

Gerrard Winstanley's Theology of Nature: the Telos of the Creation, "A Common Treasury for All"

Andrew Taylor

Introduction: The Historical Context

Modern political thought has its origin in the tumult of the mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution. C.B. MacPherson in his study of changing social relations and ideology in the period characterised this new social order as an emergent "possessive market society" (MacPherson 86).

Because the seventeenth century knew nothing of the compartmentalization of political and religious realms, one finds all the actors in this new market society - so torn by competing interests - basing their interpretations of justice, the social hierarchy and nature on specifically theological principles. Royalists, Republicans, Levellers and advocates of other factions all resorted to sources from within the Christian tradition as primary authorities. In this period Gerrard Winstanley (1609-1676), a déclassé ex-small businessman acting, as he believed, at the prompting of the Spirit of "the great Creator Reason," put forward a programme for a voluntarist communism to be inaugurated by the cultivation of the (presently expropriated) common land on St. Georges Hill in Surrey by a collective of landless workers known as "Diggers."

Winstanley's bitter experience in business had precipitated first a disillusionment with the world of the market and soon after a spiritual and psychological crisis.

Andrew Taylor is a doctoral student in theology at the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University.

Prior to his failure in business and the consequent crisis, Winstanley records, he had already moved from being an ardent "professor" of the republic's Calvinist church through a period of association with a series of independent congregations, including "dipping" in a Baptist fellowship, only to arrive eventually at a rejection of all the Christian groupings and ordinances. In the months following his financial ruin Winstanley had been forced to go to a rural area, keeping cattle as a herdsman. This was a significant movement in social location for by it Winstanley had entered the increasingly hard-pressed landless peasantry of the 1640's, England's poorest class.

This social dislocation is specially important in a discussion of Winstanley's theology of nature and natural law since he came to believe that the property system was the basis of coercive political power and that one's theology could not be abstracted from one's concrete place within the social-structure's hierarchy. I am not suggesting by this that Winstanley held to a crudely positivistic, materialist philosophy that denied the role of human subjectivity in historical development. On the contrary he stressed in his tracts as well as his deeds (in the Digger colony) that the future is open through the Spirit's liberating influence so that men and women can make history, though their knowledge of the emancipatory process be necessarily partial.

It was in this new, rural, proletarian existence when everything of his former life had been taken away that Winstanley experienced a profound enlightenment as to the real causes of the destitution all around him. It was at this time too that he found the project of Jesus of Nazareth hidden in the wisdom taught by the lives of the poor. In the early months of 1648 Winstanley published three theological tracts. Here, based on his own experience of "Christ within" the depths of human being, Winstanley first set out the theme of a coming redemption by which the poor and later all people would know by their

subjective experiences "Christ rising" in their lives and social relations, bringing humankind out of its alienation "into community with the whole globe" (*The Saints Paradise*). In the following three years Winstanley continued to develop a pneumatic theology and political theory of nature. Social action rapidly became an imperative dimension of his experiential spirituality with its focus on the breakthrough of the creation into the freedom of community.

In this paper I first want to discuss the character of Winstanley's idea of the creation and the *telos* of the creation. Next I will talk about the implications of this creation doctrine regarding nature in light of what the tradition has termed the relationship of nature and grace and in the context of Creation and Fall. Then I want to deal with the significance of Winstanley's favoured designation for the God of justice, "Reason." In conclusion I will present a brief account of Winstanley's contribution to creation theology and a renewed, inclusive anthropology in face of the present crises in both the imaginative will of the emancipatory movements and the environmental integrity of the creation itself.

Winstanley's Theology of Creation

Winstanley's theology of creation is at once a myth of original justice and an eschatological theology. It is the expression of a mystical experience and a prophetic judgement on the structures of a world far gone from righteousness. Yet the axis about which these interdependent levels in his theology move is his basic theological confession - articulating the heart of a creation-centred faith - that the earth was made to be a common treasury for all (Lindsey 182).

In a 1648 tract, *The New Law of Righteousness*, Winstanley presents within the genre of an apocalypse a picture of the vision upon which this theological affirmation rests. In the beginning of time, he writes, the whole creation lived in the human creature and the human creature lived in the maker of all. For Winstanley the life in Eden was one not only of original innocence but also of an original, harmonic *participation* flowing from the Creator into human being, the other creatures and the earth. In this Golden Age there was an immediacy of God and the creation to the human subject as spiritual/sensual creature. The earth was then a common treasury for all. Struggle arose in Winstanley's Paradise only when some men and women abandoned living in their Maker to "live upon objects." Beguiled by the "serpent" of covetousness, humankind fell from its innocence into inward pride, revenge-seeking and craving after objects. The outward order of the world was perverted into the tyranny of private property, with the coercive state rising up to guard its spoils which were won through theft and murder. Even the non-human creation was then disordered, infected by human selfishness.

If Winstanley's theology of the creation and the source of human evil said no more than this, his contribution would not be appreciably greater than that of Sts. Gregory and Ambrose or certain of the Stoics who all held to some variant of Utopian myth regarding an original communism (Cohn Ch. 10). I want to present five aspects of Winstanley's theology of creation which, I think, suggest that his contribution *is* a significant one, relevant to the creation in the inclusive, human struggle for justice.

First, his creation doctrine contains an eschatological hope for the earth: for Winstanley it is not simply that God originally intended the creation to be a common treasury for all, but that God's creative power is at work in the fallen world, bidding us all to join in the

redemptive work of *restoring* this original order of Common Treasury. A common life marked by equitable sharing is the *telos* of the creation. Winstanley makes the Paradise of Genesis a myth of the future of humankind.

Secondly, unlike Seneca and many of the Church Fathers, Winstanley rejected the notion that the old, egalitarian state of nature was irreparably lost to human history with the Fall. He was suspicious of the *motives* of the defenders of the conventional state. He rejected the establishment claim that original sin had made coercive restraints on fallen human nature such as private property and inequalities of wealth, status and power, a necessary and even salutary remedy for sinners. In a later section of this discussion I will present Winstanley's theological counter-claim to this traditional *apologia* for the status-quo.

A third aspect of the theological orientation of his creation myth which distinguishes Winstanley's contribution is his concrete identification of the figure of "the Beast" not with some remote, obscure, eschatological figure, but with *contemporary* exploitative social structures in the life of his society. In so doing, he makes today the time for action, the time for work "that befits repentance" (Rowland 108).

It is of the greatest importance to note that it was *following* his commitment to the service of God and the poor, while he lived with the proletariat of his day as a landless herdsman, that Winstanley began to write theology at all. This kind of theology he termed experimental and it was the only kind of reflection he credited. A fourth element, then, in Winstanley's type of theological reflection on the creation was his commitment to what we would term *praxis* as the continual, creative teacher which informs and reforms knowledge. The Digger's cultivation of the privately expropriated

Commons at St. George's Hill in Surrey in 1649 was seen by Winstanley as a political action and proleptic sign which would inaugurate the emancipatory process *to restore the creation* and break the bonds of oppression.

Finally, the pertinence of Winstanley's theology of creation is demonstrated by his insight that the process of making "restitution of the earth" would be a long, evolutionary one. His insistence on the need for subjective transformation points to this perception and his disillusionment following the suppression of the Digger colony sharpened his understanding. No matter how worthy the original revolutionary programme, the liberation of the earth cannot be achieved without the personal transformation of the people who are engaged in the struggle.

Winstanley on the Unity of Nature and Grace

Gerrard Winstanley's central affirmation, an affirmation rooted in a creation-centred theology, proclaimed *koinonia* as the divine intention for the earth's restoration. In a remarkable way this experiential theologian glimpsed the essential unity of nature and grace, natural law and revelation, transcendence and immanence. What were the factors that permitted this precocious theological world view?

An important antecedent is located in the writings of the democrat and radical, Richard Overton, a contemporary of Winstanley (Hayes 96-7). In the work *Man's Mortality* (1643-34), Overton unambiguously identified God with reason.

Winstanley's key notion of sharing as the hallmark of obedience to the Creator's intention was an idea first perceived as he reflected on the causes of the poverty of

his (new) class. It supplanted for him the received wisdom which segregated nature and grace. Hooker's argument in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* had defined reason according to *precedent* and had re-affirmed the notion of degrees within a fairly static hierarchy. History was rushing past the notions cherished by the Elizabethan Settlement in religion.

If redemption was nothing other than the restoration of original humanity (the humanity in which the spirit of reason rules in a community marked by common stewardship of the earth's wealth) and if, as he was already convinced, all persons will be redeemed in Christ's eventual triumph over the powers of darkness, no segregation could obtain between the "*lex naturae*" and the "*lex gratiae*". A.S.P. Woodhouse has pointed to the consistency in Puritan thought of the disposition to divide the order of grace, the spiritual, from the order of nature, material being (Hayes 98).

Winstanley had in fact obviated the basis of the Puritan justification for separation from the "natural" world which included the ungodly, the heretical, the non-Christians. His understanding of the integrity of nature and grace meant that redemption was to be realized on earth. All persons are spiritual beings capable of becoming subjects in the development of the one, unified, redemptive history encompassing both nature and grace. All persons can know that reason demands, for instance, not just a love of the neighbour but of the enemy. Similarly, social structures were capable of alteration. The "New Being" was present in power!

Winstanley on the "great Creator Reason" and Reasonableness

I am made to change the name from God to Reason because I have been held under darkness by that word, as I see many people are. . . .

. . . [T]his divining spiritual Doctrine [of the parliament's Calvinist church] is a cheat; for while men are gazing up to Heaven, imagining after a happiness, or fearing a Hell after they are dead, their eyes are put out, that they see not what is their birthrights, and what is to be done by them here on Earth while they are living: This is the filthy Dreamer, and the Cloud without rain (Winstanley in Sabine 105-6, 569).

Winstanley's epoch was one that was undergoing a shift in its understanding of central terms; seventeenth-century England was turning towards an "experimental" method and "relative" understanding of certainty (Shapiro, Introduction). Winstanley was part of this broad, multi-disciplined search for a new epistemology grounded in observation of the real, lived world of the people. Yet this statement must be made more specific since Winstanley's option was a concrete commitment to a particular sector of society, the poor and exploited. It was within this horizon that Winstanley developed his hermeneutical suspicion of religious discourse.

As a perusal of the writings of Bunyan or George Fox makes clear, a floodtide of religious irrationalism was sweeping the people, particularly society's victims. The movement towards an experimental method and a more relative attitude to certainty had been based on the precedence of subjectivity. This new thirst for direct experience gave rise to contradictory expressions. Christopher Hill characterizes this shift to the experiential and experimental option as "a transition from old to new

reason via a phase of irrationalism." Religious "enthusiasm" interacting with the social contempt vented on the marginalized pushed many poor folk in the mid-seventeenth century over the brink into insanity. Demobilized soldiers without employment, landless peasants hard-pressed by enclosure and bad harvests, tinkers and ruined small tradesmen, were lumped together by highly-placed Calvinist theologians as "a cursed generation" (Hill, 40, 1972). There are a great many sermons and tracts preserved from this period, as well as chronicles of spiritual and social history. In them one finds a biographical and paragenetic fixation with "making one's election *sure*." It would appear that the search for subjective certainty of a heaven after death drove thousands out of their wits. England was dubbed "the island of Great Bedlam" by a contemporary writer, so widespread was the phenomenon of religiously-induced mental breakdown.

Winstanley saw this all around him among his fellows - the poor "cursed" of the earth. And so it was that while the established Ministers were preaching eternal salvation (to be discerned by a number of outward tests of election) and everlasting damnation for the reprobate, Gerrard Winstanley dropped the term *God*, as a blasphemy against the unitive power that was ever wondrously restoring the dignity of human nature. He wrote,

. . . in that ["Divinity induced"] distemper many times a man doth hang, kill, or drown himself: so that this divining Doctrine . . . torments people always when they are weak, sickly, and under any distemper; therefore, it cannot be the Doctrine of Christ the Saviour (Sabine 568).

Winstanley had seen through the idolatrous dimensions of the ruling class's mystifying religious discourse, a language so ideologically corrupted that a total break with

this "God" was required. He rejected the theology that he believed permitted and encouraged the indifference of the rich to the suffering of the poor.

The divine name Winstanley favoured, "Reason," possesses a number of antecedents and associations in his theology of the creation. Probably the most immediate antecedent for understanding God as Reason came to him via the Leveller tradition, as represented by Overton, Walwyn and Lilburne. The Levellers in their argument for the right to a general enfranchisement (excluding servants and beggars!), did not typically distinguish between natural and divine law. There is not however a complete continuity between the creation theology of Winstanley and the theory of the Levellers. For the Levellers, what made a person human was their *freedom from* other persons and the freedom from restraint on the free use of one's conscience and property. In this sense they are the forbearers of the liberal rather than the radical-democratic position.

The case was quite different with Winstanley, whose reflection on the creation and experience of theory and praxis led him to a notion of species-being and collective *freedom for* the community of humankind in the riches of the earth. On a common sense level Winstanley saw an uncompelled communism as the only reasonable way of equitably managing the stewardship and protection of the creation. It would be an error however to conclude that Winstanley's Reason is the precursor of the positivist and reductionist rationalism of the eighteenth-century Deists. Paul Elmen writes,

But the Reason Winstanley speaks of is *not* cognitive reason, in the form which the eighteenth century used as a shibboleth.

The Creator Reason is equated with the Logos, which in turn is the same as the indwelling Christ. Just as did the early sects, he united Christian natural law with mystical spirituality (Elmen 211).

(See also Troeltsch vol. 11, 956, n. 456).

For Winstanley, as I have said, the natural and the supernatural were one. The locus of divine redemption was within the world's historical process. Because of this, Winstanley viewed the common sense spirit of reason that suggested "community of goods" as a manifestation of the Creator Reason who made all things and filled all things.

Conclusion: Winstanley's Contribution to a Theology of the Creation

What contribution does Gerrard Winstanley make to a theology of the creation that is applicable to the contemporary world's need and context? The radical challenge of his thought is intimated in one of the Digger leader's poems where he addresses the established clergy with this admonition, "Leave off therefore I say, betimes, and *stoop unto our God.*"

What does it mean to stoop to the God of Winstanley, the God of the ones whom Eugene Pottier called, "the damned of the earth"? What is this word asking of us as religious-educators - concerning our solidarity in and with the creation's wonder and plight?

In conclusion, then, I suggest that Winstanley's theology of the creation and human nature addresses these three questions. The key to Winstanley's creation theology is its anthropological focus with his powerful reaffirmation of the virtue of *hope*. The anthropological axis of this theology is highlighted by the admonition he

gives to "stoop" unto the true God. His is a God who is known only through the aegis of the human person and the other created forms and preeminently through solidarity with the poor. For Winstanley, true conversion demands a turning away from the quest for the control of nature and the pursuit of the gods of a market culture and a turning towards the good earth as it goes forward in all its multiplicity to its *telos* of fulfilment in community. This means that human being is known only through relation and through the experience of sharing in a common liberating process. We have a future, Winstanley assures us, but it is a future that requires our disaffiliation from the ideological myth of our separate, competitive "freedom" from one another and from the earth.

If Winstanley's theology of creation and our human created nature provides hope for the present challenge and crisis, it fosters this hope for the future also through its insistence that sin is not intrinsic to the creation. Winstanley rejects the teaching that our humanity was somehow "depraved" in its very essence by the Fall of our first parents. This teaching it seemed to him was often used by the powerful as an ideological mystification of the status-quo. His hermeneutic of the Genesis myth led him to claim that on the contrary sin was not inherent in humankind. In fact its social fabrication as an unjust system based on private property was an unnatural and onerous exploit covering centuries. "Plain-hearted" people bravely opposed this social construction, he writes, and through another long, *uneven* struggle will overcome it in the future.

Finally, Winstanley's contribution to a theology of nature was expressed through his faith in *reason* and in humanity's capacity to choose the reasonable through the spirit of "the great Creator Reason." Today when a global culture of consumerism propagates a crass, irrational spirit of social envy and privatistic forms of religious and

secular salvation, Winstanley's social picture of redemption through an inclusive, rational process which struggles against "selfish imagination" is a salutary corrective and contribution. It would be a mistake though to identify his Logos theology of Reason with the reductionist rationalism of a later age in its pursuit of a Faustian mastery of nature. Winstanley identified the original Fall into exploitation of the earth as the cause of the pollution of the non-human creation and wrote that neither society nor nature could be restored to harmony until community in the wealth of the earth was established. Today we see, smell and taste the fruits of the industrial and technological abuse of the earth. Our ecological plight may dispose us to attend to Winstanley's prophetic word more intently than did his seventeenth-century peers, "the men of property."

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