

# They once were rebels

Ranters, Diggers & mystics who challenged church authority

Bill Weinberg

2024

a review of

*Resistance to Christianity: A Chronological Encyclopaedia of Heresy from the Beginning to the Eighteenth Century* by Raoul Vaneigem, translation by Bill Brown. ERIS, 2023

While evangelical Protestantism has for generations overwhelmingly been a force of deep reaction in this country and is poised, if Donald Trump regains the White House this November, to instate a situation such as depicted in Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (and its screen and TV adaptations).

This potential recently made a media splash when Trump posted to his Truth Social platform an ultra-creepy video entitled "God Made Trump," portraying a personification of him as Redeemer and Avenger sent by the Almighty. Ralph Reed, founder of the Christian Coalition, is hawking his new book, *For God and Country: The Christian Case For Trump*.

Under a restored Trump regime, evangelical Protestantism could play the same role that reactionary Catholicism did in the clerical-fascist regimes of Francisco Franco in Spain, Ante Pavelic in Croatia and, to an extent, Benito Mussolini in Italy, in which the state and the ultimate leader are sanctified, labor suppressed, harsh and repressive interpretation of Christian morality made law, and enemies of the state eliminated.

A contemporary example of such a clerical-fascist regime is Putin's Russia, in which rights for women and sexual non-conformists are being rapidly repealed, even very indirect expressions of disagreement with the regime are severely punished, with the Russian Orthodox Church of Patriarch Kirill, a key propaganda pillar of the aggressive war in Ukraine. The church promotes a narrative of protecting Russian traditional values against Western liberal assault, and is in explicit alliance with the evangelical right in the U.S., despite the denominational gulf.

However, beside the usual role of Christianity functioning as a handmaiden of repressive state authority, heresies have emerged under its rule that have a long history of birthing rebellious groups. They are chronicled by Situationist Raoul Vaneigem in this comprehensive account of rebels, ranters, and millenarians.

In *Resistance to Christianity*, he traces a chronology from the heresies of the ancient and medieval periods, especially those in the Gnostic tradition that rejected the Church and worldly authority as inherently corrupt, through the millenarian movements that ultimately prefigured the Protestant Reformation, a heresy that succeeded.

A key episode was the German Peasants' War of 1524, which had a spiritual and millennial aspect in the person of the revolutionary priest Thomas Müntzer. He was a contemporary of Martin Luther, who disavowed Müntzer as being far too radical with his call for expropriation of the aristocracy by the commoners. The peasant army flew a rainbow flag as a symbol of solidarity and hope, but were ultimately defeated by armed forces of the lords.

This spirit was also present in the revolutionary movements of the English Civil War of the 1640s. This period famously saw the Diggers, who in 1649 at St George's Hill pulled off what the historian George Woodcock called the world's first anarchist direct action, reclaiming land from the aristocracy for their collective farms, with a vision of the earth as a "common treasury for all." The Ranters of the same period were fiery mystical anarchists who rejected all worldly authority and Christian morality.

Both the Puritans and the Quakers also came out of this ferment, and have had a significant influence on our side of the Atlantic. The Quakers were deeply involved in slavery abolitionism, aiding escaped slaves through the Underground Railroad, and in later struggles for social justice, especially war resistance based on their pacifism.

The more militant abolitionism of the armed insurrectionist John Brown in the 1850s, of Harpers Ferry and Bleeding Kansas fame, was steeped in Puritan millenarianism. And, there is a stamp of this a century later in the Baptist and pacifist Martin Luther King, Jr., seen in his famous invocation of the Old Testament: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

So, how did this trajectory warp into its opposite?

A turning point can be seen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of Biblical literalism in reaction to the rise of science, characterized by the application of a strict literal interpretation to scripture.

In the 1890s, the fundamentalist and populist politician William Jennings Bryan was a fighter for small farmers and laborers who sought to abolish the gold standard in the interest of working people. But he was on the wrong side in the 1925 Scopes trial, opposing the teaching of evolution in the schools. Battles still going on today a century later strongly echo such religiously-inspired themes.

The 1920s saw the formal, doctrinal establishment of fundamentalism. But the critical turning point was the weaponizing of the abortion issue by the Republican Party after the 1973 *Roe v Wade* decision. This culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, concomitant with the founding of the Moral Majority, comprised of conservative Christian political action committees.

This sealed the pact between the GOP and Protestant fundamentalism, with the fundis abandoning any remnant of economic populism to close ranks with neoliberalism and Reaganomics as the price for mainstreaming of their cultural-conservative agenda.

The surviving millenarian stamp in this new ultra-reactionary and Biblical-literalist form is particularly ominous. In the Book of Revelations, with which evangelicals are so obsessed, the foretold Apocalypse for John the Revelator, writing in the first century CE, was the fall of Rome. Jumping forward a millennium and a half to the English Civil War era, the prophecy was reconceived as overthrow of the aristocracy and lords of property, exemplified by the execution of the king.

For contemporary evangelicals and fundamentalists, the Apocalypse can be seen as a literal rain of fire and brimstone which state rulers now have the power to bring about through modern military weapons technology. The notion of believers in an imminent and literal Apocalypse getting anywhere near the U.S. nuclear arsenal is terrifying.

Despite his supposed love affair with Putin, the blustering, erratic Trump taking power in what is, after Ukraine and Gaza, a world at war, holds unprecedented risk of escalation to the unthinkable despite those sectors of the left who view Trump as the less dangerous candidate because he would be less likely to get into a war with Russia.

Vaneigem’s title, *Resistance to Christianity*, is in some ways more relevant and in other ways less than the author himself anticipated when he first wrote the book in 1994. Vaneigem ends his story with the 1789 French Revolution, saying that it brought about the “fall of god”—after which liberatory movements no longer had to resort to the vocabulary and iconography of religion. In an afterword for the new English edition, Vaneigem doesn’t really rethink that, seeing the world as moving “beyond religion.” This is, especially at this moment, entirely too optimistic.

On the other hand, secularism isn’t sufficient to resist the MAGA variant of clerical fascism on its own. Resistance is going to have to come, in part at least, from within elements of Christianity, and others who view the struggle in spiritual rather than rationalist terms.

Hopefully, the contradiction will be too blatant for some of those rallying around the obviously irreligious Trump in the name of religion. Some lonely figures have indeed broken ranks, such as Russell Moore, once a top official in the Southern Baptist Convention and now author of *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call For Evangelical America*, warning that evangelism is becoming the antithesis of everything it supposedly stands for by embracing MAGA.

There are also pastors in the Black church who are keeping the MLK tradition alive, such as Rev. William Barber in North Carolina, who led the Moral Mondays campaign in that state against the overturn of civil rights protections and imposition of restrictions on abortion rights. And, there are Christians who are risking their freedom to assist desperate migrants in the southern borderlands. These are a reminder that there are other currents in the Christian tradition, broadly defined, than its most reactionary exponents now preparing a bid for total power.

The history chronicled in Vaneigem's book, as obscure as much of it may seem for contemporary readers, is well worth grappling with at this moment.

Bill Weinberg rants weekly on his podcast **CounterVortex**.

# fifth Estate

Bill Weinberg  
They once were rebels  
Ranters, Diggers & mystics who challenged church authority  
2024

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/415-summer-2024-2/they-once-were-rebels>  
Fifth Estate #415, Summer 2024

**[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**