

## INTRODUCTION

*Free to Fall*  
*Milton and the Old Testament God*

## I

*Milton and the Burden of Freedom* examines the contradictions inherent in the religious, political and ethical beliefs of Milton, as expressed in his poems, prose writings and the treatise *De Doctrina Christiana*. Like his fellow seventeenth-century radicals John Goodwin and Richard Overton, Milton can be considered a post-Calvinist, rooted in the Reformed tradition yet challenging Calvinist orthodoxy. Milton's political views, like his religious beliefs, are radical in some respects, conservative in others. Milton is a biblical republican as well as a classical republican, and, as with many of his contemporaries, secular arguments in his polemical writings are buttressed with citations from scripture and Reformed theologians. As *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* show, the relationship between the biblical and classical sides of Milton is complex and problematical, and the two cannot always be harmonized as easily as they are in such poems as *Lycidas*.

Though in *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Paradise Lost* Milton dissents from the standard tenets of Calvinism in his anti-Trinitarianism and his rejection of Calvinist doctrines of predestination and the utter extinction of free will after the Fall, there remains a residue of Calvinist belief even in those passages where he sets forth his own independent position. This is illustrated in a passage in *Paradise Lost*, Book III, in which God explains to his Son that even after Adam and Eve have succumbed to temptation, 'Man shall not quite be lost, but sav'd who will, / Yet not of will in him, but grace in me' (*PL*, III.173–4). The idea that man cannot achieve salvation through his own efforts, but only through the freely offered grace of God is standard Calvinist doctrine, with which Milton entirely concurs.<sup>1</sup> But the lines that follow are flatly self-contradictory, and seem to waver between a Calvinist assertion that there are some privileged mortals who are, without any regard to merit, predestined for salvation, and the claim

that there is another group of mortals, not specially chosen for election or damnation, who have been given the chance to earn salvation by repenting their sins.

Some I have chosen of peculiar grace  
 Elect above the rest; so is my will:  
 The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warn'd  
 Thir sinful state, and to appease betimes  
 Th'incens'd Deitie, while offerd grace  
 Invites; for I will cleer thir senses dark,  
 What may suffice, and soft'n stonie hearts  
 To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.  
 (PL, III.183–90)<sup>2</sup>

Like the Dutch Remonstrants, followers of the theologian Arminius, and his fellow Puritan radical John Goodwin, Milton redefines predestination and election as conditional on faith, rather than an arbitrary assertion of the divine will, by which some are chosen and others irretrievably damned: 'Predestination and election are not particular but only general: that is, they belong to all who believe in their hearts and persist in their belief' (*De Doctrina*, I.iv/CPW, VI.176).<sup>3</sup> Yet even in the key passage of theodicy in *Paradise Lost*, bringing out how, with the guidance of the inner 'Umpire Conscience', postlapsarian mankind is able 'once more' to 'stand / On even ground against his mortal foe', the emphasis is on God's power: man must learn how feeble he is, and how dependent upon the all-seeing deity:

By me upheld, that he may know how frail  
 His fall'n condition is, and to me ow  
 All his deliverance, and to none but me.  
 (PL, III.178–82, 194–5)

A. S. P. Woodhouse in *Puritanism and Liberty* has suggested that within the Puritan tradition, a desire for liberty (defined explicitly as Christian liberty) frequently comes into conflict with 'a passionate zeal for positive reform . . . in the interests of righteousness', even if it involves a degree of coercion.<sup>4</sup> Both Luther and Calvin believed in a clear distinction between spiritual and civil liberty: 'in civil policy, obedience to the Law must be severely required':

There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority. Through this distinction it comes about that we are not to misapply to the political order the gospel teaching on spiritual

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freedom . . . as if [men] were released from all bodily servitude because they are free according to the spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Milton, in contrast, defines Christian liberty in terms of freedom from slavery, making no distinction in this respect between civil and spiritual liberty. In the *Second Defence*, he speaks of ‘three varieties of liberty without which civilized life is scarcely possible, namely ecclesiastical liberty, domestic or personal liberty, and civil liberty’.<sup>6</sup> In *De Doctrina*, citing as proof-texts a series of New Testament passages contrasting ‘the yoke of slavery’ and liberation from bondage, he asserts, ‘Christian Liberty means that Christ our liberator frees us from the slavery of sin and thus from the rule of the law and of men, as if we were emancipated slaves’.<sup>7</sup>

In *De Doctrina* as in such works as *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659), Milton argues a position characteristic of radical Protestantism, going far beyond the orthodox Calvinist doctrine: that the entire Mosaic Law, both moral and ceremonial, has been abolished by the coming of Christ and the promulgation of the Gospel, with ‘the new dispensation of the Covenant of Grace’.<sup>8</sup> *De Doctrina* I.xxvi presents the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament as ‘a written code, consisting of many stipulations and intended for the Israelites alone’, an ‘elementary, childish and servile discipline’, which, for Christian believers, has been supplanted. The Gospel, he says in the next chapter, ‘much more excellent and perfect than the Law’, ‘has been written in the hearts of believers’, promising ‘eternal life to all men of all nations who believe in the revealed Christ’.<sup>9</sup> Milton held similar views as early as 1641, in *The Reason of Church-Government*: ‘God is no more a judge under the sentence of the Law, nor as it were a schoolmaister of perishable rites, but a more indulgent father’. The Law, an ‘imperfect and obscure institution’, he argues, ‘could not give rules to the compleat and glorious ministration of the Gospell’, and is appropriate for ‘a Childe’ not yet attaining maturity (*CPW*, 1.837). In *A Treatise of Civil Power*, arguing against the power of the magistrate to regulate religious worship, Milton made a similar distinction between ‘inward perswasion’, appropriate to the individual conscience, and outward force:

The state of religion under the gospel is far differing from what it was under the law: then was the state of rigor, childhood, bondage and works, to all which force was not unbefitting; now is the state of grace, manhood, freedom and faith; to all which belongs willingness and reason, not force . . . As if God of his special grace in the gospel had to this end freed us from his own commandments in these things, that our freedom should subject us to a more greivous yoke, the commandments of men. (*CPW*, VII.259, 263)

By this argument, the promptings of conscience must be seen as sovereign, overriding ‘the commandments of men’, rulers who falsely claim to be God’s representatives on earth.

As we will see, Milton’s view of the relationship between Gospel and Law was not always consistent, and he argued a position in the divorce tracts different from that in *De Doctrina* and *A Treatise of Civil Power*.<sup>10</sup> But he was consistent, both before and after the Restoration, in his desire to ‘advance the cause of real and substantial liberty; which must be sought, not without, but within’, and in using similar arguments in defence of spiritual, domestic, and political liberty.<sup>11</sup> Milton was notorious, both in his own time and afterwards, for his arguments in favour of tyrannicide, and for extending the principle of consent from the political to the domestic sphere. In *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, he writes:

He who marries, intends as little to conspire his own ruine, as he that swears Allegiance; and as a whole people is in proportion to an ill Government, so is one man to an ill marriage. If they against any authority, Cov’nant, or Statute, may, by the sovereign edict of charity, save not only their lives, but honest liberties from unworthy bondage, as well may he against any private Cov’nant, which he never enter’d to his mischief, redeem himself from unsupportable disturbances to honest peace and just contentment.<sup>12</sup>

In *Tetrachordon*, Milton argues that the remedy of divorce, freeing oneself by legal means from ‘unworthy bondage’, is made necessary under the fallen state, at a time when ‘the sons of men grew violent & injurious’: ‘while man and woman were both perfect each to other, there needed no divorce’. The parallel between domestic and political servitude is developed further in a passage where Milton suggests that an erroneous choice should not doom men to endless suffering: ‘[God] suffer’d divorce as well as marriage, our imperfect and degenerate condition of necessity requiring this law among the rest, as a remedy against intolerable wrong and servitude above the patience of man to bear’.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton argued a position that was no less radical and that laid him open to attack as one ‘that by his will would shake off his Governours as he doth his Wives’. Answers to Milton’s writings on kingship treat him as a dangerous ‘Libertine’, one who sought ‘to pull down Monarchy, and set up Anarchy’, just as, in his tractate on divorce, ‘the bonds of marriage are let loose to inordinate lust’.<sup>14</sup> The radical nature of Milton’s version of the theory of popular sovereignty is evident in the title page of *Tenure*, in the reference to ‘any, who have the

Power, to call into account a Tyrant, or wicked King', and in the following bold statement:

It follows lastly, that since the King or Magistrate holds his autoritie of the people, both originally and naturally for their good in the first place, and not his own, then may the people as oft as they shall judge it for the best, either choose him or reject him, retaine him or depose him though no Tyrant, meerly by the liberty and right of free born Men, to be govern'd as seems to them best.<sup>15</sup>

Here Milton goes well beyond the position argued by Calvinists and in the Reformed tradition generally, and indeed, beyond the Huguenot tract *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, a classic statement of the right of resistance to tyrants. In the 'constitutionalist' position argued by Martin Bucer, John Knox, and the author of *Vindiciae*, the right of resistance against a ruler who had abused his power was limited to 'inferior magistrates'.<sup>16</sup> According to *Vindiciae*, 'private persons . . . have no power, they have no publik command, nor any calling to unsheath the sword of authority'. The author of this tract argues that the ultimate sovereignty rests with the people, but defines 'the people' as 'those who hold authority from the people . . . to represent the whole body of the people'.<sup>17</sup> Milton, in contrast, interprets the doctrine of popular consent in a way that unequivocally gives to the body of the people the right to depose their rulers whenever it suits them to do so, or, alternatively, to choose to retain them. The people set kings on their thrones and can topple them from their thrones, even if the ruler is 'no Tyrant'. With sovereignty on temporary loan to those holding power, the people are able at their discretion 'to reassume it to themselves . . . or to dispose of it by any alteration, as they shall judge most conducing to the public good' (*Tenure*, CPW, III.212).

In the second edition of *Tenure*, Milton reinforces his secular republican arguments with several pages of testimony from 'true Ministers of the Protestant doctrine . . . famous and religious men, who first reformd the Church' – Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Martin Bucer, the Marian exile Christopher Goodman. On the title page of the 1650 edition he claims that these extracts from 'the best & learnedest among Protestant Divines' concur in 'asserting the position of this book'. But these 'Testimonies' draw back from the radical position Milton had initially maintained: 'And indeed I find it generally the cleere and positive determination of them all . . . who have writt'n on this argument; that to do justice on a lawless King, is to a private man unlawful, to an inferior Magistrate lawfull'.<sup>18</sup>

There are two arguments advanced by Milton in *Tenure*: that tyrants forfeit their right to rule by abusing the power they have been granted, and, more boldly, that all free men have ‘in themselves the power to remove, or to abolish any governour supreme or subordinat’, or else must be considered ‘no better than slaves or vassals’.<sup>19</sup> But even if the two lines of argument (both common in republican discourse) can be seen as complementary, Milton’s imprecision in defining ‘the people’ is troubling, and reveals problematical aspects of his ideology.

Sir Robert Filmer, author of *Patriarcha* and a hostile critic, in *Observations on Mr Milton upon Salmasius*, is scathing in his comments on the shifting meanings of ‘the people’ in Milton’s polemics against kingship. In the *Defence*, in which ‘the People of England’ are central to the Latin title (*Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio*), Milton at one point defines ‘the people’ as ‘the sounder and better part only’, and in *Tenure*, in a passage quoted by Filmer, he writes:

But who in particular is a Tyrant cannot be determin’d in a general discours, otherwise then by supposition; his particular charge, and the sufficient proof of it must determin that: which I leave to Magistrates, at least to the uprighter sort of them, and of the people, though in number less than many, in whom faction least have prevaild above the Law of nature and right reason, to judge as they find cause.<sup>20</sup>

The argument in *Tenure*, stated on the title page, is that ‘the ordinary Magistrate’, i.e. the legally constituted Parliament, has ‘neglected, or deny’d’ to fulfil its responsibilities in deposing a king who has abused his power, and that therefore the power reverts to ‘the people’ to call a tyrant to account.<sup>21</sup> In the *Defence*, Milton explicitly defends both Pride’s Purge, the expulsion of members from the Parliament who were reluctant to proceed against the king, and the trial and execution of the king, as the acts of a ‘sound’ or healthier ‘part’ (*pars potior et sanior*, in the Latin text). Answering Salmasius, Milton argues not only that a ‘part’ can act on behalf of the whole, but that a virtuous minority has the right to override a majority complicit with injustice:

‘Did the people’, you say, ‘do violence to the commoners of the lower house, putting some to flight, and so on?’ I say it was the people; for why should I not say that the action of the better, the sound part of the Parliament, in which resides the real power of the people, was the act of the people? If a majority in Parliament prefer enslavement and putting the commonwealth up for sale, is it not right for a minority to prevent it if they can and preserve their freedom?<sup>22</sup>

Filmer comments critically on both of these passages: if ‘the people’ can be defined in terms of virtue or soundness, how can we know who they are?

Nay, J[ohn] M[ilton] will not allow the major part of the representers to be the people, but ‘the sounder and better part only’ of them and in right down terms he tells us, to determine who is a tyrant he leaves ‘to magistrates, at least to the uprighter sort of them, and of the people’. . . If the ‘sounder, the better, and the uprighter’ have the power of the people, how shall we know, or who shall judge who they be?<sup>23</sup>

In a later passage, Filmer returns to the attack, arguing not only that Milton is inconsistent in his use of the term ‘people’, but that his arguments, nominally in defence of liberty, in fact restrict liberty, justifying the use of force. He cites several passages where Milton speaks of a minority as a ‘sounder part’.

If it be demanded what is meant by this word people? 1. Sometimes it is *populus universus* [the whole people], and then every child must have his consent asked, which is impossible. Sometimes it is *pars major* [the greater part], and sometimes it is *pars potior et sanior* [the better and sounder part] . . .

But it seems the major part will not carry it, nor be allowed except they be the ‘better part and the sounder part’. We are told ‘the sounder part implored the help of the army when it saw itself and the commonwealth betrayed’, and that the ‘soldiers judged better than the great council, and by arms saved the commonwealth, which the great council had almost damned by their votes’.<sup>24</sup>

Filmer continues, with biting irony:

Here we see what the people is – to wit, ‘the sounder part of which the army is the judge’. Thus upon the matter the soldiers are the people – which being so, we may discern where the liberty of the people lieth . . . A miserable liberty, which is only to choose to whom we will give our liberty, which we may not keep. (*Observations*, p. 203)

Several of Milton’s political allies in and around 1649 had literally argued that ‘the soldiers are the people’, gaining de-facto legitimacy for their actions on the grounds that they were acting for the public good, filling a political vacuum. John Goodwin in 1648 justified Pride’s Purge on exactly these grounds in a pamphlet ominously titled *Right and Might Well Met*. The Parliament, Goodwin argued, by abusing its power, had lost its legitimacy, and the Army was acting as the people’s deputies in expelling those members of Parliament who sought accommodation with the king.

If we measure the lawfulness of Parliamentary Judicature by the call of the people thereunto, the Army hath every whit as lawfull a constitution to judge who are enemies to the peace and safety of the Kingdome, as the Parliament it self hath. Nor doth it at all argue any illegality in their judgements about the Parliament men, that they had not the express consent of the people therein.<sup>25</sup>

According to William Sedgwick in *A Second View of the Army Remonstrance* (1649), ‘This Army are truly the *people of England*, and have the nature and power of the *whole* in them’.<sup>26</sup> Goodwin’s title suggests a damaging weakness in this version of contract theory, by its too easy identification of might with right: any body of armed men can justify their actions by declaring themselves unacknowledged legislators.

In a passage in *The Readie and Easie Way* (1660) that has troubled twentieth-century Milton scholars, Milton, having become deeply distrustful of ‘the noise and shouting of a rude multitude’ whom he considers full of ‘prejudice and impatience’ and ignorant of ‘thir own good both religious and civil’, goes so far as to urge compulsion on those who differ from his opinion of ‘the main end of government’.

Is it just or reasonable, that most voices against the main end of government should enslave the less number that would be free? More just it is doubtless, if it com to force, that a less number compell a greater to retain, which can be no wrong to them, thir libertie, than that a greater number for the pleasure of thir baseness, compell a less most injuriously to be thir fellow slaves. They who seek nothing but thir own just libertie, have alwaies right to winn it and to keep it, when ever they have power, be the voices never so numerous that oppose it.<sup>27</sup>

This argument for the forcible rule of the enlightened minority over the unregenerate majority, added in the second edition of *The Readie and Easie Way*, is consistent with passages in *Tenure* and *Defence* justifying the actions of a Parliamentary minority acting as ‘the sounder part’ of the whole. *The Readie and Easie Way* in its second edition includes several passages defending these acts of ‘the best affected . . . and best principl’d of the people’, who ‘stood not numbring on which side were most voices in Parliament, but on which side appeerd to them most reason, most safetie’ (*CPW*, VII.414). Milton’s proposed ‘free commonwealth’ in *The Readie and Easie Way* is extremely remote from egalitarian democracy, with a severely limited franchise and power vested in a perpetual Senate of ‘ablest men’ chosen by this limited electorate, with its members, once elected, to hold office until death (*CPW*, VII.432–4). Several twentieth-century critics have commented on the discrepancy between this ‘repressive programme’,



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with its appeal to ‘naked force’, and the ringing phrases about liberty and the hopes of revolutionary England as a ‘towardly and pregnant soile’, on the verge of transformation into ‘a Nation of Prophets, of Sages, and of Worthies’ in *Areopagitica*.<sup>28</sup>

As theorists of republicanism have pointed out, the republican tradition, both in its Roman antecedents and in the Renaissance, has an inherent bias toward aristocracy rather than democracy. The ‘politics of virtue’ is a recurrent theme among republicans, and is particularly prominent in Milton. Milton’s proposals for models of government in *The Readie and Easie Way*, while they reject any aristocracy of birth or landed property, envisage ‘an aristocracy of civil and . . . religious virtue’, rather like the Guardians in Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>29</sup> The idea of the virtuous minority or saving remnant, an aristocracy of the godly, with its origins in the Old Testament, can be seen as ‘the political counterpart of the harsh Puritan belief in the duty and privilege of the righteous to impose the divine will on the unregenerate mass’.<sup>30</sup>

Woodhouse and Barker, historicist critics of an earlier generation, have argued that though Milton and other radical Protestants such as Goodwin disagreed with orthodox Calvinist tenets in many respects, Milton expressed himself consistently ‘in terms of the doctrines fundamental to Puritanism’. Central to these beliefs and ‘constant amongst all the Puritan groups’ was the idea of the ‘holy community’, set aside from a potentially defiling sinful world. Puritanism, according to Woodhouse, ‘means a determined and varied effort to create the holy community and to meet, with different degrees or compromise and adjustment, the problem of its conflict with the world’.<sup>31</sup> The paradox of Christian liberty, as Woodhouse has argued, is that it is simultaneously liberating and exclusionary: ‘the very fact of grounding one’s appeal on *Christian* liberty restricts the direct benefits of that appeal to the regenerate: Christian liberty freed you *for*, not *from*, the service of God’.<sup>32</sup>

The religious doctrines set forth in *De Doctrina* and in such pamphlets as *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings Out of the Church* (hereafter, *Hirelings*) and *A Treatise of Civil Power* are in many ways those associated with Congregationalism or Independency: a suspicion of the very idea of a national church as of compulsion in religious matters, a belief in ‘free consent’.

The Christian church is universal; not tied to nation, diocese or parish, but consisting of many particular churches complete in themselves; gathered, not by compulsion or the accident of dwelling nigh together, but by free consent choosing both their particular church and their church-officers.<sup>33</sup>

The emphasis on universality, an invisible church existing ‘in the hearts of believers’ and not ‘subject to spatial considerations’, is characteristically Miltonic, where the idea that a church is ‘gathered’ rather than tied to a particular diocese is central to Congregationalism. According to Geoffrey Nuttall, the principle of separation ‘from the Ignorant the Vile and the Profane’, ‘a separation . . . of the clean from the unclean’, is a guiding tenet of the more radical varieties of Puritanism, coexisting with an insistence on ‘every man’s own voluntary consent’ to church membership.<sup>34</sup> Where Milton in *Areopagitica* emphasized the need to accept ‘brotherly dissimilitudes’, as against ‘a grosse conforming stupidity, a stark and dead congealment of *wood and hay and stubble*, forced and frozen together’, his political ally and fellow Puritan Arminian Goodwin was militant in the way he sought to implement the ideal of a gathered church. In 1648, he was expelled from his London church after refusing to administer the sacrament to anyone but ‘the godly’, and his gathered church, which after 1645 initially met in his own house, admitted covenanted members both inside and outside parish boundaries.<sup>35</sup>

Though Milton argued in *De Doctrina* and elsewhere that the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament had been supplanted by the Gospel, the deity of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* is in many respects an Old Testament God. The idea of election, like the idea of the chosen people, depends upon an act of exclusion: ‘identity is purchased at the expense of the Other’. In God’s covenant with Abraham, the gift of land and of eventual prosperity is conditional on obedience, and on the rejection of other gods, other nations, as unclean: ‘On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaim, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgasbites and Jebusites.”’<sup>36</sup> What is extraordinary about this passage is the catalogue of all the nations, each worshipping its own false gods, already occupying this land. After Abraham has shown his obedience by offering to sacrifice his son Isaac, Yahweh goes on to say, ‘And your descendants shall possess the gates of their enemies and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves – because you obeyed my voice’.<sup>37</sup> The book of Leviticus sets forth a number of detailed regulations by which believing Israelites can testify to Yahweh that ‘you are his people’:

I am the Lord your God, who have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean . . . You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.<sup>38</sup>