Introduction

This book is the first of two volumes dealing with the changes in the ways in which the relationship between religion and ethics was perceived in the period from the mid-seventeenth to the later eighteenth centuries by different religious and secular movements, denominations, and individuals, and the kinds of language in which these changes were expressed. Broadly speaking, two crucial shifts in ideas took place in this period. The first is an emphasis in Anglican thought on the capacity of human reason and free will to co-operate with divine grace in order to achieve the holy and happy life. This optimistic portrait of human nature represents a rejection of the orthodox Reformation tradition, which stresses the depravity of human nature and God’s arbitrary exercise of his free grace in electing the few to salvation. The second is the attempt to divorce ethics from religion, and to find the springs of human action not in the co-operation of human nature and divine grace but in the constitution of human nature alone. The first shift comes to represent a new orthodoxy, and its effects in the period are very wide-reaching; the second shift, which in part arises from the first, remains heterodox in the period under consideration but its long-term influences are incalculable. Volume I deals with the rise in the second half of the seventeenth century of Anglican moral religion and the reaction against it of movements which attempted in different ways to continue or return to the Reformation protestant tradition in response to what was seen to be its betrayal by the Church of England. This volume essentially explores the tension between the languages of reason and grace. Volume II will deal with movements which took up ideas implicit in Anglican moral religion and developed them in the direction of naturalism, scepticism, and sentimental ethics, to which Anglican thinkers were necessarily hostile although they had to some extent prepared the ground which made these developments possible. It will essentially explore the tension between the languages of reason and sentiment.

Although 1660 and 1780 are the limiting dates of this study I have inevitably looked before and after. The re-establishment of the Church of England at the Restoration in effect guaranteed the dominance of moral, rational religion and the defeat of Reformation orthodoxy, but the struggle between competing versions of protestant thought goes back as far as the
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mid-sixteenth century, and the underlying tensions are as old as Christianity. In the first chapter of Volume I I summarise the central disputes of the mid-century and the principal religious and ethical traditions on which English thinkers drew, and I explore briefly some religious works of the 1640s and 1650s which are significant because they epitomise the main conflicting positions and continue to be widely read and influential for the next hundred years. I have not dealt with writers of the 1640s and 1650s who, for whatever reason, were no longer read and disappeared from view in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The second chapter concentrates on the period 1660–1700 and the work of the group within the Church of England sometimes pejoratively termed latitude-men, especially Whichcote, Wilkins, Barrow, Tillotson, Fowler, Patrick, and Glanvill, who were largely responsible for defining and popularising the changes of emphasis in Anglican thought. The rest of the book is concerned with different kinds of response to the new orthodoxy. Chapter 3 explores nonconformist thought from the 1660s to the 1690s and its origins in the 1640s and 1650s, and contrasts the views of Baxter and Bunyan, who were the major representatives of different types of nonconformity and who reacted in very different ways to changes in the Church of England, though their religious views overlap more than might be expected. Chapter 4 is concerned with the development of dissent in the first half of the eighteenth century, and the ways in which Watts and Dodridge, its most influential writers, tried to reconcile different tendencies in dissenting thought and yet remain true to the protestant tradition. The final chapter looks at the thought of John Wesley from the 1730s to the 1780s, and his attempt, drawing on many different traditions, to reform the Church of England from within and to create a new synthesis of the competing elements his predecessors had juggled with. Volume II will conclude with an account of the later eighteenth century, and will look forward to the developments, as the first chapter of Volume I looks back to the antecedents, of the religious and ethical conflicts explored in the two books.

I have chosen to analyse these particular writers in detail in Chapters 2 to 5 of this volume for two reasons: because in terms of the nature of their arguments and the extent of their influence they seem to me to be undeniably the most important, and because I have found them the most interesting. They are all, despite their different approaches, aware of the complexity of the terms and ideas they deal with and careful to treat them with subtlety, and I have tried to do each of them justice. My detailed concentration on their work has resulted in the exclusion of representatives of several other traditions who have a place in the story: the reader will find no prolonged attention to Roman Catholics, non-jurors, high-church Anglicans, or Quakers. However, I am confident that my account does not misrepresent the central developments in the period.

My subject is the language of religious and moral prose, and my methods
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are those of the literary historian of ideas. I have concentrated on language because I am interested in the history of religious and moral thought for its own sake, not in relation to another subject, such as science or politics, and because I believe that it is only through the careful study of language that meaning can be ascertained. I take ‘language’ in a broad sense to include terms and phrases, style, and rhetoric; I am thus concerned not only with the definition of certain ideas by a specific writer, but with the techniques of persuasion and the literary forms he employs. The development of ideas and languages from conflict between denominations or movements is particularly striking in this period. A good deal of the religious and ethical writing is polemical in character; members of particular movements tend to define their own positions in relation to what they see as the erroneous views and deceptive languages of their opponents, and are concerned to persuade their readers of the truth of their own ideas and the appropriateness of the manner in which they are expressed. In reading a given writer I have therefore asked the following questions: what form does the author employ (for example philosophical or theological treatise, popular handbook, essay, sermon, dialogue)? What are the implications of this choice of form? What is his purpose in writing? What does he take the function of books to be? What are his characteristic terms and arguments? Who else is using them in the same or different ways? What are his attitudes to language? Are they consistent with his practice? What is the intended audience of the work? Is there more than one (for example his intimates, his allies, those who already share his views, those whom he regards as dangerous, those whose views he intends to refute rationally or demolish polemically)? How does he treat his audiences? Do his ideas, arguments, terms, or style differ depending on the form he chooses or the audience he addresses? How does he respond to works addressed to him? Who are the authorities to whom he defers, or whom he recommends? Who are the rival authorities whom he attempts to dislodge? With what group does he identify himself? What label does he attach to himself? What is the origin of the label (his opponents, his allies, himself)? What use does he make of literary sources of different kinds? Is the language he uses peculiar to himself, that of a group to which he belongs, or the transmutation of the language of another group?

Each chapter (excluding the first chapter of Volume I and the last of Volume II) is divided into three parts: the first part provides an account of the social and intellectual milieu of the movement or thinker under discussion, taking account of ecclesiastical and political developments where relevant, with some biographical information; the second investigates kinds of book, circumstances of publication, intended audiences, literary assumptions, and style; the third (the most important) analyses ideas and their expression. This

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structure is designed to be as useful as possible to the reader. I have not taken
the reader’s knowledge of the period for granted, and I have not engaged in
debate with recent historians of ideas. I hope this method of presentation will
make the book accessible to undergraduates as well as scholars. Students of
history, theology, and literature will probably find different kinds of material
of interest to them, though my aim has been to cross twentieth-century
disciplinary boundaries and to encourage my readers to do the same.

I have not tried to argue for the truth or falsehood of the views I have
explored; I have not taken the side of dissenter against churchman, or of
Arminian against Calvinist, or (in Volume II) of freethinker against Christi-an. But I have tried within my limitations as a twentieth-century secular
reader to give a truthful account of what those views were and how they
developed as they did. In this attempt I am attaching myself to the tradition
inaugurated by Mark Pattison in his essay ‘Tendencies of Religious Thought
in England 1688–1750’ (Essays and Reviews, 1860), which he describes in his
Memoirs as the first ‘scientific history of the self-development of opinion’ to be
published in this country. The hostility with which it was received – the
reviewers ‘were all busily occupied in finding or making contradictions
between the writer’s words and the thirty-nine articles’ – led Pattison to
abandon the study of religious thought, but this essay was the starting point
for Leslie Stephen’s magisterial History of English Thought in the Eighteenth
Century (1876), as Stephen acknowledges in the Preface. No serious student of
the relationship between religious and moral thought in the eighteenth
century can afford to neglect Stephen’s account. Since their day there has
been a wealth of historical investigation of the kind Pattison called for, some of
the best of it by representatives of particular denominations, notably Frank
Baker, G. R. Cragg, H. R. McAdoo, and G. F. Nuttall. I have drawn widely
on the work of these and other historians of seventeenth- and eighteenth-
century thought, as the notes and bibliography show, but I hope that in my
concentration on language I have succeeded in giving the subject a new
interest and emphasis.

1

The conflict of languages in the mid-seventeenth century

certain it is that words, as a Tartar's bow, do shoot back upon the understanding of the wisest, and mightily entangle and pervert the judgement. So as it is almost necessary, in all controversies and disputations, to imitate the wisdom of the mathematicians, in setting down in the very beginning the definitions of our words and terms, that others may know how we accept and understand them, and whether they concur with us or no. For if it cometh to pass, for want of this, that we are sure to end there where we ought to have begun, which is, in questions and differences about words.

Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605)\(^1\)

the Contentions of the Clergie have done far more hurt to the Christian World, than the most bloody Wars of Princes ... those few that at great cost and labour come to the bottom of the differences do perceive, that the Proud Opinionators have striven partly about unrevealed or unnecessary things, but chiefly about mere ambiguous words and arbitrary humane notions; and multitudes condemn and revile each other, while they mean the same things, and do not know it.

Baxter, *Catholicke Theologie* (1675)\(^2\)

The modern reader of religious and moral writing in the mid-seventeenth century rapidly becomes aware of paradox: the extraordinary range and diversity of appeals to religious and moral authority in the period is combined with widespread confidence that apparent conflict can be resolved if only language is employed as it should be. The sources of authority, human and divine, are variously defined as reason, the light of nature, common notions, conscience, grace, Scripture, the Spirit, tradition, and human learning. For some, the more original and untypical of seventeenth-century moralists and controversialists, whose work provoked hostility at the time but which has proved of most interest to modern readers, these authorities are necessarily incompatible, and only a few of them can be authentic. Thus at one extreme of


\(^2\) The Preface, against Clergie Mera Contentions, and Church-distracting controversies', a.5', c.5.
the spectrum the reason and common notions shared by all men may be held up as the only universal moral authority in opposition to the corruptions of tradition and the written word, as they are by the so-called first deist, Lord Herbert; or at the other extreme the Spirit speaking in all men, the light within, may be set not only against carnal human reason and learning but also above Scripture, as it is by the Quaker George Fox. Writers of diametrically opposed views are certain that their linguistic methods will resolve religious and moral disputes and settle the foundations of religion and ethics. If only men will begin as in mathematics with the definition of names and give up the authority of ‘an Aristotle, a Cicero, or a Thomas [Aquinas],’ as the materialist philosopher Thomas Hobbes argues; following Bacon, or if only they will speak the language of Canaan and the Holy Ghost, and reject the vanity of school theology and metaphysics, as the sectarian John Webster urges, then the truth will be established. It is obvious to the modern reader that the differences between the extreme positions are real and insoluble, and not merely verbal. The differences in the centre of the spectrum are more subtle. For the majority of moralists and divines, all the sources of authority listed above are valid to varying degrees. Their problem is to establish the hierarchy of these authorities and to balance their respective claims. Thus the authority of Scripture is paramount, but Scripture must be interpreted with the aid both of the Spirit and of human reason and learning; grace regenerates the human faculties and makes all man’s endeavours after good possible, but the faculties of the soul – reason, understanding, conscience, will, affections – are themselves divine implantations. Emphasis on the operation of the Spirit may, but need not, be accompanied by distrust of human learning. Interest in classical ethics may, but need not, imply an optimistic view of human nature. For some there is tension and indeed conflict between the different sources of authority, whereas for others they exist in a dependent relationship. For the modern reader the problem is to determine the significance of these differences in emphasis and the implications of the language and rhetoric of individual writers for their religious and moral positions.

The forms this writing took and the audiences to whom it was addressed provide very important indicators of a writer’s meanings, intentions, and influence. It might be primarily speculative or doctrinal, concerned with establishing the truth of specific ethical or religious positions, and take the form of a philosophical or theological treatise, perhaps written in Latin for an international educated audience. In some cases important works were subsequently translated into English to reach a wider readership, for example the puritan William Ames’s Medulla Sacrae Theologiae (1627), translated after his death and published by parliamentary order as The Marrow of Sacred

\[1 \ De \ Veritate \ (1624); \ De \ Religione \ Libri \ (1643).\]
\[4 \ Journal \ (1694), \ ed. \ Nickalls \ (1955), \ 17, \ referring \ to \ the \ year \ 1647.\]
\[5 \ Leviathan \ (1651), \ ed. \ Macpherson \ (1968), \ 105-6.\]
\[6 \ Academiae \ Examen \ (1634). \ 8, 10.\]
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Divinity (1642). It might take the form of a public creed or confession compiled by many hands, such as the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647) produced by the Westminster Assembly of Divines to replace the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Or such writing might be primarily controversial, designed to refute the views of opponents or persuade a particular group of readers of the truth of a particular position. Some works might be both doctrinal and controversial in form, for example the Anglican William Chillingworth’s The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation (1638), which develops a very important theory of the rational interpretation of revelation in the extremely unpalatable (for the modern reader) but common form of a point by point refutation, in this case of a Jesuit work. One danger of controversial literature, of which the modern reader should be constantly aware, is that controversialists tend to simplify their opponents’ views; such accounts should not be accepted at face value unless corroborated by the statements of those under attack. The rhetoric of controversy sometimes has the effect of pushing apart positions which are closer than they appear to be. Finally, religious and moral writing might be primarily practical, concerned to teach the reader how to practise the Christian life, and designed for many different kinds of audience, both learned and popular.7 Such writing almost always has a significant doctrinal content. It might take the form of a popular devotional and doctrinal handbook, such as Lewis Bayly’s much reprinted and influential The Practice of Piety (c. 1612). The religious best-sellers of the later seventeenth century were largely of this kind.8 Or it might take the form of the printed sermon, perhaps the most important medium for the dissemination of religious and moral thought to the general reader. Although there were crucial differences between adherents of the puritan–nonconformist tradition and of the prelatical wing of the Church of England as to the centrality or otherwise of the sermon in divine service – the Directory for the Publice Worship of God, published by parliamentary order in 1644 to replace the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer and its prescribed liturgy, calls the preaching of the word ‘the power of God unto Salvation [Romans 1:16]’, and one of the greatest and most excellent Works belonging to the Ministry of the Gospel9 – clergy, ministers and lay preachers of all persuasions used the printed sermon to propagate their interpretation of the problematic relationship between religion and ethics, or, to use the biblical and contemporary phrase, faith and works. The modern reader should give careful attention to tone and emphasis, to what is stressed and what omitted, in order to establish not only the argument but the tendency of the work in hand; in particular the reader needs to be aware of what is taken for granted, the unstated moral and theological assumptions to

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7 See Baxter’s classification of his own books into doctrinal, practical, and controversies (with subheadings) in Compassionate Counsel to all Young Men (1681), Kneebie, Baxter (1985), 137.
8 See Sommerville, Popular Religion (1977), Chapter 3.
9 Directory (1644), 27.
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which the preacher appeals, even the unacknowledged quotations from authors it might not be appropriate to name.

The central dispute about the sources of moral and religious authority and the appropriate language for expressing them is very conveniently summarised in a fascinating series of letters that passed in 1651 between two Cambridge divines, Anthony Tuckney (1599–1670) and Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83). Tuckney, Presbyterian, Calvinist, one-time member of the Westminster Assembly and co-author of the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and now Master of Emmanuel College, wrote to Whichcote, his former pupil and now Provost of King’s and Vice-Chancellor of the university, to complain of the unorthodox implications of his weekly lectures (i.e. sermons) and their dangerous consequences for the students: ‘we fear, the truth of Christ, much dearer than dearest friends, hath bin and may be prejudiced; and so young ones in the universite tainted, and others greeved, by a vein of doctrine; which runnes up and down in manie of Your discourses’. Tuckney criticises Whichcote for his favourite terms and phrases – ingenuous, nature, reason, recta ratio, for his supposed reliance on philosophy, metaphysics, and the writings of rational Anglicans such as Hooker, Chillingworth, and Hammond, for his sympathy for the virtuous heathen, for his apparent misuse of Scripture, and above all for his slighting of grace and the doctrine of justification by faith. These views and habits have led some to charge Whichcote with following in the footsteps of Socinians and Arminians – ‘those very things, which You hint, They dilate’. Whichcote deftly sidesteps Tuckney’s criticisms about influences and labels, but he confronts the central issue about the nature of man and the relationship between religion and ethics unhesitatingly. Where Tuckney wishes that preachers would choose texts that treat ‘of the advancing of Faith above Reason, and of the Impotency and Weakness of Nature; rather than the Power of it’, Whichcote insists, ‘I count it true sacrilege, to take from God; to give to the Creature: yet I look att it, as a dishonouring God, to nullify and make base his works; and to think Hee made a sorrie worthlesse pieece, fitt for no use; when hee made man.’

This correspondence is important because it refers to many (though not all) of the principal intellectual traditions and religious positions available to an educated English protestant in the mid century, and it makes clear just what the issues at stake were to be. The principal traditions on which such a reader and thinker might draw were classical ethics, especially Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca; the church fathers, especially Augustine; medieval scholasticism, especially Aquinas, and its continuation in the


11 Eight Letters, 18, 27, 37-8, 80, 97, 112–13.
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sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Roman Catholic thinkers such as Suarez; the humanist tradition, especially Erasmus; continental Reformation theology, especially Calvin and Beza; English puritanism, especially Perkins and Ames; modifications of the Calvinist tradition by the French Huguenot Amyraut (Amyraldus) and the school of Saumur; repudiations of aspects of Calvinism by the Dutch Arminius and his followers the Remonstrants, especially Grotius, and by opponents of puritanism in the Church of England, especially Hooker, Chillingworth, and Hammond; Polish Socinianism (named after Socinus), a heretical form of Christian rationalism and antitrinitarianism; and English antinomianism, an extreme and widely criticised form of Calvinism, whose adherents were alleged to believe that Christians are free from the moral law.12 In controversial writing contemporaries freely and often inaccurately bandied about the labels Pelagian, Socinian, papist, and Arminian on the one side, for those who emphasised reason, free will, capacity for moral choice, and conditions for justification, and Calvinist and antinomian on the other side, for those who emphasised human depravity, predestination, free grace, and justification by faith alone. Those on the Calvinist wing warned of a slippery slope leading from Arminianism, Socinianism and Pelagianism to infidelity and atheism; conversely, those on the Arminian wing saw a different but equally dangerous slope leading from Calvinism and antinomianism to irrationality, enthusiasm, libertinism, and atheism. But it is important to remember that these labels are almost always pejorative, and that individual writers rarely use them of themselves. The only one of these labels of which polemicists do not seem to have been ashamed is Calvinist, as Tuckney makes clear; he agrees with Whitchote in preferring to be called a Christian, ‘yet, when diversities of judgements have unhappily begotten diversities of denominations; I had rather, by reason of my adhæring to the truth, that CALVINE maintained; men shoulde call mee a Calvinist; than by reason of eyther an indifferentie, or by a propending to somthing that Socinians or Arminians hold; men, though unjustlie and sinfullie, shoulde besomeare me with their appellation’.13 The diversities of judgement were complex, and it is more useful at this stage to consider briefly the central concepts that were at issue than to attempt to define and differentiate a series of denominational positions.

The disputes, which are essentially about the nature of the relationship between man and God, centre on the respective parts played by reason and faith as the basis of knowledge of God, and by faith and works as the basis of

12 Useful studies of some of these traditions include: Tiering, Moral Philosophy (1981); Kendall, English Calvinism (1979), Miller, New England Mind (1939), and Wallace, Puritans and Predestination (1982); Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy (1965); McAloon, Spirit of Anglicanism (1965), Trevor-Roper, Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans (1989), Chapters 2 and 4, and Taylor, Rational Theology (1872); Harrison, Beginnings of Arminianism (1926) and Arminians (1937); McLachlan, Socinianism (1951) and Wilbur, Unitarianism (1946 and 1952).

13 Eight Letters, 79.
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the Christian life. Related disputes concern the extent of human passivity or activity in relation to divine action, and the subordinate or central status of ethics in religion. The orthodox Reformation account (usually called Calvinism) can be summarised as follows. The first man, Adam, created by God in his own image, was possessed of perfectly integrated faculties and was capable of perfect obedience to the law of God. Adam’s original sin, his freely chosen disobedience, has burdened the human race with calamitous consequences. Human nature is now corrupt: the faculties are so depraved that man is incapable of obedience to the law and can only choose to sin. For this continuing disobedience, this inability to act with righteousness, God has justly condemned the human race to a double death, the mortality of the body and the eternal damnation of the soul. However, through his mercy God grants a measure of undeserved freedom from this punishment. The majority of mankind, the reprobate, are justly condemned for sin, but the elect few are predestined for salvation, not for any merit that God foresees in them, but by his own free grace. This is achieved through the process of redemption by God’s greatest gift to man, his Son. Through his death and his perfect obedience Christ takes on man’s sin and pays the penalty for it, though he is inherently sinless, and imputes to man his righteousness, though man is inherently unrighteous. God accepts Christ’s imputed righteousness or merits as man’s, and thus grants man salvation. Man is thus saved not by his own efforts but by God’s grace: he is justified, i.e. accepted by God as righteous despite his unrighteousness, by faith alone, by trust that God will fulfil the promises of the gospel made to his elect. The elect man is now regenerate, freed from the consequences of his corrupt nature, though many traces of that nature remain. He is granted perseverance so that he can continue in a state of grace. As a consequence of his justified state he performs good works and lives a sanctified life, and hence has evidence that he is of the elect, but his works contribute nothing to his justification: they are its fruit, not its cause. Within the limits of his nature he obeys the moral law, not slavishly through fear but freely through love. In this life he is not fully sanctified, i.e. morally perfect, he is still liable to occasional sin, and he may not always have full assurance of his election, but despite doubts and backslidings he does not fall from the state of grace.

From the point of view of the modifiers and opponents of this tradition, the Calvinist account of religion and ethics exaggerates the gap between God and man, the opposition between grace and nature, the weakness of the fallen human faculties, and the passivity of man in the process of salvation, removes the freedom of the will and human responsibility for action, elevates justification above sanctification, feeling above practice, and faith above holiness, and makes God, in his arbitrary election of the few and repudiation of the rest,

[14 Adapted from Rivers, Classical and Christian Ideas (1979), Chapter 8.]

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