A study of Milton's political opinions

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A STUDY OF MILTON'S POLITICAL OPINIONS.

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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- by -

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- Preface -

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The life and writings of John Milton present a peculiarly interesting field to the student of political science. No man ever lived and wrote in a more important period in English history, for it was chiefly in this period that the Anglo-Saxon inherent love of liberty developed into vital and specific ideals of government. The Puritan uprising during the seventeenth century represents a great crisis in the evolution of English liberties, and in the history of this crisis John Milton must always be accorded a conspicuous place. Not that he figured prominently in the uprising itself, for that he had a profound influence over the masses of his own day is exceedingly doubtful; but he is, so far as the world is concerned, the great expounder of the doctrines and ideals which overthrew the divine right of kings in England and which were finally crystallized in the glorious Revolution of 1688.

In entering the field of political controversy, Milton was prompted by the very highest motives. For twenty years of the best part of his life he left the things he loved best, knowing that the only reward he could hope for was the satisfaction which comes from a clear conscience and the knowledge
of having seen a duty and performed it. "I may deserve of charitable readers," he says in one of his prose tracts, "to be credited, that neither envy nor gall hath entered me upon this controversy, but the enforcement of conscience only, and a preventive fear lest the omitting of this duty should be against me, when I would store up to myself the good provisions of peaceful hours." During the time when he was preparing his Second Defence of the People of England, Milton's doctors informed him that if he did not stop writing he would lose his eyesight entirely, but Milton replied that he did not consider even that a sufficient reason to stop writing in the cause of liberty.

In the present study it has been the aim of the author to discover the underlying principles of Milton's political opinions as a whole, and to trace their development through the various phases of his political entity as revealed in his prose writings. An attempt has been made to prove the unity of his political opinions by showing that they are all based on one fundamental conception of liberty. That Milton was an idealist must, of course, be kept constantly in mind in making a study of his political theories. Many details have been omitted for the sake of brevity, but enough, perhaps,

have been given to show where Milton would be apt to stand on almost any question concerning civil government. Direct quotations have been introduced wherever their length seemed commensurate with the emphasis due them.

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- Bibliography -

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3. Horwood, Alfred J. (Editor) A Common-Place Book of John Milton. (Printed for Camden Society) Westminster: Nichols and Son. 1876. (From manuscript in the collection of Sir Frederick Graham.)


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Abbreviations used in notes.

P. W. - - - - - - - - Bohn edition of Milton's Prose Works.

See Bibliography, No.1.

First Defence - - - - "A Defence of the People of England, in Answer to Salmasius's Defence of the King."


Eikonoklastes - - - - "Eikonoklastes: in Answer to a Book entitled 'Eikon Basilike, the Portraiture of His Sacred Majesty in
his Solitudes and Sufferings.'"

Tenure - - - - - - "Tenure of Kings and Magistrates." ✓

Present Means - - - - - "Present Means and brief Delineation of a Free Commonwealth, easy to put in practice and without delay."

Ready Way - - - - - - "The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, and the Excellence thereof compared with the Inconveniences and Dangers of readmitting Kingship in this Nation."

Of Reformation - - - - "Of Reformation in England, and the Causes that Hitherto have Hindered it." (In 2 books)

Church Government - - - - "The Reason of Church Government Urged against Prelaty." (In 2 books)

Brief Notes - - - - - "Brief Notes upon a Late Sermon titled, 'The Fear of God and the King; preached and since published by Mathew Griffith, D.D., and Chaplain to the Late King."

Letter to a Friend - - - "A Letter to a Friend concerning the Ruptures of the Commonwealth."


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A STUDY OF MILTON'S POLITICAL OPINIONS.

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In beginning his tract on the Reason of Church Government Urged against Prelaty, John Milton asserts that individual subjects, of both church and state, should instruct themselves in the reasons of their government. On this conception as a foundation rests the whole super-structure of his political opinions, and in this foundation liberty holds a peculiar position. To Milton liberty is the ultimate goal of all laudable human endeavor, and for him, at least, liberty is no vague abstraction, no visionary mirage, but a vitalizing force in all civil communities that seek to admit it in its proper form. These two ideas, thus briefly delineated, give us the groundwork of Milton's political opinions; all his subsequent theories, intricate and chimerical as some of them may seem, are based on this fundamental conception of what we shall call rational liberty. Milton himself would style it - liberty based on right reasoning.

The individual who is poorly instructed can not be free; this is the meaning of rational liberty to Milton. Before the people of any nation may truly enjoy freedom, a given form of government must have existed long enough for the people to have become familiar with its various institutions. As one studies the life and writings of Milton as a political scientist, this particular theory of liberty must be kept constantly
in mind, for to him it was the one great fundamental principle on which society must rest. He would, with Aristotle, draw the line sharply between mere opinion and true knowledge, and against the political condition of his own day he urges: "there is no art that hath been more cankered in her principles, more soiled and slubbered with aphorising pedantry, than the art of policy; and that most, where a man would think should least be, in Christian commonwealths."

In participating in political affairs, therefore, men are to be governed by reason, and are not to follow popularized ideals simply because history has accorded to them a prominent place. In this phase of his political philosophy, Milton's plea is much the same as that of the more modern reformer who bewails the fact that the people in general refuse to take anything like an intelligent part in governmental matters, and, in fact, remain entirely apathetic with respect to practical politics. With great fervor Milton more than once in his prose writings, refers to the fact that the greatest and most important battles are fought in time of seeming peace; for under the stress of war few men can fail to do their best, while times of peace present a true test of a man's manhood and citizenship. In the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates he states that he is thoroughly convinced of the fact that

most men are apt for civil war but can not stand the stress of the dark days which are bound to come when an attempt is made to set a new government on its feet. At first, they are intoxicated by the novelty of the situation, and believe that they are doing a great work for the cause of freedom; but they soon backslide when the inevitable problems of government come up for solution. In working out these problems, they forget that they are working in the cause of liberty and justice and begin to figure in terms of personal gain. That men abuse their freedom is, of course, the strongest argument against too tolerant a government; Milton would overcome this objection by insisting that all men be governed by reason and not by custom and blind affections. "I call a complete and generous education," he says in his tract Of Education,"that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war."

According to Milton's conception, inward liberty is the necessary attribute of outward liberty. This inward liberty, Milton would be quick to inform us, is not the complement of outward liberty but is, rather, its one great prerequisite; without the former the latter could not exist. This inward

liberty is to be brought about by following assiduously the dictates of conscience. When Milton came to write his Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, some eight years after writing the first tract mentioned, he formulated this idea for us in his own words: "For, indeed, none can love freedom heartily but good men; the rest love not freedom but license." A little later, in his Second Defence of the People of England, he expounded the doctrine as follows: "Real and substantial liberty is to be sought rather from within than from without; its existence depends, not so much on the terror of the sword, as in sobriety of conduct and integrity of life."

Christianity, naturally, is made by Milton the basis of the proper sort of citizenship. Underneath the power of reason, which he insisted on so warmly, must be the clear Christian conscience; this alone can bring about the inward liberty which must precede outward liberty in any of its phases. He can not impress on his readers too strongly the necessity of basing citizenship on Christian virtue; note how forcefully he states this idea in the words: "Virtue, the only genuine source of political and individual liberty, the only true safeguard of states, the bulwark of their prosperity and renown." Addressing England and Scotland in his Of Re-

3. Ibid., p. 259.
formation in England he again gives us his idea of the highest form of citizenship based on inward liberty: "Go on hand in hand, 0 nations, never be disunited; be the praise and the heroic song of all posterity; merit this, but seek only virtue, not to extend your limits: (for what needs to win a fading triumphant laurel out of the tears of wretched men?) but to settle the pure worship of God in his church, and justice in the state."

This virtue, or inward liberty, is to be coupled very definitely with the world of action as well as the world of thought. In the Areopagitica we read: "I can not praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat." Learning for the sake of learning was never a part of Milton's philosophy; learning was merely a means to the perfecting of the life of the individual for his state and for his God. Inward liberty, based on a free Christian conscience; then the enjoyment of outward liberty by following explicitly the mandates of that inner liberty, and reasoning grounded on that conscience: here was the sum and substance of Milton's conception of freedom which stands as a foundation to the whole system of his political philosophy.

Milton's theory of liberty first takes tangible form, for those who seek to find it on the pages of his prose writings, in the great religious controversy which began to receive his attention about 1640. An analysis of the tracts which belong to this period in his life must bring us at once to the conclusion that liberty in this particular aspect means absolute religious toleration. This very thing, Milton believes, is being brought about by the Reformation, but he asserts at the outset that the Reformation in England has had certain hindrances which militate against religious freedom. Chief among these hindrances he would place the institution of prelaty; he is convinced that freedom of religion can not be realized under prelaty, for the prelates work constantly against the inward liberty which to Milton is indispensable.

Milton expresses this in a happy figure which he uses in his Reasons of Church Government Urged against Prelaty. He has been discoursing on the subject of schism, which to prelaty in his day was so odious, and he asserts that if prelaty does free England from schism it is only in the way that the dead palsy frees a man from pain. He adds that the prelates might as well say that winter keeps down all the noxious weeds - for they would ignore the fact that it also keeps down all useful vegetation. Milton would have it that schisms are inevitable if religious freedom is the goal; indeed, if they be of the right sort, they will tend to hasten reformation. "And thus I leave it," he declares, "as a declared truth, that neither the
fear of sects, no, nor rebellion, can be a fit plea to stay re-
formation, but rather to push it forward with all possible dili-
gence and speed." "Noise it till ye be hoarse," he proclaims
in the same tract, "that a rabble of sects will come in; it will
be answered ye, No rabble, sir priest; but an unanimous multi-
tude of good protestants will then join to the church, which
now, because of you, stand separated."  

All this has, to Milton, a very definite political aspect. He refutes the argument that prelaty is the only form of church
government agreeable to monarchy, and points out that, quite
to the contrary, prelaty is really an enemy of monarchy; for,
"that which can justly be proved hurtful and offensive to every
true Christian, will be evinced to be alike hurtful to mon-
archy." That is, whatever militates against the individual
must also militate against monarchy, for the strength of the
latter rests in the happiness of the former, and no king can
be secure when his subjects are discontented. Milton goes on
to prove that the prelates have been a real menace to the king-
ship: "It shall be my task to prove that episcopacy, with that
authority which it challenges in England, is not only not a-
greeable, but tending to the destruction of monarchy."  

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2. Ibid., p. 464.
4. Ibid., p. 393.

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He points out instances in English history where the bishops consulted only their own interests when they found themselves working at crosspurposes with the crown; for example, it was the prelates who caused King John to lose Normandy and later even his own throne. The bishops never supported the king for his own sake but they had learned from experience that they could best realize their own selfish ambitions by giving the crown the kind of support that would result in enhancing the power of the prelates under the leadership of men like Archbishop William Laud. This one-sided coalition, Milton believed, wrought great harm to the state as a whole and consequently must inevitably work against the man who stood at the head of the state.

To Milton it was deplorable that men who pose as representatives of God here on earth should be able to gain temporal power, and increase their worldly riches, by virtue of their position in the church. So far as organization was concerned, he stood for a complete separation of church and state. In his first religious tract he says: "What a dangerous fallacy this, when a spiritual man may snatch to himself any temporal dignity or dominion, under pretence of receiving it for the church's use?" Milton frequently calls the Bible to witness, and with regard to the temporal power of priests

he argues that Christ taught the world that his kingdom was not of this world.

Some years after Milton had finished his tracts on religious freedom, he had occasion to set down his views on another phase of rational liberty as applied to practical politics. In 1644 he published his Areopagitica in which he presented his opinions on the freedom of the press. Here again we find him clinging tenaciously to the idea which vitalizes all of his political writings - the idea of liberty based on right reasoning. We note immediately that he is concerned with the individual citizen and that he is insisting of reserving to him the right to instruct himself in matters political, unhampered by governmental restrictions. In this tract he gives us a text for the proper sort of public service, and, indeed, it is a perfect text of Milton's own public service: "For he who freely magnifies what hath been nobly done, and fears not to declare as freely what might be done better, gives ye the best covenant of his fidelity; and that his loyalist affection and his hope waits on your proceedings." Milton is convinced that the utmost bound of civil liberty is attained "when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed." In the first paragraph of one of his

1. Milton made but one exception; he would grant this freedom to all but papists.
3. Ibid., p. 50.
latest tracts he says: "I never read of any state, scarce of any tyrant, grown so incurable, as to refuse counsel from any in a time of public deliberation, much less to be offended." The state should encourage the freest expression of opinion, and should always be a willing listener to suggestions from individual subjects. To Milton, a free press, for the realization of this, was absolutely essential to a liberty-loving nation.

The fact that bad books would be mixed with the good was, to Milton, not a tenable argument against freedom of the press. He believed that the masses should be allowed to see the bad as well as the good, and should be allowed to decide for themselves what was worth their while and what was not. People should be encouraged to use their reasoning powers independently, and should learn to appreciate the good by having come in contact with the evil. Milton was sure that the highest form of freedom could never be attained unless this right were reserved to the individual and not interfered with in any way by the state. He would put it thus: "He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian."

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In order that the sort of liberty which Milton advocated may be enjoyed by individual subjects, the government must not lay down any austere codes of diet, dress, amusement, or, in fact, anything which touches the relation of the individual to his ordinary, everyday life. In this Milton proves himself to be the great prophet of that doctrine of individualism which has come to characterize modern English political science. Each citizen is to be allowed to work out his own life along the lines prescribed by the dictates of his own conscience, and it is only when he openly violates the rights of others, or steps outside the bounds set for him by established Christian society that organized government is to attempt to limit his sphere of activity. Thus, it is evident, the modern theory of laissez faire is thoroughly Miltonic.

In discussing the theories of the Puritan Revolution, William A. Dunning states that Milton always thought of liberty in terms of the individual; in this he stands out in contrast to Hobbes, his great contemporary in political science, who sought to prove that liberty resided in the state as a unit and should not be referred to in terms of the individual. Again, in contrasting Milton with Spinoza, another political writer of Milton's time, Dunning says: "The distinction that is most

1. History of Political Theories from Luther to Montesquieu, pp. 241-248.
obvious between them is that Spinoza looks at the matter from the standpoint of the state, while Milton is chiefly concerned with the individual." Sir Robert Filmer believed that Milton's doctrine of popular sovereignty was an impossible theory. On the question of the position of the individual with respect to society, Milton's opinions probable resembled those of John Locke more than any other of his contemporaries; but Dunning asserts that even Locke in his plea for toleration does not reach so advanced a point as that attained by Milton in his plea for the freedom of the individual.

Passing from Milton's general opinions on matters of liberty and citizenship, we shall look at his theories of government both in point of machinery and the workings of that machinery. To sum up these theories at the outset - Milton believed in liberty for the masses but authority for the capable.

Deep in Milton's political make-up was the firm conviction that sovereignty resides perpetually in the people and is only delegated to kings and magistrates. This idea is set forth chiefly in his Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, the aim

1. Ibid., p. 316.
2. In his Observations on Government. (See bibliography.)
3. History of Political Theories from Luther to Montesquieu, p. 366.
of which is to prove that the people of England had ample authority to overthrow the government of Charles I. In this tract Milton points out that the king receives his authority by virtue of the fact that it is delegated to him by the people at the time of his coronation. Since kings and magistrates hold their authority from the people, the people may withdraw that authority if it is abused, and the withdrawing of this authority may take any form the people elect as they alone are sovereign. "Thus far hath been considered," Milton declares, "the power of kings and magistrates; how is was and is originally the people's, and by them conferred in trust only to be employed to the common peace and benefit; with liberty therefore and right remaining in them, to reassume it to themselves, if by kings or magistrates it is abused; or to dispose of it by alteration, as they shall judge most conducing to the public good." 1

In his Defence of the People of England Milton states that Charles I was beheaded "by virtue of the supreme authority on earth," i.e., the people. He declares that this is the universal decree of nature as well as of God; "You see the closer we keep to nature, the more evidently does the people's power appear to be above that of the prince." 2 Milton calls the classical writers on political science to his aid to bear testimony on the subject of popular sovereignty, and he quotes

copiously from such writers as Plato and Aristotle. In this same tract he quotes from Livy as follows: "The sovereign power [of the Romans] resided in the people; so that they parted not with more than they retained." Milton finds numerous instances in history to prove that the people have, in the last analysis, been supreme.

With regard to the origin of government, a close scrutiny of Milton's political writings will reveal the fact that he held tenaciously to the contractual theory. This theory he expounds best in his Tenure of Kings and Magistrates. Here he asserts that men first banded themselves together for mutual protection, and for general convenience chose one or more above the rest to whom they came gradually to delegate powers exercised originally by the people as a whole. All men are by nature free and each citizen is in theory the peer of the king. The king and his officers were originally, and consequently still are, subject to the same obligations and restrictions as their subjects, and they have no rights other than those natural rights which are common to all men of the nation. In expounding his conception of the contractual theory of government, Milton attempted to show that the agreement between people and governors was a sort of mutual covenant which could not be broken with impunity even by a king. He wished

1. Ibid., p. 128.
to prove that if the king broke his part of the covenant then the people were no longer bound to support him, and they might again assemble and draw up a new contract among themselves as they had done originally. With regard to the breaking of a covenant Milton says: "If I covenant, not to hurt an enemy, in favor of him and forbearance, and hope of his amendment, and he, after that, should do me thenfold injury and mischief to what he had done when I so covenanted, and still be plotting what may tend to me destruction, I question not but that his afteractions release me; nor know I covenant so sacred, that withholds me from demanding justice on him." Here Milton is, of course, referring to Charles I to whom he believed the people of England no longer owed allegiance because he had first broken his part of the covenant, and had proved himself to be an enemy of the people. Political institutions, then, according to Milton, are the result, both logically and historically, of the social contract to which every individual in the state, whether he be king or the meanest subject, is a party.

In the same tract in which he expresses his views on the origin of government, Milton has also given us his theory concerning the origin of law; he believed that laws originated as restrictions on the power of kings and magistrates. That he

had held this theory from the time when he was a young man in college is proved by the fact that he mentions it a number of times in his Common-Place Book. Of the entries in the this book the following is typical: "Lambard saith that laws were first devised to bound and limit the powers of governours, that they might not make lust thire judge and might thire minister. Archeion. c. 3."

In the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates Milton keeps to this same idea in maintaining that laws were devised to limit the authority of the officers of government; that the law was set above the magistrates. He was exceedingly fervent in his advocacy of the supremacy of the law over its ministers, and in his tracts constantly called attention to the fact that kings and magistrates have always had to take an oath to

1. This book consists of a series of notes which Milton took on his early readings. The manuscript is in the collection of Sir Frederick Graham. These notes reveal Milton's earliest attitude toward political science, economics, and religion. They also show what books Milton read as a young man and, to some extent, what authors influenced him most. In this manuscript, for example, we learn that Milton was much interested in the history of the early kings of England and that he must have been especially interested in Asser's Life of Alfred, the Great. Milton quotes from Asser on page 9 of the Camden edition of the Common-Place Book.
abide by the laws of their people. In one of his latest political writings he affirms that since the people are above the law they are even more above the ministers of the law. After the execution of Charles I Milton prepared his Defence of the People of England, in which he stated that the one justification of the people was to be found in their laws. He argued that the highest law was that of God, and that God had laid down his laws for kings as well as subjects. The main body of the argument of the second chapter of this tract is to the effect that the kings of the Jews were subject to the same laws as the people; the laws themselves were purposely intended to be restrictions on the power of the kings. Here, again, he brings in both Plato and Aristotle to prove his point, and to show that his views coincided with those of the great political scientists in history.

Laws - at least the best laws - come as the result of the exercising of rational liberty; they come from the people and represent the reasoning of individual subjects, who have followed Milton's advice to "instruct themselves in the reason

of their government." In his *Eikonoklastes*, Milton says: "but law in a free nation hath been ever public reason, the enacted reason of a parliament."

The doctrine of divine right of kings was absolutely untenable to Milton. He believed that the king held his throne by virtue of but one fact—that if had been entrusted to him by his people. He would say: "Our king made not us, but we him." This is a typical expression of Milton on the subject of the rights of kings. The kings of England are not God's anointed, in any sense, so far as their crowns are concerned; and if the expression "the king can do no wrong" means anything in England it means that he has not power enough to do wrong unless he oversteps his authority and becomes a tyrant. In the *Defence* Milton points out that the king of England has no power to act alone, and that the only governing body in England that has such power is the House of Commons, for it represents the people while the king and the lords represent only themselves. It is, therefore, absurd for English people to speak of divine right of kings, for the theory can not stand in the light of English traditions and English laws.

Hereditary title, Milton asserts, was based merely on courtesy and convenience; the son of a king was not *ipso facto* king by divine right, but simple because it was a convenient practice to have the son take his father's place. If this man when he becomes king is accountable only to God then the

coronation oaths which he takes are mere mockery. As a matter of fact, the king, in his coronation oath, swears himself to be the servant of the people and to abide by their laws. He does not thereby become supreme but becomes subservient to the representatives of the people in the national parliament. In the *Eikonoklastes* we read: "In all wise nations the legislative power, and the judicial execution of that power, have been most commonly distinct, and in several hands; but yet the former supreme, the other subordinate."

Milton was not inherently opposed to all kings, but he drew a sharp line between kings and tyrants. In his *Second Defence of the People of England* he boldly announces that a tyrant is not, and can not be, a king, and that a tyrant is the kingship's greatest enemy; the world's history proves that more kings have been subverted by tyrants than by their subjects. Milton states emphatically in his preface to the *Eikonoklastes* that it is not his intention to write "against a king," and even in the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* it is evident that he is not opposed to good kings but only to tyrants.

Milton maintains that the people of England did not rise up and kill their king, for when he became a tyrant he ceased to be a king; "who kills a king must kill him while he is a

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3. Ibid., p. 307.
The most loyal supporter of royalty dared not assert that the outrageous enormities of the administration of Charles were the rights of kings, for if they did then there could be no such thing as a tyrant. Milton contends, further, that men like Salmasius do kings more harm than good because they seek to teach the people that they are slaves and that they should endure tyrants.

Milton defines a tyrant as follows: "He is a tyrant who places his own welfare above that of his subjects." Charles I, had done this and, therefore, should be branded as a tyrant; he had assumed that there could be no treason save against the king, and had failed to take into consideration the fact that the people might, through their laws, try the king for treason, and convict him by any means made necessary by the circumstances of the case. This was Charles' attitude according to Milton: "Finally, instead of praying for his people as a good king should do, he prays to be delivered from them." This and the following quotation should make clear Milton's idea of the difference between a good king and a tyrant. "He would be thanked for trusting them, and ought to thank them rather for trusting him; the trust issuing first

2. The First Defence was written as an answer to a book by Salmasius.
Milton held that it is the natural right of any nation to overthrow a tyrant. This right is world-old and has been exercised by all the great nations in history; it accords with the law of God and the law of nature. Milton admits that Christ often upheld kingship, but contends that he never sanctioned tyranny and with regard to the law of nature he says: "nothing is more suitable to the law of nature, than that punishment be inflicted on tyrants." Egypt and the ancient nations of Asia hated tyrants and frequently the people rose to overthrow them. To prove this Milton quotes from the old writers and especially the Greek and Roman classic writers; from Seneca he quotes: "There can not be a greater nor more acceptable sacrifice offered up to Jupiter, than a wicked prince."

A tyrant is to Milton inferior to all men; he believed that the people of England had a natural right to object to the tyranny of Charles I. and that their laws gave them the right even to kill him. He is addressing his countrymen when he says: "He (God) has gloriously delivered you, the first of nations, from the two great mischiefs of this life,

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1. Ibid., p. 354.
2. Milton would not draw as sharp a line between the law of God and the law of nature as that draw by Salmasius.
4. Ibid., p. 131.
and most pernicious to virtue, tyranny and superstition; he has endued you with greatness of mind to be the first of mankind, who after having conquered their own king, and having had him delivered into their hands, have not scrupled to condemn him judicially, and, pursuant to that sentence of condemnation, to put him to death."

Following out this same idea, Milton maintained that the right of revolution is a fundamental right. No matter what the existing form of government is, the people of the nation have a right to revolt if the majority desire a change. In the same way they may object to any phase of the government, and will, in the realm of higher law, find justification for their action if they are prompted by a desire for public good, and are not seeking to realize personal ambition. To the question of what authority the people had to revolt against the government of Charles, Milton replies: "But if you insist to know, by what right, by what law; by that law, I tell you, which God and nature have enacted, viz. that whatever things are for the universal good of the whole state, are for that reason lawful and just." Nature never expected man to endure any form of government; for if she teaches him to endure one, she teaches him to endure all. The very best citizens

1. Ibid., p. 212.
have exercised the right of revolution in many of the great
nations of history; "the best men of the age killed Caesar, 1
the tyrant, in the very senate."

Milton was convinced that the people of every nation are
given, by God and nature, the right to choose what form of
government is best suited to their needs. He finds both in
the Old and New Testament ample proof that God has ordained
that men may choose their own form of government; and he
believes that in the struggle with the king the course of the
people was made plain to them by God himself. With regard
to how the particular form of government for each nation is to
be decided upon Milton says: "So that wise and prudent men
are to consider and see what is profitable and fit for the
people in general; for it is very certain that the same form
of government is not equally convenient for all nations, nor
for the same nation at all times; but sometimes one, some-
times another may be more proper, according as the industry
or valour of the people may increase or decay. But if you
deprive the people of this liberty of setting up what govern-
ment they like best among themselves, you take that from them
in which the life of all civil liberty consists." 3

1. Ibid., p. 131.
3. Ibid., p. 79.
again emphasizes this idea in one of his very latest prose tracts, published in 1660, which he called Brief Notes on a Late Sermon. "No law can be fundamental but that which is grounded on the light of nature or right reason, commonly called moral law: which no form of government was ever counted, but arbitrary, and at all times in the choice of every free people, or their representers. This choice of government is so essential to their freedom, that longer than they have it they are not free."

Milton would not preclude, absolutely, any form of government most expedient for exercising authority delegated by the people. This will stand as an answer to the question: What form of government did Milton advocate, when you take his prose works as a whole? It is true that at one time in his life he did come out strongly in favor of one particular form of government, but he admits that even then he did it chiefly because he thought the times demanded immediate and definite action; a discussion of his plan will appear a little later. The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, in many ways, gives us most of the ground work of Milton's political opinions, and it has already been noted that in this tract Milton is not opposed to kings in general but is simply

arguing against abuse of power. The central idea of this tract is that sovereignty resides in the people and is merely delegated to kings and magistrates.

When Milton was called to the Latin secretaryship under Cromwell, he had an opportunity to try his own hand at the affairs of state in which he had so long been interested. He was, however, essentially a theorist, and was concerned more with the principles than with the organs of government. Naturally enough, this period in Milton's life led him to think more along the lines of practical politics and at the eve of the Stuart Restoration he outlined very definitely, in a series of tracts, a form of government which he urgently recommended to his countrymen. He saw clearly, perhaps more clearly than any of his contemporaries, that this was a great crisis in the evolution of Anglo-Saxon political institutions and methods, and he believed that the times demanded an immediate and forceful solution of the problems that confronted the English people. He found these people inclined toward apathy in matters governmental and he wished to impress on them the great need of crystallizing once and for all the ideas that had vitalized the Puritan uprising. With this in mind, he drew up and expounded a plan of government, with the necessary organs for carrying it out, into which he introduced the ideas and ideals for which he had left, for a time, the life he loved and entered the life of a controversial political scientist.
In a letter to a friend Milton gives us a good introduction to the details of his one specific plan for a form of government. From the first part of the letter, which is dated October 20, 1659, we learn that Milton had been talking to this friend on the previous evening concerning the political situation and that he (Milton) had consented to write down the opinions he had expressed. In the letter is an expression of the hope that even now he may have some part in the great struggle for liberty. Let the excerpts from this letter, then, serve as an introduction to the discussion of the scheme for a government which Milton formulated:

"Being now in anarchy, without a counselling and governing power; and the army, I suppose, finding themselves insufficient to discharge at once both military and civil affairs, the first thing to be found out with all speed, without which no commonwealth can subsist, must be a senate, or great council of state, in whom must be the power, first to preserve the public peace; next, the commerce with foreign nations; and, lastly, to raise monies for the management of these affairs: this must be either the parliament re-admitted to sit, or a council of state allowed of by the army, since they only now have the power. The terms to be stood on are, liberty of conscience to all professing Scripture to be the rule of their faith and worship; and the abjuration of single person." 1

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"And whether the civil government be an annual democracy, or a perpetual aristocracy, is not to be considered for the extremities wherein we are, and the hazard of our safety from our common enemy, gaping at present to devour us. That it be not an oligarchy, or the faction of a few, may be easily prevented by the numbers of their choosing, who may be found infallibly constant to those two conditions fore-named, full liberty of conscience, and the abjuration of monarchy proposed: and the well-ordered committees of their faithfullest adherents in every county may give this government the resemblance and effects of a perfect democracy. As for the reformation of laws, and the places of judicature, whether to be here, as at present, or in every county, as hath been long aimed at, and many such proposals, tending no doubt to public good, they may be considered in due time, when we are past these pernicious pangs, in a hopeful way of health and firm constitution."

In the prose tracts which appeared just before the Stuart Restoration Milton declares that the best form of government is a free commonwealth without "single person or house of lords." He now denounces kingship, but chiefly because of the peculiar dangers it would subject England to at

1. Ibid., pp. 105-106.
this particular time. In making his appeal in these tracts Milton attacks, universally, kingship in general, but it seems perfectly reasonable to believe that he did this simply because he thought the times demanded it and thought that he could draw more men over to the side of the commonwealth. Let us not think for one minute that Milton was not sincere in this his last effort as a political scientist; we should not, however, allow ourselves to believe that Milton suddenly abandoned all his old ideas with regard to political institutions and as suddenly came forward with a wholly wild and fanciful scheme for mending the bruises of political England. Milton's political opinions were a steady and definite growth; while it might seem that his latest tracts contradict the ideas expressed in his earlier writings, yet a close study of the underlying thread of thought must convince us that here are the same ideas which gave life and strength to his earliest prose.

1. The author admits freely that exception may be made to the stand he has taken on this particular phase of Milton's political career. The other view would be, of course, that Milton, for the rest of his life, could not tolerate kingship even under a just and magnanimous king. This contrasting view may be easily supported by the bitter attacks on monarchy which appear in Milton's latest tracts; but the author is firmly convinced that, in the light of
Let us see what Milton had to say in favor of the free commonwealth which he advocated:

"A free commonwealth, not only held by wisest men in all ages the noblest, the manliest, the equallest, the justest government, the most agreeable to all due liberty and proportioned equality, both human, civil, and Christian, most cherishing to virtue and true religion, but also (I may say it with the greatest probability) plainly commended, or rather enjoined by our Saviour himself, to all Christians, not without remarkable disallowance, and the brand of Gentilism upon kingship."

all of the evidence, Milton still remained tolerant and made these particular attacks simply to meet the needs of the hour. His greatest poems were all written after this episode, and in them it seems perfectly clear that Milton was tolerant toward all forms of government which made possible the enjoyment of rational liberty.

"Free commonwealths have ever been counted fittest and properest for civil, virtuous, and industrious nations, abound- ing with prudent men worthy to govern; monarchy fittest to curb degenerat, corrupt, idle, proud, luxurious people."¹

"I doubt not but all ingenuous and knowing men will easily agree with me, that a free commonwealth without single person or house of lords is by far the best government, if it can be had; but we have all this while, say they, been expecting it, and cannot yet attain it."²

Civil strife during the time since the civil war, according to Milton, has made it impossible for the authorities to draw up definitely a form of government; now the time is ripe to take definite action or England will sink back into the condition which prevailed before the Puritan uprising. Before giving the details of his plan for a form of government he points out "the danger and confusion of readmitting kingship in this land; especially against the rules of all prudence and example, in a family once rejected, and therefore not to be trusted with the power of revenge."³

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2. Ready Way, P. W., Vol. II, p. 120.
Milton first outlined his plan in a letter to General Monk. In this he exhorted General Monk to adopt the plan and to take a very firm stand for it with the army back of him. He foresaw much opposition to the plan, but he believed that after the people saw how well it worked they would all come over to the new government and would cease their clamor for the restoration of the kingship. In the Read and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth he states that England has laid the foundations for a commonwealth and if she does not finish the structure she will be the laughing stock of Europe; furthermore, the restoration of the kingship would only serve to bring on another civil war. In the first paragraph of this tract he says: "If their absolute determination be to enthrall us, before so long a Lent of servitude, they may permit us a little shroving time first, wherein to speak freely, and take our leaves of liberty."

The form of government which Milton advocated may be gathered from a careful study of his latest prose writings. In the first place, an election was to be called, at which election only those favorable to a commonwealth were to be allowed to vote. Prior to the holding of this election, 1.

the chief men of each county were to have a meeting and were to go over carefully the political situation with a view to suggesting remedies for the existing difficulties. At the very outset, these men were to be promised a free commonwealth, and they were to be instructed to return to their homes and call an election of local councils. These local councils were to begin the administration of local affairs immediately and were to be given to understand that they were to exercise wide local autonomy without fear of being disturbed by the central government unless they overstepped their authority; only matters which concerned more than one county were to be settled at London.

At the regular seat of government of each county, popular elections were to be held for the purpose of selecting the usual number of "knights and burgesses" to sit in a national parliament which was to be called the "Grand or General Council of the Nation." The powers of this council, as outlined by Milton, were to be as follows:

(1) to maintain an army and navy for the preservation of peace.

(2) to raise and manage the public revenue.

(3) to administer all foreign affairs.

(4) to make general laws, subject to the assent of the standing council in each city, or of a general assembly called for the purpose.
This general council was to be the basis of the new government. It was to be made up of the ablest men in the nation, who were to be chosen by the people at large. Their authority was definitely marked out on the principle that whatever was not granted to them specifically was denied; the greater power was to rest with the local legislative bodies which more directly represented the people.

With regard to the power of the council Milton says:

"In this grand council must be the sovereignty, not transferred, but delegated only, and as it were deposited, reside; with this caution, they must have the forces by sea and land committed to them for preservation of the common peace and liberty; must raise and manage public revenue, at least with some inspectors deputed for the satisfaction of the people, how it is employed; must make or propose, as more expressly shall be said anon, civil laws, treat of commerce, peace or war with foreign nations; and, for the carrying on some particular affairs with more secrecy and expedition, must elect, as they have already out of their number and others, a council of state."

Followers of Milton's political ideas are naturally surprised when they come to his views on the question of the

1 Ready Way, p. 121, Vol. II, p. 121;
term of office for the men who are to sit in the grand council; "the grand or general council, being well chosen, should be perpetual." Milton believed that a perpetual senate would give stability to the government and would prevent certain evils which result from short terms of office. But while he earnestly recommended this he stated that, if there were too much objection to a perpetual senate, a partial rotation might easily be provided for; however, if there were to be rotation, only a part of the body should retire at once. Milton himself could see little objection to having a perpetual senate: "The ship of the commonwealth is always under sail; they sit at the stern, and if they steer well, what need is there to change them, it being rather dangerous?" If there were rotation the best men would constantly be going out of office.

1. Ibid., p. 122.
2. The scheme Milton proposed for accomplishing this is interesting in the light of the arrangement for rotation in the United States Senate: he suggests (p.122) that "the third part of the senators may go out according to the precedence of their election."
Again, he explains, in his letter to General Monk:

"Though this grand council be perpetual, yet they will then, thus limited, have so little matter in their hands, or power to endanger our liberties; and the people so much in theirs, to prevent them, having all judicial laws in their own choice, and free votes in all those which concern generally the whole commonwealth, that we shall have little cause to fear the perpetuity of our general senate; which will be then nothing else but a firm foundation and custody of our public liberty, peace and union, through the whole commonwealth, and the transactors of our affairs with foreign nations."  

his writings as a whole, it is not a difficult task to prove
Milton's republicanism; we shall say then that Milton was
tolerant toward all but despotic and tyrannical governments,
but, for purposes of classification, that he was primarily
a republican.

It is comparatively easy to find evidences of the fact
that Milton was not a democrat. In the last analysis he did
not have faith in the masses and he frequently took occasion
to make thrusts at them. Witness, for example, the follow­
ing quotation from the Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free
Commonwealth: "not committing all to the noise and shouting
of a rude multitude, but permitting only those of them who
are rightly qualified, to nominate as many as they will; and
out of that number others of a better breeding, to choose a less
number more judiciously, till after a third or fourth sifting
and refining of the exactest choice, they only be chosen who
are the due number, and seem by most voices the worthiest." 1
Again, in the same tract, he speaks against unbridled demo­
cracy: "So that the main reason urged why popular assemblies
are to be trusted with the people's liberty, rather than a
senate of principal men, because great men will be still en­
deavouring to enlarge their power, but the common sort will be

contented to maintain their own liberty, is by experience found to be false; none being more immoderate and ambitious to amplify their power, than such popularities."

Milton expresses the same idea in *Paradise Regained* when he says:

"And what the people but a herd confused,
A miscellaneous rabble, who extol
Things vulgar, and, well weighed, scarce worth the praise?
They praise and they admire they know not what,
And know not whom, but as one leads the other;
And what delight to be by such extolled,
To live upon their tongues and be their talk?
Of whom to be dispraised were no small praise -
His lot who dares be singularly good.
The intelligent among them and the wise
Are few, and glory scarce of few is raised."

That the supreme administrative and legislative body should be made up of the best and wisest men in the nation is thoroughly Miltonic. This means, of course, the men who are best in every sense; it means the men who are capable of enjoying outward freedom because they are inwardly free - Christian men who follow the dictates of conscience. It is to these

men that Hilton would give the governing power; they might at times not represent the majority, but when they do not then Hilton would plead for minority rule. He would say: "is it just or reasonable, that most voices against the main end of government should enslave the less number that would be free?"

This was his philosophy: "To make the people fittest to choose, and the chosen fittest to govern, will be to mend our corrupt and faulty education, to teach the people faith, not without virtue, temperance, modesty, sobriety, parsimony, justice; not to admire wealth or honor, to hate turbulence and ambition; to place everyone his private welfare and happiness in the public peace, liberty and safety."

Milton has a natural antipathy for the mere politician; he could not countenance the man who took a hand in the government simply to realize personal ambitions and who always put his own interests above those of the state. Of the politician of his own day he gives us the following characterization: "This is the masterpiece of the modern politician, how to qualify and mould the sufferance and subjection of the people to the length of the foot that is to tread on their necks; how rapine may serve itself with the fair

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2. Ibid., p. 126.
and honourable pretences of public good; how the puny law may be brought under the wardship and control of lust and will: in which attempt if they fall short, then must a superficial colour of reputation by all means, direct or indirect, be gotten to wash over the unsightly bruise of honour."

It was undoubtedly this realization of the evil effects of the politician as a legislator that led Milton, toward the end of his political career, to advocate life tenure for the members of the chief national legislative body. He believed that if the members of the grand council had to think constantly of their own reelection they would be apt not to work for the public good, but would do such things as would on the face of them appeal to the people who took part in the elections. In a perpetual senate the members would never be concerned with re-election and could devote all their attention to problems of state. Milton believed that the proper political creed was the teaching of Christ - let he that is greatest be servant of all. In his own mind, this was the very thing that would be accomplished by his plan for a free commonwealth: "And what government comes nearer to this precept of Christ, than a free commonwealth; wherein they who are the greatest, are perpetual servants and drudges to the public at their own cost and charges, neglect their own

affairs, yet are not elevated above their brethren; live soberly in their families, walk the street as other men, may be spoken to freely, familiarly, friendly, without adoration?"  

Another evil that Milton laid upon the politician was that of multiplicity of laws. Short terms for legislators, he believed, was one of the things that accounted for this evil; each succeeding parliament wished to show the people of England that they knew how to make laws. Milton argued that short legislative terms made law making largely a matter of chance; if their were rotation in the grand council, he says in one of his tracts, the "wheel" would have "too much affinity with the wheel of Fortune." "I see not, therefore, how we can be advantaged by successive and transitory parliaments; but that they are much likelier continually to unsettle rather than to settle a free government, to breed commotions, changes, novelties, and uncertainties, to bring neglect upon the present affairs and opportunities, while all minds are in suspense with expectation of a new assembly, and the assembly, for a good space, taken up with the settling of itself. After which, if they find no great work to do, they will make it, by altering or repealing former acts, or making and multiplying

new; that may seem to see what their predecessors saw not, and not to have assembled for nothing; till all law be lost in the multitude of clashing statutes." Such words as these show Milton's keen insight into political institutions; this is Milton at his best. Ideas like these must live; they belong not to any day or age - they apply as well to the conditions of our own twentieth century as to those of Milton's England.

John Milton stands as the great expounder of all that was high and noble in the political philosophy of the Puritans of the seventeenth century. His was the work of handing down to posterity a definite and concrete expression of the doctrines which were to play such an important part in English constitutional history. These Puritan doctrines have been nicely valuated by Herbert L. Osgood in his Essay in the Political Science Quarterly: "But it should never be forgotten that the Puritans conception of democracy was far different from that held by many of its later defenders. There was nothing vulgar about it. The Puritans did not believe that wisdom would be discovered by the counting of heads. They talked little about equality, except the equality of the elect before God. The thought of duty was more often in their minds than

1. Ibid., p. 122.
that of right. They did not claim for all an equal share of political power. They knew the value of character and intelligence, and were resolved that nothing should rob these of their just influence in a well-ordered commonwealth. They identified liberty with virtue. 'Know,' says Milton in one of his loftiest passages, 'that to be free is the same as to be pious, to be wise, to be temperate and just, to be frugal and abstinent, and, lastly, to be magnanimous and brave; so to be the opposite of all these is the same as to be a slave.'

The whole superstructure of Milton's political opinions rested on his conception of rational liberty. To him this was fundamental; it was liberty based on "right reasoning" - outward freedom based on inward freedom. It meant, furthermore, individualism in the best sense of the term. No matter what form Milton's writings took, he was always pleading ardently in the cause of liberty. The same spirit prevails both in his prose and in his poetry. It is to be found in the intense personal invective against Salmassius, in the Defence of the People of England, as well as in the stately lines of Paradise Lost. Milton, the poet, is still Milton, the political scientist, when he says:

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"yet know withal,

Since thy original lapse, true liberty
Is lost, which always with right reason dwells
Twinned, and from her hath no dividual being.
Reason in Man obscured, or not obeyed,
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart passions catch the government
From Reason, and to servitude reduce
Man, till then free. Therefore, since he permits
Within himself unworthy powers to reign
over free reason, God, in judgment just,
Subjects him from without to violent lords,
Who oft as undeservedly enthrall
His outward freedom. Tyranny must be,
Though to the tyrant thereby no excuse.
Yet sometimes nations will decline so low
From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong,
But justice and some fatal curse annexed,
Deprives them of their outward liberty,
Their inward lost:

Milton again sums up his ideas of liberty in the lines of
his sonnet, On the Detraction which Followed upon My Writing

1. Paradise Lost, Book XII, ll. 82-101.
Certain Treatises:

"Licence they mean when they cry liberty;
For who loves that must first be wise and good:"

Such was the contribution of John Milton to the world of political science. He was always an idealist; but his ideals were such as might well be the standard for our own as well as Milton's day. Some of his theories may seem shadowy and impractical; but they were all vitalized by a most fervent love of liberty, and a desire to bring ultimately to his own people the very highest form of Christian citizenship.

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