

21H.141 Long Paper

Natural Enthusiastick Ecstasies and Revelations

Casaubon's Humanistic Attack on the 'Revelations' of the Sectaries

In 1640, King Charles I of England convened a new parliament to try and pass a budget for his wars with religious rebels in Scotland. This "Long Parliament," which sat from 1640 to 1658, quickly showed their independence from royal control, eventually sparking off the English Civil Wars and the decade long Interregnum. In 1641, they abolished the Star Chamber, a judicial body which, among other duties, enforced the royal control of the press. This breakdown of literary censorship immediately sparked a rash of new written materials, many of which expressed religious beliefs which ranged from the mildly controversial to the outright heretical. Several of the more radical publications included the claim that their authors, often leaders of relatively large groups of radicals, had received a direct message from God which showed them the right way. The Parliamentarians cracked down upon these groups upon seizing control of England, and reinstated censorship in 1643 with the Licensing Order, which reestablished the majority of the controls of the Star Chamber in a new format. Nonetheless, those three years of uncensored publishing made a great impact upon the religious and intellectual landscape of Parliamentary England, and even after the reinstatement of censorship radical publications continued to be published at a greater pace than before 1640. Meric Casaubon, a classical scholar and priest, wrote a *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* in 1654 which denied the possibility that these radicals had congress with the Holy Spirit, while nonetheless holding out the basic possibility of such communication. Casaubon's *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* looked back to a fundamentally Humanistic tradition of scholarship in addressing the contemporary problem of radical sectarian groups.

In the *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* Casaubon investigated the phenomenon where a person feels himself possessed or communicated to by supernatural forces. Casaubon separated 'enthusiasm'

into two distinct categories: the natural and the supernatural. Natural enthusiasm he defined as “an extraordinary, transcendent, but natural fervency, or pregnancy of the soul, spirits or brain, producing strange effects apt to be mistaken for the supernatural” (Casaubon, 17). Casaubon believed that most of those who claimed to be possessed or to have received guidance from God were fakers or misguided. He did not, however, “dispute...whether the most illiterate among Christians, whether men or women, may not attain sometimes by God’s special power, and real holinesse and sanctity, to the highest mysteries of Christian religion” (Casaubon, 118). Casaubon did not focus on this possibility, but rather investigated cases of supposed religious revelation that he believed to have other explanations. Casaubon separated the natural enthusiasms into eight categories, but he focused the bulk of his book on what he termed philosophical or contemplative enthusiasm –“all kind of Enthusiasme having and dependence from the intention or contemplation of the mind” (Casaubon, 60). The ‘revelations’ proclaimed by Sectarians like Reeve and Muggleton fell into this category, as they arose from contemplation of the nature of God. Casaubon described many examples of those who claimed to have received communication with angels or God, and explained why each most likely exhibited either fakery or a ‘distemper’ or ‘melancholick disposition.’

The 1650s were a time of reestablishing the authority that had been stripped from the Anglican Church and reinstating the mechanisms of censorship and public order. After the Act of Habeus Corpus in 1641 and the abolishment of the Star Chamber, underlying religious dissent and discussion quickly sprouted up into published materials. During the tumultuous decade of the Civil War, groups like the Levellers, Ranters, Muggletonians and Diggers proliferated across England. The Levellers had a large presence in the New Model Army, which greatly concerned members of the landed classes, as well as the clergy, who feared a rebellion and anarchy. When after the execution of King Charles in 1648 Oliver Cromwell’s instated himself as Lord Protector and purged the Levellers from the Army, many hoped that stability had returned to the British Isles. Although censorship controls were not as effective as they had

been before the Civil War, they were nonetheless reinstated, and with a government firmly in place natural philosophers turned to justifying the existing order against radical groups such as the Levellers.

Fundamentally, there were three major divisions of thought in England after the Civil Wars, crossing across politics, religion and natural philosophy. The first strand was the radicals, ranging from radical Puritans to the Levellers who campaigned for a communitarian state. These groups were fragmented, without any central authority or argument, but generally desired an overthrow of the established order and significant changes to be made in England. In some ways, they can be compared to the Magisterial Reformers in Germany in the 1500s, although unlike in Germany, the Parliamentarians didn't turn on radical groups like the Levellers until after the war was won. Opposing these radical groups, the second main division supported a central Church, with the authority to establish at least a semblance of unity over religious matters as well as influence in secular matters. Those supporting the central church ranged from the mainstream Puritans, who, though separate from the main body of Anglican power structures, still interacted significantly with them, to the Anglicans themselves. They were supported by natural philosophers such as Boyle and others. Finally, the third strand, essentially different than either of the other two, wanted a strong central power of the sort represented equally by Cromwell or a King, and either ignored or actively denigrated the idea of the Church having power in secular matters. This segment was epitomized by Thomas Hobbes, who actively despised the Anglican Church as having a negative effect on the stability of the Kingdom. Thomas Hobbes, a natural philosopher and political theorist, wrote *The Leviathan*, making a case for a strict and monolithic government to overcome the natural tendency of human life to be "nasty, brutish and short." He saw no role for the Church, whether Anglican or Roman Catholic, in this ordeal, and was thus opposed by other philosophers, such as David Boyle, who wanted to oppose the Levellers but still ensure a place for God and the Church in affairs of the State.

Following the English Civil Wars, the concept of enthusiasm became associated with fanaticism and radical groups such as Anabaptists and Ranters, some of whom claimed to have received direct guidance from God. In 1653, John Reeve “declare[d] from the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus, that my God the man Jesus from his Throne of glory, spake to me *John Reeve*, his third and last Witness”, and condemned those who did not follow him or his cousin Muggleton as wicked and ignorant. Casaubon and other scholars classified such claims as ‘enthusiasm,’ a term which kept its negative connotation unto the 1740s when David Hume wrote that for the enthusiastic man,

human reason, and even morality are rejected as fallacious guides: and the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly and without reserve, to the supposed illapses of the spirit, and to inspiration from above. Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of ENTHUSIASM” (Hume, Essay X¹).

Thus, Casaubon’s interpretation of enthusiasm as a naturally occurring human frailty targeted groups such as the Muggletonians by helping to discredit the foundational understanding of their message direct from God. He believed that “it is no lesse than absolute renunciation of the Gospel and Faith of Christ... after the Gospel and faith of Christ once delivered to pretend to new lights and to seek after Revelation in matters of Faith and Doctrinne” (Casaubon, 87). Thus, his writing fit into the second strand of political and religious thought of the time, as his partisanship for the Anglican Church shows, despite Parliament stripping him of his benefice at Canterbury Cathedral. He strongly opposed radical groups such as the Ranters, Levellers and Diggers. He is careful, however, not to imply any support for the views represented by Hobbes, as he continuously affirms his belief that miracles and actual supernatural enthusiasms *can* happen.

¹ Hume, David. "Essay X: Of Superstition and Enthusiasm." *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*. 1754.

Casaubon's intended audience was clearly not the common people who were likely to be swayed by publications like the *Ranter's Declaration*. Nor was his *Treatise* directed at low clergy and lay ministers as were Reeve's *Epistle*, directed "unto all Prophets, Ministers, or Speakers in the world" (Reeve, 1), or the less radical and controversial position papers of Anthony Wotton. The *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* is clearly directed at a rather more learned class of individuals, people who would not blink an eye at references to Hippocrates, Plato and Socrates, and who would find good justification for a position from such Ancient authors. When Parliament removed him from his benefice at Canterbury Cathedral in 1643 for not acknowledging Parliament's authority, Casaubon retired to the countryside near Oxford, and in that retirement read many books. In his preface, Casaubon stated that he wrote his *Treatise* in response to *Sister Katharine of Jesus; Nunne of the Order of Our Lady*, a book printed in Paris in 1628 about the "raptures and enthusiasms, that had happned unto a melancholick, or if you will, a devout Maid" (Casaubon, Preface p. 10). Casaubon did not find the stories contained within that volume interesting or worth particular notice, but he did find with some dismay "besides a long dedication to the Queen of France, made by a Cardinal,... the Approbations of one Bishop, one Archbishop, besides *Sorbonists* and Doctors of Divinity, no lesse than four" (Casaubon, Preface p. 9). Casaubon is troubled not by the contents of the book, nor by the thought that the common man on the street could read it and find it interesting, but that bishops, archbishops and people who study theology could read it and be convinced by the contents therein. "For ignorant people to be bold and confident, and in their confidence to deceive themselves and others," he states,

is no wonder at all, a man had need but open his eyes, to see such sights at every door.

That which I (not without some indignation sometimes) have wondered at, is that even learned men, yea men of great fame and credit in the world for their parts and performances in other kinds, have in this particular of Ecstasies and Raptures, been so apt in all ages to be gulled" (Casaubon, 78).

He aims to convince members of the literate and learned class, particularly those learned in theology, that the “enthusiasms’ of the type experienced by Sister Katharine were in fact natural occurrences, not legitimate Divine works. This goal was not merely theoretical or academic in nature. Rather, it had a very specific and practical reason – to try and prevent such high clergy or educated laymen from believing the claims of Reeves or his ilk. The Anglican Church could easily stand against small groups of Ranters and Levellers, even if their followers genuinely believed that their leaders were inspired by the Holy Spirit and that God had directly spoken to them. If a bishop or archbishop on the other hand, were to become convinced by Reeves that the Muggletonians were correct, than it could throw that part of England into chaos. He finds nothing “so strange [as] what Germany hath seen, and other Countrey may, where Anabaptisticall Enthusiasts are tolerated, and from toleration come in time to prevail and rule” (Casaubon, 101). Small wonder, then, that Casaubon was so appalled by the credulity of the French clergy who lauded *Sister Katharine of the Order of Jesus* so heavily. If they believe the revelations of a nun in Paris, what might their equivalents in England make of a minister like Reeve in London?

Casaubon showed some departure from the prevalent views of his time in his willingness to accept that false prophets were deceived rather than deceivers. There was no shortage of responses to the ‘enthusiastick’ groups of the 1640s. Publications such as the *Ranters Declaration* of 1650 and *Plain English, or the Sectaries Anatomized* from 1646, attacked the Sectarian groups of England, by claiming their leaders to be evil men who deceived their followers, led them astray and did the work of Satan. Unlike these texts, the *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* expressed the possibility that the preachers and so-called prophets of various groups might be inherently good and Christian men who were led astray by their own enthusiasm. In what was surely a breach with common belief at the time, Casaubon even made the claim that where the common assumption was “that Mahomet [sic] did assume to himself

divine authority by feigned Enthusiasm...but whether feigned, I make some question” (Casaubon, 11). For a writer of his time period, this belief is rather surprisingly tolerant. In this period, Islam was very much the mortal threat to Christendom. Even as he wrote, English ships were fighting with Dutch ships and Venetian galleys in the Mediterranean to keep the Ottoman Empire from seizing Crete. Not twenty years later, Ottoman armies marched as far as Vienna itself, marking the high tide of Ottoman conquests. The idea that Mohammed, the founder of Islam, could be viewed in a favorable light at all, even if only that he was duped rather than deceiver, is surprising. Of course, Casaubon does not “make any question, but that the Devil was a chief actor in the progresse of [Islam]” (Casaubon, 131), no matter whether Mohammed was a willing accomplice or unwilling dupe of the Devil.

Unlike Hobbes, Boyle and their fellows, Casaubon was certainly not a Natural Philosopher. By inclination and training, he was a classical scholar, rooted in a deeply Humanistic mindset, not a scientific one. Accordingly, his *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* is a text fundamentally Humanistic in nature. Casaubon relied heavily on Ancient authors to make his points, quoting liberally from Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, as well as other Greek philosophers, Romans and even a few writers from the East. This should not surprise us, for Casaubon was a classical scholar at Oxford when he wrote his *Treatise*, yet it nonetheless points to a fundamentally older style of scholarship than was developing elsewhere in England. Where one of his contemporaries, Descartes, had broken out of the Humanistic mold and attempted to develop and describe a philosophy from first principles, Casaubon attempts to form a consensus view from accepted wisdom of the past. This creates an interesting divergence from the natural philosophers and theorists such as Bacon, Boyle, Newton and even Hobbes. Of course, his contemporaries still based their scholarship on ancient writings, such as the Atomists for Boyle and the Stoics for Newton, but they both made distinct intellectual departures from their ancient predecessors. On the other hand, Casaubon refused to make any deviation from the views of an older authority without further backing from another. He tells the reader “that wherein I differ from Baronius ... I do it

not altogether in mine own judgement (though chiefly grounded upon S. Jerom and S. Augustine) but have also the same Franc. Junius his authority to oppose against Baronius, and some others” (Casaubon, 69).

The *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* was originally published in 1654, and there is a copy of it in the MIT library. However, there is a high quality electronic copy of the 1655 edition, from which the quotes used in this paper were drawn, due to the increased ease in reading and searching. The 1655 edition was printed in London, and consists of 228 pages. The citations and short passages inserted into the margins by making gaps in the text reveal in some ways how the text was meant to be read. In due reverence to the Humanistic tradition, Casaubon expected his readers to know the names of the Ancient authors he cited. However, some passages and sentences were so important that he, or his editors, felt it necessary to include more detailed instructions on their location. Perhaps a reader would keep copies of Plato, Aquinas and Aristotle open beside him as he read, allowing him to flip to the indicated page when prompted. Or, perhaps, he would merely write down the passage number in a notebook, to look up at his leisure later. In other cases, the marginal notes serve the same purpose as that of footnotes in modern times, to add in an additional point which the author wants to make but cannot fit into the main text.

While the content of Casaubon’s *Treatise* fits quite firmly within the contemporary context of late 17th Century England, the style of the writing and the nature of its scholarship seems to be much more rooted in the 15th and 16th centuries. The references to ancient authorities does not make the *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* unique compared to its contemporaries by any means, but the sheer volume of references and the scholastic methods expressed in the book showcase the Humanistic tradition. The text shows that a fundamentally modern view – that ‘revelations’ from God are more likely to arise from disease than from Divine intervention – can nonetheless be adeptly expressed through ancient sources.

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21H.141 Renaissance To Revolution: Europe, 1300-1800
Spring 2015

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