

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-0-521-46977-7 — Witness against the Beast  
E. P. Thompson , Foreword by Christopher Hill  
Excerpt  
[More Information](#)

---

PART I

*Inheritance*

## CHAPTER I

*Works or faith?*

When Christians unto Carnal Men give ear,  
Out of their way they go, and pay for't dear;  
For Master *Worldly Wiseman* can but shew  
A Saint the way to Bondage and to Wo.

In this verse, John Bunyan sought to enforce the lesson of Christian's first severe temptation in *Pilgrim's Progress*. After crossing the *Slough of Despond*, Christian had met with Mr Worldly Wiseman, who dwelt in the town of *Carnal Policy*. Mr Wiseman was full of good advice, and he told Christian that 'in yonder Village (the Village is named *Morality*) there dwells a Gentleman whose name is *Legality*, a very judicious man'. *Legality* could certainly help Christian to lift the burden from his shoulders, and if the old gentleman was not at home, then certainly the 'pretty young man', his son, 'whose name is *Civility*', would be able to do it as well as his father. And then, Mr Worldly Wiseman urged, Christian could send for his wife and children and settle in the village of *Morality*: 'there thou shalt live by honest neighbours, in credit and good fashion'.

The temptation was so severe that Christian succumbed to it. He turned aside from the straight and narrow path to the wicket-gate of faith, and set off for *Legality's* house, which stood on a high and threatening hill. Beneath this hill he might well have perished, had not *Evangelist* come up with him again. *Evangelist* turned Christian back into the path, rebuking him ('the just shall live by the faith . . . be not faithless, but believing'), and instructing him as to the abhorrent creed of Mr Worldly Wiseman: 'he savoureth only the doctrine of this world (therefore he always goes to the Town of *Morality* to church)' and 'he loveth that doctrine best, for it

Note: The place of publication in the works cited is London, unless otherwise stated.

saveth him from the Cross'. As for *Legality*, he is 'the Son of the Bond-woman', and 'she with her children are in bondage':

This *Legality* therefore is not able to set thee free from thy Burden. No man was as yet ever rid of his Burden by him; no, nor ever is like to be: ye cannot be justified by the Works of the Law; for by the deeds of the Law no man living can be rid of his Burden: therefore, Mr *Worldly Wiseman* is an alien, and Mr *Legality* a cheat; and for his son *Civility*, notwithstanding his simpering looks, he is but an hypocrite and cannot help thee. . .

At this, *Evangelist* called aloud to the Heavens for confirmation, and words and fire came out of the mountain under which they stood, declaring: '*As many as are of the works of the Law are under the curse. . .*'

So Christian set out on a journey which was to take him from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century and beyond, and through the hearts of hundreds of thousands of readers. But the twentieth-century reader has more difficulty in understanding the severity of this temptation. Why did Christian not just stop, and put his burden down? Or, if the reading is somewhat less crass, then certain tones of social or class conflict are noted: the humble dissenting Christian is tempted by the forms and compromises of carnal policy, and of the Established Church – but why should the doctrines of Morality be at odds with the gospel of the Cross, and, if the straight and narrow path of faith has nothing to do with Legality, or Morality, or Works, then how is it marked out and to what gate does it lead? I think it very probable that the eyes of many readers today traverse such passages in a benevolent haze of suspended attention.

I will argue, however, that such passages demand our full response. Their implications may be very radical indeed. In this episode, Bunyan is marking out a path which leads directly to antinomian conclusions, and which takes us, equally directly, into the structure of Blake's thought. We will not delay now to enquire how far John Bunyan endorsed these conclusions, or how far he hedged around his antinomian premises with doctrinal reservations.<sup>1</sup> We will note only that this episode of temptation carries us into a characteristic diagram of oppositions:

<sup>1</sup> In fact Bunyan was strongly critical of antinomianism, perhaps the more so because his own doctrines 'often skirted' it: see Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church, 1628–1688* (Oxford, 1988), chapter 17, and p. 86.

*Works or faith?*

5

Works	<i>versus</i>	Faith
Morality		The Cross
Legality		The Gospel of Forgiveness of Sins
Bondage		Freedom

And, if the path of *Legality* be taken, then it leads on to formalism, carnal policy, opportunism and, finally, to mere simpering *Civility*.

I will also argue that the doctrine of justification by faith, in its antinomian inflexion, was one of the most radical and potentially subversive of the vectors which carried the ideas of seventeenth-century Levellers and Ranters through to the next century. Since I can hear a scandalised snort from the Marxist–structuralist corner, I must ask the less committed readers to excuse me for a moment while I chastise my more brutish comrades. What (they are asking in that corner) can this odd-looking doctrine of justification by faith have to do with enlightenment and rigorous rationality? Surely it is no more than one more form of indulgent self-mystification within the otiose religiosity which was the sole inheritance of the English Revolution? And, if we are to make allowance for this religious ideological formation, surely it is equally clear that the only socially effective Christian doctrine capable of motivating a radical practice must have rested upon a doctrine of Works – a zealous and this-worldly emphasis upon affirmative moral actions?

The answer is that there are persons and places for which this last proposition is valid. But that, for much of the eighteenth century, the doctrine of justification by faith was – and was seen to be – the more ‘dangerous’ heresy. And this was because it could – although it need not – challenge very radically the authority of the ruling ideology and the cultural hegemony of Church, Schools, Law and even of ‘common-sense’ Morality. In its essence it was exactly that: *anti-hegemonic*. It displaced the authority of institutions and of received worldly wisdom with that of the individual’s inner light – faith, conscience, personal understanding of the scriptures or (for Blake) ‘the Poetic Genius’ – and allowed to the individual a stubborn scepticism in the face of the established culture, a fortitude in the face of its seductions or persecutions sufficient to support Christian in the face of the State or of polite learning. This fortitude need not necessarily be accompanied by evangelistic zeal or affirmative social action; it might equally well be defensive, and

protect the quietism of a private faith, or the introverted spiritual pride of a petty sect. But it could also nourish (and protect) a more active faith which rested upon a confidence in spiritual ‘freedom’, liberated from the ‘bondage’ of Morality and Legality.

That the language of Christian’s temptation continues with undiminished vigour may be seen if we traverse abruptly across more than one hundred years, from *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) to London in the 1790s. One of the large, self-appointed noises in plebeian London at that time was William Huntington, S.S. The ‘S.S.’ stood for ‘Sinner Saved’. Born in 1745 in a labourer’s family (he was proud to proclaim that he had once been a coal-heaver), Huntington had come, by way of a small Baptist congregation in Thames Ditton and an Independent church in Woking, to London in 1782. Here he ministered at first to Baptists, but, by the 1790s, he was his own evangelist and prophet, ministering throughout the decade from Providence Chapel, Great Titchfield Street.<sup>2</sup> There came from his pen, throughout the 1790s, a torrent of pamphlets, sermons, admonitions and expostulations, of a loud and windy nature.

The wind blew from an antinomian quarter – indeed, from much the same quarter as exemplified by Christian’s temptation by Mr Worldly Wiseman. In the 1780s he was warning his congregation lest ‘*legality* . . . entangle and govern their consciences’. In contrast to mere ‘workmongers’, the Saved must know that ‘the Saviour’s laws are written within us’.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1790s the antinomian wind blew most fiercely, and Huntington’s rhetoric moved through the familiar oppositions between ceremonial, formal law, and established forms on the one hand (all these were ‘a yoke of bondage’) and faith and free grace on the other.

We may sample the rhetoric from *The Child of Liberty in Legal Bondage* (1794). Huntington, a self-called evangelist, decried ‘legal preachers, who handle the law unlawfully . . . While they entangle the sheep of Christ, themselves are nothing but *thorns and briars*.’ Established religious forms were no more than ‘the old vail of the

<sup>2</sup> Ebenezer Hooper, *The Celebrated Coalheaver, or Reminiscences of the Reverend William Huntington, S.S.* (1871); Thomas Wright, *Life of William Huntington, S.S.* (1909). See also Jon Mee, ‘Is there an Antinomian in the House: William Blake and the After-Life of a Heresy’ in S. Clarke and D. Worrall (eds.), *Historicizing Blake* (forthcoming); and *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 62–5.

<sup>3</sup> William Huntington, *A Sermon on the Dimensions of Eternal Love* (1784), pp. 5, 9.

law, under which the gospel is hid'. Faith must always take priority to form. When not illustrated by faith—

The law, when reflected on the mind of man, is *blackness and darkness*, and the spirit of it is darkness, fear, bondage, wrath, death, and furious jealousy still.

This, and much more of the same kind, between 1792 and 1795, when the winds of political liberty blew strongly in London. Huntington himself was no political reformer: he was a High Tory and an admirer of Pitt. But his flock was strongly disposed towards the reforming cause, and he had great difficulty in governing it: 'there was a knot of young wise men among us, who were great readers and admirers of Tom Paine. . .'.<sup>4</sup> These clamoured against his discourses in the House of God, but fortunately six of them soon exposed themselves by becoming given up to the sin of adultery. Presumably their partners in sin were found among those women who—

Young and old, are breathing out *slaughter* against the ruling powers. Tom Paine and Satan have stuffed their heads full of politics.<sup>4</sup>

In 1795 Huntington had great difficulty in holding back his flock from running after Richard Brothers, the most notable of the millenarian prophets of the New Jerusalem, while others of his flock seceded towards Winchester and the Universalists.<sup>5</sup> Some of his following (he implies) were, during the general repression of reformers in the mid-1790s, 'bereaved of their houses and goods', became emigrants, were imprisoned, transported or even hanged.<sup>6</sup> Others—

Who had some sound notions of the gospel, and some good views, and who were capable of sound speech which could not be condemned, were given up to the devil and Tom Paine, that they even sucked in the rebellion, blasphemy, and carnal logic of that man. . .

<sup>4</sup> William Huntington, *A Watchword and Warning from the Walls of Zion* (1798), pp. 76, 2–3. Huntington thought the women 'had better guide the houses, teach their children to read, and take in a little plain work'.

<sup>5</sup> Huntington attacked Richard Brothers in *The Lying Prophet Examined* (1795), Elhanan Winchester and the Universalists in *Discoveries and Cautions from the Streets of Zion* (1798) and elsewhere. Jon Mee, 'Is there an Antinomian in the House', discusses the breach between Huntington and Garnet Terry, who adopted more radical positions, somewhat closer to Blake.

<sup>6</sup> William Huntington, *Discoveries and Cautions from the Streets of Zion* (1798). These allegations probably testify to Huntington's monomania.

Others promised themselves ‘from week to week French liberty by the Sword of France and by the destruction of their own country’.<sup>7</sup> As if to outbid the Painites and the millennial prophets, Huntington bent the boughs of his rhetoric low with the imagery of the New Jerusalem:

Coming to God with the judge of all under his teaching, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant by faith, and to the saints in heartfelt love and affection, is coming to the heavenly Jerusalem; for all believers *are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God*. To let Jerusalem come into our mind, in the language of the New Testament, is *to love one another*. . .

For those who had received this gospel, ‘Gospel Jerusalem is now with us.’<sup>8</sup>

Huntington is an unimportant figure and he is scarcely relevant to my theme. What relevance he has lies in his *unimportance*. With his flock pulled hither and thither, to Paine, to Brothers, to the Universalists, to the ultra-Jacobins, he is like evangelising flotsam floating upon the culture of radical Dissent. But he can keep afloat only by inflating his raft with the rhetoric which blows all around him. We approach too often the ‘mind of the age’ through the language of the rational or humanist Enlightenment: through Paley, Priestley, Price, Wedgwood, Erasmus Darwin or through genteel Behmenists. But stick your foot, or your library ticket, into the sea of pamphlets and sermons of Dissent and of Methodist breakaways, and we are back in ‘the Tradition’ indeed; but the tradition is that of seventeenth-century Anabaptists and Ranters, of Ezra and Isaiah, of John Bunyan, of the New Jerusalem, of watchwords from the walls of Zion, of the Land of Beulah, of ancient prophecies, of blood on the walls of palaces, lambs entangled in thorns and briar and of ‘the old vail of the law, under which the gospel is hid’.

It is, of course, a rhetoric very much closer to the language of Blake than is the rhetoric of the Enlightenment. Inattention to this Londonish rhetoric has led us to see Blake as a more isolated figure than he was. But while it brings us very close to Blake’s language and imagery, the fit is not exact; and when we shift our attention from the vocabulary to the structure of ideas, then the gap becomes manifest.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> *A Watchword and Warning from the Walls of Zion*, pp. 64–5.

*Works or faith?*

9

The fit between the ideas of Huntington and of Blake is suggested by the title (but not the contents) of a tract of 1792: *The Moral Law not Injured by the Everlasting Gospel*. These terms were perfectly familiar to the disputatious London Dissenter of that time. But if Blake had written such a tract, then its title would have been, not reversed, but inverted: *The Everlasting Gospel Injured by the Moral Law*. It is not only that Blake stands within the antinomian tradition. He stands at a precise, if obscure, point within it, and his writings contain the purest, most lucid and most persuasive statements that issued from that tradition in any voice and at any time: ‘The Gospel is Forgiveness of Sins & has No Moral Precepts these belong to Plato & Seneca & Nero’, or:

When Satan first the black bow bent  
 And the Moral Law from the Gospel rent  
 He forgd the Law into a Sword  
 And spilld the blood of mercys Lord. (E200)

The difficulty of such statements (if any remains) arises only if we try to tease their meanings into something else. If we take them to mean exactly what they say – that the Moral Law is the direct antagonist of the Gospel of Mercy – then they may present problems to us, but they have the simplicity of stone.

A precise, if obscure point within the antinomian tradition . . . I will attempt a reconstruction of this tradition, and consider the ways in which it may have been extended to Blake. I have no unexpected disclosures to offer. I must commence with conjectures, and conclude with some firmer evidence, out of which further conjectures will arise.



## CHAPTER 2

*Antinomianisms*

'Antinomian' was, in the eighteenth century, as often a term of abuse as of precision. The orthodox hurled the accusation of Antinomianism at their opponents, very much as, in other times and places, accusations might be hurled of heresy, anarchism, terrorism or libertinism. And the objects of such abuse often turn out to be innocent of any such subversive intentions. They may be (as in Wesley's *Journals*) members of the flock who neglect attendances and who pride themselves too far on their own purity of heart; or, with some writers, a stern theological eye may fall upon a humble fornicator for whom the pursuit of a *doctrine* has never entered his thoughts. The term *'ἀντί νομος* means, after all, *against the law*; and most men and women may, at one time or another, fall under that imputation.

I do not mean to search back into antiquity for the origin of this heresy. I am more concerned with a cluster of ideas present in late eighteenth-century England, and with their derivation from seventeenth-century sources. In this tradition antinomian doctrine was founded most commonly upon passages in St Paul's epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians. These passages, which originated in St Paul's polemics against the slavish observance of Jewish ceremonial and ritual regulations, were taken to have a very much wider significance. The Mosaic Law was seen, not only in its ceremonial edicts but also in its moral commandments, to be the necessary rules of government imposed upon a faithless and unregenerate people:

The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. (Galatians 3. 24-5)

Christ, by his sacrifice upon the Cross, in fulfilment of God's ancient covenant with man, 'hath redeemed us from the curse of the law' (Galatians 3. 13). Thereafter it is not by 'the works of the law' but by 'the hearing of faith' that believers may be justified (Galatians 2 and 3, *passim*). Believers within the church 'are become dead to the law by the body of Christ' (Romans 7. 4), they are 'delivered from the law' (Romans 7. 6):

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. . . (Romans 8. 1 and 2)

This is not all that St Paul said, nor is it without ambiguity. But such passages as these were commonly taken as texts by Puritan divines who inclined towards antinomian tenets. Thus James Barry, whose sermons were reprinted by William Huntington, cited such texts and concluded: 'There remains, now, no condemnation in force against that man or woman who believes in the Son of God.'

Neither did the Son of God flinch or shrink in the contest, till he had vanquished and overcome the condemning power of the law; leaving it, and all the other enemies of his elect, nailed to the cross; having, by his death on the cross, put to death the damnatory sentence of God's righteous law against God's elect. . .<sup>1</sup>

This is close also to Michael's doctrine in Book XII of *Paradise Lost*: 'Law can discover sin, but not remove. . .'

So Law appears imperfect, and but giv'n  
 With purpose to resign them in full time  
 Up to a better Cov'nant. . .

Christ, by his sacrifice, fulfilled the old Mosaic Law, delivered mankind from its curse, and—

. . . to the Cross he nailes thy Enemies,  
 The Law that is against thee, and the sins  
 Of all mankinde, with him there crucifi'd,  
 Never to hurt them more who rightly trust  
 In this his satisfaction. . .

<sup>1</sup> James Barry, *The Only Refuge of a Troubled Soul in Times of Affliction . . . or the Mystery of the Apple Tree* (two sermons revised and published by W. Huntington, 2nd edn, 1802), p. 80.