. But even understood in this particular sense, the secularity of the Leveller programme was unacceptable to the radical churchmen whose separatism it attempted to translate into political reality. For the separatism of the former allies of the Levellers was modified both by their millennialism and their deep desire for Christian magistracy. To a large extent many Independents and Baptists seem to have still shared with Prynne an essentially mediaeval ideal of a society unified by Christianity and governed by godly men.

But were the Levellers secular in an even more profound sense than this? David Martin has noted that "the word 'secular', like the word 'religious' is amongst the richest of all words in its range of meanings",[1] and given the disagreement and uncertainty among 20th century

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1. D.Martin, *The Religious and the Secular*, London 1969, p.48.

sociologists and historians over the whole concept of a process of "secularisation",[1] great caution must therefore be observed in employing it in the context of the 17th century.[2]

Nevertheless, there certainly were individuals throughout this period whose intellectual outlook was characterised by what can only be called 'secularism', who without attacking religion as such, welcomed the decline or curtailment of its influence upon different aspects of life.[3] Are the Levellers to be numbered among the secularists?

(i) Walwyn.

In the case of William Walwyn, the evidence is ambiguous, and one is immediately confronted by the truth of Martin's observations concerning the sheer historical fluidity of terms like 'religious' and 'secular'. On the one hand, there are aspects of Walwyn's theology which strike a genuine and heartfelt Christian note, such as his emphasis on grace, and the importance of an ethical response to God by way of concern for the poor and oppressed. On the other hand, however, there does seem to have been a deeply sceptical and naturalistic streak in his thinking, and an extreme minimalist approach to matters of faith and doctrine.

The influence of writers like Montaigne and Charron upon him underlines the extent to which his own thought had departed from a Calvinistic - though not necessarily a Christian - framework. He claimed that his fideism and scepticism were intended to lead to inner tranquility

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1. For a good survey of the debate among sociologists, see R.Gill, *The Social Context of Theology*, Oxford 1975, esp. ch.8.
2. Cf.B.Reay, "Radicalism and Religion in the English Revolution", in McGregor and Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, Oxford 1985, p.19. If there is at present any measure of consensus among scholars it is that secularisation is a complex network of processes adversely affecting religious institutions and practices, that tends to occur in modern industrial society. See D.Martin, *A General Theory of Secularisation*, Oxford 1978, pp.2,3.
3. See F.L.Baumer, *Modern European Thought*, New York, 1977, pp.66-74.

and peace and harmony in society. Many of his contemporaries saw him as an unbelieving, and therefore, highly dangerous man, who loved to undermine people's faith: he was not committed to any 'visible' church, and was openly critical of the ministry and leadership of all existing churches. Perhaps, in this particular context, their verdict is all that really matters. While Walwyn may appear to be manifestly Christian to 20th century interpreters - precisely because of his characteristic emphasis on love and good works - his faith was certainly very different to that of most of his contemporaries. For the very reason that he may appear to be religious according to today's understanding of that term, he was irreligious and unchristian according to the preoccupations of an important and influential group of 17th century believers. Alongside what has already been described as the secularity of the Levellers' political programme, the perceived <u>secularism</u> of Walwyn's whole framework of thought was a major cause of the split between the Levellers' and the radical churchmen in 1649.

(ii) Overton.

Of the three pamphleteers examined in this thesis Richard Overton is often regarded as the one in whom a secular outlook had taken the deepest root. This may be true. But two points must be recognised before this claim can be accepted. Firstly, *Mans Mortalitie* is not proof that Overton was a secularist or a materialist. His argument for mortalism was made on good Biblical and theological grounds, and the Christian hope of the resurrection was central, and not peripheral to his case. While it may have been heretical by the standards of 17th century England, it is a complete misreading of the pamphlet to view it as sub- or anti-Christian. Secondly, on the evidence of Overton's extant writings, there was nothing inherently unchristian or irreligious about his rationalism. Indeed, in

many ways it can be said to have been characteristic of a significant strand within mainstream Christian thought in the 17th century.

There is little discernible sense of development in Overton's religious thought as the 1640s progressed. But this does not mean that there was none. Overton provided virtually nothing by way of autobiography or of background to his pamphlets. There are many things one would like to know about him: what prompted the writing of *Mans Mortalitie* ? Did his churchmanship change significantly during the 1640s, and in what way did his doctrine of the church influence his thinking? Most of all, perhaps, it would be illuminating to know the contents of *Gods Word confirmed by his Works*, the pamphlet that was lost when Lt.Col.Axtel paid his unwelcome call on Overton's household. This, one suspects, would have provided the answer to many questions about his theological and philosophical outlook that, for the time being, at least, must remain the subject of speculation.

Nevertheless, there does seem to have been a strong rationalistic element in his thinking and a few hints, at least, of a secondary role for Christian revelation. His concept of the law of nature certainly was linked to the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*. But one suspects that, unlike that of Lilburne, Overton's concept was quite capable of being divorced from its theological context and of description in purely rational, naturalistic terms. Overton does not appear to have had a strong doctrine of sin, and his references to the divine image therefore emphasised the innate moral and rational potential of man. As with Walwyn's enormous stress on ethics to the exclusion of almost all else, one is perhaps justified in seeing Overton's focus on "Reason" and nature as part of a movement away from theology and a supernaturally conceived religion. This was far from being the thoroughgoing attack on Christianity and the things of the spirit that some scholars have claimed to see in his work. But it

may well have been part of the process of "staking out autonomous spheres of thought" which, according to Baumer, characterised 17th century secularism.[1]

(iii) Lilburne.

John Lilburne's theological outlook and religious experience underwent a significant change in the late 1640s under the impact of his political thinking and activity. To begin with, his theology was relatively isolated from his political theory as a result of the clear distinction that already existed in his thinking between the order of grace and the order of nature; his concept of the law of nature initially enabled him to focus on legal and constitutional issues, and deal with them on their own terms, while leaving his religious belief unaffected. But as a result of the political position he adopted in the mid-1640s, he was gradually led to reject first the theocratic implications of his millennial beliefs, and then millennialism itself. Closely connected with this was a growing sense of disillusionment with, and alienation from his brethren in the sects, which resulted in a loss of certainty about the form of the true church itself.

Lilburne's protest against the rule of the Saints was, to an extent, based on good theological grounds, namely that since all men were sinners, arbitrary government of any sort - that is, government not bounded by laws based on the good of the people - was intolerable. In this sense, it is possible to argue that his change of position over the years was the product of a deepened insight into the Bibilical doctrine of sin. But there appears to have been rather more to it than that. From another perspective it looks very much as though, by focussing his attention so

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1. Baumer, p.66.

firmly on political issues and the natural order, he experienced, if not a loss of faith, then a deadening of his religious experience and vision.

Looking back on the events of the late 1630s in 1653, Lilburne claimed that his objective then had been the establishment of a basic human right:

> the first fundamental right that I contended for in the late kings and bishops times was for the freedom of mens persons against arbitrary and illegal imprisonments, it being a thing expressly contrary to the law of the land which requireth that no man be attached, imprisoned, etc... but by lawful judgement of a Jury.[1]

Given his protest in 1638 against the *ex-officio* oath, there is some truth to this claim. Part of Lilburne's fight then was for legal and constitutional rights. But this description of his activities during that period is couched in purely secular, political terms. It completely ignores the religious dimension, which was undoubtedly of overwhelming importance to him at that time. His opposition to the rule of the bishops had not simply been that he regarded it as constituting an illegal form of government, but that it was a manifestation of Antichrist's power. As his pamphlets of this period made very clear, he interpreted his actions, including the illegal printing of Bastwick's pamphlets and his sufferings at the hands of the Court of Star Chamber, primarily in terms of the intensifying spiritual warfare in which he, as one of the Lord's chosen was inevitably involved.

This passage gives, perhaps, a clue to what was going on in Lilburne's thinking as the 1640s progressed. It was not that he rejected all that he had ever believed - although, as has been seen, there were a number of important changes in his theology - or that his earlier doctrines had been transformed by some mysterious process into political concepts. Rather, it would seem that as the focus of his attention shifted

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1. *The Just Defence of John Lilburne*, 1653, in H&D p.454.

to social, legal and constitutional issues, he became less interested in theological questions, and less prone to interpret his own life in a religious perspective.

This interpretation of Lilburne's spiritual journey is borne out by his account of his conversion to Quakerism at the end of his life. In 1656, while he was a prisoner in Dover Castle, he read two Quaker works which impressed him deeply, and which he described as "most convincingly instructive to my soul".[1] After reading these books and talking with other imprisoned Quakers, he experienced the light of God for himself and became dead

> to my fallen or first natures reason, wit, wisdom and desires, and also totally... dead to my old bustling ways in the flesh.[2]

Lilburne's conversion was accompanied, among other things, by a commitment to outright pacifism.[3] But this does not necessarily imply a rejection of all the political objectives for which he had long fought. George Fox 's doctrine of abstention from politics was not widely accepted among Quakers until 1661, and many of them were still involved in political activity in the late 1650s.[4]

The significance of the pamphlet as far as this thesis is concerned is the view that Lilburne presented in it of his spiritual condition prior to 1656. Lilburne stated that his reading of the Quaker works produced in him a sense of

> shame of soul, that so glorious a Talent as my Lord and

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1. *The Resurrection of John Lilburne*, 1656, p.5. These were, James Nayler's, *Something Further in Answer to John Jacksons Book called Strength in Weakness* (1655), and William Dewsbury's *The Discovery of the Great Enmity of the Serpent against the Seed of the Woman* (1655) (see *Resurrection*, p.1.).
2. ibid. p.7.
3. ibid. pp.12,13.
4. C.Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*,, pp.240,241. B.Reay points out that Lilburne was "one of the few Quakers to achieve an unequivocal pacifism before 1660" (*The Quakers and the English Revolution*, London 1985, p.135).

> Master (by the clear, lively and powerfull breakings in of his divine and heavenly light into my heart) long and many yeares ago, bestowed upon me, should by me (or my first and carnall wisdome) be most ungratefully and unfaithfully... hid, or buried in the earth in me, in obscurity and darkness...

He rejoiced, however, in the fact that "the spirit and power of life from God... now aloud <u>again</u> speaks within me".[1] While he expressed gratitude to his wife for all her efforts on his behalf to secure his release, he informed her that he was no longer particularly concerned about his liberty:

> for here in Dover Castle, through the loving kindness of God, I have met with a more clear, plain and evident knowledge of God, and my self, and his gracious out-goings to my soul, then ever I had in all my life-time, not excepting my glorying and rejoicing condition under the Bishops...[2]

Lilburne, unlike many converts to new faiths, clearly did not view his earlier conversion to Christ as inauthentic. Rather, he saw it as a precious experience to which he had been unfaithful in the intervening years. In fact, it is clear that, for him, this was not a conversion to a new faith at all, but the renewal of a relationship with God bestowed upon him "long and many years ago". The 'resurrected' John Lilburne bore more than a passing resemblance to the author of *A Copy of a Letter... to one of His Special Friends* (1638).

As well as bringing a fresh and invigorating experience of God, Lilburne's Quakerism, therefore, brought about the recovery of a lost sense of Christian spirituality. This is not necessarily to say that he was now turning his back on his social and political concerns of the previous decade. But he certainly was reordering his priorities, and rekindling a light that he believed he had irresponsibly and

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1. ibid. pp.2,3. My emphasis.
2. ibid. p.6.

"ungratefully" allowed to be extinguished.

In the final analysis, do the approaches of John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn provide worthy models of Christian political action, of which 20th century Christian radicals should be proud, and from which they may draw inspiration? That is a question the answer to which is beyond the scope of this thesis. But what can be said on the basis of this study of the three Leveller pamphleteers is that the necessary and unavoidable translation of Christian ethical concern into political action is not a straightforward matter, nor, as Lilburne discovered, one without its dangers for Christian faith. In the relationship between theology and politics, the 'religious' and the 'secular', the conversation is by no means one-sided. Politics also has its say.

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