

# Keeping the Faith: The Ambivalent Commitments of Friedrich Engels

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**Abstract:** The importance of the early religious commitment of Friedrich Engels, who had such an ambiguous effect on world history, is often recognised but rarely analysed. This article offers a critical treatment of the formative religious experience of the young Engels. His was a (Calvinist) Reformed upbringing and the faith he inherited was taken up with a zeal and exuberance he would later transfer to communism. In the early part of the article, this exuberance is balanced with Engels's increasing frustrations with the narrow piety of his home town in Wuppertal, a frustration enhanced by his increasing engagement with critical biblical analysis in Germany at the time. The second half of the study deals with two features that would stay with Engels: his sense of the political ambivalence of Christianity, torn between reaction and revolution (as he saw it embodied in his formidable minister, F. W. Krummacher); and his intimate knowledge of the Bible, which would lead to a life-long practice of citing biblical passages at will. In the end, Engels may have lost his Christian faith, but he could not evict Christianity from his life and thought, returning to it again and again to explore its revolutionary potential.

**Résumé :** L'influence exercée par Friedrich Engels sur l'histoire mondiale demeure ambiguë. Souvent reconnues par les chercheurs, les convictions religieuses du jeune Engels ont rarement été analysées. Cet article offre un regard critique sur l'expérience religieuse du jeune Engels. À la longue, il transformera en communisme la foi calviniste dans laquelle il a été formé, une foi qu'il a assumée avec zèle et exubérance. Dans la première partie de l'article, nous verrons que cette exubérance a été freinée par ses frustrations grandissantes devant la piété étroite de sa ville natale, Wuppertal; des

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frustrations exacerbées par son engagement avec la nouvelle critique biblique allemande. La suite de l'article traite de deux aspects qu'Engels retient tout au long de sa vie: la conviction que le christianisme (tel qu'il le voyait incarné chez son redoutable curé, F. W. Krummacker) était politiquement ambivalent, divisé entre réaction et révolution; et sa connaissance intime de la Bible, qui lui a permis tout au long de sa vie de citer des passages bibliques à volonté. Même si, à la longue, Engels a perdu sa foi chrétienne, il n'arrivait pas à évincer de sa vie et de sa pensée le christianisme et il y est retourné incessamment dans le but d'en exploiter le potentiel révolutionnaire.

### Keywords

Friedrich Engels, Christianity, Calvinism, Pietism, F. W. Krummacker, Bible, Revolution

### Mots clés

Friedrich Engels, le christianisme, le calvinisme, le piétisme, F. W. Krummacker, la Bible, la révolution

Among my own family – and it is a very pious and loyal one ...<sup>1</sup>

I can't eat, drink, sleep, let out a fart, without being confronted by this same accursed lamb-of-God expression.<sup>2</sup>

On matters of religion, Friedrich Engels is perhaps best remembered as the author of a number of works that argue for the revolutionary origin of Christianity and even the claim that the theological radical of the Peasant Revolution of 1525, Thomas Müntzer, was a forerunner of modern socialism.<sup>3</sup> What is less known is that Engels himself had in his youth a deep religious commitment of a Reformed (Calvinist) type. Those who do recognise this moment of Engels's life usually point out that he eventually gave up his faith, although not without intense struggle – an appropriate point, really, for one who was fearsome in the resolute atheism of his later years. But I would like to push back earlier and explore the nature of that faith, the struggles he fought, and the way he saw his own commitment. For it seems to me that both the strength and ambivalence of Engels's one-time faith make sense of some of his later positions in relation to Christianity. More of that in the conclusion, since first we need to examine the contours of Engels's Christian devotion. I do so by drawing on material written at the time, when he was in his late teens and early twenties: letters, anonymous journal articles, satirical and critical pieces, and earnest theological arguments.<sup>4</sup>

A number of themes emerge, which I have used to structure my discussion. To begin with, we come across his exuberance and enjoyment of the life of faith, the playfulness with which he attacked opponents and the evident pleasure his beliefs gave him. But soon another side emerges, where Engels voices his exasperation at the narrowness of the Pietism and Calvinism of his home town, Elberfeld. This awareness of two sides of religion – expressed in exuberance and exasperation – would show up most sharply in Engels's extended reflections on his minister, the formidable F. W. Krummacker. Not only was Krummacker an extreme Calvinist and given to oratorical excess, but he was also a

powerful speaker, a logical thinker and even a potential political radical. Here Engels verges on a dialectical understanding of the reactionary and revolutionary possibilities of Christianity, one that would come to full flower in his later work, although not before he had become intimate with the Bible, so much so that he could quote it at will for the rest of his life.

## The nature of faith

Engels landed at birth in a Reformed family living in the twin towns of Barmen and Elberfeld (Wuppertal).<sup>5</sup> It is not merely the proximity to the Dutch border that stamps Calvinism on Engels, for we find a few other signals. His mother's maiden name is Elisabeth Francisca Mauritzia *van Haar*,<sup>6</sup> a good and popular Dutch name (and perhaps one reason why Engels managed Dutch so easily). Add to this the following facts and we have a solid Reformed Christian commitment: his baptism in the Elberfeld Reformed Evangelical Parish; the way his father's letters drip with good Reformed observations, along with his mother's with anxious wishes;<sup>7</sup> and Engels's own confession to his close friend and pastor, Wilhelm Graeber: 'If I had not been brought up in the most extreme orthodoxy and piety, if I had not had drummed into me in church, Sunday school and at home the most direct, unconditional belief in the Bible and in the agreement of the teaching of the Bible with that of the church, indeed, with the special teaching of *every* minister, perhaps, I would have remained stuck in some sort of liberal supernaturalism for a long time.'<sup>8</sup>

Before I know it Engels comes rather close to my own background. For my parents too are of a distinctly Reformed background, especially the conservative break-away group (*Gereformeerde Kerken*) from the Herformde Kerk in the Netherlands. Further, my maternal ancestors (my mother's father's grandparents) come from Schleswig-Holstein – that endlessly contested zone between Prussia and Denmark. To escape those conflicts they moved in the 18th century to the Waddensee island of Ameland, which is about as far as you can get into the Calvinist north of the Netherlands. Engels himself would spend a couple of years (1839–41) in Bremen in the north-west of Prussia, sent there by his father to work hard as a clerk in the trading house of Consul Leupold and to get a more solid dose of Calvinism. In a letter to Friedrich Graeber he says he finds it much the same as Wuppertal.<sup>9</sup> It was also the place where F. W. Krummacher, the arch-Calvinist and head minister of the Elberfeld Reformed Parish in which Engels was baptised, grew up.<sup>10</sup> As with their religious convictions, the people of Bremen still speak a Low German that is almost indistinguishable from the Dutch spoken just across the border.

It is not purely some personal interest that has led me to dig up Engels's Reformed background; it also makes much sense of Engels's later approaches to Christianity. He may have given it away after much struggle,<sup>11</sup> reacting to the asphyxiating environment of narrow Calvinism in what he mockingly describes as Muckertal, the Valley of Bigots,<sup>12</sup> but he was one who knew from the inside what religious faith means. That sense would never leave him, bringing him eventually to come to terms with his own devout background.

## Exuberance

Engels responded to the religious context in which he grew up in two different ways. At times he gives voice to a 'blazing anger' at the pietism and literal Christianity of his home.<sup>13</sup> The new currents of free thought keep him awake at night, leaving him little peace and at times bringing him to tears.<sup>14</sup> Yet at other times there is precious little of this existential crisis. Much of Engels's early writing exhibits the exuberance, playfulness and good spirits of one who is enjoying his life, suffused as it was with Christian commitment.

Some of his biblical references are light-hearted – for example, to his sister, Marie: 'Yes, you little goose, you shall have four pages but they are according to the saying that with the same measure as you measure will it be measured unto you, and even that is too much for you.'<sup>15</sup> Others he uses to make a satirical point, as in the occasional comment on Schelling: 'and finally it appears somewhat like intellectual meanness, like petty – what does one call that well-known, pale-yellow passion? – when Schelling claims each and every thing he acknowledges in Hegel as his own property, nay, as flesh of his own flesh'.<sup>16</sup> And others may form part of a biblical landscape as he walks through the mountains: 'here and there snow glistens through the mists which hover round the most distant summits, and Pilatus rises above the mass of peaks as if it were sitting in judgment like the Judaeen governor of old who gave it his name – these are the Alps!'<sup>17</sup>

Often his letters are boisterous and playful, and the material published at the time gives the impression that he is enjoying himself, that he takes much delight in his new discoveries and indeed in the polemic against his own home town, such as the satirical, anonymous and delightfully written depiction in 'Letters from Wuppertal': 'Almost outside the town is the Catholic church; it stands there as if it had been expelled from the sacred walls. It is Byzantine in style, built very badly by a very inexperienced architect from a very good plan.'<sup>18</sup> Other examples include the various notes on the rhetorically skilful and anti-Enlightenment pastor F. W. Krummacher,<sup>19</sup> dreadful Calvinist poetry,<sup>20</sup> the reactionary Roman Catholic nonsense of a certain Joel Jacoby,<sup>21</sup> the equally reactionary efforts of Friedrich Wilhelm IV to wind back the clock to a Christian-feudal monarchy,<sup>22</sup> the zeal of a young pastor who is staying with Engels in Bremen and who believes in direct divine intervention as a result of prayer,<sup>23</sup> or the proposals for a Christian medicine by Professor Leupoldt from Erlangen (illness is the result of the sin of the fathers and needs to be dealt with accordingly).<sup>24</sup> One of my favourites is a comment on a certain minister called Döring, 'whose absent-mindedness is most odd; he is incapable of uttering three sentences with a connected train of thought, but he can make three parts of a sermon into four by repeating one of them word for word without being at all aware of it'.<sup>25</sup>

Although he is engaged in the age-old need to leave the narrow confines of home, in physical, emotional and intellectual senses, there seems to be little regret and much anticipation of the journey itself. He speaks of it more often than not as a glorious religious awakening from a narrow and barren childhood. For instance, in the allegorical piece 'Landscapes', his passage by ship along the Rhine through the drab Calvinist landscape of the Netherlands and out into the open sea becomes a passage from his own background to the depths of speculation and free thought that brings him to cry:

... 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.<sup>26</sup>

## Wuppertal Pietists and Calvinists

However, this playfulness and even religiously-laced exuberance slips away when Engels voices his frustrations at the narrowness of Wuppertal piety. Here we find the other side of the exuberance I traced above, for now Engels levels his fearsome and often amusing polemic at the reactionary paths Christianity may take, the severe restrictions that Wuppertal imposes. A sharp and satirical picture emerges from his 'Letters from Wuppertal', written when he was 18 (in 1838). Here he sketches a picture of a wide sea of Pietism and mysticism (the terms are interchangeable) that characterises all the Protestant churches in Wuppertal, whether Lutheran or Reformed (Calvinist).<sup>27</sup> Within that broad sweep, Pietism appears in greater or lesser degree, but those he knows best are the Reformed Churches. They take the prize as the most extreme of the lot. The Pietists take a fair number of hits, especially in terms of their deleterious effects on education in the schools,<sup>28</sup> as dreadful poets,<sup>29</sup> and as an alternative addiction to alcohol:

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, 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.<sup>30</sup>

This 'sprained foot of Christianity'<sup>31</sup> is simply given to pure hypocrisy:

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.<sup>32</sup>

Yet these shots are only an opening gambit, for when he turns to the Reformed wing of German Protestantism, Engels shifts gear. His target 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), the Reformed parish stands out as the most reactionary of the lot. Besides 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 that Engels spent many, many hours locked to the pew of this church as a child and teenager.

He knows it all far too well from the inside, as he, himself, admits:

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.<sup>33</sup>

With a reputation for his ‘religious feeling, purity of heart, agreeable habits and other prepossessing qualities’,<sup>34</sup> it is no wonder the young Engels published his early writings under pseudonyms such as S. Oswald. Various items draw out his anger: the collective intolerance of the Elberfeld Reformers, and both the style and content of the parish’s most powerful minister, F. W. Krummacker. I would suggest that what looked to Engels like increasing narrowness and intolerance had much to do with the growing awareness of a rebellious teenager who had begun to think for himself. As for 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 a bunch of ‘extremely bigoted preachers’.<sup>35</sup> The targets: wayward rationalists and those who denied predestination – among whom Engels now numbers 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,<sup>36</sup> 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 . . .<sup>37</sup>

## **The formidable Krummacker: between admiration and disenchantment**

Most of the polemic is reserved for Engels’s own minister, a man he knew very well and who obviously influenced him deeply – Rev. Dr Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacker, the head minister of the Reformed parish of Elberfeld. There are too many details, too many comments on sermons for Engels not to have seen the man in action on countless occasions. All the same, in the midst of the polemic Engels gives voice to a sneaking admiration for Krummacker’s oratorical skill, intellectual prowess and even a potentially radical political position. This complex pattern of criticism and admiration, at times evincing a dialectical reading, would remain with Engels when he later returned to reassess his approach to Christianity.

As far as Krummacker’s oratorical style is concerned, we see a process that moves from admiration to disenchantment – reflecting Engels’s own sense of increasing distance. He begins by pointing out that Krummacker’s ‘sermons are never boring’ and his ‘train of thought is confident and natural’.<sup>38</sup> Even more, Engels admires ‘the burning eloquence, the poetic, if not always well-chosen, splendour of imagery for which this richly

talented pulpit speaker is famous'.<sup>39</sup> Yet Krummacher 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.'<sup>40</sup> His appearance too may be strong and impressive, but his 'circumference has increased' since he settled in Elberfeld, sporting at the same time a most unfashionable way of doing his hair that everyone in the congregation seems to imitate '*à la Krummacher*'.<sup>41</sup>

However, when Engels moves to doctrine – contained in Krummacher's sermons – a more complex pattern emerges. He wants to condemn it, to deride its ridiculous nature, to dismiss it out of hand, and yet he cannot quite do so, partly because Engels once believed it himself. Krummacher's doctrine is, argues Engels, based on a 'pretence of logic' and is 'in most direct contradiction to reason and the Bible'.<sup>42</sup> It is strict Calvinist doctrine, with its predestination as the manifestation of God's grace, with the Christ-less heathen serving to fill up hell, and with the few who are chosen out of the many called. How could anyone in their right minds believe such a doctrine? Engels's texts also contain a good number of critical comments relating to specific sermons, ranging from an account of a dispute with David Strauss (of *Das Leben Jesu* fame), through Krummacher's attacks on poetry, imagination and art, to the astonishing 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.<sup>43</sup>

And yet, Engels cannot conceal his admiration. He admits that the doctrine is logically consistent: once you accept the premise (the total depravity of human beings, based on original sin), then the rest is irrefutable. So it seems that this doctrine is consistent, or at least watertight, when you grant the premise. In fact, it is fairly 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.<sup>44</sup>

It does end up being 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 actually had the chance to hear about Jesus. All manner of solutions have been offered to deal with this exclusive claim to salvation (Christ is manifest in other, very unexpected ways, or they get 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 even in this extreme form Engels once again voices his admiration. In a comment whose brevity conceals a wealth of implications, he writes:

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 demagogy 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.<sup>45</sup>

Here the sneaking admiration for Krummacher I noted earlier turns up again, for his sermons would, admits Engels, be rather good if he didn’t spoil them with such doctrines. Indeed, 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 censors, 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 demagogy?

As a student Krummacher was involved in the demagogy 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’.<sup>46</sup>

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 belonged to a sinful former life which had been overcome by his conversion. Yet Engels hints otherwise. Even though he seems to say that there is an unconscious return of this earlier life – Engels speaks of the former demagogy breaking through – he leaves open the possibility that there may in fact be some continuity between the earlier political radical and the later Calvinist preacher. But



that is what one would expect of anyone who follows Calvin to some degree, for there is a comparable tension in Calvin's own thought.<sup>47</sup>

Engels is caught in ambivalence over Krummacher, an ambivalence that borders on a dialectic: he criticises Krummacher's sermon style and doctrinal content, and yet he admires his former minister's power, doctrinal consistency and even potentially radical political positions. Engels would never lose this ambivalence, for later he would veer between doctrinaire atheism (almost as doctrinaire as Krummacher's Calvinism) and an awareness of the radical, even revolutionary potential of Christianity.

## Saturated in the Bible

This early depth of involvement in the Reformed Church of Elberfeld was to leave its indelible mark on Engels, not least of which was the habit of pulling out a text of the Bible at will. Doctrine is, at least for such biblically oriented Calvinists, an effort to weave together a series of disparate biblical texts drawn from all over the place into a somewhat coherent and logically watertight position. However, Engels is not an outsider who observes this practice from a distance. He is very much part of it, using the Bible to take sides in a theological debate. At this level, Engels is no different from Krummacher, except that he leans more heavily on other texts that oppose the ones preferred by Krummacher and the strict Calvinists.

Given the Reformed emphasis on the Word, Engels came to know his Bible inside out and was able to read the New Testament in Greek. Even in the early pieces concerning Krummacher, the text overflows with biblical references and allusions. They 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'); 1 Corinthians 1:20–5 and 3:19 ('the foolishness of God is wiser than men'); 1 Peter 2:2 ('long for the pure spiritual milk'). Engels uses them in various ways. The first three are those favoured by Krummacher 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.'<sup>48</sup> Note what has happened: Engels uses the Bible as he has been taught – to take sides within a specific debate.

We can view this situation as follows: the Bible provides a language or agreed-upon battle-ground. While Krummacher 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 battle-ground: faith versus reason; the small enclave of the righteous elect versus the ways of the 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 that of the Calvinists with whom he grew up.

These early pieces by Engels provide a distinct insight into a practice that would stay with him through much of his writing – the tendency to use 'proof 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 (a practice I know only too well in all its twisting and frustrating detail). Of course,

Engels would move away from that specific motivation, but the habit of drawing in a biblical text would never leave him.

## Conclusion

Engels's early religious experience, with its earnest commitment and later disenchantment, would continue to influence his engagements with Christianity even in the rejection of his old faith. Most obviously, his atheism could at times be as doctrinaire as the Calvinism he left behind. Sometimes it became an assertion that materialist atheism simply meant that at death we return 'to the bosom of nature' from whence we came – as he points out in a speech at Jenny Marx's funeral.<sup>49</sup> At others it was a matter of class struggle in which the working classes were moving to a clearer atheistic position.<sup>50</sup> And at others atheism was the natural outcome of the march of communism.<sup>51</sup>

Yet this doctrinaire atheism was by no means the whole story, for just as Engels's experience of Christianity was ambivalent – a mix of appreciation and condemnation, of admiration and biting critique – so also his later approach to Christianity was often ambivalent, if not dialectical. I have traced in some detail how Engels found his faith a source of exuberance and playfulness, even when he was criticising the narrow Calvinists of Wuppertal. If he found F. W. Krummacker too much in the pulpit and that his extreme Calvinism went against reason and common sense, Engels also admired the rhetorical skill of the man, was ready to admit to the logical coherence of his doctrine and was even able to detect a more radical political undercurrent in Krummacker's attacks on property, wealth and power.

This ambivalence would become a dialectical understanding of Christianity in which Engels saw both the reactionary and oppressive possibilities of religion as well as its liberating, if not revolutionary role. Yet this perspective does not come to Engels late in life, for already in his mid-twenties we find him asserting the oppressiveness of Christianity *and* its revolutionary potential. For example, in 1844 he could write: 'We too attack the hypocrisy of the present Christian state of the world; the struggle against it, our liberation from it and the liberation of the world from it are ultimately our sole occupation.'<sup>52</sup> But then, a year earlier he wrote: 'In general, this is a feature of every revolutionary epoch, as was seen in particular in the religious revolution of which the outcome was Christianity: "blessed are the poor" [Matthew 5:3], "the wisdom of this world is foolishness" [1 Corinthians 1:20], etc.'<sup>53</sup>

This sense of the revolutionary potential of Christianity would strengthen over time, so that when he came to write his study of Thomas Müntzer and the Peasant Revolution of 1525, he stressed Müntzer's revolutionary credentials.<sup>54</sup> However, in this work Engels still tried to separate the theological chaff from Müntzer's secular, revolutionary seed. Eventually, in a work published only months before the end of his life – *On the History of Early Christianity* – Engels argued that Christianity arose as a revolutionary movement in the Roman Empire, drawing its members from the poor and disaffected.<sup>55</sup> As he summarises in a brief work written at the same time:

It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the

state; it flatly denied that Caesar's will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the 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, which was known by the name of Christians ...<sup>56</sup>

He had obviously not forgotten the lesson from Krummacker's hidden radicalism.

Later, when Engels had travelled and lived elsewhere (Bremen, Manchester, Berne, Paris and Brussels), he would return home for what was, on the surface at least, a very different cause: the revolution in Elberfeld in 1849.<sup>57</sup> You get the sense, in offering himself to reorganise the armed defence of the revolution, that he would have been happy to stay had he not been asked to leave by the bourgeois leaders – and had the revolution been successful. From this experience a note of homesickness and longing suffuses some of his reflections on his home town and, I would suggest, the strong faith that he had then: 'But you too', he writes, 'have a homeland and perhaps return to it with the same love as I, however ordinary it looks, once you have vented your anger at its perversities.'<sup>58</sup> In his later texts on Christianity, Engels seems to have done just that.

## Notes

1. Engels (1975 [1844–5]), p. 231.
2. Engels (1982 [1929]), p. 29; Engels (1973 [1929]), p. 27.
3. Engels (1989 [1882]); Engels (1973 [1882]); Engels (1990 [1883]); Engels (1973 [1883]); Engels (1990 [1894–5]-b); Engels (1972 [1894–5]-b); Engels (1978 [1850]); Engels (1973 [1850]).
4. My interest in these texts developed over a few intense months in 2008 when I read through the full fifty volumes of the collected works of Marx and Engels. As I did so I was drawn more and more to the early writings of Friedrich Engels – the very early Engels, in his teens and early twenties – for he was a skilled writer and brilliant original thinker before he became Marx's Lieutenant.
5. Engels's baptism certificate comes from the Reformed Evangelical parish of Elberfeld; see Baptism Certificate of Friedrich Engels: Extract from the Baptism Register of the Elberfeld Reformed Evangelical Parish (1975 [1930]), p. 580.
6. See Birth Certificate of Friedrich Engels, Barmen, 5 December 1820: Extract from the Barmen Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages (1975 [1930]). Both van Haar and van Haaren are common Dutch names.
7. Engels (senior) (1975 [1930]), (1975 [1958]), (1975 [1969]). After the warrant for his arrest and the 1848 revolutions, his mother voices her great angst over his path, asking him to return to the path of God, rejoin the family and take up work in a business, see Elisabeth Engels (1982 [1970]-b), (1982 [1970]-a). See also the brilliant description of his parents' reaction when Engels returns home for a brief spell in 1845 when they know he is associating with communists, Engels (1982 [1929]), pp. 28–9; Engels (1973 [1929]), pp. 26–7.
8. Engels (1975 [1920]-f), p. 466; Engels (2008 [1920]-f), p. 413.
9. Engels (1975 [1920]-c), p. 416; Engels (2008 [1920]-b), p. 363.

10. See Engels (1975 [1840]-c), p. 126; Engels (1985 [1840]-b), p. 199. Here Engels mentions Krummacher visiting his parents.
11. See further, Boer (in press).
12. Engels (1975 [1920]-b), p. 457; Engels (2008 [1920]-a), p. 403.
13. Engels (2008 [1920]-a), p. 403.
14. Engels (1975 [1920]-b), p. 461; Engels (2008 [1920]-a), p. 407.
15. Engels (1975 [1930]-b), p. 390; Engels (2008 [1930]), p. 330. The allusion is to Matthew 7:2. Then there is the mention of his effort to write a chorale for Luther's famous hymn *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*. See Engels (1975 [1920]-d), p. 404; Engels (2008 [1920]-d), pp. 346–7.
16. Engels (1975 [1841]-b), p. 186; Engels (1985 [1841]-c), p. 261. Here the allusion is to Adam's saying, after Eve is created out of his side: 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Genesis 2:23).
17. Engels (1975 [1841]-c), pp. 170–1; Engels (1985 [1841]-b), p. 245.
18. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 7; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 32.
19. Engels (1975 [1839]-a); Engels (1985 [1839]-c); Engels (1975 [1840]-e); Engels (1985 [1840]-e); Engels (1975 [1840]-c), pp. 126–8; Engels (1985 [1840]-b), pp. 199–201; Engels (1975 [1842]-a), pp. 315, 346; Engels (1985 [1842]-a), pp. 391, 417; Engels (1975 [1843]-a), p. 361; Engels (1985 [1843]-b), p. 428; Engels (1975 [1920]-c), p. 416; Engels (2008 [1920]-b), p. 363; Engels (1975 [1920]-a), p. 427; Engels (2008 [1920]-c), p. 372; Engels (1975 [1920]-g), p. 472; Engels (2008 [1920]-e), p. 420; Engels (1975 [1913]); Engels (2008 [1913]).
20. Engels (1975 [1839]-b); Engels (1985 [1839]-a); Engels (1975 [1920]-c), pp. 416–17; Engels (2008 [1920]-b), pp. 363–4.
21. Engels (1975 [1840]-a); Engels (1985 [1840]-a).
22. Engels (1975 [1843]-a); Engels (1985 [1843]-b).
23. Engels (1975 [1920]-g); Engels (2008 [1920]-e).
24. Engels (1975 [1842]-b); Engels (1985 [1842]-b). Engels goes on to anticipate from the same man 'a Christian grammar based on the same principles' (p. 283).
25. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 16; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 40.
26. Engels (1975 [1840]-b), p. 99; Engels (1985 [1840]-d), p. 131.
27. Although an initial effort to bring together the Calvinist and Lutheran churches in Prussia under a broader Evangelical Church had been made by Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1817 (a process that is ongoing as I write), 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.
28. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), pp. 17–18; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 42.
29. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), pp. 24–5; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), pp. 50–1.
30. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), pp. 9–10; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 34.
31. Engels (1975 [1840]-d), p. 103; Engels (1985 [1840]-c), p. 135.
32. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 10; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 35.
33. Engels (1975 [1920]-b), pp. 460–1; Engels (2008 [1920]-a), p. 407.
34. School-Leaving Reference for Prima Pupil Friedrich Engels (No. 713) (1975 [1920]), p. 585. See also the very orthodox if somewhat wooden poem, probably written when he was 16: Engels (1975 [1930]-a); Engels (1985 [1837]).
35. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 12; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 36.

36. 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: Engels (1975 [1840]-c), pp. 126–8; Engels (1985 [1840]-b), pp. 199–201; Engels (1975 [1841]-a), pp. 155–8; Engels (1985 [1841]-a), pp. 225–8.
37. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 12; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 36.
38. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 14; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 39.
39. Engels (1975 [1840]-c), p. 126; Engels (1985 [1840]-b), p. 199.
40. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 14; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 39.
41. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 13; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 38.
42. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), pp. 14–15; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), pp. 39–40.
43. Engels (1975 [1839]-a), p. 29; Engels (1985 [1839]-c), p. 55. See also Engels (1975 [1920]-e), pp. 446–7; Engels (2008 [1920]-g), p. 393; Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 14; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 39; Engels (1975 [1840]-c), pp. 126–7; Engels (1985 [1840]-b), pp. 199–200; Engels (1975 [1840]-e); Engels (1985 [1840]-e).
44. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 15; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), pp. 39–40.
45. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 15; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 40.
46. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 13; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 38.
47. See further, Boer (2009).
48. Engels (1975 [1839]-c), p. 15; Engels (1985 [1839]-b), p. 40.
49. Engels (1989 [1881]), pp. 420–1; Engels (1973 [1881]), p. 294.
50. Among many, many example, see Engels (1975 [1846]), p. 412; Engels (1974 [1846]), p. 343: ‘Money is the god of this world; the bourgeois takes the proletarian’s money from him and so makes a practical atheist of him. No wonder, then, if the proletarian retains his atheism and no longer respects the sacredness and power of the earthly God.’
51. See, for example, Engels (1987 [1877-8]); Engels (1973 [1877-8]); Engels (1987 [1925]); Engels (1973 [1925]).
52. Engels (1975 [1844]), p. 462; Engels (1974 [1844]), p. 544.
53. Engels (1975 [1843]-b), p. 380; Engels (1985 [1843]-a), pp. 451–2.
54. Engels (1978 [1850]); Engels (1973 [1850]).
55. Engels (1990 [1894–5]-b); Engels (1972 [1894–5]-b). It was, however, an idea that had been brewing for some time. See also Engels (1989 [1882]); Engels (1973 [1882]); Engels (1990 [1883]); Engels (1973 [1883]).
56. Engels (1990 [1894–5]-a), p. 523; Engels (1972 [1894–5]-a), p. 526.
57. See Engels (1977 [1849]-a); Engels (1973 [1849]); Engels (1977 [1849]-b), (1977 [1849]-c).
58. Engels (1975 [1839]-b), p. 31; Engels (1985 [1839]-a), p. 64.

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