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**The Republic of King Jesus**

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Welcome to the first of this series of lectures on ‘Extreme Christianity’ which I’ll be offering at Gresham this year. Let me begin with a few words on why I think this is a subject worth thinking about. We’re used nowadays to talking about religious extremism, a phrase which nine times out of ten is a code for Islamic extremism. But it is not clear how helpful the notion of ‘extremism’ really is when thinking about religion. For a start, most religions of whatever kind make ultimate or totalising claims: it’s in their very nature to do so. It is in some ways hard to see how you can seriously embrace any religion without being an extremist, or at least an absolutist, of some kind. It’s one thing to be an atheist or an agnostic, but to be a moderate believer – to profess a religious faith but not to let it affect your life too much – that is a problematic stance. And while it is in fact the stance that a great many people adopt and have adopted throughout history, the more extreme believers can be forgiven for thinking that they are simply being consistent, by taking seriously what they profess to believe and its implications. As the proverb goes, extremism in the pursuit of liberty is no vice; nor, by extension, is extremism in the pursuit of true faith. So, when we describe people as religious extremists, we should be aware that we are complimenting them.

But when we talk about religious *extremism*, we are not usually talking simply about people who are passionately committed to their faith, but about people who have taken that faith in an unusual direction, especially one that’s violent or that’s socially or politically destabilising. And people who attack or disrupt social and political norms in this way tend to provoke a strong reaction, up to and including state repression or popular violence. So it has always been and so it still is. Now leave aside for the moment the question of whether that reaction is justified. There is also a good question to be asked about whether or not it works. Disruptive religious extremists of this sort know that their views are counter-cultural and unpopular, and may glory in or thrive on the fact. They are prophets, brave and lonely heralds of the truth, and opposition only proves them right.

That may sound like a counsel of despair: neither toleration nor suppression can actually do anything to stop disruptive extremism. Well, my purpose in these lectures is to offer some hopeful examples. I’m going to be looking at four historical case studies of disruptive extremism in the Christian world over the last few centuries, movements which in their time ranged from the unnerving and ridiculous through to the genocidal. And what I want to do with them in each case is to try to understand them from within: not to justify them, but to explain why people who were inherently no more stupid and wicked than we are might have embraced them. That’s partly as a reminder that religious extremism in any age has its own logic, and in its own terms makes sense. But also, and less platitudinously, because each of these cases also shows an example of how a disruptive extremist movement comes to an end: sometimes as a result of external suppression, at least in part, but more often as its own internal dynamics progress to the point where a movement has burned itself out or become trapped by its own inner logic. In future lectures, we’ll be looking at the Millerites, the apocalyptic movement that convulsed the United States in the 1840s; at the German Christian movement that affiliated itself, or tried to affliate itself, with Nazism; and at the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, who created the concept of apartheid. But today we are staying closer to home and going a little further back in history, to one of the great explosive moments of religious and sectarian creativity in world history: England in the 1640s and 1650s, the era of the Civil War and the Republic.

I am not about to talk you through the set of crises which, unexpectedly, took England from a long lifetime of settled political and religious stability from 1559 to 1640 to a vicious civil war in 1642. There were political, legal, cultural issues, and there were fatal clashes of personality: whatever other deep forces were at work, if King Charles I had been less disastrously inadequate as a ruler, the crisis would not and could not have unfolded as it did. There is, perhaps especially for our own times, a certain urgent tragedy in how war crept over the country: and in how a people who had grown used to peace and order, and who did not really think that the depth and bitterness of their political divisions posed any real danger, suddenly realised too late that a full-blown war was upon them. But the crucial accelerant to this fire was deep religious antagonism. The king favoured a hierarchical, ceremonial form of Protestantism – a sort of precursor to modern Anglicanism – and he was foolish enough to attempt to enforce this both onto England, where a vocal and militant portion of the population were bitterly opposed to it, and also, fatally, onto Scotland, where the same opposition extended almost to the whole of the political and religious establishment. Those opponents, north and south of the Border, whom for want of a better word we might call *puritans*, represented a tradition of disgruntled Protestantism that had been convinced for generations that England’s Protestant Reformation was a poor, brackish, stunted thing, a half-Reformation whose true spirit had been bound and shackled by lordly bishops and those they had befuddled. Now, these puritans feared, King Charles and his bishops were not so much cramping the true Church as throttling it. In particular, they feared that, unwittingly or even deliberately, the king was leading his subjects back to the Roman Catholic church, to what they saw as popish tyranny.

So, when England slid into civil war in 1642, plenty of people on both sides understood themselves to be fighting a war of religion. Royalists were fighting for the old church and good order against the fanatics: parliamentarians were fighting for the true Reformation against crypto-papists. Now so far, none of this is extremism. For most English parliamentarians, and most of the Scottish Covenanters who fought with them, ‘true Reformation’ meant some form or other of presbyterian church: an established church, embracing the entire nation, self-governing and independent of royal or state control, committed to a clear and stern Calvinism, stripped of popish flummery and ceremony, and governed by committees elected from amongst its ministers rather than by lordly bishops. Such systems were already partly established in Scotland, in the Netherlands, in portions of Switzerland and Germany, and elsewhere. It would have taken English history in a new direction, but in the context of the time it would not have been particularly extremist.

The moment when England might have turned Presbyterian was late 1644, after a crushing victory by a Scots-Parliamentary army at the battle of Marston Moor on 2 July. There was talk of a negotiated peace. The deal on the table would have seen a chastened king accepting a sort of housetrained variant of Presbyterianism. But if Charles I had been the kind of man who would have accepted such terms, the war would never have begun. By the winter of 1644-5 it was clear that Parliament would have to fight the war to the end, although no-one yet knew what the ‘end’ might look like. That meant fighting a new kind of war: no longer trying to fight off royalist attacks as more of the fragmented parliamentary armies had been doing up to that point, it meant going on the offensive, and defeating the king in his heartland in the Midlands and the west. That required a new strategy. So, fatefully, in January 1645 Parliament voted to consolidate its hotchpotch of forces into a ‘new-modelled’ Army, a professional, national force which could fight the war to the finish.

In military terms, this was brusingly effective. On 14 June 1645 the new Army crushing a veteran Royalist force at the battle of Naseby in Northamptonshire. In September, it took the ruined remains of Bristol, a royalist stronghold and once England’s third city. By early 1646 royalist resistance was virtually over. However, the Army’s career was only beginning. In a series of further campaigns in England, Scotland and Ireland over the following decade and a half, it was to prove itself an exceptionally formidable fighting force: man for man, a match for any army in the world. It also quickly became, and remained until 1660, the primary source of political power in the British Isles. The king was defeated not by Parliament but by the Army. Almost everything else I am going to say follows from that fact.

When armies intervene in politics in the modern world, we normally see them as authoritarian and conservative. But this Army was created, as the ‘new-modelled’ moniker indicates, to be God’s and the people’s army, a meritocracy of true believers. It imagined itself to be a truer custodian of the godly cause than the House of Commons, whose ageing electoral mandate dated from 1640, another world before the war. In 1647 one zealous London puritan called it ‘our Army ,… the Army that we had poured out to God so many prayers and tears for, and we had largly contributed unto. They were as our right hand.’ The soldiers themselves had earned authority with their blood. And God had plainly bestowed it, with an unbroken run of victories.

The Army’s godliness, however, was of a particular kind. The breakdown of religious authority since 1640 had given a vocal minority of English Protestants a taste for religious experiment. Even if they still believed in a unified national Church, a proper Presbyterian settlement, it took heroic patience to wait so as to be able to reach it in lockstep, especially with a new Jerusalem in sight. A vanguard of advanced reformers wanted to enjoy true Christian purity here and now. In 1641, the puritan hero Henry Burton, who had had his ears cut off for his public opposition to Charles I’s religious policy, was advocating a network of what he called ‘independent Churches’, governed neither by bishops nor by presbyteries, but by the law of Christ and by mutual consultation and advice. Some zealous souls were already putting his advice into practice.

These so-called Independent congregations were never numerically dominant, but they were zealous and high-profile, and they bridled at Presbyterian attempts to make them march to a slow, orderly national tune. The young poet John Milton, who was one of the most passionate early advocates for Independency, bracketed bishops and presbyteries together as disciplinarian ‘forcers of conscience’. Some Independents began to talk of *toleration*. In 1644, with Parliament trying to re-impose order on London’s unruly printers, Milton famously defended a free press as a matter of principle. Presbyterians claimed that, unlike the wicked Catholics, they were opposed to actual religious persecution, and would never put someone to death for their religious beliefs. But Milton argued that it was ‘as good almost [to] kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God’s Image; but he who destroys a good Book, kills reason itself, kills the Image of God’. Protestant that he was, he lodged his complaint at the ultimate court of appeal, conscience. He claimed the freedom ‘to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties’.

The Presbyterians’ retort was that liberty of this kind led directly to heresy and blasphemy. On this view, Independents were never merely orthodox Calvinists who had rejected external oversight: they always concealed views which were ‘higher flown, more seraphical’. That was untrue. Plenty of Independents were essentially orthodox, including the most famous of them all, Oliver Cromwell. But for some, Independency was a gateway drug. There had been a radical sectarian underground in London even in the 1630s, and now it began to come into the open. So even as a Presbyterian victory over royalist crypto-Catholicism was in its grasp, Presbyterianism was unravelling on its other flank. And Parliament, while horrified by these novelties, could not under the circumstances muster either the votes or the will for a serious crackdown.

Worst of all, the primary vector for this radical infection was the new-modelled Army. It is not simply that the zealous types who volunteered for military service in the godly cause were disproportionately Independent. Independency’s essence was its denial of the network of parish churches: the Army, forever on the move, was by definition outside that network. Its chaplains were under its own discipline, and its soldiers, risking their lives in God’s service, had their own voices. Richard Baxter, the Worcestershire clergyman who was one of the most humane pastoral theologians of his age, recalled how early in the war he and his fellow Parliamentarians in the Midlands believed that the war was being fought in defence of ‘our old principles ... only to save the Parliament and Kingdom from papists and delinquents’. But shortly after the battle of Naseby, he visited the Army’s encampment:

Among Cromwell’s soldiers, I found a new face of things which I never dreamt of: I heard the plotting heads very hot upon that which intimated their intention to subvert both Church and State. Independency and Anabaptistry were most prevalent; Antinomianism and Arminianism were equally distributed.

Something shockingly new was brewing in the Army’s ranks. The ‘old principles’ were no longer to be had.

So when the king finally surrendered in 1646, he faced a divided gaggle of victors. There was now a Presbyterian establishment, with somewhat lukewarm parliamentary backing, but it was struggling to make its long-dreamed of new settlement stick. Presbyterian structures were set up, but actually enforcing them onto relucant parish churches was all but impossible. In effect, every parish church had become *de facto* Independent, free to choose whether it submitted to Presbyterian discipline, stuck to something like the old Church of England’s rites from before the war, or explored wilder shores. For ranged over against the Presbyterians was the Army, increasingly insistent that no political and religious settlement with the defeated king could be reached unless it had their consent. Quite what it was the Army wanted was another matter. The leading officers were willing to contemplate a political settlement which permitted a fair degree of religious toleration, but which otherwise looked just about recognisably like pre-crisis England. For many of the rank and file, however, the time for that had passed.

Hence the group known to history as the Levellers, justly famous now as the first political movement in recorded history calling for representative democracy in the modern sense of the word. Their ambitions were first articulated by a series of radical pamphlets in 1645-6, but in 1647 were taken up in earnest by the Army’s rank-and-file, and reinforced by London-based petitions which gathered tens of thousands of signatures. They demanded Parliaments elected every two years, by something not too far from universal male suffrage, with guarantees of freedom of religion and of equality under the law. Some even spoke of votes for women. As to the king, some of them openly called for a republic. They certainly refused to cede any real power to the man who had ‘intended our bondage, and brought a cruell War upon us’.

It was that war which had made such unprecedented radicalism possible. Merely restoring the status quo was inadequate. The Army Levellers’ central manifesto declared that their wartime service made plain ‘at how high a rate we value our just freedom’. There was also a broader sense that the past was irrecoverable. A new world needs new rules. Even some royalists were tempted by Leveller ideas. If you feared Parliamentary tyranny, regular elections on a reformed franchise had an appeal.

But underpinning all of this was an explicitly Protestant conviction that this was an apocalyptic crisis. The living God who acts providentially in history had renewed his Gospel at the Reformation. The Romish Antichrist had mustered all his forces in response. Now this had come to a head in a series of catastrophic religious wars which had convulsed all Europe, and which had at last come to the Gospel’s last outpost, Britain, at the end of the earth. Finally, at terrible cost, victory had been won, and power providentially given to God’s own army. It was a hinge in the world’s history. God was about to do something new.

So the Levellers consistently opposed Presbyterianism as ‘a compulsive mastership, or aristocratical government, over the people’. They envisaged a government with no authority over religion at all, ‘because therein we cannot remit or exceed a tittle of what our Consciences dictate to be the mind of God, without wilful sin’. This explicitly meant refusing to allow any authority to define orthodoxy for them. For respectable Calvinists of all kinds, orthodoxy was policed by the scholarship of University-trained ministers. But what if the Universities had become a self-serving guild which excluded inconvenient truths? What use is book-learning when the Spirit of God is abroad? The radical Army chaplain John Saltmarsh claimed that the Presbyterians insisted that ‘God must not speak till man give him leave’. Saltmarsh instead appealed to ‘the infinitelyabounding spirit of God, which blows whenand where it listeth’. The Levellers felt that breath on their necks.

They could never have succeeded. Even if, impossibly, they had secured truly free elections, they would have been routed. Their awkward argument that Catholics and royalists should be disenfranchised shows that they knew it. But in any case, the discussions were cut short. It does not do to leave a live king out of your calculations. In December 1647 Charles escaped from captivity and gathered fresh supporters. Old royalists were joined by some Presbyterians, who had concluded that the Army’s radical ways were a more serious threat than the King. A second civil war ensued, which lasted for much of 1648, although Charles himself was swiftly recaptured. The new royalist coalition was potentially formidable, but was disparate and disorganised, and the Army did what it did best. Local revolts were put down one by one. A Scottish royalist army was taken unawares by a slightly smaller English force at Preston in Lancashire, and beaten into a bloody surrender.

Now the Army, officers and men alike, were unforgiving. King Charles was a war criminal, a ‘man of blood’ who bore responsibility for his subjects’ deaths. By restarting a war he had already lost, he had openly defied God. There was talk of forcing him to abdicate in favour of one of his sons, but even now such a compromise was not Charles’ style. He tried to strike a deal with the Parliamentary leadership over the Army’s heads. A crucial parliamentary vote on 5 December 1648 suggested it might happen. The result was an open coup. The Army moved in to Westminster. 45 MPs were briefly imprisoned. Nearly three hundred more were excluded, leaving a hard core of about seventy sympathetic to the Army’s views. Eventually another 130 or so would be allowed to trickle back into the body which would become known, cruelly but fairly, as the Rump Parliament. By then, it had already carried out the task for which it was created. It put its sovereign lord, King Charles I, on trial for treason against himself, and, on 31 January 1649, cut off his head.

The king’s death opened up three possible ways forward. One was to conclude that, with this exceptionally awful king gone, normality of some kind could resume. This was what the Scots did, proclaiming the dead king’s son as King Charles II as soon as the news from London reached them. The new ‘king’, in Continental exile, was reluctant to accept the filletted crown which Presbyterian Scotland was offering him, but even royal beggars cannot be choosers, and in 1650 he landed in Scotland to claim it. Relations with his Scottish subjects were not warm. Nor was England’s response. The Army, under Oliver Cromwell’s leadership, invaded, defeating the Scots royalists in a series of brutally effective battles. In 1651 Charles himself narrowly escaped to an exile once again. So the first option, a restored monarchy, failed, but not utterly: it slept until the second had run its course.

The second possible response, taken by the new regime in London, was to reform the state’s abuses while still maintaining a degree of continuity. Following the king’s execution, a republic was declared, but this was not truly an extremist regime. The fundamental structure of the English state and of English law did not change. The republican leadership experimented with a series of governing structures over the following decade. The Rump, ineffective and increasingly friendless, was forcibly dissolved by the Army in 1653 when it tried to make its own rule perpetual. A brief and quixotic attempt was made to replace it with a nominated assembly, known derisively as ‘Barebones’ Parliament’, many of them drawn from the Independent churches. However, when the radical wing threatened to take control, this too was closed down. Oliver Cromwell himself, long the effective ruler of the country, was now formally acknowledged as its Lord Protector. The following five years brought a degree of stability. Cromwell was even pressed to become king, which he and the Army leadership refused. When he died in 1658 he was succeeded as Protector by his son, Richard Cromwell, in near-monarchical fashion. However, during 1658-60 the republican regime unravelled amid rising panic about sectarianism. The Army, which did not trust Richard, deposed him in May 1659. A bewildering succession of attempted governing structures came and went over the following months, until eventually one of the most powerful of the generals accepted the growing clamour for what seemed like the only viable option: restoring the monarchy. Charles II returned in 1660, pledging forgiveness and moderation, promises which he did not violate as thoroughly as some had feared.

So in the end the second option failed absolutely. Nothing like putting the extremists in power to expose them for what they are. Republican government turned out to be simply old England in new dress. There were even traces of this in its religious policy, which on the face of it was genuinely radical. Cromwell was profoundly persuaded by the Independents’ arguments in favour of religious tolerance. Famously, and momentously, he ended England’s centuries-old exclusion of Jews from the country. Almost as momentously, he extended toleration the Baptists, who went from being a marginal sectarian movement in pre-war England to a church tens of thousands strong by 1660, and tens of millions strong worldwide today. Adult baptism had long been a symbol of extremism for establishment Protestants, since it meant abandoning the notion of an all-inclusive national church, but with that national church in ruins anyway, why not?

But Cromwell’s tolerance was not limitless. He excluded any religion which was politically subversive or dangerous. That included the Levellers, who were suppressed by force in the wake of the king’s execution. But it also meant Catholicism, or indeed the much-too-bishoppy practices of the pre-war Church of England. And all the republican regimes also maintained the underpinning structure of a national church. No-one was now compelled to attend their parish church, but most people continued to do so. The government vetted ministerial appointments and expelled known royalists. Above all, tithes continued to be legally required. For the radicals, this was a key betrayal. Tithes were the makeshift local taxes which supported parish churches and from which, very often, landowners took a considerable cut. Radicals of all kinds railed against this, but tithes, as a symbol of social order, became totemic for the establishment. The suppression of Barebones’ parliament in 1653 was triggered when they considered abolishing tithes. It was a step too far.

And that, had it been possible, would have been the third option. Not the same old England made over, but the Levellers’ vision taken up and transfigured, the first-fruits of a world remade under Christ. In 1647 the Army chaplain John Saltmarsh argued that a new age was dawning, the age of the Holy Spirit. Christians should no more stay in the old Church, stuck as it was in the old ways, than Christ’s original disciples should have stayed in his tomb after he had risen from the dead. But given that: where should they now go?

The most straightforward revolutionary ambition was for a so-called Fifth Monarchy. In Biblical prophecy, the first four monarchies were human empires, and the fifth would be Christ’s kingdom on earth. In the turmoil of the 1640s, it was not foolish to think that the time had finally come. Immediately after the king’s execution, a petition called on the Army to encourage the godly to form themselves ‘into families, churches and corporations, till they thus multiply exceedingly’. As this self-governing godly republic wriggled free from its cocoon, the husk of worldly government and law would simply wither away. In the meantime, those in power should prepare the way by abolishing tithes, imposing ferocious legislation against immorality of all kinds, redistributing land to the poor, radically simplifying the law and purging the Universities. Levellers wanted the rule of the people, but Fifth Monarchists wanted the rule of the godly. The godly who were actually in power regarded these idealists with a certain patronising tolerance. In return, they reviled their republican rulers as illegitimate. They dreamed of foreign adventures, of the New Model Army crossing the Channel to tear down the rotten edifice of popery and marching in Gospel victory all the way to Rome. At home, they talked fruitlessly of armed insurrection. The regime, sensibly, never seems to have regarded them as very dangerous.

Others took more direct action. In May 1649, Gerrard Winstanley laid claim to the Levellers’ inheritance for his group, the so-called ‘Diggers’. They had occupied a plot of land which had been shown to him in a dream, and proposed to work it together, holding all property in common. This was not, however, an anticipation of Communism. Winstanley’s commune was a prophetic act, prefiguring ‘a new heaven, and a new earth’ in which

none shall lay claim to any creature, and say, *This is mine, and that is yours, This is my work, that is yours*. ... There shall be no buying nor selling, no fairs nor markets, but the whole earth shall be a common treasury for every man, for the earth is the Lord’s. ... Every one shall work in love: one with, and for another.

The Diggers’ experiment was forcibly broken up within months, and Winstanley eventually returned to a life of genteel respectability. But other subversives were pushing in different directions. In the summer of 1649, Abiezer Coppe, a preacher of questionable mental stability, produced a book claiming that ‘Sword levelling, or digging-levelling’ were

but shadowes of most terrible, yet great and glorious good things to come. Behold, behold, behold, I the eternal God, the Lord of Hosts, who am that mighty Leveller, am coming ... to Level the Hills with the Valleys, and to lay the Mountains low.

Coppe had his sights on the ‘plaguy holinesse’ of Presbyterians and Independents alike, people whose religion was no more than ‘horrid hypocrisie, envy, malice, evill surmising’: an engine for moral self-satisfaction, as well-heeled believers used their self-awarded godliness to despise the poor whom they ought to love. He urged Christians to love not only the poor, but thieves, whoremongers and other notorious sinners. He theatrically abandoned both his own dignity and his pretensions to morality. He ran through London’s streets, charging at the coaches of the wealthy, ‘gnashing with my teeth … with a huge loud voice proclaiming the day of the Lord’. He prostrated himself before ‘rogues, beggars, cripples’, kissing their feet. He ‘sat downe, and ate and drank around on the ground with Gypsies, and clip’t, hug’d and kiss’d them, putting my hand in their bosomes, loving the she-Gypsies dearly’. Such comments, especially his claim to ‘love my neighbour’s wife as myself’, made him notorious. But his supposed sexual libertinism is a side-issue. Coppe’s point was that a true Christian ‘must lose all his righteousnesse, every bit of his holinesse, and every crum of his Religion’. Only then could he reach the point where he ‘knows no evil’.

Coppe was associated with a group of so-called ‘Ranters’, around whom a sudden moral panic ballooned in 1650. This panic was mostly about sex, and former Ranters did claim to have taught, for example, that ‘till you can lie with all women as one woman, and not judge it sin, you can do nothing but sin’. But this misses the point. The Ranters’ assault on traditional moral norms was driven by their understanding of God. ‘They call him the *Being*, the *Fulness*, the *Great motion*, *Reason*, the *Immensity*.’ Ranters taught a kind of pantheism, holding that all things are a part of God, including themselves. Hence the libertinism: if they were God and fully aware that they were God, how could they do wrong? But hence too the radical egalitarianism: every human being is a part of God, so how could social barriers have any meaning? They disliked talk of resurrection and judgement, instead thinking of the dead returning to ‘that infinite Bulk and Bigness, so called *God*, as a drop into the Ocean’.

This quixotic, short-lived and probably tiny movement matters less in its own right than as the clue to a wider milieu which contemporaries called ‘Seekers’. Seekers were in no sense a sect, but a mood: a restless conviction that the established forms of Christianity were simply inadequate and should be abandoned. Some Seekers waited for the new age of the Spirit to reveal itself. Others set out to create it.

Take, for example, Mary Springett, the kind of zealous puritan for whom the early 1640s should have been filled with opportunity. But instead, when she saw the Independents’ and Baptists’ godly reformations, she ‘saw death there’. Instead, ‘I changed my ways often, and ran from one notion to another, not finding satisfaction or assurance that I should obtain what my soul desired.’ She eventually abandoned the formal religious duties in which she had once been scrupulous, although ‘most of my time in the day was spent either in reading scriptures, or praying’. Like the Ranters, during these years she developed a deep suspicion of outward religion. She actively sought out ‘the people of no religion’, who were at least not hypocrites. She even began to explore worldly pleasures: not sexual libertinism, but ‘carding, dancing ... and jovial eatings and drinkings’, which for a former puritan was quite bad enough. She became convinced that there had been no true religion in the world since the apostles’ time, and ‘resolved in my heart I would … be without a religion until the Lord manifestly taught me one’.

Being without a religion might sound like atheism, and that accusation was often made. In fact, however, she was trying to be what the twentieth century would call a religionless Christian: gouging out hypocrisy and formalism even if, at the end, there was nothing left. That was what living on the cusp of the age of the Spirit meant. We can appreciate that people like Abiezer Coppe or Mary Springett were extremists by the standards of their times, or indeed almost any time, but that does not mean they were crazy. Yes, they were fundamentally challenging the religious, political, legal, social, economic and gender structures of their time. But the golden thread tying all of these radicals together is an almost mundane Protestant religiosity. Martin Luther would have had no hesitation in calling these people fanatics, which was not a compliment coming from him, but he also had a lot in common with them. Like him, these people had a profound experience of God’s immediate grace, and knew their consciences stood naked and shameless before God. Luther’s insistence that true faith could overcome sin is not so very different from Coppe’s intention to forswear righteousness and religion so as to know no evil. Even the extravagant mood is comparable. Like Luther, these radicals read their Bibles to make sense of their experience, and would not allow any human authority to overrule them. The difference was that Luther defied the Church with Scripture. These Seekers, like some of the early radicals in Luther’s own time had done, defied the learned theologians with an appeal to an authority no-one could refute: direct revelation from God.

But while respectable English people were alarmed by the Ranters and disturbed by the Seekers, in restrospect the clearest feature of those groups was their instability. They could not have lasted: they were howls of rage or cries of anguish. Groups like that exhaust themselves very quickly. The primary long-term inheritors of this moment of sectarian convulsion would be the one group who proved able to take those radical impulses and stabilise them into a permanent, functioning community able to build an extremism whose feet were firmly planted on the ground. This was the group that Mary Springett, like many other rootless radicals, eventually made her home: the Quakers.

The Quakers’ origins remain obscure. They sprang up almost unnoticed in the North of England and were already formidable when they began to attract serious attention. They have their origin myths, mostly based around the story of their early leader George Fox: but Fox was one of many. Rather than forming around one prophet, Quakerism coalesced from a series of radical separatist groups who found echoes in one another. Many ‘Seekers’ seem to have felt, when they encountered Quakerism, as if it was something they had already known and had been on the tips of their tongues. For Quakerism’s core doctrine is that the truth, the ‘inner light’, is already within us. They scorned university theologians, who, as Fox put it, merely had the written Bible, while Quakers had the living Word. Like Coppe and others who looked to the Levellers, the Quakers also taught a doctrine of absolute human equality. They accepted no titles or ministry, and thundered against the self-awarded privileges and self-important learning of the clergy. They not only won large numbers of women converts, but had prominent women leaders. From a standing start in the early 1650s, they numbered many tens of thousands by the end of the decade, outstripping every other sect in England, most of them many times over. It was exhilarating for them and terrifying for their neighbours.

What marked the Quakers out from their predecessor sects was their severe and exemplary morality, and their level-headed energy. Coppe had roared out against the rich: the Quakers faced them in earnest, standing up in their churches to disrupt their corrupt services. Other sects had denounced tithes: it was the Quakers who conducted the first serious campaigns of non-payment. They stubbornly refused to acknowledge social distinctions. A Shropshire Quaker, Elizabeth Andrews, waited at table for Lord Newport but refused to curtsy to him before his guests. He, teasingly, offered her £20 if she would. She replied that even if he offered her his entire estate ‘I durst not do it, for all honour belongeth to God’. Not everyone took such pertness in good humour. But such utter disregard for human hierarchy won them moral authority as well as hatred.

Like other sects before them, Quakers had their ecstasises: shaking and trembling, roaring, and foaming at the mouth, hence the nickname that soon became a badge of pride. But unlike other sects, such zeal was usually pointed and purposeful. They were not, for example, the first sect to sometimes practise nudism, in the belief that, now that they were freed from original sin, they should shed the clothes with which Adam had covered his shame in the garden of Eden. But Quaker nudity was polemical. In England’s chilly north-west Quakers were preaching stark naked in marketplaces, promising that God would strip the people bare of their hypocritical religion, exposing their shame to the world. One Quaker walked naked through Oxford in 1654 as a sign that Cromwell would soon be stripped both of his authority and of his seeming ‘Covering of Religion’. Other Quakers displayed the same zeal in other ways. Their itinerant preachers ate up the miles. No-one was too grand for them to confront. In 1656 a Quaker named Mary Howgill made her way (fully clothed) into Cromwell’s rooms at Whitehall Palace, handing him a letter denouncing him as a ‘stinking dunghil in the sight of God’. Cromwell, characteristically, patiently heard her out.

By then another Quaker, an unmarried servingmaid named Mary Fisher, had made her way to Barbados and thence to New England, one of the first Quakers in the New World. She was accused of witchcraft and shipped home, but undaunted, she and five others hatched a new scheme. After considering going to minister in Jerusalem, they instead set off to preach to the two great Antichrists of the Protestant imagination: the Pope and the Turkish Sultan. The party who reached Rome were imprisoned, but in 1658, after many adventures, Fisher came face to face with Sultan Mehmet IV, encamped at Adrianople. ‘He was very noble unto me,’ she wrote. ‘He and all that were about him received the words of truth without contradiction. … There is a royal seed amongst them, which in time God will raise.’ He was presumably unused to Christians telling him that God’s inner light was within him.

For everyone who was converted, impressed or indeed amused by the Quakers, however, many more were horrified. Their exponential growth and wilful disregard for social norms made them by far the most frightening of the sects. During 1659 fears of Quakerism crescendoed. There were mob attacks, and rumours of Quaker plots to burn cities. One preacher in July 1659 openly wondered whether God would ‘suffer ... the faithfull [to] be every where Massacred’. Anti-Quaker panic helped to steer that year’s political helter-skelter towards a restored monarchy. Presbyterians and even theologically conservative Independents were beginning to fear Quakers and other sectarians more than they feared popery.

Once the monarchy was restored in 1660, Quakerism would quickly transform itself into the least frightening of sects: stable, its social egalitarianism contained, peaceful to a fault, indeed more likely to cause trouble by its pacifism than anything else. That leap, from terrifying extremists to harmless eccentrics in just a few years, might seem hard for us to imagine in our own day, although it is not entirely unlike the road that, say, Communists have travelled in the lifetime of many of us here. The great question is, did the Quakers cease to be terrifying because they were persecuted into quietness after 1660? For they certainly were persecuted, and if only a handful were actually put to death, a great many more suffered grievous imprisonment, loss of property and civil rights, and other systematic harassment. This certainly pushed them to become more organised and to police themselves more rigorously. But it also made them formulate their beliefs more clearly and stick to them more rigidly, which in this case meant moving to a radical peacefulness, but in other cases might not. More to the point, perhaps, social rejection combined with the generational changing of the guard altered the sect’s mood. The early Quakers’ one truly terrifying and intolerable feature was that they were winning converts by the basketload, alarming every other religious group. Within a couple of decades, this was drying up: they were raising their children in the faith but not bringing in many outsiders any more. And so they could take their place as part of what was now a religious kaleidoscope in England, a jumble of sects mixed up with one another but not threatening each other’s identity.

After he was restored, Charles II restored the Church of England’s old legal framework largely unchanged, as if his kingdom had simply regained its senses after a twenty-year convulsion. In 1662 around a quarter of England’s parish ministers, over two thousand men, were once again ejected for failing to conform to it. But the attempt to turn back the clock failed, and in 1689 his successor but one admitted that England would never again be united in religion, not even as imperfectly as it had been before the Civil War. And that was the result of the age of extremism during the years of war and revolution, the result no-one had expected. The extremists were not suppressed or expelled. The head of the snake was not cut off, the country was not purged of intolerables. Nor did the extremists take over. Even when their sympathisers came close to positions of power, they were fatally compromised by pragmatism. Instead, by a mixture of external pressure, the logic of their own beliefs, and the human impossibility of keeping fires of zeal ablaze indefinitely, they settled down and became normalised. Slowly, fatefully, they learned to live with the world around them: and rather more slowly, but eventually, the world learned to live with them.

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