

# Historical Argument in the Writings of the English Deists

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## Abstract

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This study examines the role of history in the writings of the English deists, a group of heterodox religious controversialists who were active from the last quarter of the seventeenth century until the middle of the eighteenth century. Its main sources are the published works of the deists and their opponents, but it also draws, where possible, on manuscript sources. Not all of the deists were English (one was Irish and another was of Welsh extraction), but the term ‘English Deists’ has been used on the grounds that the majority of deists were English and that they published overwhelmingly in England and in English. It shows that the deists not only disagreed with their orthodox opponents about the content of sacred history, but also about the relationship between religious truth and historical evidence.

Chapter 1 explains the entwining of theology and history in early Christianity, how the connection between them was understood by early modern Christians, and how developments in orthodox learning set the stage for the appearance of deism in the latter decades of the seventeenth century. Each of the following three chapters is devoted to a different line of argument which the deists employed against orthodox belief. Chapter 2 examines the argument that certain propositions were meaningless, and therefore neither true nor false irrespective of any historical evidence which could be marshalled in their support, as it was used by John Toland and Anthony Collins. Chapter 3 traces the argument that the actions ascribed to God in sacred history might be unworthy of his goodness, beginning with Samuel Clarke’s first set of Boyle Lectures and then progressing through the writings of Thomas Chubb, Matthew Tindal, Thomas Morgan, and William Warburton. Chapter 4 charts the decline of the category of certain knowledge in the latter half of the seventeenth century, the rise of probability theory, and the effect of these developments on the deists’ views about the reliability of historical evidence. Chapter 5 is a case-study, which reads Anthony Collins’s *Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) in light of the findings of the earlier chapters. Finally, a coda provides a conspectus of the state of the debate in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, focusing on the work of four writers: Peter Annet, David Hume, Conyers Middleton, and Edward Gibbon.

## Acknowledgements

I have incurred debts in the writing of this thesis, which it is a pleasure to acknowledge here. The first are to the librarians of the Bodleian Library, the British Library, Cambridge University Library, Lambeth Palace Library, and the libraries of St John's College and Worcester College in Oxford. The second are to students and academics who have helped me: Peter Auger, Alex Englander, Christine Gerrard, Mark Goldie, Jonathan Gordon, Nick Hardy, Per Landgren, Rhodri Lewis, Jeffrey Miller, Kathryn Murphy, David Norbrook, Emma Salgård-Cunha, Stefan Uhlig, Abigail Williams, Kelsey Jackson Williams, Edmund White, and Philippa White. I am especially grateful to David Womersley for his diligent and patient supervision.

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## Abbreviations

- ESTC            *The English Short Title Catalogue*
- STC            *A Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475-1640*, eds A.W. Pollard and G.R. Redgrave, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., revised W.A. Jackson, F.S. Ferguson, and Katherine F. Pantzer, 3 vols (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976-91)
- Wing           *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America and of the English Books Printed in Other Countries, 1641-1700* (Index Society: New York, 1945–1951), ed. Donald Wing

## Conventions

Dates before the birth of Christ are marked BC. Dates afterwards are left unmarked. Dates have been regularised to conform to the continental practice of having the year begin on 1 January, rather than on 25 March as was the case in Britain until 1752. They have otherwise been left unaltered. No attempt has been made to regularise the discrepancy of 10 days which arose through the adoption from 1582 of the Gregorian calendar in continental Europe.

There has, for general purposes, been an attempt to maintain gender-neutral language, although male pronouns have been used when discussing anonymous sources. This is a reflection of fact that third-person pronouns are difficult to avoid when talking about individual human agency and that the anonymous sources discussed in this study were very likely written by men. I am not, in applying this convention, asserting that any given work was actually written by a man.

The names of writers which were habitually Latinised in the period (e.g. Hugo Grotius rather than Huig de Groot) have been given in their Latinised form.

The titles of works have been changed so that they conform to modern standards of capitalisation. Where the title is longer than can reasonably be included in a footnote, an abbreviated form has been used and the full title given in the bibliography. Diphthongs have been removed from titles and replaced with the appropriate vowels.

All works cited from before 1800 were printed in London unless otherwise stated.

Short title catalogue references have been given for quoted works which are not uniquely identified by their title and date of publication: STC numbers cover works from 1475-1640; Wing numbers cover works from 1641-1700; and ESTC numbers cover works from 1701-1800.

In citing primary sources, every effort has been made to cite the first edition of a work where this is appropriate. In the case of a small number of works with complicated publication histories, a modern scholarly edition has been used.

In citing sources which were published anonymously, pseudonymously, or with initials, and of which the author is now known, the author's name is given first, followed by the word 'anonymous', the pseudonym, or the initials in brackets. In citing pseudonymous or initialled sources of whom the author remains unknown, the word 'anonymous' is given first, followed by the pseudonym or initials in brackets.

Page signatures have been given for works which do not include page numbers or in which the page numbers are unreliable.

The original italicisation and capitalisation have been retained in quotations from works written before 1800 with the following exceptions for quotations in English:

- Fossil thorns have been rendered as 'th'
- Long 's's have been rendered as 's'
- 'v's given as 'u's have been rendered as 'v's
- 'u's given as 'v's have been rendered as 'u's'
- 'w's given as double 'v's or double 'u's have been rendered as 'w's

- Letters and numbers linking to footnotes have been omitted
- Where the first word of a paragraph, a proper name, or the words 'God' or 'Christ' are given entirely in capitals, the word has been rendered with only the first letter capitalised
- Contractions have been expanded with the missing letters supplied in squared brackets

All biblical quotations are taken from the Authorized or King James Version of the Bible.

## Introduction

After its Restoration in 1660, the Church of England underwent sustained attack, from Catholics and Protestant dissenters and from a new kind of religious controversialist who took issue with Christianity as a whole. Critics of this latter kind took many forms, but were united in their efforts to shake the foundations of orthodox belief. The most important group among them were the deists, who rose from relative obscurity in the 1670s to offer a serious threat to the Church of England in the 1720s and 30s, before dissipating in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The aim of this study is to explain the role of history in the arguments between the deists and their critics. It shows how the deists combined arguments about the content of Christian history with arguments about whether the truth of Christianity could depend on historical evidence.

Deism is not easily defined.<sup>1</sup> The term was used to describe a variety of positions, ranging from scepticism about the reliability of the Bible, through disbelief in miracles, prophecy, providence, and revelation, to denials of the afterlife, the divinity of Jesus, and even God's creation of the world.<sup>2</sup> The term retained a broad range of meanings

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<sup>1</sup> In Europe, 'deistes' was first used in Pierre Viret's *Exposition de la Doctrine de la Foy Chrestienne* (Geneva, 1564), sig. C5v. In England, 'deist' was first used in print in Joseph Hall's *A Sermon of Publike Thanksgiving for the Wonderfull Mitigation of the Late Mortalitie* (1626), sig. A7v and in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1628), sig. Kkkk1v; it was first defined (under the heading 'Anti-Trinitarians') in Thomas Pope Blount's *Glossographia* (1656), Wing B3334, sig. D2r; and it was first used to designate a category of religious controversialist in Edward Stillingfleet's *A Letter to a Deist* (1677), title page and *passim*. 'Deism' was first used in John Dryden's *Religio Laici* (1682), Wing D2342, sig. a1v. 'Theist', meaning the same as 'deist', entered English a little later, was interchangeable with it, fell out of use in the latter decades of the seventeenth century, and began to be used to refer to those who believed in God, in contradistinction to atheists, in the early eighteenth century. For the first use of 'theist' in its earlier sense, see Thomas Pierce, *Autokatakrisis* (1658), sig. N1r and, for an example of its use in the latter sense, see William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist*, 2 vols (1738-41), I, 46.

<sup>2</sup> There has been some debate about whether the term should be used by modern scholars, either because it was hopelessly vague or because the phenomenon which it referred to was exaggerated. There is some truth in these allegations, but they underestimate the consistency of Anglican apologists in defining and applying the term. It would be strange, moreover, if so many works had been written about deism (perhaps 1,500, between 1675 and 1750) without referring to some concrete reality. See S.J. Barnett, *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests: The Origins of Enlightenment Anticlericalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 129-51; S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 11-37; and Robert E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the*

even when the refutation of deism became a major objective for Anglican apologists. The Boyle Lecturers, who included some of the Church of England's most respected defenders, distinguished various species of deism, which they sought to confute and confound.<sup>3</sup> But although 'deism' was a flexible and capacious term, it was most often used to refer to disbelief in revelation.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, though many works were written against deism which omitted to identify any deists, and though many people were accused of deism, a small number of names occurred repeatedly: John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal in the first three decades of the eighteenth century; and Thomas Chubb and Thomas Morgan after 1730.<sup>5</sup> These are the figures with whom this study is principally concerned.

While there was consensus about what deism was and who the deists were, the deists themselves were hostile or ambivalent towards the term. Some purported to be defending Christianity from deism.<sup>6</sup> Some used it to describe other people or defined

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*Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 205-35. For details of how the term was defined, see the following three footnotes.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Bentley, *The Folly of Atheism and (what is now Called) Deism, even with Respect to the Present Life* (1692), Wing B1932, 4-10 and Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1706), 19-45.

<sup>4</sup> See Stillingfleet, *Letter to a Deist*, sig. A3r; William Stephens, *An Account of the Growth of Deism in England* (1696), 4; Charles Leslie, *A Short and Easie Method with the Deists* (1698), 5-7; John Edwards, *A Free Discourse Concerning Truth and Error, Especially in Matters of Religion* (1701), 87; Francis Gastrell, *The Principles of Deism* (1708), 9-10; Joseph Smith, *The Unreasonableness of Deism* (1720), xii; and John Reynolds, *Three Letters to the Deist* (1725), 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> See Gastrell, *The Principles of Deism*, 47; Thomas Woolston, *A Free Gift to the Clergy* (1722), ESTC T040177, 60; Thomas Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1729), ESTC T058115, 5; Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, 416; William Whiston, *Historical Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Samuel Clarke* (1730), ESTC T036320, 88; William Whiston, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. William Whiston*, 2 vols (1753), I, 96; John Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistic Writers*, 3 vols (1754-56), *passim*; anonymous, *The Freethinker's Catechism* (1755), *passim*; William Warburton, *Remarks on Mr. David Hume's Essay on the Natural History of Religion* (1757), 76; Peter Annet, *Tyranny and Persecution Enemies to Liberty and Truth; Displayed in Prose and Verse, by a Lover of Truth and Righteousness* (1763), xxxiv; and Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 89. Edward Herbert, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Herbert of Chisbury, Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, Charles Blount, Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, Thomas Woolston, Peter Annet, Conyers Middleton, and Henry St John, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Bolingbroke, were also routinely identified as deists, but are absent from this study, or feature in it only in passing, because they fall outside its chronological limits or because their works did not exhibit the interplay of evidential and abstract arguments which is the focus of this study.

<sup>6</sup> See John Toland (anonymous), *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), Wing T1762, 176.

themselves in opposition to it.<sup>7</sup> And others used it to describe themselves, but only with the ambiguous prefix ‘Christian’.<sup>8</sup> Nor were they content with their opponents’ placement of them outside Christianity. Though they were habitually unclear about their position on many matters of doctrine, they professed belief in God, upheld the need for public worship, and presented themselves in general terms as Christians. They did not attack Christianity directly, but exacerbated divisions within the Church of England by defending marginal positions in debates which were internal to Christianity. Many of the deists knew each other personally, but there was never an organised deist movement or a set of beliefs to which they subscribed.

There were also important differences among them. Toland rose from humble origins in Ireland to become an international figure, whose patrons included the Electress Sophia of Hanover and Prince Eugene of Savoy.<sup>9</sup> Toland’s writings encompassed theology and philosophy, but he was active primarily as an ecclesiastical historian, scouring the Bodleian Library and other collections, both in Britain and abroad, for incendiary scholarly finds.<sup>10</sup> Collins was a different figure. After studying under the philosopher

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<sup>7</sup> See Charles Blount et al., *The Oracles of Reason* (1693), Wing B3312, sigs E8v-E12v and Anthony Collins (anonymous), *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), ESTC T140491, xlvi.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Christian deist’ was coined by Tindal and then used by Morgan to describe a speaker in a dialogue, whose name he later adopted as a pseudonym. Chubb used the term to describe his own position. See Matthew Tindal (anonymous), *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730), ESTC T101186, 373-82; Thomas Morgan (anonymous), *The Moral Philosopher* (1737), title page; Thomas Morgan (‘Philalethes’), *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. II* (1739), title page; and Thomas Chubb, *An Enquiry into the Ground and Foundation of Religion* (1740), viii. On Morgan’s pseudonymity, see Jan Van Den Berg, ‘Is Thomas Morgan Philalethes?’, *Notes and Queries*, 58:3 (2011), 400-01 and, for a summary of deists’ attitudes to ‘deist’ and ‘deism’, see Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> See Justin Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696-1722* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1-22 and *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-42. In particular, Toland was notable for publishing details of an Italian manuscript of the Gospel of Barnabas, which he had seen in the library of Prince Eugene of Savoy. On this topic, see Justin Champion, ‘Introduction’, in John Toland, *Nazaenus*, ed. Justin Champion (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999), 1-106 and Justin Champion, ‘Apocrypha, Canon and Criticism from Samuel Fisher to John Toland, 1650-1718’, in Allison P. Coudert, Sarah Hutton, Richard D. Popkin, and Gordon M. Weiner (eds), *Judaean-Christian Intellectual Culture in the Seventeenth Century: A Celebration of the Library of Narcissus Marsh (1638-1713)* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 91-117.

John Locke, he lived the life of a minor aristocrat and a major bibliophile.<sup>11</sup> He was distinguished from the other deists by his technical philosophical interests and the persistent rumours of atheism which surrounded him.<sup>12</sup> Tindal was a different case again. He was a lawyer at All Souls College, Oxford, with a background in anti-Trinitarianism, who ranged in his writings from the legal history of the Church of England to biblical history and *a priori* theology.<sup>13</sup> The later deists were different again. Chubb was an autodidact and glover, who was pensioned to write works of religious controversy by his well-connected friends, and Morgan was a rural doctor and priest, who wrote principally about the ancient Jews.<sup>14</sup> The later deists were less exalted than their forebears and their works were more parochial in their reach.

Deism needs to be understood in relation to other forms of ‘heterodoxy’, a term, meaning ‘other belief’, which encompassed all those who deviated from the teachings of a Christian Church, whether Anglican, Catholic, or dissenting, and who were not members of another religion. These included Socinians and Arians, who denied the divinity of Jesus, libertines, who publically ridiculed religion and flouted its moral teachings, freethinkers, who cultivated independent judgement and militated for the freedom of the press, and atheists, who denied the existence of God.<sup>15</sup> None of these

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<sup>11</sup> See James O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins: The Man and his Works* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 1-41. On Collins library see footnote 13 in Chapter 5 below.

<sup>12</sup> On atheism, see footnotes 15 and 18 below.

<sup>13</sup> See Stephen Lalor, *Matthew Tindal, Freethinker: An Eighteenth-Century Assault on Religion* (London: Continuum, 2006), 9-36.

<sup>14</sup> See Wayne Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity: The English Deists and Reform* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 74-91.

<sup>15</sup> Atheism was widely discussed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially between the Restoration and the mid-1690s (when it was displaced in importance by Socinianism and deism), though there is little evidence of disbelief in God. Among the deists, Anthony Collins, Charles Blount, and John Toland have been suspected of atheism by modern scholars, although the case for Collins’s atheism is more convincing and depends less on internal evidence. The question of early modern atheism is complicated for several reasons. Atheism is likely to have been kept out of sight and print, there was widespread hysteria about it, and acts of public disregard for religion were routinely interpreted as expressions of private disbelief in God. Furthermore, ‘atheism’ could be used refer to verbal or implicit disbelief in the immortality of the soul and a future state of rewards and punishments, as well as the existence of God. See David A. Pailin, ‘The Confused and Confusing Story of Natural Religion’, *Religion*, 24:3 (1994), 199-212; David Berman, ‘Anthony Collins and the Question of

terms was precise and many of them changed in meaning. ‘Socinianism’ was both a general term for anti-Trinitarianism and the name of a specific theological movement;<sup>16</sup> ‘freethinking’ was both a posture of conspicuous intellectual élan and a set of beliefs associated with Anthony Collins;<sup>17</sup> and ‘atheism’ changed from meaning public disregard for religion (sometimes known as ‘practical atheism’) to propositional disbelief in God (sometimes known as ‘speculative atheism’).<sup>18</sup> Beyond these various forms of heterodoxy was a penumbra of unbelief, disbelief, irreligion, scepticism, and

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Atheism in the Early Part of the Eighteenth Century’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 75 (1975), 85-102; David Berman, ‘Disclaimers as Offence Mechanisms in Charles Blount and John Toland’, in Michael Hunter and David Wootton (eds), *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 255-72; David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 70-82 and *passim*; and David Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For criticism, see Sarah Mortimer and John Robertson, ‘Nature, Revelation, History: Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy C. 1600-1750’, in idem (eds), *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy 1600-1750* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1-46 (5). For an important early round in the debate, see Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l’Incroyance au XVIe Siècle: La Religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1942), 1-18.

<sup>16</sup> See Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also pages 41-42 below.

<sup>17</sup> See Peter N. Miller, ‘“Freethinking” and “Freedom of Thought” in Eighteenth-Century Britain’, *Historical Journal*, 36:3 (1993), 599-617.

<sup>18</sup> The search for early instances of atheism has been closely connected with the work of Leo Strauss, who sought to discover heterodoxy in the margins of early modern culture, in secret societies, clandestine manuscripts, and other esoteric locations. It has also gained momentum from the idea, which was widely discussed in the enlightenment, that religious teachings possessed a ‘double truth’, a vulgar meaning for the masses and a hidden meaning for the elite, and involved scholarly interest in heterodox manuscripts, such as ‘Le Traité des Trois Imposteurs’, ‘Theophrastus Redivivus’, ‘La Vie et L’Espirt de Spinoza’, Giordano Bruno’s ‘Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante’, and Henry Stubbe’s account of the rise and progress of Islam. It is noteworthy, however, that many of the heterodox manuscripts which are rumoured to have existed in the English enlightenment, such as the manuscript version of Blount’s *Anima Mundi* (1679), Collins’s treatise against the existence of God, and the second volume of Tindal’s *Christianity as Old of the Creation* (1730), are not known to be extant. On Straussianism, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), 22-37. On double truth, see Peter Harrison, ‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86 and Martin Pine, ‘Pomponazzi and the Problem of “Double Truth”’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29:2 (1968), 163-76. On heterodox manuscripts, see Charles Blount (anonymous), *Anima Mundi* (1679), Wing B3297, sig. π5v; Blount et al., *The Oracles of Reason*, sigs F1r-F5r; Roger L’Estrange, *The Observer in Dialogue*, 290 (Wednesday February 14 1683), 1; Henry Brougham, John Campbell, et al. (eds), *Biographia Britannica: Or, The Lives of the Most Eminent Persons who have Flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, from the Earliest Ages*, 7 vols (1747-66), ESTC T139262, II, 836; and David Berman and Stephen Lalor, ‘The Suppression of Christianity as Old as the Creation vol.II’, *Notes and Queries*, 31:1 (1984), 3-6.

indifference, which fluctuated in intensity throughout the period.<sup>19</sup> The deists covered in this study were a small part of this larger pattern.

The deists were also influenced by heterodox groups within the Church of England. The most important of these was the circle of divines which orbited Sir Isaac Newton in Cambridge and included among its members the philosopher and theologian Samuel Clarke, the mathematician and scholar William Whiston, and the controversialist John Jackson.<sup>20</sup> The thought of members of this group was characterised by a high estimation of what could be known through *a priori* reasoning without the assistance of revelation, an interest in the application of mathematics to the study of the scriptures, and scepticism about the doctrine of the Trinity. It will become apparent later in this study that many of the deists' most powerful ideas were extrapolated from the work of members of this group.

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The deists were interested in history for several reasons. In the first place, they believed that sacred history, which comprised the Old and New Testaments, the extra-biblical history of the Jews, and ecclesiastical history, was unreliable.<sup>21</sup> The scriptures were fragmentary compilations, which were likely to have been corrupted through successive rounds of copying and translation. They had been written by biased and uneducated authors long after the events which they described and they contained omissions and internal contradictions. There were also serious questions to be asked about the different cultural settings in which the Old and New Testaments had been written, the connection

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<sup>19</sup> For a brief summary of the range of negative attitudes to religion in the period, see J.C.A. Gaskin (ed.), *Varieties of Unbelief: From Epicurus to Sartre* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1989), 1-16.

<sup>20</sup> See J.P. Ferguson, *An Eighteenth Century Heretic: Dr Samuel Clarke* (Kington: Roundwood Press, 1976), 120-36, 210-26 and James E. Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> On all this, see Diego Lucci, *Scripture and Deism: The Biblical Criticism of the Eighteenth-Century British Deists* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008). See also Chapters 1 and 4 below.

which was supposed to exist between them, and the means by which the canon had been formed. The scriptures could also be unfavourably contrasted with other sources of knowledge. The accounts of the creation in Genesis were very different from those which were emerging from contemporary science; the anthropomorphic depictions of God in the Old Testament were incompatible with the deity which was discovered through *priori* reasoning; and the central events of the New Testament were not recorded in contemporary sources. Institutions, beliefs, and practices which were justified through appeal to the scriptures were therefore to be treated with suspicion.

The deists were also interested in history because it revealed the dangers of clerical power. They believed that much of modern Christianity, far from having been inherited from Jesus and the apostles, was the product of what the deists called ‘priestcraft’, the system of dogma and ritual observance which the clergy used to impose themselves on the laity.<sup>22</sup> The most conspicuous example of priestcraft was the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, but examples could be found in the Church of England in the doctrine of the Trinity, the acknowledgement of saints, and the conception of the Church as a spiritual institution defined by the Apostolic Succession. History also showed why priestcraft was effective. It revealed that human judgement was unreliable, that prejudices were readily perpetuated across generations, and that mankind was susceptible to pomp. These weaknesses in human nature led to two kinds of religious error: the ‘superstition’ of believing that God needed to be appeased through a complex round of ritual observance and the ‘enthusiasm’ of believing in personal divine

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<sup>22</sup> For the most extensive study of the subject to date, see J.I.A. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

inspiration.<sup>23</sup> The perils of superstition and enthusiasm had been illustrated in the recent past. The Counter-Reformation in Europe had seen the reassertion by the Catholic Church of the drama of the sacraments and the need for personal spiritual devotion, and the Civil War and Protectorate in England had witnessed a proliferation of Protestant sects, all claiming a direct mandate from God.

In some cases, the deists argued that the Church had arrogated to itself an independence from the state.<sup>24</sup> The argument turned on the legal claim that there could be no *imperium in imperio*, no two independent authorities with powers over the same people, but it also encompassed the allegation that the governing documents of the Church of England had been forged to grant it doctrinal autonomy.<sup>25</sup> The Church's claim to independence, moreover, lay behind many of the most galling episodes in the history of Christianity and involved the clergy's dereliction of their responsibility for the immortal souls of believers in favour of control over their temporal bodies. In making these allegations,

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<sup>23</sup> For contemporary discussions of these topics, see Anthony Ashley Cooper, *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708); Edward Stillingfleet, *The Nature of Superstition* (1682); and David Hume, 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', in idem, *Essays, Moral and Political* (1741), 141-51. For modern discussions, see J.G.A Pocock, 'Enthusiasm: The Antiself of Enlightenment', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60:1/2 (1997), 7-28 and Jonathan Sheehan, 'Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay', *American Historical Review*, 108:4 (2003), 1061-80.

<sup>24</sup> This has sometimes been associated with the attempts of Thomas Hobbes and James Harrington to demonstrate that political power must flow from a sovereign who was authoritative over Church and state, although recent scholarship has placed it in a longer tradition of Protestant legal theory. See Dmitri Levitin, 'Matthew Tindal's *Rights of the Christian Church* (1706) and the Church-State Relationship', *Historical Journal*, 54:3 (2011), 717-40.

<sup>25</sup> Specifically, Anthony Collins sought to show that the first clause of the twentieth of the Thirty-Nine Articles ('The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith') had been absent when the articles were formulated in 1562, and when they were revised and sanctioned by convocation and parliament in 1571, and had been mischievously interpolated in 1617. The clause first appeared in a Latin copy of the Articles in 1563, but its status was subsequently unclear. Collins was not the first writer to address the clause, as it had been debated as early as 1637 when Henry Burton charged William Laud with having forged it. Collins is likely to have been inspired by Gilbert Burnet's observation that the clause was absent from a 1563 manuscript of the articles in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and from the earliest English printed editions. Collins credited Burnet with having been the first to note the problem. See Church of England, *Articles whereupon it was Agreed by the Archbishops and Bishops of Both Provinces and the Whole Clergie* (1616), sig. B3v; Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1699), 16, 192; Anthony Collins (anonymous), *An Historical and Critical Essay on the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1724), 45; and O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 132-52. In writing that the clause was present in all versions of the articles since 1617, Collins seems to have been referring to its introduction in the articles of 1616, quoted above.

the deists sought to remove the historical justification for a conception of the Church as an institution which could place demands on its members in contradiction to their political obligations. The argument looked in two directions, towards an image of the clergy assisting the sovereign in the governance of his subjects and towards an image of the laity working to secure their salvation without the imposition of clerical coercion.

The deists were also interested in the history of pagan religion, which exposed mistakes in sacred history, revealed that elements of Judaism and Christianity had descended from pagan precedents, and demonstrated that societies could function and flourish without knowledge of the Christian revelation.<sup>26</sup> Pagan history also made it apparent that religions could be constructed deliberately to function as tools of political control. Many deists saw a compelling analogy between the ‘pious fraud’ which had been practised in many pagan cultures, in which the masses were taught a set of disempowering doctrines which were privately disbelieved by the elite, and the role of the Church in modern Christian states.<sup>27</sup> As the similarities between paganism and Christianity were recognised, it became increasingly easy to transfer the debunking explanations of pagan miracles which had been devised by Christian apologists to comparable events in sacred history and to conceive of Christianity not as the one true religion but as one religion among many. This was the aim of the most famous heterodox manuscript work of the period, *Le Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, which

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<sup>26</sup> For a survey of the topic, see David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 1-63, 121-37 and Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989). The possibility of a society of virtuous atheists was influentially asserted by Pierre Bayle in *Pensées Diverses sur l'Occasion de la Comète* (Rotterdam, 1682). A related line of argument was taken up by Bernard Mandeville in *The Fable of the Bees* (1714). For further details, see pages 142-46 below.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion, see Sarah Ellenzeig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660-1760* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 1-28.

presented Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed as imposters.<sup>28</sup> In such treatments, religion was presented as a political construction, rather than as a repository of theological truths or a set of duties owed by man to God.

The study of paganism was connected with a change in historical explanation. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was widely believed that angels, demons, and spirits had an influence on human affairs and that evidence of their activities in the contemporary world might corroborate accounts of supernatural events in sacred history.<sup>29</sup> Scepticism about the reality of these beings, and increasing support for explanations of events in terms of human actions and natural causal laws, arose from scholarship and science. The belief that pagan oracles had been mouthpieces for fallen angels, and that they had been silenced by the Incarnation, became less tenable in the 1680s as a result of new scholarship showing that the oracles had been frauds created by pagan priests and had continued throughout late antiquity.<sup>30</sup> Belief in the reality of the devil suffered similarly when investigations into reports of witchcraft showed that in many cases they were fabricated or stemmed from unreliable sources.<sup>31</sup> These conclusions were disseminated by the deists, who used them to imply that similar explanations could be applied to sacred history.<sup>32</sup>

More broadly, history mattered to the deists because it was routinely invoked in early modern culture to justify beliefs and institutions. Appeals to precedent, pedigree, and

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<sup>28</sup> On the *Traité*, see Silvia Berti, Richard H. Popkin, and Françoise Charles-Daubert (eds), *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 374-406; Kevin Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 109-58; and Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), 577-78.

<sup>30</sup> See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 359-74.

<sup>31</sup> See John Webster, *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677), *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> See Charles Blount, *Great is Diana of the Ephesians* (1680), *passim* and Anthony Collins (anonymous), *A Discourse of Freethinking* (1713), ESTC T031966, 27-28.

priority were commonplace in debates about the monarchy, the parliament, the aristocracy, the Church, and the law. These appeals were undergirded by a number of deeply-held assumptions: that the authority of a belief or institution was constituted partly by its age;<sup>33</sup> that the past was essentially comparable to the present;<sup>34</sup> and that reliable historical knowledge could be obtained through the study of extant sources.<sup>35</sup> These assumptions, though not unquestioned, were widely held. At the same time, there were deep disagreements about how and why the past should be studied. For some, history was a sub-discipline of classical rhetoric, in which moral exemplars were used as a means of inculcating virtuous behaviour; for others, it was an Aristotelian science, in which a body of knowledge was assembled by following codified rules.<sup>36</sup> There were also important changes afoot. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed developments in philology and textual criticism,<sup>37</sup> the increasing use by historians of non-textual sources,<sup>38</sup> and a shift from a conception of ‘a history’ being an organised body of knowledge to a body of knowledge organised chronologically.<sup>39</sup> Scholarship underwent further changes in the eighteenth century as a result of developments in

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<sup>33</sup> For a seminal discussion of the search for legal precedents, see J.G.A Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; first published 1957), 1-55 and, for a brief discussion of the general preference for older institutions and ideas, see J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; first published 1985), 14-17.

<sup>34</sup> On this point, it has been traditional to quote Hume’s remark that ‘Mankind are so much the same, in all times in all places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular’ in *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), 134.

<sup>35</sup> See Anthony Grafton, *What was History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 73-106.

<sup>36</sup> The conflict between these two approaches is emphasised by Champion in *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 25-52.

<sup>37</sup> See N.J.S. Hardy, ‘The Ars Critica in Early Modern England’ (unpublished D.Phil thesis: University of Oxford, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> The classic study of this topic is Arnaldo Momigliano, ‘Ancient History and the Antiquarian’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 13 (1950), 285-315. See also Peter Burke, ‘Images as Evidence in Seventeenth-Century Europe’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 64:2 (2003), 273-96.

<sup>39</sup> This point has been addressed with reference to Uppsala University in the early seventeenth century by Per Landgren in *Det Aristoteliska Historiebegreppet: Historieteori i Renässansens Europa och Sverige* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University Press, 2008).

probability theory,<sup>40</sup> in which practitioners attempted to quantify the reliability of historical testimony; the expansion of the genre of ‘civil’ (later known as ‘philosophical’) history, which aimed at the explanation of social change in terms of secular human reason;<sup>41</sup> and the extension of the genre of ‘natural history’ from natural subjects, such as plants and meteorological phenomena, to human ones, including religion.<sup>42</sup>

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But the deists were not only interested in rewriting the history of religion. They were also interested in the question of whether the truth of Christianity could depend on historical evidence. In particular, they sought to demonstrate that there could be no legitimate ‘historical faith’, meaning any system of religious belief in which knowledge which believers needed in order to achieve salvation was available only from history.<sup>43</sup> Their arguments in this direction were contentious and they were rarely expressed explicitly in print before the 1730s, when the tenor of controversial writing changed. Instead, they were pursued indirectly, through an argot of insinuations and hints, through asides and seemingly casual remarks, and through apparently ingenuous historical writing.<sup>44</sup> These arguments are the focus of this study.

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<sup>40</sup> See Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 74-163 and Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 296-342.

<sup>41</sup> See Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment*, ed. John Robertson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), especially ‘The Historical Philosophy of the Enlightenment’ and ‘Pietro Giannone in Great Britain’, 1-16, 34-53.

<sup>42</sup> See Peter Anstey and Michael Hunter, ‘Robert Boyle’s ‘Designe about Natural History’’, *Early Science and Medicine*, 13:2 (2008), 83-126 and Richard Serjeantson, ‘David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* (1757) and the End of Modern Eusebianism’, in Mortimer and Robertson (eds), *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy 1600-1750*, 267-95.

<sup>43</sup> See for instance Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. II*, 8-9.

<sup>44</sup> The deists’ use of literary subterfuge as a response to censure and censorship has provoked a variety of critical responses. Leslie Stephen noted that the threat of prosecution forced the deists to ‘fight in fetters’, John Redwood notes the ‘moral prevarication’ of much of Shaftesbury’s writing and emphasises the importance of wit and ridicule across a range of genres and media, and Wayne Hudson describes how the deists ‘practised reservation or engaged in a degree of concealment’, although none

The first concerned the question of which kinds of proposition could depend for their truth on historical evidence. Until the end of the seventeenth century, many of the central doctrines of Christianity, including the nature and attributes of God, the eternal generation and incarnation of the Son, and the union of divine and human natures in Jesus, were widely held to be mysterious. This meant that they were less than fully comprehensible by reason but believable on the basis of historical evidence which showed that they had been enjoined by God. Against this, the deists argued that mysteries were incomprehensible and therefore that they could not be believed, irrespective of any historical evidence which might be proffered in their support. The argument introduced criteria for the assessment of the meaningfulness of propositions from Locke's *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1690) to the interpretation of historical sources and decreased the number of doctrines which could depend for their truth on historical evidence.

The second argument concerned the question of which of the actions ascribed to God in sacred history he could possibly have performed. In the opinion of most of the deists'

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of these writers provides worked examples. More sustained attention has been paid by David Berman, who identified 'theological lying' and 'displacement' as rhetorical devices used by the deists, by Roger Lund, who identified a counter-genre of Christian wit, and by Perez Zagorin, who, while qualifying some of Berman's claims, has adopted a similar approach to the subject. See Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), I, 73-74; John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660-1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 183; Hudson, *The English Deists*, 22-24; David Berman, 'Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying', in J.A. Leo Lemay (ed.), *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment: Essays Honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 61-79; David Berman, 'Censorship and the Displacement of Irreligion', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 27:4 (1989), 601-04; Roger D. Lund, 'The Bite of Leviathan: Hobbes and Philosophic Drollery', *English Literary History*, 65:4 (1998), 825-55; Roger D. Lund, 'Irony as Subversion: Thomas Woolston and the Crime of Wit', in idem (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 170-94; Roger D. Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit in Augustan England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); and Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). For contemporary discussions of the topic, see Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, iii-xxx; Richard Blackmore, *A Satire Against Wit* (1700); Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1708); Mary Astell ('Mr Wotton'), *Bartlemy Fair: Or, an Enquiry After Wit* (1709); Anthony Collins (attributed), *A Discourse Concerning Irony and Wit in Writing* (1729); and Warburton, *The Divine Legation*, I, vii-xix, xxviii-xliv. See also pages 186-94 below.

contemporaries, God was unconstrained in his actions, which meant that the only way for believers to work out which actions he had performed, and therefore what he required of them, was by studying sacred history. The deists took a different view. They believed that God was constrained in his actions by his goodness, which meant that he could perform only good actions. The argument raised some difficult questions, one about whether it was possible to know God's goodness in sufficient detail to determine the range of actions which he could perform, and another about whether it was possible to know the actions ascribed to God in sacred history in sufficient detail to know whether they were good, but its implications were considerable. In the first place, it could be used to argue that any account in which an action was ascribed to God which was unworthy of him must have been mistaken or forged. More generally, it could be used to argue that God could not have revealed knowledge which believers needed to achieve salvation only through an historical revelation, which would be differently accessible to people in different times and places, and would grant them unequal access to salvation. If an historical revelation had occurred, it could only have repeated what God had revealed through the media of reason and nature.

The third argument concerned the question of whether history could be known sufficiently certainly to provide a foundation for religious belief. The majority of the deists' contemporaries believed that religious beliefs should be capable of certainty and therefore that the historical knowledge on which those religious beliefs depended should be capable of certainty as well. The deists took a more sceptical position. They contrasted the uncertainty of historical knowledge with the certainty which the mind possessed of self-evident truths and immediate sense perceptions and with the certainty of *a priori* reasoning, and they argued that recent scholarship had proven that the text of the scriptures was uncertain. They also combined their arguments against the certainty

of historical knowledge with their arguments concerning God's goodness. Because history was unreliable, and because anything which God revealed through history would be subject to corruption and change, he could not have revealed knowledge which believers needed to achieve salvation only through an historical revelation.

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Previous studies of deism and history have taken a variety of forms. In Jonathan Israel's influential view, the deists were part of the 'Radical Enlightenment', the leading edge of the wider European enlightenment, whose members sought to overhaul authority, tradition, and faith by building on the work of the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who had equated God and nature by denying the distinction between natural and providential causes and who had used this philosophy to bolster negative criticism of the Bible.<sup>45</sup> Israel's work has been widely criticised for its depiction of a single experience of enlightenment, for its stark divisions between conservatives, moderates, and radicals, and for its identification of Spinoza as the motive intelligence behind heterogeneous schools of thought.<sup>46</sup> Other scholars have located the deists within a tradition of radical biblical criticism and comparative religion, sometimes placing them on a high road from the confessionalised scholarship of seventeenth-century Europe to the 'higher criticism' of nineteenth-century Germany.<sup>47</sup> These accounts have detected the origins of deism in the work of historians, such as the Dutchmen Gerardus Vossius

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<sup>45</sup> See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 1-22, 599-628 and Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981).

<sup>46</sup> See Anthony J. La Vopa, 'A New Intellectual History? Jonathan Israel's Enlightenment', *Historical Journal*, 52:3 (2009), 717-38 and Samuel Moyn, 'Mind the Enlightenment', *The Nation* (31 May 2010) <<http://www.thenation.com/article/mind-enlightenment>> (accessed 6 July 2014).

<sup>47</sup> For instances of the first tendency, see Lucci, *Scripture and Deism* and James E. Force, 'Biblical Interpretation, Newton, and English Deism', in Richard H. Popkin and Arjo Vanderjagt (eds), *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 282-305. For instances of the second, see Harrison, 'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment, 62-99; Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart & Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 270-96; and Pailin, *Attitudes to other Religions*, 1-63, 131-37.

and Anton Van Dale, and biblical critics, such as the Huguenot Louis Cappel and the Catholic Richard Simon, but they have done so only by exaggerating these earlier figures' heterodox intentions. More plausible studies have situated the deists in more insular contexts, in controversies about the origins of episcopacy and foundation of the Church of England.<sup>48</sup> Rather than insisting on the deists' importance in biblical criticism or the European enlightenment, these studies have described the deists' attempts to write histories of priestcraft and corruption in opposition to the accepted narratives of ecclesiastical history.

These studies may be seen in the context of a broader shift in the study of the enlightenment. A once-popular account, in which the eighteenth century witnessed a process of secularisation, driven by Newtonian science and Lockean liberalism, has recently been strenuously challenged.<sup>49</sup> In the view of many scholars working today, and particularly that of J.G.A. Pocock, the enlightenment in England was distinguished from similar events elsewhere by its scholarly, clerical, and conservative character.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* and Mark Goldie, 'Priestcraft and the birth of whiggism', in Nicholas T. Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 209-31.

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Jacob has updated this account by distinguishing between Anglican Newtonian and radical factions in the English Enlightenment. Dorinda Outram, while emphasising the diversity of enlightenments, follows earlier scholarship in fixing on Locke and Newton as the central figures in the English enlightenment. See Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1976); Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*; and Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; first published 1995), esp. 106-29. For other instances of the same argument, see Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648-1789* (Bristol: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 65-81 (esp. 73-77); Hudson, *The English Deists*; and Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics, and Newtonian Public Science* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). For the old reading of Locke, see Gerald R. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 1-28 and James Daly, *Sir Robert Filmer and English Political Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979).

<sup>50</sup> J.C.D. Clark has defended a similar view, although without specific reference to the enlightenment, emphasising the connection between civil and ecclesiastical politics throughout the long eighteenth century and the fine shades of difference between factions which modern historians have identified as radical and conservative. See J.G.A. Pocock, 'Post-Puritan England and the Problem of Enlightenment', in Perez Zagorin (ed.), *Culture and Politics: From Puritanism to the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 91-111; B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2001); and Clark, *English Society*, 318-406. For a survey of modern scholarship on the enlightenment, with

Narratives describing the enlightenment origins of western secular modernity are now criticised for imposing an artificial separation between secular and religious spheres of life and for their Whiggish, teleological character. Such criticisms have in turn led scholars to reconsider a time-honoured image of the eighteenth-century Church of England being overrun by deists and Methodists, and palsied by corruption and vice.<sup>51</sup> In rewriting these once-accepted narratives, historians have sought a more accurate assessment of the importance of religious heterodoxy and to stifle any easy equation between the history of the enlightenment and the making of the modern world.

This revised perspective on the enlightenment has been closely associated with the emergence of the history of scholarship as an academic sub-discipline. Through the work of Anthony Grafton and Jean-Louis Quantin among others, the enduring importance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of scholarly fields such as chronology, biblical criticism, and Hebrew scholarship is now coming into sharper focus.<sup>52</sup> There is growing support for an account of the period which emphasises the continuity between the confessionalised scholarship of the seventeenth century and the events around the turn of the eighteenth century which were memorably described by Paul Hazard as a European '*crise de la conscience*'.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, as Noel Malcolm has influentially demonstrated, many critics of orthodox religion spent less time formulating arguments designed to tackle their opponents head-on than exacerbating the

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particular reference to the question of whether there was one enlightenment or several, see John Robertson, *The Case for Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-51.

<sup>51</sup> For a general discussion of this and other nineteenth-century views of the eighteenth century, see B.W. Young, *The Victorian Eighteenth Century: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> See Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Christopher Ligota and Jean-Louis Quantin (eds), *History of Scholarship: A Selection of Papers from the Seminar on the History of Scholarship held annually at the Warburg Institute* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la Conscience Européenne (1680-1715)* (Paris: Boivin and Cie, 1935), trans. J. Lewis May as *The European Mind, 1680-1715* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953).

destabilising momentum which had been building up within orthodox learning.<sup>54</sup> It is now apparent that in many fields, from the criticism of the Greek New Testament to the study of ancient Egyptian religion, problems which had previously been contained within a heterogeneous and largely tolerant scholarly tradition became problems for that tradition as a whole.

There is a great deal to recommend this view. But in emphasising the continuity between seventeenth-century scholarship and deism, some scholars may have overstated the case. Dmitri Levitin describes the ‘deist-centred narrative’ of the enlightenment giving way to ‘the gradual (albeit very incomplete) realization by early modern intellectual historians that the figures they study for the most part eschewed abstract philosophical reasoning in favour of historical modes of discourse’.<sup>55</sup> While Levitin is surely right to criticise the deist-centred view, he is wrong if his statement is intended to imply that the deists were averse to abstraction. What is needed is not an account of the deists which depicts them as marginal figures in the history of scholarship, but an account which shows how they combined material borrowed from their scholarly contemporaries with abstract philosophical reasoning.

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The central findings of the present study are as follows. History was a major field of contention between the deists and their critics. Their disagreements concerned the content of sacred history and the relationship between the truth of Christianity and historical evidence. In most cases, the deists stated their arguments concerning the latter

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<sup>54</sup> Noel Malcolm, ‘Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea’, in idem, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 383-431 (411).

<sup>55</sup> Dmitri Levitin, ‘From Sacred History to the History of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European Historiography from Reformation to ‘Enlightenment’’, *Historical Journal*, 55:4 (2012), 1117-60 (1122, 1130). See also Levitin, ‘Matthew Tindal’s *Rights of the Christian Church* (1706) and the Church–State Relationship’ and Dmitri Levitin, ‘Histories of Philosophy in England, c.1650-1700’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2011), 13.

question covertly and in the course of historical writing. Hence, even when they resembled their opponents in their handling of historical evidence, they adhered to a different conception of history. The material in the following chapters is arranged thematically and according to a rough chronological sequence.

The first chapter explains how Christianity acquired historical commitments through the doctrine of the Incarnation and how these commitments were deepened by a conception of the Church as a spiritual institution which continued Christ's presence on earth. It describes how the situation came under scrutiny in the fourteenth century, when the recovery of classical learning and the development of textual criticism introduced more exacting scholarly standards, in the sixteenth century, when the division of Europe into Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican blocs caused the writing of sacred history to become a major field of contention between scholars of different confessional stripes, and in the seventeenth century when the development of the natural sciences created a new body of knowledge with which sacred history needed to be reconciled.

The second chapter examines the deists' criticism of belief in mysteries. In the second half of the seventeenth century, many Anglicans held that mysteries were 'things above reason', which meant that belief in them was compatible with reason without being sanctioned by it. The chapter describes how this view was attacked by Toland in *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), which combined a modified form of the theory of meaning from Locke's *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* with debunking accounts of the origins of mysteries which had been written by Socinian and Unitarian writers earlier in the century. It concludes by describing how Toland's arguments were defended by Collins in *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason* (1707) and *A Vindication of the Divine Attributes* (1710) against the accusation that they made God incomprehensible.

The third chapter examines the deists' use of deductions from the moral attributes of God. It begins with the Boyle Lectures of 1704, in which Clarke argued that the attributes of God could be known through *a priori* reasoning, and describes how the argument was exploited by Chubb in works published in the 1720s, by Tindal in *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), and by Morgan in *The Moral Philosopher* (1737). It then describes how the deists attempted to demonstrate that God could not have favoured the ancient Jews without contradicting his goodness, and how this conclusion was opposed by the Anglican historian William Warburton, who argued in *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1738-41) that the omission of a doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments from the Jewish dispensation was evidence that they had been favoured by God.

The fourth chapter examines the deists' arguments against the certainty of historical knowledge. It traces the mounting scepticism of writers about the possibility of certain knowledge, from the philosophical musings of Francis Bacon, through the 'rule of faith' controversy between Catholics and Anglicans around the middle of the century, to the emergence of probability theory in the years after 1660. It describes how this created a dilemma for Christians who were committed to the idea that their religious beliefs should be capable of certainty and how this dilemma was exploited by Tindal, Morgan, Collins, and Chubb, who drew a series of unflattering contrasts between the uncertainty of historical knowledge and the certainty which could be obtained elsewhere.

The fifth chapter is a case study, which interprets Collins's *Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) in light of the findings of the earlier chapters. The *Grounds and Reasons* was the most scholarly and influential work to be written by a deist and provides a vital test-case for this study. The work has traditionally been interpreted as a contribution to biblical scholarship, which extended the work of

the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius to argue against Jesus's fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. The chapter qualifies this view. A more attentive reading of the work reveals that Collins's arguments were informed by a scepticism about sacred history, by a series of destructive comparisons between Christianity and paganism, and by the belief that theology was essentially incoherent.

Finally, a coda considers the dissipation of deism in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. It shows how the deists' arguments were teased apart by their critics and how writers increasingly distinguished between the study of the history of religion and the study of the truth of its doctrines. It reaches these conclusions by considering the work of four writers: Peter Annet, David Hume, Conyers Middleton, and Edward Gibbon.

## Chapter 1:

### History and Christianity

[A]s the tempers and Genius's of Ages and Times alter, so do the arms and weapons which atheists imploy against Religion; the most popular pretences of the Atheists of our Age, have been the irreconcilableness of the account of Times in Scripture, with that of the learned and ancient Heathen Nations, the inconsistency of the belief of the Scriptures with the principles of reason, and the account which may be given of the Origine of things from principles of Philosophy without the Scriptures. These three therefore I have particularly set my self against, and directed against each of them a several Book.<sup>1</sup>

Edward Stillingfleet

I do not admit the Church it self to be a Society under a certain form of Government and Officers; or that there is in the world at present, and that there continu'd for 1704 years past, any constant System of Doctrine and Discipline maintain'd by such a Society, deserving the title of the Catholick Church, to which all particular Churches ought to conform or submit, and with which all private persons are oblig'd to hold communion.<sup>2</sup>

John Toland

In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, religious thinking in England was historical. The authority of the Church of England, and of the various forms of Presbyterianism and Independency which were attempted during the Interregnum, was habitually defended through appeals to history. By the middle of the eighteenth century, this could no longer be taken as given. Confidence that history would uphold Christian orthodoxy had weakened, in part because of the actions of the deists. But before turning to the deists themselves, it is necessary to understand how theology and history became entwined in early Christianity, how they were related in the minds of early modern Christians, and how the attempts of the deists to discredit sacred history developed out

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae* (1662), sig. b2v.

<sup>2</sup> John Toland, *The Miscellaneous Works*, 2 vols (1747), II, 122.

of orthodox learning. Only then will it be apparent that the ideas and practices which the deists rebelled against, as well as the arguments which they used to do so, were contained in the Christianity which they inherited. After sketching the relationship between history and theology in the early Church, this chapter describes how it was reconceived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a result of developments in textual criticism and Hebrew scholarship, in chronology and natural science, and in ecclesiastical history. It describes how the conditions were gradually met for the deists to prosecute the arguments which are described in the central chapters of this study.

## I. The early Church

The central claim of Christianity, which distinguished it from the Judaism which had preceded it and the Neo-Platonism with which it was combined, was that God had become incarnate in creation and entered human history. He had not merely acted on creation, as the Jews believed, through miracles, prophecy, providence, and revelation; nor had he merely caused or shaped creation, as the Neo-Platonists believed, as an inert first-mover or demiurge: he had actually entered it in the person of Jesus Christ. The attempt to explain how this could have happened, how a transcendent or an immanent being could have taken on human form, lay behind many of the tumults of the early Church. St John gave an influential answer, identifying Jesus in the opening verses of his gospel as the Word or Logos of Neo-Platonism, an eternal being who had been present in the beginning with God and who was God. But the matter did not settle there. The major questions debated at the Church Councils, and which separated such factions as the Gnostics, the Arians, the Athanasians, and the Nestorians, concerned the nature of Jesus and his relationship to the other parts of the Trinity: the Father and the Holy

Spirit.<sup>3</sup> As well as being questions about Jesus, these were questions about mankind's relationship with God. If Jesus had been God incarnate, then he might have acted as a substitute for mankind, dying for their sins and redeeming their fallen nature. But if Jesus had been a human who had been adopted by God, or God disguised in the appearance of a human, then mankind might continue to be unredeemed.<sup>4</sup> These questions had implications for the Church. If Jesus had been God incarnate, then the Church might continue his presence on earth and inherit his power and authority (a doctrine later known as sacerdotalism).<sup>5</sup> If this were so, then the Church was a spiritual entity and its clergy were empowered by God in their administration of the sacraments. But if Jesus had been adopted by God, or had merely been God in disguise, then the Church might fulfil a different function, as the guardian and disseminator of the Gospel. The question of Jesus's nature involved explaining how God the Son could act within human history, but it placed no immediate burden on historians to vindicate the Christian revelation. This changed towards the end of the first century, as the development of Christianity from a Jewish sect to an international religion led to a deepening of its historical commitments. There were three principal ways in which this occurred: the first was through accounts of Jesus's life and death; the second was through explanations of the relationship between the histories of paganism, Judaism, and Christianity; and the third was through histories of the Church. These genres of

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<sup>3</sup> On Gnostics, see James M. Robinson, 'Nag Hammadi: The First Fifty Years', in John D. Turner and Anne McGuire (eds), *The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 3-33 (25-33) and Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1-54; on the Arians and Athanasians, see footnote 24 below; and on the Nestorians, see John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 126-74.

<sup>4</sup> On 'Adoptionist' theories, see Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 19-24 and on the latter doctrine, known as 'Docetism', see Ronnie Goldstein and Guy G. Stroumsa, 'The Greek and Jewish Origins of Docetism: A New Proposal', *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 10:3 (2007), 423-41. For a summary of early debates about the divinity of Christ, see Charles H. Talbert, *The Development of Christology during the First Hundred Years: And Other Essays on Early Christian Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3-45.

<sup>5</sup> On the development of sacerdotalism, see Daniel J. Jones, *Christus Sacerdos in the Preaching of St. Augustine: Christ and Christian Identity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), 121-42.

historiography came into being in the first three centuries of Christianity and attained crystallised form in the New Testament canon and the writings of the Church Fathers. They continued in early modern Europe, where they were transformed by the recovery of classical learning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, by the Reformation which divided Western Christendom in the sixteenth century, and by the development of the exact sciences in the seventeenth century. They were also affected by the actions of the deists.

During the first, apostolic age of Christianity, the Gospel was known through the memories of those who had encountered it and there was little effort, in part because of the millenarian beliefs of early Christians, to commit these memories to writing.<sup>6</sup> Instead, there was an oral tradition, recounting Jesus's words and deeds. This was treated as revelation, alongside the Jewish Tanakh, but gradually, towards the end of the first century, it was replaced by a written record, which included gospels of Jesus's life and death, accounts of the acts of his followers, and evangelical epistles and apocalypses. Among the works composed at this time were the three synoptic gospels and St John's gospel, which were later defined as canonical. Christianity now had two testaments, one Jewish and one Christian in origin, but neither was very clearly defined. Churches differed about which texts were authoritative and made little attempt to define a scriptural canon.<sup>7</sup> Scholars were concerned instead with exegetical works, such as commentaries and homilies, and with the study of the Old Testament, which, although it had been authoritatively defined by Jewish scholars, had no stable textual form, existing instead in a number of redactions and translations.<sup>8</sup> This was the context in which the

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<sup>6</sup> On all this, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 2-8.

<sup>7</sup> See E. Earle Ellis, 'The Old Testament Canon in the Early Church', in Jan Mulder (ed.), *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), 653-90 (esp. 655-77).

<sup>8</sup> See Roger T. Beckwith, 'Formation of the Hebrew Bible', in Mulder (ed.), *Mikra*, 39-86 (58-61).

Alexandrine scholar Origen produced the famous ‘Hexapla’, the first major work of scholarship by a Father of the Church, in which six translations of the Old Testament were presented in parallel, allowing variants to be compared and contrasted.<sup>9</sup> The tenor of scholarship changed in the fourth century, as greater efforts began to be made towards establishing a scriptural canon and fixing on a single text. In 363, the Council of Laodicea published the first list of canonical books which was intended to be authoritative, together with the prescription that no other books were to be read in the churches, and, in the 380s, Jerome began work on the Vulgate, a Latin revision and translation of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew texts of the Old and New Testaments, which was to serve as the Bible for the whole of Christendom.<sup>10</sup> Oral learning, personal experience, and philosophy might all enable knowledge of the divine, but Christianity was now an historical religion, in which God was encountered through the histories of his incarnation.

The books of the New Testament were not conceived as stand-alone works. One of the aims of St Paul and the evangelists was to establish the place of Jesus in Judaism, demonstrating that he was the messiah who had been foretold by the prophets and who was figuratively foreshadowed in the histories, laws, and poetry of the Jewish people. He had absolved the primal sin of Adam, fulfilled God’s promise of a saviour, and replaced the Law of Moses with a new covenant.<sup>11</sup> But all of this needed to be reconciled with the decision of the apostles, presupposed in St Paul’s epistles and formally agreed at the Council of Jerusalem around the year 50 (described in Acts 15), to extend the Gospel to the Gentiles. This raised several difficult questions. How could the saviour of a persecuted Semitic minority also be the saviour of mankind? How could

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<sup>9</sup> See Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 86-133.

<sup>10</sup> See Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> See Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea (AD30-325)* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 87-114.

the jealous God of the Old Testament also be the creator of the world? How could ethnic Jews and Gentile converts have the same duties under the New Testament dispensation? An account was needed in which God's appointment of the Jews as his chosen people and his actions in the period covered by the Old Testament formed part of a larger providential plan. This would explain why Jesus's teachings had overhauled the Law of Moses and why God had made different successive revelations to mankind. Early Christians were more virulent in declaiming than explaining their relationship with Judaism, but some writers took on the task.<sup>12</sup> In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (c.150-161), the apologist Justin Martyr presented an extensive discussion of the disagreements between Christians and Jews, taking pains to explain that the Christians had 'a New Covenant, not a new God' and that the Church was 'really the nation promised of old to Abraham by God, when he told him that he would make him a father of many nations'.<sup>13</sup> The apologist Tertullian followed a similar line in *Adversus Judaeos* (c.197), in which he argued that the Mosaic Law formed part of a gradual scheme of revelation, which manifested the 'power of God to modify the commands of the law for human salvation, according to the conditions of the time'.<sup>14</sup> The incarnation had been a decisive moment in this process, but the Jews, failing to recognise it, had clung onto the Mosaic Law in the moment of its obsolescence.<sup>15</sup> The result was their replacement by the Christians as God's chosen people.

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<sup>12</sup> See Peter Richardson and David Granskou (eds), *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity, Volume 1: Paul and the Gospels* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986). In recent years, scholars have questioned whether there was ever a definite parting of ways between Judaism and Christianity or even a conception of Judaism as a religion earlier than the fourth century after Christ. See Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, revised edition, trans. Thomas B. Falls, rev. Thomas P. Halton, ed. Michael Slusser (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003; first published New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), xii, xv, 20-31, 178-89.

<sup>14</sup> See Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 47-53, 63-105 (65, 71). The attribution of the second half of the work to Tertullian has been disputed.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-78.

By the early decades of the fourth century, the vindication of Christianity and the writing of its history were inseparable. There was still a need for accounts of Jesus's life and death and of Christianity's relationship with Judaism, but the growing importance of the Church in the Roman Empire made it necessary to write a new kind of history, which would reconcile Christian and pagan versions of the past and explain the actions of the apostles and their successors.<sup>16</sup> Around 300, Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, set about showing that Christian and pagan chronologies were compatible. Following the work of the Roman writer Julius Africanus and the Christian bishop Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius composed a chronicle of world history from Abraham to the present day.<sup>17</sup> It consisted of tables showing the dates of events in the Old Testament alongside those of events in Greco-Roman history and the successions of the bishops of the major sees alongside those of pagan magistrates and kings. The presentation of the dates affirmed the parity between the two histories. But there were also important differences. Like the dialogue *Contra Apionem* (c.93-100) by the Romano-Jewish scholar Flavius Josephus, the *Chronicle* depicted Jewish culture preceding its pagan counterpart, and, in explanatory notes accompanying the text, it provided debunking explanations of pagan miracles.<sup>18</sup> Christian and pagan histories might be compatible, but the hand of God could be discerned in the former only.

Eusebius's work entered a new phase after the victory of the Roman emperor Constantine at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 and the Edict of Milan in 313, which ended the Roman persecution of Christians and began the reforms which

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<sup>16</sup> See J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999-2010), V, 21-46. Although he has been remembered as the father of church history, Eusebius was not alone in responding to the need for vindicatory histories of the Church. Lactantius's *De mortibus persecutorum* was also written in the aftermath of Constantine's victory.

<sup>17</sup> See Grafton and Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book*, 133-77.

<sup>18</sup> For a brief discussion of the text and its date of composition, see Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, his Works, and their Importance*, trans. Herdis Laessoe (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 113-21. For an English translation of the text, see Josephus, *The Life; Against Apion*, trans. H. S. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 162-413.

established Christianity as the religion of the Empire.<sup>19</sup> In the *Praeparatio evangelica* and the *Demonstratio evangelica* (c.310-30), Eusebius described how the actions of God the Son, conceived as the Word or Logos of St John's Gospel, could be discerned in Jewish history.<sup>20</sup> This allowed the Jewish and Christian pasts to be seen as a coherent whole, while ensuring that events within it were explicable in terms of Christian theology. Then, in the *Ecclesiastical History* (completed after 325), he charted the development of the Church from the ascension of Jesus to the accession of Constantine:

my book will start with a conception too sublime and overwhelming for man to grasp – the dispensation and divinity of our Saviour Christ. Any man who intends to commit to writing the record of the Church's history is bound to go right back to Christ Himself, whose name we are privileged to share, and to start with the beginning of a dispensation more divine than the world realizes. [...] By this means, both the antiquity and the divine character of Christian origins will be demonstrated to those who imagine them to be recent and outlandish, appearing yesterday for the first time.<sup>21</sup>

The *History* was built around five narratives, each of which supported a different vindication of the Church. It recounted in turn the lines of succession from the apostles to the present-day bishops, the emergence of heresy, the downfall of the Jews, the persecutions of the Christians, and the deaths of the Christian martyrs. The first of these narratives established the Church's continuity, showing how a single institution, defined by the Apostolic Succession, had existed from the time of Jesus to the present day. The second showed how the teachings of the True Church could be traced back to Jesus and the apostles while the teachings of false Churches could be traced back to human frauds

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<sup>19</sup> See Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A.D.', in idem (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 79-99.

<sup>20</sup> See Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica*, trans. W.J. Ferrar, 2 vols (London: SPCK, 1920) and Eusebius, *De evangelica praeparatione*, trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford, 2 vols (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. G.W. Williamson (London: Penguin, 1965), 33.

and misunderstandings. The third explained how the failure of the Jews to recognise Jesus as the messiah, and their decision to have him crucified, had led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in the year 70 and to the establishment of the Church as a replacement for the Jews as God's institutional presence on earth. The fourth and fifth narratives concluded the work by displaying the Church's enduring strength and the conviction of individual Christians. And, when taken together, the narratives supported a further idea, that the course of history, and potentially everything from the creation to the present, could reveal the will of God to mankind.

Eusebius's narrative of the emergence of heresy reflected a further aspect of the fourth and fifth centuries, which would later prey on the minds of early modern churchmen. The establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire heightened tensions between the Church in Rome and Churches in other parts of the world, especially North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, and motivated a search for greater clarity and uniformity of doctrine.<sup>22</sup> One of the ways in which Churches attempted to settle their differences was through ecumenical Church Councils, at which representatives from the whole of Christendom convened. The first such Council, held at Nicaea in 325, witnessed a dispute about the Trinity between the Arians (who held that God the Son had been created by and was subordinate to God the Father) and the Athanasians (who held that the Son was eternal and coequal with the Father).<sup>23</sup> The Council published creedal formulae supporting the Athanasian position (which was formally adopted by the Western Church in the Edict of Thessalonica in 380), but its conclusions were not universally endorsed. Throughout the following centuries, there were serious disagreements about which Churches were authoritative, which had continued the practices of the apostles faithfully, and which could consecrate new

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<sup>22</sup> See Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Penguin, 1990), 125-73.

<sup>23</sup> See J. Stevenson (ed.), *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337* (London: SPCK, 1987), 321-63.

bishops. Many adherents to heretical beliefs abjured the Councils which condemned them. The Donatists, who were condemned in the early fourth century for their ecclesiology and their theology of forgiveness, boycotted the Councils which debated the matters, leading to the development of a schismatic account of where the True Church was located.<sup>24</sup> In 381, the first Council of Constantinople attempted to settle the matter by defining the True Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.<sup>25</sup> But even equipped with such criteria, Churches found that their differences were insuperable. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 witnessed the first publication of an official list of heresies and provided the animus for a major split between Dyophysite Churches, which emphasised that Jesus had a divine nature and a human nature, and Monophysite or Miaphysite Churches, which emphasised that Jesus had a single nature, in which humanity and divinity were combined.<sup>26</sup> The increasing importance of Church Councils in determining doctrine led to a corresponding expansion of the range of material which was comprehended by ecclesiastical history. As Churches sought to demonstrate that their beliefs and practices were derived from those of Jesus and the apostles, it became possible for the importance of ecclesiastical history to rival that of the Old and New Testaments. The fusion of these kinds of history and their close connection to matters of theology were part of the structure of belief which the deists inherited and against which they chose to rebel.

## II. Textual criticism and Hebrew scholarship

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire, considerable knowledge of the classics, and especially of classical Latin, was lost, placing limits on the reach of later scholars.

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<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, 297-312 and J. Stevenson (ed.), *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church AD337-461* (London: SPCK, 1989), 23-25, 216-28.

<sup>25</sup> See Stevenson (ed.), *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, 111-19 (esp. 115).

<sup>26</sup> On the Council and the attendant terminology, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 222-28.

In the Middle Ages, the study of sacred history focused largely on biblical commentaries which had been written in late antiquity by scholars such as Jerome, Augustine of Hippo, Cassiodorus, and Bede. Christian scholars had little access to Jewish Biblical learning, from which many later developments in biblical scholarship would stem, and they depended largely on Jerome for their knowledge of Hebrew and also Greek. In many cases, it took the form of the production of biblical texts in which patristic notes and glosses were inserted between the lines and in the margins.<sup>27</sup> In other cases, and especially from the end of the twelfth century, scholars compiled concordances and dictionaries of biblical words and phrases, and sometimes listed textual variants, but linguistic and contextual studies were rare.<sup>28</sup>

The situation changed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the development of textual criticism.<sup>29</sup> This involved the systematic study of texts in terms of their philological properties and the variants between extant manuscripts. Textual criticism had been practised in antiquity, most notably by the Church Fathers, but it had largely died out in the intervening years. In its revived form, it originated in the study of classical texts, but quickly spread to religious ones, where it was capable of yielding astonishing results. After the groundwork of Petrarch and his fellow Italian humanists Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini in the recovery of classical learning, the first great victory of criticism was won by Lorenzo Valla, who demonstrated (around 1440)

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<sup>27</sup> See C.F.R. de Hamel, *Glossed Books of the Bible and the Origins of the Paris Booktrade* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984), 1-13 and Celia Chazelle and Burton Van Name Edwards, *The Study of the Bible in the Carolingian Era* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 1-16.

<sup>28</sup> See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983; first published 1941), 365-70. See also A. J. Minnis, and A.B. Scott (eds), *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary-Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 373-438 and Paul F. Stuehnenberg, 'The Medieval Commentary Tradition: The Glossa Ordinaria, Hugh of St. Cher and Nicholas of Lyra and the Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages', *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 1:2 (1993), 91-101.

<sup>29</sup> For a recent study of the discipline in England before the Restoration, which emphasises its conservative and literary, as opposed to radical and historical, nature, see Hardy, 'The Ars Critica in Early Modern England', esp. 7-38. See also Benedetto Bravo, 'Critice in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and the Rise of the Notion of Historical Criticism', in Ligota and Quantin (eds), *History of Scholarship*, 135-95.

that the Donation of Constantine (a letter in which the eponymous emperor awarded temporal power in the Western Roman Empire to the Pope), far from legitimizing the monarchic ambitions of the papacy, was in fact an eighth-century forgery.<sup>30</sup> Similarly unsettling results were achieved by Desiderius Erasmus, whose edition of the Greek New Testament (1516) revealed textual problems in the Latin Vulgate, including the absence of the Johannine Comma (John 5:7, the only text in the Bible to refer to the Trinity) from most early Greek biblical manuscripts.<sup>31</sup> It also impugned the scriptural evidence for several doctrines, including the perpetual virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus.<sup>32</sup> As such discoveries and reinterpretations mounted, and as a culture of criticism began to take shape, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that Christianity had changed over time and that many of its teachings derived from Councils in the fourth and fifth centuries, rather than from Jesus and the apostles. The impetus behind many of the heroic scholarly endeavours of the seventeenth century was a desire to resolve these difficulties and to place Christianity on solid (and, if it were possible, orthodox) historical foundations.

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<sup>30</sup> Valla's treatise on the subject drew partly on the work of Nicholas of Cusa and included explicit criticisms of the papacy, together with a disproof of the authenticity of Christ's correspondence with King Abgar V of Edessa, which had been quoted with approval by Eusebius. Anthony Grafton stresses, however, that although Valla's work was ground-breaking and had a particular influence on Erasmus, it was cited sparingly in later criticism, which also drew on works by critics in the circle which had surrounded Angelo Poliziano. See Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983-1993), I, 9-13; Anthony Grafton, 'Church History in Early Modern Europe: Tradition and Innovation', in Katherine Van Liere, Simon Ditchfield, and Howard Louthan (eds), *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-26 (9-12); and Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 65-70. On Petrarch, Bruni, and Poggio, see L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; first published 1968), 122-40 and Paul Botley, *Latin Translation in the Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Leonardo Bruni, Giannozzo Manetti, and Desiderius Erasmus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-62. On Valla more generally, see Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> See Joseph M. Levine, 'Erasmus and the Problem of the Johannine Comma', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58:4 (1997), 573-96.

<sup>32</sup> See Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants', in R.N. Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary: Papers Read at the 2001 Summer Meeting and the 2002 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), 191-217.

This desire was keenly felt in the study of the Bible. Since the late 1400s, biblical scholars had had access to a Hebrew version of the Old Testament known as the Masoretic text (due to the ‘Masorah’, or annotations, which surrounded it).<sup>33</sup> Interest in the text grew after 1525, when an edition was printed in Venice, and again after 1539, when the German Hebraist Sebastian Münster published a Latin translation of the *Masoret ha-Masoret* (1538), in which the Jewish scholar Elias Levita argued that the vowel-points which the text contained had been added by Jewish scribes and copyists to what was originally a consonantal script.<sup>34</sup> The introduction of these vowel-points had involved serious interpretative decisions because the meaning of a passage could depend on which vowel-points were added. The text, therefore, had been mediated or even constructed by Jewish scribes and had reached its final form many centuries after its first composition. For Catholic scholars, Levita’s arguments provided a convenient means of discrediting the Masoretic text and of maintaining the authority of the Vulgate, the Bible of the medieval Church and the official Bible of the Catholic Church after a ruling of the Council of Trent in 1546.<sup>35</sup> The mainstream Catholic position, as outlined by the Italian cardinal Robert Bellarmine in his lectures to the Collegium Romanum in the 1580s, was that the Masoretic text had some authority, since, like parts of the Vulgate, it was based on ancient Hebrew manuscripts, but that it had been corrupted by later scribes.<sup>36</sup> The position was reinforced by the English theologian Thomas Stapleton in the 1590s and by the French critic Jean Morin in the early 1630s, who dated the vowel-points to the fifth to tenth centuries after Christ.<sup>37</sup> The Protestant view of the

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Jan Mulder, ‘The Transmission of the Biblical Text’, in Mulder (ed.), *Mikra*, 87-136 (116-19).

<sup>34</sup> See Malcolm, ‘Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible’, *idem*, 414-16 and Stephen G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 205.

<sup>35</sup> See Martin Jan Mulder, ‘The Transmission of the Biblical Text’, in Mulder (ed.), *Mikra*, 104-26.

<sup>36</sup> See Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationes de controuersiis Christianae fidei, aduersus huius temporis haereticos*, 3 vols (Ingolstadt, 1590-93).

<sup>37</sup> See Malcolm, ‘Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible’, 415, 418-20.

matter was different. First Amandus Polanus and then Johannes Buxtorf and his son (also Johannes Buxtorf) argued that the vowel-points were original or, failing that, had been added early in the history of the text. Either way, the points were divinely inspired and not the results of human interference.<sup>38</sup> The view garnered widespread support from Protestants and, when doctrinal canons for the Reformed Church were agreed at the Synod of Dort in 1618, it was the Masoretic text which was identified as the unfaltering Word of God.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Protestants also criticised the text. Foremost among them was the Huguenot scholar Louis Cappel (1585-1658), whose *Critica Sacra* (1650) launched a devastating attack on it and advocated a late dating of the vowel-points. Cappel believed that the text was sufficient to uphold the central tenets of Protestantism, but this part of his argument was accepted less readily than his critical comments.<sup>40</sup> It was clear to many that the text was unreliable and that another alternative to the Vulgate would have to be found. They turned their attention to the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Koine Greek which had been made by Hellenised Jews in Alexandria around 300BC (its name deriving from a legend that it had been simultaneously and identically translated by 72 scribes).<sup>41</sup> It had been known to scholars since antiquity, but no text was known to exist in Europe until 1521, when enquiries by Erasmus led to the discovery of an early manuscript in the Vatican, which had been stored there without being properly identified since some point in the fourteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The manuscript (which came to be known as Codex Vaticanus) gained the widespread attention of scholars after an

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<sup>38</sup> Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies*, 204-06, 209-28.

<sup>39</sup> See Erik Jorink, “‘Horrible and Blasphemous’: Isaac La Peyrère, Isaac Vossius, and the Emergence of Radical Biblical Criticism in the Dutch Republic”, in Scott Mandelbrote and Jitse M. Van der Meer (eds), *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions*, 4 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2008), II, 429-50 (443).

<sup>40</sup> Hardy, ‘The Ars Critica in Early Modern England’, 221-39.

<sup>41</sup> See Jennifer M. Dines, *The Septuagint*, ed. Michael A. Knibb (London: T and T Clark, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> See Levine, ‘Erasmus and the Problem of the Johannine Comma’, 25-52 and T.C. Skeat, ‘The Codex Vaticanus in the Fifteenth Century’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 35:2 (1984), 454-65.

edition was published in 1587.<sup>43</sup> Interest was sparked again in 1628 when the English diplomat Sir Thomas Roe obtained another early manuscript version, known as Codex Alexandrinus, from Cyril Lucaris, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.<sup>44</sup> The authority of the Septuagint was initially supported by Morin, whose studies of the Samaritan Pentateuch (the Hebrew Pentateuch transliterated into the alphabet of the Samaritans), a copy of which had been imported into Europe for the first time in 1616 by the Italian traveller Pietro della Valle, led him to doubt the reliability of the Masoretic text.<sup>45</sup> But he was outdone in ardour by the Dutch scholar Isaac Vossius (son of Gerardus Vossius), who devoted much of the 1650s and 60s to a contentious defence of the Septuagint against the Masoretic text and the Vulgate.<sup>46</sup> He was attacked by Catholics and Protestants alike, by the French critic Richard Simon and by the Oxford scholar Humphrey Hody, the latter of whom demonstrated in 1684 that the *Letter of Aristeas*, on which Vossius's case substantially depended, had been forged by Alexandrine Jews.<sup>47</sup> Hody's criticisms were the more immediately devastating to Vossius's position, but Simon's ramified more broadly. In his *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (1678), he denied that any of the available texts of the Old Testament

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<sup>43</sup> See F.J. Crehan, 'The Bible in the Roman Catholic Church from Trent to the Present Day', in S.L. Greenslade (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume 3: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 199-237 (esp. 207-17).

<sup>44</sup> On the latter manuscript, which also contained the epistles of Clement of Rome, see Scott Mandelbrote, 'English Scholarship and the Greek Text of the Old Testament, 1620-1720: The Impact of Codex Alexandrinus', in Ariel Hessayon and Nicholas Keene (eds), *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 74-93. On Clement of Rome, see footnotes 138 and 166 below.

<sup>45</sup> The Samaritan text agreed more closely with the Greek than the Hebrew and, because it was unpointed, it supported a late-dating of the vowel-points. See Hardy, 'The Ars Critica in Early Modern England', 218-21.

<sup>46</sup> Vossius's argument drew partly on Chinese chronology, the great length of which supported the longer Septuagint chronology. On this point, see footnote 78 below.

<sup>47</sup> In particular, Hody showed that the *Letter* was the product of a Jewish writer working later than the letter was thought to have been written and that the Septuagint as a whole was the product of acts of translation carried out at different times and in different places. Earlier scholars, such as Joseph Justus Scaliger and Isaac Casaubon, had also doubted the letter's authenticity. See Scott Mandelbrote, 'Isaac Vossius and the Septuagint', in Eric Jorink and Dirk Van Miert (eds), *Isaac Vossius (1618-1689), Between Science and Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 85-117 (111-17) and Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger*, II, 706-07.

was reliable, original, or authoritative. The validity of the scriptures did not depend on their internal coherence or the history of their dissemination, but on the authority and the traditions of the Church, which for Simon meant the Catholic Church of Rome. The discoveries of textual criticism showed that Protestant *sola scriptura* was built on sand.<sup>48</sup> But although Simon wrote in support of the Catholic *status quo*, his works were engulfed in immediate scandal. He was expelled in 1678 from his position at the Paris Oratory and the *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* was prohibited by the Roman Congregation of the Index (the arm of the Inquisition which dealt with censorship and publication) in 1682, forcing him to publish the second edition and a successor volume on the New Testament through clandestine publishers in the Dutch Republic.<sup>49</sup> The momentum of textual criticism had carried it beyond the bounds of acceptability.

Doubt about the text of the scriptures extended to the authorship and canonicity of the books of the New Testament. Erasmus, Martin Luther, and John Calvin had noted stylistic inconsistencies between the Epistle to the Hebrews and the other works traditionally ascribed to St Paul, and Erasmus had questioned whether the fourth gospel and the book of Revelation had really been written by the same St John, as traditionally believed.<sup>50</sup> Luther also questioned the canonicity of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the books of James and Jude, and the Revelation of St John the Divine, and placed them at the end of the New Testament in his Bible of 1534. For Catholics, such lines of enquiry were blocked at the Council of Trent, which authoritatively defined the canon, although the disagreements of Protestants provided Catholic polemicists with convenient

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<sup>48</sup> For a brief discussion of *sola scriptura*, see David S. Katz, *God's Last Words: Reading the English Bible from the Reformation to Fundamentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 74-81.

<sup>49</sup> On the prohibition of Simon's work, see Patrick J. Lambe, 'Biblical Criticism and Censorship in Ancien Régime France: The Case of Richard Simon', *Harvard Theological Review*, 78:1/2 (1985), 149-77 and Mandelbrote, 'Isaac Vossius and the Septuagint', 99. On the workings of the Papal Index and its treatment of Simon, see John Robertson, 'Sacred History and Political Thought: Neapolitan Responses to the Problem of Sociability after Hobbes', *Historical Journal*, 56:1 (2013), 1-29 (13-15).

<sup>50</sup> See Nicholas Keene, 'A Two-Edged Sword': Biblical Criticism and the New Testament Canon in Early Modern England', in Hessayon and Keene (eds), *Scripture and Scholarship*, 94-115.

examples of the discord which arose from placing too much faith in the scriptures and too little in the authority of the Church.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, as the seventeenth century progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the Apostolic Fathers had referred to a range of texts without any obvious sense of canonicity and that rival canons had existed in the later Church.<sup>52</sup> There was also a growing realization that the Church Councils had defined the canon, rather than having inherited it from the apostles. This raised the further question of whether the Councils had been inspired in their decisions.<sup>53</sup> Many Protestant writers took a dim view of the subject, adverting, like the English Presbyterian John Tombes, to the contradictions between different Councils:

As for the Scriptures the Papists are not all agreed which be the Canonical Scriptures, which not: nor can they set down certain rules to know what are the unwritten traditions of the church, which they are *to admit and embrace with a like affection of piety as the written Word*, as the Trent council decreed, nor can they have any bottom to rest on by their principles; sometimes one Pope and one council crossing another [...]<sup>54</sup>

The Quaker Samuel Fisher (1605-1665) went further:

Who was it? Was it *God* or was it *Man* that set such distinct Bounds to the Scripture, so as to say such and such a set number of Books, *viz.* Those that are sum'd up together before your *Bibles*, excepting the *Apocrypha*, which stands between them, shall be owned as *Canonical*, and the rest, though such as were of

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<sup>51</sup> On the Council of Trent, see Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 246. For an example of Catholic polemical references to Protestant disagreement about the canon, see Henry Turberville (H.T.), *A Manuel of Controversies* (1654), 114.

<sup>52</sup> Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 39-72, 201-09. Eusebius was typical in identifying 'Recognised Books', 'those that are disputed, yet familiar to most', and 'spurious books', while neglecting to give any instructions about how books in the middle category were to be treated. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 134.

<sup>53</sup> See Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 47-50, 375-78.

<sup>54</sup> John Tombes, *Romanism Discussed, or, an Answer to the Nine First Articles of H.T.* [Henry Turberville] *his Manuel of Controversies* (1660), sigs L2r-L2v. Hobbes took a slyly critical view, describing how the Councils had schemed to set up their authority as a rival to that of the civil power. Though he was 'perswaded that they did not therefore falsifie the Scriptures', he noted with characteristic acerbity that 'the copies of the Books of the New Testament, were in the hands only of the Ecclesiasticks'. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), III, 600.

the same *divine Inspiration*, be rejected as *humane*, and no otherwise accounted on then other *meer mens Writings*, not to be received with such high respect as the other?<sup>55</sup>

But the strongest challenge arose from a less obviously heterodox quarter. In his *Dissertationes in Irenaeum* (1689), the Anglo-Irish scholar Henry Dodwell argued that the apocryphal gospels had had the same status as the canonical gospels in the first two centuries of Christianity.<sup>56</sup> Dodwell's argument met with opposition, but the depth of his scholarship and his reputation for professional seriousness made doubt about the canon difficult to subdue.<sup>57</sup>

The discovery that a text or canon had changed over time became something of a scholarly leitmotif as the seventeenth century progressed. Between 1651 and 1670, a trio of writers argued that the Pentateuch had not been written by Moses, as traditionally believed, but by Ezra the Scribe after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile.<sup>58</sup> Thomas Hobbes, the French Millenarian Isaac La Peyrère, and Baruch Spinoza each gave voice to the argument and they were later supported in part by Richard Simon.<sup>59</sup> The Ezran hypothesis had been discussed in Christian and Jewish scholarship for centuries, but it was now deployed with hostile intent. For Hobbes, it formed part of an attempt to demonstrate that the authority of the scriptures was derived from the civil power; for La Peyrère, it provided evidence that the Pentateuch was a history of the

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<sup>55</sup> Samuel Fisher, *Rusticus ad academicos* (1660), sig. K2v. He was here referring to the contents pages of Bibles in which the Apocrypha was placed between the Old and New Testaments.

<sup>56</sup> See Jean-Louis Quantin, 'Anglican Scholarship Gone Mad?: Henry Dodwell (1641-1711) and Christian Antiquity', in Ligota and Quantin (eds), *History of Scholarship*, 305-56.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance Jeremiah Jones, *A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament*, 3 vols (1726-27), I, 51-52, 161, 519-20.

<sup>58</sup> On all this, see Malcolm, 'Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible', 383-409 and Michael M. Homan, 'How Moses Gained and Lost the Reputation of Being the Torah's Author: Higher Criticism Prior to Julius Wellhausen', in Shawna Dolansky and Richard Friedman Elliott (eds), *Sacred History, Sacred Literature: Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IND: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 111-31.

<sup>59</sup> See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III, 598-601; Isaac La Peyrère, *Prae-Adamitae* (Leiden?, 1655), 196-202; Baruch Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118-52; and Richard Simon, *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (Rotterdam, 1685), 4, 25, 152.

Jews and not a history of the whole of mankind; and for Spinoza, it figured in a wide-ranging assault on ‘the blind acceptance of human fictions as God’s teachings’.<sup>60</sup> The implications of the argument were considerable. If the earliest books of the Bible were less ancient than previously believed, then this might undermine their authority as an account of the creation of the world. If Christian tradition had erred in its ascription of the Pentateuch to Moses, then it might also be mistaken in other matters. But though the arguments of Hobbes, La Peyrère, and Spinoza inspired searing attacks on the authority of the scriptures, they were most influential in the scholarly mainstream, where divine inspiration was increasingly conceived as operating across generations, through teams of scribes and copyists, and over long periods of time.<sup>61</sup>

Hobbes and Spinoza were also participants in a more general move towards the interpretation of the Bible like any other historical source. Claims made for its special treatment could be neutralised by treating miracles and prophecies as natural events and by denying, where revelation was transmitted from one person to another, that the testimony provided was in any way exempt from the usual problems of human fallibility.<sup>62</sup> By the same means, theology, which at the beginning of the seventeenth century had enjoyed a disciplinary distance from historical scholarship, was increasingly subject to its gravitational pull. Critics such as the Swiss Jean Le Clerc resigned themselves to writing the history of the attempts of early Christians to articulate their encounter with the divine, rather than passing through that history to

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<sup>60</sup> Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 98.

<sup>61</sup> Malcolm, ‘Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible’ idem, 424-31.

<sup>62</sup> On Spinoza, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 115-41 and Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza, Religious Heterodoxy, and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2004), 250-96. On Hobbes, see Iain Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Political Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 3, 15-16 and J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes’, in idem, *Politics, Language, and Time* (London: Methuen, 1972), 148-201.

encounter the divine for themselves.<sup>63</sup> By 1704, it was possible for Toland to complain that modern Christians had become obsessed with the history of Christianity in a manner which was entirely unfaithful to the practices of the early Church. ‘Curious questions about the Person of Christ were not substituted by his apostles to his Doctrines’, he expostulated, ‘the circumstantials were not made the fundamentals, nor the history of Christianity transform’d into the essence of the same’.<sup>64</sup> If the teachings of Jesus were true on their own terms, and not by virtue of having been revealed, as Toland and the other deists believed, then the history of their subsequent transmission and interpretation had no bearing on their truth, whatever contemporary Christians might think.

The belief that religious texts should be viewed in context, rather than as the timeless utterances of God, could also receive theological momentum. In the latter decades of the sixteenth century, the Italian theologian Faustus Socinus began arguing that Jesus had saved mankind through his teachings and moral example rather than through an act of atonement.<sup>65</sup> This meant rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity, which situated Jesus in eternity rather than at a specific point in time, and focusing attention on what had occurred in first-century Judea. At the same time, because Socinus believed that mankind would be judged according to what they had freely willed, he argued that individual Christians should judge the plausibility of revelation on the basis of the historical evidence, rather than following ecclesiastical authorities or depending on divine inspiration. Socinus was vituperated in his native Italy, but he met with support in the Polish town of Rakow, whence his ideas spread across Protestant Europe as the seventeenth century progressed. Among those whom they influenced was Grotius,

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<sup>63</sup> See Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, V; J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of their History’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 5:1 (2008), 83-96. For criticism, see Levitin, ‘From Sacred History to the History of Religion’, 1119-20, 1135-37.

<sup>64</sup> Toland, *The Miscellaneous Works*, II, 132-33.

<sup>65</sup> On all this, see Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution*, 13-39.

whose biblical *Annotationes* (1641-50) emphasised the different circumstances in which the Old and New Testaments had been written.<sup>66</sup> He trained his attention in particular on the web of typologies and prophecies which surrounded the interpretation of the scriptures and sought to show how prophecies in the Old Testament could be related to their fulfilments in the New. In doing so, he touched on Protestant anxieties about whether biblical typology could be understood by readers who lacked expert scholarly knowledge and the guidance of the Church and had only their natural sagacity and the assistance of the Holy Spirit to guide them.<sup>67</sup> Grotius's work was influential in England among the circle of divines who would later forge the Restoration Church and in the liberal theological haunts of the Dutch Republic. Here they were taken up by Le Clerc, who sharpened the edge of Grotius's argument by revealing the ease with which prophecies of an event could be interpolated into earlier documents and exposing the spurious interpretative logic by which prophecies could be connected to their fulfilments.<sup>68</sup> Under the influence of Grotius and his followers, the fibres binding the Testaments started to fray.<sup>69</sup>

Scholars' increasing awareness of historical change involved the fragmentation of an older view in which the peoples of the earth, along with their languages, cultures, and religions, had descended from a Hebrew source. The original point of unity might lie at the time of Adam or Noah, or at the scattering of nations and splintering of languages at Babel, but the narrative framework (later known as diffusionism) was the same in a

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<sup>66</sup> See Levitin, 'From Sacred History to the History of Religion', 1128-30.

<sup>67</sup> See Jeffrey Alan Miller, 'Theological Typology, Milton, and the Aftermath of Writing' (unpublished D.Phil thesis: University of Oxford, 2011), 61-130.

<sup>68</sup> On Grotius' influence on biblical typology and the use of his work by English deists, see pages 181-86 below.

<sup>69</sup> For discussions of later thinking about the connection between the testaments, see Chapters 3 and 5 below.

variety of accounts.<sup>70</sup> An early exponent was Augustine, who identified Noah's sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth, with the Jews, the pagans, and the Greeks.<sup>71</sup> Detail was added by the Franciscan friar Annius of Viterbo in the 1490s, who produced elaborate (and, as it happened, entirely fabricated) accounts of how the peoples of Europe could be traced back to the progeny of Japheth and how the names of ancient tribes and nations could be mapped onto those of their biblical founders.<sup>72</sup> Annius's forgeries were later exposed, but his conclusions, and his use of etymology and onomastics (the study of proper names), resembled those of more credible scholars, such as Johann Boemus, William Camden, and Sir Walter Raleigh.<sup>73</sup> The theory also extended to linguistics, where scholars sought to demonstrate that Hebrew, or perhaps an earlier version of it such as Samaritan, had been the original language of mankind.<sup>74</sup> Problems arose, however, in making space for the Americans and the Chinese within a diffusionist narrative. Their absence from traditional accounts of the descendants of Noah and their physical distance from the world of the Bible made their existence difficult to explain. In a work published posthumously in 1614, the English scholar Edward Brerewood argued that the Americans were Tartars from Russia who had passed over the northern Pacific into

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<sup>70</sup> See Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 207-94.

<sup>71</sup> See Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2009), 471.

<sup>72</sup> See Giovanni Nanni (Annius of Viterbo), *Commentaria super opera diversorum auctorum de antiquitatibus loquentium* (Rome, 1498) and, for a discussion, see Walter Stephens, 'When Pope Noah Ruled the Etruscans: Annius of Viterbo and his Forged Antiquities', *Modern Language Notes*, 119 Supplement (2004), S201-S23. On a later, similar, but more honest attempt to trace national history back to Noah, see Gunnar Eriksson, *The Atlantic Vision: Olaus Rudbeck and Baroque Science* (Canton, MA: Science History Publications, 1994), 13-46.

<sup>73</sup> Boemus's study of human origins, which was partially translated by William Waterman as *The Fardle of Façons* (1555), presented two accounts of the origin of mankind, one set in Ethiopia and one in Judea, but declined to choose between them. See Johann Boemus, *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus* (Augsburg, 1520); William Camden, *Britannia sive Florentissimorum regnorum, Angliæ, Scotiæ, Hiberniæ, et insularum adiacentium ex intima antiquitate chorographica descriptio* (1586), 7-9; and Walter Raleigh, *History of the World* (1614), sigs H2r-H3v, M7r-N2r, and *passim*. For a similar account, see Nathanael Carpenter, *Geographie Delineated Forth* (1635), sigs O5v-O5r.

<sup>74</sup> See Rhodri Lewis, *Language, Mind and Nature: Artificial Languages in England from Bacon to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17, 124-28.

Alaska.<sup>75</sup> They were not, he emphasised, in any way Hebrew.<sup>76</sup> But the Mosaic history could be adapted to make room for far-flung peoples. In the late 1660s, John Webb, argued that Noah's Ark had landed in China and that Chinese had been the language of Adam.<sup>77</sup> Yet diffusionist theories had passed their perihelion. The size and geographical distribution of mankind became increasingly difficult to accommodate within biblical time and space, and increasing knowledge of the grammatical differences between languages (as opposed to the semantic similarities which had been emphasised in earlier scholarship) made it difficult for linguists to argue for the existence of an ur-language in the not-too-distant past.<sup>78</sup> Theories which explained the growth of language from basic human capacities, rather than from an historical point, became more influential in the eighteenth century.<sup>79</sup>

As well as seeking the lineages of peoples and languages, scholars also sought the origins of religion. Here an initial distinction was needed between true religion and pagan idolatry. While true religion was agreed to come from God or to be obtainable through the exercise of reason (if reason had not been depraved by the Fall of Man), idolatry was a more complicated matter. Its origins might lie in human passions, such as ignorance and fear, in the interference of fallen angels, or in the deformation of true religion.<sup>80</sup> A popular view among the Fathers, which acquired interest from early

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<sup>75</sup> Edward Brerewood, *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages, and Religions through the Cheife Parts of the World* (1614), 94-97.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-96.

<sup>77</sup> See John Webb, *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language* (1669). For a discussion, see William Poole, 'Heterodoxy and Sinology: Isaac Vossius, Robert Hooke, and the Early Royal Society's Use of Sinology', in Mortimer and Robertson (eds), *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy 1600-1750*, 135-53.

<sup>78</sup> See for instance William Wotton, *A Discourse Concerning the Confusion of Languages at Babel* (1730).

<sup>79</sup> See Victor Anthony Rudowski, 'The Theory of Signs in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35:4 (1974), 683-90 and Jules Paul Seigel, 'The Enlightenment and the Evolution of a Language of Signs in France and England', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30:1 (1969), 96-115.

<sup>80</sup> See Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, ed. and trans. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 159-66; Justin Martyr, 'First Apology', in *St Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies*, ed. and trans. Leslie William Barnard (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 23-

modern scholars, was that a revelation had been made to the pagans and diffused throughout the ancient world.<sup>81</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, the Sibylline Oracles, Sophocles, Orpheus, and Virgil were all thought to have been party to this wisdom or to have prophesied the coming of Christ. Central among these figures was Plato, now dubbed ‘Moses Atticus’, whose works were thought to adumbrate Christian doctrines, including monotheism, the Trinity, and the immortality of the soul.<sup>82</sup> The view was associated with Marsilio Ficino and the Florentine Academy, but had adherents among English Neo-Platonists, who dubbed the ancient wisdom *prisca theologica* or cabbala.<sup>83</sup>

As the Cambridge Platonist Henry More explained:

*Moses seems to have been aforehand, and prevented [i.e. anticipated] the subtilest and abstrusest inventions of the choicest Philosophers that ever appeared after him to this very day. And further presumption of the truth of this Philosophical Cabbala is; that the grand mysteries therein contained are most-what the same that those two eximious [i.e. excellent] Philosophers Pythagoras and Plato brought out of Egypt, and the parts of Asia into Europe. And it is generally acknowledged by Christians, that they both had their Philosophy from Moses. And Numenius the*

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72 (esp. 61-64); and Athenagoras, ‘Embassy for the Christians’, in *The Embassy for the Christians: The Resurrection of the Dead*, ed. and trans. Joseph Hugh Crehan Jr. (London: The Newman Press, 1956), 63-71. On Milton’s debt to Lactantius and his account of idolatry in *Paradise Lost*, see Pitt Harding, ‘Milton’s Serpent and the Birth of Pagan Error’, *Studies in English Literature, 1550-1900*, 47:1 (2007), 161-77.

<sup>81</sup> On the *prisca theologica*, see Sarah Hutton, ‘Edward Stillingfleet, Henry More, and the Decline of *Moses Atticus*: a Note on Seventeenth-Century Anglican Apologetics’ and Joseph M. Levine, ‘Latitudinarians, Neoplatonists, and the Ancient Wisdom’, both in Richard Kroll, Richard Ashcraft, and Perez Zagorin (eds), *Philosophy, Science, and Religion in England, 1640-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 64-84, 85-108. See also Joseph M. Levine, ‘Sir Walter Raleigh and the Ancient Wisdom’, in Bonnelyn Young Kunze and Dwight D. Brautigam (eds), *Court, Country and Culture: Essays on Early Modern British History in Honor of Perez Zagorin* idem (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1992), 89-108. For Eusebius’s belief in knowledge of Christ, conceived as the Word of St John’s Gospel, in ancient Judaism, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 34-49.

<sup>82</sup> The moniker ‘Moses Atticus’ derived from Numenius’ description of Moses as speaking Attic Greek. See Numenius, *The NeoPlatonic Writings*, trans. Kenneth Guthrie (Lawrence, KS: Selene Books, 1987), 2-3.

<sup>83</sup> On the effect of diffusionist narratives beyond Neo-Platonism, see Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and *Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 61-73; Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions*, 23-44; and Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 14-39, 77-101.

Platonist *speaks out plainly concerning his Master; What is Plato but Moses Atticus?*<sup>84</sup>

Yet the search for ancient wisdom was ill-fated. In 1614, the Anglo-French critic Isaac Casaubon demonstrated that the Hermetic Corpus was a Hellenistic forgery and that prophecies of Jesus had been interpolated into the Sibylline oracles.<sup>85</sup> His conclusions were challenged by later writers, including Isaac Vossius and the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, but the reputation of Hermes and the Sibyls declined as the seventeenth century progressed.<sup>86</sup> Toland, writing in 1699 and following the work of Van Dale, took great pleasure in listing six works (including those of Hermes, the Sibyls, and Zoroaster) ‘alleg’d in favor of Christianity, which were forg’d under the Name of Heathens’.<sup>87</sup> The supposed revelation of Christian truths through the pagan culture, which had once provided a plausible means of reconciling sacred and pagan history, was now an increasing source of embarrassment for anyone seeking to defend Christianity from the onslaughts of textual criticism.

In others contexts, diffusionist narratives had greater sticking power. Though scholars gradually gave up on the idea that Christian doctrines or prophecies could be found in pagan writings, they retained their belief in the antiquity of the Jewish people and the corruption of a revelation which had been made to the Jews in the hands of later pagans.

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<sup>84</sup> Henry More, *Conjectura Cabbalistica* (1653), sigs A8v-B1r.

<sup>85</sup> See Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 145-78. Grafton emphasises that these discoveries, although significant, repeated classical and early humanist discussions of the reliability of the texts and made extensive use of existing analytical techniques.

<sup>86</sup> See Ralph Cudworth, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), 281-94 and Isaac Vossius, *De Sibyllinis aliisque quæ Christi natalem præcessere oraculis* (Oxford, 1679), *passim*.

<sup>87</sup> John Toland (anonymous), *Amyntor: Or, a Defence of Milton's Life* (1699), Wing T1760, 40-41. Toland was here replying to Offspring Blackall, who had criticised an apparently anti-scriptural remark in Toland's life of Milton. For the relevant passages, see John Toland (anonymous), *The Life of John Milton* (1698), 29 and Offspring Blackall, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons at St Margaret's Westminster 30<sup>th</sup> January 1698/99* (1699), 16. Toland's argument followed Anton Van Dale's *De oraculis veterum ethnicorum dissertationes* (Amsterdam, 1683), on which see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 361-73. On Toland and Blackall, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 40-43.

In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, it became common for scholars to argue that not only pagan religion, but also pagan culture and learning, had descended from Hebrew originals. The Hebraising thesis originated in the works of Josephus, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius, but enjoyed a recrudescence in *De theologia gentili* (1641) by Gerardus Vossius and in the works of the English scholar Theophilus Gale and the French scholars Samuel Bochart and Pierre Daniel Huet.<sup>88</sup> But the hypothesis later lost ground. In *Canon chronicus* (1665-72), the English scholar Sir John Marsham collated Greek, Hebrew, and Egyptian chronologies to vindicate the antiquity of the Egyptian and in *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* (1669) and *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus* (1685), the Cambridge academic John Spencer argued that many aspects of Jewish religion and culture had been borrowed from Egyptian originals.<sup>89</sup> Spencer's aim had been to vindicate Eusebius by showing how God could accommodate revelation to the changing fortunes of his chosen people and how providence could act dynamically through the medium of human culture. But the effect was to discredit the Jews, who could no longer be lauded as the springhead of culture and learning, and to show how the formation of religious institutions could be explained in social and political terms.<sup>90</sup>

### III. Chronology and the creation

For all their achievements, textual criticism and Hebrew scholarship were far from being the only disciplines in which doubt was cast on sacred history.<sup>91</sup> Another was

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<sup>88</sup> See Samuel Bochart, *Geographia sacra, seu Phaleg et Canaan* (Caen, 1646); Theophilus Gale, *The Court of the Gentiles*, 4 vols (1669-1677); and Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Demonstratio Evangelica* (Paris, 1679). For a discussion, see Serjeantson, 'David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757) and the End of Modern Eusebianism'.

<sup>89</sup> See Daniel Stolzenberg, 'John Spencer and the Perils of Sacred Philology', *Past and Present*, 214:1 (2012), 129-63.

<sup>90</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 38.

<sup>91</sup> For a crisp summary of the major intersections between seventeenth-century science and Mosaic history, see William Poole, *The World Makers: Scientists of the Restoration and the Search for the*

chronology, which provided the backdrop to many of the period's most fervent explorations of the past. The central aims of chronologers were to calculate the age of the earth and to date historical events with accuracy, and these aims were closely connected because the ultimate point from which to reckon dates was the creation. Here things began quite smoothly. Genesis 5:1 lists the ages of the patriarchs from Adam to Noah and the ages at which they fathered their first-born sons, so that using these figures scholars could date the flood to 1,656 years after the creation. Problems arose, however, when chronologers tried to relate dates in the Old Testament to dates in the New Testament, which are reckoned from the birth of Jesus or from dates in Greco-Roman history. To connect the Testaments, it was necessary to find events, known as synchronisms, which could be dated according to more than one chronology. A popular choice was the accession of the Babylonian king Nabonassar in 747BC, which had been used by the astronomer Ptolemy in the *Almagest* to date the reigns of Roman kings.<sup>92</sup> Because the accession of Nabonassar could be dated from references to Babylonian dynasties in the Second Book of Kings and Isaiah, which also referred to events which could be dated from the creation, it could be used to connect the Testaments.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, because Ptolemy had used the accession of Nabonassar to date astronomical events, such as eclipses and conjunctions, it was possible to cross-reference the chronology contained in the *Almagest* with any chronology in which the same astronomical events were listed. Using this technique, chronologers could correlate chronologies which would otherwise have remained intractably separate, meaning that,

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*Origins of the Earth* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010). See also Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>92</sup> See Ptolemy, *Almagest*, ed. and trans. G.J. Toomer (London, Duckworth, 1984), 9 and *passim*. Another option was the death of Nebuchadnezzar, which is mentioned in II Kings 25:27 and in Josephus's records of Berossus. See *Josephus* (1965), VI, 219 and, on Berossus, see footnote 97 below. For a later use of the accession date of Nabonassar, see Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected* (1716), ESTC T088601, 1-2.

<sup>93</sup> See Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger*, II, 115-16, 123-33, 263. Nabonassar is mentioned under the name of 'Baladan' in 2 Kings 20:12 and Isaiah 39:1.

in principle at least, pagan sources could be used to construct a coherent biblical chronology and then to correlate that chronology with historical records from across the ancient world.

But things were not quite so simple. To begin with, there were discrepancies in Genesis. Chapters 5 and 7 record that Noah's sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth, were born 100 years before the flood, whereas Chapter 11 records that Shem was 100 when he fathered his firstborn son, Arphaxad, in the second year after the flood, when he should have been 102. There were also ambiguities about whether dates after the Flood were reckoned from the beginning of the year or from the flood and about whether the dates in Genesis were given in Solar years (roughly 365 days) or Lunar years (roughly 354 days). More generally, the sporadic nature with which months were intercalated into Jewish calendars to correct for slippage between lunar and solar years made it difficult to translate with accuracy between dates in Jewish and Roman calendars.<sup>94</sup> Pagan chronology was similarly refractory. There were problems in translating between different calendars and there was confusion about the identities of the near-Eastern kings whose accession dates provided valuable synchronisms. A titanic effort to solve these problems was made by the Huguenot scholar Joseph Justus Scaliger in *De emendatione temporum* (1583). Scaliger not only drew together a larger number of ancient calendars than any previous scholar, but created a framework which allowed a date in one chronology to be converted into a date in another.<sup>95</sup> He also exposed many of the forged chronologies which had retarded progress in the discipline, most notably those of Anniius of Viterbo, and solved the problem of the near-Eastern kings by distinguishing Nabonassar, king of Babylon, from Salmanassar, king of Nineveh (who

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<sup>94</sup> For a discussion and a more general overview of biblical chronology in the early eighteenth century, see Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected*, iii-xvi.

<sup>95</sup> See Anthony T. Grafton, 'Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline', *History and Theory*, 14:2 (1975), 156-85 and, for a more technical account, see Grafton, *Defenders of the Text*, 104-45, 262.

had often been deleteriously conflated). But even with greater learning and more sophisticated techniques than any previous chronologer, Scaliger was ultimately unsuccessful in creating a single unified chronology.

A particular difficulty for Scaliger was the existence of annals, such as those of the Babylonians and the Egyptians, which recorded events before the flood and even before the creation. These annals were known through the medieval Byzantine scholar George Syncellus, who had preserved fragments of Eusebius and Julius Africanus on the chronologies of Berossus, a Babylonian chronologer from the fourth century BC, and Manetho, an Egyptian priest from the third century BC.<sup>96</sup> Egyptian annals were also known through the Arabic historian Imam Jalaluddin Al-Suyuti, whose work was followed by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher.<sup>97</sup> Scaliger published an Egyptian chronology in the *Thesaurus temporum* in 1606, knowing that it would be scandalous, but without explaining the inclusion of events before the flood. Scaliger's work was hotly criticised, but was defended by Gerardus Vossius in 1642, who resurrected a contention of Eusebius that the Egyptian dynasties, rather than having ruled successively, had ruled co-terminously in different parts of Egypt.<sup>98</sup> This made the chronology more compatible with a shorter, biblical timespan.<sup>99</sup> But the problem of pre-biblical chronology would not go away. From the sixteenth century, reports had entered Europe from Jesuit missionaries in China of annals which stretched back thousands of years before the biblical creation. These annals became available in 1658 when the Jesuit Martino Martini published *Sinicae historiae decas prima* and no argument based on the contemporaneity of dynasties would compress them down to biblical proportions.

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<sup>96</sup> Grafton and Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book*, 146-47, 160-66.

<sup>97</sup> See Grafton, 'Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology', 164 and Anthony Grafton, 'Kircher's Chronology', in Paula Findlen (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man who Knew Everything* (London: Routledge, 2004), 171-87 (180-81).

<sup>98</sup> See Grafton and Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book*, 165.

<sup>99</sup> See Poole, 'Heterodoxy and Sinology', 146-47.

Chronology after Scaliger ran largely on confessional lines. As in many areas, Catholics were able to adopt a more sceptical position than their Protestant counterparts by using the authority of the Church as an un-sceptical counterweight. The Jesuit Denis Pétau (1583-1652), while closely following Scaliger, devoted more attention to the problems of Old Testament chronology and often without proposing solutions.<sup>100</sup> Where the text appeared to be unreliable, the authority of the Church could be invoked. For Protestants there was no such escape route, but there was a large choice of texts. One option was to stick with the Masoretic text and to attempt to succeed where Scaliger had failed. This was the aim of one of the most famous chronologers of the period, James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, who used the Masoretic text in 1650 to date the creation to six hours before the midnight which began Sunday, 23 October 4004BC.<sup>101</sup> Another option was to turn to the Septuagint, which, as Eusebius and Jerome had realised, offered a different and incompatible chronology, with greater ages for the antediluvian patriarchs and a correspondingly earlier date for the creation and one which might be more compatible with pagan annals.<sup>102</sup> This was the approach of Isaac Vossius and the English High-Church scholar John Pearson.<sup>103</sup> Vossius defended the Septuagint with vigour, constructing a chronology which dated the creation to 5390BC, and Pearson adopted a more moderate position, defending the Septuagint's antiquity, but warning

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<sup>100</sup> See Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger*, II, 520-24.

<sup>101</sup> See James Ussher, *Annales veteris testamenti* (1650). For a detailed discussion of Ussher's working, see James Barr, 'Why the World was Created in 4004 B.C.: Archbishop Ussher and Biblical Chronology', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 67:2 (1985), 575-608.

<sup>102</sup> A still different chronology was recorded in the Samaritan Pentateuch, in which the period from the creation to the flood was 349 years shorter than in the Hebrew version. Eusebius had included dates from the Samaritan text as well as from the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint in the first book of the Chronicle, but they were unknown to early modern chronologers before Scaliger, who depended on Jerome's revision and translation of the Chronicle into Latin, in which the first book was omitted. Scaliger recovered the first book of the Chronicle through a Greek text preserved by Syncellus, but died before the Samaritan Pentateuch or Codex Alexandrinus was imported to Europe. See Anthony Grafton, 'Isaac Vossius, Chronologer', in Jorink and Van Miert (eds), *Isaac Vossius (1618-1689)*, 43-84 (53-56) and Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger*, II, 514-48.

<sup>103</sup> See Gerardus Vossius, *Chronologiae sacrae isagoge* (The Hague, 1659); Isaac Vossius, *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi* (The Hague, 1659); and John Pearson (ed.), *Hē Palaia Diathēche kata tous Hebdomēkonta* (Cambridge, 1665). For a discussion, see Mandelbrote, 'Isaac Vossius and the Septuagint', 93 and Poole, *The World Makers*, 42.

that the text required editing. His warnings turned out to be sound. It became apparent towards the end of the century through the researches of Simon and Hody that the texts were hopelessly corrupt and this discovery proved to be fatal to the study of the Septuagint's chronology.<sup>104</sup>

While these debates were taking place, a novel solution appeared in France. In a work first circulated in manuscript in 1643, La Peyrère argued that there had been men before Adam.<sup>105</sup> This explained why there were two accounts of the creation of mankind in Genesis (1:26 and 2:7), because one could be interpreted as the creation of the Gentiles and the other as the creation of the Jews; and it also explained why Cain had feared assault after the murder of Abel and how he had managed to find himself a wife (Genesis 4:14-17).<sup>106</sup> More importantly for La Peyrère, it made sense of Romans 5:12-17, in which St Paul discusses a time 'until the law'. Traditionally, this had been interpreted as referring to the time from the creation to the Mosaic dispensation, but La Peyrère took it to refer to the time from the creation of the Gentiles to the creation of the Jews. This allowed him to argue that the Jews were the chosen people in perpetuity because the Incarnation, rather than overhauling the Mosaic Law, had brought about the salvation of the Gentiles. The downfall of the Jews after the Crucifixion was part of a larger providential plan, which would culminate with their recall to God. La Peyrère revised and expanded his position in 1655, this time drawing on extra-biblical sources. What had been a coast-hugging biblical voyage now entered deep and heterodox waters:

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<sup>104</sup> On biblical chronology in the eighteenth century, see R.J. Arnold, 'Learned Lumber': The Unlikely Survival of Sacred History in the Eighteenth Century', *English Historical Review*, 125 (2010), 1139-72.

<sup>105</sup> The original work may be lost and is known only through manuscript copies. See Poole, *The World Makers*, 27-39 and Anthony Grafton, 'Isaac La Peyrère and the Old Testament', in idem, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 204-13 (204).

<sup>106</sup> On the importance of the theological origins of La Peyrère's position, see William Poole, 'Francis Lodwick's Creation: Theology and Natural Philosophy in the Early Royal Society', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66:2 (2005), 245-63 (256-58).

It is a natural suspicion that the beginning of the world is not to be receiv'd according to that common beginning which is pitched in *Adam*, inherent in all men, who have but an ordinary knowledge in things: For that beginning seems enquirable, at a far greater distance, and from ages past very long before; both by the most ancient accounts of the *Chaldeans*, as also by the most ancient Records of the *Ægyptians*, *Æthiopians* and *Scythains*, and by parts of the frame of the world newly discovered.<sup>107</sup>

As well as comparing the Bible adversely with other historical sources, La Peyrère argued that the Old Testament had been written as a national history of the Jews rather than (as later Christians believed) as a universal history of mankind. In La Peyrère's interpretation, many biblical events had been less miraculous than later readers tended to suppose. The flood described in Genesis 'was not upon the whole earth, but only upon the Land of the Jews'; the star which had led the journey of the magi was 'a stream of light in the ayr, not a star in heaven'; and the darkness at the crucifixion was 'over the whole land of the Jews, not over all the world'.<sup>108</sup> These conclusions were provocative, but their implications were even more so. If only the Jews were descended from Adam, then the Fall, Original Sin, and the Atonement were only of consequence to ethnic Jews. If Genesis was merely a Jewish myth or a record of regional events, then it could be of little use as a source of information about the creation of the world. La Peyrère's work was strongly criticised and he was forced to recant by the Catholic authorities, but his idea would not go away, reappearing in *A Country Not Named* (c.1655) by the English linguist Francis Lodwick, in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), and in *La Terre Australe Connue* (1676) by the French writer Gabriel

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<sup>107</sup> Isaac La Peyrère, *Men before Adam*, trans. David Whitford (1656), sig. F1r.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, sigs U6r, X8r

de Foigny.<sup>109</sup> By the end of the century, it was a standard item in the toolkit of freethinking writers.

Debate about the biblical creation was not the exclusive preserve of scholars. It was also of interest to natural philosophers because the credibility of the Bible as an historical source and the acceptability of scientific discoveries were mutually related. In the early years of the Royal Society, attempts to interpret the Mosaic creation in line with the best available science became something of a literary subgenre. For those who were willing to take on the task, the first step was to decide which events to explain in terms of divine intervention and which in terms of natural causes. John Keill, writing in 1698, produced an estimate of the amount of water which had covered the earth during the flood and concluded that it was far more than could have fallen in the forty days and nights described in Genesis 7:12.<sup>110</sup> It could only be explained as a miracle. In other cases, philosophers opted for naturalistic explanations, but had difficulty squaring the account in Genesis with the best available empirical evidence. The English natural philosopher John Woodward argued that the reality of the biblical flood was compatible with the presence of the fossils of sea creatures in successive layers of rock rather than in a single layer as might be expected from a flood which had covered pre-existing land:

*It will perhaps at first sight seem very strange, and almost shock an ordinary Reader to find me asserting, as I do, that the whole Terrestrial Globe was taken all to pieces and dissolved at the Deluge, the Particles of Stone, Marble, and all other solid Fossils dissevered, taken up into the Water, and there sustained together with Sea-shells and other Animal and Vegetable Bodies: and that the present Earth*

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<sup>109</sup> See Poole, *The World Makers*, 30. Lodwick's manuscript is BL, MS Sloane 913, ff. 1v-33r. For a transcription, see *Francis Lodwick: On Language, Theology, and Utopia*, ed. William Poole and Felicity Henderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 65 and Gabriel de Foigny, *La Terre Australe Connue (1676)*, ed. Pierre Ronzeaud (Paris: Société de Textes Français Modernes, 1990).

<sup>110</sup> See John Keill, *An Examination of Dr. Burnet's Theory of the Earth* (1698), 158-70 and Genesis 7:24.

*consists, and was formed out of that promiscuous Mass of Sand, Earth, Shells, and the rest, falling down again, and subsiding from the Water.*<sup>111</sup>

But the evidence was against Woodward's scheme. Fossils could be found in caves and mines which were deeper in the earth's surface than the flood's dissolving powers could have reached. They could also be found in layers of rock which were contorted and awry, and which must have been formed through some other process in addition to sedimentation. As discoveries of this kind mounted, it became increasingly implausible that the Mosaic account was literally true.

There was also the question of the appearance of the earth. To the eyes of early modern observers, many of the earth's geographical features, such as mountains, glaciers, and deserts, appeared to be imperfections, which meant that they were unworthy of God and could not have been formed at the creation. Traditionally, their presence had been explained as the indirect result of human action, either in the Garden of Eden, where Eve's transgression had brought about the Fall of Man, or among the immoral contemporaries of Noah, whose actions had brought about the flood. The argument was theologically convenient because it offered a possible means of exculpating God of responsibility, but its credibility gradually waned. Developments in natural philosophy in the second half of the seventeenth century gave increasing weight to the conclusion that the earth's appearance had been formed by natural processes. The difficulty lay in calculating the speed at which these processes had occurred.<sup>112</sup> Could mountains and oceans really have formed in 6-7000 years? Had the creation in fact occurred much earlier than the Bible claimed? Was Genesis a factual account at all? An

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<sup>111</sup> John Woodward, *An Essay toward the Natural History of the Earth and Terrestrial Bodies, especially Minerals: As also of the Sea, Rivers, and Springs* (1695), sigs A4v-A5r.

<sup>112</sup> For an attempt to explain how the earth's appearance could have been formed by natural processes in the narrow confines of biblical time, see John Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (1675), 62-77.

uncompromising position was taken up by a founding member of the Royal Society, Robert Hooke, who argued that fossils had formed in longer periods of time than those provided by biblical chronology and that the earth's appearance was in a constant state of flux.<sup>113</sup> The arguments bore the implication that the Mosaic creation was at best an allegory for how the earth had really been formed and that God was indirectly responsible for its apparent imperfections. Hooke made no attempt to train his theories on the wires of biblical history. The biblical flood was merely one of several floods, all resulting from natural causes, and the earth had been created much earlier than the Bible claimed.<sup>114</sup>

The most famous attempt to reconcile the Bible and natural philosophy was a work by the Englishman Thomas Burnet.<sup>115</sup> In *Telluris theoria sacra* (1681), he set out 'to see those pieces of most ancient History, which have been chiefly preserv'd in Scripture, confirm'd a-new, and by another Light, that of Nature and Philosophy'.<sup>116</sup> He theorised that the world had originally been egg-shaped and that it had cracked under the effect of insolation, so that a flood of waters had erupted from its core. This explained how there had been more water in the flood than could plausibly have fallen as rain, how mountains and oceans had formed within a biblical timespan, and how the earth's axis had come to be tilted in relation to the ecliptic. For Burnet, these were natural events, rather than acts of divine intervention or the consequences of human action. But his

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<sup>113</sup> Robert Hooke, *Posthumous Works* (1705), xiii, 279-450. Hooke's work on earthquakes comprised lectures which were delivered to the Royal Society in 1667-68.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 408-10.

<sup>115</sup> He was not alone in undertaking the task: John Woodward argued that the Flood had been caused by a providential weakening of gravity, which had caused water to be released from pre-existing bodies, and William Whiston argued that the flood had been formed from the condensation of water in the tail of a comet which had narrowly missed collision with the earth. See Woodward, *An Essay toward the Natural History of the Earth and Terrestrial Bodies, especially Minerals* and William Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth from the Original to the Consummation of Things* (1696).

<sup>116</sup> Thomas Burnet, *The Theory of the Earth* (1684), sig. a3r. The work was initially published in Latin in 1681. The work cited here is Burnet's own English translation. A second volume was added in Latin in 1689 and in English in 1690. For a brief discussion of Burnet, Woodward, and Whiston, see Poole, *The World Makers*, 55-75. See also Joseph M. Levine, *Dr Woodward's Shield: History, Science, and Satire in Augustan England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 18-93.

theory contained an exegetical mistake. By focusing his attention on the flood, he neglected the account in Genesis 1:2, in which the waters pre-exist the land. In an effort to accommodate this detail, he embarked on a second volume of the work, in which the Mosaic creation was interpreted as a story which had been told by Moses to illustrate his moral teachings to the Jews.<sup>117</sup> It was an allegory and not a record of fact. Burnet's arguments were contentious, but were not formed with heterodox intent. They were, nevertheless, reprinted by the early deist Charles Blount, who included two chapters of *Telluris theoria sacra* in *The Oracles of Reason* (1693), without obtaining Burnet's consent, and accompanied them with a 'vindication' which accentuated their provocative features.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, because the *Oracles* was a miscellany of freethinking works by a number of different authors, Burnet found himself depicted as a member of a clandestine club. In this, Burnet gained the dubious distinction of being an early victim of a rhetorical device which later became one of the deists' favourites, in which heterodox opinions were back-projected onto largely orthodox figures.<sup>119</sup>

#### IV. Ecclesiastical history

At the same time as these debates were taking place, scholars were studying ecclesiastical history, in which the early Church and the Fathers were paramount. For Catholics, the appeal to the Fathers was a convenient means of undermining Protestant *sola scriptura* and of reiterating the importance of the authority and the traditions of the

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<sup>117</sup> On Burnet and 'accommodation', see Scott Mandelbrote, 'Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet: Biblical Criticism and the Crisis of Late Seventeenth-Century England', in James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (eds), *The Books of Nature and Scripture: Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza's Time and the British Isles of Newton's Time* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 149-78 (157-58).

<sup>118</sup> Blount et al., *The Oracles of Reason*, sigs B1r-E2v.

<sup>119</sup> In an especially bold use of the device, Anthony Collins claimed that the most understanding and virtuous people in all ages had been freethinkers, including Solomon, the Jewish prophets, Josephus, and the then late Archbishop of Canterbury John Tillotson. See Collins, *A Discourse of Freethinking* (1713), vi, 120-78.

Church. But they needed to be careful about which Fathers they chose to invoke, since the views of those who had been active before the Edict of Milan and the Council of Nicaea might sit uncomfortably with a conception of the Church as a single institution led from Rome and with an Athanasian conception of the Trinity.<sup>120</sup> The Fathers played a different role for Protestants. They provided an alternative to the uncertainties of the scriptures and a means of attacking the historical foundations of Catholicism. Polemical appeals to the Fathers took many forms. In straightforward cases, Protestants argued that a Catholic practice lacked a patristic precedent. This was the form of argument adopted by several leaders of the Swiss Reformation, including Joachim Vadian, Heinrich Bullinger, and Johann Kessler, when they attacked the corruption of religious orders and the Catholic Eucharistic rite.<sup>121</sup> Bullinger and Kessler appealed to the simple arrangements described by Cyprian of Carthage as a true precedent for later practice and dismissed the Catholic rite as an innovation.<sup>122</sup> In more complicated cases, a precedent existed, but without legitimating a later practice. When Bullinger attacked the Catholic cult of saints, he conceded its patristic origins, but argued that it had been instituted as a mean of accommodating Christianity to pagan mores.<sup>123</sup> Such accommodation was no longer necessary and the continuation of the cult was a disgrace.

As the ambitions of reformers grew, these *pointillist* arguments were accompanied by more sweeping works of scholarship. Among Lutheran reformers, the circle of scholars which surrounded Philipp Melanchthon formed an important centre for scholarship at Wittenberg, where they set about writing a history of the Church which would place it

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<sup>120</sup> On all this, see Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 204-51 (esp. 228-51).

<sup>121</sup> See Euan Cameron, 'Primitivism, Patristics, and Polemic in Protestant Visions of Early Christianity', in Van Liere, Ditchfield, and Louthan (eds), *Sacred History*, 27-51.

<sup>122</sup> For an English translation of the work in question, see Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Church: Select Letters*, trans. Allen Brent (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 171-88.

<sup>123</sup> See Cameron, 'Primitivism, Patristics, and Polemic in Protestant Visions of Early Christianity', 36-38.

in universal history.<sup>124</sup> The work was begun by Johannes Carion and published in an initial form in 1532. It unified biblical and pagan history within the framework of the prophecies of Daniel, according to which the rise and fall of four empires, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, and the Roman, would precede the second coming of Christ.<sup>125</sup> Because the Holy Roman Empire was widely believed to be the continuation of the Roman Empire, its downfall, which might be predicted through comparison with earlier empires, would be a portent of the end of the world. In the hands of Melanchthon and a younger generation of Lutheran historians, including David Chytraeus and Christoph Pezel, the chronicle was expanded to include an account of the corruption of the medieval Church.<sup>126</sup> In this form, it provided an example of how an instrument of religious controversy could be created by a team of researchers. The techniques which had been used were swiftly imitated by the Lutheran Matthias Flacius in the composition of the *Ecclesiastica historia* (1559-1574), which has come to be known as *The Magdeburg Centuries*. The *Centuries* continued Eusebius's narrative to the end of the twelfth century, emphasising the continuity of doctrine and practice, but also the gradual dilution of apostolic purity. The work of Flacius and the centuriators not only increased the scale on which ecclesiastical history was written, but instigated a Catholic counter-history in the form of the *Annales ecclesiastici* (1588-1607) by the Italian cardinal Caesar Baronius. In turn, the confutation of this work became a major objective for Protestant historians. The first volume of the *Annales* was answered by

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<sup>124</sup> See Asaph Ben-Tov, *Lutheran Humanists and Greek Antiquity: Melanchthonian Scholarship between Universal History and Pedagogy* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>125</sup> The fall of the Persians and the rise of the Greeks at the Battle of Issus (333BC), which was the middle point of history in schemes based on the prophecies of Daniel, was memorably depicted by Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1538) in a painting completed in 1529. The work is now housed in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

<sup>126</sup> See Ben-Tov, *Lutheran Humanists and Greek Antiquity*, 42-47.

Isaac Casaubon's *Exercitationes* (1614), which became a model for anti-Baronian works by the Anglican Richard Crakanthorpe and the Huguenot Louis Du Moulin.<sup>127</sup>

Reformers in England were equally zealous in their imitation of the early Church. In Henry VIII's 'Great Matter' with the papacy, scholars including Thomas Cranmer and Edward Foxe were enlisted to attack the Church of Rome.<sup>128</sup> They located its decline from apostolic purity in the pontificate of Gregory the Great and they were followed in this line of argument by John Bale and John Foxe (no relation of Edward).<sup>129</sup> By 1559, there was sufficient consensus about when the Catholic rot had set in for John Jewel, then bishop-elect of Salisbury, to challenge Catholics to produce precedents for 15 (later expanded to 27) of their beliefs and practices from before the seventh century.<sup>130</sup> Jewel's challenge chimed with the assertiveness of the Church of England after the accession of Elizabeth I and with the historical interests of its primate, Matthew Parker, whose assiduity in collecting Anglo-Saxon and medieval manuscripts supplied the Church with valuable ammunition.<sup>131</sup> It was followed in 1563 by the most significant work of anti-Catholic historiography in the period, John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, which drew closely on *The Magdeburg Centuries*, to which Foxe had contributed in the

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<sup>127</sup> The works in question are: Isaac Casaubon, *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI, ad cardinalis Baronii prolegomena in Annales* (1614), Richard Crakanthorpe, *Justinian the Emperor Defended, against Cardinal Baronius* (1616), and Louis du Moulin, *A Short and True Account of the Several Advances the Church of England hath Made towards Rome* (1680). Isaac Vossius and Richard Montague were also commissioned, by William Laud and James I respectively, to reply to Baronius. For a discussion, see Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg, *'I have always loved the Holy Tongue': Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 163-230; Giuseppe Antonio Guazzelli, 'Cesare Baronio and the Roman Catholic Vision of the Early Church', in Van Liere, Ditchfield, and Louthan (eds), *Sacred History*, 52-71; Meric Casaubon, *Generall Learning*, ed. Richard Serjeantson (Cambridge: RTM, 1999), 33-37; and Hardy, 'The Ars Critica in Early Modern England', 98-114.

<sup>128</sup> See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 41-79 (esp. 54-55).

<sup>129</sup> See Rosamund Oates, 'Elizabethan Histories of English Christian Origins', in Van Liere, Ditchfield, and Louthan (eds), *Sacred History*, 165-85 (165-70).

<sup>130</sup> For details of the delivery and publication of the sermon, see Gary W. Jenkins, *John Jewel and the English National Church: The Dilemmas of an Erastian Reformer* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 70.

<sup>131</sup> See Timothy Graham, 'Matthew Parker's Manuscripts: An Elizabethan Library and its Use', in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume 1: To 1640*, ed. Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 322-41.

1550s.<sup>132</sup> The work was first and foremost a martyrology, which recounted the progress of reformation in England from John Wyclif to the accession of Elizabeth and concentrated on the plight of Protestants under Mary. The second edition, which was published in 1570, partly in response to the criticisms of the English Catholic Nicholas Harpsfield, expanded the scope of the work considerably to include the medieval and early Church.<sup>133</sup> It showed how corruptions begun at the time of Gregory had progressively overwhelmed the Church and how a seam of pure Christianity had run through the centuries of Catholic darkness to be brought to light in the Reformation and the final repudiation of papal tyranny. A hastily compiled third edition in 1576 and a deluxe fourth edition in 1583, as well as five unabridged editions by 1684, maintained the book in popular consciousness until the beginning of the deist controversy.

The scholarly successes of Parker and Foxe, together with renewed attacks by Catholic scholars, such as Robert Parsons and Richard Verstegan, moved members of the Church of England to entrench their position. Foremost among their revetments were Oxford University Press, which was founded in 1586, and the Bodleian Library, which was founded in 1602 and quickly supplied with manuscripts by Thomas Bodley, Sir Henry Savile, and William Laud.<sup>134</sup> Other foundations included Chelsea College (a short-lived venture begun in 1609), Lambeth Palace Library, which grew from a bequest by the Archbishop of Canterbury Richard Bancroft in 1610, and Sion College, which was founded in 1623.<sup>135</sup> Oxford benefited most from this period of activity and became a

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<sup>132</sup> See Elizabeth Evenden and Thomas S. Freeman, *Religion and the Book in Early Modern England: The Making of John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 73-79.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-46.

<sup>134</sup> See Harry Carter, *A History of Oxford University Press, Volume 1: To the Year 1780* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1-37 and I.G. Philip and Paul Morgan, 'Libraries, Books, and Printing', in Nicholas Tyacke (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford, Volume IV: Seventeenth-Century Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 659-85.

<sup>135</sup> See Julian Roberts, 'Extending the Frontiers: Scholar Collections' and C.B.L. Barr and David Selwyn, 'Major Ecclesiastical Libraries: From Reformation to Civil War', both in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume 1: To 1640*, ed. Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 292-321, 363-99.

major centre for patristic scholarship, beginning with an eight-volume edition by Savile of the works of John Chrysostom (1613).<sup>136</sup> Major publications followed in turn: an edition by Patrick Young of Clement of Rome's first epistle to the Corinthians from Codex Alexandrinus (1633); an edition by Archbishop Ussher of the Epistles of Polycarp and Ignatius of Antioch (1644); a nine-language polyglot Bible (1653-57) edited by Brian Walton; the *Critici Sacri* (1660), a vast collaborative work of biblical commentary edited by John Pearson; and an edition by John Fell of the works of Cyprian (1681).<sup>137</sup> Some of these works, such as Savile's edition of Chrysostom, received international applause, but they were written to provide the Church of England with evidence of Catholic corruption, especially regarding its deviation from the beliefs and practices of the early Church.<sup>138</sup>

The growth of patristic scholarship in Oxford was important in the defence of Anglican episcopacy against its presbyterian critics, who insisted that it was an innovation which had been absent from the early Church. The Elizabethan religious settlement of 1559 had resulted in an uneasy peace, although there was little potential for presbyterian progress while Elizabeth remained on the throne.<sup>139</sup> The accession of James I in 1603 gave presbyterians a new opportunity to prosecute their case, and their appeals were answered at a conference at Hampton Court in January 1604. The conference was

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<sup>136</sup> John Chrysostom, *Opera Graecè*, ed. Henry Savile, 8 vols (Eton, 1613).

<sup>137</sup> In many cases, editions were sparked by the discovery of more authentic primary texts: the epistles of Clement of Rome in Codex Alexandrinus supplanted forged versions which had previously had currency; Ussher's edition of the epistles of Ignatius worked from previously overlooked Latin manuscripts; and Polycarp was edited from a Greek text where previously only a Latin one had been available. See Clement of Rome, *Epistolae ad Corinthios*, ed. and trans. Patrick Young (Oxford, 1633); Polycarp and Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistolae*, ed. James Ussher (Oxford, 1644); John Pearson et al. (eds), *Critici sacri*, 9 vols (Oxford, 1660); Brian Walton (ed.), *Biblia sacra polyglotta* (London, 1657); and Cyprian of Carthage, *Of the Unity of the Church*, ed. and trans. John Fell (Oxford, 1681). For a discussion, see Quantin, 'Anglican Scholarship Gone Mad?', 322.

<sup>138</sup> On Oxford Patristic scholarship, see Nicholas Keene, 'John Ernest Grabe, Biblical Learning and Religious Controversy in Early Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 58:4 (2007), 656-74 (659).

<sup>139</sup> For a clear summary of events, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547-1603* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 24-51.

convened with the nominal intention of finding common ecclesiological ground between episcopalian and presbyterian parties, but James's actions during the conference favoured the episcopalians.<sup>140</sup> When the presbyterian John Reynolds suggested a new biblical translation, citing mistakes in the Great Bible of 1539-40, James responded by commissioning a new version, which would combine compilations from existing versions with newly translated material.<sup>141</sup> Ignoring Presbyterian interests, he commissioned only Anglican translators, issuing them with the instruction that '[t]he old ecclesiastical words [are] to be kept, viz.: as the word 'Church' not be translated 'Congregation'.'<sup>142</sup> The translators also opted for 'bishop' in preference to 'senior' or 'elder' to refer to the leaders of the early Church, with the result that when the King James Version was published in 1611 it supported Anglican episcopacy. It commanded particular authority because the translators drew on European sacred and secular philology (principally works by Scaliger and Casaubon), which allowed them to interpret Greek biblical and patristic texts with greater accuracy by comparing them with pagan texts in which the same words and grammatical forms were present.<sup>143</sup> But after the premiership of Archbishop Laud and a period of authoritarian episcopacy, the situation changed completely when Parliament abolished episcopacy in 1643. The High-Church party was thrown into abeyance, but its members undertook a tenacious search for historical evidence in favour of episcopacy against the Presbyterian and Independent alternatives which were considered at the Westminster Assembly from 1643-53.<sup>144</sup> When the monarchy was restored in 1660 and negotiations began about the restoration

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<sup>140</sup> See David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2-6.

<sup>141</sup> See *ibid.*, 2-6.

<sup>142</sup> See *ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>143</sup> See Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Bible, 1611-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82 and Hardy, 'The Ars Critica in Early Modern England', 123-33.

<sup>144</sup> See John Spurr, "'A Special Kindness for Dead Bishops': The Church, History, and Testimony in Seventeenth-Century Protestantism', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 68:1/2 (2005), 313-34.

of the Church, the High-Church party swept to success, so that episcopacy was re-instituted when the Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662.<sup>145</sup>

The popular narrative of the corruption of the medieval Church placed an onus on apologists for the Church of England to explain how it had retained its fidelity to the beliefs and practices of the early Church.<sup>146</sup> To do this, it was necessary to refute the Catholic view that the Church of England had been founded in the sixth century by Augustine of Canterbury and had therefore derived the Apostolic Succession from St Peter.<sup>147</sup> Anglicans responded by arguing that the Church of England had been founded independently of Rome, deriving the Succession not from St Peter, but from St Paul or Joseph of Arimathea (who was thought to have been a disciple of St Philip).<sup>148</sup> The arguments were scrutinised by Ussher and the English antiquary Henry Spelman in 1639, who concluded in favour of the existence of a Church in England before the arrival of Augustine.<sup>149</sup> They raised queries, however, about the Arimathean hypothesis and these were taken up by the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and later Bishop of Worcester Edward Stillingfleet, who concluded that the story was 'an *Invention* of the *Monks of Glassenbury* to serve their Interests, by advancing the Reputation of their Monastery'.<sup>150</sup> He inferred from a reference in Eusebius to the apostles having preached in Britain that the Church of England had been founded at that time.<sup>151</sup> The historical

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<sup>145</sup> Presbyterian criticisms of the historical foundations of episcopacy continued throughout the later seventeenth century. See Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 284-98.

<sup>146</sup> On debates about the origins of the Church of England in the sixteenth century, see Oates, 'Elizabethan Histories of English Christian Origins', 165-85; on the continuation of these debates in the seventeenth century, see Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 53-99.

<sup>147</sup> See Bede, *The History of the Church of Englande*, trans. Thomas Stapleton (1565) and Robert Parsons, *A Treatise of Three Conversions* (1603).

<sup>148</sup> See Matthew Sutcliffe, *A Subversion of Robert Parsons* (1606) and Francis Godwin, *A Catalogue of the Bishops of England* (1615).

<sup>149</sup> See Henry Spelman, *Concilia, decreta, leges, constitutiones, in re ecclesiarum orbis Britannici* (1639) and James Ussher, *Britannicarum ecclesiarum antiquitates* (1639).

<sup>150</sup> See Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines Britannicae* (1685), 6. A less critical position had been adopted a few years earlier by Thomas Jones in *Of the Heart and its Right Sovereign* (1678), 127.

<sup>151</sup> See Stillingfleet, *Origines Britannicae*, 36 and Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel: Being the Demonstratio evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, trans. William J. Ferrar, 2 vols (London: SPCK,

logic of these debates was one of precedent: if the Church of England had derived the Apostolic Succession from St Peter, then the Church of Rome had a claim to dominion and the English Reformation had been schismatic; if the Church of England derived the Apostolic Succession from one of the other apostles, then Augustine's mission had been an invasion of an independent and legitimate Church, which the Reformation had finally repulsed.

After the debates of the 1660s, a series of further controversies renewed the study of ecclesiastical history in England. The first, known as the non-juring schism, arose in 1689 when six bishops, including the Archbishop of Canterbury William Sancroft, refused to swear the oath of allegiance to William III on the grounds that their allegiance was still to James II, whom William had illegally deposed. At first, the bishops were suspended, but after their continued implacability they were deprived of their positions and replaced by Williamite successors. In protest, a faction of High-Church clergy (soon dubbed 'non-jurors') refused to acknowledge the monarch's appointees and formed their own separate ministry. Conforming clergy suffered acute humiliation as many of the scholars who had championed Anglican episcopacy, including George Hickes and Henry Dodwell, chose to join the ranks of the non-jurors.<sup>152</sup> Here, they devoted themselves to providing historical justifications for a sacerdotal conception of the ministry, the independence of the Church from the state, and the associated doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>153</sup> In the latter of these endeavours they were motivated by the suspicion that many of the clergy who had risen to prominence after

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1920), I, 118, 130. The inference was challenged by the Catholic theologian Emmanuel Schelstrate, who cited several sources, including Eusebius, who had described St Peter preaching in Britain. See *A Dissertation Concerning Patriarchal and Metropolitan Authority* (1688), x-xi.

<sup>152</sup> For a neat summary of the non-juror's historical thought, see C.D.A. Leighton, 'The Non-Jurors and their History', *Journal of Religious History*, 29:3 (2005), 241-57. For a more detailed account of the non-jurors, but one less concerned with their historical thinking, see Robert D. Cornwall, *Visible and Apostolic: The Constitution of the Church in High Church Anglican and Non-Juror Thought* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993).

<sup>153</sup> See for instance George Hickes, *A Word to the Wavering* (1689) and Henry Dodwell, *A Vindication of the Deprived Bishops* (1692).

William's accession nursed closet Socinian sympathies.<sup>154</sup> A storm of controversy ensued, in which Anglican clergy turned on each other. Its first onslaught came in 1690 when Arthur Bury, the Rector of Exeter College, Oxford, published a book entitled *The Naked Gospel*, in which he argued that Trinitarianism had been absent from the early Church. Its second came in 1693, when the Anglican Robert South launched an attack on William Sherlock, the Master of the Temple Church in London, who had defended the doctrine of the Trinity against Socinian criticism by arguing that it could be rationalised by conceiving of the parts of the Trinity as independent consciousnesses.<sup>155</sup> The result had been to reason into ridicule what had always been mysterious:

he is now entering upon his *Grand Project* (and a great one it is undoubtedly) viz. To give the World a fuller, a clearer, and a more Intelligible *Notion* of a *Trinity in Unity*, than all the *Fathers* and the *Catholick Church* ever had of it for above sixteen hundred Years before. And as a Preparation to this, he tell us, That the *Great Objection all along against the Article of the Trinity has been the Unconceivableness of it*: And therefore, no doubt, there must needs be the highest Reason and Necessity in the World for the *Churches* admitting this Man's *New Explication* of it, as the only *sure Expedient* to remove this *mighty Objection*, and so to render a *Trinity in Unity* for ever after *Plain, Easie, and Intelligible*.<sup>156</sup>

The controversy was sufficiently acrimonious for William to ban further debate about the Trinity in 1696 and give his assent to the Blasphemy Act in 1697, which banned all printed denials of God's tri-unity or the divine authorship of the scriptures, although the divisions which had been created lasted well into the eighteenth century.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> See Charles Leslie, *The Charge of Socinianism against Mr. Tillotson Considered* (1695).

<sup>155</sup> The works in question were William Sherlock, *A Vindication of the Doctrine of the Holy and Ever Blessed Trinity* (1690) and Robert South, *Animadversions upon Dr. Sherlock's Book, Entituled A Vindication of the Holy and ever-Blessed trinity, &c* (1693), Wing S4731.

<sup>156</sup> Robert South, *Tritheism Charged upon Dr Sherlock's New Notion of the Trinity* (1695), 12.

<sup>157</sup> See Parliament of England and Wales, *An Act for the more Effectual Suppressing of Blasphemy and Profaneness* (1698).

In an attempt to terminate the debate by enforcing doctrinal discipline, High-Church clergy began a campaign for the resumption of convocation, the traditional meeting of the clergy in the Church of England which consisted of separate convocations for the provinces of York and Canterbury, each divided into an upper house of bishops led by the archbishop and a lower house of non-episcopal clergy led by an elected prolocutor.<sup>158</sup> Convocation traditionally met at the same time as parliament, but it had been prorogued since 1689. Debates ensued about whether convocation could meet without the monarch's approval, which was unforthcoming, moving High Churchmen to scabble for historical precedents showing that the Church, in its first apostolic form and as subsequently established in England, was a spiritual body and independent of the civil power.<sup>159</sup> The campaign was ultimately successful, but when a convocation of the province of Canterbury met in 1701, it was paralysed by debates about whether the proceedings of the lower house could be suspended by the upper house, a move which would have prevented the lower house from censuring *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (1699) by the Bishop of Salisbury Gilbert Burnet, although the case against Burnet was eventually ended by the dissolution of convocation by the king.<sup>160</sup> The disagreement reflected the political difference between the predominantly Whig episcopate and the Tory-sympathising non-episcopal clergy and again led to a vigorous search for historical precedents.<sup>161</sup> It rumbled on, with convocation meeting from 1702-

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<sup>158</sup> See Martin Grieg, 'Heresy Hunt: Gilbert Burnet and the Convocation Controversy of 1701', *Historical Journal*, 37:3 (1994), 569-92.

<sup>159</sup> See Francis Atterbury (anonymous), *A Letter to a Convocation Man Concerning the Rights, Powers, and Priviledges of that Body* (1697), esp. 19-20. For a counterargument, see William Wake, *The Authority of Christian Princes over their Ecclesiastical Synods Asserted* (1697). See also Humphrey Hody, *Some Thoughts on a Convocation and the Notion of its Divine Right* (1699).

<sup>160</sup> For defences of the authority of the upper house, see Edmund Gibson, *The Right of the Archbishop to Continue or Prorogue the Whole Convocation, Asserted* (1701) and Edmund Gibson, *The Pretended Independence of the Lower-House upon the Upper* (1703).

<sup>161</sup> See Francis Atterbury, *The Rights, Powers, and Priviledges of an English Convocation, Stated and Vindicated* (1701); and White Kennett, *Ecclesiastical Synods and Parliamentary Convocations in the Church of England Historically Stated* (1701).

05, in 1708, and again from 1710-13, until the Bangorian Controversy of 1716-17 led to its prorogation until 1852.<sup>162</sup>

Amid the general practice of appealing to the example of the Fathers, a more specific attitude developed known as ‘primitive Christianity’. The phrase came to particular prominence in 1673 when the Anglican scholar William Cave published a popular defence of the early Church entitled *Primitive Christianity* (1673). The work was ostensibly orthodox, but was unusual in its emphasis on the imitation of the lives and manners of the Fathers, rather than their theology and liturgy:

I studiously avoided controversies, it being no part of my design to enquire, what was the judgement of the Fathers in disputable cases, especially the more abstruse and intricate speculations of Theology, but what was their practice, and by what rules and measures they did govern and conduct their lives. The truth is, their *Creed* in the first Ages was *short* and *simple*, their Faith lying then (as *Erasmus* observes) not so much in *nice* and *numerous* Articles, as in a *good* and an *holy* life.<sup>163</sup>

For Cave, the Fathers were not the makers of doctrinal precedents to be cited in polemics against Rome, which he conspicuously omitted to mention, or in disputes between Protestant factions, but moral exemplars who were equally important to members of all Christian Churches. Cave made no explicit statement about whether imitating the Fathers would require the reform of the Church of England, but he was dissatisfied with modern Christianity. ‘Its disciples are generally so debauched and vitious, so corrupt and contrary to the rules of this holy Religion’, he wrote, ‘that if a modest and honest *Heathen* was to estimate Christianity by the lives of its Professors,

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<sup>162</sup> See William Gibson, *Enlightenment Prelate: Benjamin Hoadly, 1676-1761* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2004), 147-99 and Andrew Starkie, *The Church of England and the Bangorian Controversy, 1716-1721* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007).

<sup>163</sup> William Cave, *Primitive Christianity: Or, the Religion of the Ancient Christians in the First Ages of the Gospel* (1673), sigs a4r-a4v.

he would certainly proscribe it as the vilest Religion in the world'.<sup>164</sup> Also distinctive was Cave's choice of sources. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he gave credence to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a collection of eight treatises surviving in a fourth-century manuscript, which were thought to have been dictated by the apostles to Clement of Rome (hence their also being known as the *Clementine Constitutions*).<sup>165</sup> Cave denied that they were genuinely apostolic, but insisted against the Huguenot Jean Daillé, who had dated them to later than the fifth century, that they were a genuine record of the early Church.<sup>166</sup>

Following Cave, the standard of 'primitive Christianity' was raised by Protestant dissenters. Prominent among them were the Baptists, who argued that adult baptism had been the true practice of the early Church, and the Quakers, who argued that spiritualism and self-denial were more accurate imitations of the apostles than Anglican prelacy.<sup>167</sup> 'Our principles', wrote the Quaker Joseph Wyeth in *Primitive Christianity* (1698), 'are no other than the Doctrines which our Lord Jesus Christ did reveal, and which his Apostles did Preach, and which after a time of great Apostacy have been again Preached'.<sup>168</sup> But dissenting uses of the phrase were soon eclipsed. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the Anglican scholar William Whiston, who was Newton's successor as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at the University of Cambridge, became convinced that the *Apostolic Constitutions* were authentic and

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., sig. Abv.

<sup>165</sup> On the *Constitutions* and their provenance, see David A. Fiensy, *Prayers Alleged to be Jewish: An Examination of the Constitutiones Apostolorum* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 19-41 and Keene, 'John Ernest Grabe, Biblical Learning and Religious Controversy in Early Eighteenth-Century England', 667-68.

<sup>166</sup> Cave, *Primitive Christianity*, sigs a4r-a8r.

<sup>167</sup> See for instance William Russel, *An Epistle Concerning Baptism* (1696) and William Penn, *Primitive Christianity Revived in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers* (1696). For Anglican criticisms, see Francis Bugg, *A Sober Expostulation, with some of the Hearers of the Quakers, against the Insolent Boldness of their Mercenary Teachers* (1698) and, in a critical vein, Charles Leslie, *Primitive Heresy Revived in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers* (1698).

<sup>168</sup> Joseph Wyeth, *Primitive Chirstianity* [sic] [...] *Continued in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers* (1698), 50.

undertook to reform the Church of England along what he believed to be apostolic lines. He proposed, among other reforms, that several apocryphal books (including the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the epistles of Clement of Rome, and a second-century literary work known as the *Shepherd of Hermas*) should be included in the New Testament canon and that Trinitarianism should be replaced with the ‘Eusebian’ doctrine that the Son and the Holy Spirit were not consubstantial with the Father (as the Athanasians held) or subordinate to him (as the Arians held), but equal and coeternal with him.<sup>169</sup> He published his proposals in 1711 and founded the Society for Promoting Primitive Christianity in 1715, which included among its members the future Speaker of the House of Commons, Arthur Onslow (1691-1738), and the rising star of Anglican-Whiggism, Benjamin Hoadly.<sup>170</sup> Whiston’s proposals were not warmly received. He was banished from Cambridge in 1710, dismissed from his professorship in 1711, and investigated by convocation and tried before the High Court of Delegates in 1713-14.<sup>171</sup> He was eventually pardoned by George I in 1714 in an effort by the newly acceded monarch to solidify his position by quelling ecclesiastical fervour.<sup>172</sup> Even after Whiston’s removal from public office, he was still a magnet for religious controversy. In 1722, he published doubts about the reliability of the extant texts of the Old Testament and outlined a set of ambitious proposals for the restoration of the original text. In doing so, he provided a point of departure for the freethinker Anthony Collins, whose *Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) used the

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<sup>169</sup> See William Whiston, *Sermons and Essays upon Several Subjects* (1709), 296 and *Letter to the Right Honourable the Earl of Nottingham* (1721), ESTC T041587, 41. For a brief discussion, see Keene, ‘A Two-Edged Sword’: Biblical Criticism and the New Testament Canon in Early Modern England’, 99.

<sup>170</sup> See William Whiston, *An Historical Preface to Primitive Christianity Reviv’d* (1711) and *Primitive Christianity Reviv’d*, 5 vols (1711-12). On the Society for Promoting Primitive Christianity, see Force, *William Whiston*, 19-27.

<sup>171</sup> Until 1832, the High Court of Delegates was a special tribunal with authority over other courts, whose members, the delegates, were appointed by the monarch if the case was civil and by the Archbishop of Canterbury if the case was ecclesiastical. For more information, see G.I.O. Duncan, *The High Court of Delegates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

<sup>172</sup> See Eamon Duffy, ‘Whiston’s Affair’: The Trials of a Primitive Christian 1709-1714’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 27:2 (1976), 129-50.

criticism of Whiston's proposals as a convenient mantle under which to prosecute arguments about the connection (or rather lack of one) between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>173</sup> Once again, well-intentioned scholarship had had unexpectedly heterodox results.

Though ecclesiastical history was often studied with the aim of settling religious controversies, it suffered no fewer tribulations than other areas of sacred history.<sup>174</sup> Casaubon's demonstration that the Sibylline oracles were forgeries had the knock-on effect of discrediting the Fathers, many of whom had taken the oracles seriously.<sup>175</sup> The reputation of the Fathers was further damaged during the 1620s when the Anglican scholars John Downe and Richard Holdsworth argued that many patristic texts were of uncertain attribution and contained lacunae and possible corruptions.<sup>176</sup> The texts were contradictory, frequently ambiguous, and sometimes even positively heretical, and it was far from clear in many cases that the Fathers had an adequate grasp on the languages with which they dealt.<sup>177</sup> The arguments of Downe and Holdsworth were taken up in the 1630s by the circle of scholars and philosophers which orbited Lucius Cary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Falkland, and met at his Oxfordshire home at Great Tew (hence their sometimes being known as 'the Great Tew circle').<sup>178</sup> Cary and John Hales lauded reason, private judgement, and the Bible above the opinions of the Fathers and the Councils.<sup>179</sup> But their works were only jabs in comparison with the resounding blow

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<sup>173</sup> On Whiston, see Chapter 5 below.

<sup>174</sup> On all this see Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 203-51.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-48.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 203-08.

<sup>177</sup> See John Downe, 'The Reall Presence by Transubstantiation unknown to the ancient Fathers', in *idem*, *Certaine Treatises* (Oxford, 1633), sigs ddd3r-vvv1r and Richard Holdsworth, *Praelectiones theologicae* (1661). Holdsworth's work consisted of lectures which had been delivered at Gresham College in the 1630s.

<sup>178</sup> For an eloquent account of Falkland and his peers, see Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Great Tew Circle', in *idem*, *Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans: Seventeenth-Century Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987), 166-230.

<sup>179</sup> See for instance Lucius Cary, *Of the Infallibilitie of the Church of Rome* (1645) and John Hales, *A Tract Concerning Schisme and Schismatiques* (1642), Wing: H278, esp. 4-7.

which was struck by Daillé in the *Traicté de l'employ des Saints Peres* (1632).<sup>180</sup> The work provided a clear conspectus of previous criticisms of the Fathers and underlined the twofold difficulty of discovering what their views had been and correcting their very numerous mistakes. The work was targeted at the French cardinal Jacques Davy Du Perron, who had defended the authority of the Fathers on the grounds that they were witnesses of the Gospel, rather than the authoritative authors of Christian doctrine.<sup>181</sup> Yet even judged as witnesses, Daillé argued, the Fathers were incorrigibly unreliable.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the reputation of the Fathers had been further damaged, above all by Henry Dodwell. From the 1690s until his death in 1711, Dodwell deployed a formidable knowledge of the early Church against many modern Anglican doctrines. In his *Dissertationes Cyprianicae* (1682), he reduced the number of early Christian martyrs and, in his *Epistolary Discourse* (1706), he drew on evidence from the Fathers to argue for a heterodox understanding of the soul, according to which it was naturally mortal and only made immortal through baptism by a priest in the Apostolic Succession.<sup>182</sup> Dodwell's works not only shook the confidence of Anglicans in the authority of the early Church, but also provided freethinkers and deists with a valuable and dangerous resource.<sup>183</sup> The erosion of the Fathers' authority continued in the eighteenth century, hastening in the work of Thomas Woolston, who absurdly extrapolated Origen's allegorical exegeses to argue against the reality of miracles, reaching its greatest intensity in the work of the Anglican clergyman Conyers

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<sup>180</sup> The work was published in an English translation by Thomas Smith as *A Treatise Concerning the Right Use of the Fathers, in the Decision of the Controversies that are at this Day in Religion* (1651).

<sup>181</sup> See Jean Daillé, *Traicté de l'employ des Saints Peres, pour le Jugement des Differends, qui sont Auiourd'hui en la Religion* (Geneva, 1632), 24-59 and *passim*.

<sup>182</sup> See Ellis, 'The Old Testament Canon in the Early Church', 665-77; Keene, 'A Two-Edged Sword': Biblical Criticism and the New Testament Canon in Early Modern England', *f passim*; and Quantin, 'Anglican Scholarship Gone Mad?', 353.

<sup>183</sup> Collins used the controversy created by Dodwell's *Epistolary Discourse* to argue for the materiality of the soul, and later used Dodwell in his criticism of prophecy. See Anthony Collins (anonymous), *A Letter to the Learned Mr. Henry Dodwell* (1707) and Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 49, 89.

Middleton, who argued that none of the miracles described by the Fathers had actually occurred, and persisting in Edward Gibbon's notorious but entertaining account of how the Fathers had exaggerated the numbers and sufferings of the early Christian martyrs.<sup>184</sup>

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This chapter has described the background to the deists' historical arguments. It has sketched the origins and later ubiquity of the belief that historical evidence could support belief in theological doctrines and has described the fluctuating confidence of seventeenth-century Christians that the truth of their religion could be demonstrated through the study of its past. It has shown how heterodox conclusions were often the unintended consequences of orthodox religious brio and how traditional views of sacred history came to be challenged on numerous fronts by the beginning of the eighteenth century. The next step is to see how the deists appropriated and broke away from seventeenth-century learning by questioning its philosophical and theological presuppositions. As the following chapters of this study will show, the deists were distinguished from many of their forebears by their interest in how philosophy and theology could structure the study of the past.

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<sup>184</sup> Gibbon was also influenced by Dodwell's works on the subject. See Conyers Middleton, *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, which are Supposed to have Subsisted in the Christian Church* (1749) and Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols (London: Penguin, 1994), I, 514-81 (esp. 540, 545).

## Chapter 2:

### History and Comprehensibility

God is true, and his Word to be Credited for it self alone without any further Security or Evidence of the thing it self; and if we are once satisfied about the Revelation, and do own that to be true, we are not to demurre to the plain sense and meaning of it, though there be no other Evidence in the thing, nor any other ground of perswasion for the Truth of it but only *that* [...] <sup>1</sup>

William Payne

[N]othing *contradictory* or *inconceivable*, however made an *Article of Faith*, can be contain'd in the *Gospel*, if it be really the Word of God [...] <sup>2</sup>

John Toland

At the beginning of the deist controversy, in the 1680s and 90s, it was widely held that less than fully comprehensible doctrines should be believed if they were contained in revelation. Some theologians, and especially those with Calvinist leanings, believed that human reason had been deprived by the Fall of Man and that doctrines should be believed through faith, not reason, irrespective of their comprehensibility. Others distinguished between doctrines which were 'contrary to reason', which should not be believed under any circumstances, and those which were 'above reason', which were neither contradictory nor fully comprehensible and should be believed if they were contained in revelation. The distinction was important in debates about the Trinity and other mysteries, which appeared to be neither contradictory nor fully comprehensible, and to be supported by revelation.

These principles were challenged by John Toland in *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696).<sup>3</sup> By combining the epistemology of Locke with the debunking accounts of the

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<sup>1</sup> William Payne, *The Mystery of the Christian Faith and of the Blessed Trinity Vindicated and the Divinity of Christ Proved* (1697), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 174.

origins of mysteries which had been written by Socinian and Unitarian writers in their struggle against the doctrine of the Trinity, Toland argued that there was ‘nothing in the Gospel contrary to reason, nor above it’.<sup>4</sup> The work was an assault on belief in mysteries, but it also bore implications for the question of whether the truth of

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<sup>3</sup> The circumstances of the work’s creation have not been stated clearly in existing scholarship. The work was begun in 1694 when Toland was studying in Oxford and completed late in 1695, by which time he had moved to London. He arrived in Oxford in January 1694, having left Leiden the previous summer, and was rumoured to be writing a heterodox work by May. In March 1695, there were rumours that draft papers were in circulation and by October Toland was banished from Oxford by the Vice-Chancellor in punishment for irreligious behaviour (although he apparently returned in the Vice-Chancellor’s absence). An advert for *Christianity not Mysterious* appeared in November 1695, though it is unclear whether this accompanied the work’s publication as the advert omitted to specify where the work could be bought. The first edition, which omitted the names of the author and the printer, was dated 1696 and a second, enlarged and corrected, edition appeared later in the same year, this time naming Toland and the printer. Two adverts for the second edition appeared in June 1696, the first informing readers that the work could be obtained ‘at the Dolphin, next to St Dunstan in the West on Fleet Street’ and the second revealing ‘Mr. Tooland’ as the author. There is no record of either edition in the Stationers’ Register. Replies to Toland appeared before the end of 1696, but Toland avoided the ensuing scandal by travelling to Dublin in March or April 1697. In his absence, the book was presented to the Grand Jury of Middlesex in May 1697 and condemned as a work of heresy. Its reception in Ireland was similarly fraught. It was brought before the Irish House of Commons on 14 August 1697, condemned on 4 September, and burnt by the public hangman on 14 September. Toland stayed in Dublin as late as 3 September, but was in London by the autumn of that year, where he published an apology and a defence of his actions. These were followed by a second apology in 1698 and, after unsuccessful attempts to condemn *Christianity not Mysterious* by the Lower House of Convocation, by a second defence in 1702 and a reissue of the second edition, also in 1702, which included a reissue of the first apology. There seems to be no evidence for Robert Sullivan’s claim, reproduced by Michael Brown, that Toland burnt a copy of *The Book of Common Prayer* at an Oxford tavern in the mid-1690s. Likewise, while it was once thought that Toland used his time in London to write *Two Essays sent in a Letter from Oxford to a Nobleman in London* (1695), the attribution has now been convincingly challenged. For information on the dating of Toland’s composition of the work, see John Toland, *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Toland*, 2 vols (1726), II, 292-94, 312; Benjamin Furly to John Locke, 9/19 August 1693, John Freke to John Locke, 9 April 1695, and William Molyneux to John Locke, 6 April 1697 in *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. Esmond Samuel de Beer, 8 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976-89), IV, 710-11, V, 326-27, and VI, 82-83; Pierre Des Maizeaux, ‘Some Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. John Toland’, in *The Miscellaneous Works*, I, iii-xcii (xii-xiii, xxii); and Lambeth Palace Library, MS 942, f.110r (Arthur Charlett to Thomas Tenison, 25 October 1695); for details of the work’s publication, see *The Post Man and the Historical Account*, 84, 172, 177 (19-21 November 1695, 13-16 June 1696, and 27 June 1696); for early responses, see Samuel Bold, *The Christian Belief: Wherein is Asserted and Proved, that as there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason* (1696) and Alan Monro, *A Letter to the Honourable Sir Robert Howard* (1696); for details of attempts to prosecute Toland, see John Toland, *An Apology for Mr. Toland* (1697), title page and 27; and, for modern scholarly discussions, see Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*, 5; Michael Brown, *A Political Biography of John Toland* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), 29; and Rhona Rappaport, ‘Questions of Evidence: An Anonymous Tract Attributed to John Toland’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58:2 (1997), 339-48.

<sup>4</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, title page. For examples of the Lockean and Socinian drifts in existing interpretations of Toland, see Robert Reese Evans, *Pantheisticon: The Career of John Toland* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 8-9, 19-23; Philip McGuinness, ‘*Christianity not Mysterious* and the Enlightenment’, in Philip McGuinness, Alan Harrison, and Richard Kearney, *John Toland’s Christianity not Mysterious: Text, Associated Works and Critical Essays* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997), 231-42 (233-37); and John C. Biddle, ‘Locke’s Critique of Innate Principles and Toland’s Deism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37:3 (1976), 411-22.

Christianity could depend on historical evidence. This chapter summarises seventeenth-century thought about mysteries, contradictions, and things above reason, and explains how it was criticised by Toland. It then describes how the fallout from *Christianity not Mysterious* gave rise to a further controversy about the comprehensibility of God, in which the central figure was Anthony Collins. In each case, it shows the deists' abiding conviction that only comprehensible doctrines could depend for their truth on historical evidence.

#### I. Things contrary, above, and according to reason

In asserting that there was nothing in the Gospel which was 'contrary to reason, nor above it', Toland was using a well-worn distinction.<sup>5</sup> It had origins at least as early as Aquinas, but had grown in significance in the seventeenth century as a result of debates about which kinds of proposition could be believed on the basis of revelation.<sup>6</sup> Here Calvinist theologians argued that the appearance of a contradiction in a doctrine was not a reason not to believe it, so long as it was present in the scriptures. Since reason had been depraved by the Fall of Man, it was no sure guide as to which doctrines merely appeared contradictory and which doctrines were really so.<sup>7</sup> The Independent leader John Owen was of this persuasion:

there are in the Gospel Things that are unsuited, yea *contradictory* unto Reason as it is Corrupted. [...] To deny this, is to deny the fundamental Principle and

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<sup>5</sup> On all this, see Jan W. Wojcik, 'The Theological Context of Boyle's *Things above Reason*', in Michael Hunter (ed.), *Robert Boyle Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 139-55 and Jan W. Wojcik, *Robert Boyle and the Limits of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 151-60 and *passim*. For a more philosophically intricate account, see Thomas Holden, 'Robert Boyle on Things above Reason', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 15:2 (2007), 283-312.

<sup>6</sup> On the origins of the distinction, see Wojcik, *Robert Boyle and the Limits of Reason*, 27-41.

<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Robert Boyle and John Locke each identified a single context in which it might be rational to believe contradictions. See respectively footnotes 32 and 37 below. For Toland's condemnation of the kind of view adopted by Owen and Baxter, see Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 5-6.

Supposition that in all things the Gospel proceedeth on; that is, that *Jesus Christ* came into the World to restore and repair our Natures. In this state as it is unable of it self to *discern* and judge of *Spiritual Things* in a due manner, so it is apt to frame unto it self *vain Imaginations*, and to be prepossessed with innumerable *Prejudices*, contrary to what the Gospel doth teach and require.<sup>8</sup>

He confined his account to ‘things which Practically respect the Obedience of Faith’, but was emphatic that the Gospel ‘prescribeth things *contrary* unto our natural Conceptions, or Reason as it is in us *depraved*’.<sup>9</sup> The Presbyterian leader Richard Baxter adopted a similar but more general view, contending that the scriptures ought to be accepted as the word of God even if they contained apparent contradictions. Adherents to the opposite view, he explained,

do think it so capable of disputing with God, and comprehending the reasons of his Truths and ways, that they are ready to deny the most confirmed Truth, if they do not reach the maner and Ends and Reasons of it, and God shall not be believed, unless their Reasons be satisfyed in all these, and unless they are able to take so full a view of the whole body of Truth, as to answer all gain-sayers, and reconcile all seeming contradictions<sup>10</sup>

If a contradiction was present in the scriptures, this was a reason to believe the contradiction, not a reason to disbelieve the scriptures. Neither Owen nor Baxter believed that contradictions were true, only that some doctrines might appear

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<sup>8</sup> John Owen, *The Nature of Apostasie* (1676), 286. See also pp. 5-12, 276-329. Outside the sphere of practical reasoning, Owen resembled his Anglican contemporaries in distinguishing between contradictions and things above reason. He differed, however, in maintaining that faith involved the intervention of the Holy Spirit and that faith and reason both played roles in the formation of belief. For Owen, reason could demonstrate religious truths, dispose someone to believe them, support a belief which was already acquired, and refute arguments against that belief. It could not, without the assistance of faith, support resolute belief or dispose someone to believe in things above reason. See Sebastian Rehnman, ‘John Owen on Faith and Reason’, in Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 31-48.

<sup>9</sup> Owen, *The Nature of Apostasie*, 289. For Owen’s views on things above reason contradictions which should not be believed, see John Owen, *The Reason of Faith* (1677), 83-84, 137-38.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Baxter (anonymous), *The Arrogancy of Reason against Divine Revelations* (1655), 50-51. Similar views were espoused among Toland’s critics by the Independent minister Thomas Beverley in *Christianity the Great Mystery* (1696), 32-33.

contradictory to fallen human reason. Contradictions might be believed through faith, here defined in opposition to reason, on the understanding that they were contradictory from a human perspective only and not from the perspective of God.<sup>11</sup>

Most writers took a different view and were stalwart against belief in contradictions. These included Anglicans, who sought to confute the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation,<sup>12</sup> and Socinians and Unitarians, who sought to confute the doctrine of the Trinity, which was believed by Anglicans and Catholics alike.<sup>13</sup> There was a prior

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<sup>11</sup> Wojcik has argued that Boyle believed that some contradictions were true, although this interpretation has been challenged. For further details, see footnote 37 below.

<sup>12</sup> The orthodox Catholic position was that transubstantiation was not contradictory but mysterious and should be believed on the basis of the traditions and authority of the Church. The point was addressed in the thirteenth session of the Council of Trent in October 1551. The Latin text published in Brescia in 1563 read: ‘Principiò docet sancta synodus, & apertè, as simpliciter profitetur: in almo sanctæ eucharistiæ sacramento, post panis, & uini consecrationem D.N. Iesum Christum, uerum dem, atq; hominem, uerè, realiter, as substantialiter, sub specie illarum uerum sensibilibium contineri. Nec enim hæc inter se pugnant, ut ipse saluator noster, semper ad dexteram patris in cœlis assideat, iuxta modum existendi naturalem: &, ut multis nihilominus aii in locis, sacramentaliter præsens, sua substantia nobis adsit: ea existendi ratione, quam, etsi uerbis exprimere uix possumus: possibilem tamen esse deo, cogitatione per fidem illustratam assequi possumus: & constantissime credere debemus. Ita enim maiores nostri omnes, quotquot in uera Christi Ecclesia fuerunt: qui de sanctissimo hoc sacramento disseruerunt, apertissime professisunt: hoc tam admirabile sacramentum, in ultima cæna, redemptorem nostrum instituißè: cùm post panis, uiniq; benedictionem: se, suum ipsius corpus, illis præbere, as suum sanguinem: differtus, as perspecuis uerbis testatus est’. The non-contradictory nature of the belief was made explicit in the English translation of 1687: ‘In the first place, this holy Synod doth teach, and openly and simply profess, That, after the Consecration of the Bread and Wine in the Blessed Sacrament of the holy Eucharist, our Lord Jesus Christ, truly God and Man, is indeed Really and Substantially contain’d under the *Species* of those sensible things: Neither are these things contradictory in themselves, That our Saviour may always sit at the right hand of God in Heaven, according to the Natural way of Existing, and that his Substance should nevertheless be present with us Sacramentally in many other places, by that same manner of Existing; which, though we can scarce express it in words, yet it is possible to God, and our imagination being illustrated through Faith, we may follow, and ought most firmly to believe it: For so all our Predecessors, as many as were of Christs true Church, and have writ or discours’d upon this most holy Sacrament, have most clearly professed, That our blessed Redeemer instituted this most holy Sacrament at his Last Supper, when after the Benediction or Blessing of the Bread and Wine, he witnesses in plain and perspicuous words, That he gave them his very Body and Blood’. Bozola, J.B. (ed.), *Vniuersum sacrosanctum concilium Tridentinum* (Brescia, 1563), 54 and John Bromely (attributed), *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (1687), 49. Anglican critics of transubstantiation tended to take the Catholic claim that it was mysterious to mean that it was a thing above reason. See for example Edward Stillingfleet, *The Doctrine of the Trinity and Transubstantiation Compared*, 2 vols (1687), I, 4-5 and Richard Kidder, *A Second Dialogue between a New Catholick Convert and a Protestant* (1687), 3-5.

<sup>13</sup> For a clear discussion of ‘Socinian’ and ‘Unitarian’, see John Marshall, ‘Locke, Socinianism, “Socinianism”, and Unitarianism’, in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 111-82 (111-14) and, on Toland’s relation to the Socinians, see Gerard Reedy, ‘Socinians, John Toland, and the Anglican Rationalists’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 70:3/4 (1977), 285-304. Toland may have had access to Socinian and Unitarian writings through the three volumes of ‘Unitarian Tracts’ which were compiled and published by Thomas Firmin: *The Faith of One God* (1691); *A Second Collection of Tracts, Proving the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only True God* (1693); and *A Third Collection of Tracts, Proving the God and Father of our*

question, however, about whether it was possible to believe in contradictions. The question was answered differently depending on whether the contradictions under consideration were of pairs of propositions which contradicted each other (henceforth, ‘mutual contradictions’) or individual propositions with parts which contradicted each other (henceforth, ‘self-contradictions’).<sup>14</sup> In his running battle with the Jesuit Edward Knott, the Anglican theologian William Chillingworth argued that belief in mutual contradictions was possible.<sup>15</sup> Whereas Knott had denied that salvific truths and damnable heresies could be believed at the same time, Chillingworth argued that belief in mutual contradictions had to be possible because the only rational means by which an arguer could dislodge one of his opponent’s beliefs was by showing that it contradicted another belief which the opponent held more strongly.<sup>16</sup> Belief in contradictions was irrational, but it was only because humans were capable of this irrationality that they could be moved by means of argument towards correct, non-contradictory beliefs.

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*Lord Jesus Christ, the only True God; and Jesus Christ the Son of God, him whom the Father Sanctified and Sent, Raised from the Dead and Exalted* (1695). On the authorship of the tracts and for a further discussion of ‘Socinian’ and ‘Unitarian’, see Daniela Bianchi, ‘Some Sources for a History of English Socinianism: A Bibliography of 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Socinian Writings’, *Topoi*, 4:1 (1985), 91-120 (104-05).

<sup>14</sup> Most, if not all, mutual contradictions can be re-stated as self-contradictions (e.g. the propositions ‘the object is round’ and ‘the object is square’ can be re-stated as ‘the object is round and square’). The difference, for seventeenth-century writers, lay in whether the mind believed contradictory propositions or parts of propositions at the same time. This was more likely to occur in the case of self-contradictions, in which the contradictory parts of the proposition were presented to the mind almost simultaneously, than mutual contradictions, in which the contradictory parts might be temporally disconnected.

<sup>15</sup> The origins of the dispute were highly involved. Knott had seized on a passage by the Laudian Provost of the Queen’s College, Oxford, Christopher Potter, in which Potter had followed Archbishop Ussher in arguing that those who adhered to truths which were necessary for salvation might be guilty ‘of overthrowing that which they have builded by superinducing [i.e. additionally and simultaneously believing] any *damnable heresies* thereupon’. Knott responded by denying that damnable heresies and salvific truths could be believed simultaneously. In answering Knott, Chillingworth’s objective seems to have been to explain how the medieval Church could have communicated salvific truths from the Primitive Church to the Reformation despite being steeped in heresy. See Christopher Potter, *Want of Charitie Justly Charged, on all such Romanists* (Oxford, 1633), STC 20135.3, sig. h2r; Edward Knott, *Mercy and Truth* (1634), 134-35; and William Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation* (1638), STC 5138.2, 213-17.

<sup>16</sup> See Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants*, 214-17.

Self-contradictions were treated differently. Many writers held that they were meaningless and therefore that they were not candidates for belief. As the future deist (and, at this point in his career, Unitarian sympathiser) Matthew Tindal wrote:

A Man that is obliged to believe a thing, must first know what it is before he can believe it, otherwise he may be obliged to believe he knows not what; it being impossible to believe any thing concerning empty Sounds, or Words that have no Idea's fix'd to them. One can neither affirm or deny, believe or disbelieve a Proposition that he does not understand; it is impossible to assert somewhat of nothing, and what he has no Idea of is nothing to him [...] As we cannot believe where we have no Idea's, so we cannot believe those Idea's that are contradictory to be true, because they contain an Affirmation and a Negation of the same thing.<sup>17</sup>

The argument was adapted from the theory of meaning in Locke's *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1690). For Locke, words were of use and signification only 'so far as there is a constant connexion between the Sound and the *Idea*; and a Designation, that the one stand for the other'.<sup>18</sup> Without this constant connection, he continued, words 'are nothing but so much insignificant noise'.<sup>19</sup> In self-contradictions, the terms (e.g. 'round' and 'square') were meaningful because they were constantly connected to ideas (e.g. of roundness and squareness), whereas the whole proposition was not meaningful because the combination of words (e.g. 'this object is round and square') could not be connected to any possible combination of ideas.<sup>20</sup> Self-contradictions were therefore neither true nor false, nor supportable nor confutable by evidence of any kind.

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew Tindal (anonymous), *A Letter to the Reverend Clergy of Both Universities Concerning the Trinity and the Athanasian Creed* (1694), 3, 32. On Tindal's debts to Locke, see Dmitri Levitin, 'Reconsidering John Sergeant's Attacks on Locke's Essay', *Intellectual History Review*, 20:4 (2010), 457-77 (468-69).

<sup>18</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), III, ii, §8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, III, ii, §8.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, II, i-ii. On Locke, see footnotes 41-43 below.

Where belief in contradictions was thought to be possible, there were two main objections to it.<sup>21</sup> The first was that God would not require it. For the Socinian writer Stephen Nye, it was evident that the doctrine of the Trinity ‘doth Reflect upon the Goodness of God, and his Love to Mankind: as making that fundamental and necessary to Salvation, the truth whereof must be confessed to be so very obscure and uncertain’.<sup>22</sup> God would not have created humans with reason and then required them to believe things which were confusing or abhorrent to it. The second objection was that no revelation could be more convincing than what the mind received through intuition. The point had been addressed by Locke. Because knowledge was founded on the simple ideas which the mind received through sensation and reflection, it could never be rational to believe a proposition in preference to one of these ideas.<sup>23</sup> ‘[W]hatsoever Truth we come to the discovery of, from the Knowledge and Contemplation of our own clear *Ideas*’, he wrote, ‘will always be certainer to us, than those which are conveyed to us by *Traditional Revelation*’.<sup>24</sup> It would always be more reasonable to believe that an error had been made in the ascription of the contradiction to God or the construal of it as a contradiction than to believe that God had actually enjoined it.

While attacking belief in contradictions, many Anglicans identified a separate category of ‘things above reason’. These were usually taken to be identical to mysteries and were sometimes described as objects of ‘faith’, here defined as an alternative to reason and

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<sup>21</sup> In many cases, writers simply argued that belief in contradictions was absurd. See for instance John Biddle, *A Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity* (1648), sigs D4v-D6r; Paul Best, *Mysteries Discovered* (1647), 13; Stephen Nye, *A Brief History of the Unitarians, also Called Socinians* (1687), 20-21; and Stephen Nye, *Considerations on the Explications of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1693), 29-34. The last of these contains an especially clear statement of contemporary thinking about the relationship between contradictions, mysteries or things above reason, and things according to reason.

<sup>22</sup> Nye, *A Brief History of the Unitarians*, 169. See also Matthew Tindal, *A Letter to the Reverend Clergy of Both Universities* (1694), 35.

<sup>23</sup> The relationship between simple and complex ideas and clear and distinct ideas in Locke’s philosophy has been a topic of disagreement among scholars. It seems, however, that simple ideas were more likely to be clear and distinct (or were more easily rendered clear and distinct) than complex ideas, though were not necessarily clear and distinct. See John W. Yolton, *A Locke Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 88-93.

<sup>24</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, IV, xviii, §4.

not placed in opposition to it.<sup>25</sup> They included the nature and attributes of God, the eternal generation and incarnation of the Son, the union of divine and human natures in Jesus, the resurrection of the body, the influence of the Holy Spirit on mankind, the Trinity, the felicity of the saints in heaven, and the nature of the last judgment.<sup>26</sup> Things above reason were known by several names. Chillingworth was typical in describing things ‘above reason’, ‘above humane discourse’, or ‘surpassing the sphere of human wit’ and including among them the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and God’s offer of salvation to mankind.<sup>27</sup> Though these doctrines were not attended ‘with such *evidence* of reason, as is wont to be found in the *Principles*, or *Conclusions* of humane naturall *Sciences*’, they were supported by ‘*arguments of credibility*, which though they cannot make us *evidently* see what we believe, yet they *evidently* convince that in true wisdom, & prudence, the objects of faith deserve credit, & ought to be accepted as things revealed by God’.<sup>28</sup> A similar position was adopted by Hobbes, although with rather more palpable irony:

though there be many things in Gods Word above Reason; that is to say, which cannot by naturall reason be either demonstrated, or confuted; yet there is nothing contrary to it; but when it seemeth so, the fault is either in our unskilfull Interpretation, or erroneous Ratiocination. Therefore when any thing therein written is too hard for our examination, wee are bidden to captivate our understanding to the Words; and not to labour in sifting out a Philosophical truth

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<sup>25</sup> For Toland’s views on the interchangeability of ‘mystery’ and ‘thing above reason’, see Toland, *Christianity not Mysteriorious*, 6, 67. On faith as an alternative to reason, see Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants*, 313 and Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, IV, xviii. The changing meanings of ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ have not been covered well in the secondary literature, although it is interesting to note in this connection that the OED dates ‘faith’ meaning ‘belief based on testimony’ to 1551, suggesting that Toland was extending a long-established sense to the term to annex other areas of its meaning.

<sup>26</sup> The list is taken from Peter Browne, *A Letter in Answer to a Book Entitled, Christianity not Mysteriorious* (Dublin, 1697), Wing B5134, 193. As well as being non-contradictory and less than fully comprehensible, things above reason were almost always assumed to be true. See Holden, ‘Robert Boyle on Things above Reason’, 291-92.

<sup>27</sup> Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants*, 45, 315, 377. See especially pp.313-16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 313-14.

by Logick, of such mysteries as are not comprehensible, nor fall under any rule of naturall science.<sup>29</sup>

Later writers employed a similar distinction, criticising belief in contradictions and defending belief in things above reason on the basis of inspired testimony.<sup>30</sup> The standard account was given by Locke:

By what has been before said of *Reason*, we may be able to make some guess at the distinction of Things, in those that are according to, above, and contrary to Reason. 1. *According to Reason* are such Propositions, whose Truth we can discover by examining and tracing those *Ideas* we have from *Sensation* and *Reflexion*; and by natural deduction, find to be true, or probable. 2. *Above Reason* are such Propositions, whose Truth or Probability we cannot by Reason derive from those Principles. 3. *Contrary to Reason* are such Propositions, as are inconsistent with, or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct *Ideas*. Thus the Existence of God is according to Reason; the Existence of more than one God contrary to Reason; the Resurrection of the Body after death above Reason.<sup>31</sup>

Things of these three kinds were each governed by different conditions of belief: things according to reason might be believed through ‘the discovery of the Certainty or Probability of Such Propositions or Truths, which the Mind arrives at by Deductions made from such *Ideas*, which it has got by use of its natural Faculties, viz by Sensation and Reflexion’; things above reason might be believed ‘upon the Credit of the Proposer, as coming directly from God’; and things contrary to reason might never be believed

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<sup>29</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III, 576-78. For Hobbes’s views on transubstantiation, the perils of attempting to believe in things which were contrary to reason, and the ways in which political power could be exerted by requiring belief in such things, see chapter xxx in volume 2 of the edition cited above.

<sup>30</sup> See Joseph Glanvill, *Logou theēskeia: Or, A Seasonable Recommendation and Defence of Reason in the Affairs of Religion against Infidelity, Scepticism, and Fanaticisms of all Sorts* (1670), Wing: G812, 12-14, 25; George Rust, *A Discourse of the Use of Reason in Matters of Religion* (1683), 25-42; Sherlock, *A Vindication of the Doctrine of the Holy and ever Blessed Trinity*, 2-6; and South, *Animadversions upon Dr. Sherlock’s Book*, 2-3. The category of things above reason was also employed by Leibniz in an attempt to repulse Socinian attacks on Christian mysteries. On this topic, see Maria Rosa Antognazza, ‘The Defence of the Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation: An Example of Leibniz’s ‘Other’ Reason’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 9:2 (2001), 283-309.

<sup>31</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, IV, xvii, §23.

because ‘nothing, I think, can under that Title, shake or over-rule plain Knowledge, nor rationally prevail with any Man, to admit it for true, in direct contradiction to the clear Evidence of his own Understanding’.<sup>32</sup> Locke added that things above reason were those regarding which ‘we have very imperfect notions, or none at all’, but this was the full extent of his account.<sup>33</sup>

A more intricate account was offered by the Anglo-Irish natural philosopher Robert Boyle in *Things above Reason* (1681).<sup>34</sup> Whereas previous writers had imagined an homogenous category, Boyle identified three distinct kinds. The first, which he termed ‘incomprehensible’, were things of which the mind was incapable of forming distinct ideas, such as the nature of angels and the attributes of God.<sup>35</sup> These were roughly things above reason as they were understood by Locke. The second, which he termed ‘inexplicable’, were things which could neither be denied nor explained, such as the infinite divisibility of matter and the incommensurable ratio between the sides of a square and its diagonal.<sup>36</sup> These differed from other things above reason in being believable on the basis of mathematical necessity rather than revelation. The third, which he termed ‘unsociable’ or ‘inconceivable’, were mutual contradictions in which each proposition was known with equal certainty to be true, so that neither proposition

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., IV, xviii, §1-5. He made an exception for cases in which God had apparently imparted new simple ideas through direct revelation, such as St Paul’s experience on the Damascus road. These new ideas might contradict the ideas which were ordinarily available through sensation and reflection, for on them, Locke demurred, ‘I pretend not to set any Bounds’, although he added the qualification that these new ideas would be only be communicable through language to people who had received an identical revelation.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., IV, xviii, §7.

<sup>34</sup> See also Robert Boyle, *Some Considerations about the Reconcilableness of Reason and Religion* (1675); Robert Boyle, ‘Advices in Judging of Things Said to Transcend Reason’, in idem, *A Discourse of Things above Reason* (1681), Wing B3944, sigs Aa1r-Gg2v; Robert Boyle, ‘Reflections upon a Theological Distinction’ Wing B4019, in idem, *The Christian Virtuoso* (1690), Wing B3931, sigs A1r-C4r; and Robert Boyle, ‘An Appendix to the first part of the Christian Virtuoso’, in idem, *Works*, ed. Thomas Birch, 5 vols (1744), V, 655-736. *The Reconcilableness* was published under the pseudonym ‘T.E.’, but has usually been attributed to Boyle.

<sup>35</sup> Boyle, *Things above Reason*, 6-8.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 7-10.

could be rejected.<sup>37</sup> He gave the moral example of the contradiction between divine foreknowledge and human freewill and the mathematical example of the contradiction between objects possessing different lengths but being divisible into infinite parts.<sup>38</sup> This was the most sophisticated account of things above reason when Toland made his entrance to the debate.

## II. The elimination of things above reason

Toland's argument in its simplest form was that things above reason could be divided into those which were contradictions, which he took to entail that they were meaningless, and those which were according to reason. For the argument to work, he needed to show why belief in contradictions was wrong, which he did by using the objections which had featured in writings against the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>39</sup> Like Nye, he objected that God would not require belief in contradictions, insisting that '*the Subject of Faith must be intelligible to all, since the Belief thereof is commanded under no less a Penalty than Damnation*'.<sup>40</sup> And like Locke,<sup>41</sup> he objected that the contents of revelation would always be less certain than the evidence of sensation and

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<sup>37</sup> Wojcik and Holden disagree about whether Boyle believed that some contradictions were true and whether he believed that some propositions were insolubly contradictory to human reason while being non-contradictory in the mind of God. See Wojcik, *Robert Boyle and the Limits of Reason*, 212-17 and Holden, 'Robert Boyle on Things above Reason', 302-12.

<sup>38</sup> Boyle, *Things above Reason*, 7, 11-16.

<sup>39</sup> For generally derisive remarks about belief in contradictions, see Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 1, 24-37 (esp. 30-31).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 139. See also p.132.

<sup>41</sup> Scholars have disagreed about Toland's relationship to Locke. For accounts emphasising the continuity of their ideas, see G.R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason: A Study of Changes in Religious Thought within the Church of England, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 140-41; Ronald N. Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth-Century England* ([London]: Oxford University Press, 1954), 98; and John W. Yolton, *Locke and the Way of Ideas* (London: Oxford University, 1956), 118-26. For an account emphasising Toland's distortion of Locke, see Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*, 122-23 and for an attempted rapprochement, see Ian Leask, 'Personation and Immanent Undermining: On Toland's Appearing Lockean', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 18:2 (2010), 231-56. Leask's account is in turn indebted to Pierre Lubre, 'The Intricacies and Ambiguities of Philosophical Dialogue: The Locke / Toland Case', in Kevin L. Cope and Rüdiger Ahrens (eds), *Talking Forward, Talking Back: Critical Dialogues with the Enlightenment* (New York: AMS Press, 2002), 241-63.

reflection, for ‘as ’tis by *Reason* we arrive at the Certainty of God’s own Existence, so we cannot otherwise discern his *Revelations* but by their Conformity with our natural Notices of him, which is in so many words, to agree with our common Notions’.<sup>42</sup>

Toland’s principal objection, however, was that belief in contradictions was impossible. Here, he followed the example of Locke, beginning with a definition of reason as ‘[t]hat Faculty of the Soul which discovers the Certainty of any thing dubious or obscure, by comparing it with something evidently known’.<sup>43</sup> Reasoning thus occurred in cases where the relationship between two ideas was not self-evident and had to be established by comparing them with one or more intermediate ideas. If

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<sup>42</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 30. Toland used ‘common notions’ to refer to the impressions through which the mind received simple ideas, to the simple ideas themselves, and to the apprehension of relations between them. By contrast, Locke had used the term to refer only to the innate religious principles which had been hypothesised by Lord Herbert of Cherbury. Compare Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 13, 23, 29-30, 80 and Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, I, iii, §15-21.

<sup>43</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 12-13. The similarity between Locke and Toland was sufficient for Edward Stillingfleet, Peter Browne, John Edwards, and William Carroll to accuse Locke of laying the foundations of Toland’s heterodoxy. It was also once thought that *Christianity not Mysterious* was inspired by Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, although it now appears that Locke may have composed the work in part to distance himself from Toland. Locke was at work on *The Reasonableness of Christianity* throughout the winter and spring of 1695 and received papers from Toland, possibly containing a draft of *Christianity not Mysterious*, in the March of that year. There was ample time between then and the 12 June 1695, when Locke secured a contract for the publication of the *Reasonableness*, for Toland’s ideas to have influenced the work, although Locke may also have been influenced by the Portuguese philosopher Uriel Acosta, whom he identified in his commonplace book as ‘the father and patriarch of the Deists’. At any rate, Locke’s claim in 1697 to have written the *Reasonableness* against ‘those who thought either that there was no need of Revelation at all, or that the Revelation of our Saviour required Belief of such Articles for Salvation, which the settled Notions and their way of reasoning in some, and want of Understanding in others, made impossible to them’ was reflected in real points of disagreement between him and Toland. It appears, moreover, that scholars have overstated the importance of Toland in the *Essay*’s reception history: as Dmitri Levitin has shown, some of Locke’s respondents, including the Catholic philosopher John Sergeant, were motivated by the irreligious use of Lockean ideas by Tindal, not Toland. See Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697), Wing S5585, 231-92 (esp. 231-32, 262-76); Edward Stillingfleet, *The Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to Mr Locke’s Letter* (1697), 5-6, 39-47; Edward Stillingfleet, *The Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to Mr Locke’s Second Letter* (1698), 5-22 and *passim*; Browne, *A Letter in Answer to a Book Entitled Christianity not Mysterious*, 43-45, 131-32; John Edwards, *A Free Discourse Concerning Truth and Error* (1701), 418-24; and William Carroll, *A Dissertation upon the Tenth Chapter of the Fourth Book of Mr Locke’s Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1706), 276. On Stillingfleet, Locke, and Toland, see M.A. Stewart, ‘Stillingfleet and the Way of Ideas’, in *idem, English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, 245-80 (252-54); on Sergeant, see Levitin, ‘Reconsidering John Sergeant’s Attacks on Locke’s Essay’, 468-69; on the composition of *The Reasonableness* and the differences between Locke and Toland, see the editor’s introduction to John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), xv-xlii (esp. xxx-xxxii, xxxiv-xxxvii); and, for Locke’s comment about his purposes in *The Reasonableness*, see John Locke, *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity* (1697), Wing L2756, sigs a2r-A3v.

no ideas were present to the mind, then no reasoning could take place.<sup>44</sup> The same applied to other mental operations, such as believing, willing, denying, and suspending judgement.<sup>45</sup> When the mind was faced with a contradiction, no mental operation could take place.<sup>46</sup> ‘To say, for instance, that *a Ball is white and black at once*, is to say just nothing; for these Colours are so incompatible in the same Subject as to exclude all Possibility of a real positive Idea or Conception’.<sup>47</sup> The simple ideas of white and black could not be combined in a complex idea of a ball which was white and black at once, so no mental operation could take place and the proposition was meaningless. Toland believed that this was true of all self-contradictions and of all propositions in which the terms were not connected to ideas by established convention.<sup>48</sup> ‘Could that Person justly value himself’, he asked, ‘who having infallible Assurance that something call’d *Blicktri* had a Being in Nature, in the mean time knew not what *Blicktri* was?’<sup>49</sup> Unless terms could be connected to ideas, the propositions in which they featured would be meaningless.

The payload of Toland’s argument was directed against things above reason as they were understood by Locke and in the first of Boyle’s three senses. He based his argument on a distinction, which had been implicit in Locke and Boyle, between indistinct and partial ideas. Indistinct ideas were unclear or vague and partial ideas encompassed only some of the properties of an object. Ideas of either kind could be invoked in defence of things above reason because they enabled knowledge of an object without rendering it fully comprehensible. Toland gave them each short shrift.

Whereas Locke had written that

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<sup>44</sup> See Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> See *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. See also p.86.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Unless the Mind had a distinct perception of different Objects, and their Qualities, it would be capable of very little knowledge, though the Bodies that affect us, were as busie about us, as they are now, and the Mind were continually employ'd in thinking.<sup>50</sup>

Toland introduced the tighter constraint that

simple and distinct Ideas, thus laid up in the great Repository of the Understanding, are the Sole Matter and Foundation of all our *Reasoning* [...]<sup>51</sup>

Whereas for Locke distinct ideas were merely highly desirable, for Toland they were necessary for thought. Indistinct ideas did not exist and propositions in which the terms were apparently connected to them were really meaningless noises.

Toland handled partial ideas similarly, considering two kinds of case. The first were those in which the mind possessed an idea of an object of which it was reasonable to believe that there were other properties, which were not encompassed by the idea. The object was not a thing above reason because this was trivially true of everything:

I understand nothing better than this *Table* upon which I am now writing: I conceive it divisible into Parts beyond all Imagination; but shall I say it is *above my Reason* because I cannot count these Parts, nor distinctly perceive their Quantity and Figures?<sup>52</sup>

The confusion lay in a misunderstanding of knowledge:

Rightly speaking then, we are accounted to *comprehend* any thing when its chief Properties and their several Uses are known to us: for *to comprehend* in all correct Authors is nothing else but *to know*; and as of what is not knowable we can have no Idea, so it is nothing to us. It is improper therefore to say that a thing is above

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<sup>50</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, II, xi, §1.

<sup>51</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 10-11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

our Reason, because we know no more of it than concerns us, and ridiculous to supersede our Disquisitions about it upon that score.<sup>53</sup>

Cases of the second kind were those in which the essence of an object was unknown. Here Toland adapted Locke's distinction between nominal essences, which were the congeries of properties by which objects were characteristically known, and real essences, which were whatever it was in an object which gave rise to its properties and caused them to occur in regular concurrence.<sup>54</sup> Because real essences could never be known, but undergirded all experience, they could plausibly be cited as examples of things above reason.<sup>55</sup> But again, Toland argued, this was trivially true of everything:

It follows now very plainly, that *nothing can be said to be a Mystery, because we are ignorant of its real Essence, since it is not more knowable in one thing than in another and is never conceiv'd or included in the Ideas we have of things, or the Names we give 'em.*<sup>56</sup>

Again there was a misunderstanding of knowledge, which extended only to the known properties of objects and not to their real essences. Indistinct ideas were therefore impossible, partial ideas were according to reason, and there were no grey areas between words connected to distinct ideas and meaningless noises, between the known and unknown properties of objects, or between nominal and real essences. There could therefore be no things above reason.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>54</sup> Toland indirectly acknowledged the debt. See *ibid.*, 75-89 (esp. 83-87) and Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, III, vi, §5-6. According to Justin Champion, who neglects to cite a source, Toland later denied that he had quoted Locke. See Champion, *Republican Learning*, 79. For a more detailed analysis of Toland's appropriation of Locke's distinction, see Leask, 'Personation and Immanent Undermining', 250-52.

<sup>55</sup> For an example of the argument, see Glanvill, *Logou theēskeia*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 85.

The argument had implications for the relationship between theology and history. It meant that only doctrines which were according to reason might be believed on the basis of historical evidence:

Whoever reveals any thing, that is, whoever tells us something we did not know before, *his Words must be intelligible, and the Matter possible*. This Rule holds good, let *God* or *Man* be the revealer. If we count a Person a Fool who requires our Assent to what is manifestly incredible, how dare we blasphemously attribute to *the most perfect Being*, what is an acknowledg'd Defect in our selves? As for unintelligible Relations, we can no more believe them from the Revelation of God, than from that of Man; for the conceiv'd Ideas of things are the only Subjects of Believing, Denying, Approving, and every other Act of the Understanding: Therefore all Matters reveal'd by God or Man, must be *equally intelligible and possible*; so far both Revelations agree.<sup>57</sup>

A further consequence of the argument was that faith could no longer be defined as belief in things above reason on the basis of inspired testimony. For Toland, faith was any belief based on testimony and the only difference between human and divine faith was that human witnesses were capable of deception whereas divinely inspired ones were not.<sup>58</sup> Faith was not opposed or alternative to reason, but a state of mind which proceeded from it.<sup>59</sup>

### III. The history of things above reason

As well as arguing philosophically, Toland also supported his conclusion with evidence drawn from Greco-Roman history, the scriptures, the Fathers, and the history of the early Church. In modern parlance, he observed, 'mystery' was used in one of two senses, either to refer to something which was comprehensible but hidden under types

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>58</sup> See *ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, 137-38.

and shadows or something which was incomprehensible even after it had been revealed.<sup>60</sup> The first of these could be traced back to pagan mystery cults, in which initiates had been sequentially inducted into a series of closely guarded secrets.<sup>61</sup> The same sense could be found in the New Testament, but with more elaborate subdivisions. There the term was used both in a general and a particular sense, first to refer to matters of fact which God had made known through revelation and which could not have been discovered by other means, and second to refer to doctrines which had been hidden under types and shadows in the Jewish dispensation and then made plain in Christianity.<sup>62</sup> More precisely still, the term had been used in three distinct senses, as a synonym for the Gospel or the Christian revelation, as a term for certain doctrines which were revealed by the apostles, and as a term for anything which had been veiled under parables and allegorical forms of speech.<sup>63</sup> But in none of these cases was ‘mystery’ used in the second of its modern senses, to refer to something which was incomprehensible after it had been revealed.

To support his argument, Toland provided a concordance of ‘mystery’ and its cognates in the New Testament, in each case classifying the passage in which the word appeared according to the three senses which he had distinguished.<sup>64</sup> In some cases, this required a degree of exegesis. Regarding 1 Timothy 3:16 (‘And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of Angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the World, received up into Glory’), Toland argued that all interpreters ‘agree that the Gradations of the Verse are Gospel-Revelations; so that *the Mystery of Godliness* cannot be restrain’d to any one, but is

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 68-74.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 90-96.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 98-110. His citations were taken from the Authorized Version of the Bible. He made no reference to the translation of the word.

common to them all, [and] refers not to the Nature of any of them in particular, but to the Revelation of them all in general'.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, regarding 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 ('Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an Eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed'), he argued that it was not the doctrine of the resurrection which was called a mystery, 'but only this particular Circumstance of it, *viz.* that the Living shall at the Sound of the last Trumpet put off their Flesh and Blood, or their Mortality, without Dying'.<sup>66</sup> Far from teaching anything incomprehensible, the passage 'obviates an Objection or Scruple that might be rais'd about the State of such as should be found alive on the Earth at the last day'. Once such marginal cases were correctly interpreted, it was clear that there was no passage in the New Testament in which 'mystery' was used in the second of its modern senses.

In choosing to provide a concordance, Toland was following the practice of Socinian and Unitarian writers who had used dense networks of scriptural citations to support their arguments against the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>67</sup> His account especially resembled an anonymous pamphlet entitled *An Impartial Account of the Word Mystery, as it is taken in the Holy Scripture*, which was first published in 1691.<sup>68</sup> The author of the work began like Toland with the conception of mysteries as hidden things, which had been used alike by pagan cultists and the authors of the New Testament.<sup>69</sup> He omitted

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 102.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>67</sup> See for instance see John Biddle, *XII Arguments Drawn out of the Scripture: Wherein the Commonly-Received Opinion Touching the Deity of the Holy Spirit, is Clearly and Fully Refuted* (1647) and Biddle, *A Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity*.

<sup>68</sup> The work was later included in anonymous (multiple authors), *The Faith of One God*. The tract has scarcely been mentioned in modern scholarship on Toland, except briefly by Reedy, but the similarities are close enough to suggest that it was either written by Toland or heavily plagiarised by him. The tract has been attributed (without cited evidence) to Stephen Nye. See Reedy, 'Socinians, John Toland, and the Anglican Rationalists', 294 and Paul C. H. Lim, *Mysteries Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 305.

<sup>69</sup> See anonymous, *An Impartial Account of the Word Mystery, as it is taken in the Holy Scripture* (1691), 3-5.

Toland's distinction between the general and particular senses in which the term was used in the New Testament, but provided a concordance of the word and its cognates in the New Testament in which the passages were classified according to the three senses which Toland distinguished.<sup>70</sup> He also analysed the texts similarly, remarking with respect to Timothy 1:16 that 'this Title, *the Mystery of Godliness*, is [...] undeniably ascribed to the Gospel' and with respect to 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 that 'to teach or to tell a Mystery according to St Paul in this place, is as much as to reveal some Decrees of God, which will not be fulfilled till the end of the World; it is to set them before us, as if we did see the Execution thereof; it is to relieve Difficulties, instead of raising them'.<sup>71</sup> And like Toland, he reached the conclusion that there were no mysteries in the sense of incomprehensible doctrines in the New Testament.

Toland buttressed his concordance with a brief account of how 'mystery' had been used by the Fathers. He was clear, however, that the Fathers' opinions were irrelevant to the truth of his conclusions. 'Tis not out of any Deference to their Judgements', he wrote, 'that I take these Pains', but 'to shew the Disingenuity of those, who pretending the highest Veneration for the Writings of the *Fathers*, never fail to declare their Sentence when it sutes not with their Humour or Interest'.<sup>72</sup> With this declared, he quoted from the fifth chapter of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata*, in which the author described Christ 'alone removing the Cover of the Ark' and making previously hidden things apparent.<sup>73</sup> He followed this with the example of Justin Martyr, who had used 'mystery' to refer to things in the Old Testament which typologically foreshadowed the New, such as Joshua foreshadowing Jesus and Moses's holding of his arms out over the battle at Rephidim foreshadowing the crucifixion, and Tertullian, who had referred to mysteries

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 5-13.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 6, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysteriorous*, 117-18.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 118. See also *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, trans. William Wilson, 2 vols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867-69), II, 259.

as doctrines held ‘under oath of secrecy’.<sup>74</sup> Finally, he made an allusion *en passant* to ‘the other fathers of the first three centuries’, asserting that they also conceived of mysteries as things which had been unknown and then revealed.<sup>75</sup>

All this left a question unanswered about when the second modern sense of ‘mystery’ had first entered Christianity. In answering it, Toland again followed Socinian and Unitarian writers, this time in their location of the origins of Trinitarianism in ideas imported to Christianity by pagan converts after the Edict of Milan. The Socinian Paul Best had described how a primitive Unitarianism had been ‘trodden under foot by a verball kinde of Divinity, introduced by Semi-Pagan Christians of the Third Century in the Western Church’, and the author of *An Impartial Account* had attributed the decline of this Unitarianism to the encroachment of Platonism into Christianity and the increasing dependence of priests on St John’s Gospel.<sup>76</sup> In a similar vein, Toland argued that the conception of mysteries as things which remained incomprehensible even after they had been revealed had first entered Christianity through Jewish and Gentile converts in the second and third centuries after Christ, who had refused to abandon elements of Levitical Law and pagan rite.<sup>77</sup> The situation had been compounded by the willingness of Christians to accommodate their faith to the tastes of their new converts and by the acquisitiveness of the clergy, who had distracted the laity from the truth of Christianity by entralling them with delusive ceremonies. The same practices had

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<sup>74</sup> Toland, *Christianity no Mysterious*, 119-22. See also Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 117, 140 and *The Apology by Tertullian for the Christians*, ed. and trans. T. Herbert Bindley (London: Parker & Co., 1890), 24.

<sup>75</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 122.

<sup>76</sup> Best, *Mysteries Discovered*, 11; anonymous, *An Impartial Account*, 12-24. See also Nye, *A Brief History of the Unitarians*, 26-30.

<sup>77</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 67, 158-73. The account was highly impressionistic. Toland cited only John Chrysostom, Basil of Cesarea, and Synesius, Bishop of Ptolemais, although he expanded the account in the second edition to include citations of Tertullian, Ovid, Horace, Aristophanes, Cicero, and Lucian. See Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 158-73 and *Christianity not Mysterious*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1696), Wing T1763, 151-69.

continued in the modern Church. Mysterious doctrines had ‘been invented by some leading Men to make plain things obscure’, Toland wrote, and are

the known Refuge of some Men, when they are at a loss in explaining any Passages of the Word of God. Lest they should appear to others less knowing than they would be thought, they make nothing of fathering that upon the secret Counsels of the Almighty, or the Nature of the Thing, which is indeed the Effect of Inaccurate Reasoning, Unskilfulness in the Tongues, or Ignorance of History.<sup>78</sup>

Mysterious doctrines could also be more sinister. The clergy had striven ‘not only to make the plainest, but the most trifling things in the World *mysterious*, that we might constantly depend upon them for the Explication’.<sup>79</sup> It was not only his opponents’ evidence but also their sincerity which was at issue.

On the face of it, Toland’s arguments mimicked a traditional Anglican formula in which points were proven by reason, the scriptures, and the Fathers.<sup>80</sup> But there was also a difference. For the majority of earlier writers, these sources of credibility were cumulative, so that a proposition would become increasingly convincing as the evidence for it mounted under each heading, whereas, for Toland, the rational credibility of a proposition (i.e. its comprehensibility) was a precondition for scriptural evidence having any bearing on its truth, and the opinion of the Fathers was irrelevant. There was a closer similarity between Toland and the Socinians and Unitarians, but here too there was a difference. While they had assailed the doctrine of the Trinity with rational, scriptural, and historical arguments, they had depended more heavily than Toland on the latter kinds of argument and had been far less explicit about how the kinds were connected. Toland was far more explicit that there could be no question of a doctrine

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<sup>78</sup> Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 25-26. See also pp. xii-xxiii,

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> Toland alluded to it on p.123.

being supported by the scriptures if it was not already comprehensible. In citing scriptural and historical arguments, he was appealing to a different section of his readership from those who might be persuaded by his philosophy. Just as he drew arguments from revelation and the Fathers in the hope that this might gain traction with his readers, and not because he believed that the question turned on this evidence, he drew arguments from the scriptures and history in order to make his conclusions persuasive to readers who still believed that the problem of mysteries could be solved by looking at what had happened in the past.

#### IV. Analogy and negation

Though Toland's arguments were intricate, their targets were not clearly defined. He referred to transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of impanation (according to which the body and blood of Jesus were present in the consecrated elements, but without the substance of the bread and wine changing), and alluded to Arianism and Trinitarianism, but the only things above reason which he analysed in detail were the attributes of God.<sup>81</sup> Here he entered difficult terrain. In the opinion of most of Toland's contemporaries, God's attributes were the only parts of God which were accessible to human understanding, since his real essence was concealed from view, and they were less than fully comprehensible, since they belonged to an infinite being who transcended finite human understanding. Both God and his attributes were therefore things above reason. In attempting to refute this view, Toland needed to avoid the pitfalls of making God either wholly accessible to human understanding or incomprehensible. He addressed the point using his earlier distinction between the known properties of an object and its real essence:

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 25, 31.

As for *God*, we comprehend nothing better than his Attributes. We know not, it's true, the Nature of that eternal *Subject* or *Essence* wherein Infinite Goodness, Love, Knowledge, Power and Wisdom co-exist; but we are not better acquainted with the *real Essence* of any of his Creatures. As by the Idea and Name of *God* we understand his known Attributes and Properties, so we understand those of all things else by theirs; and we conceive the one as clearly as we do the other.<sup>82</sup>

God was not wholly accessible to human understanding because his real essence remained concealed from view and because the idea of God extended only to his known attributes. In these respects, God resembled any ordinary object. But there was still the question of whether God's attributes were themselves things above reason. Toland addressed the point with reference to God's eternity:

The *mysterious* Wits do never more expose themselves than when they treat of *Eternity* in particular. Then they think themselves in their impregnable Fortress, and strangely insult over those dull Creatures that cannot find a thing where it is not. For if any Bounds (as Beginning or End) could be assign'd to *Eternity*, it ceases immediately to be what it should; and you frame only a finite or rather a *negative Idea*, which is the Nature of all Limitation. Nor can it be said, that therefore *Eternity is above Reason* in this Respect, or that it is any Defect in us not to exhaust its Idea; for what greater Perfection can be ascrib'd to *Reason* than to know precisely the Nature of things? And does not all its Errors lie in attributing those Properties to a thing which it has not, or taking any away that it contains? *Eternity* therefore is no more above Reason, *because it cannot be imagin'd*, than a Circle, *because it may*; in both Cases *Reason* performs its Part according to the different Nature of the Objects, whereof the one is essentially imaginable, the other not.<sup>83</sup>

Toland was consistent with his earlier position in denying that eternity was a thing above reason because it could not be imagined, but inconsistent in implying that

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 88. Toland appears to have used 'property' and 'attribute'. See for instance p.82.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 81-82.

‘eternity’ could be meaningful in the absence of an idea of it. Yet if eternity could not be imagined, then there could be no idea of it and ‘eternity’ could not be meaningfully ascribed to God. Despite his protestations to the contrary, therefore, Toland’s argument had the potential to push God out of the bounds of comprehension.

For his critics, this was the crucial point.<sup>84</sup> But rather than challenging Toland directly on indistinct and partial ideas, they argued that God’s attributes could be known through negation and analogy, the first of which involved defining God’s attributes by subtracting properties which he did not possess and the second the drawing of comparisons between God’s attributes and human properties. Negation could establish what God’s attributes were not, but not what they were, and analogy could establish what God’s attributes were like, but not what they were in themselves. In each case, the attributes were less than fully comprehended, which preserved their status as things above reason. As the Anglican clergyman Samuel Bold explained:

with respect to the Godhead we must affirm, That our ideas are made up of Negatives, and consequently with *Clemens Alex.* Affirm, That we rather know God by concealing what He *is not*, than what He *is*: Or at least, if we attempt any positive Conceptions, we are forced to shadow ’em forth by some Finite Ideas which we have taken up, and are already implanted in us. Thus the Divine Attribute of Wisdom we are forc’d to resemble by a Faculty of *Discerning* and *Comprehending*, infinitely surpassing the Sphere of *Humane Knowledge*.<sup>85</sup>

The Church of Ireland bishop Peter Browne reached a similar conclusion:

our imagination can frame no likeness or resemblance of God, as it can do of material and sensible Objects; [and] as we can form similitude from the *Sences*, so neither hath the *Reason* any the least glimps of his real Nature as he is in himself, for the only way we have of forming an Idea of him is either negatively, by

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<sup>84</sup> See Bold, *The Christian Belief*, 150 and Browne, *A Letter in Answer to a Book entitled Christianity not Mysterious*, 164.

<sup>85</sup> Bold, *The Christian Belief*, 12.

removing from him all the Imperfections of the Creatures, or by enlarging those excellencies we find in these, and attributing them to God.<sup>86</sup>

It was this line of objection to Toland which set the terms of the next round of debate. Whereas indistinct and partial ideas had been crucial, the question now at issue was whether negation and analogy could enable knowledge of the attributes of God without making God incomprehensible. But it was not Toland who pursued the question; it was the freethinker Anthony Collins.

#### V. The comprehensibility of God

Like Toland, Collins was a follower of Locke who adapted Locke's philosophy in an increasingly heterodox direction.<sup>87</sup> After studying at Cambridge under the cynical but ostensibly orthodox Francis Hare, he became acquainted with Locke and Toland in the early 1700s and refined the arguments of *Christianity not Mysterious* in his first major

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<sup>86</sup> Browne, *A Letter in Answer to a Book entitled Christianity not Mysterious*, 40-41.

<sup>87</sup> Collins was acquainted with Locke by 1701 and was on friendly terms with him by the spring of 1703, when he visited Locke at the country residence of their mutual friend Sir Francis Masham. Collins was acquainted with Toland by 1704, when he was honoured as the dedicatee of a translation of Aesop's fables, in which Toland criticised the misrepresentation of Aesop by the Greek monk Maximus Planudes and pursued an anticlerical agenda. Collins and Toland were also connected in other ways. Collins knew of the contents of Toland's *Letters to Serena* before they were published in 1704, was honoured by Toland as the dedicatee of *Dissertationes Duae, Adeisidaemon et Origines Judaicae* in 1708, and was described by him in favourable terms in *Nazarenus* in 1718. He also recorded letters and manuscripts by Toland in his library catalogue, owned many of his works, and received him at his home at Great Baddow in Essex in 1721, on which occasion Toland borrowed Collins's copy of Daniel Whitby's *Several Tracts Collected into one Volume* (1690) in the hope that Whitby's *Treatise of Traditions* (1688), which was included in the collection, would help him to write a work on the same subject. Toland's death on 11 March 1722 brought the project to an untimely halt and moved Collins to request his friend Pierre Des Maizeaux to recover the book. Des Maizeaux may have been successful in this task, contrary to James Dybikowski's claim, as the book appears in the 1731 sale catalogue of Collins's library. Despite their connections, Toland and Collins do not seem to have been close friends. Collins was wary of Toland's unreliability and seems to have been untroubled by his death. See O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 3-9, 13-14; Thomas Woolston, *A Fourth Discourse on the Miracles of our Saviour* (1728), iv; Awnsam Churchill to Locke, 17 November 1701 and Locke to Anthony Collins, 4 May 1703 in *The Correspondence of John Locke* (1976-89), VII, 762, 776; 'Anthony Collins to John Locke' (16 February 1704) and 'Anthony Collins to Pierre Des Maizeaux' (15 March 1722), in Anthony Collins, *Correspondence*, ed. James Dybikowski (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), 91-93, 335-336; Aesop, *The Fables of Aesop with the Moral Reflexions of Monsieur Baudoin* (1704), trans. John Toland, i-vii; John Toland, *Dissertationes Duae, Adeisidaemon et Origines Judaicae* (The Hague, 1708), 2; John Toland, *Nazarenus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1718), ESTC T120680, xxiii; Toland, *Tetradymus* (1720), xxii, 209; and Thomas Ballard, *Bibliotheca Antonii Collins*, 2 vols (1731), I, 22, 30, 55, 145, 188, 191, II, 25, 27. On Collins's library, see footnote 13 in Chapter 5 below.

publication, *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions, the Evidence whereof Depends on Human Testimony* (1707).<sup>88</sup> He started off as Toland had done, outlining the usual objections to belief in contradictions and attempting to show that things above reason could be divided into those which were meaningless and those which were according to reason.<sup>89</sup> But he differed from Toland in taking greater pains to demonstrate that the elimination of things above reason was compatible with the comprehensibility of God.

He considered three cases. The first was the ascription to God of human parts and passions, as in the passages of the Old Testament which ascribed to him a face (Genesis 30:20), a finger (Exodus 31:18), and back parts (Exodus 33:23), and repentance (Exodus 32:14), ignorance (Genesis 18:21), and wrath (Exodus 32:10). '[T]o understand such a Book literally', Collins argued, 'and not make use of common Sense whereby to adjust the several popular Expressions wherewith it abounds, to the Maxims of Reason and Philosophy, would be unreasonable in it self, and justly expose it to the Scorn of Unbelievers'.<sup>90</sup> It was necessary instead to 'accommodate' such passages to what *a priori* reasoning discovered of God: that he was invisible, spiritual, and infinite.<sup>91</sup> This meant that the parts and passions should be interpreted as analogues of moral properties,

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<sup>88</sup> He did not respond to Toland directly, but referred to 'a great deal of wrangling in the Controversy of *Mysterys*'. See Anthony Collins (anonymous), *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions, the Evidence whereof Depends upon Human Testimony* (1707), 10. For details of Collins' time at Cambridge and acquaintance with Hare, see BL Add. MS 5817, f.97r.

<sup>89</sup> Whereas Toland had confined his account to indistinct and partial ideas, Collins considered four further kinds of things above reason. The first were things which could be comprehended, but of which the physical cause was unknown. The second were things of which it was impossible to form ideas but which might be legitimate objects of assent. The third were things which were according to divine but not human reason. And the fourth were things which could be proven by demonstration, but where the demonstration entailed a contradiction. In his treatment of things above reason in the senses which Toland had considered, he differed from Toland in agreeing with Locke that thought could occur when ideas were unclear and indistinct and in applying the argument which Toland had used against partial knowledge (i.e. that the knowledge extended only to the known properties of objects) against indistinct ideas (which Toland believed were impossible). See Collins, *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions*, 29-45. For a conservative reading of the *Essay*, which emphasises Collins's debt to Locke, see O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 50-61.

<sup>90</sup> Collins, *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions*, 19.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-21.

such as wisdom and goodness, which humans and God possessed alike, the only difference being that humans possessed these properties to a finite and God to an infinite extent. The ascription to God of parts and passions therefore operated at two levels: first, there was the interpretation of parts and passions, which God did not possess, as moral properties, which he could; and second, there was the application of the ideas of these moral properties to God's attributes, of which they afforded partial knowledge. The objects of analogy were not therefore things above reason.

The second case was the contradiction between divine foreknowledge and human freewill. Collins required a solution which would preserve knowledge of God's foreknowledge without having recourse to things above reason. He achieved this by rejecting the standard definition of freewill as 'a Power in Man to determin himself [such] that there are several Actions of Man absolutely contingent' and defining it instead as a power in man 'to do or forebear several Actions, according to the Determination of his Mind'.<sup>92</sup> The former definition was incompatible with divine foreknowledge because no action could be absolutely contingent (as the definition required) and foreknown by God (as divine foreknowledge entailed). The latter definition was compatible because an action could be determined by the actor's mind and foreknown by God.

The third case was God's eternity. Here there were thought to be two problems.<sup>93</sup> The first was that if God was eternal, then he must have caused himself, which was inconceivable. The second was that if God was eternal, then he must be capable of change (because even if he remained unchanged in himself, he would have to change in relation to changes in time), which implied an imperfection in his being. Collins solved

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>93</sup> Collins was here responding to Stillingfleet's sermon on 1 Timothy 1.15, which was preached at St Lawrence-Jewry on 7 April 1691. See Edward Stillingfleet, *Thirteen Sermons Preached on Several Occasions* (1698), 209-54 (esp. 227-31).

the first problem by denying that God's eternity entailed that he must have been caused and solved the second problem by denying that change implied an imperfection.<sup>94</sup> 'The Inconsistencies charg'd on the Attribute of Eternity', he concluded, 'are the Consequences of our Idea of it'.<sup>95</sup>

Collins continued to defend the elimination of things above reason in *A Vindication of the Divine Attributes* (1710). The work was an indirect response to the Huguenot philosopher Pierre Bayle, who had argued in the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1696, 1702) that a set of theological problems, including the problem of divine foreknowledge, were 'perfectly unanswerable on the Principles of Reason' and answerable only by 'keeping close to the Holy Scripture, and *captivating the Understanding to the Obedience of Faith*'.<sup>96</sup> Bayle's claim had provoked a wave of criticism, from the Huguenots Isaac Jacquelot, Philippe Naudé, and Jean La Placette, the Swiss critic Jean Le Clerc, and the Archbishop of Dublin William King, the last of whom bore a special interest for Collins. In response to Bayle, King had defended a modified form of analogy, according to which God's attributes could be comprehended through analogy with human properties while being wholly unlike them. With respect to the problem of divine foreknowledge, this meant that God's foreknowledge could be comprehended, but that it could not be comprehended in sufficient detail to know how it was compatible with freewill. It was therefore a thing above reason and not a theological problem.

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<sup>94</sup> Collins, *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions*, 52-55.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. Collins's critics were not convinced. An anonymous writer concluded that Collins's arguments made God unknowable and that Collins had foolishly neglected analogy. See anonymous, *The Reasonableness of Assenting to the Mysteries of Christianity Asserted and Vindicated* (1708), 63-81.

<sup>96</sup> Collins, *A Vindication of the Divine Attributes* (1710), ESTC T050850, 6. Collins seems to have conflated Bayle's articles on Origen, the Paulicians, the Manicheans, and Zoroaster, rather than quoting him directly, which makes it difficult to determine which edition of the dictionary he was using. The other problems were the origin of matter, the problem of divine foreknowledge, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Original Sin. They were known as the Manichean problems (counterintuitively) because they did not affect Manicheism, which posited the existence of two gods, one good and one bad, in addition to the natural world, and contained no doctrine equivalent to the incarnation.

On the face of it, the argument resembled the one which Collins had expounded in the *Essay Concerning the Use of Reason*. There was, however, an important difference. Whereas Collins had argued that God's attributes were like human mental properties in quality but unlike them in extent, King had argued that they were wholly unlike any human properties. To propose that God was wise or good, in King's account, did not mean that he possessed these properties to a divine rather than a human extent, but rather that he possessed some other properties which corresponded to human wisdom and goodness without being like them. Collins was quick to seize on the point:

The Idea I have given of his Grace's meaning may perhaps shock the Reader, who has always imagin'd, That the Scripture only spoke analogically when it attributed Parts and Passions to God; but when it gave him such moral Attributes as Wisdom, Justice, and Goodness, and such natural Attributes as Will and Foreknowledg, it was with design that we should take them to be really in God as they are in us, and of the same kind, only that he has them in the highest degree possible. Our conception indeed of those Attributes do not reach the full extent of them as they are in God; but yet so far as our Conceptions go, they correspond to the Wisdom, Goodness, Holiness, Justice, Will, and Foreknowledg of God.<sup>97</sup>

As a solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge, King's argument was a manifest failure because it reached its conclusion only at the cost of making God's foreknowledge incomprehensible:

as the Absurdity of giving Hands and Eyes, makes us deny God to have any Hands and Eyes, so his Grace denies any proper Foreknowledg in God, from the Inconsistency of that Attribute with the Contingency of Events and the Liberty of Man. [...] 'Since we have no more proper notion of Foreknowledg and Predetermination in God than a Man born blind has of Sight and Colours, we ought no more, *says he*, to pretend to determine what is consistent or not consistent

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

with them, than a Man ought to determine from what he hears or feels to what Objects the Sense of Seeing reaches'.<sup>98</sup>

When applied to all of God's attributes, the argument was tantamount to atheism:

According to his Grace's Notions, it is impossible for him to prove the Existence of God against Atheists. For our Conceptions or Ideas that we signify by the term *God*, must be the Subject of Proof, whenever we bring the term *God* into a Proposition: But his Grace says, *All our best Conceptions of God are infinitely short of Truth*, and as *different from Truth, as weighing in a Balance is from Thinking or Light from Motion*. Therefore his Grace cannot prove the Being of God, or which is all one, the Existence of any Being that is really conformable to our Conceptions of God [...]<sup>99</sup>

By making God incomprehensible, King conceded Bayle's accusation that the problem of divine foreknowledge could be solved only by captivating the understanding to faith. What Collins believed was needed instead was a conception of analogy like the one which he had expounded in the *Essay Concerning the Use of Reason*, in which analogies between human moral properties and God's attributes afforded partial knowledge. Only this would be sufficient to demonstrate that things above reason could be eliminated while retaining the comprehensibility of God. In reacting so violently against King, Collins was at pains to demonstrate that his position, though similar to King's, had drastically different results.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>100</sup> According to O'Higgins's, the work was largely orthodox and sought to defend the comparability of human and divine attributes while rejecting things above reason. This interpretation has been challenged by David Berman, who argues that the work was an inflammatory intimation of atheism. There are problems with both interpretations. O'Higgins is wrong, as Berman claims, to overlook the suggestive imbalance between Collins's detailed discussion of the atheistic implications of King's position and his cursory explanation of how knowledge of God's attributes could be obtained through analogy. However, Berman is wrong to argue that Collins's position is unintelligible without construing it as atheistic and that Collins's conclusion was that 'there are very formidable, or insuperable, difficulties in the theistic conception of God'. If the work bore an implicitly atheistic meaning, it did so under the cover of a defence of the elimination of things above reason from the accusation that it led to atheism.

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In attempting to eliminate things above reason, Toland and Collins sought to alter the balance of power between natural and revealed religion. If things above reason were meaningless or according to reason, then fewer doctrines could form a part of revealed religion than was usually believed. In effect, their arguments tightened the *a priori* constraints on the interpretation of sacred history and decreased the number of doctrines which could depend for their truth on historical evidence. In the next phase of the deist controversy, similar arguments became important, but with a different *a priori* element. As the next chapter will explain, it was knowledge of God's moral attributes, which had previously been at the margins of the controversy, which occupied a central position in the 1720s and 30s. The question raised then was not whether contradictory doctrines could be enjoined in an historical revelation, but whether such a revelation could have occurred at all.

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See O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 61-64 and Berman, 'Anthony Collins and the Question of Atheism in the Early Part of the Eighteenth Century', 98.

### Chapter 3

#### History and the Moral Attributes of God

All-seeing in thy mists, we want no guide,  
A Mother of Arrogance, and Source of Pride!  
We nobly take the high Priori Road,  
And reason downward, till we doubt of God<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Pope

Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?<sup>2</sup>

Plato

The Boyle Lectures of 1704 were delivered by the Cambridge academic Samuel Clarke, whose aim was to show what could be known of God through unassisted reason and to lay a foundation for further lectures on morality and revealed religion.<sup>3</sup> The lectures were built around three main arguments: a cosmological argument for the existence of a necessary being; a deduction of the attributes of such a being from the idea of necessity; and a deduction of further attributes based on the principle that a cause must be more excellent than its effect and therefore possess all of its attributes.<sup>4</sup> Using these arguments, Clarke established the existence of a necessary being and showed that it possessed all of the traditional attributes of God, that it was eternal, omnipresent, simple, unchangeable, incorruptible, one, intelligent, free, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. But the last of these raised a difficult question. Was goodness defined by God's will (a doctrine later known as voluntarism) or was it defined by a standard independent of God's will and then known by God to be good (a

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad: Book the Fourth* (1742), 32 (lines 661-64).

<sup>2</sup> 'Euthyphro', section 10a, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705), sigs A3r-A3v. The lectures were delivered in St Paul's Cathedral.

<sup>4</sup> For Clarke's account of the principle, see *ibid.*, 86-89.

doctrine later known as intellectualism)? Either answer encountered a problem: if goodness was defined by God's will, then his goodness was arbitrary because anything which he did would be good; if goodness was defined by a standard independent of God's will, then his power was limited because he was incapable of defining goodness. The question appeared to force a trade-off between God's goodness and power, or to lead to the scandalous conclusion that God was incomprehensible. Debate about the question, often in response to Clarke, formed an important strand in theological writing in the first half of the eighteenth century and played a particular role in the writings of the deists. This chapter explains the connection between intellectualist conceptions of God's goodness and the deists' use of *a priori* arguments against historical faith. It then shows how meditation on God's goodness formed the background to an historical controversy about the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Jews.

## I. *A priori* and historical theology

Clarke began answering the question with what looked like an intellectualist solution:

That there are *different Relations* of Things one towards another, is as certain as that there are *Different Things* in the World: That from these *Different Relations* of *Different Things*, there necessarily arises an *Agreement* or *Disagreement* of some Things to others, or a *Fitness* or *Unfitness* of the Application of Different Things or Different Relations one to another; is likewise as certain, as that there is any Difference in the Nature of Things, or that Different Things do Exist. Further, that there is a *Fitness* or *Suitableness* of certain *Circumstances* to certain *Persons*, and an *Unsuitableness* of Others, Founded in the *Nature of Things* and the *Qualifications of Persons*, antecedent to *Will* and to all *Arbitrary* or *Positive Appointment whatsoever*; must unavoidably be acknowledged by every one [..]<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 233-34.

Differences between things entailed moral relations, of agreement and disagreement, fitness and unfitness, suitability and unsuitability, so that if two or more things existed (which Clarke believed he had already established) then there would be moral relations between them. These moral relations gave rise to reasons which should determine the actions of all free and rational beings, so that in acting on these reasons such beings were good.<sup>6</sup> The question was whether God could change the moral relations between things, and therefore redefine goodness such that anything which he did was good, or whether he was determined in his actions by the reasons which arose from them. Clarke's phrasing was potentially ambiguous ('all *Arbitrary or Positive Appointment whatsoever*'), but seemed to imply that the moral relations between things were independent of God's will. The implication became more explicit as Clarke explained the connection between God's knowledge of the moral relations between things and his actions:

And by this *Understanding or Knowledge* of the Natural and Necessary Relations of Things, the *Actions likewise* of all Intelligent Beings are constantly Directed; (which, *by the by* is the true Ground and Foundation of all Morality:) unless their *Will* be corrupted by particular *Interest or Affection*, or swayed by some unreasonable and prevailing Lust. The Supreme Cause therefore, and Author of all Things [...] must of necessity have Infinite *Knowledge*, and the Perfection of *Wisdom*, so that it is absolutely impossible he should *Err* or be in any respect *Ignorant* of the True Relations and Fitness or Unfitness of Things [...]<sup>7</sup>

Clarke concluded the point by clarifying the sense in which God was determined in his actions:

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<sup>6</sup> He later clarified that 'these same Reasons, I say, which always and necessarily *do* determine the Will of God, as hath been before shown; *ought* also constantly to determine the Will of all Subordinate Intelligent Beings'. *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-36.

He must of Necessity (meaning, not a *Necessity of Fate*, but such a *Moral Necessity* as I before said was consistent with the most perfect Liberty,) *Do always* what he *Knows* to be *Fittest to be Done*: that is, He must Act always according to the strictest Rules of Infinite *Goodness, Justice and Truth*, and all other *Moral Perfections*.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, God was determined not in the sense that he was unable to act in contradiction to the moral relations between things, but in the sense that in doing so he would contradict his moral attributes. By distinguishing between a necessity of fate and a moral necessity, Clarke affirmed an intellectualist position, while denying the apparent corollary that God's power was limited.<sup>9</sup> Here, however, Clarke encountered a problem. If God always did what was good and if he always had the power to do so, then how was it possible for evil to exist in the world? This was the familiar problem of evil, but Clarke had made it difficult to solve by asserting that God's goodness and power (either of which could have been sacrificed to solve the problem) were compatible and by insisting on their comprehensibility (thereby preventing any appeal to mystery). His solution was to point to the limited nature of human knowledge:

For concerning the Justice and Goodness of God (as of any Governour whatsoever,) no Judgement is to be made from a partial View of a few small Portions of his Dispensations, but from an Entire Consideration of the Whole; and consequently not only the short Duration of this present State, but moreover, All that is past and that is still to come, must be taken into Observation: and Then everything will clearly appear just and right.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 236-37.

<sup>9</sup> Clarke made the point more explicit later, denying that it was a limitation on God's power that he could not perform actions which he would not perform: "Tis therefore as Impossible and contradictory, to suppose *his Will should Choose* to Do any thing contrary to Justice, Goodness or Truth; as that *his Power should be Able* to Do anything inconsistent with Power. 'Tis no Diminution of Power, not to be able to Do things which are no Object of Power: And 'tis in like manner no Diminution either of Power or Liberty, to have such a Perfect and Unalterable Rectitude of Will, as never Possibly to Choose to do any thing inconsistent with that Rectitude'. Ibid., 251-52.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 242.

The solution produced a bi-focal quality in Clarke's view of God's goodness. It meant that God could be known to be determined in his actions by the moral relations between things, and be known to be good in a non-arbitrary sense, but that the way in which his individual actions conformed to those relations could not be known because of the limited nature of human knowledge. The position combined the strength of voluntarism, in that anything which God did was good, with the strength of intellectualism, in that God's actions were not made good by his will.

Clarke's position became more complicated when he delivered his second set of Boyle Lectures in 1705. Here he stated explicitly that the moral relations between things were independent of God's will:

As this *Law of Nature* is infinitely superior to all Authority of *Men*, and independent upon it; so its obligation, primarily and originally, is antecedent also even to *this* Consideration, of its being the positive Will or Command of God himself. [...] *So in matters of Natural Reason and Morality, that which is Holy and Good* (as Creatures Depending upon and Worshipping God, and practising Justice and Equity one with another, and the like,) *is not therefore Holy and Good, because it is commanded by God to be done; but is therefore commanded by God, because it is Holy and Good.*<sup>11</sup>

The argument faced an obvious problem: if God had created everything, including the moral relations between things, then how could those relations be independent of his will?<sup>12</sup> Clarke's answer was that God had created the moral relations between things in his initial act of creation and had subsequently been determined by them in his management and government of the world:

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<sup>11</sup> Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, 109-10.

<sup>12</sup> Clarke's contemporaries were divided on the issue. For the moral philosopher John Balguy, God was bound to create the world by 'the *Rectitude* of the Thing itself', even before the moral relations existed which would determine his subsequent actions. See John Balguy, *Divine Rectitude or, a Brief Inquiry Concerning the Moral Perfections of the Deity; Particularly in Respect of Creation and Providence* (1730), 9.

The *Existence* indeed of the *Things themselves*, whose proportions and relations we consider, depend entirely on the mere arbitrary Will and good Pleasure of God; who can create things when he pleases, and destroy them again whenever he thinks fit: But when things are Created, and so long as it pleases God to continue them in Being, their *Proportions*, which are *abstractly* of Eternal Necessity, are also in the *Things themselves* absolutely unalterable.<sup>13</sup>

Having performed an act of creation, God could perform actions which are determined by the moral relations between things or else arbitrarily overhaul that creation. He could not, having performed an act of creation, act contrary to the moral relations between things which existed in that creation without contradicting his moral attributes. The argument relied on a distinction between God's creative and providential wills, the former of which was authoritative over the latter. The resulting theory was a qualified form of intellectualism. The moral relations between things were the products of God's creative will and they determined his providential will by moral necessity; yet, at the same time, God's creative will was always free arbitrarily to overhaul the moral relations between things and to erect a new set of relations in their stead.

Clarke's lectures were not merely an academic disquisition on the existence of God and the nature of his attributes. They were also a defence of Christianity, including the Incarnation, the teachings of Christ, and the actions ascribed to God in sacred history. To mount his defence, Clarke needed to explain why God had made a revelation, rather than conveying his will to mankind through other media, such as reason and nature. Why had a revelation been necessary to instruct mankind in their moral obligations, their duties towards God, and their prospects for everlasting life? Why had these things been revealed at certain points in history and to only a small portion of mankind? In

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<sup>13</sup> Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, 110.

answering these questions, Clarke sought to confute an argument which had been raised by Charles Blount in *The Oracles of Reason* (1693):<sup>14</sup>

The Rule which is necessary to our future Happiness, ought to be generally made known to all men.

But no Rule of Revealed Religion was, or ever could be made known to all men.

Therefore no Revealed Religion is necessary to future Happiness.<sup>15</sup>

Clarke attacked the major premise, which Blount had believed to follow from ‘God’s Infinite Goodness, which provides for all his Creatures the means of attaining that Happiness whereof their Natures are capable’.<sup>16</sup> This was false, Clarke argued, since it was evident from any conspectus of humanity that different people had been differently supplied with the knowledge necessary for attaining happiness and had been fitted for different degrees of happiness in just the same way that they had been supplied with different mental abilities and made differently capable of apprehending truth:

As God was not obliged, to make all his Creatures equal; to make Men, Angels, or to endue all Men, with the same Faculties and Capacities as Any; So neither is he bound to make all Men capable of the *same Degree* of the *same Kind* of Happiness, or to afford all Men the very same *means and opportunity* of obtaining it.<sup>17</sup>

But in describing how God was ‘not obliged’ to act in these ways, Clarke drifted towards a conception of God’s goodness in which his actions were not determined by the moral relations between things. The point became explicit when Clarke explained why God had made a revelation. Whereas he had argued that all God’s actions were

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<sup>14</sup> For Clarke’s citation of Blount, see *ibid.*, 259.

<sup>15</sup> Blount et al., *The Oracles of Reason*, sig. I3v.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. K4r.

<sup>17</sup> Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, 262.

determined by the moral relations between things, he now argued that the divulgence of revelation had been a spontaneous act of grace:

'tis agreeable to the Natural Hopes and Expectations of Men, that is, of Right Reason duly improved; to suppose God making some particular Revelation of his Will to mankind, which may supply the undeniable Defects of the Light of Nature. And at the same time, 'tis evident that such a thing is by no means unworthy of the Divine Wisdom, or inconsistent with any of the Attributes of God; but rather, on the contrary, most suitable to them. Consequently, considering the manifold Wants and Necessities of Men, and the abundant Goodness and Mercy of God; there is great ground, from right Reason and the Light of Nature, to believe, that God would not always leave Men wholly destitute of so needful an Assistance, but would at some time or other actually afford it to them. Yet it does not follow that God is *Obliged* to make such a Revelation: For then it must needs have been given in all Ages, and to all Nations; and might have been claimed and demanded as of Justice, rather than wished for and desired as of Mercy and condescending Goodness.<sup>18</sup>

Clarke was unclear about whether unassisted reason had been defective originally or whether it had been made so by the Fall, yet, strictly speaking, the kind of divine action which he now described was impossible according to his former distinction between God's creative and providential wills. The contradiction arose because Clarke had shifted from providing an *a priori* account of how God was determined in his actions by the moral relations between things to an historical account of how his divulgence of a revelation had been compatible with his being determined by the moral relations between things. This implied that at any point in time there was a range of actions which God could fulfil while continuing to be determined by the moral relations between things and that his decision about which of these actions to perform would be determined by some other factor, such as his mercy or condescending goodness. This

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 258-59.

placed Clarke in opposition to contemporary writers who maintained that a factor such as mercy or condescending goodness could only determine God's will when two or more possible actions were equally fit or when, such as before the creation, there were no moral relations in existence.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, though Clarke had earlier discounted the possibility of knowing how God's individual actions conformed to the moral relations between things, this was exactly what was required for a rational defence of revelation. In principle, there should have been no need to demonstrate the compatibility of the actions ascribed to God in sacred history with his being determined by the moral relations between things because any action which he performed could be known to be good through *a priori* reasoning, even if the way in which it conformed to the moral relations between things could not be known. In practice, Clarke took on the Herculean task of showing that what could be known of God through *a priori* reasoning was compatible with what could be known through sacred history.

## II. The scriptures pruned

The first deist to take the measure of Clarke was Thomas Chubb. Chubb followed Clarke in arguing for the existence of moral relations which were independent of God's will and which gave rise to reasons which should determine the actions of all free and rational beings. In his early works, he made liberal use of Clarke's terminology (though tending to use 'the fitness of things' as a synecdoche for the moral relations between things), describing how the 'fitness of things [arises] from the Nature and the Relations

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<sup>19</sup> As the heterodox writer Samuel Colliber argued (partially in response to Clarke): 'since [God's] Choice can't but follow his Perception of what is Fitter, and his Other Consequent Acts can't but be Ever Agreeable to his Choice, it plainly follows that he could Never be Indetermin'd with reference to External Action, [yet] in Many Cases Different Methods are Equally Suitable'. See Samuel Colliber, *An Impartial Enquiry into the Existence and Nature of God* (1718), 47. The argument forms part of a longer discussion of God's freedom, covering the same ground as Clarke, which begins on p.42 and ends on p.48.

of Things, antecedent to, and independent of any divine or human Determination concerning them'.<sup>20</sup> He also employed Clarke's distinction (although without using Clarke's terminology) between God being determined by a necessity of fate and being determined by a moral necessity:

Tho' God is absolute and uncontrollable with relation to his Creatures, and in that respect can do with them as he lists; yet he is not so with relation to himself; because he is influenced and govern'd by those Divine Perfections of Wisdom and Goodness, Truth and Righteousness which dwell everlastingly in him. And tho' God is under no Restraint with respect to any thing without himself; yet he is so far restrain'd (in all his Dealings with his Creatures) by the moral Rectitude of his Nature, as that he never will act contrary to the Principles of Wisdom, Goodness, Truth and Justice [...]<sup>21</sup>

There were also important differences of emphasis. Chubb objected more explicitly than Clarke had done to the arbitrariness of voluntarism, describing how God would not 'answer the Character which Nature has given him' if morality were founded on his arbitrary will, and how this would lead to 'a *universal indifferency* with respect to actions'.<sup>22</sup> He was also conspicuously silent about how the fitness of things could have been created by God while also being independent of his will. In each of these respects, Chubb's position was more intellectualist than Clarke's and threatened God's power more directly.

But where Clarke and Chubb truly parted ways was at the intersection of their *a priori* arguments with sacred history. Whereas Clarke had shied away from knowing how God's individual actions conformed to the fitness of things, or had cavilled by showing merely that his attributes were compatible with his actions, Chubb was far more willing

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Chubb, *The Previous Question with Regard to Religion* (1725), ESTC T60624, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Chubb, *Two Enquiries* (1717), 32-33.

<sup>22</sup> Chubb, *The Previous Question with Regard to Religion*, 13 and Thomas Chubb, *Four Tracts* (1734), 86.

to speculate. The point came to a head in *A Supplement to the Previous Question* (1725), in which Chubb responded to an anonymous critic who maintained that the Bible contains evidence of God acting arbitrarily and who had cited as an example the prohibition of the Jews from eating pork. To this Chubb replied:

tho Swines-flesh might be *proper Food in one Climate*; yet it might be very *hurtful in another*: And this might possibly be the Case with respect to the Land of *Canaan*. The taking plentifully of that Food might introduce the *Leprosy* or some other Disorder very *afflictive* or *disagreeable* to Mankind. And, if this was the Case, then here is a Reason arising from the Nature of Things for the Prohibition; and consequently this is not an instance of Arbitrary Pleasure.

If it should be urged; that these are mere Suppositions, which have no Foundation in the History.

I ANSWER: allowing them to be such; yet, if God governs himself by the moral Fitness of Things in his Dealings with his Creatures (which I think I have proved that he does,) then *these*, or something *like* these, must be the case.<sup>23</sup>

Chubb's argument resembled Clarke's in defending the goodness of an action performed by God by appealing to reasons which were hidden from human understanding. But whereas for Clarke such reasons were hidden absolutely, being visible only from the perspective of God, for Chubb they were hidden partially, by human ignorance of the past. Though imperfections in the historical record might hinder a full explanation of how an action performed by God had conformed to the fitness of things, there was no other restraint, as there had been for Clarke, on the possibility of such an explanation. If the full circumstances of God's prohibition of pork to the Jews could be known, then the nature of its conformity to the fitness of things could be known as well. Conversely, because the prohibition could have been fit only within certain circumstances, it was possible to speculate, based on known circumstances,

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Chubb, *A Supplement to the Previous Question* (1725), 10-11.

about unknown ones (such as whether eating pork was dangerous in a desert climate). In this way, knowledge of God's goodness which had been obtained through *a priori* reasoning enabled inferences about events in the past. The underlying assumption, which Chubb did not make explicit, was that if the reasons for God's actions could not be known, whether because of an absolute lack of perspective or because of intractable historical ignorance, then this would make his goodness arbitrary. Yet the assumption was crucial, since it drove Chubb in the direction of the historical vindication of God's goodness, and towards the systematic explanation of how the actions ascribed to God in sacred history conformed to the fitness of things.

Chubb also applied the argument to actions ascribed to God in sacred history where he believed that the historical circumstances were adequately established, but where the reasons for God's action were in doubt. He trained his sights on God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac because it appeared to be an arbitrary action.<sup>24</sup> For Chubb, it was necessary to reinterpret God's motives carefully in order to make them compatible with what could be known through *a priori* reasoning:

As to the Case of *Abraham*, I think (with Submission) that the Thing commanded, was in itself *morally unfit*, and that God gave the Command not with the Intent that it should be obeyed, but that he might take occasion from it, to shew to *Abraham* and to all his Posterity, the *unfitness of all human sacrifices*.<sup>25</sup>

Chubb's critics opined that he had been able to reach this conclusion only by ignoring the wider historical context. '[T]his Command of God to *Abraham*', wrote William Whiston, 'has of late been greatly mistaken by some, who venture to Reason about very

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<sup>24</sup> He is likely also to have been responding to a sermon on the same subject by Clarke. See Samuel Clarke, *XVII Sermons on Several Occasions* (1724), ESTC T126843, 239-58. Abraham had long been of interest to the deists. See for instance Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 136-37.

<sup>25</sup> Chubb, *A Supplement to the Previous Question*, 18. See also, Thomas Chubb, *A Supplement to the Vindication of God's Moral Character* (1726), ESTC T97854, 27-48 and Chubb, *Four Tracts*, 83-119.

antient Facts, from very modern Notions; and this without a due Regard to either the Customs, or Opinions, or Circumstances of the Times whereto those Facts belong'.<sup>26</sup> For Whiston, the meaning of God's command could be understood only in the context of ancient paganism, in which human sacrifice had sometimes been practised. God's purpose in commanding Isaac's death was to challenge Abraham to prove that his obedience was equal to that of the pagans to their gods.<sup>27</sup> Chubb's interpretation, from which such details were conspicuously lacking, was in Whiston's eyes historically inadequate. Chubb's cavalier attitude to the past, moreover, was the result of an excessively intellectualist conception of God's goodness:

till this very profane Age, it has been, I think, universally allow'd by all sober Persons, who owned themselves the Creatures of God, that the Creator has a just Right over all his rational Creatures, to produce their Lives to what length he pleases [...] I do not mean to intimate, that God may, or ever does act in these Cases after a meer arbitrary Manner, or without sufficient Reason, believing, according to the whole Tenor of natural and revealed Religion, that he *hateth nothing that he hath made*, that whatsoever he does, how melancholy soever it may appear at first sight to us, is really intended for the Good of his creatures, and at the Upshot of Things, will fully appear so to be; but that still he is not obliged, nor does in general give his Creatures an Account of the particular Reasons of such his Dispensations towards them immediately; but usually tries and exercises their Faith and Patience, their Resignation and Obedience, in their present State of Probation; and reserves those Reasons to the last Day, the *Day of the Revelation of the righteous Judgment of God*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> William Whiston, *A Dissertation Concerning God's Command to Abraham* (1734), 3-4. Whiston avoided direct reference to Chubb because he had played a role in launching Chubb's career. He later admitted to writing against him. See Whiston, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. William Whiston*, I, 238.

<sup>27</sup> See Whiston, *A Dissertation Concerning God's Command to Abraham*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6. See also Edward Stone, *The Reasonableness, and Excellency of Abraham's Faith in Offering up his Son* (Oxford, 1733), 4-10 and Edward Stone, *Remarks on Mr Chubb's Case of Abraham* (Oxford, 1734), 1-7.

Whiston's position was similar to Clarke's, although with less emphasis on what could be known through unassisted reason. Though God's actions might appear to be immoral, or inexplicable from a human perspective, they could be known through *a priori* reasoning to be intended for the good of mankind. This removed all restrictions, such as those which were enforced by Chubb, on the range of actions which God could have performed in the past. But although Whiston's argument was intended to show how sacred history could be used to arrive at knowledge of God, it could yield the opposite conclusion. If God's motives could not be inferred from his actions, then sacred history was a barren record, from which no theological knowledge could be gleaned.

As well as enabling speculations about the historical circumstances of divine actions and inferences about God's reasons for performing them, Chubb's argument had implications for the relationship between sacred history and the religious practices of modern Christians. His writing about Abraham and Isaac formed part of a larger debate about religious obligations, known as 'positive duties' or 'Gospel ordinances', which had been revealed to mankind in the scriptures and were unknowable through unassisted reason.<sup>29</sup> Foremost among positive duties were the sacraments, which, because they typically required a priest to perform them, were tangled up with questions about the status and the function of the Church. If the salvation of individual Christians depended on their participation in the sacraments, and if the sacraments could occur only through the power of a priest, then the Church was necessary for Christians to achieve salvation. But if the salvation of individual Christians depended on their moral conduct only, then

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<sup>29</sup> The debate reached its peak after the publication of Clarke's *Exposition of the Church-Catechism* (1729). Related works included John Chilton, *Positive Institutions not to be Compar'd with, or Preferr'd before Moral Duties* (1730), Thomas Chubb, *The Comparative Excellence and Obligation of Moral and Positive Duties* (1730), Daniel Waterland, *The Nature, Obligation, and Efficacy, of the Christian Sacraments, Considered* (1730), Arthur Ashley Sykes, *An Answer to the Remarks upon Dr Clarke's Exposition of the Church-Catechism* (1730), and Thomas Johnson, *An Essay on Moral Obligation* (1731).

the function of the Church was to supply the laity with moral guides and teachers. The example of Abraham was important because it provided a model of obedience, to be imitated by modern Christians, and because the ram which he had sacrificed in place of Isaac was interpreted as an antetype of Christ, who had been sacrificed in place of mankind. It could therefore support a sacrificial conception of the Eucharist, in which the officiant fulfilled the role of a Jewish priest and exercised a spiritual function. The Oxford academic Edward Stone touched on the point in his reply to Chubb:

the most natural Conclusion is, that as God commanded *Abraham* to offer up his Son, and rewarded his Obedience with such extraordinary Favours, He took from thence an Occasion to shew to him and his Posterity the Fitness of all such Sacrifices, when he Himself requir'd them.<sup>30</sup>

Chubb's interpretation was different. In construing God's command to Abraham as a warning against all forms of sacrifice, he turned Whiston's interpretation on its head. By this means, he illustrated a more general argument against positive duties and Gospel ordinances:

ANOTHER *Error* or *Fault* of *Defect* charged upon me [...] is, that I ascribe *too little* to Gospel-Ordinances. And here I observe, that as Experience abundantly shews Mankind to be *much disposed* to Ceremonies, and external Observances, there being something *pompous* in them which strike and affect our Senses; so in the *Christian Revelation* there is Provision of this kind by the Appointment of a *few Ceremonies* or Institutions, which are *plain* and *simple* in themselves, the *least burdensome*, and the *most instructive* to us: And these are prescribed not as *Taxes* upon Mankind, but to dispose them to Virtue and Goodness, and to prevent their running into *burdensome* and *hurtful Superstitions*: And as far as they are *subservient* to these Ends, so far as they are *useful* and valuable to us, and in an

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<sup>30</sup> Stone, *The Reasonableness, and Excellency of Abraham's Faith in Offering up his Son*, 37.

improper Sense may be said to render us *acceptable* to God, as they are subservient to that *Virtue* and *Goodness* which in truth and reality does so.<sup>31</sup>

Some modest ceremonies might be acceptable, but not those in which a priest exercised a spiritual function or in which a congregation might be distracted from the ceremony's moral point. Ceremonies were not duties which were owed by man to God, but moral exercises which God had instituted to accommodate a proclivity of human nature. Sacred history was important to modern Christians not because it contained divine commands which must be obeyed in order to achieve salvation, but because it contained suggestions about how to live a virtuous life, the salvific importance of which could be discovered through *a priori* reasoning. Sacred history was valuable, but the salvation of individual Christians could not depend on knowledge of it.

Chubb also used *a priori* knowledge of God's goodness to derive criteria for the possible true contents of the scriptures.<sup>32</sup> First, he argued, all doctrines or propositions contained in the scriptures must be true; second, they must be consistent with each other; and third, they must be transparent to human understanding:

with respect to any Doctrine or Proposition, which may be supposed to be contained in Scripture, the Question arising from hence will be, whether that Doctrine or Proposition appears to be *consistent* with, or be *repugnant* to, the *Nature* or *Truth* of things? If it does not appear repugnant to the Nature or Truth of things, then it will follow that that Doctrine or Proposition *may* be contained in Scripture; [...] But if any Doctrine or Proposition, which may be supposed to be contained in Scripture, does, upon Examination, evidently appear to be *repugnant* to the *Nature* or *Truth* of things; then it will unavoidably follow, not only that that Doctrine or Proposition is *false*, but also that *it is not* contained in Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Chubb, *Three Tracts* (1727), 76-77.

<sup>32</sup> See Thomas Chubb, *Two Enquiries*, 32-34; *Three Tracts*, 20-33; and *Four Tracts*, 119.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Chubb, *Scripture-Evidence Consider'd* (1728), 39-40.

The argument worked as a razor, cutting false doctrines and propositions away from true. But the blade could cut in only one direction.<sup>34</sup> Though the falsehood of a doctrine or proposition was conclusive evidence that it was not contained in the scriptures, there was no equivalent way of concluding that a doctrine or proposition was scriptural, which could be shown only by exegesis. The three criteria, he explained, ‘do not afford us a Rule of judging what is the *true* Sense of Scripture in any one Instance; yet they do afford a certain Rule of judging what is *not* the Sense of Scripture’.<sup>35</sup> Any doctrine or proposition which, taken literally, was false, inconsistent with another doctrine or proposition, or insolubly opaque, he continued, ‘must be understood not *literally* but figuratively’, as a figurative expression of a doctrine or proposition which satisfied the three criteria.<sup>36</sup> But this was not the only possible outcome. In a discussion of divine commands, which paralleled his discussion of the scriptures, Chubb considered the possibility that the unfitness of a command showed that had not been delivered by God:

If the thing commanded *appears to us* morally unfit, then there is not any thing which can give us a *reasonable* Satisfaction that the Commandment is *Divine*, because here is the highest Presumption to the *contrary*. It is not enough to say in this Case, that our Judgement ought to *submit* to the infallible Judgment of God, with regard to the Fitness of the Thing commanded, because that would be to take the Thing for *granted* which is in dispute; the present Question not being whether our Judgment ought to come in *Competition* with the Judgment of our Maker, but only whether the *Command* in question is of a divine Original or not.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The point was not original to Chubb. Chillingworth had noted in 1638 that the presence of contradictions in a book was evidence that it was not divinely inspired whereas the absence of contradictions was not evidence that it was divinely inspired. Chubb, however, had a far more exacting set of criteria which could disqualify a putative revelation. See Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants*, sig. §§§1r.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Chubb, *A Supplement to the Previous Question*, 16-17. He deployed a similar argument with regard to revelation in *A Discourse Concerning Reason* (1731), 26-29.

Just as Chubb could show what the true sense of the scriptures was not, without being able to show what was, he could whittle down the number of divine commands, without being able to show that any of them had been delivered by God. The same unidirectional logic operated in each case, but the outcomes were different: rather than proposing that divine commands which were morally unfit should be interpreted figuratively, Chubb proposed that they should be regarded as false. This argument, if applied to the scriptures, would yield the conclusion that a doctrine or proposition which failed to meet one of Chubb's three criteria might be regarded as an uninspired interpolation.

In the late 1720s, Chubb opened a new line of argument about why a revelation had been given. Whereas Clarke had argued that revelation had corrected 'the undeniable Defects of the Light of Nature', Chubb was adamant that mankind had been able to discover their duties to God through the exercise of unassisted reason. The alternative was impermissible because it implied that God had created mankind in a state of imperfection and had damned everyone who had lived before the Christian revelation or who had subsequently been incapable of encountering it:

If Revelation is so *absolutely necessary*, as that Man's Duty cannot be discover'd without it, then surely far the *greatest* Part of Mankind must be in a *deplorable Condition* indeed. The Christian Revelation was not given till a *Multitude of Ages* were *past*: And since it has been given, it has been far from *prevailing all over the World*. And therefore if *Man* by his Condition in Nature upon the Fall of *Adam*, was *unqualified* to know, and consequently to do his Duty, then the Multitudes of Mankind who have been *destitute of Revelation*, must be wholly *unaccountable*, (so far as their Incapacity extends) or else they must be in a *damnable State*, beyond all possibility of Relief, for any thing we can *see* to the contrary.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Chubb, *Three Tracts*, 62-63. For Chubb's disagreement with Clarke, see pages 63-64.

But although mankind had been able to discover their duties to God, they had been apt to fall into superstition. This had occurred in the pagan world and been corrected by the Christian revelation. It had done so, Chubb agreed with Clarke, through a spontaneous act of grace:

it was an Instance of *Divine Kindness*, and exceeding useful and advantageous to *Mankind*, for *God* to give them a *Revelation*, whereby to deliver them from the *Bondage* and *Corruption* of all pretended Revelations, and to restore them to their *manly Liberty*, by reducing them to the right Use and Exercise of their Reason in matters of Religion. And this was plainly the Case of the *Christian Revelation*, the Use of which was not so much to *supersede* or *supply* the *Defects* of our natural Faculties, as to call us back to a *right Use* of them [...]<sup>39</sup>

Chubb was unclear about whether mankind could have extricated themselves from pagan superstition without the assistance of revelation. But he was clear that the Christian revelation, rather than revealing knowledge which was otherwise unknowable, had reminded mankind of knowledge which was in principle discoverable through the exercise of unassisted reason. Its value for later generations of Christians was as a storehouse of this knowledge, which was useful, but not necessary, for achieving salvation.

### III. The scriptures felled

Chubb's arguments were taken up by Matthew Tindal.<sup>40</sup> In *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), Tindal argued that any knowledge of God which was revealed in the scriptures must have been revealed already through reason and nature. Like Chubb, Tindal argued from an intellectualist conception of God's goodness to conclusions

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<sup>39</sup> Chubb, *Three Tracts*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Tindal was clearly aware of Chubb as he cited *A Supplement to the Previous Question*. See Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 123.

about his actions in the past and grafted his arguments onto those of Clarke. The debt was made evident on the title page of the work, which bore a quotation from Clarke's second set of Boyle lectures stating that the 'Will of God always determines itself to act according to the eternal Reason of Things'.<sup>41</sup> For Tindal as for Chubb this was fundamental. If God could perform only certain actions without contradicting his goodness, then with sufficient historical knowledge modern Christians could know which of the actions ascribed to God in sacred history he had actually performed. But rather than merely pruning the scriptures, Tindal put an axe to their roots, denying that knowledge which was necessary for salvation could be revealed only in an historical revelation. A different revelation could never have been made to people in different times and places, so at best Christianity was a set of truths which were as old as the creation.

The work took the form of a dialogue between speakers entitled 'A' and 'B', with 'A' playing the deistic catechist to 'B's' impressionable catechumen.<sup>42</sup> Tindal's arguments resembled those of Chubb, but there was also an important difference. Whereas Chubb had described God willing the good of his creatures, but had left this good unspecified, Tindal defined it in terms of human happiness. Because God is good, A argued,

it unavoidably follows, [that] nothing can be a Part of the Divine Law, but what tends to promote the common Interest, and mutual happiness of his rational Creatures, and every Thing that does so must be a Part of it.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., title page. Tindal also responded more directly to Clarke in the final chapter of the book (pp.353-432).

<sup>42</sup> Tindal defended his choice of the dialogic format, as opposed to 'the dry way of question and answer', on the grounds that it imitated Cicero's dialogues *De Natura Deorum* and *De Divinatione*. In reality, the mock-catechistical style was far more evident than Ciceronian imitations or allusions. See *ibid.*, iv.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

The change was subtle, but significant. By conceiving of the ends of God's actions in terms of human happiness, rather than an unspecified good, Tindal was able to decrease the number of actions which it was possible for God to perform.<sup>44</sup> This narrowed the gap between knowing *a priori* that God was good, which Clarke and Whiston had been content with, and knowing how God's individual actions conformed to the fitness of things, which Chubb and Tindal insisted must be knowable if God was not an arbitrary ruler.<sup>45</sup> In particular, it allowed Tindal to argue that the desire for happiness had been placed in mankind by God, so that anything contrary to the pursuit of it was contrary to his will. This meant that human nature was a medium of revelation:

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<sup>44</sup> The mathematician Thomas Bayes also noted that defining God's goodness in terms of his desire for the happiness of his creatures allowed the range of his possible actions to be narrowed. In an argument against John Balguy, who had attempted to subsume God's moral attributes within a single attribute of moral rectitude (hoping that this would be less problematic than conceiving of him with multiple attributes which might fall into mutual contradiction), Bayes wrote: 'if you suppose with me, that the view by which the divine being is directed in all his actions, is a regard to the greatest good or happiness of the universe, then the moral rectitude of God may be thus described, *viz.* That it is a disposition in him to promote the general happiness of the universe: Which definition would in effect be the same with that given by our author [i.e. Balguy], if we suppose that a tendency or fitness in things to produce happiness, or to prevent mischief, is that which constitutes the fitness of things; but whatever it be, whether a tendency to promote happiness, or order and beauty, or the like, that renders actions fit to be performed, this must be mentioned in the definition of divine rectitude, if we would have it of any use in our inquiries about the divine perfections or conduct; for only to know that God will act according to the fitness of things, will make us no wiser in relation to this matter, than a person's knowing that he ought to act according to the fitness of things, or, as it is fit he should, will lead him into a right moral conduct'. See Balguy, *Divine Rectitude or, a Brief Inquiry Concerning the Moral Perfections of the Deity* and Thomas Bayes, *Divine Benevolence: Or an Attempt to Prove that the Principal End of the Divine Providence and Government is the Happiness of his Creatures* (1731), 14-15.

<sup>45</sup> Tindal's critics challenged him on the point. '[T]ho it be allowed', wrote James Foster, 'that the All-perfect Being does not make his *mere will* the rule of his actions, but the *fitness* and *propriety* of things; and consequently that he never acts *arbitrarily*, or without a reason; it does by no means follow, that his creatures must necessarily see *the reasons* of his conduct in *every* instance; or that they have a right to *censure*, whatever they cannot *distinctly* account for'. George Turnbull argued similarly: 'God cannot be said to act *arbitrarily* meerly because we are not able to comprehend the reasons and end of his *political laws*; but on the contrary ought, on account of his infinite wisdom and goodness, to be supposed by us ever to act for reasons worthy of himself'. John Jackson agreed: 'if the Reason of some few Things, of such Antiquity and Distance from us, contained in Books wrote in dead Languages, and in a Style too, peculiar to the Eastern Nations, and respecting Ways of speaking and Customs of acting, now perhaps no where used, should be difficult or impossible to be accounted for; this ought not to prejudice anyone against a System of *Laws* and *Doctrines*, which in general are most evidently agreeable to the best Light of natural Reason'. James Foster, *The Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency of the Christian Revelation* (1731), ESTC T087613, 79; George Turnbull, *Christianity neither False nor Useless* (1732), 17; and John Jackson, *Remarks on a Book Intituled Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1731), 66.

- A. [...] With relation to ourselves, we can't but know how we are to act; if we consider, that God has endow'd Man with such a Nature, as makes him necessarily desire his own Good; and, therefore, he may be sure, that God, who has bestow'd this Nature on him, cou'd not require any Thing of him in Prejudice of it; but on the contrary, that he shou'd do every Thing which tends to promote the Good of it [...]<sup>46</sup>

In desiring vigour, health, and pleasure, mankind heard the will of God directly, so that just as it could be known through *a priori* reasoning that God willed the happiness of his creatures, so it could be known through human nature what he specifically desired them to do.<sup>47</sup>

From the premise that God could will only the happiness of his creatures, Tindal drew several further conclusions. The first was that God must always have placed the knowledge which mankind needed to attain happiness within the reach of human understanding.<sup>48</sup> Had he done otherwise, he would have willed the unhappiness of all those who were unable to attain it. The second was that there could be no contradiction between what God willed for mankind in this life and what he willed for them in the life to come.<sup>49</sup> If there was, and if mankind needed to sacrifice their present happiness to fulfil their religious obligations, then God must have willed a lower overall level of happiness than if he had made their happiness in the hereafter attainable through the pursuit of their happiness now. The third was that God could not have revealed the knowledge which mankind needed to attain happiness only at a certain point in history or to only a portion of mankind, as this would have required him to will the unhappiness of those were excluded from the revelation.<sup>50</sup> And the fourth was that God could not

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<sup>46</sup> Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> See *ibid.*, 16-21.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 72.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

have supplemented or replaced what he had revealed through reason and nature with a subsequent historical revelation.<sup>51</sup> As the first revelation must have been adequate for the first members of mankind, there was no way in which it could require addition or replacement for subsequent generations. Together, these supported the further conclusion that anything which God revealed through an historical revelation (which Tindal termed ‘external’) must repeat what he had revealed through reason and nature (which Tindal termed ‘internal’).<sup>52</sup> God’s first, internal revelation must be accessible, complete, universal, and unchanging:

- A. I desire no more than to be allow’d, That there’s a Religion of Nature and Reason written in the Hearts of every One of us from the first Creation, by which all Mankind must judge of the Truth of any instituted Religion whatever, and if it varies from the Religion of Nature and Reason in any one Particular, nay, in the minutest Circumstance, That alone is an Argument, which makes all Things else that can be said for its Support totally ineffectual. If so, must not Natural Religion and external Revelation, like two Tallies, exactly answer one another; without any other Difference between them, but as to the Manner of their being deliver’d?<sup>53</sup>

This left the question of why a revelation had been given. To begin with, Tindal argued like Chubb, describing how mankind had lapsed into a state of superstition, from which an external revelation had recovered them:

- A. [...] If God created Mankind to make them happy here, or hereafter, the Rules he gave them, must be sufficient to answer that benevolent Purpose of infinite Wisdom; and consequently, had Mankind

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 70, 130-31, 283

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 60.

observ'd them, there cou'd have been no Occasion for external Revelation [...]<sup>54</sup>

But he later adopted a different view. Whereas Chubb had been unclear about whether mankind could have extricated themselves from pagan superstition without the assistance of an external revelation, Tindal argued that mankind must have always been capable of discovering the knowledge necessary for salvation through the exercise of unassisted reason:

*The Bulk of Mankind, by their Reason, must be able to distinguish between Religion and Superstition; otherwise they can never extricate themselves from that Superstition they chance to be educated in.*<sup>55</sup>

This was necessary, Tindal believed, because otherwise God must have created mankind with the potential to lapse into superstition inextricably, which would contradict his goodness. A situation could never arise therefore in which an external revelation was needed; a conclusion which bore the clear implication that no such revelation had occurred.<sup>56</sup>

Tindal's argument had significant implications for the status of the ancient Jews as the chosen people. If God's revelation was unchanging, then there was no way in which the New Testament could have completed or superseded the Old. To illustrate his point, he trained his sights on the popular belief that the Jews' status as the chosen people had

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 195. Like Chubb, Tindal specifically argued that a revelation could not have been necessitated by the Fall. On this point, see *ibid.*, 375.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>56</sup> He stated the point explicitly in passing: 'if the eternal Reason of Things is the *Supreme Obligation*, must not That, if there's any Difference between It and External Revelation, take Place? And must not That Rule, which can annul any other, be not only the supreme, but the sole Rule'. Ibid., 367. The implication of the argument was not lost on Tindal's critics. See anonymous, *Christianity not as Old as the Creation* (1730), 2; John Balguy, *A Second Letter to a Deist, Concerning a Late Book Entitled, Christianity as Old as the Creation: More particularly that Chapter which Relates to Dr. Clarke* (1731), 6-7; Joseph Conybeare, *A Defence of Revealed Religion* (1732), ESTC T135208, 3-4; Foster, *The Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency of the Christian Revelation*, 5; Jackson, *Remarks on [...] Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 4, 11-13; Daniel Waterland, *Scripture Vindicated*, 3 vols (1730-32), I, 1-9; Thomas Broughton, *Christianity Distinct from the Religion of Nature*, 4 vols (1732), I, 1.

been evident in their superiority to other ancient people in their religious practices, moral conduct, and political constitution. He focused his ire on the Jewish religion, describing how the Jews had been beset by misapprehensions of God. There were passages in the Old Testament which ascribed human parts and passions to God (Nahum 1:2; Ezekiel 38:18), which described him performing bizarre or unworthy actions, such as hissing (Isaiah 5:26, 7:18; Zachariah 10:8), swearing (Deuteronomy 1:34; Psalm 95:11), and repenting (Genesis 6:6; Jeremiah 15:6), and which described him performing immoral actions, such as breaking his promise to the Israelites to bring them into the land of Canaan (Numbers 14:30-34) and inflicting a famine during the reign of David to punish crimes committed during the reign of Saul (2 Samuel: 21:1).<sup>57</sup> The Jewish prophets had been little better, indulging in wild superstition. Isaiah had walked for three days naked (Isaiah 20:3), Jeremiah had hidden his girdle in the banks of the Euphrates and then retrieved it many days later (Jeremiah 13:4-6), and Ezekiel had lain on his left side for 390 days (Ezekiel 4:4-5), all allegedly in obedience to God.<sup>58</sup>

But Tindal's central claim against the Jews was that they had practised human sacrifice, a claim which extended the doubts of Chubb and other deists about whether God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac had occurred into a far more serious aspersion against the reality of the Mosaic dispensation.<sup>59</sup>

- A. [...] The *Jews* cou'd not think it absolutely unlawful for a Father to sacrifice an innocent Child; since *Abraham* was highly extoll'd for being ready to sacrifice his only Son, and that too without the least

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 250-51, 257, 266.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of the deists' views of sacrifice, see Susan Staves, 'Jephtha's Vow Reconsidered', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 71:4 (2008), 651-69. In arguing that the Jews practised sacrifice, Tindal was developing an argument he had earlier used with reference to the druids. See Matthew Tindal (anonymous), *The Rights of the Christian Church Asserted* (1706), ESTC N12925, 99.

Expostulation; though he was importunate with God to save an inhospitable, idolatrous, and incestuous City [Sodom].<sup>60</sup>

He buttressed this with the example of Jephtha, a Jewish judge who had prayed for victory over the Ammonites in exchange for the sacrifice of whatever he first encountered on his return (Judges 11:1-40).<sup>61</sup> When he returned triumphant and was greeted by his daughter, he allowed her a period of two month's grace and then sacrificed her as he had sworn to do. There was no indication, in Tindal's view, that Jephtha's sacrifice had been considered outrageous:

- A. [...] Had there been any Way of dispensing with this solemn Vow, he, since he had two Month's Time to consider, wou'd no doubt, have found it out; but he says, *I have opened my Mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back*; and he did with her according to his Vow.<sup>62</sup>

Further evidence could be found in Exodus 34:20 ('But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb: and if thou redeem him not, then shalt thou break his neck. All the first-born of thy sons thou shalt redeem. And none shall appear before empty') and Leviticus 27:28-29 ('Notwithstanding no devoted thing, that a man shall devote unto the Lord of all he hath, both of man and beast, and of the field and of his possession, shall be sold or redeemed: every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord. None devoted, which shall be devoted of men, shall be redeemed; but surely be put to death'), which described how animals and people were pledged to God and sacrificed unless they were first redeemed, and in Micah 6:7 ('Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or

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<sup>60</sup> Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 97.

<sup>61</sup> He was here replying to George Smalridge's sermon 'Jephthah's Vow', in *Sixty Sermons Preach'd on Several Occasions* (1724), 220-32. The vindication of Jephthah not only exercised the clergy. George Frederick Handel's oratorio *Jephtha* (1751), the libretto for which was written by the virulent anti-deist Charles Jennens, was conceived with this objective in mind.

<sup>62</sup> Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 96.

with ten thousands of river of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’), in which the prophet offered to sacrifice his child in order to redeem his sins.<sup>63</sup> Taken collectively, the evidence was clear: the Jews had been no better than any other pagan people and had not received a revelation.

But if this was so, then how had Judaism been connected to Christianity? The answer lay in the apostles’ misidentification of Jesus as the messiah who had been foretold by the Jewish prophets. It was clear from the accounts contained in the Gospels that the apostles had ignored Jesus’s denials that he was the Jewish messiah and had construed him as a temporal ruler, who would re-establish the kingdom of Israel:

- A. [...] the Apostles first became Jesus’s Disciples upon temporal Motives; and the Belief of Christ’s temporal Kingdom was so firmly rooted in them, that Jesus neither during his Life, nor even after his Resurrection was able to remove it.<sup>64</sup>

Nor, Tindal continued, was there any reason to suppose that the apostles were authoritative witnesses. Though they had been invested with the power of working miracles, Judas had betrayed Jesus to the Jewish priests, several of them had deserted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter had denied that he knew Jesus when he was questioned after Jesus had been arrested. ‘Do not these Instances, tho’ many more might be added’, Tindal asked, ‘plainly shew, that inspir’d Persons, whether Prophets or Apostles, are subject to the same Passions, even to dissembling and lying, as other Men?’<sup>65</sup> Yet the results of their mistake had been considerable. Christianity had been saddled with a bogus Jewish past and Christians down the ages had been brought up to believe that God was an arbitrary ruler who could make positive duties a part of true

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 95. See also Exodus 30:12-13, 34:19-20.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 245.

religion, which in turn had provided a warrant for all kinds of immoral acts, all carried out in the mistaken belief that they had been enjoined by God.<sup>66</sup>

In one way, Tindal's arguments were contradictory. If it could be known through *a priori* reasoning that God's revelation could not change and therefore that the Jews could not have received a revelation which was different from the religion of nature, then there was no need arising from the logic of Tindal's argument to demonstrate from the evidence of sacred history that such a revelation had not in fact been given. But for Tindal, just as for Toland earlier, the use of examples drawn from sacred history made his argument more persuasive to readers who might not be convinced by his theology. And in another way, the arguments ran in parallel and were even mutually supportive: the fact that the Jews had not received a revelation was affirmed by two different bodies of evidence and the fact that their religious teachings had differed from the religion of nature, and were therefore undeserving of any kind of positive treatment, was something which could be discovered only historically. But although sacred history was significant to Tindal to this extent, he made no attempt, as Chubb had done, to show how knowledge contained in revelation could assist Christians in achieving salvation. It was, in effect, redundant.<sup>67</sup>

#### IV. The moral attributes of God and the ancient Jews

In the aftermath of *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, the debate between the deists and their critics came to focus on the ancient Jews. Where Tindal had cited passages of the Old Testament which ascribed human parts and passions to God and described him performing immoral acts, his critics argued that these were figurative expressions,

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 102-03.

<sup>67</sup> The point was nicely apprehended by William Law in *The Case of Reason or Natural Religion Fairly and Fully Stated* (1731), i-iii.

which could be made compatible with a conception of the deity as a spiritual and morally perfect being.<sup>68</sup> Where he had criticised the Jews for their moral conduct, his critics argued that many of the customs in question had been admissible in the circumstances described.<sup>69</sup> And where he had criticised the apostles for misidentifying Jesus as a temporal ruler, his critics largely accepted the point, but denied that it discredited the apostles as witnesses of the events which they described.<sup>70</sup> Most importantly, his critics reasserted that the Jews had received a revelation.<sup>71</sup> Though they had fallen into pagan idolatry and been subject to the state of superstition from which Christianity had recovered mankind,<sup>72</sup> they had frequently discoursed with God,<sup>73</sup> enjoyed a superior political constitution to that of other ancient peoples,<sup>74</sup> and schooled mankind for the Incarnation. All this provided evidence *contra* Tindal that the content of revelation could change and that God was not determined by the fitness of things.<sup>75</sup>

The debate reached its climacteric in Thomas Morgan's *The Moral Philosopher* (1737), a philosophical dialogue between Philalethes, 'a Christian deist', who spoke for Morgan, and Theophanes, 'a Christian Jew', who spoke for Morgan's Anglican opponents.<sup>76</sup> The work was an advance on Tindal's position in two distinct directions: first, towards more explicit repudiations of historical faith; and second towards the

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<sup>68</sup> See Jackson, *Remarks on [...] Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 32-33; Waterland, *Scripture Vindicated*, I, 29-31, II, 47-48; John Leland, *An Answer to a Late Book Intituled, Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1733), II, 339-42; and James Foster, *The Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency of the Christian Revelation* (1732), 217-23.

<sup>69</sup> See Jackson, *Remarks on [...] Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 28; Waterland, *Scripture Vindicated*, II, 34-42; and Leland, *An Answer to a Late Book Intituled, Christianity as Old as the Creation*, II, 396-445.

<sup>70</sup> See Jackson, *Remarks on [...] Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 40-41 and Leland, *An Answer to a Late Book Intituled, Christianity as Old as the Creation*, II, 67-68.

<sup>71</sup> See anonymous, *Christianity not as Old as the Creation*, 46; Jackson, *Remarks on [...] Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 12-13; Conybeare, *A Defence of Revealed Religion*, 158-59; and Foster, *The Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency of the Christian Revelation*, 319.

<sup>72</sup> See Benjamin Andrewes Atkinson, *Christianity not Older than the First Gospel Promise* (1730), 41-42 and Foster, *The Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency of the Christian Revelation*, 14-15.

<sup>73</sup> See Broughton, *Christianity Distinct from the Religion of Nature*, I 13-14.

<sup>74</sup> See Jackson, *Remarks on [...] Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 14-15.

<sup>75</sup> See Conybeare, *A Defence of Revealed Religion*, 158 and Foster, *The Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency of the Christian Revelation*, 66-72, 302.

<sup>76</sup> Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, title page. On 'Christian deist', see footnote 8 in the introduction.

criticisms of the moral conduct of the ancient Jews and the connection between Judaism and Christianity which drew on the extra-biblical history of the Jews. But it was also a retreat from the full extent of Tindal's anti-scripturism. Whereas Chubb had been unclear about whether mankind could have extricated themselves from pagan superstition without the assistance of a revelation, and whereas Tindal had been explicit that they could, Morgan argued that the content of revelation was available to unassisted reason, but that it had not been discovered prior to the Incarnation. The Jews and Gentiles had been uncertain about the fate of the soul after death and about the actions necessary to achieve salvation, and this uncertainty had been dispelled by Jesus:

Philalethes: [...] If any one should here say, that these being natural Truths and moral Obligations evident to Reason, there could be no Need of Revelation to discover them; perhaps he may have been a little too hasty in his Conclusion. The Books of *Euclid*, and *Newton's Principia*, contain, no doubt, natural Truths, and such as are necessarily founded in the Reason of Things; and yet, I think, none but a Fool or a Madman would say that he could have informed himself in these Matters as well without them, and that he is not at all obliged to any such Master or Teacher.<sup>77</sup>

Jesus's teachings had been disseminated historically and contained knowledge which was valuable for the achievement of salvation and difficult to obtain through unassisted reason,<sup>78</sup> but the salvation of individuals was not contingent on knowledge which was contained only in an historical revelation:

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>78</sup> He made the point more explicit later: 'We may be informed by human Testimony, and good historical evidence, of very important Facts, no doubt, and Facts which we could not otherwise have known, But what certain Mark of Criterion have we to distinguish *human Testimony* from *Divine Authority*'; and again, 'It is true indeed, that History and humane Testimony bring these Doctrines down to us, and propose them to our Consideration; but this is not, or ought not to be, the Ground of their Reception'. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 345 and Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. II*, 4.

Philalethes: For this, I think, is certain, that the Being and moral Perfections of God, and the natural Relations of Man to him, as his reasonable Creature, and the Subject of his moral Government, cannot depend upon the Truth or Falshood of any historical Facts, or upon our forming a right or wrong Judgment concerning them [...]<sup>79</sup>

Even where true beliefs were conveyed historically, the details of their having done so were irrelevant:

Theophanes: [...] A Matter of Revelation is as capable of being convey'd down to Posterity upon Tradition and human Testimony, as any other Matter of Fact of what Nature or Kind soever. And therefore you must either allow this, or reject all historical Evidence of every other Kind.

Philalethes: But what I insist upon is this, that you can assign no Reason or Proof of any Revelation, as coming from God, but what will prove at the same Time, that the Matter of Such a Revelation was morally fit and reasonable in the Nature of the Thing, antecedent to, and abstracted from any such Tradition or human Testimony; and consequently, that your Tradition or human Testimony is here brought in to no Manner of Purpose and without Effect.<sup>80</sup>

For Morgan, theological beliefs could not depend on historical ones because in that case they could be no more certain than the underlying historical evidence; instead, their truth was determined by the fitness of things, which was the same in all times and places, irrespective of any historical beliefs which an individual might hold about the manner of their conveyance.

With this theological framework in place, Philalethes turned his attention to the Jews. He first addressed their moral conduct as this was expressed in the Mosaic Law, which

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<sup>79</sup> Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 345-46.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

he distinguished from the Levitical law of the priests. There was no way, he argued, in which the Mosaic Law could have been an incomplete or shadowed version of the law which was revealed by Jesus because there was an essential difference between them, the one being temporal and the other spiritual in nature:

Philalethes: [...] For, as this Law was barely Civil, Political, and National, so all its Sanctions were merely Temporal, relating only to Men's outward Practice and Behaviour in Society, none of its Rewards or Punishments relating to any future State, or extending themselves beyond this Life.<sup>81</sup>

A law thus constituted, he continued, was defective because it

could only extend to outward Actions, and thereby secure Civil Virtue, and the Civil Rights and Properties of the Society, against such Fraud or Violence as might fall under a human Cognizance [...], providing no sufficient Remedy against any such Immoralities, Excesses and Debaucheries, in which a Man might only make a Fool or a Beast of himself, without directly hurting his Neighbour or injuring his Society.<sup>82</sup>

Because the law was only temporal in nature, it extended only to inter-personal actions in which the perpetrator might be caught, leaving a significant range of actions in which he might legitimately act out of self-interest. This in turn meant that too few of the Jews' actions had to be performed according to the requirements of the law for them to develop the strength of character which was necessary to perform moral actions consistently.<sup>83</sup> More importantly, it had extended to ethnic Jews and Jewish converts only, so that people of other ethnicities and faiths were treated as inferior beings.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>83</sup> See *ibid.*, 27.

Though they were ‘obliged to live in Peace and Amity with one another’, they were ‘put into a State of War with the rest of the World’ and ‘directed by *Moses* himself to extend their Conquests as far as they could’.<sup>84</sup> The law which had been taught by Jesus was entirely different, being eirenical in character and universal in extent. There was no plausible way of concluding that the laws, at least in terms of content, had anything to do with each other.

This still left the possibility that Judaism and Christianity were connected in some other way, and that the moral teachings of Jesus, rather than clarifying or completing the Mosaic Law, had thoroughly overhauled it. But here Morgan was anxious to affirm, in a manner reminiscent of Tindal, that Judaism and Christianity had become connected through the misunderstanding of the apostles. He provided a far more elaborate account, however, of how the two religions had become intertwined in the early years of Christianity and how this affected modern Christian practice. Much of the blame lay with early Christian evangelists who had emphasised the continuity between Judaism and Christianity as a means of winning Jewish converts:

Philalethes: [...] In the Days of Christ and the Apostles, the *Jews* who adhered to Jesus, as the Messiah after his Resurrection, all expected that he would soon come again, with sufficient Power from Heaven, to destroy the *Roman* Empire, to restore the Nation, and to set up his kingdom at *Jerusalem*. And this was properly the *Jewish* Gospel, which Christ’s own Disciples firmly adhered to, and preach’d. So that this Matter at first, with regard to that Nation, was only a State Faction among the *Jews*; some of them receiving and adhering to Jesus as the Messiah, and others rejecting him under this Character, which was the main body of the Nation.

I shall not here enquire how it came about at first, that so small and contemptible a Faction among the *Jews* should propagate this

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 28. See also pp. 304-325.

Notion so far and wide in the Christian Churches, and even among the *Gentile* Converts: But so it was, and yet I may venture to say, that none of our Christian *Jews*, at this Time, will ever be able to prove, that the Restoration of the Kingdom to *Israel*, and making *Jerusalem* the Seat of it, was not an essential Character of the Messiah with all the Prophets, who said any Thing of the Matter: Nor will our modern *Judaizers* be able to prove, that our Saviour Jesus Christ ever made the least Claim or Pretensions to this prophetick *Jewish* Character, or that he pretended, in any peculiar Sense, to be the saviour and Deliverer of the *Jews*.<sup>85</sup>

Morgan also elaborated on Tindal's account by describing the origins of Christian ceremonies. The sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism, though present in New Testament Christianity, had been grafted onto Jewish stock:

Philalethes [...] Both the Sacraments, as we now call them, were civil Usages, or national Customs among the *Jews* in our Saviour's Time, and all along for many Ages before. So that Christ did not herein institute any new Ritual or Ceremony, but thought fit to apply two of their antient, national Customs to a religious Use, which might be more agreeable to the Nature and Constitution of his new Religion; and as it is plain, that our Saviour made no Change or Alteration in these national Customs or Usages, but took them as they were, it is impossible to understand them right, without considering what the national Usage of the *Jews* then was.<sup>86</sup>

The ceremonies in question had been civil and not religious in character, which made it absurd for modern Christians to suppose that the Eucharist or Baptism could be necessary for the achievement of salvation or performable only by a priest.<sup>87</sup> Nor was this the only way in which Christianity had suffered from its mistakenly-acquired Jewish past. The doctrine of the Satisfaction, according to which the crucifixion had

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 328-39.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 104-05

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 102-12.

discharged or atoned for mankind's debt of guilt to God, had come about through the actions of early Jewish-sympathising Christians, who had misinterpreted passages in St Paul's epistles which compared the crucifixion to a Jewish sacrifice by mistaking the figurative for the literal sense:

Philalethes: [...] But, in the case before us, of *St Paul's* using so often as he does these figurative, metaphorical Expressions as *Jewish Law Terms*, we need not go far for a Reason; since the strong Prejudices and Prepossessions of the People he had to deal with, and the Principles of Caution and human Prudence he was obliged to act upon are very evident. It was establish'd Principle with the whole *Jewish Nation*, that *without shedding of Blood there could be no Remission*. And they had such an Opinion of their legal, propitiatory Sacrifices and Atonements by Blood, that had *St. Paul* told them, in plain Terms, that there was nothing in it, and that they had herein been grossly abused and imposed on by their Priests, they would certainly have stoned him.<sup>88</sup>

The interpretation was mistaken in two ways. It was clear in the first place that Jesus had taught a different doctrine, in which anyone could achieve salvation by practicing the religion of nature. Far from discharging the debt of guilt owed by man to God, his death had merely demonstrated the seriousness of his convictions.<sup>89</sup> In the second place, the writers of the New Testament had misunderstood the Jewish law, in which the only sacrifices involving a satisfaction were those performed by the guilty party in legal disputes, in which cases the sacrifice was always performed in parallel with a civil punishment and never in substitution for it.<sup>90</sup> There was no genuine historical connection between the crucifixion and the sacrifices which had been practised under Jewish law.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>90</sup> Morgan cited only the last chapter of Leviticus. His quotations were taken from the Geneva Bible.

Morgan's arguments were aimed at severing Christianity from Judaism, through *a priori* arguments, by contrasting their contents, and by showing that they had been linked historically through a series of misunderstandings. They also allowed Morgan to sever true Christianity, which was a restatement of the religion of nature, from the elements of modern Christianity which derived from ancient Jewish practice. There was, moreover, a self-reflective element, as the belief that God could stipulate arbitrary ceremonies, such as baptism and the Eucharist, as necessary religious duties was itself a leftover of mistaken Jewish thinking, in addition to the ceremonies themselves. To a greater extent than Chubb or Tindal, therefore, Morgan practised something like genealogical thinking, in which elements of modern Christianity were shown to have become detached from the conceptual architecture which could support them.

#### V. The Jews defended

While Morgan was writing *The Moral Philosopher*, a parallel debate was taking place about whether the Jews had believed in a future state of rewards and punishments. After *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, a number of Anglican apologists sought to clarify what could be known through unassisted reason and what could be known only through revelation. They identified knowledge of a future state as the most likely candidate for the latter category and supported this conclusion with an historical account of how a future state had been unknown until the Gospel.<sup>91</sup> Though many pagans had believed

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<sup>91</sup> For the view that knowledge of a future state could only be obtained through revelation, see Balguy, *Second Letter to a Deist*, 25; Broughton, *Christianity Distinct from the Religion of Nature*, I, iv; Henry Stebbing, *A Discourse Concerning the Use and Advantages of the Gospel Revelation* (1730), 19-22; Patrick Middleton, *A Short View of the Evidences upon which the Christian Religion and the Divine Authority of the Holy Scriptures is Established*, 2 vols (1734), I, 163-219. For the contrary view, see Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, 160-93; John Jackson, *A Plea for Humane Reason, Shewing the Sufficiency of it in Matters of Religion* (1730), 20; Arthur Ashley Sykes, *The True Foundations of Natural and Reveal'd Religion Asserted* (1730), 78-79;

that the soul was immortal, and some had longed for a future state, they had not known what would happen to the soul after death.<sup>92</sup> Instead, their priests had fabricated a false doctrine of a future state to inculcate virtuous behaviour among those who were willing to trade present happiness for future felicity and to scotch the complaints of atheists for whom the unequal distributions of providence provided evidence against the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. It was unclear, however, how the Jews fitted into this account. Though Job 19:26 ('And *though* after my skin *worms* destroy this *body*, yet in my flesh shall I see God') and Psalm 16:10 ('For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption') provided evidence of Jewish belief in immortality, the Jewish moral and ceremonial laws (as described in Leviticus 27 and Deuteronomy 28) were remarkable for their emphasis on temporal rewards and punishments, as opposed to eschatological justice.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, if it could be shown that the Jews had possessed a doctrine of a future state, and one which was not the product of priestcraft, then this might provide compelling evidence that they had received a revelation.

This debate was transformed by the future Bishop of Gloucester William Warburton in *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (2 vols, 1738-41), a colossal work of historical scholarship which expanded in size in successive editions and additional

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Conybeare, *A Defence of Revealed Religion*, 96-99; Thomas Chubb, *The True Gospel of Jesus Christ Asserted* (1738), 184-93; and Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 358-59.

<sup>92</sup> See for instance Benjamin Bennet, *The Truth, Inspiration, and Usefulness of the Scripture Asserted and Proved* (1730) 19-24; Henry Grove, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Proofs of a Future State from Reason* (1730), 202-05; William Richardson, *The Usefulness and Necessity of Revelation* (1730), 82-86; Foster, *The Usefulness, Truth, and Excellency of the Christian Revelation*, 21-22; and Thomas Johnson, *The Insufficiency of the Law of Nature* (1731), 15-16. The political and theological uses of belief in a future state had been noticed by the deists, though without explicit judgement about whether the belief was justified. See for instance Blount, *Anima Mundi*, 59-63 and John Toland, *The Letters to Serena* (1704), 52-56.

<sup>93</sup> See Jackson, *Remarks on [...] Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 15; Edward Littleton, *Sermons upon Several Practical Subjects*, 2 vols (1735), I, 238-43; Samuel Croxall, *Scripture Politics* (1735), 43-45. The point was further disputed in the 1750s and 60s when the Oxford Professor of Poetry, Robert Lowth, criticised the sixth edition of the *Divine Legation*, in which Warburton argued that references to a future stated in the Book of Job were intended allegorically. For a discussion, see Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England*, 199-205.

books throughout much of the latter half of the century. Rather than arguing that the presence of a doctrine of future state among the Jews was evidence that they received a revelation, he argued that the omission of such doctrine was evidence that they had been the chosen people. The crucial premise of the argument was ‘that the inculcating the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments, is necessary to the well being of civil society’.<sup>94</sup> Because the Jews were the sole exception to this rule, Warburton argued, they must have been the recipients of continuous divine intervention or what he described as ‘a divine legation’.<sup>95</sup>

The argument was based on a daring gamble. As Warburton explained in the work’s subtitle, its conclusions were to be demonstrated ‘on the Principles of a Religious Deist, From the Omission of a Doctrine of a Future State of Reward and Punishment in the Jewish Dispensation’.<sup>96</sup> He omitted to specify which deist’s principles he had in mind, but the thrust of the argument was clear, that the deists could be effectively refuted by conceding some of their criticisms of the Jews.<sup>97</sup> For his gamble to pay off, however, he needed to prove his crucial premise. He began with the opinion of Bayle and the Italian

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<sup>94</sup> Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, 7.

<sup>95</sup> The term attracted jocund remarks at the time. Hume wrote to William Ruat that ‘As to private news, there is little stirring; only Dr. Warburton turned Mahometan, and was circumcised last week. They say he is to write a book, in order to prove the divine legation of Mahomet; and it is not doubted but he will succeed as well as in proving that of Moses. I saw him yesterday in the Mall with his turban; which really becomes him very well’. See ‘David Hume to William Ruat, 6 July 1739’, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), I, 310.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, title page.

<sup>97</sup> It is unclear whom Warburton had in mind. He described how ‘this very Circumstance of Omission, which they pretend to be such an Imperfection, as makes the Dispensation unworthy the author to whom we ascribe it, is, in Truth, a Demonstration that God only could give it.’ But of the writers he named (Woolston, Edmund Hiceringill, Collins, Shaftesbury, Herbert, and Toland) and alluded to (Tindal, Thomas Gordon, Thomas Trenchard and Henry Dodwell), only Toland had denied that the Jews had possessed a doctrine of a future state. It was once thought that Warburton was replying to Morgan, who believed that the doctrine of a future state had been introduced to the Jews by Ezra, but this now seems to be unlikely. The most recent extended treatment of Warburton makes no attempt to identify the deists to whom Warburton was responding and instead compares Warburton with Bolingbroke, whose deistic works were published more than a decade after *The Divine Legation*. See Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, xix, xxi-xxiii, xxxiv, xxxvi, xxxix-xl, 2, 5-6, 8, 23, 33-34; Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 45-46; Jan Van Den Berg, ‘Thomas Morgan versus William Warburton: A Conflict the Other Way Round’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 42:1 (1991), 82-85; and Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England*, 167-212.

philosophers Pietro Pomponazzi and Gerolamo Cardano that a virtuous society could operate without knowledge of God, although the underlying question, in Warburton's view, was whether humans could perform virtuous actions consistently without knowing that they were obliged by God.<sup>98</sup> To this he gave a negative answer, for unless humans were motivated by the prospect of infinite rewards and punishments they could be motivated only by their moral sense, which provided 'An *instinctive* Approbation of *Right* and Abhorrence of *Wrong*', and by their reason, which apprehended 'the real essential Differences in the Qualities of human actions', and neither of these was sufficient to motivate virtuous actions consistently because they only provided recommendations, which the will was always at liberty to ignore.<sup>99</sup>

Warburton directed particular ire at those who believed that reason could motivate virtuous actions consistently. He did not specify his targets, but he gave a hint of who he had in mind by adopting the language of Clarke and the deists:

Another undertakes to demonstrate *the Essential Difference of Things*, and their natural Fitness and Unfitness to certain Ends: And then *Morality* is solely founded on those Differences; and God and his Will have nothing to do in the Matter. Then the Will of God cannot make any Thing morally good and evil, just and unjust; nor consequently be the Cause of any Obligation on Moral Agents: because the Essences and Natures of Things, which constitute Actions good and evil, are independent of that Will, which is forced to submit to the Relations like weak Man's.<sup>100</sup>

Warburton believed that this was mistaken, first because it was premised on the false belief that the reasons which arose from the essential difference of things could motivate virtuous action consistently without being expressive of divine commands, and

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<sup>98</sup> See Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, 33-61.

<sup>99</sup> See *ibid.*, I, 36.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 39.

second because it failed to acknowledge that the differences which existed in fact were expressions of such commands. He was ultimately undecided about whether the essential differences were created by God's providential or creative will, or indeed whether they existed independently, writing that 'we cannot so much as conceive an intelligent first Cause, whether eternal Verities be dependent or independent of him, without conceiving at the same Time a *Will*, that enjoins all his intelligent Creatures', but he was stalwart that these differences could only give rise to reasons which could motivate virtuous action consistently if they were understood as expressions of God's will.<sup>101</sup>

Warburton's argument was different from those which had been employed by the deists' earlier critics. Whereas Clarke and Whiston had objected that an intellectualist conception of God's goodness, together with the requirement that it must be possible to know how God's individual actions conformed to the fitness of things if God was not an arbitrary ruler, could make sacred history redundant as a source of theological knowledge, Warburton argued that an intellectualist conception of God's goodness led divine obligation to be neglected in accounts of the foundations of morality. He believed that this contributed to the view that humans could perform virtuous actions consistently without knowing that they were obliged by God and thence to the view that societies could operate harmoniously without a doctrine of a future state. Only by rejecting these views was it possible to see that knowledge of a future state was necessary for a harmonious society and that the omission of such a doctrine from the Jewish dispensation was evidence of their divine legation.

The example of Warburton is illustrative in two respects. In the first place, it shows how eighteenth-century Anglican apologists, rather than conducting their historical

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<sup>101</sup> See *ibid.*, I, 50-51.

researches unconscious of the philosophical and theological assumptions which informed them, were happy to lay foundations in these disciplines and build their historical researches on them. More importantly for the purposes of this study, it shows the fundamental difference between Anglicans and deists about which doctrines could depend for their truth on historical evidence: whereas the deists believed that the uninspired status of the Jews was a logical necessity, derivable from the attributes of God, for Warburton their status as the chosen people, and the further truths which this revealed about God, could only be discovered through historical study.

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This chapter has shown how Clarke's intellectualist conception of God's goodness was appropriated by the deists, who used it to argue against the possibility that certain actions which were ascribed to God in sacred history could have occurred and against the possibility that knowledge which was necessary for Christians to achieve salvation could have been revealed only in an historical revelation. It has also shown how the example of the Jews became central in these debates. But this was only half the argument. As the following chapter will shortly demonstrate, the deists' deductions from the moral attributes of God worked in concert with a far-reaching historical scepticism.

Chapter 4:  
Certainty, History and Doubt

The Writers, in Defense of Revealed Religion, distinguish their Arguments into two Sorts: The one they call the *internal*, and the other the *external* Evidence. Of these, the first is, in its Nature, more simple and noble; and even capable of Demonstration: while the other, made up of very dissimilar Materials, and borrowing Aid from without, must needs have some Parts of unequal Strength with the rest; and, consequently, lie open to the Attacks of a willing Adversary. Besides, the *internal* Evidence is, by its Nature, perpetuated; and so fitted for all Times and Periods: while the *external*, by Length of time, weakens and decays.<sup>1</sup>

William Warburton

I own my self no less inclined to *scepticism* in *history* than in *speculations* [...]<sup>2</sup>

Anthony Collins

Among the major developments of English thought in the seventeenth century was the contraction of the category of certain knowledge. Whereas writers at the beginning of the century had been confident that conclusions in theology, natural philosophy, and history could be rendered as certain as those of metaphysics, logic, and mathematics, by the end of the century this confidence had waned. Certain knowledge seemed to be unobtainable and probable knowledge to be all that could be had. But not all fields were equally affected. In theology, the belief persisted that certain knowledge ought to be possible and this was buttressed in the early eighteenth century by theologians' rising estimations of what could be known through *a priori* reasoning. The result was a conundrum about the proper status of sacred history, which seemed to be a field in which only probable knowledge was possible but also to be a vital point of access into the certainties of theological truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Collins, *An Historical and Critical Essay on the Thirty Nine Articles*, vi.

This chapter examines the deists' historical scepticism and their use of arguments against the reliability of historical evidence in their controversy with the Church of England. It begins by describing how conceptions of certainty changed in the early seventeenth century and how Anglican apologists attempted to show that history could provide a sufficiently certain foundation for theological belief. It then describes the failure of their efforts in the face of the development of probability theory and how these ideas were adapted by the deists. It shows that the deists' criticisms of the reliability of historical evidence involved an implicit contrast with the certainty of *a priori* reasoning and that their sceptical arguments worked in concert with their deductions from the moral attributes of God.

#### I. Certainty, moral certainty, and opinion

In scholastic-Aristotelian philosophy, there was a sharp distinction between beliefs which were certain and demonstrable, which were taken to constitute knowledge, and beliefs which were uncertain and arose from experience, which were taken to constitute opinion.<sup>3</sup> 'Demonstration' was modelled on geometrical proofs, such as those contained in Euclid's *Elements*, and 'experience' was modelled on what a reliable observer would recognise as the ordinary course of nature.<sup>4</sup> Many writers followed Aristotle in restricting knowledge to knowledge of causes and in using it to fashion demonstrations (usually syllogistic in form) in which states of affairs were explained as the necessary

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<sup>3</sup> On certainty, demonstration, and knowledge, see Aristotle, 'Posterior Analytics', 71b-72a, in *The Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); on classical and medieval ideas about chance and probability, see O.B. Sheynin, 'On the Prehistory of the Theory of Probability', *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, 12:2 (1974), 97-141 (91-105); and on the early modern reception of these ideas, see Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England*, 5-6 and *passim*. All subsequent citations from Aristotle are taken from the edition cited here.

<sup>4</sup> On demonstration, see Aristotle, 'Physics', 184a. On experience, see Aristotle, 'Posterior Analytics', 99b-100a; Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and its Ambitions, 1500-1700*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; first published 2001), 4-7; and footnote 9 below.

outcomes of their causes.<sup>5</sup> Matters of opinion were handled using a variety of qualitative measures, including spontaneity, coincidence, and chance. They were treated by practitioners of rhetoric and dialectic, who assessed their probability in terms of the plausibility, credibility, or worthiness of the available testimony, rather than in terms of statistical likelihood.<sup>6</sup>

These principles were challenged by Francis Bacon in the *Advancement of Learning* (1605) and *Novum Organum* (1620). He took issue with Aristotelian logic, arguing that the major premises of syllogisms, which stated general truths about the world, were not true by definition, as Aristotle had supposed, but were simply plausible generalisations which had come to be accepted as true. Moreover, because the particular truths which were stated in the conclusions of syllogisms were already included in the general truths which were stated in the major premises, syllogisms did not discover new knowledge but presented what was already known. The conclusion of a syllogism could only be as certain as the evidence for the major premise:

*Arguments consist of Propositions, and Propositions of Words, and Wordes are but the Current Tokens or Markes of popular Notions of thinges: which Notions if they bee grossely and variably collected out of Particulars; It is not the laborious examination either of Consequences of Arguments, or of the truth of Propositions, that can ever correct that Errour; being (as the Phisitians speake) in the first digestion; And therefore, it was not without cause, that so many excellent Philosophers became Sceptiques and Academiques, and denied any certaintie of*

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<sup>5</sup> On knowledge being confined to causes, see Aristotle, 'Posterior Analytics', 71b, 94a; 'Physics', 194b. On the role of causal knowledge in explanation, see Aristotle, 'Physics', 184a.

<sup>6</sup> On qualitative measures, see Aristotle, 'Physics', 198b; 'On Divination in Sleep', 463b; and 'Parts of Animals', 641b; on dialectic, see Aristotle, 'Topics', 100a-104a; and on rhetoric, see Aristotle, 'Rhetoric', 1357a, 1376a. On the later reception of Aristotle's views on chance and rhetoric, see Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment*, 38-39. For a good summary of probability before the emergence of probability theory, see Douglas Lane Patey, *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-76.

Knowledge, or Comprehension, and held opinion that the knowledge of man extended onely to Appearances, and Probabilities.<sup>7</sup>

In place of the Aristotelian syllogism, Bacon proposed a system of induction which would formalise the procedures of inquiry necessary to progress from experience to knowledge. To begin with, particular knowledge would be gathered from the observation of nature. This would then be enumerated and classified in order to yield more general knowledge and this general knowledge would then be qualified in light of contradictory evidence and used to create hypotheses about cases which were yet to be observed.<sup>8</sup> Undergirding the system was a conception of experience as the product of the observation of nature under orchestrated conditions.<sup>9</sup> By experimenting with nature in this way, natural philosophers could discover new knowledge, achieve progressively higher degrees of certainty, and overcome the habitual inclinations (which Bacon famously characterised as ‘idols’) which led the mind towards confusion.<sup>10</sup> But despite criticising Aristotle, Bacon shared the conviction that philosophers ought to strive for certain knowledge. As he explained the point in *Novum Organum*, the highest aim of

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<sup>7</sup> See Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning, Divine and Humane*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 110.

<sup>8</sup> See Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum and Associated Texts*, ed. Graham Ress and Maria Wakely (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 26-37, 64-81. As Richard Serjeantson has noted, the analysis of particular knowledge also involved the analysis of observation reports according to juridical and rhetorical criteria. See Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (2000), 109-10 and *Novum Organum*, 164-65, 254-57 and Richard Serjeantson, ‘Testimony and Proof in Early-Modern England’, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, 30:2 (1999), 195-236 (211). See also Barbara Shapiro, ‘Testimony in Seventeenth-Century English Natural Philosophy: Legal Origins and Early Development’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 33:2 (2002), 243-63.

<sup>9</sup> Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 18-21, 110-115, 128-131. Scholars disagree about the extent to which Bacon’s experiments resembled those of earlier scholastic-Aristotelian models and those later employed by the Royal Society. Compare Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences*, 137-44 and the editors’ introduction to Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), vii-xxviii (esp. xiv-xviii). On the difference between experience in Aristotle and Bacon, see Rhodri Lewis, ‘A Kind of Sagacity: Francis Bacon, the *Ars Memoriae* and the Pursuit of Natural Knowledge’, *Intellectual History Review*, 19:2 (2009), 155-75.

<sup>10</sup> See Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 34,-37, 78-109.

natural philosophy was ‘not to express pretty and probable opinions but to acquire certain and ostensive knowledge’.<sup>11</sup>

Philosophers working after Bacon were less convinced that certain knowledge was possible outside the spheres of mathematics and immediate sensory perception.<sup>12</sup> In his inaugural lecture as Gresham Professor of Astronomy in 1657, Christopher Wren described how ‘Mathematical Demonstrations being built upon the impregnable Foundations of Geometry and Arithmetick, are the only Truths, that can sink into the Mind of Man, void of all Uncertainty’.<sup>13</sup> ‘All other discourses’, he continued, ‘participate more or less of Truth, according as their Subjects are more or less capable of Mathematical Demonstration’.<sup>14</sup> A different account was given by the natural philosopher and Bishop of Chester John Wilkins in the *Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (1675) where he distinguished between ‘mathematical certainty’, which applied to mathematical deductions, and ‘physical certainty’, which applied to immediate sensory perception.<sup>15</sup> Though he described both kinds of certainty as ‘infallible’, he identified physical certainty as ‘the first and *highest kind of Evidence*, of which humane nature is capable’.<sup>16</sup> A middle position was adopted by Locke. In the *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, he identified ‘the view the Mind has of its

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 58-59. The untranslated text reads ‘non bellè & probabiliter opinari, sed certò & ostensiuè scire’.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance John Tillotson, *The Wisdom of Being Religious* (1664), Wing TT1272, 25-30; Robert Hooke, *Micrographia* (1665), Wing H2620, sigs A2v-g2v; Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661), 188-201 and *passim*; Joseph Glanvill, *Plus ultra, or, the Progress and Advancement of Knowledge since the Days of Aristotle* (1668), 126-28; Joseph Glanvill, *Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion* (1676), 1-65 (esp. 14-16) and *passim*; Charles Wolseley, *The Unreasonableness of Atheism Made Manifest* (1669), 122-33; and Boyle, *Some Considerations about the Reconcilableness of Reason and Religion*, 9-16. For a discussion, see Henry G. Van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630-1690* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1963), 49-142 and Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 15-73.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Wren (ed.), *Parentalia: Or, Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens* (1750), 200-01.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 201. See also Isaac Barrow, *The Usefulness of Mathematical Learning Explained and Demonstrated*, trans. John Kirkby (1734), 50-100. The latter work is an English translation of lectures delivered by Barrow in Latin at Cambridge during the 1660s.

<sup>15</sup> Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 1-11. Wilkins took physical certainty to encompass the immediate perceptions of the five external senses and the internal senses by which we acquire knowledge of such objects as our apprehensions, inclinations, and determinations.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5, 7.

own *Ideas*' as 'the utmost Light and greatest Certainty', which included the mind's apprehension of self-evident mathematical truths and immediate sensory perceptions.<sup>17</sup>

'For', he explained,

if we will reflect on our own ways of Thinking, we shall find, that sometimes the Mind perceives the Agreement of Disagreement of two *Ideas* immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other: And this, I think, we may call *intuitive Knowledge*. For in this, the Mind is at no pains of proving or examining, but perceives the Truth, as the Eye doth light, only by being directed toward it. Thus the Mind perceives, that *White* is not *Black*, That a *Circle* is not a *Triangle*, That *Three* are more than *Two*, and equal to *One and Two*. Such kind of Truths, the Mind perceives at the first sight of the *Ideas* together, by bare *Intuition*, without the intervention of any other *Idea*; and this kind of Knowledge is the clearest, and most certain, that humane Frailty is capable of.<sup>18</sup>

But although certainty was possible in this domain, Locke was sceptical about the possibility of certainty in cases where knowledge was obtained through reasoning. 'Tis true the Perception, produced by demonstration, is also very clear', he wrote, 'yet it is often with a great abatement of that evident lustre and full assurance that always accompany that which I call intuitive'.<sup>19</sup> Yet in contrast to scholastic-Aristotelianism, he insisted that knowledge based on reasoning, which was probable and not certain in character, should be classified as knowledge. '*The notice we have by our Senses, of the existing of Things without us,*' he explained, 'though it be not altogether so certain, as our intuitive Knowledge, or the Deductions of our Reason, employ'd about the clear abstract *Ideas* of our own Minds; yet it is an assurance that deserves the *name of*

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<sup>17</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, IV, ii, §1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, ii, §1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, ii, §6.

*Knowledge*'.<sup>20</sup> There was no room in the Lockean picture, as there had been in the Baconian one, for certain knowledge of the external world.

Certainty was treated differently in other contexts. For religious writers, it was vital to affirm that the teachings of Christianity, and especially those relating to salvation, were certain.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the seventeenth century, books and pamphlets were published in large numbers with titles offering their readers certain knowledge of their salvation.<sup>22</sup> These works were popular with readers who had been influenced by Calvinism and who were anxious to know whether the fate of their soul was predestined or whether they could alter it through their actions. An emphasis on certainty was also present at the other end of the theological spectrum among Catholic polemicists and Jesuit missionaries who wrote numerous works arguing that the Catholic Church was uniquely able to offer certain knowledge of salvation.<sup>23</sup> Whereas Protestants were reliant on their

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., IV, xi, §3.

<sup>21</sup> For revealing discussions, see Richard Hooker, *A Learned and Comfortable Sermon of the Certaintie and Perpetuitie of Faith in the Elect* (1612), 1-14; Francis Rous, *Testis veritatis* (1626), STC 21347.3, 30-72; and John Hales, *Sermons Preach'd at Eton* (1660), 4.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance James Speght, *A Briefe Demonstration, who Have, and of the Certainty of their Salvation, that Have the Spirit of Christ* (1613); Richard Baxter, *The Saints Everlasting Rest: Or, a Treatise of the Blessed State of the Saints in their Enjoyment of God in Glory. Wherein is shewed its Excellency and Certainty; the Misery of those that Lose it, the Way to Attain it, and Assurance of it; and how to Live in the Continua Delightful Forecasts of it, by the Help of Meditation* (1650); Edward Hyde, *The True Catholicks Tenure, or a Good Christians Certainty which he Ought to Have of his Religion, and May Have of his Salvation* (1662); and Zachary Cawdrey, *The Certainty of Salvation to them who Dye in the Lord* (1680). There was also an association in some early seventeenth-century Puritan works between theological and scientific certainty, which seems to have evaporated later in the century without shaking the assumption that knowledge of salvation should be certain. For examples, see Richard Niccols, *A Day-Starre for Darke-Wandering Soules* (1613), sig. A3r and Thomas Wilson, *Theologicall Rules* (1615), sig A3r.

<sup>23</sup> On the earlier part of the period, see Nicholas McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 50-88. On the latter part, see Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991-2000), I, 130-63. See also Malcolm H. MacKinnon, 'Part I: Calvinism and the Infallible Assurance of Grace: The Weber Thesis Reconsidered', *British Journal of Sociology*, 39:1 (1988), 143-77; Malcolm H. MacKinnon, 'Part II: Weber's Exploration of Calvinism: The Undiscovered Provenance of Capitalism', *British Journal of Sociology*, 39:2 (1988), 178-210; and David Zaret, 'Calvin, Covenant Theology, and the Weber Thesis', *British Journal of Sociology*, 43:3 (1992), 369-91. On the continental origins of the use of scepticism by Jesuits, see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism From Erasmus to Descartes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1968; first published 1960), 70-80. On Jesuits in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, see Arthur F. Marotti, *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy: Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 95-130 and Michael C. Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England:*

private judgement and possibly the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in their interpretation of the scriptures, Catholics could rely on their Church's teachings, which were guided by the hand of God. As the English Jesuit John Percy explained:

those, who, for matters of faith, relie wholly, either upon their owne private opinio[n] or judgment, of the sense and meaning of Scripture; or upon the learning and judgement of others, who are but men, not infallibly assisted by the holy Ghost, nor by him infallibly preserved from errorrs (as many or rather all Protestants do) those (I say) cannot have divine and Christian faith, but only fallible opinio[n], and humane faith.<sup>24</sup>

The Jesuits were answered by Anglican writers, who accused them of requiring a degree of certainty which was impossible in theological matters. As Chillingworth wrote in his answer to Knott, the mistake of Catholic writers was to 'exact a certainty of Faith above that of sence or science [when] God desires only that we believe the conclusion, as much as the premises deserve'.<sup>25</sup> A similar argument was deployed by Tillotson against the Catholic polemicist John Sergeant. Where Sergeant had argued that Protestantism was built '*on the Inevidence or Ambiguity of Words*' rather than 'the Churches Living Voice or Tradition', Tillotson answered that Sergeant's discourse 'plainly implies, that we can have no security at all either of the Letter or sense of any other parts of Scripture, but only those which are coincident with the main body of Christian Doctrine'.<sup>26</sup> 'Nor do we say', Tillotson continued, 'that the certainty and assurance which we have, that these Books are the same that were written by the Apostles, is a *first and self-evident Principle*; but only that it is a truth capable of evidence sufficient,

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*Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c.1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 288-314.

<sup>24</sup> John Percy [alias John Fisher], *A Treatise of Faith* (1605), 28. See also Edward Knott, *Charity Mistaken* (1630), STC 25774, 57-60.

<sup>25</sup> Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants*, 36. See also Lucius Cary, *His Discourse of Infallibility, with an Answer to it: And his Lordships Reply* (1651), 136, 200 and Seth Ward, *A Philosophicall Essay Towards an Eviction of the Being and Attributes of God* (Oxford, 1652), 75-152.

<sup>26</sup> John Sergeant, *Sure-Footing in Christianity* (1665), Wing S2595, sigs A6v-A7r; John Tillotson, *The Rule of Faith* (1666), 12.

and as much as we can have for a thing of that nature'.<sup>27</sup> In arguing that their religious convictions were less certain than Catholics insisted that they should be, Tillotson and his Anglican colleagues were adopting a potentially hazardous strategy, but also one which gained plausibility from the sceptical conclusions which many of them were reaching in their natural-philosophical studies.<sup>28</sup>

The debates between Catholics and Anglicans gave rise to the category of 'moral certainty', which encompassed the highest degree of probable certainty or the degree of certainty needed for practical (and hence 'moral') purposes.<sup>29</sup> The phrase was initially used by Chillingworth to describe the assurance of salvation which the Church of England offered to its members:

Now though I have, and ought to have an absolute certainty of this Thesis, *All which God reveales for truth is true*, being a proposition that may be demonstrated, or rather so evident to any one that understands it that it needs it not; Yet of this Hypothesis, *That all the Articles of our Faith were reveal'd by God*, we cannot ordinarily have any rationall and acquired certainty, more then morall, founded upon these considerations: First that the goodnesse of the precepts of Christianity, and the greatnesse of the promises of it, shewes it, of all other Religions, most likely to come from the fountaine of goodnesse. And then that a

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<sup>27</sup> Tillotson, *The Rule of Faith*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> The connections between natural philosophy and Restoration Anglicanism have been widely discussed. For a summary of the topic, see Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 15-118.

<sup>29</sup> The concept had been intimated by classical philosophers and had currency in seventeenth-century Europe. There was also an important association between 'moral certainty' and the moral disciplines of morality, rhetoric, law, and history, in which the credibility of testimony was paramount. Scholars are divided, however, on whether seventeenth-century debates about moral certainty were an explication or repudiation of 'certainty' as it had been understood by Bacon. See Aristotle, 'Nichomachean Ethics', 1094b; René Descartes, 'Discourse on the Method', in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20-56 (38); Antione Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic, or, the Art of Thinking: Containing, Besides Common Rules, Several New Observations Appropriate for Forming Judgment*, ed. and trans. Jill Vance Buroker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 264; Serjeantson, 'Testimony and Proof in Early-Modern England', 226; Van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630-1690*, 1-12; Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 27; and Silvia Manzo, 'Probability, Certainty, and Facts in Francis Bacon's Natural Histories. The Double Attitude towards Skepticism', in José Raimundo Maia Neto, Gianni Paganini, and John Christian Laursen (eds), *Skepticism in the Modern Age: Building on the Work of Richard Popkin* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 123-37 (128). Aristotle's contention, cited here, that different standards of proof applied in different fields was widely quoted in the seventeenth century, as in the passages of Tillotson and Cary cited in footnotes 12 and 25 above.

constant, famous and very generall Tradition, so credible, that no wise man doubts of any other, which hath but the fortieth part of the credibility of this, such and so credible a Tradition, tell us, that God himself hath set his Hand and Seal to the truth of this Doctrine, by doing great, and glorious, and frequent miracles in confirmation of it.<sup>30</sup>

Chillingworth needed to be certain that the scriptures contained true revelation, but of the premises of his syllogism only the first, that anything which God revealed was true, could be known through logical demonstration whereas the second, that the scriptures had been revealed by God, was discovered through historical enquiry. His solution was to argue that the second premise was morally certain, which meant that it was founded on indubitable evidence rather than being logically demonstrable. This ensured that the conclusion was certain, at least in a sense, while conceding that historical enquiry was a less certain means of attaining knowledge than logical demonstration. The same argument was employed by Anglicans throughout the later decades of the century.<sup>31</sup>

Edward Stillingfleet spoke for many when he wrote:

In short, then, either we must destroy all *Historical faith* out of the world, and believe nothing (though never so much attested) but what we see our selves, or else we must acknowledge, that a *moral certainty* is a *sufficient foundation* for an *undoubted assent*, not such a one *cui non potest subesse falsum*, but such a one *cui non subest dubium*, i.e. an *assent undoubted*, though not *infallible*.<sup>32</sup>

But unease was quick to stir. As early as 1667, the Church of Ireland bishop Jeremy Taylor was prepared to accept that the conflict between Catholics and Anglicans might boil down to a simple disagreement about who had the more probable arguments; in the

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<sup>30</sup> Chillingworth, *The Religion of the Protestants*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance Edward Fowler, *The Principles and Practices of Certain Moderate Divines of the Church of England* (1670), 61-66; Robert Boyle, *The Excellency of Theology Compar'd with Natural Philosophy* (1674), 140; Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 22-38; and William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning a Judge of Controversies in Matters of Religion* (1686), Wing S3285, 52-54.

<sup>32</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae*, sig. P4v. See also Edward Stillingfleet, *A Rational Account of the Grounds of Protestant Religion* (1665), 2, 179, 187.

same year, Sergeant replied to Stillingfleet, arguing that a good God could not have made use of history as a medium of revelation without intervening in that history to ensure that the revelation was faithfully conveyed; and in 1681, the Anglican Samuel Parker argued that ‘moral certainty’ was used ambiguously, sometimes to refer to the highest levels of probable certainty possible and sometimes to the highest levels of certainty possible in a given field.<sup>33</sup> As he explained:

Thus have I a moral Certainty that *Romulus* was the Founder of *Rome*, *i.e.* I have all the proof of it that the matter is capable of, and yet have I not sufficient grounds to venture any thing that nearly concerns me upon the truth of it; because the first beginning of the Roman Story is in many things very fabulous, and in all very far from being sufficiently certain.<sup>34</sup>

Parker’s argument was not taken up by other writers, but its implications were potentially destructive. If there were different degrees of moral certainty, then it might not make sense to think in terms of moral certainty at all, as opposed to a continuous scale of more and less certain beliefs.

## II. The emergence of probability

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, moral certainty appeared less frequently in historical writing. A major factor in its decline was the development of probability theory, which occurred in the years around 1660.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to practitioners of

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<sup>33</sup> See Jeremy Taylor, *The Second Part of the Dissuasive from Popery* (1667), sigs F3r-F4r and John Sergeant, *Faith Vindicated from Possibility of Falsehood* (1667), 144-48. See also John Sergeant, *Error Non-Plust* (1673), 173-81.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Parker, *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature, and of the Christian Religion* (1681), 178.

<sup>35</sup> For the standard accounts of the subject, see Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; first published 1975), O.B. Sheynin, ‘Early History of the Theory of Probability’, *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, 17:3 (1977), 201-59, Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, and Daston, *Classical Probability*. Through moral certainty was prized out

rhetoric and dialectic, the early theorists of probability attempted to assign numerical values to different degrees of belief and to formulate numerical expressions of the behaviour of randomizers (such as dice, spinning tops, and playing cards) which produced stable relative frequencies.<sup>36</sup> The theory grew out of studies of gambling by Blaise Pascal, Pierre de Fermat, and Christiaan Huygens, but its applications to other fields were quickly realised.<sup>37</sup> In 1662, Pascal applied it to theology in his famous ‘wager’ argument and in 1665 Leibniz applied it to the law in a paper on the evaluation of evidence.<sup>38</sup>

In England, the development of probability theory led major blows to be struck against the use of moral certainty in historical contexts. The first appeared in an incomplete and obscure work by the Precentor of Exeter Cathedral, George Hooper, entitled *A Fair and Methodical Discussion of the First and Great Controversy between the Church of England and Church of Rome* (1689).<sup>39</sup> Superficially, the work was a continuation of

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of historiography by the development of probability theory, it clung on in other contexts. It was quantified by Jakob Bernoulli in 1713 as a probability of at least 0.999 and appeared in Isaac Watts’s much-reprinted *Logick* (1725), Peter Browne’s response to Locke, and Edmond Hoyle’s enormously popular works on whist and piquet. Nevertheless, it occupied an increasingly precarious position in the later eighteenth century, where doubts were raised about whether theological truths should be more than morally certain, whether it applied only to cases in which decision making was practically constrained, and whether it applied only to cases in which exact probabilities could not be calculated because of a shortage of data. See Jakob Bernoulli, *Ars Conjectandi* (Basel, 1713), 217; Isaac Watts, *Logick, or the Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth* (1725), 284-85; Peter Browne, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding* (1728), 231-33; Edmond Hoyle, *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* (1742); Edmond Hoyle, *A Short Treatise on the Game of Piquet* (1744); Jeremiah Seed, *Posthumous Works*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1750), I, 21-44; Edward Bentham, *An Introduction to Logick* (1773), 71-78; and Charles Bonnet, *Philosophical and Critical Inquiries Concerning Christianity* (1787), 62-65. For a translation of Bernoulli’s quantification of moral certainty, see Jakob Bernoulli, *The Art of Conjecturing*, ed. and trans. Edith Dudley Sylla (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 321.

<sup>36</sup> The duality of the theory is emphasised in Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*, 11-17.

<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*, 49-56. On Fermat and Pascal, see Daston, *Classical Probability*, 15-33.

<sup>38</sup> See Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*, 63-72, 85-91 and Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 60-63, 163-93. The wager first appeared in an appendix to the Port Royal Logic in 1662 and subsequently appeared in Pascal’s *Pensées* (Paris, 1669). The paper by Leibniz was *Disputatio juridica de conditionibus* (Leipzig, 1665).

<sup>39</sup> The work consisted of three discourses, of which one was complete and one partially complete at the point of publication. Hooper described these as having been ‘begun, and almost finished nigh four years ago’. The work was originally published anonymously, but it was later included in *The Works of the Right Reverend Father in God, George Hooper* (1757). Its authorship has not been subsequently

Anglican attacks on Catholic claims to possess an infallible oral tradition and, like most works on the subject, it concluded that the scriptures were a more reliable body of evidence. The work, however, was original in beginning with an account of how the reliability of oral testimony declines as the number of successive witnesses increases:

Oral Tradition, after it has gone but a little way, finds small Credit in the Affairs of the World; it is call'd Hearsay, or Fame; and goes for uncertain at least, if not reputed a Lyar. A Story told at the third or fourth hand, is commonly so changed in its circumstances, that in common Conversation, tho' it passes for Discourse, it is never rely'd on without nearer Enquiry; nay, will hardly be repeated in the next Company, without this Addition; that he heard it not himself, and was only told so at such a distance.<sup>40</sup>

In itself, this would have been remarkable, but Hooper went some way further by attempting to quantify the rate at which the reliability of oral testimony declined. He imagined a scenario in which an historical relation was conveyed through four successive oral witnesses and assumed that each witness had a one-in-five chance of conveying the relation incorrectly. Under these circumstances, the likelihood of the relation being conveyed through all four witnesses correctly was less than 50 per cent:

let us suppose the four successive Relators to aver, what they successively said; and let it be supposed, that I would have given each of them in my Belief, such an odds or preponderance as 5. to 1. which in many cases is a very liberal Allowance: It is demonstrable then, that altho' I give a very great Credit to such a Relation at the first hand, at the 4th I must not give any; as it is also certain by the same undeniable computation, that a Report which at the first hand has the Odds in certainty, of 10 to 1, at the 7th hand would have none: And alike certain, that if at

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disputed. See George Hooper, *A Fair and Methodical Discussion of the First and Great Controversy between the Church of England and Church of Rome* (1689), sig. A3r.

<sup>40</sup> Hooper, *A Fair and Methodical Discussion*, 7.

the first hand there be two to one for the probability of a Narrative, the advantage at the second will lye on the other side.<sup>41</sup>

Hooper did not provide a formula or any way of setting the initial values for the reliability of the witnesses, nor give a parallel account of the rate at which the reliability of written evidence decreased. And nor did he consider the possibility that a witness might alter a relation so that it was more, rather than less, like the original and that the sum of alterations might not equate to the difference between the original relation and its rendition. But the burden of his argument was clear: that, even assuming relatively reliable witnesses, the probability of an historical relation being conveyed correctly to the present might decrease dramatically as the number of successive witnesses increased.

Hooper's argument was quickly followed by *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, in which Locke also reached the conclusion that the reliability of historical testimony is inversely proportional to its temporal distance from the original event.<sup>42</sup> However, whereas Hooper had argued within the emerging paradigm of statistical probabilities, Locke argued within the terms of the older approach to probability and made no use of quantification. And, whereas Hooper had argued only with respect to oral testimony and in the course of an attack on Catholic infallibility, Locke's argument was entirely open-ended:

any Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less force and proof it has. The Being and Existence of the thing it self, is what I call the original Truth.

A credible Man, vouching his Knowledge of it, is a good proof: But if another

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 9. In the first scenario, there are 635 outcomes, of which 256 preserve the truth of the historical relation and 369 do not; in the second, there are 10,000,000 outcomes, of which 4,782,969 preserve the truth of the historical relation and 5,217,031 do not; and in the third scenario, there are 4 outcomes of which 1 preserves the truth of the historical relation and 3 do not.

<sup>42</sup> There is no evidence from Locke's letters or library that he had read Hooper on probability. See *The Correspondence of John Locke* and John Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971; first published 1965).

equally credible, do witness it from his Report, the Testimony is weaker; and a Third that attests the Hear-say of an Hear-say, is yet less considerable. So that *in traditional Truths, each remove weakens the force of the proof*: And the more hands the Tradition has successively passed through, the less strength and evidence does it receive from them. This I thought necessary to be taken notice of: Because I find amongst some Men, the quite contrary commonly practised, who look on Opinions to gain force by growing older; and what a thousand years since would not, to a rational Man, contemporary with the first Voucher, have appeared at all probable, is now urged as certain beyond all question, only because several have since, from him, said it one after another.<sup>43</sup>

Locke's argument also differed from Hooper's in terms of its evidential basis. Whereas Hooper had stipulated probabilities for the reliability of historical witnesses, and had assumed that these would seem plausible to his readers, Locke's argument was more closely linked to the recent achievements of textual criticism. 'He that has but ever so little examined the Citations of Writers', he explained, 'cannot doubt how little Credit the Quotations deserve, where the Originals are wanting; and consequently how much less Quotation of Quotations can be relied on'.<sup>44</sup> But while Locke's argument was different from Hooper's, it was equally hazardous to the use of moral certainty in history. It also yielded the conclusion that historical relations from more than the very recent past were unlikely to be true.

The style of argument used by Hooper gained greater notoriety in the work of the Scottish mathematician John Craig.<sup>45</sup> In *Theologiae christianae principia mathematica*

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<sup>43</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, IV, xvi, §10. In referring to writers who believed that the reliability of historical evidence grows with time, Locke may have been thinking of Zachary Coke, who affirmed that 'Old testimony is worth more than new', or John Newton, who affirmed that '*The Testimony of the Antients is to be preferred before the testimony of the Neotericks*'. Zachary Coke, *The Art of Logick; or the Entire Body of Logick in English* (1654), 163-64; John Newton, *An Introduction to the Art of Logick* (1671), 157. For similar arguments in later writers, see the passages by John Edwards, Arthur Ashley Sykes, and David Hartley cited in footnote 48 below and Sherlock in *The Tryal of Witnesses*, 7-9, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, IV, xvi, §10.

<sup>45</sup> On Craig, see Stephen M. Stigler, 'John Craig and the Probability of History: From the Death of Christ to the Birth of Laplace', *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 81 (1986), 879-87; Daston, *Classical Probability*, 312-16; and Richard Nash, *John Craige's "Mathematical Principles of Christian*

(1699), Craig sought to prove that the quantification of the gradual decay of historical evidence could be used to vindicate the evidence of the Gospels. To begin, he identified five factors which influenced the reliability of a relation: the number of concurrent witnesses, the number of successive witnesses, the number of separate lines of transmission, the geographical distance covered by the relation, and the temporal distance between the original event and the present day. He then devised a formula expressing the relationship between these factors which he used to reach the dubious conclusion that oral testimony would fall below the threshold of credibility after 800 years and written testimony after 3,150 years; a conclusion which vindicated Anglican historical commitments against Catholic ones far more emphatically than Hooper's had done.<sup>46</sup> The argument gained immediate notice. In the same year that Craig's work was published, Hooper published an anonymous article in the *Philosophical Transactions*, entitled 'A Calculation of the Credibility of Human Testimony', in which he followed the practice of *A Fair and Methodical Discussion* of calculating probabilities by assigning values to individual witnesses and concluded, much as Craig had done, that the reliability of oral testimony decreased much faster than that of written testimony.<sup>47</sup> Hooper, Locke, and Craig intended that their arguments would be of assistance to the Church of England in its continuing fight against Rome. But their heterodox potential was quickly realised and entered the bloodstream of controversial writing in the first half of the eighteenth century. David Hume was not alone in thinking that the fact of the

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*Theology*" (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), the last of which contains an English translation of Craig's work.

<sup>46</sup> The formula is explained in Karl Pearson, *The History of Statistics in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries against the Changing Background of Intellectual, Scientific, and Religious Thought*, ed. E.S. Pearson (London: Charles Griffin, 1978), 465-66.

<sup>47</sup> See George Hooper, 'A Calculation of the Credibility of Human Testimony', *Philosophical Transactions*, 21 (1699), 359-65. On the authorship of the article, see A.I. Dale, 'On the Authorship of "A Calculation of the Credibility of Human Testimony"', *Historia Mathematica*, 19:4 (1992), 414-17. See also Daston, *Classical Probability*, 315-16 and S.L. Zabell, 'The Probabilistic Analysis of Testimony', *Journal of Statistical Planning and Inference*, 20:3 (1988), 327-54 (336-37).

gradual decay of historical evidence was ‘a very celebrated argument against the *Christian Religion*’.<sup>48</sup>

### III. Uncertainty and historical belief

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Anglican apologists were facing a problem. The mounting evidence of textual corruption in the history of Christianity, together with the arguments of Hooper, Locke, and Craig, made it increasingly implausible to argue that morally certain theological beliefs could be founded on historical evidence. The problem produced a variety of solutions. The majority of writers continued to argue that the historical evidence of Christianity was sufficient to support its theological doctrines, even if it did so less certainly than had formerly been supposed.<sup>49</sup> Others, such as Clarke and Whiston, sought to show how *a priori* reasoning could strengthen the historical evidence for Christianity.<sup>50</sup> And others, such as the Anglican scholars John Mill and Richard Bentley, sought to strengthen the historical evidence for Christianity through

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<sup>48</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3 vols (1739-40), I, 256. See also John Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted* (1697), 424-27; Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion*, 379-88; Humphrey Ditton, *A Discourse Concerning the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (1712), 161-91; John Edwards, *Some New Discoveries of the Uncertainty, Deficiency, and Corruptions of Human Knowledge and Learning* (1714), 85-86; Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 182-85; George Berkeley (anonymous), *Alciphron: Or, the Minute Philosopher*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1732), ESTC T86056, II, 2-28; Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, 1-5; Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. II*, 31-32; Arthur Ashley Sykes, *The Principles and Connexion of Natural and Revealed Religion Distinctly Considered* (1740), 207-13; Pope, in *The Dunciad, Book the Fourth*, 32 (lines 451-56); John Jackson, *An Address to the Deists* (1744), 23-28; Abraham Le Moine, *A Treatise of Miracles* (1747), 349-59; David Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 2 vols (1749), I, 335-53; and John Trenchard, *Essays on Important Subjects* (1755), 4-21.

<sup>49</sup> See for instance Leslie, *A Short and Easie Method with the Deists* and Offspring Blackall, *The Sufficiency of a Standing Revelation, in General and of the Scripture Revelation in Particular* (1700), esp. 10-24. This line of argument culminated in Sherlock's *The Tryal of Witnesses*, which tested the evidence of the Gospel according to legal criteria of reliability. Sherlock concluded that the apostles were not guilty of giving false testimony, but made no mention of the degree of certainty which beliefs based on their evidence might attain.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance Whiston, *Sermons and Essays Upon Several Subjects*, 197-221 and John Jackson, *A Collection of Queries wherein the most Material Objections from Scripture, Reason, and Antiquity, which have as yet been Alledged against Dr Clarke's Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1716), 102-11.

ambitious schemes of textual editing.<sup>51</sup> Most originally, the future Bishop of Durham Joseph Butler argued that large domains of human understanding were probabilistic in character and therefore that the uncertainty of sacred history made it no different from any other field. The truths which Clarke had thought could be arrived at through *a priori* reasoning could be discovered only through probable inferences from observed matters of fact.<sup>52</sup>

The deists took a different view. Since their first emergence in the 1670s, their position had involved a basic contrast between the certainty which was needed for theological beliefs and the uncertainty of history.<sup>53</sup> But their use of historical scepticism took a variety of forms. In some cases, it rested on very general remarks about the reliability of historical evidence. As Tindal wrote in 1694:

We cannot be as sure of any thing we receive by Tradition, as we are of those things God has discovered to us by original Revelation, I mean those things of which he has given us clear and distinct Idea's: we cannot be so certain as we are of these, that God so long since revealed his Will to such Persons, or that they did not mistake their Fancies and Dreams for Revelation, or that they did rightly apprehend what was spoken to them, and that it has been exactly and religiously delivered down to us at so great a distance without any Alterations or Additions; or that we apprehend it in the right sense, considering moral things are capable of receiving vastly different Interpretations, and the Divine Speech as well as Human is subject to divers Senses; especially since we are so little acquainted with the particular Phrases and peculiar Idioms of the Tongues the Scripture was written in,

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<sup>51</sup> See Kristine Haughen, 'The Transformation in the Trinity Doctrine in English Scholarship: From the History of Beliefs to the History of Texts', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 3 (2001), 149-68. On Whiston's exploits in a similar direction, see pages 181-86 below.

<sup>52</sup> 'Forming our Notions of the Constitution and Government of the World upon Reasoning, without Foundation for the Principles which we assume, whether from the Attributes of God or any thing else; is building a World upon Hypothesis, like *Des Cartes* [whereas] it is allowed just, to join abstract Reasonings with the observation of Facts, and argue from such Facts as are known, to others that are like them'. Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736), v. For a discussion, see Bob Tennant, *Conscience, Consciousness and Ethics in Joseph Butler's Philosophy and Ministry* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), 76-123.

<sup>53</sup> The point was noted by several of their critics. See Stillingfleet, *A Letter to a Deist*, 15-16; William Assheton, *An Admonition to a Deist* (1685), 16-35; and John Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism, especially in the Present Age* (1695), esp. 80-85.

and those Customs among the Eastern Nations it so much alludes to. To which an hundred things might be added, as the different Readings, the different Significations of the same Words, and even the different Pointings [i.e. vowel-points], which alone may strangely vary the Sense. But the innumerable Sects of Christians that so widely differ about the meaning of the plainest Texts, sufficiently shew how subject we are to mistake; therefore to prefer Tradition before our clearest Idea's, is to prefer probable before certain, Belief before Knowledge, that which we possibly may be mistaken in, before what we are most certain of; which would leave no difference between Truth and Falshood, no means of Credible and Incredible; which would destroy all the Principles and Foundation of that Knowledge God has given us, and render all our Faculties useless, and wholly confound the most excellent Part of his Workmanship, our Understanding.<sup>54</sup>

Like Locke's position, Tindal's was founded on an epistemology of clear and distinct ideas, according to which what was close at hand was far more capable of certainty than what was distant, combined with a précis of recent events in the history of scholarship. That theological beliefs should be certain was implicit; the important point for Tindal was that, of the two apparent sources of knowledge of God, traditional revelation was subject to countless considerations which detracted from its potential certainty while original revelation was as certain as anything. To favour the former over the latter was a straightforward logical mistake.

The uncertainty of history was also contrasted with the *a priori* reasoning which had been pioneered by Clarke. The contrast was drawn especially clearly in the latter volumes of *The Moral Philosopher*, in which Morgan replied to the Anglican John Leland.<sup>55</sup> Where Leland had accused him of forsaking the Christian faith for infidelity, Morgan answered that Leland's faith was built on an uncertain foundation. '[B]y the faith he contends for', Morgan wrote, 'he means, a firm indubitable Belief, or

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<sup>54</sup> Tindal, *A Letter to the Reverend Clergy of Both Universities Concerning the Trinity*, 34.

<sup>55</sup> For an earlier statement of the argument, see Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 346.

Persuasion, that the whole Jewish and Christian History contain'd in the Books of the Old and New Testaments, is infallibly and certainly true'.<sup>56</sup> 'But would any wise Man', he continued, 'who was really a Friend to any Religion, place it upon a Bottom so very weak, precarious, and uncertain?'<sup>57</sup> Because apologists such as Leland believed that the scriptures had been uniformly inspired, they were forced to run around defending them against every new discovery which showed that some books and passages were more credible than others. '[S]uch are the wretched Shifts', Morgan explained, 'to which all these must be driven, who place Infallibility and Certainty in any thing else but the necessary immutable Truth, Reason, and Fitness of Things'.<sup>58</sup> He returned to the point in a later volume:

The excellent and truly learned Dr. *Samuel Clarke*, in his Book of natural and reveal'd Religion, [has] clearly prov'd, that there must be an eternal, immutable Rule of Rectitude, natural Relation of Things, and moral Fitness of Actions, as founded in Nature and Reason, antecedent to all positive Will or Law whatever [...] Now this was proving the Authority, Will, and Law of God, concerning our Duty and moral Obligations, *a priori*, from the Nature and Reason of Things, and not resolving all, like this Author [i.e. Leland], into Authority; and this, as to all practical Intents and Purposes, into *human Authority*, upon which, in his Way, the Credit of his original *main Facts*, and *divine Authority*, must intirely depend.<sup>59</sup>

Leland's basic error had been to search for the truth of Christianity in history, which could never provide a sufficiently certain foundation for religious belief. 'It is impossible', Morgan continued, 'for us to know or judge of Truth, in the Way of Bare Authority, or to distinguish it from Falshood, because we can have no certain Evidence,

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<sup>56</sup> Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. II*, 2-3.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. See also John Leland, *The Divine Authority of the Old and New Testament Asserted* (1739).

<sup>58</sup> Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. II*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Morgan ('Philaethes'), *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. III* (1740), 137-38.

Criterion, or Rule of Judgment in this Case, *a posteriori*, and from Facts only'.<sup>60</sup> There could be no uncertain religion.

#### IV. Uncertainty and scholarship

The arguments used by Tindal and Morgan depended on very broad claims about the unreliability of history. But in other cases, the deists made greater efforts to show that the recent achievements of textual criticism and the continuing disagreements of the clergy provided evidence that sacred history was uncertain. This was the aim of Collins in *A Discourse of Freethinking* (1713). In it, he described the disagreements of Catholics, Anglicans, and other Protestants about the scriptural canon, cited the Oxford scholars John Mill and Ernest Grabe on missing early Christian scriptures, such as the Gospels according to the Hebrews and the Egyptians, and catalogued the different conceptions of the Trinity which had been defended by Anglican writers, including Sherlock, South, and Clarke.<sup>61</sup> By describing these debates he sought to demonstrate that his opponents had convicted themselves. With this end in view, he quoted twelve prescriptions by Jeremy Taylor for the correct interpretation of the scriptures, which made the entire enterprise seem hopeless.<sup>62</sup>

In the most notorious passage in the *Discourse*, Collins described the Greek edition of the New Testament which had been published by Mill in 1707. In conducting the research for the edition, Mill had consulted over 100 manuscripts and discovered, as the Anglican John Whitby noted, over 30,000 textual variants.<sup>63</sup> Such considerations, wrote

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), 52-58.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-61. See also Jeremy Taylor, *Simbolon ethiko-polemikon, or, A Collection of Polemical and Moral Discourses* (1657), 439-53.

<sup>63</sup> Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, 87-88. Collins was drawing on Daniel Whitby's 'Examen variantium lectionum Millii', which was first published as a supplement to *Additional Annotations to the New Testament* (1710).

Collins, show that ‘*nothing certain can be expected from Books, where there are various Readings*’ and ‘*prove the Uncertainty of the Text of Scripture*’.<sup>64</sup> They also provided important evidence that the scriptures were not the word of God, for ‘it is impossible that God, when he condescends to teach Mankind by Writing or Books, should write as ill or worse than mortal Men’.<sup>65</sup> Collins’s comments elicited the rancour of the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, Richard Bentley, who responded to the *Discourse* with 33 (later expanded to 53) remarks in which he accused Collins of a basic misunderstanding of textual criticism.<sup>66</sup> Where Collins had argued that Mill’s work on the New Testament had rendered the text of the scriptures precarious, Bentley’s answered with scorn:

If there had been but One manuscript of the *Greek Testament*, at the restoration of Learning about Two Centuries ago; then we had had no *Various Readings* at all. And would the Text be in a better condition then, than now we have 30000? So far from That; that in the best single Copy extant we should have had Hundreds of Faults, and some Omissions irreparable. Besides that the Suspicions of Fraud and Foul Play would have been increas’d immensely. [...] the more Copies you call to assistance, the more do the Various Readings multiply upon you: every Copy having its peculiar slips, though in a principal Passage or two it do singular service. And this is Fact, not only in the New Testament, but in all Antient Books whatever.<sup>67</sup>

Far from imperilling the authority of the scripture, a plethora of textual variants was vital for a critic to identify scribal errors and mistranslations. But in focusing on Collins’ scholarly failings, Bentley underestimated the extent to which the disagreement

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<sup>64</sup> Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, 88-89.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. The implication of Collins’s remark was noted by William Whiston in *Reflexions on an Anonymous Pamphlet, Entitled, A Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), 14.

<sup>66</sup> The 20 extra remarks were added in the third edition of the *Remarks*, which was published in response to a public letter of thanks to Bentley by Francis Hare (which is quoted in footnote 69 below above).

<sup>67</sup> Richard Bentley (‘Phileleutherus’), *Remarks on a Late Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), ESTC T53380, 64-65. Bentley’s response to Collins was widely celebrated. Besides Hare’s work, a grace was composed for Bentley in Cambridge to celebrate his success. On which point, see James Henry Monk, *The Life of Richard Bentley*, 2 vols, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Rivington, 1833), I, 351-53.

was theological. For Collins, any uncertainty in the scriptures was evidence that they were not the word of God. For Bentley, this was not the case. The purpose of criticism, as he saw it, was to render texts ‘more certain and authentic’, which bore the apparent corollary that there could be degrees of certainty in theology.<sup>68</sup>

It was clear to a number of Collins’s other critics that his position was founded on a high estimation of the degree of certainty which was necessary or possible in theology.<sup>69</sup>

Collins’s fundamental error, wrote the Boyle Lecturer Benjamin Ibbot, was to ‘require stricter Proofs of the Truth, than are either necessary or possible to be had, and insist upon such a Certainty as is inconsistent with our present State and Condition’.<sup>70</sup> He

might have done better to have adopted a definition of certainty according to which

‘Those things are to be look’d upon by men as Certain, which cannot be deny’d with apparent Obstinacy and Folly’.<sup>71</sup> Though the truth of the Christian revelation depended

on historical evidence, and was therefore not certain, the evidence was sufficiently

credible to satisfy a reasonable enquirer. It was, as he described it, ‘a moral Evidence

arising from ancient Testimonies, and authentick History of plain Matters of Fact’.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, he continued, ‘if the Facts recorded in the Gospel be True, then Christianity is

founded on Divine Revelation’.<sup>73</sup> As it was, Collins had attempted to discover the truth

of Christianity ‘by bare dint of thought and mental reflection’ in the mistaken belief that

this might allow him to place it on a certain foundation.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, he had neglected

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>69</sup> See for instance anonymous (‘a Lay Man’), *A Letter to the Free-Thinkers* (1713), 1; anonymous (‘Philaretus’), *An Essay on Free-Thinking* (1713), 15; ; Francis Hare, *The Clergyman’s Thanks to Phileleutherus for his Remarks on a Late Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), 6, 21, 33-39; Benjamin Hoadly, *Queries Recommended to the Authors of The Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), 10-11; Whiston, *Reflexions* (1713), 35-39; and Daniel Williams, *A Letter to the Author of a Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), i-ii, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Benjamin Ibbot, *A Course of Sermons Preach’d For the Lecture Founded by Robert Boyle* (1727), 28. Ibbot’s lectures were delivered in 1713-14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 46.

its real evidence, which was contained in the historical record. The natural consequence of his views, Ibbot concluded, was ‘*Pyrrhonism and Scepticism*, and so on to downright *Atheism*’.<sup>75</sup>

The controversy surrounding the *Discourse* heightened the sensitivities of Anglicans to disparaging remarks about sacred history. In 1714, the Lower House of Convocation censured an anonymous satire of freethinking entitled *The Difficulties and Discouragements which Attend the Study of the Scriptures in the Way of Private Judgement* (1714). The author of the work was Francis Hare, the Dean of Worcester and Collins’s former tutor at Cambridge.<sup>76</sup> The work was an intervention in the controversy which had surrounded Samuel Clarke after his publication of Arian views in *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) and it made use of the ambiguous arts of satire which had been pioneered by Jonathan Swift.<sup>77</sup> The problem was that the language and the content of the work were too strongly redolent of Collins. Where Collins had written that ‘there is not perhaps in the World so *miscellaneous* a Book and which treats of such a Variety of things as the *Bible*’ so that to understand it ‘a Man must be able to think justly in every Science and Art’, Hare wrote that ‘the *Study of the Scriptures* [...] is extremely *difficult*, and not to be successfully pursued, without a very great and constant

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>76</sup> Hare did not admit authorship of the work, but it was widely attributed to him and was included in the posthumous edition of his works in 1749. See Woolston, *A Fourth Discourse on the Miracles of our Saviour*, ESTC N006998, iv; Whiston, *Historical Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Samuel Clarke* (1730), ESTC T11668, 142-43; and Francis Hare, *The Difficulties and Discouragements which Attend the Study of the Scriptures* (1749), title page. Details of the censure first appeared in *The Difficulties and Discouragements which Attend the Study of the Scriptures* (1716), 39.

<sup>77</sup> Of Swift’s satires, see ‘An Argument to Prove that the Abolishing of Christianity in England, May, as Things now Stand, be Attended with some Inconveniences, and perhaps, not Produce those many Good Effects Proposed thereby’, in Jonathan Swift, *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose* (1711), ESTC T039454, 152-81 and Jonathan Swift, *Mr C—ns’s Discourse of Free-Thinking, Put into Plain English* (1713). The similarity between Hare’s and Collins’s works was noted at the time. See Anonymous (‘A Divine of the Church of England’), *Some Brief Remarks on a Late Pamphlet [...] Entitled, The Difficulties and Discouragements which Attend the Study of the Scriptures* (1714), 3-4.

*Application*, and a previous Knowledge of many other Parts of useful Learning'.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, where Collins had complained that '*There are so many thousand Copies of the Scriptures, which were writ by Persons of different Interests and Persuasions*', Hare wrote that 'No Man can be ignorant, who knows any thing of Letters, that no Versions of old Books can be thoroughly depended on; the mistakes [being] so many, and sometimes of great Moment'.<sup>79</sup> Yet in spite of these similarities, the arguments were importantly different. The main thrust of *The Difficulties and Discouragements*, as Hare explained in its largely un-satiric conclusion, was that the study of the scriptures was a difficult business which ought to be carried out by experts who could work without fearing that they would be persecuted if they differed from the party line.<sup>80</sup> It was no coincidence, he noted, that the greatest critics of recent history, including Scaliger, Casaubon, Grotius, and Cappel, had not been members of the clergy.<sup>81</sup> Their goal had been to find out the truth and they had recognised that this was inconsistent with subscribing themselves to a set of doctrines. Only by allowing such scholars to work unmolested could the difficulties of studying the scriptures be overcome and religion moved towards greater consensus. But Hare's satirical subtext was neglected and his argument received sharp reproof.<sup>82</sup> As Anglican apologists later came to realise, the scandal surrounding *The Difficulties and Discouragements* was a particularly embarrassing episode in the Church of England's battle with the deists.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Collins, *A Discourse of Freethinking*, 10-11; Francis Hare (anonymous), *The Difficulties and Discouragements which Attend the Study of the Scriptures* (1714), ESTC N028407, 5. All subsequent citations from this work are taken from this, the first, edition.

<sup>79</sup> Collins, *A Discourse of Freethinking*, 58; Hare, *Difficulties and Discouragements*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Hare, *Difficulties and Discouragements*, 48-56. In general, there is a close similarity between pages 10-12 of Collins and 52-99 of Hare.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>82</sup> See for instance anonymous, *Some Remarks on a Pamphlet, Entitled, The Difficulties and Discouragements* and James Paterson, *Anti-Nazarene* (1718). The latter work contained a section answering Hare, which associated him closely with Toland.

<sup>83</sup> Patrick Delany described the work as 'a publick, an elaborate, an earnest dissuasive' from studying the scriptures; Warburton mourned that a 'beautiful Satire [was] censured by those, in whose Cause it was Written'; and Whiston took a less sanguine view, accusing Hare of '*Scepticism not Infidelity*'. Patrick

## V. Christianity without history

Controversial writing in England entered a new phase when the *a priori* theology which had been pioneered by Clarke intersected with the historical scepticism which had gained ground in the works of Collins and Hare. The principal deist in this period was Chubb, whose writings after 1730 contained a series of increasingly ambitious reflections on the connection between Christianity and its history.<sup>84</sup> The first question which he considered was whether history was insufficiently reliable to have been used by God as a medium of revelation. The argument had been explored by Tindal in *Christianity as Old as the Creation*:

- A. I might go further, and ask You, Whether it is consistent with that Impartiality, which is essential to the Deity, not to make those, he designs should know his Will by Revelation, capable of knowing that Revelation; and consequently, his Will, contain'd in it, at one Time as well as another? Which cou'd not be, if that which was plain at first, became obscure by Reason of the Change of Languages, Customs, the Distance of Time and Place, the Errors of Transcribers and Translators, and an hundred other Things too long to mention.<sup>85</sup>

Because historical revelations were liable to corruption and decay, anything which was revealed historically would end up being differently accessible to people in different

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Delany, *Revelation Examined with Candour*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1732), II, xvi; Warburton, *Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, v; Whiston, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. William Whiston*, I., 96. *The Difficulties and Discouragements* was condemned for promoting Arianism by the hysterical Myles Davies in *Athenæ Britannicæ*, 3 vols (1716), II, 432-33, remembered with regret by François De La Pilonnière in *A Reply to Dr. Snape's Vindication* (1718), 86, and exploited for freethinking purposes by the anonymous author of *A Short Essay upon Lying* (1720), 3-7.

<sup>84</sup> The first evidence of Chubb's interest in the reliability of history is a letter which he wrote to Cox Macro on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1718. Enclosed in the letter was a fair copy of 'An Enquiry Concerning the Books of the New Testament', which, when it was later published in an expanded form in *Four Tracks* (1718), was Chubb's first published work in which he considered the scriptures' reliability at length. His only earlier writing on the topic was an aside in *A Supplement to the Previous Question*, 11-12. The letter is BL, Add MS 32556, f. 134.

<sup>85</sup> Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 198. See also pp.245-46.

times and places, which would contradict God's goodness. This meant that the discovery of uncertainty in the evidence of a revelation was not only a reason to doubt the revelation but also to doubt the possibility of its occurrence.

The argument was handled similarly by Chubb, although he focused less on the history of the scriptures than the history of debates about them. If the scriptures had been divinely inspired, he reasoned, then God must have intervened in their history to ensure their faithful conveyance to posterity. The mere fact of debates about the authenticity and meaning of the scriptures was evidence that they had not been divinely inspired:

I observe, that as the *Christian* revelation was *first* promulged *seventeen hundred years* ago; so this great distance of time renders it absolutely necessary (in order *rightly* to direct our judgements and actions, with regard to that revelation) to enquire whether, when it was *first* given to the Apostles to be promulged, as aforesaid, the Deity gave with it a *passport*, to conduct it *safe* through the world, and down to all posterity, free from *corruption* and *alteration*? Or, whether it was put (*without* any such guard upon it) in the hand of *men* who were at *liberty* to do with it, and by it, and make it subservient to what purposes they pleased? If the former was the case, that is, if, when God *first* put the *Christian* revelation into the hands of men, he, by a *particular* and *constant* application of his power and providence did interpose, and *defend* such revelation, wheresoever it was promulged, or whatsoever language it might be rendered into, from all *corruption*, *alteration*, *addition* or *diminution*; I say, had this been the case, then, as we may be certain God would not reveal any thing that was *unworthy* of himself, nor *improper* for us, and as it would have been conveyed to us either by oral or written tradition, so we should have had nothing more to do than to *hear* or *read*, and *believe* and *obey*, without any further solicitation, and without any difficulty or perplexity attending the case; and there would be no need for us to be upon the *watch* against *fraud* and *imposition*, as knowing ourselves to be in *safe hands*. But if the *Christian* revelation was *put into* and *left* in the hands of *men* (*without* any *such guard* upon it) who were at liberty to do with it, and by it as, and make it subservient to what purposes they pleased, which was most essentially the case;

then, *a little knowledge* of mankind will enable a man to *guess* what the *consequence* would needs be.<sup>86</sup>

Chubb's phrasing of the point was careful. Rather than state outright that the scriptures had not been divinely inspired, he used subtly different language to describe his hypothetical cases. If the Christian revelation had been conveyed to posterity without difficulty or perplexity, or suspicion of fraud and imposition, then this might provide convincing evidence that 'God *first* put the *Christian* revelation into the hands of men', whereas, if the Christian revelation had been conveyed to posterity with these difficulties, then this meant that it had been '*put into* and *left* in the hands of *men* (without any *such guard* upon it)'. There was no specification in the latter case whether the actions had been performed by God or men. But the implication of the argument was clear. It was no more possible for God to make a revelation without defending it from corruption, alteration, addition, and diminution than it was for him to reveal anything which was unworthy of himself or improper for mankind.

To a greater extent than Tindal or Morgan, Chubb depended in his arguments on the general view that history was unreliable, rather than on scholarly knowledge. But he went further than earlier deists in outlining considerations which detracted from the reliability of history. In the first place, there was the inherent plausibility of the central events described in a relation, for 'the fact itself may be such as renders it more *easy*, or more *difficult* to detect a fraud, if there be any'.<sup>87</sup> Next, there was 'a possibility of mistakes in lesser circumstances' and of variations in the credibility of different reports from within the same text.<sup>88</sup> Though an historian might 'be able to come at the truth with respect to the *great* and *principal* transactions which are the subjects of his

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<sup>86</sup> Chubb, *Posthumous Works*, II, 61-63.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Chubb, *A Discourse on Miracles* (1741), ESTC T31978, 77.

<sup>88</sup> Chubb, *Four Tracts*, 6.

enquiry; yet there is not the like ground for presuming that he can come at the truth with respect to *every individual fact, or circumstance*'.<sup>89</sup> And then there were a number of factors (very like those which had been listed by Craig) which affected the likelihood of an historical relation being conveyed correctly, including the number of original and subsequent witnesses, their integrity and powers of observation, the number of supporting documents, the time-lag between an event and its relation, and the temporal distance which the relation had covered.<sup>90</sup> In light of these considerations, Chubb concluded that if a relation 'has been of *long-standing*, and has passed thro' *many* hands in it's conveyance to us, this will render it *uncertain* whether it has been *fairly* delivered down, and is the very same *now* as at it's *first* promulgation'.<sup>91</sup> But rather than stipulating values for the reliability of historical witnesses or allude to events in the history of scholarship, Chubb appealed for confirmation of its views to the everyday experience of his readers. 'Constant experience shews', he wrote, 'how *hard* and *difficult* a thing it is to come at the *truth* of facts performed but *yesterday*, and in the *next parish*; and this difficulty of course must *increase* in proportion to the *distance* of time and place'.<sup>92</sup> The reliability of history could be reckoned without reference to the historical record.

In his final works, Chubb applied the language of probability to the central doctrines of Christianity. 'That there was such a person as *Jesus Christ*', he wrote, 'and that he, in the main, *did*, and *taught*, as is recorded of him, appear to be probable'.<sup>93</sup> And 'if *such power* attended Jesus Christ, as the history sets forth', he continued, 'then, seeing that

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<sup>89</sup> Thomas Chubb, *Some Observations offered to Publick Consideration Occasioned by the Opposition to Dr Rundle's Election to the See of Gloucester* (1735), 13. The work was occasioned by an allegation that the bishop-elect of Gloucester, Thomas Rundle, had been overheard expressing disbelief in the account of Abraham and Isaac contained in Genesis. For details, see pp.1-2.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-82.

<sup>91</sup> Chubb, *Posthumous Works*, II, 151. See also Chubb, *Some Observations offered to Publick Consideration occasioned by the Opposition to Dr Rundle's Election to the See of Gloucester*, 16.

<sup>92</sup> Chubb, *A Discourse on Miracles*, 81.

<sup>93</sup> Chubb, *Posthumous Works*, II, 41.

ministry naturally terminated in the *publick good*, it is *more likely* that God was the *primary agent* in the exercise of that power, than any other *invisible being*'.<sup>94</sup> From these premises, he concluded, 'it is *probable Christ's mission was divine*', although whether this qualified him for the appellations of a believer and a Christian he declined to judge.<sup>95</sup> In making this argument, Chubb was not asserting that Christians' knowledge of their salvation could depend on uncertain evidence. Rather, he was indirectly criticising the opinion of his contemporaries that history could provide a sufficiently certain foundation for theological belief. For his own part, he was adamant that the truth and history of Christianity were independent. At the heart of Jesus's teachings was the principle of '*conforming our minds and lives to that eternal and unalterable rule of action which is founded in the reason of things (which rule is summarily contained in the written word of God), and this he lays down as the only ground of divine acceptance*'.<sup>96</sup> Even if Jesus's mission was divine, as Chubb was willing to accept that it was, there was no need for anyone to know about it in order to be saved.

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The deists' sceptical arguments reveal a peculiarity of their position. In arguing against the reliability of historical knowledge, they assembled far more evidence than was strictly necessary to reach their conclusion. If God was determined by the fitness of things to reveal his will equally to everyone, then the merest imperfection in the documents which were believed to contain the word of God would be sufficient to demonstrate the impossibility of any kind of historical faith. Morgan and Chubb approached this realisation, but generally the deists worked on the assumption that

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>96</sup> Chubb, *The True Gospel of Jesus Christ Asserted*, 18.

history could be discounted only if it could be shown that historical knowledge fell below a certain threshold of reliability. The location of this threshold varied in the minds of different writers. But this did not mean that the deists' belief that it was impossible for God to have instituted an historical faith was dependent on historical evidence in the same way as their opponents' belief that he had done so. For whereas the deists needed to demonstrate only that history was less reliable than reason and nature as a medium of revelation, their opponents needed to demonstrate that the events of sacred history had occurred more or less as they were described in extant sources. It was therefore entirely appropriate that the deists' assault on sacred history consisted mostly of swipes made *en passant*, since, besides allowing them to provoke their opponents and avoid embroilment in scholarly wrangling, it was all that their arguments really required. Their deductions from the attributes of God thus operated like the carriage on a lathe, controlling how far into the historical evidence it was necessary for their arguments to cut.

## Chapter 5

### Case Study: Anthony Collins's *Grounds and Reasons* (1724)

The book I speak of is intitled, “A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion,” written, as is generally supposed, by Mr. Collins; a Writer, whose dexterity in the arts of Controversy was so remarkably contrasted by his abilities in reasoning and literature, as to be ever putting one in mind of what travellers tell us of the genius of the proper Indians, who, although the veriest bunglers in all the fine arts of manual operation, yet excel every body in slight of hand and the delusive feat of activity.<sup>1</sup>

William Warburton

[O]ur Author has used the utmost Liberty in speaking his Mind with Reserve: He has conceal'd his Thoughts under no other Mask, than would most effectually promote the Contempt of that Religion, he intended to destroy.<sup>2</sup>

Herbert Crofts

In the course of the deist controversy, the debate in which Christianity's historical foundations were most explicitly attacked was that which occurred between Whiston and Collins in the early 1720s. The question debated was whether Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of a messiah in a literal or a typological sense, although the real question at issue was whether Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies at all. Collins's principal contribution to the debate, *The Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), was the most sustained attempt by a deist to mount a scholarly argument against Christianity. The work therefore provides a vital test case for the central hypothesis of this study: that the deists, even when they resembled their orthodox opponents in their use of historical evidence, adhered to a different conception

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<sup>1</sup> William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, 5 vols (1765), V, 281.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Crofts, *The Christian Religion not Founded on Allegory* (1724), 3.

of history. It also provides a valuable example of how the arguments which have featured in the three preceding chapters of this study could influence historical scholarship. This chapter shows that the *Grounds and Reasons* was not a work of scholarship cast in an orthodox mould which happened to reach heterodox conclusions, but a work of deist historiography, in which the analysis of historical evidence was informed by theological objections to the possibility of historical religion and by scepticism about historical knowledge.

Until now, it has generally been thought that Whiston and Collins approached the prophecies with many of the same beliefs in place, and differed only in their conclusions.<sup>3</sup> It has been thought that they adhered to Locke's dictum that the central article of Christianity was that Jesus was the messiah and also to its apparent corollary, that a demonstration of Jesus's fulfilment of the prophecies would demonstrate that Christianity was true.<sup>4</sup> The only significant point on which they differed, or so the interpretation runs, was whether there was adequate evidence of Jesus having fulfilled the prophecies, a claim which Whiston affirmed and Collins denied.<sup>5</sup> Against this

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the scholars discussed below, there have been a number who have touched on the controversy. R.M. Stromberg, John Drury, and Eamon Duffy emphasise the jesting nature of Collins's role, Stromberg describing 'Collins, tongue firmly in cheek [...] [r]idiculing the idea that the prophecies were literally fulfilled', Drury describing Collins's 'gleeful exploitation' of orthodox scholarship, and Duffy describing how 'freethinkers like Anthony Collins [...] found Whiston a convenient peg upon which to hang their attacks on Christianity'. Diego Lucci adopts a more moderate position, describing Collins 'exploiting' Whiston's argument, but also identifying the 'uncertain, unreliable, and dubious' nature of Christianity's scriptural foundations as the central issue. Wayne Hudson, Jeffrey Wigelsworth, David Katz, and Ronald E. Clements place Whiston and Collins closer together and describe them as concurring on the main points of exegetical practice. See Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth-Century England*, 72; John Drury (ed.), *Critics of the Bible, 1724-1873* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 19; Duffy, 'Whiston's Affair', 150; Diego Lucci, *Scripture and Deism*, 153; Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity*, 29; Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England*, 173; Katz, *God's Last Words*, 144-45; and Ronald E. Clements, 'Messianic Prophecy or Messianic History', *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 1:1 (1979), 87-104.

<sup>4</sup> John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), 25-27.

<sup>5</sup> The scholars who have addressed the controversy in detail have agreed that Collins and Whiston shared many of the same beliefs and attitudes, although there have been some revealing signs of uncertainty. James O'Higgins argues that '[t]here was nothing in Collins's philosophy, apart from his views on Revelation, which made prophecy impossible', but also that if 'a prediction had been produced to his satisfaction he would probably have accepted it'. Henning Graf Reventlow argues similarly, emphasising Collins's distance from the 'typological thinking which had its heyday at the end of the [seventeenth] century', but also maintaining that Collins's position 'was built up to some degree on

interpretation, this chapter argues that much of the apparent similarity between Whiston and Collins was the result of Collins's rhetorical strategies rather than of his private convictions.

The traditional view of the *Grounds and Reasons* has seen Collins extending the literal interpretation of the prophecies which had been pioneered by Hugo Grotius.<sup>6</sup> Adherents to this view have emphasised Collins's debts to the biblical criticism of Louis Cappel and Richard Simon and to the Hebrew scholarship of John Spencer and his Anglican contemporary Humphrey Prideaux.<sup>7</sup> The *Grounds and Reasons* was built on these foundations, but, in emphasising their importance, modern scholars have neglected Collins's earlier writings and the similarity between the *Grounds and Reasons* and other writings by the deists. They have made little attempt to connect Collins's handling of historical evidence to the deists' theological and philosophical arguments or to scrutinise the sections of the *Grounds and Reasons* which might most be expected to participate in deistic legerdemain, such as the preface, the footnotes, and the asides. Yet in its blend of scholarship, philosophy, misdirection, and ridicule, the *Grounds and Reasons* bore the

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Whiston's'. Stephen Snobelen has been more interestingly ambiguous, arguing that Collins 'rejected supernatural predictive prophecy outright' and 'never came to accept the possibility of predictive prophecy', but 'may or may not have been sincere in implying that the argument from prophecy would be a valid one if it could be demonstrated in a conclusive fashion'. The most sceptical position to date has been occupied by Hans W. Frei, who argues that Whiston's work enabled Collins 'to take a delicious romp among the embattled enfilades of orthodox biblical interpretation'. In contrast, James Force argues that Collins's decision to attack the argument from the prophecies 'indicates that he (Like Locke, Newton, and Whiston) believed Christianity to be chiefly founded on this argument' and David Ruderman has gone further, arguing that Whiston and Collins were 'of the same mindset'. Despite the number of previous studies of the controversy, however, the question of Collins's sincerity has never been seriously raised. See O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 163, 184; Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1984), 365-66; Stephen Snobelen, 'The Argument over Prophecy: An Eighteenth-Century Debate between William Whiston and Anthony Collins', *Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15 (1996), 195-213 (201, 204, 208); Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 67; Force, *William Whiston*, 83-88; and David B. Ruderman, *Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2007), 76. On Ruderman's interpretation, see also footnote 81 below.

<sup>6</sup> See O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 158-60 and, on developments in biblical criticism, see Levitin, 'From Sacred History to the History of Religion', 1128-30.

<sup>7</sup> O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 155-63.

hallmarks of deist writing. Once this is realised, it becomes possible to understand Collins's likely purposes and to see the *Grounds and Reasons* as the culmination of a sustained meditation on the connection between Christianity and history.

## I. The Background to a debate

The argument that Jesus had demonstrated his messiahship by fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies was as old as Christianity itself. It had been used by the apostles and the authors of the New Testament and it featured in early Christian apologetics.<sup>8</sup> In seventeenth-century England, it was almost universally accepted.<sup>9</sup> Isaiah's prophecy that a 'virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel' (Isaiah 7:14) and Malachi's prophecy of one who would 'purify the sons of Levi' (Malachi 3:2) were taken to refer to Jesus.<sup>10</sup> It was also thought that various episodes in the histories, laws, and poetry in the Old Testament were typological pre-enactments of events in the Gospels.<sup>11</sup> The ram which was sacrificed by Abraham in place of Isaac (Genesis 22:13) and Jonah, who spent three days inside a great fish (Jonah 1:17), were types of Christ, who was sacrificed in place of mankind and spent three days in harrowing hell.<sup>12</sup> Typological interpretation was thought to have been practised by the apostles and

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<sup>8</sup> For a summary of appeals to the prophecies in the New Testament, see Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 4-13. For early Christian uses of the argument, see Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ed. Owen Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 46-47, 91-92 and Julian the Apostate, *Against the Galileans*, ed. and trans. R. Joseph Hoffman (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 124-26. See also Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent survey of the topic, which emphasises the ubiquity of typology against the view that it was a peculiarly Catholic preoccupation, see Miller, 'Theological Typology, Milton, and the Aftermath of Writing', 61-130.

<sup>10</sup> The similarity between the texts involved in the Collins-Whiston dispute and those which appeared in Handel's *Messiah* (1742) was no coincidence. The libretto for the work, like that of *Jephtha* (1751), was written by the anti-deist Charles Jennens. On this point, see John H. Roberts, 'False Messiah', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 63:1 (2010), 45-97.

<sup>11</sup> Typological interpretations were variously described as metaphorical, mystical, typological, allegorical, enigmatical, and figurative. Collins noted that the terms were interchangeable. See Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 40, 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> For a clear explication of the mainstream Anglican position, see William Lowth, *A Vindication of the Divine Authority and Inspiration of the Writings of the Old and New Testament* (Oxford, 1692), 68-73, 115-93.

blended with the wider practice of finding parallels between figures and events in the Bible and those in the contemporary world.<sup>13</sup> But although the argument was widely accepted, it was also attracting critical attention as a result of developments in biblical scholarship and the challenges of deists and Jews.<sup>14</sup>

In the latter decades of the seventeenth century, there were three important debates about the prophecies.<sup>15</sup> The first concerned their fulfilment. It appeared that many of the prophecies had been fulfilled in the vicinity of the prophet, which raised questions about whether they could also have been fulfilled at the time of the New Testament. Isaiah's prophecy of a virgin who would conceive and bear a son had been fulfilled in Isaiah's lifetime, by Abijah, the wife of Ahaz and the mother of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:2 and 2 Chronicles 29:1). A solution was offered by the principle of double fulfilment, whereby some prophecies could have a literal fulfilment in the Old Testament and a typological fulfilment in the New. Double fulfilment was supported by the Arminians, led by Grotius and Le Clerc, but exegetes remained uncertain about whether the argument from the prophecies should depend on double fulfilment.<sup>16</sup> In his *Paraphrase, and*

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance Samuel Mather, *The Figures or Types of the Old Testament* (1683), a work which Collins owned. Collins's library was one of the largest private collections of the period and was a major resource for freethinkers. When he catalogued it in 1720, he counted 6,906 items, but since he counted volumes containing multiple titles and titles comprising multiple volumes as single items, the total number of volumes and titles was probably much greater. The library was also catalogued when it was auctioned in 1731, two years after Collins's death. See Ballard, *Bibliotheca Antonii Collins*, II, 30 and, for the most sustained account of the library to date, see Giovanni Tarantino, *Lo Scrittoio di Anthony Collins (1676-1729): I Libri e i Tempi di un Libero Pensatore* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007). For summaries, including figures comparing Collins's library to those of his contemporaries, see O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 23-40 and Giovanni Tarantino, 'The Books and Times of Anthony Collins (1676-1729), Free-Thinker, Radical Reader and Independent Whig', in Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan (eds), *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 221-40. Collins's catalogue of 1720 is King's College, Cambridge, Keynes MS 217.

<sup>14</sup> For a contemporary discussion of the deists' attacks on the prophecies, see William Nicholls *A Conference with a Theist* (1696). For a summary of the principal Jewish works on the subject, see O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 200.

<sup>15</sup> Not everyone was affected. Robert Jenkin drew a straightforward distinction between types and prophecies, without any discussion of primary and secondary fulfilments. He also defended the value of types, albeit conceding that 'Arguments from Types are, above all, apt to be look'd upon as uncertain, and to depend rather upon the Conjectures and Fancies of Men, than upon any clear Evidence'. See Robert Jenkin, *The Reasonableness and Certainty of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols (1698), II, 156-84 (177).

<sup>16</sup> See O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 155-63.

*Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament* (1653), the English scholar Henry Hammond followed Grotius in distinguishing between the primary and secondary fulfilments of the prophecies, but he was careful to emphasise that some of the prophecies, such as Isaiah 53:4 ('Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted'), had been fulfilled by Jesus alone. He was also careful to note, where a prophecy had been fulfilled in both Testaments, that its fulfilment by Jesus was 'notable', 'more eminent', or 'most eminent'.<sup>17</sup>

The second debate concerned the connection between the prophecies and their fulfilments. In his *Five Letters Concerning the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (1690), Le Clerc argued that many of the prophets in the Old Testament spoke 'without thinking of prophesying' and without being 'immediately inspir'd by the good and merciful Spirit of God'.<sup>18</sup> The implication of his remarks was that the more loosely typological prophecies were not really prophecies at all, but had merely been interpreted as such by later readers.<sup>19</sup> Le Clerc developed his position in his supplement to Hammond's *Annotations*, where he followed Hammond in distinguishing between the primary and secondary fulfilments of prophecies, but did so with far greater reservation, quoting a warning by Henry Dodwell about the ease with which prophecies could be forged.<sup>20</sup> Dodwell was concerned that many of the prophecies, such as Hosea 11:1 ('When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt'), could

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Hammond, *A Paraphrase, and Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament* (1653), 6, 10, 23, 50, 78, and *passim*. He also allowed that some prophecies were fulfilled twice by Jesus. See p.50.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Le Clerc, *Five Letters Concerning the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (1690), 14-28 (23), 155.

<sup>19</sup> Le Clerc purported to have translated the letters, which he claimed had been written by an anonymous 'Mr. N'. On this point, see *ibid.*, 5 and Martin I. Klauber, 'Between Protestant Orthodoxy and Rationalism: Fundamental Articles in the Early Career of Jean LeClerc', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54:4 (1993), 611-36 (627).

<sup>20</sup> Jean Le Clerc, *A Supplement to Dr Hammond's Paraphrase* (1699), 4-13. See also Henry Dodwell, *Two Letters of Advice* (1672), 260-73.

never have been used to predict their supposed fulfilments (in this case, the flight of the holy family to Egypt to escape Herod's Massacre of the Innocents).<sup>21</sup> This raised a question about whether events had been grafted onto earlier prophecies in order to create the appearance that the prophecies had been fulfilled. Le Clerc's conclusion, following Dodwell, was 'that there remained among the *Jews* in Christ's time several traditions concerning the *sense* of Prophecies, handed down from the *Prophets* themselves'.<sup>22</sup> When interpreted according to these traditions, the prophecies predicted their fulfilments precisely. These traditions were regrettably not extant, but scholarly diligence might yet recover them. For Le Clerc, this was an important conclusion, as it explained the apostles' use of typology while removing any suspicion of foul play. But the problem was not so easily solved. For the Anglican historian William Lowth, the inability of scholars to explain how the apostles had interpreted the prophecies was not evidence of lost interpretative traditions, but of the apostles having been divinely inspired. The 'explaining the *Mystical Sense* and Design of [...] the Prophecies of the Old Testament', he argued, 'is to be reckon'd a peculiar gift bestowed upon the apostles by the holy Spirit'.<sup>23</sup> Their interpretations were the product of a miracle and no feats of scholarship would recover lost traditions.

The third debate concerned apparent discrepancies between the text of the Old Testament which the apostles had cited and the text which had descended to posterity. In at least one case (Matthew 2:22: 'And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene'), the prophecy seemed to be absent from extant Old Testament texts.<sup>24</sup> In other cases,

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<sup>21</sup> Le Clerc, *A Supplement to Dr Hammond's Paraphrase*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Lowth, *A Vindication of the Divine Authority and Inspiration of the Writings of the Old and New Testament*, 69-70.

<sup>24</sup> Hammond noted the problem and concluded with evident uncertainty that '*prophecies* are sometimes said to be *completed* or fulfilled, when *strictly* and properly (or in the primitive sense of the words of the

there was an imperfect fit between the prophecy and its citation. Matthew 27:9 ('Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value') might refer to Jeremiah 32:9 ('And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver') or to Zachariah 11:13 ('And the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord'), but neither text entirely vindicated the citation.<sup>25</sup>

Whiston began working on the prophecies in the 1690s and announced his conclusions in the Boyle lectures of 1707. He was not the first Boyle lecturer to address the prophecies, as Richard Kidder had done so in 1693 and George Stanhope in 1701, but he was the first to specify precise rules for their interpretation.<sup>26</sup> First, he insisted that the prophecies ought to be interpreted literally: typological interpretations were uncertain and arguments about them were liable to wrangling.<sup>27</sup> Second, he insisted that the prophecies ought to have one fulfilment: once two fulfilments were allowed, the number

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*Prophet*) they are not fulfilled, but only in a large acception of them, so as by way of *accommodation* they may be applicable to what is to come to passe, or that the thing done may *reflect* or *referre* to such words in the *Prophets*, or bring them to the minds of men'. Hammond, *A Paraphrase, and Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament*, 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>26</sup> Kidder's lectures were closely based on his *Demonstration of the Messiahs* (1684), to which further volumes were added in 1699 and 1700. The lectures were not published until they appeared in an abridged form in Gilbert Burnet (ed.), *A Defence of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 4 vols (1737), ESTC: T114187, I, 70-119 and in their entirety in Sampson Letsome and John Nicholl (eds), *A Defence of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 3 vols (1739), I, 90-152. Stanhope's lectures were published individually in 1701-1702 and were first published together in George Stanhope, *The Christian Religion no Just Offence to the Jews* (1702). For Kidder and Stanhope's endorsement of double fulfilment and typology, see George Stanhope, *The Christian Interpretation of the Prophecies Vindicated* (1701), ESTC TT102831, 19-23 and Letsome and Nicholl (eds), *A Defence of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, 140, 148.

<sup>27</sup> See William Whiston, *The Accomplishment of the Scripture Prophecies* (1708), 13-29. Whiston's movement away from typology was driven in part by his mentor Sir Isaac Newton. On this point see Scott Mandelbrote, 'A Duty of the Greatest Moment': Isaac Newton and the Writing of Biblical Criticism', *British Journal of the History of Science*, 26:3 (1993), 281-302.

could multiply absurdly.<sup>28</sup> By introducing these constraints, he hoped to attain a mathematical rigour, but his thoughts were in a state of flux. In his advocacy of Primitive Christianity, he became increasingly concerned by the discrepancies between the Testaments, but found the available explanations unpersuasive. He proposed instead that the apostles had used a text of the Old Testament in which the prophecies were literal predictions of their fulfilments and that this text, of which the Hebrew and Septuagint versions were identical, had been corrupted in the second century after Christ by the interference of malevolent Jews. This explained the prophecies' double fulfilments, the apostles' apparent use of typology, and the discrepancies between the prophecies and their citations. If the text which the apostles had used could be recovered, then it would demonstrate that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies literally and was therefore the messiah. With this end in mind, Whiston undertook to analyse all the extant texts which dated from earlier than the hypothesised corruption, including *The Apostolic Constitutions*, the early manuscripts of the Septuagint, the works of Josephus, and the Samaritan Pentateuch.<sup>29</sup> He published his argument in *An Essay Towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament* in 1722 and this was the work to which Collins replied in the *Grounds and Reasons*.

## II. Intimations of ill-intent

The *Grounds and Reasons* consisted of two sections. In the first, Collins argued that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies typologically. It was clear from the discrepancies between the prophecies and their citations that the apostles had used typology. They must, moreover, have used strict typological rules (what Dodwell and Le Clerc had

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<sup>28</sup> See Whiston, *The Accomplishment of the Scripture Prophecies*, 13-29

<sup>29</sup> See William Whiston, *An Essay towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament* (1722), 329-33 and Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 101-02.

called ‘traditions’) to prevent their interpretations from descending into chaos.<sup>30</sup> These rules, though lost, had been recently recovered by a Dutch scholar named Willem Surenhusius, who had learned them from an anonymous Rabbi.<sup>31</sup> Surenhusius’s work placed the argument from the prophecies on a stronger foundation than ever by supplying modern Christians with the interpretative rules which were necessary to see how Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies and been revealed to the apostles as the messiah.

In the second section, Collins turned his attention to Whiston’s scheme for the literal interpretation of the prophecies. He began by attacking Whiston’s assumption that there had once been a single, uncorrupted text of the Old Testament. For Collins, it was clear that the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint had never been in perfect agreement and that there had always been rival texts and traditions.<sup>32</sup> Next, he attacked Whiston’s claim that the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint had been corrupted in the second century. There was no evidence of such a corruption, even among the authors, such as Origen, who might most have been expected to have noticed.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Collins criticised the texts with which Whiston hoped to restore the Old Testament, arguing that they were either too scanty for Whiston’s purposes or else must have been subject to the same corruption which Whiston claimed had affected other sources.<sup>34</sup> The argument presented Whiston with a dilemma: to embrace the typological scheme which he had rejected or to cling to the literal scheme which Collins had savaged.

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<sup>30</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 39-53.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-78. Collins is likely to have discovered Surenhusius’ work in Michel De La Roche (ed.) *Memoirs of Literature*, 8 vols (1722), VI, 110-18, 184-92, which contained an anonymous review of Surenhusius’ book, [*Sefer ha-mashyeḥ*] sive [*Biblos katallagēs*] (Amsterdam, 1713).

<sup>32</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 99-101, 162-83.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-06

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-208, 215-26, 270-71

But there was more to Collins's work than met the eye.<sup>35</sup> As many of his readers realised, his typological scheme was a feint.<sup>36</sup> Just as he had extracted heterodox conclusions from writers as diverse in their opinions as Bayle, King, Taylor, and Whitby, and from the scholarship of Burnet and Mill, he now used the same technique on Surenhusius and Whiston.<sup>37</sup> More specifically, he repeated the argumentative move which he had used against King and Tillotson in the debate about the attributes of God by presenting a choice between independently untenable and mutually incompatible schemes. Surenhusius's supposed recovery of the apostles' typological rules was as ludicrous as Whiston's far-flung hypothesis about the corruption of the Old Testament texts. Neither the typological scheme nor the literal scheme was viable and the argument from the prophecies was false.

The first sign that Collins had a covert purpose appeared in the work's preface, which defended Whiston's right to think freely. While it reiterated many of the arguments of A

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<sup>35</sup> Collins's thought about prophecy may have been informed by the controversy surrounding the Camisards, a Huguenot sect whose members arrived in Britain in 1706 and claimed to possess prophetic powers. At the time of his death, Collins's library contained two volumes of tracts relating to them, containing nine works in total, including Sir Richard Bulkley's *Impartial Account of the Prophets* (1707), John Lacy's 1707 translation of Maximilien Misson's *Théâtre sacré des Cévennes*, and Benjamin Hoadly's *A Brief Vindication of the Antient Prophets from the Imputations and Misrepresentations of such as Adhere to our Present Pretenders to Inspiration* (1709). See Ballard, *Bibliotheca Antonij Collins* (1731), II, 32, 68. Collins may also have encountered the Camisards through his friend, Pierre Des Maizeaux, who wrote two articles about them for Jacques Bernard's periodical *Nouvelles de la République de Lettres* between 1706 and 1708. On Des Maizeaux, see Joseph Almagor, *Pierre Des Maizeaux (1673-1745): Journalist and English Correspondent for Franco-Dutch Periodicals, 1700-1720* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1989), 39-40 and, for a general discussion of the Camisards, see Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>36</sup> See the anonymous review in *The Universal Journal*, 2 (18 December 1723), 1; anonymous, *An Examination of a Late Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), vii; Crofts, *The Christian Religion not Founded on Allegory*, 3-4; George Lavington, *The Nature and Use of a Type* (1724), ix; anonymous ('A Minister of the Church of England'), *The Nature of the Prophecies of the Old Testament* (1724), ESTC: T114187, 3; anonymous, *A Preservative Against a Late Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1725), 3-5; Thomas Bullock, *The Reasoning of Christ and his Apostles in their Defence of Christianity Considered in Seven Sermons Preached at Hackney in Middlesex, in the Months of November and December 1724* (1725), viii-ix; Samuel Chandler, *A Vindication of the Christian Religion* (1725), xii-xvi; Thomas Curteis ('Theotimus Philalethes'), *A Dissertation on the Unreasonableness, Folly, and Danger of Infidelity* (1725), 12-18; John Green, *Letters to the Author of the Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1726), 6; and Conyers Middleton, *An Examination of the Lord Bishop of London's Discourses Concerning the Use and Intent of Prophecy* (1750), 23. It is unclear how a review of the *Grounds and Reasons* appeared in *The Universal Journal* in 1723 when all other sources date the work to 1724.

<sup>37</sup> See pages 8, 102-04, 167-68 above.

*Discourse of Freethinking* (1713), and to this extent was entirely serious, it was also intended to disunify the Church of England by encouraging heterodox figures such as Whiston to commit their ideas to print. The central argument was that free debates were more likely to be amicable, brief, and correct in their conclusions than those which were debilitated by censorship or orchestrated by an institution.<sup>38</sup> But the preface also possessed a subtext, which Collins disclosed in an aside:

While *Rome* was in the height of its glory for arms, learning, and politeness, there were *six hundred different religions* profess'd and allow'd therein. And this great variety does not appear to have had the least ill effect on the peace of the state, or on the temper of men; but on the contrary, a very good effect: for there is an intire silence in history about the actions of those antient different professors, who, it seems liv'd so quietly together, as to furnish no materials for an *Ecclesiastical History*, such as Christians have given occasion for.<sup>39</sup>

The greater religious liberty enjoyed by citizens of the Roman Empire, in contrast to the subjects of modern Christian states, did not lead to greater consensus, as Collins's comments on free debate suggested, but to greater tolerance of disagreement. This was because religious debates had no intrinsic animus towards agreement:

Are not the *United Provinces*, remarkable for *liberty* and *peace*? There all men, how different soever in notions, live in such peace and friendship with one another, as is unknown to men of the same religion in other countries; where some foolish question about the antiquity and authority of *hair, teeth, tears, milk, rags, handkerchiefs, smocks, bones*, and other *relicts*, or about the immaculate conception of the Virgin, or about habits and dress, or about *the manner of holding their fingers when they cross themselves*, and such like mere ceremonies, or about metaphysical speculations (some of which are as little understood by the disputants themselves as by the vulgar) is fuel for the most uncharitable contention.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, iii-xxiv.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii-xxix.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xxx-xxxii.

Ignorant and zealous men, he continued,

most manifestly determine the point before them wrong, by taking sides in matters, wherein, as understanding nothing, they have no concern, and should not pretend to have any opinion at all. Would it not be excessively ridiculous to see ignorant people zealously engag'd for or against propositions (as led by different guides chosen at a venture) in *Astronomy*, whereof they neither do, nor can understand any thing?<sup>41</sup>

Those who sought to eradicate religious disagreement and to impose a uniformity of opinion were like errant knights pitting themselves against insuperable challenges. A history of this 'saint-errantry' might be written,

But till a new Cervantes arises and performs this work, I would recommend the *History* of Don Quixot, as in some measure suited and applicable to *Saint-errantry*, to be read in conjunction with *ecclesiastick historians*. For the principle of enthusiasm being the same in the *Saint* as in the *Knight*, and producing the like effects; the reader may, by comparing things, and by an easy application in many cases, take Don Quixot for a *Turmigant Saint* and a *Turmigant Saint* for a Don Quixot.<sup>42</sup>

Having begun by praising Whiston for his free-thinking, Collins ended by depicting him as an enthusiast who sought to impose his ideas on the public without understanding what they meant. Whiston, like the Spanish knight, had been tilting at windmills. But for Collins the fun was only just beginning. At the end of the preface, he switched his digression for another form of disguise, concealing his meaning in a sinuous sentence, which purported to back-up Whiston's position:

It may be objected to Mr. Whiston, that he has advanc'd a multitude of paradoxes about very important matters, many of which are founded on very slight

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxvii-xxxviii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xli.

appearances of probability; and, in particular, that he calls in question the integrity of our present copies of the Old Testament, which he supposes corrupted to that degree by the Jews in respect to some quotations made from thence by the Apostles, as to make their reasonings from, and use of, those quotations seem *weak* and *enthusiastical*.

To which I answer,

That Mr. Whiston acts the part of an honest man and lover of truth, by thus proposing his *conjectures* and *sentiments*, and putting points of consequence in the way of examination, and is so much better than all other such learned Divines as himself, as he exceeds them in the liberty he takes of proposing his *conjectures* and *sentiments*: that the method, whereof he sets us an example, tends to the information of all men of sense, and both increases the number of capable judges, and renders the learned themselves better judges than they were before: that, in particular, the Old Testament will appear so undoubtedly genuine and uncorrupt in the respect abovemention'd, when the question is debated, that it must unavoidably gain ground as a genuine and uncorrupt book, in that respect, in the minds of all intelligent men, who are not wedded to an *hypothesis*: and that it ought to be consider'd; that Mr. Whiston proposes his *scheme* of a corrupted Old Testament, as the best and only method of defending christianity, which according to him, had a rational dependence on the Old Testament before it was corrupted; and that he apprehends, that the *scheme* or supposition of an uncorrupted Old Testament really destroys the truth of christianity, and gives the Deists, Jews, and Infidels a just subject of triumph over it, which, according to him, is now in an *irreconcilable state* with, and depends not on, the present Old Testament: whereby this matter amounts to no more than a question between Christians contending for the truth of christianity against unbelievers, viz. which is the best method of defending christianity, whether by supposing the Old Testament corrupted or uncorrupted.<sup>43</sup>

Despite using a literary formula ('it may be objected'...'I answer') which conventionally implied opposition, none of the five sections of Collins's reply contradicted his assertion that Whiston had advanced a multitude of paradoxes and matters of very slight probability. Moreover, although Collins used flattering and obfuscatory language throughout ('much better than all other such learned Divines',

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., xli-xliv.

‘renders the learned themselves better judges’, ‘in that particular’, ‘in that respect’, etc.), he was careful to deny that the Old Testament had been corrupted in the manner hypothesised by Whiston (‘the Old Testament will appear so undoubtedly genuine and uncorrupt *in the respect abovemention’d*’) while remaining open to the possibility that it was corrupted in other ways (‘must unavoidably gain ground as a genuine and uncorrupt book, *in that respect*’). More provokingly, he stated that if the Old Testament had not been corrupted in the specified sense then, according to the terms of Whiston’s argument, this would destroy ‘the truth of christianity’ and give ‘the Deists, Jews, and Infidels a just subject of triumph over it’, while at the same time maintaining that it was ‘a genuine and uncorrupt book, in that respect’. Hence, if Whiston’s premises were accepted with Collins’s account of the evidence, then the truth of Christianity would be destroyed.

Collins also hinted at a deeper disagreement with his opponent. He quoted with approval a remark of Whiston’s supporting greater freedom of speech:

*I wish that all unbelievers were openly allow’d and invited to produce their real arguments, substantial objections, and considerable doubts without molestation, as being perswaded, says he, they are capable of satisfactory answers and solutions. [...] The answers and solutions mention’d by Mr W. which are now wanting, would, if produc’d, greatly weaken the cause of unbelievers; who can now pretend to have real arguments and substantial objections unanswer’d, and considerable doubts unsolv’d; and clamour because they have not liberty to speak for themselves; and who have a pretence to say, that their adversaries, conscious of the weakness of their own cause, dare not let them speak or write against it. And Mr W. is very far from being singular in thinking, that it would be a benefit to allow infidels to publish their objections against Christianity.*<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., xliv. For Whiston’s remark, see Whiston, *Reflexions on an Anonymous Pamphlet, Entitled, A Discourse of Freethinking*, 6.

Whereas Whiston had emphasised the absence from printed controversy of objections to Christianity, Collins emphasised the absence of answers. He returned to the point a few pages later:

Dr Nichols and other learned divines have writ many elaborate works, in behalf of christianity, by way of *Dialogue*: wherein they introduce *Deists* and *Scepticks*, who must be suppos'd to argue for their several *hypotheses* with the same strength *real Deists* and *Scepticks* do; for it is not to be imagin'd, that the authors of those dialogues, who cannot but know that the nature of dialogue requires a true representation of characters, and that justice is due to all men) [*sic*] should be so illiterate and unfair, as to make their *Dialogist-Deists* and *Scepticks* talk booty, and in concert with the *Orthodox Dialogist*, in order to establish the author's own opinions.<sup>45</sup>

He affected solidarity with Whiston, but with the clear implication that censorship kept the Church of England safe against deists and sceptics, whose objections, if stated openly, could not be refuted. He also implied that he knew deists and sceptics personally and that the source of his disagreement with Whiston lay outside what could be discussed in print.

For Collins's readers, it was the shaping and phrasing of his arguments which gave the clearest evidence of ill-intent. Rather than seeing Jesus's fulfilment of the prophecies and his performance of miracles as separate demonstrations of his divinity, Collins insisted that the argument from Jesus's miracles was subsidiary to the argument from the prophecies.<sup>46</sup> The miracles performed by Jesus, he argued, 'are no otherwise to be

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<sup>45</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, xlviiii-xlix. The work in question was William Nicholl's *A Conference with a Theist* (1696).

<sup>46</sup> For a contemporary and contrary account of the relationship between the argument from Jesus's miracles and the argument from the prophecies, see Offspring Blackall, *The Way of Trying Prophets* (1707), ESTC T052271, 11-24.

consider'd as proofs [...] than as fulfilling the sayings in the Old Testament'.<sup>47</sup> In the eyes of Collins's readers, this was a clear attempt to find a single thread on which the truth of Christianity depended and was clear evidence of malice aforethought. 'Whether those Proofs be true or not', wrote an anonymous critic, '*Christianity* stands upon a sure Foundation, being built [...] upon *Jesus Christ* himself; and the Scriptures of the Prophets are Proofs of it, so far only as they testify of Him'.<sup>48</sup> Collins's critic Herbert Crofts agreed: '[H]e most unmercifully triumphs and blindly runs riot from one end of his Book to another forgetting that we have other Arguments that are not typical [and] that there are some of a different kind'.<sup>49</sup> His contents page drew similar notice. 'The subject of your book', wrote an anonymous reviewer, 'your own *Contents* (too obviously, considering the great Caution you use in other Places,) shew to be the Subversion of Christianity itself'.<sup>50</sup> There was justice in the accusation. In the subtitle of his seventh chapter, Collins stated that if the argument from the prophecies was unsuccessful 'then is Christianity false'.<sup>51</sup> Nor was this the only place in which he used such language; he employed it throughout the work, describing how Whiston's argument 'really destroys the truth of Christianity', how if it succeeded 'then has Christianity no just foundation', and how to accept it would '*give up the cause of Christianity*'.<sup>52</sup> As his readers recognised, this was the furthest that any deist had gone in print in contemplating the end of their religion.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 37. Collins reiterated the argument, but, perhaps doubting its sufficiency, he later planned to write a discourse on miracles. See Anthony Collins (anonymous), *The Scheme of the Literal Prophecy Considered* (1726), 310-32, 419-20.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous, *An Examination of a Late Discourse*, 21-25.

<sup>49</sup> Crofts, *The Christian Religion not Founded on Allegory*, 5. See also Lavington, *The Nature and Use of a Type*, iv-vi.

<sup>50</sup> Anonymous review in *The Universal Journal*, 2 (11 December 1723), 1. See also Crofts, *The Christian Religion not Founded on Allegory*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 31.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, xliii, 31, 48. See also, pp.111-13.

<sup>53</sup> See Crofts, *The Christian Religion not Founded on Allegory*, 1-2. It is interesting to note in this connection that 'Christianity' was frequently printed in the *Grounds and Reasons* with a lower-case 'c', as in the quotations on pages 191, 193, 196 below.

### III. Theology and historical change

In the main body of the work, Collins larded his case against Whiston with sceptical comments about sacred history. In some cases, he achieved this by alternately adopting contradictory positions on the same topic, implying that neither position was tenable. Treating the scriptural canon, he initially praised the Old Testament as ‘the *sole true Canon of Scripture*’ in contrast to the books of the New Testament, which ‘are Christian Books, and contain proofs of Christianity from the Old Testament; but contain Christianity itself, no otherwise’.<sup>54</sup> Nor, he continued,

was there *any new Canon of Scripture, or any Collection of Books of Scripture made, whether of Gospels or Epistles, during the lives of the apostles* [...] and if Jesus and his apostles have declar’d no Books to be *Canonical*, I would ask, who did or could afterwards declare, or make any books *Canonical*? If it had been deem’d proper, and suited to the state of Christianity, to have given or declar’d a *new Canon* or *Digest of Laws*, it should seem most proper to have been done by Jesus, or his apostles, and not left to any after them to do; but especially not left to be settled long after their times by weak, fallible, factious, and interested men.<sup>55</sup>

Such considerations, he concluded, ‘put an end to all the controversies of Christians about the *Canon of Scripture*’.<sup>56</sup> The Old Testament alone was canonical. But in the second half of the work, he adopted a far more negative stance:

I will readily confess to Mr. W. that the books of the Old Testament are *greatly corrupted*, that is, greatly chang’d from what they were when they proceeded from

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<sup>54</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17. Collins is likely to have been following Toland’s argument in *Amyntor*. Collins cited John Richardson’s *Canon of the New Testament Vindicated* (1700) and Stephen Nye’s *Historical Account, and Defence, of the Canon of the New Testament* (1700), both of which were replies to *Amyntor*. Similarly, he later quoted Thomas Mangey’s *Remarks upon Nazareus* (1718), rather than Toland’s original, even though his argument adhered to that of Toland. See Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 81 and Toland, *Amyntor*, 17-19, 42-44.

<sup>56</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 17.

the authors of them. He has himself acknow'edg'd, and in many respects prov'd, that those books are *greatly corrupted*; and particularly, that they *are so frequently corrupted in the names, and numbers therein set down, especially the books written after the captivity, that it is almost endless to enter into the detail of them*; many such changes happening, without any form'd design, from the nature of things.<sup>57</sup>

Having identified the Old Testament as the sole true scriptural canon, Collins now underlined that it was corrupted, not, as Whiston hypothesised, as the result of a single act of forgery which patient study might amend, but through successive alterations and changes, in Egypt, during the Babylonian exile, under the leadership of Ezra, in the Masoretes' introduction of accents and vowel-points, and in the slapdash transmission of Hebrew texts.<sup>58</sup> In arguing that all the corruptions in the text had been added in a single act, Whiston supposed that the copying and translation of texts was a generally reliable process, which Collins took to be obviously false. The history of the early Church provided numerous examples of corruption, in the Apostolic Constitutions, the Sibylline Oracles, and the 'divers forg'd passages put into authors, and books corrupted and forg'd in favour of christianity and *orthodoxy*'.<sup>59</sup> Collins's and Whiston's different conclusions were informed by differences in their wider views. Whereas Whiston believed that it was 'a natural Consequence from the common State of Books translated out of one Language into another, that the Original and the Version should agree' and that '[t]his is a still more natural Consequence in the Case of Books in their own Nature Sacred', Collins believed that it was

as probable, that books should be *ill* as *well* translated: and it is more probable that books deem'd *sacred* should be *ill* than *well* translated; for the directors in such translations, tho' real believers of the *sacredness* of the books, are very capable of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 135-36.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 137-42.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 105.

sinister views and being govern'd by them, as having usually departed in many respects from the original sense of their sacred books, and having divers ill-grounded things receiv'd among them to support and maintain; to say nothing of their ignorance.<sup>60</sup>

In the absence of detailed records of the transmission of the texts of the Old Testament from the time of the prophets to the time of the apostles, it was reasonable to suppose that the texts had been changed through accidental and deliberate alterations.

Collins was similarly deft in his handling of typology. In the first half of the work, he praised the apostles' use of it as 'the most suitable method of applying [the prophecies] to the understanding of men'.<sup>61</sup> In the second half, he changed his tune, describing literal interpretation as

the method of the great Grotius; whose commentaries on the Bible will ever be esteem'd by all those who desire truly to understand it; notwithstanding the imputation of some upon him, that he could *neither find the Messiah in the Old Testament, nor the Pope in the New*.<sup>62</sup>

Had Whiston followed Grotius, he would have interpreted the prophecies literally and then discovered that they could refer to Jesus only in a typological sense. Instead, he had proposed speculative interpretations of the prophecies which were designed to capture their original literal sense from their corrupted citations. In proposing these interpretations, 'Mr. W manifestly begs the question about the Jews corruption of the books of the Old Testament in all his instances', presupposing that the apostles had

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<sup>60</sup> Whiston, *An Essay Towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament*, 4-5 and Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 163. Collins's views on this subject had changed. For an account more like the one offered by Whiston, see Collins, *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 90.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-45.

interpreted the prophecies literally, which was the very thing he set out to prove.<sup>63</sup> The root of the problem lay in Whiston's character:

his judgement does not seem to be equal to his sagacity, learning, zeal, and integrity. For, either thro' the prejudices of education, which he still retains, or thro' some superstition, which, notwithstanding his examination, sticks by him, he seems still qualify'd to admit the most precarious suppositions, and to receive many things without the least foundation. The warmth of his temper disposes him to receive any sudden thoughts, any thing that strikes his imagination, when favourable to his preconceiv'd scheme of things, or to any new scheme of things, that serve in his opinion, a religious purpose.<sup>64</sup>

Collins's criticisms were aimed at Whiston, but participated, like his comments in the preface, in an attack on religious hysteria. Whiston had been guilty of superstition in seizing on any scrap of evidence which might support what he already believed. Such behaviour was characteristic of Whiston, but also of enthusiasm, zeal, and superstition, which were perennial causes of error.

Collins's sceptical view of sacred history was informed by an account of religious change. '[I]f we consider the various *Revelations*, and *Changes* in Religion', he reflected, 'we shall find them for the most part to be grafted on some old stock, or founded on some preceding *Revelations*, which they were either to supply, or fulfil, or retrieve from corrupt glosses, innovations, and traditions, with which by time they were encumber'd'.<sup>65</sup> New religions served their teachings on a bed of pre-existing beliefs in order to make them easier to swallow. '[I]t must be difficult, if not impossible,' he continued, 'to introduce among men (who in all civiliz'd countries are bred up in the belief of some Reveal'd Religion) a Reveal'd Religion wholly new, or such as has no

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 142. See also p.119.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 21.

reference to a preceding One'.<sup>66</sup> The account had implications for prophecy. '[I]t seems most natural', he explained,

upon the first view of a prophesy plainly fulfill'd, to suppose the prophesy made for the sake of the event, or both prophesy and event invented; as we do in the case of Homer and Virgil and other Pagan authors, who make telling things by way of prophesy, a method of writing; founded in all likelihood on a design to keep up *prophesy* (which made so great a part of the Pagan religion) among the Pagans.<sup>67</sup>

But examples of the fabrication of prophecies were not confined to pagan religion. When the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile, they made numerous alterations to their scriptures, which Collins ascribed to natural error while implying that they were created through deceit:

And it is now generally allow'd by the most judicious and learned criticks, such as Huet, Simon, Du Pin, Le Clerc, and particularly, of late, by our excellent Prideaux; [that] many of the prophetical passages with their completions have been added. For if it once be allow'd, that books collected into one volume have been retriev'd from obscurity, and have had additions made throughout to them, and that without any express notice given of such *additions*, which are only to be found out by a critical examination of those books themselves; *prophecies* with their *completions* recorded in those books or fulfill'd before those books were publish'd with *additions*, may be justly suspected to be *interpolations* or *additions*. For plain *prophecies*, with *exact completions* are not matters in themselves very credible without the best and most undeniable attestations, that the former existed before the latter<sup>68</sup>

The argument had a natural momentum. As the number of known forged prophecies increased, the evidence which was needed to vindicate a prophecy would grow proportionately. In the absence of extraordinary evidence showing that a prophecy had

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 137-38.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 136-37.

preceded its fulfilment, it would always be more reasonable to explain it as an accident or fraud than as a genuine instance of prophecy. The apostles' use of typology was no exception. When they set about converting the Jews, they 'manifestly put new interpretations' on the books of the Old Testament, which were 'not agreeable to the obvious and literal meaning'.<sup>69</sup> Typology was a device by which Christianity had been grafted onto Judaism and the establishment of Christianity was a sleight.

The explanation of the apostles' use of typology in terms of a more general account of religious change bore two important consequences. The first was that Christianity and paganism could be seen as instances of a common phenomenon. Whereas for Whiston, the evidence of pagan corruption either enhanced the credibility of sacred history or was simply separate from it, for Collins it provided evidence that the history of religion was unreliable. In all his disagreements with Whiston, he had a higher expectation of corruption in the historical record. The second consequence was that Christianity could be related genealogically to earlier Jewish and pagan beliefs. Christian monotheism could be traced back to the Babylonian exile, when the Jews had acquired belief in one God from their Babylonian (or in Collins's terms Chaldean') masters:

It is to be observ'd, that the Jews, who were greatly departed from the *Law* of Moses, and especially from the doctrine of the *Unity of God*, went idolaters into captivity [but] came out at different times from *Chaldea* such firm believers and worshippers of *One God* [...]<sup>70</sup>

The apostles' use of arguments from prophecy could also be traced back to pagan roots. The ancient Jewish prophets were 'taught the rules of *Divination practis'd* by the *Pagans*, who were skill'd therein, and in possession of the *Art* long before them'.<sup>71</sup> Part

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 139-40.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 28.

of the reason why the pagans had been amenable to Christianity was that they were already steeped in typology. ‘Religion itself’, he explained, ‘was deem’d a mysterious thing among the Pagans, and not to be publickly and plainly declar’d’.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, ‘it was never simply represented to the people, but was most obscurely deliver’d and veil’d under *Allegories, or Parables*’.<sup>73</sup> Such methods were vital to pagan religion, both as a means of withholding secrets and of ‘explaining away what, according to the letter, appear’d absurd in the antient fables’.<sup>74</sup> The prophetic arguments of modern Christians were a continuation of pagan practice. There was no sacred lineage connecting Christianity to Judaism and Judaism to the word of God. There was only a tangled history of miscegenation.

At the bottom of Collins’s scepticism was an objection to the structure of religious belief and its relation to historical change. Though religious teachings were usually presented as the unchanging word of God, they were subject to innumerable alterations. This ‘may seem matter of surprize to those, who do not reflect on the changeable State of all things,’ Collins explained, but it happened ‘tho’ the old *Revelations*, far from intending any change, engraftment, or new dispensation, did for the most part declare they were to last *for ever*, and did forbid all alterations and innovations, they being the *last dispensations* intended’.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, one of the main reasons why teachings were altered was to make them appear unchanging and timeless. Whiston had been guilty of comparable errors:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 84. Collins was probably following Toland, who had argued in *The Letters to Serena* that ‘most of the Philosophers (as we read) had two sorts of Doctrins, the one internal and the other external, or the one private and the other publick; the latter to be indifferently communicated to all the World, and the former only very cautiously to their best Friends’. He later wrote about the topic in ‘Clidophorus’, in which he hinted at concealed messages in his own writings and attacked the Church for concealing truths about its history from public view. See Toland, *The Letters to Serena*, 56 and Toland, ‘Clidophorus’, in idem, *Tetradymus*, 63-100. See also footnote 18 in introduction.

<sup>74</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 21.

Tho' Mr. Whiston calls the Books of the New Testament *Scriptures* and *Canonical Scriptures* [...] he cannot think them *divinely inspir'd* books, or of that authority which other Christians do. For he not only thinks them to have been alter'd and chang'd, and to be contradictory to one another; but that the Authors themselves may be mistaken [...]<sup>76</sup>

In contrasting the unchangeable word of God with the changeable state of the scriptures, Collins extended a theme from his earlier works. But he no longer skulked beneath a mantle of Chillingworthian scripturism. Instead, he was adamant that the mere demonstration of change in a religion's teachings, or of alteration in its sacred texts, was evidence that it had not received a revelation. 'Theology', he concluded, 'than which nothing is more naturally changeable [...] neither art nor power, nor discipline, could ever long fix or ascertain among Heathens, Jews, Christians, or Mahometans'.<sup>77</sup> History was generally changeable, but theology was especially so because it lacked an internal structure. Sacred history catalogued the failed attempts of theologians to impose form on amorphous matter. Theology and history were inimical.

At the centre of the *Grounds and Reasons*, Collins's text and subtext were combined. In his presentation of Surenhusius's supposed recovery of the apostles' typological rules, he came close to open satire.<sup>78</sup> Surenhusius's rules, he had argued, were the foundation of any typological scheme and were, by extension, the foundation of Christianity itself. But just as Whiston's literal scheme had the unfortunate consequence of justifying disbelief in Christianity until the recovery of the true text of the Old Testament, so

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> There has recently been some confusion on this point. David Ruderman writes that Collins 'found the notion that rabbinic study could enrich Christian self-understanding to be at least worthy of mention, and he basically reported it to his readers as a reasonable alternative to Whiston's approach'. This is supported neither by the text nor by Collins's critics, to whom it was obvious that he had presented Surenhusius with comic and malicious intent. Compare Ruderman, *Connecting the Covenants*, 68 and anonymous, *An Examination of a Late Discourse*, 60; Lavington, *The Nature and Use of a Type*, ix; Chandler, *A Vindication of the Christian Religion*, xxii; and Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, I, xxxvi.

Collins's typological scheme justified disbelief in Christianity until the typological rules were brought to light.<sup>79</sup> Even if Surenhusius was reliable, the consequences for Christianity were devastating. But in reality, the rules were absurd. They allowed the prophecies to be interpreted to mean almost anything: the letters, the vowel-points, and the words themselves could all be rearranged, the words could be divided to create different words, and new words could even be inserted.<sup>80</sup> Collins could barely conceal his glee:

Thus by a most lucky accident of Mr. Surenhusius's meeting and *conference* with a learned allegorical *Rabbin*, are the *Rules*, by which the apostles cited and apply'd the Old Testament, discover'd to the world; to which they had been for several ages lost, as has been observ'd from the Rev. Drs. Stanhope and Jenkin, abovemention'd. Which *conference* seems not, in its nature and consequence, much unlike that between Luther and the *Devil*. Luther reports himself to have had frequent conferences with the Devil; in one of which he pretends he receiv'd from him the *arguments* for the *abolition of the sacrifice of the mass*, which he urges in his Book, *De Abrog. Miss. Privar.* The *Rabbin* establishes Christianity; and the *Devil* Protestantism!<sup>81</sup>

Having enjoyed a joke at Surenhusius's expense, Collins put the boot in a few pages later:

It is indeed possible, that [...] he may not always have hit upon those peculiar *rules*, which the Apostles had, in every citation, more particularly in view [...] yet nothing can be plainer, from the reasonings of the Apostles, and from the common way of reasoning used among the Jews known both by their *practise* and *rules*, as they are both explain'd with the greatest clearness by Surenhusius; than that, the Apostles, who manifestly argu'd not by Scholastick rules, and interpreted not the

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<sup>79</sup> Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 112.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

passages they cited out of the Old Testament according to the obvious and literal sense they bore therein, did proceed by such *rules* as are set forth by him.<sup>82</sup>

Having argued that the truth of Christianity depended on these rules, and having praised Surenhusius for recovering them, Collins's ultimate conclusion was that the rules were incredible and that all that could be known with certainty was that some such rules had once existed. The bathos was withering.

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The example of the *Grounds and Reasons* is illustrative of the broader themes of this study. It shows how the deists conducted their historical scholarship with different background beliefs from those of their opponents. Some of these were straightforwardly historical, such as Collins's distrust of clerical testimony; some related to how evidence was categorised in different historiographical genres, such as Collins's belief that pagan history was essentially comparable to Christian; and others were more abstract in nature, such as Collins's suspicion that the unreliability of the history of religion was bound up with the lack of structure in theology. The last belief is especially important, since it illustrates how philosophical reasoning and historical evidence could support the same conclusion: Collins's musings on the attributes of God had led him to see that theology might be incapable of describing God and might therefore be a flawed undertaking; but he also found evidence in the history of religion that theological debates did not gravitate towards consensus. A similar fusion of theology and philosophy with historical reasoning was evident in the works of Toland, Clarke, Whiston, Chubb, Tindal, Morgan, and Warburton, but it has yet to be fully understood.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 78.

## Coda

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the knot of the arguments which the deists had tied began to unravel.<sup>1</sup> Deistic writings, in which evidential and abstract arguments were deployed in parallel, were gradually replaced by works in which arguments of these kinds were deployed individually. At the same time, the literary conventions of controversial writing were changing. Heterodox writers in the 1740s and 50s made less use than their forebears had done of literary cloaks and disguises,<sup>2</sup> although the risks incurred in publishing material which was offensive to Christianity remained sufficient for Conyers Middleton, Henry St John, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Bolingbroke, David Hume, and Edward Gibbon to exercise caution in what they allowed to be printed.<sup>3</sup> Deism was also

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<sup>1</sup> The decline of deism would be fertile ground for further study. The most common theories are i) that the deists' ideas lost their piquancy through dissolution into popular discourse, ii) that the deists were successfully defeated by the Church of England, iii) that deism was replaced by Methodism as the major threat to the Anglican establishment, and iv) that deism was exported to Europe and America. The most recent accounts, by James Herrick, Jeffrey Wigelsworth, and Wayne Hudson, have shed little light on the matter. Herrick provides scant evidence for his claim that deism was 'mounted anew' in the 1740s, Wigelsworth scarcely argues for his conclusion that deism became 'radical no more', and Hudson makes little attempt to demonstrate that there was a 'diffusion of disbelief'. See James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680-1750* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 124-25, 205-13; Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England*, 194-208; and Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity*, 73-102. For an interesting contemporary discussion of deism and Methodism, see anonymous (M.B.), *Deism Genuine Anti-Methodism* (1751) and, for a scholarly discussion of the topic, see J.D. Walsh, 'Elie Halévy and the Birth of Methodism', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, 25 (1975), 1-20. For case studies of the exportation of deism, see Clements, 'Messianic Prophecy or Messianic History', and Jan Van Den Berg, 'English Deism and Germany: The Thomas Morgan Controversy', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 59:1 (2008), 48-61.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Annet went further than any previous deist in rejecting the scriptures in their entirety, openly advocating deism, and denying that Jesus had risen from the dead. See Peter Annet, *Judging for Ourselves: Or, Free-Thinking, the Great Duty of Religion* (1739), ESTC T029257, 9; Peter Annet (anonymous), *The Resurrection of Jesus Demonstrated to have no Proof* (1744), title page; and Peter Annet ('a Moral Philosopher'), *Deism Fairly Stated and Fully Vindicated from the Gross Imputations and Groundless Calumnies of Modern Believers* (1746), ESTC T57971, title page and *passim*. *Deism Fairly Stated* was published anonymously, but is likely to have been written by Annet since he defended it against the criticisms of the anonymous *Defence of the Peculiar Institutions and Doctrines of Christianity* (1746) in his anonymously published *Supernaturals Examined* (1750), 117-47. The work was also attributed to Annet by John Leland, who claimed that Chubb had revised it for publication. See Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, 378.

<sup>3</sup> Middleton drafted but declined to publish 'An Expostulatory Letter to the Reverend Dr Waterland', although an undated manuscript survives in Middleton's hand (BL, Add MS 32459, ff53-97). The work comprised a strongly-worded animadversion of Daniel Waterland's *The Importance of the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity Asserted, in Reply to some Late Pamphlets* (1734) and a more general discussion of

losing its appeal. From the mid-1750s, the number of works being written about deism declined and the pens engaged were less often those of bishops and scholars and more often those of amateurs and hacks. Senior churchmen were concerned with other matters, such as the startling appearance of Methodism and debates about clerical subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles. They were, moreover, enjoying a period of relative calm after the *risorgimento* which had been accomplished under the premiership of the Archbishop of Canterbury William Wake.<sup>4</sup>

One writer, Peter Annet, continued the tradition of Chubb, Tindal, and Morgan. Like earlier deists, he used deductions from the moral attributes of God to structure criticisms of sacred history and to make up for his lack of historical learning.<sup>5</sup> He also extended their criticism of miracles. Where Chubb had argued that a miracle could never give credibility to a religious teaching, that it could never be known for certain whether an event was the result of miraculous or natural causes, and that the historical evidence for miracles was slight, Annet took the further step of arguing that miracles could not

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appeals to tradition. Though Middleton chose not to discuss the truth of Trinitarianism, he criticised Waterland's work as 'a design [...] of establishing a system of power and authority under the specious name of discipline' (f.53r) and accused Waterland of creating 'surprising axioms, calculated for the very purpose, of raising abhorrence and detestation' (f.56r). It was later rumoured that he had left a manuscript on 'the inutility and inefficacy of prayer' to his widow Anne Middleton and that she sold it to Middleton's executor, William Hebdenden, who had burnt it. Bolingbroke wrote heterodox philosophical essays which were published according to instructions contained in his will by his literary executor David Mallet. Hume redrafted 'The Natural History of Religion' after the first draft was suppressed through the intervention of Warburton and declined to publish the 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion' and the essays on suicide and immortality, instead leaving instructions for their publication in his will. Gibbon revised the controversial fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* for the second edition of 1776 and the third edition of 1777. On Middleton, see John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 138-39; on Hume, see *Letters*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), II, 316-17, 324, 453-54 and Ernest Campbell Mossner, 'Hume's "Four Dissertations": An Essay in Biography and Bibliography', *Modern Philology*, 48:1 (1950), 37-57; and on Gibbon, see pages 215-18 below.

<sup>4</sup> See Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England*, 45 and Clark, *English Society 1660-1832*, 348-61 (356).

<sup>5</sup> Though Annet has been neglected by scholars, the one scholar who has studied him in detail, James Herrick, makes absurd claims for his significance, describing him as 'a writer of peculiar power'. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*, 125-44. For a briefer and more accurate assessment, see Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity*, 96-97.

possibly occur.<sup>6</sup> He reached the conclusion in two ways, first by arguing that miracles contradicted the laws of nature, which he believed that Newton had shown to be unvarying,<sup>7</sup> and second by arguing that miracles contradicted God's goodness, which he believed entailed that the creation had been originally perfect and could never require subsequent change.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, he published a series of works intended to refute *The Tryal of Witnesses* (1729) by the Bishop of Bangor Thomas Sherlock, which had defended belief in the Resurrection by considering the quality of the apostles' testimony according to a quasi-legal model. In *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered* (1743), Annet adopted the same approach, but reached different conclusions. The apostles were not expert or unbiased witnesses and their reports were incomplete and contradictory. There was every possibility that the texts had been deliberately corrupted and there was 'no shadow of proof remaining, more than the bare report'.<sup>9</sup>

Annet's originality was acknowledged by his critics.<sup>10</sup> 'He is the first I know of', wrote John Jackson, 'either among Ancients or Moderns, who professed to believe a God and Providence, that ever said it was inconsistent with the divine Attributes, and the Rules of Truth and Certainty, that God should work Miracles'.<sup>11</sup> The essayist George Psalmanazar reached a similar conclusion. Annet had seen 'that a new Expedient must

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<sup>6</sup> See Chubb, *A Discourse on Miracles* and Peter Annet ('a Moral Philosopher'), *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered; in Answer to The Tryal of the Witnesses* (1743), ESTC T65034, 52, 61-68. The *Resurrection of Jesus Considered* has been attributed to Morgan, although a recent account resolves in favour of Annet. See Jan Van Den Berg, 'Who Wrote *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered....*': Peter Annet or Thomas Morgan?', *Notes and Queries*, 57:4 (2010), 521-24.

<sup>7</sup> After stating the argument for the first time in 1743, Annet developed it in 1749 and gave it its fullest statement in 1750. His thought on the subject resembles that of Hume, whose first publication on the subject appeared 1748, although there is no evidence of influence in either direction. The similarity was noted at the time. See Peter Annet (anonymous), *The Sequel to The Resurrection of Jesus Considered: In Answer to The Sequel of The Trial of the Witnesses* (1749), 33; Annet, *Supernaturals Examined*, 36-43; Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, 168-99; and George Psalmanazar, *Essays on the Following Subjects* (1753), viii-xx.

<sup>8</sup> See Annet, *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered*, 94-99; Annet, *Deism Fairly Stated*, 12-16; and Annet, *Supernaturals Examined*, 43-61.

<sup>9</sup> Annet, *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Though Annet's critics were shocked by his decision to argue against the possibility of miracles, the argument had been ascribed to Woolston and countered by Sherlock. See Annet, *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered*, title page and Sherlock, *The Tryal of Witnesses*, 73-74.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, *An Address to the Deists*, 14.

be thought on, that might at once overturn both the Foundation and the Superstructure [...] by trying to destroy, not only the Probability, but even the Possibility of all Miracles'.<sup>12</sup> But Annet's critics also noted the uneasy relationship between his *a priori* arguments and his criticism of the evidence of sacred history: All he has to say, wrote John Jackson, is comprised in two points:

First, That the Scripture-Evidence of the Resurrection is not sufficient Evidence, and that it ought to be set aside as being inconsistent and contradictory. Secondly, That it being an Evidence brought to confirm the *greatest Miracle that ever was*, it is self-convictive and destroys its own Possibility of being True; because, he thinks, every Miracle is an Impossibility in the Nature of Things, is destructive of the *Rules of all Truth and Certainty*, and *inconsistent with the Attributes of God*. But [...] if Miracles are in themselves Impossibilities, then he has prov'd, *a priori*, or from the Nature of the thing, the Falsehood of the Resurrection of *Jesus*; and no Evidence, *a posteriori*, or from Fact can prove it to be true, and it would be in vain to talk about it.<sup>13</sup>

In the works of Chubb, Tindal, and Morgan, deductions from the moral attributes of God worked in concert with objections to the reliability of sacred history because the objections showed that history was too poor a medium to be used by God for revelation. In Annet's works, there was no such harmony because his *a priori* arguments made it impossible for miracles to occur, irrespective of the reliability of history. In light of this, Annet's critics were careful to address each kind of argument in turn. Against the argument from the laws of nature, they objected that it begged the question. The laws of nature were generalisations based on previous events and could not be used to demarcate God's possible actions or infer which events had occurred.<sup>14</sup> Against the argument from the moral attributes of God, they objected that it was incoherent, because

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<sup>12</sup> Psalmanazar, *Essays on the Following Subjects*, xi.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, *An Address to the Deists*, 12. See also anonymous ('A Brother Lunatic'), *The Enthusiastic Infidel Detected* (1743), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *An Address to the Deists*, 17. See also Psalmanazar, *Essays on the Following Subjects*, 35-36.

its conclusion contradicted God's omnipotence, or was otherwise atheistic, because it made God and nature indistinguishable by conflating providential and natural causes.<sup>15</sup> Finally, against Annet's historical arguments, they objected that they led to outright scepticism. 'He must be an Enemy to all Faith as well as to that in Jesus', Jackson argued, 'to all historical Truth whatsoever, as well as to that of the Scriptures'.<sup>16</sup> Their arguments were found convincing. Though Annet continued to write in a deistic vein until the early 1760s, he was an increasingly marginal figure. His literary output met with only 12 replies, far fewer than had answered earlier deists, and of these many were cursory, anonymous, or polemical in tone. After 1751, he was ignored completely.<sup>17</sup>

A more successful attempt to make historical inferences from evidence which was extrinsic to the historical record was undertaken by David Hume in *The Natural History of Religion* (1757). Hume argued that religion originated 'from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind'.<sup>18</sup> Driven by these hopes and fears, early humans had postulated the existence of invisible, unknown powers which controlled the events of human life and which might be appeased through ritual observance.<sup>19</sup> Revelation and reason had nothing to do with it. Nor was the Old Testament correct in its depiction of monotheism as the original religion. It was clear from the history of the arts and sciences, and from the general progress of the human mind, that mankind must have ascended from a barbarous state

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<sup>15</sup> Jackson, *An Address to the Deists*, 14-15. See also Charles Moss, *The Evidence of the Resurrection Cleared from the Exceptions of a Late Pamphlet, Entitled, The Resurrection of Jesus Considered by a Moral Philosopher* (1744), 143-67 and Tipping Silvester, *The Evidence of the Resurrection Vindicated* (1744), 111-26.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, *An Address to the Deists*, 153. See also Moss, *The Evidence of the Resurrection Cleared*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> The last work published against him was Capel Berrow's *Deism not Consistent with the Religion of Reason and Nature* (1751).

<sup>18</sup> David Hume, *Four Dissertations* (1757), 13.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent discussion, which argues that Hume was replying to Bolingbroke, see Serjeantson, 'David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757) and the End of Modern Eusebianism'. Hume made two changes to the text of the *Natural History* during its first printing, perhaps for prudential reasons. For a discussion, see the editor's introduction to David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions: The Natural History of Religion*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), xi-cxxxii (esp. xxiv-xxvii).

of polytheism to purer monotheistic religion. In some respects, *The Natural History* bore heavy overtones of deism. Though Hume entitled it a ‘natural history’, it bore greater resemblance to works of deist historiography than to a comprehensive factual account. The evidence was not demonstrative but illustrative, the tone of the writing was suggestive and droll, and Christianity was, through its conspicuous absence, subjected to the same debunking explanations as any hysterical pagan cult.<sup>20</sup> But whereas the deists had been guided in their treatment of historical evidence by deductions from the attributes of God, Hume was guided by an account of the human mind:

We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event, are entirely unknown to us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent those ills, with which we are continually threatened. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes*, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence.<sup>21</sup>

Hume did not explain what evidence supported this account of the human mind, but, in presenting it as an entirely general account, he implied that it could be supported by a wide range of evidence, including the historical record, but also contemporary works and testimony, his own observations of humanity, and his experience of his own mind. Hume used this evidence to make inferences about how the mind had worked in the past and interpreted the history of religion in light of them. His critics were quick to seize on the point, but conflated the logic of his argument with that of deists like Morgan and

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<sup>20</sup> Hume, *Four Dissertations*, 52-53, 77-80.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Annet. '[T]he incapacity of a people unacquainted with the arts and sciences, to find out the principles of theism', complained Thomas Stona, 'should be demonstrated, before this argument can have any weight or validity'.<sup>22</sup> If Hume could not disprove the Mosaic history on its own terms, then his historical conclusions were groundless. '[H]e supports his Thesis', sneered Warburton, 'by something between history and argument'.<sup>23</sup> Instead, he should have undertaken

Either to prove *a priori*, and from the nature of things that Polytheism must be before Theism; and then indeed he may reject history and record: Or else *à posteriori*, and from antient testimony; in which case, it will be incumbent on him to refute and set aside that celebrated record which expressly tells us, Theism was first.<sup>24</sup>

But neither argument could prove successful: *a priori* reasoning could never demonstrate that polytheism had preceded monotheism and the historical record was unambiguous that monotheism had in fact come first. Hume's argument was therefore obviously false. But in attempting to impale Hume on a dilemma, Stona and Warburton missed their mark. Rather than combining historical arguments with *a priori* reasoning, Hume combined them with the evidence of psychology. Neither Stona nor Warburton grasped this. Though they recognised the shape of Hume's argument from their dealings with the deists, they failed to discern that its contents were different.

In other respects, Hume's argument turned deism on its head. Whereas Chubb, Morgan, and Annet had believed in a golden age of natural religion, before the age of pious

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Stona, *Remarks upon the Natural History of Religion by Mr. Hume* (1758), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Warburton, *Remarks on Mr. David Hume's Essay on the Natural History of Religion*, 24. The remarks were written with the assistance of the future Bishop of Worcester Richard Hurd and were written as a letter to Warburton, which was a peculiar literary device to adopt given the distinctiveness of Warburton's style. Hume, needless to say, was not deceived.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

frauds and priestcraft, Hume's history began with corruption.<sup>25</sup> He rejected the narrative of the Mosaic history, which the later deists had essentially retained, in which mankind had fallen from a state of grace to be recovered at a later point in time, and he assumed that God's existence was inferrable from 'the whole frame of nature', rather than being deducible, as the deists had believed, through *a priori* reasoning.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, though he criticised superstitious practices for implicitly misrepresenting God, he made no claim to possess rigid knowledge of the attributes of God and made no attempt to limit precisely God's possible actions in the past. Moreover, whereas the deists had adopted a bipartite model, in which error gave rise to false religion and reason gave rise to true, Hume adopted a sequential model in which false religion had evolved into true. He also underlined that true beliefs could result from faulty reasoning:

The doctrine of one supreme deity, the author of nature, is very antient, has spread itself over great and populous nations, and among them has been embraced by all ranks and conditions of persons: But whoever thinks that it has owed its success to the prevalent force of those invincible reasons, on which it is undoubtedly founded, would show himself little acquainted with the ignorance and stupidity of the people, and their incurable prejudices in favour of their particular superstitions.<sup>27</sup>

The argument extended the deists' debunking explanations of religious belief to include beliefs which the deists endorsed and it did so by dislodging their assumption that true religion and false religion must have different kinds of history. Only in special cases, if at all, would true doctrines arise from correct reasoning. For the most part, the history of religion could be written without reference to the truth of the doctrines involved.

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<sup>25</sup> The hypothesis had been discussed by Cudworth in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 208-10.

<sup>26</sup> Hume, *Four Dissertations*, 1. See also p.115.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. See also pp.43-44.

The separation of history and truth was also important to the work of Conyers Middleton. Though Middleton was sympathetic to the deists, and has sometimes been included in their number, his historical arguments were different. This was first made apparent in *A Letter to Dr Waterland* (1731), in which Middleton accused the fervently Trinitarian Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, Daniel Waterland of having made a fumbled attack on *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730).<sup>28</sup> Whereas Waterland had criticised Tindal for his misrepresentation of the scriptures, Middleton argued, the real problem lay in Tindal's proposals for replacing Christianity with a religion of nature. The basic error was an over-estimation of mankind's potential for rational belief:

The testimony of all ages [...] teaches us that *Reason*, whatever force and strength it might have in particular men, yet never had credit or authority enough in the world to be received as a publick and authentick Rule either of *Religious* or *Civil Life*. [...] we find in fact, from the *records of all History*, that there never was a nation in the world, whose *publick Religion* was formed upon the *plan of Nature*, and instituted on principles of *meer Reason*: but that *all Religions* have ever derived their Authority from the pretence of a *Divine Original*, and a *Revelation from Heaven*.<sup>29</sup>

In one respect, there was a parallel between Tindal's and Middleton's views. They both believed that the history of religion was a history of irrational belief. But Tindal saw this as a reason for instituting a religion of nature whereas Middleton saw it as a reason why a religion of nature would never work. He drew a distinction where Tindal saw none between the truth and efficacy of a religion's doctrines. What was needed was an

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<sup>28</sup> The *Letter* embroiled Middleton in immediate controversy, including allegations of atheism. For details, see Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment*, 139-40. For general discussions of Middleton, see Trevor-Roper, 'From Deism to History: Conyers Middleton', in idem, *History and the Enlightenment* 71-119 and Brian Young, 'Conyers Middleton: The Historical Consequences of Heterodoxy', in Mortimer and Robertson (eds), *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy 1600-1750*, 235-65 (238, 248-9). For a discussion of Middleton's place in the longer history of Anglican patristic scholarship, see Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 22-26.

<sup>29</sup> Conyers Middleton, *A Letter to Dr Waterland* (1731), 45-46. See also p.12.

artificial public religion which would maintain morality and the social order. If Christianity was false, this was no reason to overhaul it:

For should we allow *Christianity* to be a *meer Imposture*, on a level only with all the *other Impostures* that have obtained in the world; it would not be difficult to shew from the *dictates of Reason*, that an attempt to overturn it, as 'tis now *established by Law, derived from our Ancestors*, confirmed by the belief and practice of *so many ages*, must be *criminal and immoral*.<sup>30</sup>

Middleton sublimed the logic of the deists' argument, accepting that religious belief was irrational and extending this to Christianity, but denying that this upheld the conclusion that Christianity should be replaced by a religion of nature. The deists had paid too much attention to which beliefs were true, and too little to which were practicable.

The same aversion to theological reasoning was evident in Middleton's historical writings. In the *Free Inquiry* (1749), he argued against the truth of the miracles ascribed to the early Church without deviating from the criticism of sources.<sup>31</sup> Though the work bore the clear implication that no miracles had ever occurred, Middleton invoked neither the determinacy of the laws of nature nor the moral attributes of God to support his case.<sup>32</sup> Nor did he interleave his source-criticism with arguments about the unreliability of history or engage in extended comparisons between miracles in sacred and pagan history. Instead, he began his argument with the consensus of Tillotson, the Anglican scholars Nathaniel Marshall, Dodwell, Whiston, Waterland, and the classicist John Chapman that miracles had abated in the third and fourth centuries of Christianity.<sup>33</sup> He then worked backwards, asking if there was any reason to believe that

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>31</sup> Middleton (anonymous), *An Introductory Discourse to a Larger Work* (1747), title page and *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> Middleton's critics were aware of the implication. See John Jackson, *Remarks on Dr. Middleton's Free Enquiry* (1749), ESTC T011304, iii-iv and John Wesley, *A Letter to the Reverend Dr Conyers Middleton, Occasioned by his Late Free Enquiry* (1749), 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> Middleton, *Introductory Discourse*, 9-11.

the earlier centuries had been less rife with gullibility, priestcraft, and deception.<sup>34</sup> His conclusion was that the earlier Fathers were ‘less learned, and more credulous, and in greater need of such arts for their defence and security’ than their successors and that there was a compelling inference to be made from the attested forgery of scriptures by the Primitive Christians to the likely forgery of miracles, for which the evidence was anyway slight and contradictory.<sup>35</sup> The only occasions on which he made use of a theological argument were those in which a miracle was ascribed to an immoral figure, which he argued would contradict God’s goodness.<sup>36</sup> Yet even here, the contrast was not between the actions ascribed to God in sacred history and the discoveries of *a priori* reasoning, but between different parts of the historical record. In attributing miracles to immoral figures, the Fathers contradicted the depiction of God in the New Testament, which Middleton treated as an authoritative source.<sup>37</sup> With this exception, he avoided theological arguments entirely.

The line of argument which Middleton began was continued by Edward Gibbon. In the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Gibbon described the progress of Christianity and the conduct towards it of the Roman authorities.<sup>38</sup> The chapters received immediate notice for the negative light in which they depicted early Christianity and they exposed Gibbon to allegations of deism.<sup>39</sup> But whereas Chubb, Tindal, and Morgan had used theological arguments to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 26-57.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 37. See also p.38.

<sup>36</sup> Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, 21-26.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>38</sup> On the long debate about Gibbon’s intentions in these chapters, see B.W. Young, ‘“Scepticism in Excess”: Gibbon and Eighteenth-Century Christianity’, in *Historical Journal*, 41:1 (1998), 179-99 and Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, V, 215-310.

<sup>39</sup> See Richard Watson, *An Apology for Christianity* (Cambridge, 1776), 34-36; Smyth Loftus, *A Reply to the Reasonings of Mr. Gibbons [sic], in his History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Dublin, 1777), 21, 26; and Henry Edwards Davis, *A Reply to Mr. Gibbon’s Vindication of some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire”* (1779), 166-67.

structure their historical enquiries, Gibbon adhered to the historical evidence and used more abstract arguments only as a means of removing theology from view:

Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry, an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose; we may still be permitted though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church.<sup>40</sup>

By confining himself to secondary causes, Gibbon was able to separate history and theology. But there was a deistic tinge to the argument because it allowed Gibbon to explain events in sacred history in terms of natural causes and to imply that even a true revelation would pass through the corrupting channels of history. Moreover, though Gibbon distinguished between primary and secondary causes, it was unclear whether each type of cause corresponded to a viable explanation. What Gibbon's distinction presupposed, and what the fifteenth chapter attempted to demonstrate, was that the rise of Christianity was not owing to the convincing evidence of its doctrine, but to human passions and the general circumstances of mankind. If the rise of Christianity had resulted from the evidence of its doctrines, there would be no secondary causes in terms of which this fact could be explained. By distinguishing between types of causation, Gibbon purported to be bracketing a question to which he was giving a negative answer. Gibbon's critics were perplexed by the distinction. '[T]he friends of christianity', wrote the Anglican clergyman James Chelsum, 'will very readily acknowledge the doctrine of

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<sup>40</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, 447.

a future life, brought to light by the gospel, to have had its share in spreading the belief of it. But with what propriety can this be considered, as an human cause?’<sup>41</sup> Richard Watson also cavilled on the point. ‘You esteem “the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church,”’ he wrote, ‘as the third of the secondary causes of the rapid growth of Christianity; I should be willing to account the miracles, not merely ascribed to the primitive church, but really performed by the Apostles, as the one great primary cause of the conversion of the Gentiles’.<sup>42</sup> But none of Gibbon’s critics went further. Instead, they argued that the growth of Christianity was inexplicable in terms of natural causes. ‘[T]hat one most material proof for our religion is here totally suppressed,’ wrote Smyth Loftus, ‘namely, the very numerous and stupendous miracles which Christ and his Apostles worked for the confirmation of their divine mission’.<sup>43</sup> The Anglican historian Joseph Milner argued similarly:

Let us place before our eyes the first beginnings of the Gospel, as stated in the history of the Acts, and as allowed of necessity by all acquainted with antient history. Will any man say, that the fervent zeal of the Apostles against idolatry had, in itself, the least tendency to propagate the faith? [...] This then is so far from having been an human cause of the success of Christianity, that it only shews in a stronger light the power of those divine causes, which alone can account for it.<sup>44</sup>

Gibbon’s response to these criticisms was careful. He avoided the question of miracles entirely, fearing perhaps from the example of Hume that an outright denial would be too scandalous and knowing perhaps from the work of Middleton that the case against miracles was sound. Nor could he be drawn to quarrel about whether secondary causes could be indicative of divine intervention, preferring instead to advert acidulously to his

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<sup>41</sup> James Chelsum, *Remarks on the Two Last Chapters of Mr. Gibbon’s History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, in a Letter to a Friend* (1776), 9.

<sup>42</sup> Watson, *An Apology for Christianity*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> Loftus, *A Reply to the Reasonings of Mr. Gibbons* [sic] (1777), 22.

<sup>44</sup> Milner, *Gibbon’s Account of Christianity Considered* (1781), 178-79. See also pp.188-89.

critics' scholarly faults.<sup>45</sup> In the third edition of the *Decline and Fall* (1777), he strengthened his citations and sharpened the cutting edge of his prose, but made no further foray into abstraction.<sup>46</sup> In response to every attempt by his critics to steer the debate towards providential causes, he turned it gently in the opposite direction, towards writing the history of religion in human terms.

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<sup>45</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, 473.

<sup>46</sup> David Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City': The Historian and his Reputation, 1776-1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 13-42.

## Conclusion

This study has examined historical argument in the writings of the English deists. Specifically, it has shown that the deists reacted against the established view that theological beliefs could depend for their truth on historical evidence in three distinct ways: by narrowing the range of beliefs which could depend for their truth on historical evidence; by denying that a good God could make his subjects' salvation contingent on knowledge which was contained only in an historical revelation; and by denying that history was a sufficiently reliable medium for the communication of theological truth. It has also shown that the second and third of these objections worked in tandem because the reliability of history was correlative in the minds of the deists to the likelihood that a good God would use it as a medium of revelation. Additionally, it has revealed something of how these objections were mobilised in the deists' writings: that abstract arguments were often bound in the skeins of evidential ones; that parallel and even contradictory arguments could operate using the same historical examples; and that the deists often resembled their opponents in their analysis of historical evidence even when their purposes and assumptions were different. Finally, it has adumbrated the dissipation of deism in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, which occurred in part through an increasing separation between *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments and between questions relating to the history of religion and questions relating to the truth of its doctrines.

A great deal of work might still be done. There is clear scope, for instance, for further study of the deists' appropriation of orthodox scholarship, the literary techniques which they used to disclose their ideas to selected audiences, and the still perplexing fate of their ideas. More particularly, this study's interpretation of the deists could be extended in two directions. The first is towards the more detailed comparison of historiographical

works by the deists and their opponents and of the ways in which their theological beliefs informed their historical practice. The second is towards the comprehension of deist and Anglican writers within a single explanatory framework. While this study has focused on the deists, it has remained largely agnostic about the current efforts of historians to understand the English enlightenment as a debate within Christianity, in which the deists were a marginal group. The analysis presented in the central chapter of this study, which gauged the distance of the deists from heterodox Anglican figures such as Samuel Clarke and William Whiston, might be expanded in a fuller treatment of the many different shades of belief about the relationship between theology and history which were present and complexly connected in the eighteenth-century Church of England.

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