

The Conflict of Puritanism in Milton: An Analysis

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Abstract

The age of Milton is an era of extreme religious and political polarization, revolving around reforms in the English Church commonly known as Puritanism. It is a disturbing epoch questioning Christianity as a moral order, having serious political implications. In the midst of a turbulent and highly contested religious debate, Milton appeared to be standing alone, mostly because of his distinct and individual stand of seeing the turmoil as a devout Christian as well as a rational being. Not very many agreed to his point of view, at times; a contradictory stance during this particular phase of the English politico-religious and literary history roughly beginning in the age James I (1566-1625) to that of Charles I (1600-1649). This paper, through an analysis of some of his major works, seeks to situate Milton's convictions as a Puritan, which is distinctly Miltonic in essence, as well as explores his impassioned voice in support of reason and human liberty.

Keyword: Milton, Puritanism, Christianity, Literature, Areopagitica, Paradise Lost.

Introduction

John Milton (1608-1674) represents a whole age in the English literary history. Like Shakespeare he shares the glory as well as the strife of his time but his philosophical view of the world, his zeal for liberty and his staunch stand on the Puritanism cause, makes him more important in the context. The Puritanism envisioned by him is truly Miltonic in spirit and essence than the mainstream thinking on the religious and political implications of this religious renaissance, seeking reforms in the English Church. On the potent question of the divine rights of Kings, however, Puritanism finds its more serious political strength upholding individual liberty as sanctified and sacred than the mere ritualistic reforms. The emphasis shifted to questioning the parliamentary authority rather than the superficial reformation of the church practices, and given the spirit of the age, the voice of liberty and human dignity

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prevailed. Drawing its strength from the Renaissance, Milton, a lone warrior, fought the status quo of the Church as well as the irrational acts of the Parliament, after Charles I was publically beheaded and England was ruled by the Parliament for almost seventeen years. This he did through a series of pamphlets invoking the spirit of the ancient Greeks as documented in his impassioned appeal for liberty in *Areopagitica; A speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parliament of England* (1644) as well as saving man against Christian dogma of his time by publishing his controversial works, namely on *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643).

*“For a poet like Milton, convinced of his genius and determined to put it at the service of his country, this atmosphere was both dangerous and fascinating. Christian and Humanist, Protestant, patriot and heir of the golden ages of Greece and Rome, he faced what appeared to him to be the birth-pangs of a new and regenerate England with high excitement and idealistic optimism.”*¹

However it is in the greatest Christian epic, *Paradise Lost* that Milton releases his spirit of Puritanism and eternalizes the conflict of his age. It was this religio-political charged atmosphere that provides Milton the strength and opportunity to show his grand intellectual and literary prowess, exhibiting his great moral courage and an unprecedented outburst for the cause of Christian faith concerning its reform initiatives as well as upholding personal liberty. Interestingly though, Milton is confronted with a dilemma to hold on to the two, apparently, contradictory stands, vis-à-vis, Christianity and the reform of the English Church and the humanistic agenda, philosophically oscillating between faith in the Bible and a powerful appeal to reason. It was the so-called Puritan Revolution (1640-1660) in England that provided an opportunity to Milton to write his famous prose work. Interestingly though, the turbulence at this juncture of the English history proved conducive for such an intellectual outburst, writing freely on such diverse issues like religion, politics, history, democracy, liberty and of course, literature. However it was his religious zeal that dominated his struggle as a man who alone represents his age. *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, are undoubtedly the most noble and greatest of his poems, which inform on Milton's dilemma of justifying the “ways of God to man” as well as celebrating the indomitable human spirit respectively.

Puritanism – An Overview

As noted above, Puritanism was basically a reform agenda by the Christian zealots to bring certain reforms in the English Church within the spirit of the Renaissance. This religious movement became a multifaceted revolution having political and social repercussions, ultimately resulting in the beheading of King Charles I and the rise of parliamentary democracy led by Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658). Puritanism was a potent moral reform agenda when compared to the intellectual and liberal awakening of the Renaissance that happened in 15th Century as having “two chief objects; the first was personal righteousness; the second was civil and religious liberty...it aimed to make men honest and to make them free”.² It is this distinct line of departure from the mainstream push of the Renaissance, which makes the Puritanism a religio-political movement that not only calls for reforms in the Anglican Church, but upholds the ideal of freedom, questioning despotism in all its manifestations, and was even more focused on the tyranny of kings. The problems arose, however, when Cromwell passed certain laws which were too severe, to those who wished for a more balanced, humane and just, social, political and religious order. It is at this junction in the English history and with reference to Milton’s role, that we come across his problematic stance on Christianity as a moral order and an appeal to reason on the question of human freedom.

“In its broadest sense the Puritan movement may be regarded as a second and greater Renaissance, a rebirth of the moral nature of man following the intellectual awakening of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In Italy, whose influence had been uppermost in Elizabethan literature, the Renaissance had been essentially pagan and sensuous. It had hardly touched the moral nature of man, and it brought little relief from the despotism of rulers.”³

In this perspective, Puritanism emerges as one of the most important reform agendas in the English history, which not only sought purification of the Church, but also had greater implications concerning justification of Kingship as such. On this account it appears problematic and controversial. However, a deeper insight reveals that the Puritan movement was a blend of the Reformation and the Renaissance.

“Such a movement should be cleared of all the misconceptions which have clung to it since the Restoration, when the very name of Puritan was made ridiculous by the jeers of the gay courtiers of Charles II. Though the spirit of the movement was profoundly

religious, the Puritans were not a religious sect; neither was the Puritan a narrow-minded and gloomy dogmatist, as he is still pictured even in the histories.”⁴

Puritanism was an all-inclusive religious and constitutional interventionism questioning the dictatorship of the Church and the tyranny of the king i.e. Charles I. That monarchy was restored in 1660 with Charles II returning from France, but this by no means takes away the credit from the Puritans in general and Milton in particular to challenge the status quo. History testifies that later on Puritanism hugely influenced the lives of Englishmen colonizing the New World i.e. USA, having greater implications than Milton and his party might have imagined.

“From a religious view point Puritanism included all shades of belief...It included English churchmen as well as extreme Separatists, Calvinists, Covenanters, Catholic noblemen,—all bound together in resistance to despotism in Church and State, and with a passion for liberty and righteousness such as the world has never since seen...Religiously the age was one of even greater ferment than that which marked the beginning of the Reformation.”⁵

Interestingly, in this Age of Milton, only poetry of some substance was written by the so-called Metaphysical Poets, making it a time of transition. Many old ideals were losing ground and new patterns and forms had not distinctly arisen, as yet.

“In literature also the Puritan Age was one of confusion, due to the breaking up of old ideals. Mediaeval standards of chivalry, the impossible loves and romances of which Spenser furnished the types, perished no less surely than the ideal of a national church; and in the absence of any fixed standard of literary criticism there was nothing to prevent the exaggeration of the “metaphysical” poets.”⁶

Milton and the Parliament

The coming of the commonwealth with Cromwell as its mainstay was seen by the English public as a victory for the liberty of man vis-à-vis the divine rights of kings, whose whims and frivolities had brought the so-called English Revolution. Milton’s republicanism and anti-Royalist stance, like most of the puritans, could be assessed from his following comment:

“...A King must be adored like a demigod, with a dissolute and haughty court about him, of vast expense and luxury, masks and reveals to the debouching of our Prime gentry, both male and female: not in their pastimes only, but in earnest, by the loose

employments of court service...to the multiplying of a servile crew, bred up then to the hope not to public, but of court offices, to be stewards, chamberlains, ushers, grooms even of the close stool.”⁷

However, it was certain harsh enactments by the Parliament, particularly forbidding the publication of books, unless cleared by an authority vested in nominated censors that enraged the liberal spirit in Milton who, following the Hellenic tradition, gave vent to his free spirit questioning the very basis of the irrational law in his famous but controversial prose work, *Areopagitica*. An impassioned appeal to the spirit of democracy and parliamentary ideals calling for the endorsement of the voice of the people, Milton presents a powerful argument in favor of freedom of expression as well as faith in a man's conscience than in external regulations. It is a well-stated, properly evidenced argument, abundant with historical allusions and instances that carry the point despite its difficult language. This document symbolizes the tremendous force, almost violent, with lengthy deliberations, that makes it a canonical work defining the idealism of a great soul.

“...kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God's Image; but he who destroys a good Book, kills reason itself, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured u on purpose to a life beyond life.”⁸

In the same breath, Milton invokes the moral strength of true Christianity by upholding truth, rather than to succumb to the wantonness of falsehood and voices his concern. “He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian.”⁹

In a complex array of argumentation and referring to multiple sources, both Christian and Hellenic, he hails valiantly: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.”¹⁰

Milton's dilemma

Milton is a beguiling genius: a man with strong contradictions, upholding man's inherent goodness, and standing for individual liberty against the tyranny of the Church, the King, and the Parliament. In this respect his view of Puritanism does not seem simple or linear but quite complex and intriguing. Though

basically a poet, one of the greatest, having written such works as *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, yet to him the human cause was no less important for which he emerges as the only pallbearer of his age, through a serious prose work giving vent to his view on the human condition of his age.

Milton's dilemma lies in his perspective of Christianity as a moral order, seeking the purification of its dogma and ridding it of bigotry and churchmen's supremacy, but at the same time he is not ready to condone the dictatorial enactments of Cromwell's Commonwealth curtailing free inquiry and freedom of expression. In this regard he appears to go against the mainstream Puritan perspective. It is in this environment that Milton published numerous pamphlets on diverse subjects concerning religion, politics, history, and of course literature; the intellectual outburst of a literary genius following indeed, a literary revolution in its own way.

The ideal state which Milton envisioned was above personal considerations and his party was sincere in the sense to provide justice to the people of England in a Puritanical system of Government and the Parliament as the sole spring of liberty and justice which according to him, were denied to them in the monarchy.

Milton's formidable concern with religion was to regenerate the humanist ideals of the Church. His first pamphlet published in 1641 entitled *Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline in England and the Causes That Hitherto Have Hindered It*, advocates purification of the Church so that it could personify the very Christian character of the people of England. Writing about worship, the deformities of his comments are loaded with irony. He writes that:

*"the Bishops have hollowed it, they fumed it, they sprinkled it, they bedecked it, not in robes of pure innocence but of pure linen, with other deformed and fantastic dresses in palls and miters, gold ...and that Baptism is little enough to wash off the original spot without the scratch or cross impression of a priest's forefinger."*¹¹

Milton seems torn asunder between the two intrinsically pole opposite convictions of a true Christian and that of a rational being of the Renaissance man. He seems to be at a loss to reconcile these parallel streams of consciousness. His appeal is to honest return to the scripture devoid of dogma and irrationality.

*“The Puritans, of whom Milton was the avowed champion, were neither vagabonds nor fools. They were patriots...He [the puritan] fought for civil liberty principally because civil liberty involved much that is vital to religion. The Royalists were more charming and elegant in manner, but their cause was that of bigotry and tyranny.”*¹²

Milton seems to maneuver between the two potent forces and while pondering the faults in these two antagonistic strands, he attempts to steer clear by seeking the middle ground; to reconcile the deformation of the contending parties.

*“Milton stood between the Royalists and the Puritans. He was a moral and religious eclectic. He was the survival and embodiment of the fittest, drawing to himself from both sides all that was good and great. He hated the wild manners and delusions of the Puritans; he had no patience with their ridicule of science and pleasure. He was like them in that he kept himself always “in his great Taskmaster’s eye”. Hence he had within him the secret-power of their heroism. On the other hand, while Milton hated the tyranny of the Royalists, he adorned himself with all that was truly admirable in them.”*¹³

In a series of prose works, touching issues as vital as the importance of Scripture juxtaposed to Churchmen’s dogmatic approach to Christianity as we come across in *Of Reformation* to critiquing the power of the temporal authority in *Kings and Magistrates*, as well as the even more radical views on social matters posited in *The Doctrine of Divorce*.

Towards the purifications of church practices and denying the dogmatic authority of the church on matters concerning truth faith and the human conscience, Milton keeps on breaking idols one by one, upholding the supremacy of the gospels...

*“refined to such a spiritual height and temper of purity, and knowledge of the Creator, that the body, with all the circumstances of time and place, were purified by the affections of the regenerate soul, and nothing left impure but sin; faith needing not the weak and fallible office of the senses, to be either the ushers or interpreters of heavenly mysteries, save where our Lord himself in his sacraments ordained.”*¹⁴

But when it comes to the equally deep-seated desire of man’s liberty, curtailed through unilateral enactments and irrational regulations, Milton reacts as manfully and of course through convincing argumentation, and voices his concern as a true republican and a constitutional man.

“It being thus manifest, that the power of kings and magistrates is nothing else but what is only derivative, transferred, and committed to them in trust from the people to the common good of them all, in whom the power yet remains fundamentally, and cannot be taken from them, without a violation of their natural birthright.”¹⁵

In line with Milton’s new commitment to religious and reformative zeal, his views on divorce and marriage, in an era not really ready for such a sensitive debate, concerning personal life, personal relationships as Christians, his perspective is even more radical but amazingly realistic. “That marriage, if we pattern from the beginning, as our Saviour bids, was not properly the remedy of lust, but the fulfilling of conjugal love and helpfulness.”¹⁶

Milton’s Paradise Lost

It is a colossal epic, not of a man or a hero, but of the whole race of men; and that Milton’s characters are such as no human hand could adequately portray. But the scenes, the splendors of heaven, the horrors of hell, the serene beauty of Paradise, the sun and planets suspended between celestial light and gross darkness, are pictured with an imagination that is almost superhuman.

Any student of literature would know that he remained steadfast so far as his convictions were concerned, and this stance with all impartiality was grand and majestic. The clarity of thought and strength of the argumentation, supported by historical as well as religious evidences that Milton utilizes, is in fact devastating and iconoclastic. There is no shred of sentimentality or superficiality in his discourse challenging the mightiest of his times: the hegemony of the Church and the tyranny of the King. Here an interesting example is worth quoting when the Dutch scholar, Salmasius, an equally competent scholar of his times, wrote his *Eikon Basilike* (Royal Image) praising Kingship, and rebutting Milton’s views. Milton loses no time to issue a reply, a rejoinder, destroying his thesis in *Eikonoklastes* (Image Breaker).

By this premise, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is also Miltonic, as no one ever sense or after wrote a grand Christian epic, and it appears, because no one dared to make an attempt in the first place. It is a Milton-specific domain, his special territory. Having said that, like its creator, the epic itself is a work of extreme contradictions, given its treatment of the divine drama, and of Man’s fall, and of Satan’s revolt, and the redemption with the blood of Jesus, as focused on in the *Paradise Regained*. The most

striking aspect appears to be the towering characterization of the antagonist in the epic. The vanquished Satan, in the company of his clan of rebels, exerts his freewill that, for a while, overshadows the very theme with which the poem opens. Satan while accepting this defeat, works asymmetrical warfare in an attempt to avenge his fall.

*“A mind not to be changed by place or time; the mind is its own place, and in itself Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”*¹⁷ *“To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell: Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven ”*¹⁸

The above lines may hint at a tendency of heresy and irreligiousness in a man who fought the war of Faith as a staunch Puritan therefore highlighting his conflicting world-view. Milton seeks to justify the ways of God to man in the epic but at the same time, the rebellious tone of Satan seeking individuality, echoes the Machiavellian voice of politics and power.

Paradise Lost is interpreted from so many angles that make it controversial in the sense that, at times, he sounds heretic when speaking through the voice of Satan, with respect to freewill. The main contention as the poem opens is about man’s disobedience and his ultimate redemption by way of crucifixion of Christ. The problem that surfaces is that of the identity of the hero of the epic. Apparently it is Adam, who disobeys God’s commandments, and is punished by exile from heaven. Later on, as a consequence of Satan’s rebellion, the epic takes the shape of a cosmic drama, with Satan as the main antagonist. One may argue that Jesus, who sacrifices himself, is the hero, though Milton does not mention anything on this account. A close reading of the epic raises questions regarding Milton’s idealistic approach towards Christianity vis-à-vis, his depiction of Satan as a towering character. He sounds more a Greek man of reason than a Christian devout. As he almost glorifies Satan’s insistence on his freewill as evident from the above quote from *Paradise Lost*.

Dismissing the argument that Satan is the hero of the *Paradise Lost*, David Daiches notes:

*“the speeches of Satan and his followers in Book I and Book II are magnificent in their way, ‘Miltonic’ in the popular sense of the word; they represent the attractiveness of plausible evil. If evil was never attractive, there would be no problem for man...To see Satan as a hero because Milton goes out of his way to show the superficial seductiveness of this kind of evil is to show an extraordinary naiveté.”*¹⁹

This cosmic tragedy is created in a way that the antagonist takes control of the epic which primarily was written as a dedicated Christian, not as a rationalist. "Although he did not mean it, has created in Satan a type that is not essential evil, his poetic genius thus, triumphing over his Puritanism."²⁰

W. H. D. Rouse, in his introduction to *Poetical Works of John Milton* while comparing the religious world-view of Homer and Virgil, with that of Milton, takes a significant stand. He argues that "Homer touches his gods with light ridicule", while for Virgil, "the divine has something of the grimness of a stoic fate". In contrast, "Milton has the courage to grapple with the great problem: he will justify the ways of God to man."²¹

When Milton wrote *Paradise Regained* the force was either all spent, or that the religious doubt and rational skepticism stayed with the great man till last.

*"The first [Paradise Lost] tells how mankind, in the person of Adam, fell at the first temptation by Satan and became an outcast from Paradise and from divine grace; the second [Paradise Regained] shows how mankind, in the person of Christ, withstands the tempter and is established once more in the divine favor."*²²

Conclusion

That Milton was a Puritan and stood firmly with the Parliament against the King, is an established historical fact, and much of Puritanical discourse is related to what he determines in the era, commonly known as the Age of Milton in English literature. But it is also true that his rational view of human condition did bring him in conflict with the very party he fought along with, not only against the misplaced notion of the divine rights of king, but the terror of the Church authority. Imbibing the spirit of the Renaissance that notifies human liberty, and celebrates reason, Milton did not hesitate to raise his mighty voice against the powerful English Parliament under Cromwell. In this respect he emerges as the man faced with the conflict of conscience, which not only *Paradise Lost*, but also *Areopagitica*, documents so powerfully. They contain his voice, drawing its moral inspiration from Christian faith and its rational sensibility from the Renaissance.

Milton's apparently contradictory stance on the vital problems of his age, arose from religious contestations, to the questions of the divine rights of kings. In both the cases, he seems in control, taking stock of the situation arising from the

polarization of the English society on religious and political lines. He fought with the Puritans against the Cavaliers i.e. the King's party, and helped win the day. But the very same constitutional and republican polity, when tried to curtail freedom of speech, Milton, given his humanistic zeal, wrote *Areopagitica* to call attention to the faith in human judgment than condone external regulations. Even on other important issues like divorce, education, and roles of public offices, among other, he aired his views with such forceful argumentations and supportive evidences that could not be brushed aside. However taking on so many strong and diverse issues single-handedly literally left him all alone, particularly after the restoration of the monarchy. This apparent alienation, and the tragic loss of eyesight, brightened up the inner self of this mighty genius. Hence *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*.

*“This passionately individual Christian Humanist poet, so powerfully enmeshed in the history of his own time, with his great sense of poetic mission, his deflection into public service, reaching the full flower of his poetic achievement in the midst of a civilization in which he had completely lost faith, presents a fascinating and moving picture.”*²³

Notes & References

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