Why did radical sects emerge during the 1640s and 1650s?

The dramatic political and social upheaval of the 1640s and 1650s in England saw the proliferation of radical ideas and religious separatism as the old institutions of government broke down: the ‘womb of teeming birth’, as John Milton chose to call it. Ever since the Reformation, a remarkable sense of religious independence had gained a footing in England; the Puritan ethic where individuals strove to break loose from church hierarchy and formal constraints in favour of personal identification with Christ. Following the almost apocalyptic events of the 1640s, there was the sense that a new age was dawning which ‘new men’ were destined to shape: ‘the old world is running up like parchment in the fire’ Digger pamphleteer Gerrard Winstanley said, and thus radical strands of thought began to flourish in the form of religious sects as diverse as the Quakers, Ranters and Muggletonians. Though it is difficult to define clearly such groups, particularly as they never included more than five per cent of the English population, their radicalism can be taken as the expression of novel ideas such as millenarianism or salvation based on ‘experienced truths’. Perhaps the term ‘radical’ is best defined as the opinion of those threatened by these Protestant sects, namely the danger they posed to social order and hierarchy. Toiling too long over a definition is somewhat fruitless: more pertinent is to understand how these sects emerged from a novel environment of religious liberty, toleration and the breakdown of censorship, against the excitement of the Civil War and the novel organisations such as the New Model Army, which likewise advocated for the liberty and sovereignty of the people. The geographical and demographical descriptions of such radical sects also suggest that there might have been elements of class hostility at play, a view that Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill emphasise. In a time of social uncertainty, charismatic leaders were able to form tight, exclusive congregations in which to express novel ideas, which had developed as a result of the skepticism the Civil War had evoked. Though today these radical sects might be dismissed as the ‘lunatic fringe’, it is inspiring to examine how such ideas rose to prominence, where individuals saw revolutionary England as a clean slate that was theirs to reform in ‘the daily progress of the light of truth’; to use one of Christopher Hill’s favourite phrases, it was their opportunity to ‘turn the world upside-down’.

Though the emergence of radical religious sects was very much an exceptional product of an exceptional time, there are certain underlying factors that may be taken into account: as John Morrill puts it, ‘the coiled spring effect’. The Puritan ethic, seeking to construct a godly self-conscious community, emphasising personal salvation, had gained some sway under Charles I, particularly in Parliament. Their desire to ‘reform the Reformation’, in the words of Edmund Calamy, became more determined as Charles implemented the Laudian programme of Church reform, whose “popish” traits horrified the “hotter Protestants”, as the Puritans were named. As a result, following the collapse of the Personal Rule in 1639, these concerns were voiced in Parliamentary debate and the push for more radical church reform, such as the abolition of the episcopacy, which would subsequently open the floodgates for religious liberty, gained sway. Pym voiced such fears in his Grand Remonstrance of 1641, when he attacked the ‘Jesuited Papists’ of the Personal Rule and earlier, in 1640, 15,000 Londoners signed the Root and Branch Petition, demanding the abolition of the episcopacy along with ‘all its dependencies, roots and branches.’ This suggests already that there was a popular anti-episcopacy, anti-hierarchy sentiment. Already, religious practices had increasingly focused on ‘voluntary religion’ and on more casual ‘gadding’ from sermon to sermon, which consequently focused religious practice on preaching as opposed to ceremony. Chafing under the ceremonial and rigid Laudian episcopacy, the Puritan ethic striving for a more personal religious experience, which lay at the heart of the radical sects, was bound to
explode once Charles’ stranglehold on church and state policy had been removed. Returning once more to the Root and Branch petition, one sees an example of the pamphleteering phenomenon which emerged in the 1640s and 1650s. Following the abolition of the episcopacy in 1646, censorship of the press was near impossible to enforce and people enjoyed extensive liberty to print whatever they wished, leading to a period of intellectual excitement where diverse views on religion and politics were expressed. The amount of published material increased rapidly, from 2000 new titles in 1641 to three new titles appearing each day in 1660. This wealth of published material created an environment of religious excitement and self-expression, which in turn opened up a religious marketplace where individuals were free to preach their own ideas and to form religious groups accordingly.

This newfound liberty owes its existence entirely to the abolition of the episcopacy, which marks the move from formal traditional constraints into a world of self-expression. The rival groups of Presbyterians and Independents in Parliament were able to unite together against the mutual threat of the Laudian Church in order to abolish the episcopacy, though they did not have a positive programme of reform in common. Furthermore, the New Model Army, with its strong Leveller influences advocating total liberty for the people, proved a powerful obstacle to the Presbyterian reform of the Church of England. Ultimately, as a result of Parliament’s inability to implement secure reform of the Church of England, nonconformists were able to pursue religious worship of their own devising without harassment. Indeed, Cromwell would pursue a policy of religious toleration, stating in the Instrument of Government ‘That to the public profession held forth none shall be compelled by penalties or otherwise; but that endeavours be used to win them by sound doctrine and the example of a good conversation’11. The promise that religious harassment could not legally be enforced simultaneously secured the people’s liberty of conscience. Importantly, the removal of this traditional constraint encouraged individuals to look inwardly for answers, to create a self-imposed morality. This individualism explains why such diverse religious sects emerged, as religious conformity was no longer enshrined in law. Leveller Richard Overton reflects on another consequence of the abolition of church hierarchy: ‘Without a powerful compulsive presbytery in the church, a compulsive mastership of aristocratical government over the people in the state could never long be maintained’12. In effect, a society of ‘masterless men’ had been created. With pulpits vacated, preachers from diverse backgrounds were able to voice their interpretations of the Bible, leading to the sectarian phenomenon where close-knit congregations would form around a gifted speaker. The absence of ministers subsequently brought a new emphasis on the laity, who was newly empowered: William Dell told his congregation in 1646 ‘the power is in you, the people; keep it, part not with it.’14. These congregations, not bound to any central authority, were often more radical than the preaching ministry, and thus thrust religious activity in an anti-clerical, separatist direction, forming what from the outside might be seen as elitist, radical sects. The Quakers can be taken as an example: they shunned any visible godliness and focused instead on the congregation and the inner light within each member of the congregation as a guiding force towards their salvation. Particularly in the further flung parts of England, such as the formerly Royalist North and West, where parishes were particularly large and where royalist armies had bankrupted their territory in the Civil War, such ideas rejecting the notion of a visible church could gain appeal; Thomas Edwards regards The Weald as ‘that dark country which is the receptacle of all schism and rebellion’15. This might also serve as an explanation for why Quakers originally emerged in the Northern backwaters of England before gaining ground in the West Country. Radical sects appealed to such ‘masterless men’ as they provided some form of social security and the opportunity to find masters within themselves. The demographics of the radical sects links into this idea: members of the sects tended to emerge from the middle class, where they had been exposed to
radical dialogue somewhat more than their lower counterparts but who were less attached to hierarchy than the upperclassmen. The Quakers were regarded as particularly radical in allowing women to preach, which shows that individuals who previously would have enjoyed little autonomy or the opportunity for self-expression could find positions of leadership within these radical sects, thus forming the basis of their appeal. In the ecclesiastical vacuum, invested with a new self-confidence as a result of the environment of religious toleration, individuals sought to create a new order; new forums of religious discussion, which emerged in the form of radical sects. Marxist historian Christopher Hill views this time as the ‘attempts of various groups of the common people to impose their own solutions to the problems of their time, in opposition to the wishes of their betters’.

The New Model not only played an important role in securing liberty of conscience against the strictly disciplined Presbyterian ideals, but also served as an important breeding ground for novel, if not radical, ideas. The New Model has been popularly described by historians, albeit somewhat cautiously, as a hotbed for radicals, given the prominent role religion played amongst its ranks: lay preaching and religious discussion was an everyday activity, and as the Civil War progressed, much of the New Model’s success was assigned by their officers to the will of God. The mobile nature of the New Model, travelling up and down the country, billeting soldiers, meant that such radical ideas that may have first materialized amongst its ranks were spread to the local population as they intermingled in inns along the wartime road. It is noteworthy that many of the sectarian leaders served their apprenticeships in the New Model, including Everard the Digger, Clarkson and Coppe the Ranters, and James Nayler the Quaker. Particularly in the case of the Second Civil War, war became increasingly tied up with religion and was regarded by many as a war of good against evil: the godly Parliamentarians against ‘Charles Stuart, that man of blood’ and Laudian innovation. Religious discourse became more and more interwoven with political events and as the King came to be painted in an increasingly wicked light, the focus on sin and salvation became even more pertinent. This revolutionary skepticism and disillusionment became even more pronounced following the execution of Charles in 1649.

Whilst discussing these various factors, it is important not to lose sight of the extraordinary circumstances in which these events took place: the Civil War and the regicide were both extremely momentous events. With no historical precedent, they divided the country and threw the population into turmoil as all familiar institutions of the old regime were called into question. The almost apocalyptic events encouraged an influx of revolutionary thinking, a ‘fever of speculation’, particularly a new wave of millenarian thinking. The Fifth Monarchists were perhaps the most literal millenarian group to emerge, believing that the regicide marked the imminence of the Second Coming, a Fifth Monarchy where Christ would rule with a council of Saints. The Muggletonians were also influence by millenarian ideas. The regicide brought a deep cultural shock to the population and the upheaval from the Civil War as well as the government’s inability to implement a new orthodoxy meant that many found old formulae for religious worship, with its emphasis on the ceremonial, insufficient; they sought some sort of ecstatic experience that would fit with the dramatic nature of the times. This is exemplified in Quaker ideology, where believers seek immediate, personal contact with God through their own inner light. Considering that it was only a small minority in Parliament that supported the regicide, it is also possible that many felt ambivalent, if not guilty, over the execution of Charles I. As a result, many searched more frantically to feel assured of their personal salvation, causing many to defect from traditional congregations to more radical sects, all with differing opinions on who the elect were, but where more emphasis was put on the individual responsibility in achieving salvation. Now that the old formal constraints had been swept away, a period
of revolutionary optimism dawned, the opportunity to reshape England however they wished, to form their own utopia: ‘All sorts of people dreamed of an utopia and infinite liberty, especially in matters of religion’ said one royalist. The Revolution opened up infinite possibilities, which different groups took to different lengths, and it is perhaps here that the label ‘radical’ has its foundations: with the social order already thrown into confusion by Civil War and regicide, the new ways of conducting life as proposed by the different sects were radical in that they differed from pre-revolutionary norms. Such lewd behavior as the Ranters displayed, believing that they could not sin as sin itself was immaterial, was deeply shocking to the conservative population though it was likely just a product of the revolutionary upheaval; one might argue that the Ranters were simply seeking a visceral, ecstatic connection with God as dramatic as the events that had taken place. Indeed, the wish to experience truths, a principle common to most of the radical sects, is itself a product of revolutionary uncertainty and of the individualism it brought about. The omnipresent novelty of this period brought with it a reliance on experienced truths in order to rebuke traditional views, in revolutionary spirit: Thomas Collier while preaching to the Army in 1647 chose experience over tradition when he offered to confirm one of his points from Scripture, ‘although I trust I shall declare nothing unto you but experimental truth’. The Civil War had created national disillusionment and it was down to the charisma of certain individuals, such as the Quaker leader George Fox, and their ability to capture the imaginations of the people that radical sects emerged. Indeed, one of the reasons that Quakerism survived the Restoration was due to the sect’s organization and evangelizing, recruiting many Seekers, a loose grouping of individuals disillusioned with the Church.

The emergence of radical sects has its roots in the emergence of a Protestant ethic, one of personal salvation and godly self-consciousness, at the forefront of political discourse. The offensive Laudian policies implemented during Charles’ Personal Rule only aggravated the desire to dismantle any form of church hierarchy, which subsequently unbridled the muzzle on religious conversation. Due to Parliament’s inability to unite behind a specific reform programme for the church, the English population experienced an extraordinary period of religious freedom during the 1640s and 1650s. With the proliferation of printed material covering diverse religious opinions and the rise of lay preachers, people began to more self-consciously analyse their religion and to interpret their spirituality for themselves. However, it was the complete social upheaval that the Civil War and regicide fostered in England that ultimately inspired the emergence of the radical sects. These events spurred unprecedented levels of intellectual excitement as well as unprecedented levels of disillusionment, where Protestant unity was fractured in all directions: some saw the events as apocalyptic, joining millenarian sects, others became increasingly concerned with their own salvation or conversely began to live free of moral restraints, such as the Ranters. The fact that only around five per cent of the population joined sects may be attributed to human fragility: often the level of internal purity that the sects required was too demanding and for some the revolutionary events of the 1640s only prompted a desire to return to the familiar old ways, the old social order that such radical sects only served to threaten. Precisely because the radical sects were so small and survived, broadly speaking, for such as short time, one can regard them as a product of their time: the revolutionary change prompted the desire for a complete religious and social reshaping of English ways. Therefore, we can confidently see that it was due to the exceptional circumstances of the 1640s and 1650s, the remarkable social, religious and moral disruption it caused, that these radical sects emerged. Thomas Hobbes stresses the importance of change in stimulating thought: ‘it being almost all one for a man to be always sensible of the same thing and not to be sensible of anything’. And in analyzing the emergence of radical sects we can recognize the same phenomenon: political change that inspired individuals, in newfound liberty, to discover their own truths.
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11. *The Instrument of Government* Article XXXVI (1653)
19. [Chestlin] *Persecutio Undecima* p. 8

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