

Hill is obliged to acknowledge, 'Coppe agreed that adultery, fornication and uncleanness were sins', but he regarded the wickedness of those who hypocritically preached Christianity while evading their real obligations as Christians as so much worse. Coppe's tragedy is that he has, nevertheless, been transformed by the same historian into the 'leader of the drinking, smoking, swearing Ranters'.<sup>26</sup>

Coppe's vision was therefore of a soon to be purged and reformed society. The spirit of Christ would cast down the mighty and the wealthy, sweep away the hypocrisy of formal religion and open the hearts of men and women to a life of true charity, of true righteousness. It is a noble vision and one deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. Moreover, it owes nothing, in this version, to pantheism, antinomianism or liberation from the restraints of a religion which demands self-effacement. Indeed, through the work runs a heavy insistence on the arduous and even frightening social obligations of Christianity. It is an insistence which is abroad in the later 1640s and culminates in different ways in Walwyn, Winstanley and Coppe. 'The true communion amongst men, is to have all things common, and to call nothing one hath, ones own. And the true externall breaking of bread, is to eat bread together in singleness of heart, and to break thy bread to the hungry, *and tell them its their own bread* &c. els your Religion is in vain.'<sup>27</sup> In one of his typical, and yet scriptural, inversions Coppe insists that this rigorous self-denial and service 'is perfect freedom and pure Libertinisme'. With its performance, 'Sin and Transgression is finished and ended'.<sup>28</sup>

Such a vision was critically alarming precisely because it could be argued to have some warrant in the teachings of Christ. It therefore had to be dissociated from them, and it is not at all surprising that accusations of blasphemy and immorality swiftly followed. What is surprising is the credulity of some historians in the face of these charges and their unwillingness to examine Coppe's denials seriously. As we have seen, Coppe was swiftly imprisoned after the appearance of *A Fiery Flying Roll* but was dealt with lethargically, even by seventeenth century standards, thereafter. Beyond Parliamentary condemnation, he was never, as far as we know, officially found guilty of anything, including any offence under the Blasphemy Ordinance of 9 August 1650; which is, of course, supposed to have been occasioned by the sort of Ranter excess Coppe is alleged to have incited and taken part in.

His *Remonstrance* and *Copps Return to the Wayes of Truth*, both of 1651, can be read as the sincere protestations of a man whose social and ethical message has been blanketed under a welter of accusations of blasphemy and immorality without the issue ever being brought to the test in court. But historians have thought otherwise.