

Roland Boer

THE REVEREND AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS, OR, THE RADICAL CALVINISM OF F.W. KRUMMACHER

Abstract:

This article closely examines the first indications of the political ambivalence of Christianity in the thought of Friedrich Engels. He is well known for his later articulation of this ambivalence in his studies of Thomas Müntzer and early Christianity. Yet the initial insights into this ambivalence actually occur when Engels was still a believer of the Reformed (Calvinist) conviction. In particular, they take place in his extensive engagements with the Reverend F. W. Krummacher, the formidable minister of the church in which he grew up in Elberfeld (Wuppertal).

Słowa kluczowe: Fryderyk Engels, F.W. Krummacher, kalwinizm, chrześcijaństwo, polityczna dwuznaczność, radykalna polityka.

Key Words: Friedrich Engels; F. W. Krummacher; Calvinism; Christianity; political ambivalence; radical politics.

It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman empire ... It had long carried on seditious activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow ... was known by the name of Christians.¹

It may be surprising to some, but Friedrich Engels was arguably the first to suggest that earliest Christianity was not only a revolutionary movement, but that throughout its history it has been deeply ambivalent in political terms. At times, it can be thoroughly reactionary, doing deals with one despot or tyrant or

¹ F. Engels, "Introduction to Karl Marx's *the Class Struggles in France*," [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1894–1895 [1990], p. 523. Note: citations to the works of Engels and Marx provide the date of composition first and then the most recent date of publication.

another, providing biblical justification and theological elaboration for autocracy, absolutism and oppression of dissent.² But it can also be revolutionary, inspiring one rebellion after another. The early Christians, heretical sects throughout the Middle Ages, the Peasant Revolution in 16th century Germany, the Diggers under Gerrard Winstanley in the 17th century, even the political and liberation theologies of the 20th century – these and more speak of that irrepressible tradition. Many would carry on the assessment of this political ambivalence after Engels,³

² In response to this feature of Christianity, Engels delivered some of his strongest polemic against religion, stating that ‘our liberation from it and the liberation of the world from it are ultimately our sole occupation’. F. Engels, “The Condition of England: *Past and Present* by Thomas Carlyle, London, 1843,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, 444–468, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1844 [1975], p. 462; *idem*, “Die Lage Englands. „Past and Present“ by Thomas Carlyle,” [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 1, Berlin: Dietz, 1844 [1974], p. 544. See also: *idem*, “The Condition of England II: The English Constitution,” pp. 501–504, 510, 512; *idem*, “Die Lage Englands II. Die englische Konstitution,” pp. 580–583, 589, 591; *idem*, “Letters from London,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, 380–391, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1843 [1975], pp. 385–386; *idem*, “Briefe aus London,” [in:] *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1:3, 451–466, Berlin: Dietz, 1843 [1985], pp. 460–461; *idem*, “The Condition of England. I. The Eighteenth Century,” pp. 469–476, 486; *idem*, “Die Lage Englands I. Das achzehnte Jahrhundert,” pp. 550–557, 567; *idem*, “The Condition of England: *Past and Present* by Thomas Carlyle, London, 1843,” pp. 446–447, 450; *idem*, “Die Lage Englands. „Past and Present“ by Thomas Carlyle,” pp. 527–528, 531; *idem*, “The Condition of the Working-Class in England, 1846 [1975], pp. 412, 421, 556, 569; *idem*, “Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England. Nach eigener Anschauung und authentischen Quellen,” [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 2, 225–506, Berlin: Dietz, 1846 [1974], pp. 343, 352–343, 480–341, 492–343; *idem*, “Refugee Literature,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24, 3–50, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1874–1875 [1989], pp. 15–16; *idem*, “Flüchtlingsliteratur,” [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 18, Berlin: Dietz, 1874–1875 [1973], pp. 531–532; *idem*, “The Ruhr Miners’ Strike of 1889,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 26, 539–541, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1889 [1990], p. 539; *idem*, “Introduction to the English Edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27, 278–302, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1892 [1990], pp. 283–300. See also the myriad comments on religion in *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*: *idem*, “Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 25, 3–309, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1877–1878 [1987], pp. 16, 22, 26, 40–11, 62, 67–18, 79, 86, 93–19, 125–126, 130, 144, 232, 244, 300–124; *idem*, “Herr Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft (Anti-Dühring),” [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 20, Berlin: Dietz, 1877–1878 [1973], pp. 16, 20–11, 25, 39–40, 62, 66–18, 79, 86–17, 93–100, 126–107, 131, 143–105, 230, 239, 294–108; *idem*, “Dialectics of Nature,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 25, 313–588, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1873–1882 [1987], pp. 318–320, 325, 423, 474, 480–311, 498–500, 551–312, 565; *idem*, “Dialektik der Natur,” [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 20, Berlin: Dietz, 1873–1882 [1973], pp. 311–313, 318, 415, 465, 470–311, 486–319, 535–316, 547.

³ For instance, see K. Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus I: Kommunistische Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Berlin: Dietz, 1976 [1895–1897]; *idem*, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus II: Der Kommunismus in der deutschen Reformation*, Berlin: Dietz, 1976 [1895–1897]; K. Kautsky, P. Lafargue, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus III: Die beiden ersten grossen Utopisten*, Stuttgart: Dietz, 1977 [1922]; K. Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums: Eine*

but he was the first to provide the outlines of this feature of Christianity. The tension I have mentioned may be obvious enough if one considers his well-known later works, especially *The Peasant War in Germany* and *On the History of Early Christianity*,⁴ but it also appears in his earliest reflections on religion and politics. The insight may be more fleeting in these cases, but this erstwhile believer (of Reformed or Calvinist persuasion) began to see the contours of this ambivalence in the religion of his youth.

In this essay, I trace that tension via Engels's early and frequent writing on the Reverend Dr Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher, leading minister in the Reformed Church of Elberfeld, where Engels was born and baptised and where he sat for many hours as a child and then young man on the pews.⁵ Here Engels absorbed the underlying theme that a radical allegiance to God, especially through a doctrine that stresses the sinfulness of human beings and God's grace, has as one possible outcome a radical political agenda that seeks to overthrow corrupt earthly rulers and their vain desire for wealth and power.

We may distinguish between two tendencies in Engels's writings on Krummacher, which were written in his late teens and early twenties (often pseudonymously) and published in local newspapers and journals.⁶ The first is a sustained

historische Untersuchung, Stuttgart: Dietz, 1977 [1908]; R. Luxemburg, "Socialism and the Churches," [in:] *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. M.-A. Waters, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970 [1905], pp. 131–152; A.V. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, Moscow: Shipovnik, 1908; idem, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, Moscow: Shipovnik, 1911; E. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J.T. Swann, London: Verso, 2009 [1968]; S. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, London: Verso, 2000.

⁴ F. Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany," [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1850 [1978], pp. 397–482; idem, "Der deutsche Bauernkrieg," [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 7, Berlin: Dietz, 1850 [1973]), pp. 327–413; idem, "On the History of Early Christianity," [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1894–1895 [1990], pp. 445–469; idem, "Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums," [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 22, Berlin: Dietz, 1894–1895 [1972]. See further: R. Boer, "Keeping the Faith: The Ambivalent Commitments of Friedrich Engels," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 40, no. 1, 2011.

⁵ To my knowledge, no one has written on this particular feature of Engels's thought, so my references are primarily to the work of Engels.

⁶ Idem, "F.W. Krummacher's Sermon on Joshua," [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2, 28 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1839 [1975]); idem, "Friedrich Wilhelm's Predigt über Josua," [in:] *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1:3 (Berlin: Dietz, 1839 [1985]); idem, "Two Sermons by F.W. Krummacher," [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2, 121–122 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1840 [1975]); idem, "Zwei Predigten von Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher," [in:] *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1:3 (Berlin: Dietz, 1840 [1985]); idem, "Reports from Bremen: Rationalism and Pietism," pp. 126–128; idem, "Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Rationalismus und Pietismus," pp. 199–201; idem, "The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible or: The Triumph of Faith, To Wit, the Terrible, Yet True and Salutary History of the Erstwhile Licentiate Bruno Bauer; How the Same, Seduced by the Devil, Fallen from the True Faith, Became Chief Devil, and Was Well and Truly Ousted in the End: A Christian Epic

polemic against the ‘narrowness and absurdity’ of Krummacher’s hyper-Calvinism, set within the context of the overwhelming piety (both Reformed and Lutheran) in Wuppertal, as the twin towns of Elberfeld and Barmen were called. However, in the midst of that polemic another theme emerges, namely a grudging awareness of the political ambivalence of Krummacher, if not the potential for radical politics. I analyse each stage in turn.

Before proceeding, a word on Krummacher (1796–1868) is in order.⁷ He was arguably the most renowned preacher in Germany at the time. The son of the Reformed theologian Friedrich Adolf Krummacher, he studied the latest rationalist theology at Halle and Jena. Yet he resisted the influence of that theology in light of both Reformed and Lutheran pietism. As a Reformed minister himself, he drew upon the inspiration of the *nadere Reformatie* in the Netherlands,⁸ which predated Lutheran pietism of the 17th century. Here we find the sources of his emphasis on the historical veracity of the Bible, on the need to make reason subservient to faith, on the state of absolute sinfulness that could be redeemed only through God’s grace, on a personal life of prayer and a strict moral code based on the Bible, and on a desire to reform the church itself in a way that had not been completed with the Reformation. These elements were reinforced by German pietism, which was initially inspired by the Reformed version.⁹ They shared the belief that the various state churches had compromised too much with the times, and that the niceties of professional theological debate failed to touch the personal lives of believers and would-be believers. Here we may see

in Four Cantos,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2, 313–351, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1842 [1975], pp. 315, 346; *idem*, “Die frech bedräute, jedoch wunderbar befreite Bibel. Oder: Der Triumph des Glaubens. Unter Mitwirkung von Edgar Bauer” [in:] *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1:3, 387–422, Berlin: Dietz, 1842 [1985], pp. 391, 417; *idem*, “Frederick William IV, King of Prussia,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2, 360–367, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1843 [1975], p. 361; *idem*, “Friedrich Wilhelm IV, König von Preußen,” p. 428. See also: *idem*, “To Friedrich Graeber, Bremen, February 19, 1839,” p. 416; *idem*, “An Friedrich Graeber, 19. Februar 1839,” [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 41, 361–364, Berlin: Dietz, 1839 [2008], p. 363; *idem*, “To Friedrich Graeber in Berlin, Bremen, about April 23-May 1, 1839,” p. 427; *idem*, “An Friedrich Graeber, um den 23. April – 1. Mai 1839,” p. 372; *idem*, “To Wilhelm Graeber in Berlin, Bremen, October 8, 1839,” p. 472; *idem*, “An Wilhelm Graeber, 8. Oktober 1839,” p. 420; *idem*, “To Wilhelm Graeber in Barmen, Bremen, November 20, 1840; *idem*, “An Wilhelm Graeber, 20. November 1840,” [in:] *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 41, 465–467, Berlin: Dietz, 1840 [2008].

⁷ See F.W. Krummacher, *An Autobiography*, New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1869.

⁸ Among the most significant leaders of this movement were Willem Teellinck (1579–1629), Gisbert Voetius (1589–1676) and Jean de Labadie (1610–1674).

⁹ The great inspiration of Lutheran pietism, Philipp Spener (1635–1705), was initially influenced by Jean de Labadie when the latter spent some time preaching in Geneva. Later, Spener translated Labadie’s *Manual of Piety* into German.

the seeds of a challenge to the powers that be, for these currents also called upon rulers to such a religious life in order to reform the state itself. Krummacher's time as minister at Elberfeld (1834-43) saw his power as a preacher and as a champion of Calvinist theology become widely recognised. Here led attacks on the rationalist theologians and ministers, declined an invitation to take up a post at a theological college in Mercersburg in the United States, and was subsequently appointed to be court preacher in Berlin in 1845. From there he went to famed Trinity Church, Berlin (1847), and then spent his last sixteen years as a court chaplain at Potsdam from 1853. So as a boy and young man, Engels encountered a formidable Reformed preacher on the cusp of fame and influence.

Polemic

The context of Engels's polemic against F.W. Krummacher is his wider criticism of the piety of his hometown of Elberfeld. One of the best examples of that polemic is his *Letters from Wuppertal*, written when he was 18 (in 1838).¹⁰ The picture he presents is of a wide sea of pietism and mysticism (the terms are for him interchangeable) that characterises all the Protestant churches in Wuppertal, whether Reformed or Lutheran.¹¹ Within that broad sweep, pietism appears in greater or lesser degree, but those he knows best are the Reformed churches, for they were the most extreme. The pietists do not fare well in Engels's account, whether in terms of pure hypocrisy,¹² the deleterious effects on education in the schools,¹³

¹⁰ F. Engels, "Letters from Wuppertal;" *id em*, "Briefe aus dem Wuppertal."

¹¹ It is worth noting that the Erweckungsbewegung, or "Awakening" was not restricted to German Lutheranism and the influence of Philipp Spener in the seventeenth century. It was preceded by the pietist movement in the Dutch Reformed Church. Indeed, pietism became the core of a number of Lutheran-Reformed unions that led to the official union of the two German Churches in Prussia under the direction of Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1817 (a process that is ongoing as I write). Even so, sharp differences remained. The united church still had its Lutheran and Reformed parishes and there were independent 'Old Lutherans' and purely Reformed churches as well.

¹² I quote some of the better examples: "But the wealthy manufacturers have a flexible conscience, and causing the death of one child more or less does not doom a pietist's soul to hell, especially if he goes to church twice every Sunday." And: "But anyone who really wants to get to know this breed should visit the workshop of a pious blacksmith or boot-maker. There sits the master craftsman, on his right the Bible, on his left – very often at any rate – a bottle of schnapps. Not much is done in the way of work; the master almost always reads the Bible, occasionally knocks back a glass and sometimes joins the choir of journeymen singing a hymn; but the chief occupation is always damning one's neighbour." F. Engels, "Letters from Wuppertal," p. 10; *id em*, "Briefe aus dem Wuppertal," p. 35.

¹³ *Id em*, "Letters from Wuppertal," pp. 17–18; *id em*, "Briefe aus dem Wuppertal," p. 42.

as an alternative addiction to alcohol,¹⁴ or as dreadful poets.¹⁵ Pietism is, in short, the ‘sprained foot of Christianity’.¹⁶

But these shots merely enable Engels to get his range; when he turns to the Reformed wing of German Protestantism, Engels finds his target. And that is none other than the Reformed parish of Elberfeld. In the context of a uniform orthodoxy across all Protestant churches in Barmen and Elberfeld (differing only in terms of the amount of pietism added to the mix), this one stands out as the most conservative. Apart from the facts that he was baptised in this church and that his parents were members, one can see from the vividness and satirical bite of his images (they conjure up all too quickly memories of my own upbringing) that Engels spent a few too many youthful hours locked to the pew of this church.

Engels knows it well from the inside. With a reputation for his “religious feeling, purity of heart, agreeable habits and other prepossessing qualities”,¹⁷ it is no wonder the young Engels published his early writings under pseudonyms such as S. Oswald. A few items draw out his anger: the collective intolerance of the Elberfeld Reformers and both the style and content of their most powerful minister, F.W. Krummacher. I would suggest that what looked like increasing “narrowness and intolerance” had much to do with the growing awareness of a rebellious teenager who had begun to think for himself. In regard to the Elberfeld Reformers as a whole, it seemed to Engels that the strict “Calvinist spirit” had become of late “the most savage intolerance” in the hands of

¹⁴ “Those who do not fall prey to mysticism are ruined by drunkenness. This mysticism, in the crude and repellent form in which it prevails there [Elberfeld], inevitably produces the opposite extreme, with the result that in the main the *people* there consist only of the ‘decent’ ones ... and the dissolute riff-raff.” Idem, “Letters from Wuppertal,” pp. 9–10; idem, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 34.

¹⁵ Idem, “Letters from Wuppertal,” pp. 24–25; Engels, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” pp. 50–51.

¹⁶ Idem, “Reports from Bremen: Theatre. Publishing Festival,” p. 103; idem, “Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Theater. Buchdruckerfest,” p. 135.

¹⁷ J.C.L. Hantschke, “School-Leaving Reference for Prima Pupil Friedrich Engels (No. 713),” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2, 584–585, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1837 [1975], p. 585. See also the very orthodox if somewhat wooden poem, *Herr Jesu Christe, Gottes Sohn*, probably written when he was 16: F. Engels, “Poem, Probably Written Early in 1837,” [in:] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2, 555–556, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1837 [1975]; idem, “Herr Jesu Christe, Gottes Sohn,” [in:] *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1:3, Berlin: Dietz, 1837 [1985]. Further, in a letter of 12–27 July 1839 to Friedrich Graeber he speaks of his own awareness and conviction: “I believed because I realised that I could no longer live only for the day, because I repented of my sins, because I needed communion with God. I gladly gave away immediately what I most loved, I turned my back on my greatest joys, my dearest acquaintances, I made myself look ridiculous to everybody everywhere... You know yourself that I was in earnest, in dead earnest.” idem, “To Friedrich Graeber in Berlin, Bremen, July 12–27, 1839,” pp. 460–461; idem, “An Friedrich Graeber, 12.–27. Juli 1839,” p. 407.

a bunch of “extremely bigoted preachers”.¹⁸ The targets: wayward rationalists and those who denied predestination – among whom Engels now numbered himself, at least for a time. Through the vicious gossiping judgement of the Calvinist church members as well as through the open polemic between rationalists and Calvinists,¹⁹ rationalist preachers were condemned and anti-predestinarians were sent straight to hell, there to join the Lutherans and their close friends, the idolatrous Roman Catholics. Exasperated, Engels throws out: “But what sort of people are they who talk in this way? Ignorant folk who hardly know whether the Bible was written in Chinese, Hebrew or Greek...”²⁰

Yet, the bulk of the polemic is reserved for the Reverend Dr F.W. Krummacher, head minister of the Elberfeld Reformed parish and influential enough to colour the poetry written in Wuppertal.²¹ Although he never says so directly, it is a reasonable assumption that Dr Krummacher was Engels’s own minister. There are too many details, too many comments on the sermons for Engels not to have seen the man in action on countless occasions. Indeed, Krummacher seems to have been in the habit of visiting the home of Engels’s parents.²²

Engels focuses on Krummacher’s doctrine, which held the Bible up as its sole authority and all of which was contained in his sermons. So let us consider each item – doctrine, Bible and sermon – moving in reverse. On the sermons, the polemic is at times curiously mixed: Engels gives voice to a sneaking admiration in the very act of criticising him. His “sermons are never boring”, writes Engels, and his “train of thought is confident and natural”. Yet he ends up overdoing it: “Then he thrashes about in the pulpit, bends over all sides, bangs his fist on the edge, stamps like a cavalry horse, and shouts so that the windows resound and people in the street tremble.”²³ And the man in the pulpit may be strong and impressive, but his “circumference has increased” since he settled in

¹⁸ *Idem*, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 12; *idem*, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 36.

¹⁹ See especially the comments on the struggles between Krummacher and the rationalist (although untalented) K.F.W. Paniel, the minister of St. Ansgarius church in Bremen. *Idem*, “Reports from Bremen: Rationalism and Pietism,” pp. 126–128; *idem*, “Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Rationalismus und Pietismus,” pp. 199–201; *idem*, “Reports from Bremen: Ecclesiastical Controversy,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2, 155–160, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1841 [1975], pp. 155–158; *idem*, “Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Kirchlicher Streit,” in *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1:3, Berlin: Dietz, 1841 [1985], pp. 225–228.

²⁰ *Idem*, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 12; *idem*, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 36.

²¹ *Idem*, “From Elberfeld,” pp. 30–31; *idem*, “Aus Elberfeld,” pp. 63–64.

²² *Idem*, “Reports from Bremen: Rationalism and Pietism,” p. 126; Engels, “Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Rationalismus und Pietismus,” p. 199.

²³ *Idem*, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 14; *idem*, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 39. Elsewhere he writes of the “the burning eloquence, the poetic, if not always well-chosen, splendour of imagery for which this richly talented pulpit speaker is famous.” *Idem*, “Reports from Bremen: Rationalism and Pietism,” p. 126; *idem*, “Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Rationalismus und Pietismus,” p. 199.

Elberfeld, sporting at the same time a most unfashionable way of doing his hair that everyone (presumably not the women) in the congregation seems to imitate “à la Krummacher”.²⁴

Alongside general observations on the nature of his sermons, a good number of comments relate to specific sermons, ranging from an account of a dispute with David Strauss (of *Das Leben Jesu* fame²⁵), through Krummacher’s attacks on poetry, imagination and art, to the assertion, based on Joshua 10: 12–13 and many other passages in the Bible, that the sun moves around a still earth:

In a recent sermon in Elberfeld on Joshua 10:12-13, where Joshua bids the sun stand still, Krummacher advanced the interesting thesis that pious Christians, the Elect, should not suppose from this passage that Joshua was here accommodating himself to the views of the people, but must believe *that the earth stands still and the sun moves round it*. In defence of this view he showed that it is expressed throughout the Bible. The fool’s cap which the world will give them for that, they, the Elect, should cheerfully put in their pockets with the many others they have already received. – We should be happy to receive a refutation of this sad anecdote, which comes to us from a reliable source.²⁶

²⁴ Idem, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 13; idem, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 38.

²⁵ D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined*, trans. G. Eliot, London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1902; idem, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, Tübingen: C.F. Osiander, 1835.

²⁶ F. Engels, “F.W. Krummacher’s Sermon on Joshua,” p. 29; idem, “Friedrich Wilhelm’s Predigt über Josua,” p. 55. So also: “Krummacher declared recently in a sermon that the earth stands still and the sun rotates around it, and the fellow dares to trumpet this to the world on this April 21, 1839, and then he says that pietism does not lead the world back to the Middle Ages! It is scandalous. He should be expelled, or one day he will yet become Pope before you know, and then may a saffron–yellow thunderstorm strike him dead.” Idem, “To Wilhelm Graeber in Berlin, Bremen, about April 28–30, 1839,” pp. 446–447; idem, “An Wilhelm Graeber, um den 28.–30. April 1939,” p. 393. For the sake of completeness, the other references to sermons are as follows: “not long ago he regaled his reverent audience with two sermons about a journey to Württemberg and Switzerland, in which he spoke of his four victorious disputes with Paulus in Heidelberg and Strauss in Tübingen, naturally quite differently from Strauss’ account of the matter in a letter.” Idem, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 14; idem, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 39. Further: “Anyone who did not accept this crass mysticism as absolute Christianity was delivered up to the devil. And with a sophistry which emerged as strangely naive, Krummacher always managed to shelter behind the apostle Paul. ‘It is not I who is cursing, nay! Children, reflect, it is the apostle Paul who condemns you!’ – The worst of it was that the apostle wrote in Greek and scholars have not yet been able to agree on the precise meaning of certain of his expressions. Among these dubious words is the anathema used in this passage, to which Krummacher, without more ado, ascribed the most extreme meaning of a sentence of eternal damnation.” Idem, “Reports from Bremen: Rationalism and Pietism,” pp. 126–127; idem, “Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Rationalismus und Pietismus,” pp. 199–200. See the reference to two further sermons in: idem, “Reports from Bremen: Rationalism and Pietism,” pp. 126–128; idem, “Korrespondenz aus Bremen: Rationalismus und Pietismus,” pp. 199–201; idem, “Two Sermons by F.W. Krummacher”; idem, “Zwei Predigten von Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher.” There is also a quotation from a sermon by Emil Krummacher, the brother of F.W. Krummacher in: idem, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 17; idem, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 41.

That “reliable source” was, of course, Engels himself. But even here we find the constant recourse to the Bible – the view that the sun revolves around a stationary earth is “expressed throughout the Bible”. However, Engels is not an outsider who observes this practice from a distance. He is involved in the very same practice, using the Bible to take sides in a theological debate. At this level, Engels is no different to Krummacker, except that he leans more heavily on other texts that oppose the ones preferred by Krummacker and other strict Calvinists. It is worth noting the number of biblical texts mentioned or alluded to in Engels’s pieces on Krummacker. These texts pepper the polemic: John 14:6 (“no one comes to the father, but by me”); Matthew 22:14 (“many are called but few are chosen”); I Corinthians 1:20–5 and 3:19 (“the foolishness of God is wiser than men”); I Peter 2:2 (“long for the pure spiritual milk”).²⁷ Engels uses them in various ways. The first three are those favoured by Krummacker et al., but the last he claims for himself: “How all this fits in with the teaching of the apostles who speak of the rational worship of God and the rational milk of the Gospel is a secret beyond human understanding.”²⁸ Engels has clearly taken sides within a specific debate.

We can view this situation as follows: the Bible provides a language or agreed-upon battleground. While Krummacker focuses on some texts to bolster his position, Engels responds by picking up others that support his own. A host of issues turn up on that battleground: faith versus reason; the small enclave of the righteous elect versus the ways of that world; the claim to mystery or the claim to open scientific research. Engels still sees himself as part of the Christian scene, but he takes a very different stand from the Calvinists with whom he grew up.

For example, as he passes out of what he regards as the dreary Calvinist landscape of the Netherlands on his way over the channel to England, the newly awakened free-thinker can exclaim:

... it was like a breath of fresh sea air blowing down upon me from the purest sky; the depths of speculation lay before me like the unfathomable sea from which one cannot turn one’s eyes straining to see the ground below; in God we live, move and have our being! We become conscious of that when we are on the sea; we feel that God breathes through all around us and through us ourselves; we feel such kinship with the whole of nature, the waves beckon to us so intimately, the sky stretches so lovingly over the earth, and the sun shines with such indescribable radiance that one feels one could grasp it with the hand.²⁹

²⁷ The editors of MECW – *The Collected Works of Marx and Engels* – do their best to pick up the biblical allusions and reference the quotations, but it does not always succeed. Many are not referenced and some are not quite correct.

²⁸ *Idem*, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 15; *idem*, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 40.

²⁹ *Idem*, “Landscapes,” p. 99; *idem*, “Landschaften,” p. 131.

These early pieces on Krummacher provide a distinct insight into a practice that would stay with Engels through much of his writing – the tendency to refer to biblical texts in all manner of situations. Such a practice owes its origin to his time in the Reformed church in Elberfeld, for in such a context the Bible is the supreme and final authority. One must be able to justify one position or other by finding a biblical text that would support it. Eventually, Engels would move away from Christianity itself, at least in terms of a specific commitment, but he would not dispense with his practice of quoting the Bible, since from the time of his polemic with Krummacher the practice had become integral to his writing.

Ambivalence

Finally, the question of doctrine: Engels cannot see how anyone in their right mind could believe Krummacher's strict Calvinist doctrine, which is based on a "pretence of logic" and is "in most direct contradiction to reason and the Bible".³⁰ But what are those doctrines? The answer to that question opens up the issue of political ambivalence. Despite Engels's protests against Krummacher's doctrine as an affront to reason, he also admits that it is logically consistent: once you accept the premise (the total depravity of human beings based on original sin), then the rest is irrefutable. In fact, it is standard Calvinist doctrine: since human beings can do no good on their own, they must rely entirely on God, or rather God's grace. The next step is to argue that because human beings have no say in salvation, it all devolves upon God's own apparently arbitrary will. Salvation depends on God alone, so he is the one who decides who will be saved and who will be damned – in short, predestination.

However, Krummacher is more extreme than this standard Calvinist fare:

Further, the Scriptures say: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. But the heathen cannot come to the Father by Christ, because they do not know Christ, so they all exist merely to fill up hell. – Among Christians, many are called but few are chosen; but the many who are called are called only for the sake of appearance, and God took care not to call them so loudly that they obeyed him; all this to the glory of God and in order that they should not be forgiven.³¹

Biblical texts pepper the account (John 14:6 and Matthew 22:14 turn up here), but Krummacher's proposal is a rather crass solution to an unresolved problem in many theological systems. If you take seriously the text from John 14:6 – "no one comes to the Father, but by me" – then you face the difficulty that, through no fault of their own, most people throughout history have not

³⁰ *Idem*, "Letters from Wuppertal," pp. 14–15; *idem*, "Briefe aus dem Wuppertal," pp. 39–40.

³¹ *Idem*, "Letters from Wuppertal," p. 15; *idem*, "Briefe aus dem Wuppertal," pp. 39–40.

actually had the chance to hear about Christ. All manner of solutions have been offered to deal with this exclusive claim to salvation (Christ is manifest in other, very unexpected ways, or those unfortunates are able to hear about him in purgatory). The simplistic solution that they go straight to hell without passing “Go” is, I must admit, one of the less sophisticated. I too would find a sermon thundering on about those un-Christianised heathen filling up hell just a little farcical.

But now we come across a comment whose brevity conceals a wealth of implications:

Such doctrines spoil all Krummacher’s sermons; the only ones in which they are not so prominent are the passages where he speaks of the contradiction between earthly riches and the humility of Christ, or between the arrogance of earthly rulers and the pride of God. A note of his former demagoguery very often breaks through here as well, and if he did not speak in such general terms the government would not pass over his sermons in silence.³²

Once again the sneaking admiration for Krummacher I noted earlier turns up, for his sermons would, admits Engels, be rather good if he did not spoil them with such doctrines. In fact, when the doctrines fade into the background and are replaced by other themes, Krummacher’s sermons take on a more dangerous political tone. Instead of the damned heathen and the waywardness of other Christian groups, the targets are none other than earthly riches and arrogant rulers. Add a specific reference or two – the Prussian king, for instance, or the owners of capital, or the inherited privileges of the nobility, or the names of a rapacious factory owner or two – and the political edge of these sermons would have been much sharper. You can see Engels relishing the thought of government censor, a provincial governor or the police becoming concerned, asking for copies of the sermons, posting spies in the worship services, all on the lookout for sedition and insurrection.

What exactly was that earlier demagoguery?

As a student he was involved in the demagoguery of the gymnastic associations, composed freedom songs, carried a banner at the Wartburg festival, and delivered a speech which is said to have made a great impression. He still frequently recalls those dashing times from the pulpit, saying: when I was still among the Hittites and Canaanites.³³

Krummacher may have felt that these days of student protests and incendiary speeches against monarchist landowners and the Metternich regime (17 October 1819 at the Wartburg Festival) were past him, that they belong to a sinful former life which has been overcome by his conversion. Yet, Engels hints otherwise. Even though he seems to say that there is an unconscious return of this earlier

³² *Idem*, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 15; *idem*, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 40.

³³ *Idem*, “Letters from Wuppertal,” p. 13; *idem*, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” p. 38.

life – Engels speaks of the former demagogy breaking through over against the Calvinist doctrines – he leaves open the possibility that there may in fact be some *continuity between the earlier political radical and the later Reformed preacher*. Difference begins to fade before identity: less an opposition between youthful radical and mature conservative, between a sinful and a forgiven state, than a deeper identity between that radicalism and theology itself.

Conclusion

At this moment we leave the account of Engels's engagement with his minister, the Reverend Dr Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacker, except to make two points in conclusion. To begin with, the deep political tension within Christianity that is glimpsed in Krummacker – via Engels – is really what one would expect for anyone who follows Calvin to some degree, for there is a comparable tension in Calvin's own thought. Too good a student of the Bible to paper over its inconsistencies and contradictions, Calvin, a natural conservative, found that the text again and again opened up radical possibilities that he perpetually tried to close down. His experience may be compared to a radical political cat: Calvin repeatedly opens the theological bag, encouraging the cat to make the leap to freedom, only to draw it tightly shut at the last necessary moment.³⁴ As a Calvinist, Krummacker too faces the same tension.

Second, this moment of engagement with Krummacker in the *Letters from Wuppertal* is the first intermittent signal of Engels's own awareness of the political ambivalence of Christianity itself. It would stay with him for the rest of his life, turning up with greater clarity in later works, such as *The Peasant War in Germany* of 1850 and *On the History of Early Christianity* of 1894.³⁵ From these works it not only became a significant feature of socialist understandings of religion, an understanding that has been revived of late, but also influenced biblical criticism.³⁶ Despite all the theological justifications of power, empire, absolutism and oppression that one finds throughout the history of Christianity, there was also a current that found a more revolutionary line in the Bible and certain key Christian doctrines. It seems to me that Engels is on the verge of a similar insight in his early engagements with F.W. Krummacker.

³⁴ For a full elaboration of this argument, see: R. Boer, *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

³⁵ That is another story. See: *idem*, "Keeping the Faith: The Ambivalent Commitments of Friedrich Engels," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 40, no. 1, 2011.

³⁶ See the references in note 3.

Roland Boer

PASTOR I FRYDERYK ENGELS LUB RADYKALNY KALWINIZM
F.W. KRUMMACHERA

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł omawia pierwsze oznaki politycznej dwuznaczności w myśli Fryderyka Engelsa w odniesieniu do chrześcijaństwa. Owa dwuznaczność jest dobrze znana z jego późniejszych prac dotyczących Tomasza Munzera oraz wczesnego chrześcijaństwa. Jednakże wczesnej jej ślady pojawiają się jeszcze w czasie, gdy Engels był osobą wierzącą i należał do Kościoła kalwińskiego. W szczególności widoczne są w jego polemikach z ojcem F.W. Krummacherem, znakomitym pastorem kościoła w Elberfeld (Wuppertal), gdzie dorastał Engels.

Pierwsza część rozważań poświęcona jest polemicznym poglądom Engelsa na hipokrytyczny petyzm współwyznawców, w szczególności radykalnego kalwinizmu Krummachera. W drugiej części pokazano, jak owa świadomość przeradza się w dwuznaczną ocenę postawy Krummachera, mającą również wymiar wywrotowy. Odkrycie to stanie się niezwykle istotne dla Engelsa w późniejszym czasie, w szczególności dla jego długotrwałej krytyki i sporów z radykalnym skrzydłem chrześcijaństwa. Ponieważ polemika owa nie była dotychczas szerszej analizowana, w artykule zamieszczono szczegółową analizę tekstów Engelsa.

