

Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery

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The quotation from Leonardo Boff, *Way of the Cross – Way of Justice* (Orbis Books, 1980) is used by permission.

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For convenience I have continued the convention of the RSV of referring to God with masculine pronoun and adjective.

*To Catherine, Phil and Vicki and all my friends in
São Paulo*

History is usually told by the victors.
It is they who preserve the written documents,
erect monuments,
and have epics sung about themselves
in order to immortalise their deeds.
Who will tell the history of the vanquished, the losers?

All these people fell.
They are Jesus falling again and again
in the course of history's Way of the Cross.
Jesus is already risen from the dead, already in the glory of the Father.
But his resurrection is not complete
because his passion still goes on
in the passion of his brothers and sisters.

It is to such people that God promised the Kingdom.
And it is all the more theirs
in so far as they do not succumb to feelings of impotence,
in so far as they work to anticipate it by enacting profound changes
that create the real conditions for justice, peace and reconciliation.

All memory of suffering awakens dangerous visions,
visions that are dangerous for those who try to control the
present or the future.
They are visions of the kingdom of justice,
which enable the suffering people to shake off their bonds
and to keep moving along the road to liberation.

From Leonardo Boff *Way of the Cross – Way of Justice*

Introduction

This book seeks to look at parts of Christianity's foundation documents in the New Testament and to relate them to themes of hope, protest and social change in later Christian tradition. It also marks the start of a personal pilgrimage to recover those strands of the fabric of tradition which have been woven into the texture and whose effect has had to yield to the dominant strands. That journey into forgotten paths of the Christian story has begun to help my understanding of contemporary Christian discipleship. So much more remains to be done, but it is my hope that this initial essay will turn out to be accessible to as wide a circle of readers as possible.

Perhaps the time has come to put together the fragments of evidence at our disposal which relate to the radical movements on the fringes of Christianity. They have often been despised and excluded from the mainstream of the Christian tradition, but their ideas have continued to re-emerge, provoked by the licence given to them in the canon of Scripture. The canon of Scripture itself manifests the uneasy compromise between consolidation and innovation which has been so characteristic of all religions. It is a heterogeneous collection of documents. The reasons for the inclusion of many of them are now largely hidden from us.¹ But we may be right to suppose that they reflect the struggles between proponents of competing ideas and interests. The inclusion of so much challenging and subversive material alongside the socially conservative is a testimony to the former's deep-rootedness in the tradition; it was easier to tame rather than to remove. Its opponents tamed its power by subsuming it into their own ideology so that its impact could be lessened. But the very act of appropriating and neutralizing opposition ideas and making them part of the dominant ideology had the effect of preserving them. As a result they provided a potent resource for agents of change in subsequent generations of Christian history.

The details of the stories of many of the saints have been submerged for ever beneath an ocean of contrary opinion. It is important to piece together the story of the opponents of the dominant religious ideologies from the hints

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and fragments available to us. The task of recovery is an arduous one but is long overdue; we have for too long accepted the story offered by the powerful. I have not sought to offer an argument for my preferred reading of the tradition, though my personal preference is evident in the choice and treatment of material. There is need to embark on the process of what I have called 'a reading of recovery', in order to allow those faint voices of protest on the very margins of the tradition to be heard more clearly. The powerful voices of theological orthodoxy must be mute for a while; they need to listen to the wisdom and insight offered by the still small voice of protest. In any case, the powerful have their own protagonists. It is not my intention to add to that list in what I write. Both Thomas Muenzer and Gerrard Winstanley have been either discredited or forgotten, and yet the power and perceptiveness of their writing need to be heard by Christians as well as by the long line of Marxist historians who in various ways have claimed them as their own.

Writing a history of radical social movements within Christian history would require a more wide-ranging enterprise than is possible within this particular project. The scope of the book is of necessity limited. I recognize that Jesus of Nazareth, Paul, Thomas Muenzer and Gerrard Winstanley did not stand alone in their generations in espousing such views nor were they without successors or predecessors. There are omissions and large gaps in the story I have to tell (particularly with regard to the medieval period), partly because of the fragmentary nature of the story, but also because the choice of material reflects my interests and concerns. My scholarly expertise is in the area of Christian origins which helps to explain the balance of the book. The New Testament material forms the heart of the book, and the references to later movements indicate ways in which the threads of the story can be taken up in later periods. No attempt has been made to offer complete accounts of those later movements, a task which has been carried out very adequately by others. Needless to say, I am indebted to the studies of others to illuminate areas where I can make no special claims at competence. Those debts are acknowledged in the notes where further reading is suggested.

I have learnt much from the study of religion in the human sciences and, like many others, welcome their fruitful convergence with biblical study in recent years. I have received much stimulus from my reading of the encounter between Marxism and religion, the variegated character of which has been well set out recently by David McLellan.² This has contributed to my understanding of the phenomenon of Christianity and sent me back to look again at the tradition from different perspectives. While I am indebted to study of the sociology of knowledge, it is primarily from the impulses of the contemporary study of the biblical tradition and the consideration of its competing social and political options that is the starting-point for this

particular reading of the Christian tradition. It is in the light of this background that I am using the term 'radical'. Radicalism may involve tearing things up by the roots but within Christian history this is done from the perspective of a commitment to the roots of the religion, the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his proclamation of the reign of God which confronts us in the pages of the gospels. The fact is that the shape of the canon of Scripture offers an invitation to the continuous critique of every project and institution, whether temporal or spiritual, in the light of the reign of peace and justice to come. Scripture has provoked the continuous stream of appeals to the inadequacies of the present, leading to the undermining of the foundations of structures painfully built. That process seems to be at the heart of the Christian religion.³ That is not to deny that some semblance of institutionalization is inevitable but along with it there must exist that prophetic protest which points out its imperfections and demands at the very least that the costs of those compromises should be as small as possible.

Students of movements of protest and hope are indebted to investigations of the character of the millenarian spirit. Among the most important studies of millenarianism are the books of Karl Mannheim and Norman Cohn.⁴ It is Mannheim's theoretical study and his outline of what he terms 'the chiliastic mentality' that offers a paradigm which is particularly applicable to many of the texts and movements we shall be examining. In this type of outlook there is the conviction that the present moment is one of critical significance within the whole gamut of salvation history, in which action is necessary, as it is no ordinary moment but one pregnant with opportunity for fulfilling the destiny of humankind. Thus the future hope is not merely a regulative ideal which acts as a stimulus to action and a norm by which one can judge the present state of affairs.⁵ Mannheim suggests that the present offers the possibility of realizing the millennium . . . 'for the real chiliast, the present becomes the breach through which what was previously inward bursts out suddenly, takes hold of the outer world and transforms it'. The absolute perfection of the millennium ceases to be a matter of speculation and becomes a pressing necessity for active implementation. The reason is that the *Kairos*, or Propitious Moment, has arrived. As a result the chiliastic mentality 'has no sense for the process of becoming; it was sensitive only to the abrupt moment, the present pregnant with meaning.' For those gripped by this conviction the divine breaks into human history and is active through those who respond to the call to inaugurate the millennium. In this the chiliastic mentality contrasts with that strategy which sees the enlightened elite as a 'leaven in the lump of society'.⁶

With the conviction that the age of perfection can become a reality here and now there is an inevitable distancing from the present age of imperfection. As Mannheim puts it, the 'chiliastic mentality severs all relationships with

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those phases of historical existence which are in daily process of becoming in our midst. It tends at every moment to turn into hostility towards the world, its culture, and all its works and earthly achievements'. But such attitudes do not last and lead to mutation and the diminution of the original millenarian impetus : 'it became watered down into mere enthusiasm, and the ecstatic element came to life once more, though in a gently soothing form, only in the Pietistic experience of awakening'.

Those who are convinced that the *Kairos* has arrived respond in various ways. Violence is one possibility, in which the elect take up the sword inspired by the divine impulse in a Holy war. But the tradition of peaceful direct non-violent action is another alternative. There is an opportunity to compare these two strategies in the lives of Thomas Muenzer and Gerrard Winstanley, and this contrast illuminates contemporary discussion about the role of violence in the pursuit of the millennial dream which is still a live option in our day.

The New Testament continues to be the battleground for competing interests. That is reflected in the markedly different political options of contemporary Christians as it has been throughout the history of Christianity. That point is well brought out in a recent study of contemporary usage of the eschatological tradition of the Bible in the USA. The threat of nuclear annihilation and environmental pollution have been responsible for a more pessimistic attitude in the contemporary world. It is a mark of our generation that the startling imagery of the apocalyptic tradition and the hope for a better world have become potent modes of discourse in a way which would seem unthinkable to the optimistic minds of even two decades ago. The use of this imagery is to be found right across the political spectrum. On the one hand Daniel Berrigan finds inspiration in the eschatological material of the book of Revelation for his anti-nuclear activism. But at the other end of the religious and political spectrum the book of Revelation more often serves as a dream of miraculous rescue and as a licence for escape from political struggle.⁷ The interpretation of Revelation and other pieces of eschatological imagery in the New Testament by born-again Christians absolves them from any concern to do anything about militarism or unjust social arrangements. This contemporary usage indicates the ways in which a common stock of ideas is used to legitimate very different interests, a point well made by Stuart Hall:

Ideology is not autonomous of the socio-economic and political contexts in which it operates. Ideologies do express and advance certain interests; they are used to legitimate particular structures of power, to defend a particular order of society (or to oppose it); they do become linked with certain groups and classes and, as such, either help to preserve their position of privilege and domination or are used by others to contest that position. In this sense, most

conflicts, whether they arise from economic exploitation, political oppression or social inequality, will also be articulated in the domain of ideology because it is the domain in which, as Marx said, 'men (and women) become conscious of their contradictions and fight them out'.⁸

One area above all other has compelled a reassessment of the form of the Christian religion: the recognition of the importance of eschatology.⁹ There are complex reasons for the rediscovery in the second half of the nineteenth century of eschatological beliefs as a significant aspect of earliest Christianity. The exploration of Abyssinia, for example, led to the discovery of Jewish apocalyptic works like 1 Enoch, which for centuries had been part of the Old Testament canon of the Ethiopic church. Awareness of these Jewish texts gradually infiltrated the world of New Testament scholarship.¹⁰ Another concern was one which is endemic in the Christian tradition: it seemed to open a door to the Jesus of history and to offer a very different understanding of reality to that which the church had developed around the central figure of the Christian religion. Such ideas made their most dramatic impact on the study of the New Testament in the work of Albert Schweitzer.¹¹

Schweitzer reviewed the various attempts over the previous hundred years to penetrate behind the pages of the New Testament to the historical Jesus. He proposed that Jesus' mission could only be understood if one took seriously those eschatological convictions found in Jewish apocalypses like 1 Enoch. Jesus, argued Schweitzer, was convinced that the reign of God was so near that when he sent out his disciples on a mission through the towns and villages of Galilee they would not return before the heavenly Son of Man came in glory to establish the Kingdom. Matthew 10.23 ('you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes') provides Schweitzer with a central piece of evidence of Jesus' expectation of the imminent end of the old order. When this did not take place, Jesus resolved to go up to Jerusalem and by his death seek to bring about the Kingdom by taking upon himself the messianic tribulations which had to precede the Kingdom of God.

If Schweitzer's thesis is correct, the early church had to deal with an initial and dramatically disappointed hope.¹² Schweitzer argues, for example, that the ideas of the apostle Paul himself were shot through with an eschatological scheme derived from Judaism which had to be revised. Much of what has been written since Schweitzer's work has been an attempt to come to terms with the impact of the eschatological ideas brought to the fore in such a dramatic way by Schweitzer in particular.

The effect of the discovery of eschatology was to force Christians to deal with a strange figure locked into the world of first-century Jewish hopes and

to separate Jesus from the concerns of the present world. After all, what had a dreamer about a new age to say about the world where people were anxious about what they had to wear, to eat and to drink? Thus, when Schweitzer spoke of Jesus *eschatological* expectation, he was in no doubt that the kingdom of God which Jesus expected was otherworldly and would be brought in by God alone without any human agency. Many have followed him in assuming that the eschatological character of the gospel necessarily means that the early Christians denied both a historical fulfilment of their hopes and the need for human agency in their fulfilment. Humankind, according to this view of the messianic age, was made up of merely passive spectators of a vast divine drama with the cosmos as its stage. So, reserve is expressed towards a close alignment with historical projects which takes sides in contemporary political struggles. This prevalent reading retains a clear contrast between history and eschatology, the latter being conceived as something totally *beyond* history. This has had unfortunate consequences for the use of the New Testament in Christian social ethics. By refusing to look for the reign of God in human history supporters of such ideas have, often unwittingly, helped to bolster consensus or even a conservative attitude towards the status quo in society, academy and church. That legacy can be challenged in one important respect: early Christian and Jewish writings offer a this-worldly materialistic hope which did not depend on a cataclysmic irruption from the world beyond and the destruction of the present world for the manifestation of the divine righteousness.¹³ When we recognize that the teaching in the New Testament, particularly that attributed to Jesus, consists of the ideals applicable to God's reign *on earth*, the New Testament writings can be seen as the struggles of those who looked forward to a new age recognizing the obligation to live in the present *as if* they were living in the age to come.

Radical movements in Christianity have always gone back to the foundation documents to find support for their ideals and distinctive ways of looking at the world. The synoptic gospels with their portrait of Jesus have offered a catalyst for men and women in later generations to respond to the challenge presented to those who would follow Jesus. Prominent themes from the New Testament find echoes from time to time in unexpected parts of the Christian tradition. The Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, indicated the power of the utopian inheritance and its contribution to Marxism as well as the Judaeo-Christian tradition.¹⁴

His views are somewhat tangential to the mainstream Marxist tradition and have been received with considerable scepticism by other Marxists. But what is most important from the point of view of Christianity is his role as promoter of the eschatological traditions which mainstream Christianity has preferred to forget. Thus one of his early books was on Thomas

Muenzer as theologian of revolution. His promotion of millenarianism and the this-worldly eschatology of Judaism and Christianity stands in stark contrast to the way in which theologians have tended to accept the orthodox eschatology which has concentrated on life after death or life in another world. He has been keen to point out the ways in which basic patterns of hope were submerged by less subversive images.

One example of Bloch's approach to the Christian tradition must suffice. In it he contrasts Jesus, the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven to establish justice for the poor, with the Lord Christ, enthroned in heaven in a glorious state similar to the imperial oppressors of the poor. He contrasts the expectation of the Son of Man as liberator and vindicator who would come to transform the lot of the lowly with the figure of the heavenly lord (*Kyrios*), buttress of church and authorities. He shows how the former expectation has moved to the margins of the Christian tradition, ostracized by the exponents of the dominant ideology. Gradually, this Son of Man belief has been displaced by the divine *Kyrios*, a title 'which', as he puts it, 'admirably suited the purposes of those who would reduce the Christian community to a sort of military service of their cultic hero'¹⁵:

the Son of Man passed over to the poor. . . . It passed to the heretical brethren . . . to Thomas Muenzer with his Allstedt sermon on the vision of the Son of Man in Daniel and on Jesus the true corner-stone, whom the builders rejected. . . . The other future, the dawning of the 'better age', belonged to the early community and to its Son of Man. This future has, to put it mildly, been a constant stone of contradiction to Christianity.

For Bloch utopia is located in the present as well as the future. It is not yet, in the sense that it has never come to fruition and as such functions as a norm to show up the inadequacy of the reality of the present. The utopian is not something far off in the future but is at the heart of human experience; it is already at hand in an anticipatory and fragmentary way. These fragments are themselves an encouragement to human action in the present. Utopia is not fully possible within the limitations of the present order of things, so Bloch looks for its realisation beyond the confines of the present world. But he denies that utopianism is merely a retreat into a fantasy world and maintains it has the effect of laying bare what is utopian in human experience and broadening horizons so that the hope for a better world may inform and change the present.¹⁶

Examples of the quest for the original vision and the accompanying protest at the ordering of society are touched on in the chapter on the early church. The view that the age of Jesus and the apostles was a golden age which could be repeated if only there were radical reform and renewal is a recurrent theme. The early Christian belief that the messianic age was

already in some sense present meant that many believed that Christianity ought to offer an alternative pattern of living which continues to challenge all projects for ordering society. Such an idea is deeply rooted in the mind of the Church and has continued to disturb the complacency and acquiescence.

The Apocalypse in particular has gone on being a potent resource for the religious imagination. Its apocalyptic spirit offers a tool for those who are discontented with the reality which confronts them. Those who wish to pierce behind the bland appearance to demonstrate the reality of injustice find their inspiration in the apocalyptic tradition of which the Apocalypse is the best example. Of course, it also offers a hope for the future of the world which shows up the inadequacy of the present and stimulates those who perceive injustice to costly action in favour of change.

My earlier studies of the antecedents to the book of Revelation in the ancient Jewish apocalypses and of the eschatological hope within the New Testament have stimulated my interest in millenarian movements and utopian ideas in later Christian history. The light shed on my reading of those ancient texts by the later manifestations of the apocalyptic tradition has been a prime reason for wanting to write this book. I believe that there is great benefit in comparing later movements of radical social zeal with similar trends within earliest Christianity. Such comparisons have always been one of the tools of the historian of religion.¹⁷ Although doubts have been expressed about the value of comparing movements which are not contemporaneous, similarity of concern and outlook can often be as revealing as the comparison of texts from groups which were contemporary but did not have so much in common. This has always been a problem for the study of early Christianity. A natural area for comparison is of course the matrix from which Christianity originated, Judaism. But a major difficulty with this comparison is the fact that the Christian texts are unique in one important sense: they purport to offer the ideas of those who believed that the messiah, the agent of liberation and the fulfiller of the promise of righteousness and peace on earth, *had already come*.¹⁸ In contrast, the extant Jewish material still looks forward to the fulfilment of that promise at some indefinite point in the future. For non-messianic Jews, meanwhile, there were other pressing concerns. For the Christians, however, things were different: *if* the messiah had come, what did that mean for the present, the past and the future, not least in dealings with those who shared the same Scriptures (the Old Testament) but rejected the distinctive interpretation of those texts being offered by the Christians? Such differences of emphasis indicate why it is not always going to be as helpful to compare parallels from Jewish (and for that matter, Greek) literature contemporary with the New Testament and expect to find similar concerns. The messianic emphasis in the New

Testament did set up a range of issues which it would not have been necessary to consider unless one believed that the messiah had come. That is why it is useful to look at parallel movements which, allowing for the change of circumstances of their day, do indicate a preoccupation with the belief that a new era in the divine purposes is about to break in and radical social change is once again on the agenda.

But my concern in this book is not merely antiquarian: hence there is a final chapter on the most influential and challenging theological movement in our contemporary world, the theology of liberation. That development in parts of Latin America is indicative of a widespread rediscovery of radical political commitment as part of the Christian gospel. Less influential and politically powerful it may be than the resurgence of fundamentalist religion allied to conservative politics; but its roots are deep and its effects on the shape of the church to come incalculable. I have embarked upon this study because I have learnt much from experiences of those who are committed to the poor and to the liberation of the oppressed in the Third World. The Theology of Liberation claims to be an authentic reading of the tradition, four square within the catholic theology. Proponents of its novelty do well to recognize this claim and its continuation of the thread of hope and radical change in it which has run throughout the fabric of Christian theology.

It is a mark of the success of the conservatives within the church down the centuries that they have been able to construct an ideology which makes a challenge to the status quo appear to be a departure from orthodoxy. But the Christian tradition is itself diverse, and my hope is that a glimpse of some of those texts and movements which bear witness to a very different attitude may reveal the fragility of the conservative ideology and the antecedents of contemporary Christian commitment to social change and greater equality. Identifying the memory of those struggles from the mists of the past is an important part of rediscovering our inheritance. One of the most exciting projects going on in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, for example (as it has elsewhere in post-colonial Latin America) is the attempt to rewrite the history of the country and tell it from the point of view of the oppressed rather than the conquerors. That recovery of popular culture has marked various pioneering studies by English historians who have wanted to lay bare some of the popular religious and political movements which feature as a backdrop to the dominant ideologies of the day.¹⁹ The time has come to do that for other parts of the Christian tradition. It is incumbent upon those of us who have the opportunity and the resources to lay bare this tradition to reclaim it as a resource of hope and an inspiration in our present struggles rather than as a support to maintain structures which perpetuate the triumph of the powerful and the subordination of the weak.

One area where this is now being achieved in the First World is in the area

of feminist theology.²⁰ The full story of radical Christianity would devote a significant place to the creativity and ingenuity of women through the centuries to make space for themselves in an institution and culture which rapidly became male-dominated. I would like to have been able to include more of this story (and a consideration of the medieval period would have included the prominent role of women like Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila in the mystical tradition). Much valuable work is being done to recover the important role of women as exponents of a submerged but authentic voice of Christian discipleship. The theological outlook of Julian of Norwich and the creative energy of founders of religious orders like Mary Ward²¹ are a reminder that the story I have to tell must remain incomplete without adequate treatment of this subject. I can only plead that this is an area where I am still in the process of discovery myself, and at this stage do not feel able to do improve on the excellent work which is now available from women theologians.

Finally, I want to outline some of the key terms linked with Christian hope which will be used in this book. Apocalyptic derives from the word *apokalypsis* in Greek and means a revelation, an unveiling of that which is hidden. The book of Revelation in the New Testament opens with the words 'Revelation (*apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ'.²² It is a sign of the uncertainty of the times that commentary on political affairs can allude so often to the 'apocalyptic' character of doom-laden news. Familiarity with the cataclysmic upheavals which take place during the demise of the present order in the book of Revelation has meant that the word is used to speak of similar dire predictions about imminent catastrophe. But the book of Revelation itself is above all an *apocalypse* in a rather different sense; it offers disclosures about *how things really are*, a veritable 'tearing off of disguises – the unmasking of those unconscious motives which bind the group existence to its cultural aspirations and its theoretical arguments'.²³ Apocalyptic is thus just as much concerned with the present as the future; with the unmasking of reality and the use of its imagery to present an alternative symbolic discourse which offers an analysis of the present society and its values. In this study apocalyptic's concern to unmask reality and to offer an alternative vision of how things might be will predominate in the way in which that term is used. That is something which is in line with the apocalyptic tradition as a whole whose major characteristic in fact is to offer an unveiling of the hidden mysteries and purposes of God and the true significance of persons and events.

Strictly speaking, the words millenarian and chiliastic are alternative ways of describing the idea which derives from the twentieth chapter of Revelation where the author describes the period of the messiah's reign on earth for a thousand years (*mille* in Latin and *chilias* in Greek mean a

thousand). They have, however, come to refer in more general terms to a hope for a future new order on earth in which a new set of values will be established and the powerful in the present order will be swept away.²⁴ They can refer to a number of related expectations for a future society in which justice, peace and equality and a sense of community will be established, and where the poor and the rich will have their positions reversed. It will be this extended usage that will be followed in this book.

There is another aspect of millenarianism to which more attention will be devoted in the section on the Millenarian Character. In many millenarian movements there is the conviction that the present is a critical time when the millennium is about to dawn and the prophet proclaims a key role in that process for himself and his followers. Thus the millennium ceases to be a matter merely for speculation or a compensation for the inadequacies of the present, for the present rather than the future becomes the critical moment for decisive action to inaugurate the New Age.

Millenarianism forms a part of *eschatology*, another term which is used to speak of a variety of hopes for the future in Christian theology.²⁵ Although eschatology etymologically had to do with the discussion of the 'Last Things' (traditionally, heaven, hell, judgement and eternal life), the term has come to encompass the destiny of society as well as of the individual. It is, therefore, misleading to suppose that the eschatological hope in Christian theology is always going to involve a belief in the 'end of the world' or in an 'other-worldly' rather than a 'this-worldly' hope. In its eschatological concerns mainstream Christian theology has tended to concentrate on ideas like life after death. But eschatology should be seen as a general term describing the end of the present order and the future destiny of the individual or society after the end of the old order, whether in human history or in a transcendent world. Thus it can cover expectations which speak of a radical discontinuity between the present age and the future (and therefore are happy to speak about the end of the world) and views which want to stress continuity between the old order and the new within the fabric of human history.

Utopianism may be part of a future hope, but it also has its roots in a non-Christian philosophical tradition stretching back to Plato.²⁶ The descriptions of the ideal society such as we have in classics like Plato's *Republic* and Thomas More's *Utopia* offer a fantasy about how society might be organized without any suggestion that this is an *eschatological* expectation of how society might be in the future. In these utopian descriptions there is a realistic acceptance of human failings which need to be taken account of in enabling a just society to be constructed. Utopianism is different from other millenarian beliefs in the precision of the regulations which govern the perfect society. What is more, it is not necessarily linked with any eschatological expectation. Millenarianism, by contrast, is eschatological

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and is content with vague convictions that in a new age justice will prevail. Utopianism seeks to put flesh on the bare bones of hope in the light of the realistic assessment of the limits of humanity. Whereas in Revelation 20 the messianic reign for a thousand years is described and Satan is bound and evil thereby restrained, in a utopian tract like Winstanley's *Law of Freedom* it is recognized that transgression will occur and needs to be restrained. Utopian fantasies do have the effect of throwing the shortcomings of the present into sharp relief, though equally they can offer a distraction from the patient analysis of the present order and the articulation of appropriate actions.²⁷

1

Radical Christianity

Roots and Branches

The hidden messiah

Imagine visiting one of our medieval churches for a Sunday morning service. Picture the strangely haunting beauty of the old stonework, dappled with the reds and blues from the reflections of the painted glass. At the furthest end of the building, men in white sing and chant their way through the ritual, separated off from the small huddle of elderly people. The congregation, whose role thus far has been passive, is summoned to receive wine and wafers from the leader of the ritual who earlier had mounted the steps of the pulpit and delivered a homily, loosely related to various readings chosen from the Bible. The whole experience, even with updated wording, seems strange and old-fashioned. The ancient building and furnishings, the dress and singing of the main participants, all conspire to give the occasion an otherworldly quality. It evokes an age gone by and offers an escape from the modernity which confronts the participants when they step out into the world of the late twentieth century.

The scene here described is the face of the Christian religion perceived by thousands. It is the mask which many feel it must wear in order to be true to itself. That evocation of another world is central to its appeal for many who support its rites. At no time is its nostalgic spirit more evident than during the Christmas season. Those beautiful buildings in the dark of a winter evening, flooded with candlelight and the sweet music of Christmas carols are suffused with a cosy glow. It all reinforces the feeling of peace and security which is at the heart of the Christmas experience. But more perceptive consciences will detect a discordant note in the beautiful harmony of the music of goodwill. The Christmas story focuses on the birth of a poor child who became a refugee and who was persecuted by the rulers of the land he was in. However clear the story may be and however discordant the note