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THE SPIRITUAL QUEST AGAINST RELIGION

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In the last lecture, we saw that while the religious establishments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were panicking about the mostly imaginary atheism of amoral Machiavellian libertines, a quite different form of unbelief was bubbling up under their noses: an unbelief of anxiety, assaulting earnest Christians from within. It may not have been what either they or we expected to find, but it makes a certain amount of sense. This was a period when no-one was going to drift into unbelief by mistake: all the forces of social convention pushed the other way. People with no interest in religion might neglect it, but they would not take a stand against it. They might be bad Christians but would hardly rise to being anti-Christian. Only those who cared enough to believe also cared enough to doubt.

Most of the people we met in the last lecture who suffered from this kind of doubt classed it as a temptation and tried to overcome it and return as best they could to their former faith. But in religion as in anything else, you can never truly go back. And if doubt was a *temptation*, that also meant that it couldn't simply be ignored. Any Christian preacher would tell you that the devil can only tempt you if God allows it; and if God allows it, he does so for a reason. Temptation, even the temptation to doubt whether there is a God, is not simply a meaningless attack to be repulsed. It is a trial by combat: a training arena from which the victor emerges stronger. It is to be feared, but it is also an opportunity to be grasped.

We began last time with this much-quoted Bible verse: 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief'. It of course implies that faith and doubt are not alternatives but companions, inevitably intertwined. If your faith is untroubled by doubt, then what you have is not faith at all, but vanity and smug self-satisfaction. If you do not feel vertigo when you look down, you must still be at the bottom of the pit. This was an observed fact: it was a widely acknowledged truism that the more earnest and intense your faith was, the more likely you were to be troubled by doubt. But it was also a theological axiom that, as Elizabethan England's theological giant William Perkins put it, 'true faith, being imperfect, is always accompanied with doubting'.¹ This is not exactly a *good* thing, but the preachers were clear that God permits it for a reason. As one shrewd minister reassured his readers, 'nothing is so certain as that which is certain after doubts. Shaking settles and roots.'² Doubt was an ordeal that tempered and purified those who passed through it. So, you ought not to flee from it. Instead you should set your feet, spit on your hands and grapple with it, like Jacob wrestling with God in the book of Genesis. What I want to do with you this evening is to look at some of the consequences of those wrestling-matches, in which the combatants fought on with grim determination, found themselves forced into painful contortions, and also discovered reserves of strength they did not know they had. Many of them managed, like Jacob, to fight their enemy to a standstill: but like him, they sometimes sustained wounds in the process, and like him, the encounter changed their lives.

This story takes us back to the early days of the Reformation, when, alongside the relatively well-ordered and carefully controlled reforms that Martin Luther, John Calvin and other big-name Protestant Reformers were putting in place, there was also a wilder fringe, the people whom Luther called 'fanatics' and whom historians nowadays lump together rather unhelpfully as the Radical Reformation. This group were actually extremely varied, containing apocalyptic revolutionaries, utopian communalists, and all points between, but I want to draw your attention to one strand of this radicalism, who called themselves Spiritualists. Confusingly, that word is

¹ William Perkins, *An exposition of the Lords prayer* (London: [J. Wolfe for] Robert Bourne and John Porter, 1593), p. 161; he was explicitly cited on this point in Robert Linaker, *A comfortable treatise, for the reliefe of such as are afflicted in conscience* (London: W. Stansby for John Parker, 1620), pp. 93-4.

² Sibbes, *The bruised reede*, p. 68; underlining in the Folger Shakespeare Library's copy, call no. STC 22479. Cf. the same sentiment in Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, vol. I p. 22.



nowadays used to refer to people who hold seances to speak to the dead: these Reformation-era Spiritualists were not like that in the slightest.

The two leading figures here are a pair of German preachers named Sebastian Franck and Caspar Schwenckfeld. They disagreed on a lot, we don't know for sure if they ever even met, and they seem to have reached their views independently of one another: which I think makes them the more interesting. Both men started out as defenders of Martin Luther's Reformation but quickly came to believe that Luther's purge of superstition and corruption didn't go far enough. Luther was very critical of outward piety, which he said was an open invitation to hypocrisy: and yet he insisted that churches, liturgies, sacraments and all sorts of other traditional Christian practices ought to continue, making (as it seemed to Franck) only superficial changes. True religion, Franck and Schwenckfeld came to believe, was a matter of the heart and only of the heart. In Franck's case, what pushed him over the edge was the cacophony of different sects and preachers competing for attention in those chaotic early days of the Reformation. How do you know which one is the true Church of Christ? It was the sort of crisis of doubt that lots of people had in the Reformation period, but Franck came to a disconcerting solution. Instead of picking a team, he decided that there was no longer a true Church at all. It had once existed, to be sure, but it had disappeared centuries ago, when the last of Christ's original apostles died.

“The outward church of Christ ... went up into heaven and lies concealed in the Spirit and in truth. ... For fourteen hundred years now there has existed no gathered church nor any sacrament.”

Instead, he suggested, ‘the church is today a purely spiritual thing’. In which case:

“All outward things and ceremonies ... have been done away with and are not to be reinstated. ... Nothing has been taken from the child except its doll with which it has played long enough.”

The implications were dramatic. All religious observance should stop immediately. No baptisms, no other sacraments, no ministers and preachers, no churches and services. Franck did not even encourage his readers to meet informally to support and encourage one another. He did remain convinced that the Bible was God's Word, he was increasingly reluctant to lean on its precise text, which he called ‘the rind of Scripture’, ‘the covering of ... letters’, turning instead to its hidden spirit. This meant abandoning not just each particular Christian church, but Christianity as a whole. The Christian creed was just a stale formula. What mattered was the inner journey to perfection, a journey in which, he insisted, pagans and Muslims could join just as well as Christians, since everyone is inwardly instructed by God. So, to be plain, this is not *atheism*: but it could hardly have been more hostile to religion.³

For Schwenckfeld, doubt and uncertainty were even more central. The crisis for him came in 1526, when he decided he could not be sure which was the correct way to celebrate the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, and decided that it was better to stop it altogether rather than risk blasphemy by getting it wrong. He always spoke of this as a temporary suspension, but it always seemed obvious there was no way of bringing it to an end. Pretty soon he extended the suspension to baptism too. Unlike Franck, Schwenckfeld did encourage his disciples to meet secretly for discussion and mutual encouragement, communities that did not celebrate any sacraments, recognise any ministry or enforce any orthodoxy or practice anything that their contemporaries would recognise as religion.

Historians of spiritualism actively debate to what extent the later spiritualists were directly or indirectly inspired by Franck's or Schwenckfeld's movements, which is interesting, but I am not sure makes a great deal of difference. What matters, I think, is that whether by direct influence or independent and parallel development, these sorts of ideas kept surfacing. The Netherlands became a particular centre for them. In particular, I want to notice a Dutch group called the Collegiants, who first emerged in the 1620s as a set of freewheeling religious discussion groups who rejected having any fixed ministry or sharply defined orthodoxies. By the 1640s they had a presence in most Dutch cities, when the movement was given a new lease of life by the philosopher, linguistic

³ Douglas Gwyn, *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2000), pp. 57-9; Sebastian Franck, ‘A Letter to John Campanus’ in George Hunston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (eds), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 149-150, 155-6; R. Emmet McLaughlin, ‘Spiritualism: Schwenckfeld and Franck and their Early Modern Resonances’ in John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (eds), *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 119-161 at pp. 138-9.



scholar and religious adventurer Adam Boreel. Boreel's 1645 manifesto argued that when Christ's first apostles preached, their truth of their message was undeniable, because it was authorised by miracles and the inward work of the Holy Spirit. But now, Boreel insisted, we have no such evident divine authorisation. No church can ever be sure if it is truly preaching in accordance with God's will. In which case, any entities that still claim to be true Christian Churches are built on lies: they are 'malignant societies; where into the soul of a man fearing God ... ought not to enter.' He was extremely vague about what these scrupulous objectors should do instead. Certainly, the Collegiants he led feel more like moral and philosophical discussion groups than churches.⁴

Quite how spiritualism first reached England is unclear. It is in the 1590s that we hear of some English radicals allegedly arguing that Roman Catholic baptism is invalid. That might sound like a normal enough thing for a Protestant to think, but it's not. If Catholic baptism was not a true Christian baptism, then none of the first generation of Protestant Reformers had been baptised at all. And since everyone accepted that no-one could baptise anyone else unless they were baptised themselves, this was something that no mere Reformation could put right. The chain had been broken: the true Church of Christ had entirely vanished from the world. The same idea surfaces more explicitly with a man named Bartholomew Legate, who has the distinction of being the second last person to be executed for heresy in England, in 1612. Legate, like Schwenkfeld, held that all sacraments and Christian ministry ought to be suspended unless and until God directly intervenes to renew it. The Church has been fatally corrupted by centuries of enslavement to the Pope, he argued, and could only be re-founded by God. 'New Baptism there cannot be, till there come new Apostles. New Apostles there cannot be, who are not endowed (from above) with miracles.'⁵

Now if you had to guess the next line, you would assume he was going to proclaim his own sect's miracles or anoint himself as a new apostle. But Legate said something altogether more surprising. There are no miracles. Yes, some people have claimed to have visions, but they are only 'idle dreams.' So, he concludes: 'Consequently,' there is 'no true Baptism in the earth, nor any one true visible Christian' – not even himself. Our source tells us that the people to whom he said this were nonplussed. One asked him to pray with them. He refuses, to do so 'should imply, that you and I were in communion or Christian fellowship', and as the world currently stands 'there can be no such fellowship; and therefore, no such prayer'. Another asked if he can join the Legatine's church, only to be told: 'How sillily you speak. I have all this while taught you, that there is no Church.'⁶ He wasn't an atheist. But if he has found religious reasons to abandon Christian practice of any kind, what's the difference? And it's not just about outward show either. Even if such spiritualists really did expect that new apostles would appear, a God who allows his Church to dissolve into utter depravity and leaves his people with nothing at all for centuries on end is pretty ineffectual. Praying to him hardly seems worthwhile. According to one report, Legate did not pray to Christ for seven years before his death.⁷ He appears to have believed that God is almost entirely absent from the world, that there is no immediate prospect of that changing, and that humanity has no choice but to carry on regardless. Whether the mood of this stark vision was bleak or liberated, we do not know. But while it was not 'atheism' in the strict modern sense, we can see why contemporaries might have used that word.

Again, whether his movement died with him, we don't know. There are echoes rather than definite lines of descent. But some of the ideas which surfaced in London in the 1620s and 1630s do sound oddly familiar. An informant who gave a detailed report on clandestine radical groups in 1638 said that one sect denied...

"the Resurrection of the body, or any heaven or hell, but what is in this life. ... Heaven is when they do laugh and are merry, and hell when they are in sorrow and pain. And at last they do believe that all things do come by nature."⁸

⁴ Boreel, *To the lavv, and to the testimonie*, esp. pp. 5, 28, 37-8, 83, 92-3, 96.

⁵ Henoeh Clapham, *Error on the right hand* (London: W. White, 1608), pp. 29-31. Cf. the briefer report from John Etherington, which in essence agrees with Clapham's testimony: *A discovery of the errors of the English Anabaptists* (London: W. Jones for Robert Bird, 1623), pp. 76-7.

⁶ Clapham, *Error on the right hand*, pp. 31-2, 37-8.

⁷ Thomas Fuller, *The church-history of Britain from the birth of Jesus Christ until the year MDCXLVIII* (London: for John Williams, 1655), book X p. 62.

⁸ The National Archives, Kew, SP 16/520 fos 126r-v.



It was almost becoming normal for spiritualists to feel that ordinary Christian prayer, or orthodox doctrines about life after death, were simply too gross for the elevated purity of their vision. The wrestlers with doubt whom we met in the last lecture were doggedly resisting temptations to question the Bible, to doubt immortality and to deny God, but these spiritualists were embracing the same questions and doubts. They believed that by doing so they were not rejecting divine truth but pursuing it and leaving behind the crass carnalities of a childish faith. This was not unbelief: it was belief raised to a new height. If reaching that height meant abandoning doctrines and practices which had been Christian shibboleths for centuries, then their boldness in doing so only demonstrated the depth of their faith. And if unenlightened worldlings thought that their faith looked like atheism, what of it: since the time of Christ, such people had always persecuted the truth.

Even so, spiritualism remained as much a fringe phenomenon in England as it was everywhere else, the preserve of a few persecuted eccentrics – until the summer of 1640, when the authority of King Charles I's regime collapsed, setting in motion the process that would lead to civil war, to the king's execution and to an eleven-year republic. At no point during the 1640s and 1650s did England have a government with both the power and the will to impose religious conformity. The result was an exuberant flowering of religious variety without precedent in the Reformation era. Old radicals and new adventurers at the edges of orthodoxy found themselves converging on ideas and practices that look very much like unbelief, and on a scale never before seen.

Most of the zealous reformers whom the burgeoning revolution brought to power wanted to replace the Church of England's establishment with a new church and new ministers. But plenty of radicals thought that this was a trick, the same old clerical lies and tyranny in new clothes – as John Milton famously said, 'new Presbyter is but old Priest writ large'. The logical conclusion was to reject the idea of a distinct ministerial caste entirely. Violent denunciations of ministers became almost routine. A troop of Parliamentary soldiers quartered in Warwickshire in the mid-1640s were 'constant' in condemning the region's ministers, 'dissuading the people from going to church', and claiming that they themselves could preach better. Bookstalls heaved with denunciations of the rituals practiced in 'vile stone Churches', and of the 'atheists and godless persons' who still enslaved themselves to them.⁹ But attacking atheism by withdrawing from communal religious observance was, to say the least, a high-risk gambit.

Most radicals favoured some measure of religious toleration. But the horrified traditionalists who saw toleration as a slippery slope to atheism were not wrong. Toleration meant abandoning the long-cherished idea that religious unity was necessary to hold society together: a tolerant society must be a plural one, and that means one where public life is neutral and so in at least some sense secular. And if that sounded a bit too theoretical, the inescapable fact was that toleration eroded religion in practice as well as in theory. In a free market of religious ideas, consumers get what they want. Books and sects denying the most basic of Christian doctrines and practices started to appear. Toleration was a religious principle, but it was also deliberately kicking away the props that had long kept most people's religion secure.

As we saw last time, those who were tempted to unbelief tended to be troubled by two doctrines in particular: the immortality of the soul and the authority of the Bible. In the 1640s English radicals in the 1640s deliberately assaulted both. In a notorious 1644 pamphlet called *Man's Mortality*, the radical Richard Overton branded immortality a 'Hell-hatched doctrine' invented by the clergy to terrorise the simple into obedience. He argued that the 'soul' is a pagan, not a Christian concept, and ridiculed the idea of disembodied survival as nonsensical. Actually, beneath the surface shock, Overton's doctrine was very close to traditional Christianity – he very much believed in a bodily resurrection at the Day of Judgement – but not everyone who followed on from him was so measured. The claim 'the soul of man is mortal as the soul of a beast and dies with the body' surfaced repeatedly in the years that followed, sometimes with a promise of a future resurrection and sometimes without.¹⁰ Others suggested that *only* the soul and not the body will be raised. This turns 'resurrection' into an inward, spiritual event, and 'Heaven' and 'Hell' into metaphors for happiness or misery. Those who took this line believed that

⁹ Edwards, *The third part of Gangraena*, pp. 20-21; *A discovery of the great fantasie, or, Phantasticall conceitednesse* (London: T. P. and M. S., 1642), pp. 12, 18.

¹⁰ Thomas Edwards, *The first and second part of Gangraena* (London: T.R. and E.M. for Ralph Smith, 1646), p. 22; cf. *A relation of severall heresies ... Discovering the originall ring-leaders, and the time when they began to spread* (London: by J.M., 1646), p. 10.



they were not abandoning traditional Christianity, but instead revealing the profound inner truths that had long lain concealed within it. If they were pressed on what actually lies beyond death – a subject they claimed, implausibly, to find uninteresting – they might maintain that ‘every creature is God ... and shall return into God again, be swallowed up in him as a drop is in the ocean’.¹¹ It’s not atheism, but it’s not Christianity either.

The Bible’s literal authority didn’t do any better. One radical who was confronted with awkward prooftexts simply replied, ‘This is Scripture to you, but not to me’: how could his opponents answer that?¹² The radicals picked up longstanding niggles about textual variations, problems of translation and apparent contradictions – issues which Biblical scholars had known about and had been successfully managing for centuries – and turned them into real arguments for the first time: not because they were newly persuaded by these old chestnuts, but because, unlike their predecessors, they genuinely needed arguments against the Bible. They did not exactly reject it, but they felt they had outgrown it. It was a tool of self-serving priests. The soldiers in Surrey who mocked churches and ministers in 1649 also declared that the Bible ‘is abolished: It containeth beggarly rudiments, milk for Babes. But now Christ is in Glory amongst us and imparts a fuller measure of his Spirit to his Saints than this can afford’. They underlined the point by burning a Bible before the people.¹³ Some radicals distinguished between Scripture as ‘history’, the dead outward letter recording what God had done in ages past, and Scripture as ‘mystery’, the inner Word written on the hearts of God’s people here and now.¹⁴ None of this was atheist scoffing: it was the pursuit of a high mystery. But the effect – to lend credence to every burgeoning doubt about the Bible – was the same.

Once you have begun cracking open the husks of traditional Christian doctrines in order to reveal their inner spiritual kernels, how do you know when to stop? Christianity is a historical faith, centred around a specific set of events in Judea in the first century. Was that story just a symbol too? Gerrard Winstanley, now famous for leading a utopian commune in Surrey in 1649-50, wrote that ‘Jesus Christ at a distance from thee, will never save thee; but a Christ within is thy Saviour’. *Christ* has here become a universal spiritual principle, not the distant historical figure of the preacher from Nazareth. Some said they believed in Jesus in the same way they believed in Queen Elizabeth I, ‘because Chronicles make mention of her’.¹⁵ All the better to put their own fresh revelations on a higher plane.

Could this journey into ever more rarefied and allegorised spiritualism end in actual, ‘hard’ atheism? It came close. Winstanley denied being an atheist, but he also avoided using the word ‘God’, preferring ‘Reason’ with a capital R instead.¹⁶ We do have reports of radicals claiming that ‘there is no God, or if there be a God, the Devil is a God’. It does look as if, having pursued truth up and up the mountain, some radicals had at last found the summit bare.

Most English men and women were horrified by all this, but not all of them panicked. In 1646 Samuel Bolton, a prominent London preacher and master of a Cambridge college, published a guide to surviving an age of ‘abounding errors.’ The burgeoning sectarian chaos, he suggested, was a test: a means for those who had spent their lives blithely claiming to be Christians to discover whether it was true. He cited Jesus’ parable of the house built on sand, the weakness of whose foundations is only revealed when the storm comes. England was now living through just such a storm.

“When a man sees abundance of opinions abroad, one saith this, another that, sure it will make a man to put the question to himself: upon what foundation do I stand? What is my bottom? And how can he have any rest till he have gotten a better foundation to build on, a foundation which none of these opinions can shake and unsettle?”

¹¹ Edwards, *The first and second part of Gangraena*, p. 17.

¹² Edwards, *The first and second part of Gangraena*, p. 34.

¹³ ‘Theodorus Verax’, *Anarchia Anglicana*, p. 153.

¹⁴ For example, Bauthumley, *The light and dark sides of God*, p. 72: this distinction would become a mainstay of Quakerism.

¹⁵ Edwards, *The first and second part of Gangraena*, p. 18; Winstanley, *Truth lifting up its head*, p. 12; George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. Norman Penney (New York: Cosimo Books, 2007), p. 37; Edwards, *Gangraena, or, A catalogue and discovery*, sig. P4v.

¹⁶ Winstanley, *Truth lifting up its head*, esp. sig. A7v-8v, pp. 2, 10.



There would be casualties. ‘Many fair buildings ... fall down, and [are] not able to stand out the blast of trial and temptation, because they are houses built on the sands.’ The vain and hypocritical Christian, whose faith has never had a secure foundation, will find that ‘the multitude of opinions doth draw him away, or else Atheist him’. Such people will be revealed for the unbelievers they had always truly been. But for the true believer, sectarian cacophony has the opposite effect.

“It will make [such] a man to enquire after the rock, and endeavour to build there. ... The multitude of opinions ... doth *un-atheist* him, put him upon the search and examination what is the truth of God. ... These things do fire him out of his formality, and he can have no rest till he come to some bottom to stand on.”¹⁷

Christians, then, ought not respond to the storm by hunkering down inside their inherited orthodoxies. Instead, they should let the storm do its work of washing away ill-founded habits and notions. If cracks started to appear in their temple, they ought not to patch it up, but abandon it or even tear it down. And before they thought about rebuilding, their chief duty was to dig; to work down through as many layers of shifting sand as necessary until their shovels finally rang on bedrock.

Bolton hoped to use this storm to turn lazy, habitual Christians into earnest, engaged but still orthodox Christians. But not everyone stuck to the script. Instead, on a scale never before seen, bands of earnest excavators began churning up the landscape of traditional religion. Many of them found their rocks and started to build again, but soon others – or they themselves – began to worry that this foundation, too, might be shakier than it seemed. And in the process the traditional ritual, devotional and intellectual structures of the faith were undermined or deliberately demolished.

This was an age which loved categories, and so it coined a word for such people: *Seekers*. The name is a little misleading: it refers not to a sect but to a mood, a mood in which standard Puritan dislike of ritual and superstition had turned into a hypersensitive allergy, such that it was hard for any religious practice to be pure enough. Psalm-singing, collective prayers, sermons: could you be certain those things were God’s will? If not, then surely better safe than sorry? The most momentous issue, again, was baptism. Plenty of these radicals concluded that baptism ought to be restricted to believing adults, not administered indiscriminately to babies. In 1644 a group of Parliamentary soldiers in Huntingdonshire heard that a baby was about to be baptised in the parish church. They blocked the road, and some of them...

“got into the Church, pissed in the Font, and went to a Gentleman’s stable in the Town, and took out a horse, and brought it into the Church, and there baptised it.”

It hardly matters whether this was gratuitous desecration, or whether they were trying to demonstrate that infant baptism was a grotesque parody of God’s true ordinance. The assault on long-standing Christian practice was equally severe either way.¹⁸

But denouncing infant baptism was the easy part. If you were reforming baptism, how could you be sure that your new practice was correct? Some of those who sought out the new baptism found it emotionally intense and satisfying; others were left cold, found that their newfound zeal quickly faded, or observed that baptism didn’t actually appear to transform believers into truly godly people. Some such people concluded that adult baptism, too, did not ‘answer the cry of our hearts’, and withdrew from these communities. Instead, as one such man put it, ‘I gave myself up to a seeking state again.’¹⁹

These ‘seekers’ will by now be familiar enough. Like Franck and Schwenkfeld, like the Dutch Collegiants, like Bartholomew Legate, they rejected all sacraments, ministry or church, not because such things are inherently

¹⁷ Bolton, *Arraignment of error*, p. 22.

¹⁸ David Booy (ed.), *Autobiographical Writings by Early Quaker Women* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 81-2; Matthew Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Edwards, *The third part of Gangraena*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁹ Howard, *Love and Truth in Plainness Manifested*, pp. 8-11; cf. Stephen Crisp, *A memorable account of the Christian experiences, Gospel labours, travels, and sufferings of that ancient servant of Christ, Stephen Crisp* (London: T. Sowle, 1694), p. 13; Laurence Claxton, *The lost sheep found: or, the prodigal returned to his father’s house* (London: printed for the author, 1660), p. 19; Edwards, *Gangraena, or, A catalogue and discovery*, sigs K4v, L1v, L3v.



wrong, but because they had not yet found rites and ministry that were demonstrably in keeping with God's will. They were waiting for proof, for miracles to witness a new dispensation, miracles that would be utterly unmistakable and not some mere rumours. And if God had not yet seen fit to provide such a thing, who were they to try to run on ahead? Nor was it just about churches. A clothier from Worcester named Clement Writer, one of the first Seekers to defend his views in print, had to confront orthodox critics bombarding him with awkward Bible verses, and it turned out he had the same scruples about the Bible as he had about churches. If a preacher tells him to obey the Scriptures, 'I must ask him ... what Scriptures?' The originals, when all we have are 'the copies of the copies'? Or a translation? – in which case which one? Texts whose interpretation is, at best, 'mysterious and dark'? There is no rock to be built on here. The Bible cannot infallibly teach us any doctrines at all.²⁰ His fear of being deceived by error meant that, as a pious duty, he refused to embrace any firm truth.

The Kentish Seeker Mary Springett shows us what this religion of anxiety meant in practice. During the 1640s, she wrote, 'I changed my ways often, and ran from one notion to another, not finding satisfaction or assurance'. She ended her regular daily prayers. Her former piety now seemed to her mere hypocrisy. She was 'ashamed to be accounted religious' and grew to 'loathe' anyone who claimed to be. And so, at last...

"I began to conclude that the Lord and his truth was, but that it was made known to none upon the earth. ... There was nothing manifest since the Apostles' days that was true religion. ... I knew nothing to be so certainly of God, as I could shed my blood in defence of it."

It was braver and more truly pious to admit her utter ignorance of God than to worship some imaginary substitute. And so 'I ... resolved in my heart I would ... be without a religion until the Lord manifestly taught me one'. She had become a devout and expectant unbeliever.²¹

The Seekers' hopes were real. They seem genuinely to have believed that the time would come when God would send a new dispensation. The difficulty with this hope is not merely that it became thinner the longer it was delayed, but that it did not solve the problem of what to do in the meantime. If Seekers met together – and it seems as if at least some of them did – they were, like the Collegiants, more discussion groups than congregations. Even on their own, they abandoned most or all of their former religious practices, either doubting that they could ever do them right, or trusting that they had ascended above such fleshly habits as prayer and Bible-reading. As an act of faith, they had renounced religion. So, how *should* they live? This was the crucial question, and the answer was momentous: they transposed their religion into a moral key. One woman, told by a radical preacher that nothing of what she believed was certain, asked what, in that case, she should do. He replied, 'if you live honestly and modestly, you shall do well enough'. Some suggested that instead of meeting for worship, Seekers ought to gather periodically to 'read some good moral things' such as the works of Plutarch or Cicero.²² As Clement Writer put it, if all doctrine and authority was uncertain, the only certainty left was God's law written onto every human heart. That was the only yardstick against which churches, their doctrines and their Gods might be measured. The only way to truly follow God was to abandon dogmatism. The price was to redefine 'following God' as striving to adhere to a supposedly universal moral law. That may be magnificent, but it is not religion.

It was also impossible. Apart from anything else, while most seventeenth-century people believed a universal natural law existed, they could not quite agree on its contents. Just what counts as immoral? In 1649-50 respectable England was swept by a panic about so-called Ranters, who, it was said, abandoned any kind of sexual restraint, claiming that God had given them liberty to do as they pleased, and that marriage was just another human superstition. A lot of this was scurrilous nonsense, but this much was true. If you climb above all devotional practice, all communal religious life, all doctrinal fixed points and even all moral conventions, then no matter how sincere your principles are, you will be left very exposed. To maintain this rarefied trans-religious spirituality, and live your life in the unblinking, invisible light of Reason, is not easy. It is no surprise if those who set out up this mountain found that they struggled actually to make homes for themselves above the

²⁰ Edwards, *Gangraena, or, A catalogue and discovery*, sig. M1v; Writer, *Jus Divinum* (1655), pp. 28, 66-71, 87-88.

²¹ Booy (ed.), *Autobiographical Writings*, pp. 82-4, 88.

²² Edwards, *The third part of Gangraena*, pp. 93; [John Price or William Kiffin?], *Walwins wiles: or The manifestators manifested* (London: H[enry] C[ripps] and L[odowick] L[loyd], [1649]), p. 10.



treeline. One of the most compelling accounts of the Seekers, by the charismatic former preacher Laurence Claxton, tells how his itinerant life began to offer him worldly compensations: he found he could make a decent living from preaching radical doctrines, and also that his freewheeling doctrines of spiritual liberty segued very nicely into arguments against conventional sexual morals. Eventually the main point of his ministry became to prey on his pockets and their chastity: he told his followers in London that ‘till you can lie with all women as one woman, and not judge it sin, you can do nothing but sin’. By this time, he admitted, he was acting entirely cynically, preaching whatever lies serve his own ends best. His account is not exactly trustworthy, but the arc from idealism through opportunism to cynicism is plausible enough. If you have abandoned all the structures and constraints of your old religion, what was to stop you?

For a more highbrow, but equally notorious, example of the way conventional morality could dissolve along with religious certainty in this period, consider the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who became so notorious for his unbelief that ‘he cannot walk the streets, but the Boys point at him saying ‘there goes Hobbes the Atheist!’’. It was probably not exactly true. Hobbes conformed outwardly to the Church of England for most of his life and may even have attended its traditional worship in the 1650s, when it was illegal to do so. But his reported claim that he ‘liked the religion of the church of England best of all other’ sounds more like an aesthetic choice than a confession of faith. It is also distinctly muted in its enthusiasm. If he accepted the church, he did not like its priests. When clergy pestered him on his sickbed, he threw them out with threats to expose the deceits of their whole caste since ancient times. The fourth and final section of his great book *Leviathan*, titled ‘The Kingdom of Darkness’, is essentially an extended howl of rage against the clergy.

Hobbes’ reputation for atheism rested chiefly on *Leviathan*, and especially on the half of the book which is supposedly devoted to religion. His attack on Biblical authority became particularly notorious. But this was not about disinterested Biblical scholarship.²³ For all his religious conventionality, Hobbes’ two-pronged attack on both Biblical and clerical authority has something Seeker-ish about it. His persistent theme throughout the religious passages of *Leviathan* is the impossibility of certain religious knowledge. No human claim about God – whether made by priests or by the Bible – is or can ever be beyond question, even if apparently authorised by miracles. Churchmen may believe such claims, but they cannot force anyone else to agree. They can only persuade, as the first apostles did. Seekers used this sense of provisionality to argue that no religion was possible. Hobbes gave the argument a simple twist. He had spent the first half of his book arguing for the absolute sovereignty of secular governments. He now claimed that, since absolute religious truth is unknowable, secular governments’ sphere of control ought to extend over religion too. He does not argue that they have some secret religious knowledge: merely that they are no more likely to be wrong than anyone else, and that no-one can prove that they are wrong. He is particularly hostile to any notion of a separate religious authority. All real religious authority is vested in the secular ruler, he thinks, not because of some notion of divine right of kings, but because the mere fact of being in power bestows on itself religious as well as political authority. If all other truths are provisional, political power is all that remains.²⁴

What was truly shocking about Hobbes’ view is not merely that he believed that religious truth was fundamentally inaccessible, a view that the Seekers shared; but that that fact did not trouble him. He does seem to have believed that there is a God – otherwise we have to dismiss an implausible amount of his writing as a smokescreen – but he was not especially interested in the question, except insofar as he was suspicious of anyone claiming to act in God’s name. The deity he truly revered was political power. The reputation for atheism that this won him was not unjust.

But I don’t want to give the impression that the acid-bath that the spiritualists plunged religion into led usually or inevitably to immorality. Quite the opposite: intense moral seriousness was the norm for these people. The Ranters were blown entirely out of proportion, and Hobbes was an isolated eccentric. The most common route that Seekers eventually took was to become Quakers, a sect which successfully institutionalised most of the Seeker qualms about churches, rites and hierarchy, and who were marked out by their severe and earnest

²³ The same goes for the slightly earlier denial of Moses’ authorship in Isaac la Peyrère’s *Pre-Adamitae*, written in 1641 but not published until 1655: la Peyrère ‘wanted to raise a basic kind of religious scepticism about Scripture in order to justify his own religious views’, namely a weird doctrine of human polygenesis. Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, pp. 221-3.

²⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), esp. pp. 306, 327, 357.



moralism, guided, as they saw it, not by the dead word of the Bible but by the inner light of Christ. But I want to finish with a different, slightly less expected representative of the moralistic tradition in spiritualism: the philosopher who did more than anyone else to create modern secular thought, the fountainhead of the Enlightenment, the most brilliant and notorious thinker of his age, Baruch Spinoza.

Spinoza's story might at first seem to be quite different from the ones I have been telling: he was a Dutch Jew who in 1655, at the age of 22, began to challenge his own community's orthodoxies. The following year he was expelled from the Amsterdam synagogue. These early clashes eventually bore fruit in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), a devastating attack on the authority of the Bible, on any notion of the supernatural, on any attempt to override human reason and, in particular, on clerical authority or any kind of theocracy – a preoccupation he shared with Hobbes, although he was also very critical of Hobbes' political absolutism. Spinoza's claim that 'nature is self-moving and creates itself' was not atheistic in the strict sense – it is closer to pantheism – but his reputation as the founding father of modern unbelief is well deserved.²⁵

But notice what happened after Spinoza was excommunicated in 1656: he fell in with Amsterdam's most intellectually open religious community, Adam Boreel's Collegiants. He did so at a moment of particular religious flux, when a pair of English Quaker missionaries had come to Amsterdam, and the Collegiants recognised the Quakers as kindred spirits. The young Spinoza quickly became a part of this milieu. He collaborated with a Quaker missionary, translating a Quaker pamphlet into Hebrew, in the (vain) hope of winning Jewish converts: it was Spinoza's first ever published work. That Quaker missionary later wrote a detailed critique of the Bible which anticipated many of Spinoza's arguments: there is no knowing who learned what from whom, but plainly the two men were intellectually close. In 1658 another Quaker missionary wrote that Spinoza was 'very friendly' to their cause. The friendship came to an end because the Quakers and Collegiants fell out with one another: in the way of sects, they were so similar to one another that their remaining differences were intolerable. Spinoza stuck with his Collegiant friends, one of whom would translate Spinoza's first original book into Dutch. Spinoza remained personally close to Balling and to several other leading Collegiants throughout his life. When he moved out of Amsterdam in 1660-1, he chose as his rural refuge the village of Rijnsburg, the heartland of the Collegiant movement, founded there four decades earlier.²⁶

Spinoza was never a Christian. But he was a Collegiant fellow-traveller: an affinity which would never have required him to contemplate anything so crassly carnal as a baptism. His early critique of both Christianity and Judaism was very much of a piece with the Collegiant, Seeker and Quaker critique of 'religion'. The philosophical heft he brought to the table was new, but the moral force behind it was not. A vital part of this is that, despite or perhaps because of his Jewish background, Spinoza had an extraordinarily positive view of Jesus, whom he called 'not so much the prophet as the mouthpiece of God'. He not only unproblematically used the momentous title *Christ* for him – no small step for a Jew to take – but also repeatedly emphasised that Jesus' teaching and moral vision were so far above anyone else's that 'the voice of Christ may be called the voice of God'. For all his Biblical scepticism, he was happy to accept the basic accuracy of the Christian Gospels. The main exception to that is his blanket rejection of miracle-stories, but here, too, his reasoning was driven more by theology and ethics than by any quasi-scientific scepticism. The reason he believed that 'nature cannot be contravened' was because the alternative is 'to assert that God has created nature so weak ... that he is repeatedly compelled to come afresh to her aid': miracles were theologically incoherent. In fact, because a miracle would be 'in contravention to God's nature and laws ... belief in it would throw doubt upon everything, and lead to atheism'.²⁷ Any Collegiant or Seeker might have said the same. And so, the most truly devastating critique of religion in the western tradition was not coming from outside, but from within. It was friendly fire: a

²⁵ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 159-60, 230; cf. the similarly pivotal role Spinoza plays in Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*, pp. 147-52.

²⁶ Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, pp. 151-5, 193, 200, 203; Richard H. Popkin, 'Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam' in *Quaker History* 73/1 (1984), 14-28; Karen Clausen-Brown, 'Spinoza's translation of Margaret Fell and his portrayal of Judaism in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*' in *The Seventeenth Century* 34/1 (2019), 89-106.

²⁷ Richard H. Popkin, 'Spinoza and Bible Scholarship' in James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (eds), *The Books of Nature and Scripture* (Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), p. 15; Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, p. 90, 97-9, 108, 112, 114; Baruch Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, ed. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), vol. I pp. 83-4, 87.



determination to save religion from itself, fired as much by a compelling moral vision and critique as by any metaphysical concerns. Religion would be distilled over and over until nothing remained but pure spirit. And if that pure spirit produced madness or blindness, or even if it just boiled away into the thin cold air leaving an empty vessel behind it – then that, maybe, is the price of fearlessly pursuing God’s truth.

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