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CHAPTER I

*Enlightened Dissent: an introduction**Knud Haakonssen*

A quarter of a century ago Peter Gay presented the Enlightenment as ‘the rise of modern paganism’.¹ Gay’s magisterial study was in many respects the apogee of a tradition in scholarship according to which the Enlightenment was anti-Christian, anti-Church and at the point of sliding into irreligion and proto-atheism. On this interpretation, the Enlightenment was further seen as socially and institutionally reformist in a way that begged to be made political and, eventually, revolutionary. Enlightenment was a time-bomb set for 1789, and it was set in France.

In recent years scholars have called into question most aspects of this way of understanding the Enlightenment. For one thing the Enlightenment has proliferated both nationally and socially. Instead of seeing it as an aspect of French cultural imperialism, we have come to consider the Enlightenment in national contexts from Aberdeen to Athens, from St Petersburg to Philadelphia.² At the same time, we have been urged to see it as not only a movement in the history of ideas, instigated by an intellectual élite, but also as a social process involving wide groups of local and national communities. Study of the Enlightenment has thus been intimately connected with methodological debates about the relationship between the history of ideas and intellectual history – the former conceived as analysis of the intellectual content of ideas formulated in the past, the latter considered as the social or contextual study of the intellects who proposed ideas in the past.³ Methodology has again been

¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (London, 1967), vol. 1: *The Rise of Modern Paganism*.

² See for example Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981); Siegfried Jüttner and Jochen Schlobach, eds., *Europäische Aufklärung(en). Einheit und nationale Vielheit*, Studien zum 18. Jahrhundert, 14 (Hamburg, 1992).

³ For programmatic statements of the idea of a social, as opposed to philosophical, history of the Enlightenment, see Robert Darnton, ‘In Search of the Enlightenment’, *Journal of Modern History*, 43 (1971), 113–32. Concerning the distinction between history of ideas and intellectual history, see the Introduction to K. Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1995).

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intertwined with pathology, namely the deconstruction of modernity viewed as ‘the Enlightenment project’.⁴

The many Enlightenments that have resulted from these endeavours are beyond easy summary, and this is in any case not the place to attempt it. The important point in the present context is that the question of an English Enlightenment has been opened up for interesting discussion. Not least in this discussion is a scrutiny of the political colour and religious temperature of the Enlightenment. The present volume is a contribution to this scrutiny.

A fruitful point of departure is J.G.A. Pocock’s complex notion of a conservative Enlightenment in England.⁵ The central suggestion in this interpretation is that the Enlightenment was first and foremost a movement to preserve civilised society against any resurgence of religious enthusiasm and superstition, that is to say, of evangelical Protestantism and Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Europe had only just escaped the barbarism of religious wars, especially civil wars, and the task of enlightened minds was to preserve modern society from the confessional backwoodsmen of all creeds. The weapons in this struggle were ‘sceptical’ philosophy, sound theology, polite letters, science, and economic betterment: modern philosophy’s systematic exploration of the deficiencies of the human mind inevitably suggested limits to its ability to re-fashion authority and social order; politico-religious contention was made safe for society by being subjected to the requirements of polite literature; science was dissociated from subversive spiritualism by being required to account only for the causal coherence of the providential order; and the means of securing the safety of modern society were, domestically, the discipline of the division of labour and, externally, trade. Conservation and modernisation were thus one and the same thing, namely the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment thus understood was evidently approximated in many parts of Europe; indeed I would suggest that it constituted the

⁴ See for example Robert Wokler’s discussion, ‘Projecting the Enlightenment’, in John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds., *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 108–26.

⁵ Here I draw particularly upon the following works by J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Post-Puritan England and the Problem of the Enlightenment’, in Perez Zagorin, ed., *Culture and Politics. From Puritanism to the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA, 1980), pp. 91–111; ‘Clergy and Commerce. The Conservative Enlightenment in England’, in R. Ajello, ed., *L’Età dei Lumi: Studi storici sul settecento europeo in onore de Franco Venturi* (Naples, 1985), pp. 524–62; *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985); ‘Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: The American and French Cases in British Perspective’, *Government and Opposition*, 24 (1989), 81–105; ‘History and Sovereignty: The Historiographical Response to Europeanization in Two British Cultures’, *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 358–89.

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mainstream of the Enlightenment. The point pressed by Pocock, however, is that the conservative modernity he portrays was so peculiarly forceful in England as to set her apart from the rest of Europe. He even questions whether one can speak of an English Enlightenment in the same sense as that of the French, Germans or Scots. The reason seems to be the English – eventually British – constitution. The outcome of the English religious wars, and especially of the Glorious Revolution, was the sovereignty of the King-in-Parliament and the Anglican Church-state. The former turned ruling into a political process in which public opinion was so significant that it drew in educated minds as opinion-makers and -seekers and diverted them from becoming a secluded and potentially oppositional élite of philosophes. At the same time enlightened conservatism was obviously attractive to a large section of the Church, whose establishment as part of the English state was premised on the need for a bulwark against any resurgence of enthusiasm. There was thus a significant unity of purpose between Church and Enlightenment – Pocock even talks of the Enlightenment as ‘clerical’ – and the former learnt amazingly quickly to tolerate the ‘sceptical’ excesses of the latter. In short, the peculiarity of England was that the strong modernising drive that we identify with the Enlightenment was integral to the preservation of the establishment in state and Church.

Although Pocock has not had occasion to spell this out at any length, he seems to imply that in most parts of the European continent, and especially in France, the constitution of state and Church prevented such ready absorption of Enlightenment ideas. The ambiguity of the relationship between *ancien régime* and Enlightenment made the latter itself ambivalent, and its – often exaggerated – potential as an oppositional force was only brought out by a political culture unable to utilise schemes of reform to secure existing social and political institutions. It was this situation in France that allowed radical and eventually revolutionary ideas to take over – or overtake – Enlightenment on the Continent. In England, by contrast, the French Revolution soon came to be seen by many as a revolt *against* Enlightenment values and, in Burke’s analysis, as a relapse into the barbarism of religious enthusiasm.⁶

⁶ For Pocock’s understanding of Burke, see ‘The Political Economy of Burke’s Analysis of the French Revolution’, in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, pp. 193–212; ‘Introduction’, in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis, IN, 1987), pp. vii–lvi; and ‘Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-revolution’, in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. III: *The Transformation of Political Culture 1789–1848*, eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Oxford, 1989), pp. 19–43.

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Although England was dominated by a conservative clerical Enlightenment, this was not the only form of Enlightenment in Britain. Scotland found herself complexly situated between continental and English traditions, and her attempts to respond in enlightened ways have attracted great scholarly efforts in recent years.⁷ Similarly in England itself some of those who were excluded from full membership of the Anglican Church-state because of their dissent from its central articles of faith were clearly modern men of the Enlightenment. The question is whether their Enlightenment had more in common with the conservative one from whose clerical establishment they dissented or with the radical one that eventually emerged on the Continent. This question is the subject of the following studies.

It is tempting to see enlightened Dissent as a Trojan horse full of continental-style *philosophes* ready to burst upon the English *ancien régime*. As Pocock says,

There was an Enlightenment of and by the increasingly rationalist sects, as well as an Enlightenment directed against the enthusiasm of the sects . . . If we were to present the Anglo-American crisis of the 1770s in Franco Venturi's terminology, as part of the *crisi e caduta dell'antico regime*, we should have to do so by saying that the Dissenting Enlightenment rose against the conservative Enlightenment, and particularly against the latter's aristocratic and clerical components (which did not cease to be enlightened in their own way).⁸

This rising became complete with the reaction to the French Revolution of Price, Priestley, Paine and Godwin, who all came from Dissenting backgrounds.⁹

The problem with this picture, as Pocock of course is well aware, is that it is too neat to capture the complexity of enlightened Dissent as a whole. The purpose of this volume is to present and analyse this complexity, which begins with the very label for the subject studied. Properly speaking 'Rational Dissent' meant the rejection of Calvinism and the denial of the necessity of spiritual regeneration.¹⁰ Indeed, the label was – and is – often taken to be more or less synonymous with

⁷ See the Bibliography in Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh*, (Princeton, NJ, 1985), pp. 329–76; and the Introduction to Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (fn. 3).

⁸ Pocock, 'Conservative Enlightenment', pp. 97–8. Pocock's reference is Franco Venturi, *Settecento Riformatore*, iv (1): *La Caduta dell' Antico Regime; i grandi stati dell'Occidente* (Turin, 1984).

⁹ See Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine. Social and Political Thought* (Boston, 1989); Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (Ithaca, NY, 1986).

¹⁰ See Alan Saunders, Chapter 10 of this volume.

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intellectual Unitarianism. The problem with these definitions is that they exclude a large number of English Dissenters who found it eminently possible to adopt an Enlightenment agenda very similar to that of the mainstream clerical modernism of the establishment without committing themselves to quite so stark a choice between inspiration and reason as their guide to the Word. After editing the following essays, I prefer to use 'Enlightened Dissent' for this wider and much less well-defined group, but I have to agree that 'Rational Dissent' is commonly accepted in this sense too.

The opening essay by Robert Webb (Chapter 2) explains some of the necessary conditions for the emergence of such a phenomenon as Enlightened Dissent. Most important, perhaps, was a broadly based rational religion characterised by a determination to combine reason and faith and by a will to tolerate different ways of doing so. It was a spirit generous enough to appeal not only to a wide latitudinarian spectrum of the Established Church and, by the middle of the eighteenth century, to most Presbyterians, but also to many Congregationalists and Baptists, as Webb points out, even much later in the heyday of evangelicalism. Rational religion was, in other words, a *modus vivendi* in the broad field between High-Church Anglicanism, orthodox or evangelical Dissent and deism.¹¹

The important point is that this common religious denominator was only made possible by the divisions it tried to straddle. Deep disputes in Christology and ecclesiology had divided English Protestantism over the question whether it was, or could be, an ecclesiastic polity. Yet England manifestly was a Christian Protestant polity and there was a need across a wide spectrum of denominations for some theological justification of this historical *fait accompli*. In accounting for the need, Webb's essay becomes an historical overview of the emergence of Enlightened Dissent.

In purely theoretical terms, views of state and Church may be divided into four broad categories: those that see both as divinely instituted (often as one body); those according to which both are conventional, 'man-made' arrangements; and those for which either state or Church is of divine, and the other is of human, making. In the first category, we find the basis for the dominant form of ecclesiastical politics in Britain. This was the notion which high, and not so high, Anglicans shared with

¹¹ See also Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, vol. 1: *Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge, 1991). For a wider intellectual context, see Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1991).

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Roman Catholicism, that Church and state are two aspects of the same historical body. On this view humanity, considered as a Church, is heir to the disciples' faith in Christ, hope for themselves and charity to each other. Considered as a state, humanity is organised to do duty to God's temporal vicegerents on earth and to themselves and each other in their respective stations in life. This standpoint is analysed in Anthony Waterman's essay (Chapter 8) and shown to be the central target for Rational Dissent.

Diametrically opposed is the idea that both state and Church are purely conventional bodies created through compacts of individuals for mutual convenience. On such a view, the state is a civil institution for the protection of all private organisations, and Churches are among the latter. This idea had its origins in the fundamental evangelical rejection of intermediaries, especially 'authoritative' intermediaries, between God's word and individual consciences. The primacy and privacy of conscience was the core of such religion, which was not, of course, exclusive to Dissent. It always had Low-Church representatives in the established Church. But one of the most important developments in this view took place, in the main, within Dissent. This was a gradual change from concern to protect the intimacy of the individual with his Maker, to concern for the privacy of conscience, whatever the latter was conscientious about. This was at the heart of the transformation from Old, orthodox Dissent to Enlightened and Rational Dissent, and it is a recurring theme in the following essays, reaching a concentrated discussion in Alan Saunders's analysis of the epitome of this development, Priestley's reception of the key Dissenting idea of candour (see Chapter 10).

A third and very wide category of Protestants would see the Church as, in some sense, of divine origin and the state as a conventional human institution. At least in its general form, this view facilitated a *rapprochement* between many elements of Enlightened Dissent and Whig latitudinarian Anglicanism. Of fundamental importance here was Bishop Hoadly's writing and preaching early in the century – sketched by M.A. Stewart as part of his complex story (Chapter 3) – while the full cultural, political and social impact of this alliance was felt only after mid-century, as explained at length by John Seed (Chapter 6) and John Gascoigne (Chapter 9).

The logical fourth possibility – the Church as a convention and political society as a divine institution – is at first sight implausible, yet in a sense it is most important to the following studies in complexity. For there was a significant strand in eighteenth-century British thought according

to which sociability was the essence of the divine dispensation for human nature, while the mere *forms* of worshipping this dispensation simply swelled the ranks of *adiaphora*, things theologically indifferent. This is, in broad terms, the standpoint adopted by the mainstream of the Scottish Enlightenment, as initiated by Francis Hutcheson and George Turnbull.¹² According to these thinkers, man's natural sociability, or benevolence, demanded for its proper flourishing that the individual fulfil a set of duties and protect a number of rights. The means to this were contractual arrangements of civil and political society, but the goal was the realisation of the natural moral community to which humanity was providentially disposed. Depending on the emphasis required in particular situations, this line of thought could thus appear individualistic-contractarian in its conception of social life or as a holistic and teleological naturalism. Furthermore, the sociability ascribed to humanity could be stressed variously as a natural disposition or tendency and as a power of judgement about our action (in God's image) to promote the happiness of moral creation. Indeed, the latter could, with infinite nuances, shade into an ideal of rational piety that became one of the long-lasting legacies of Enlightened Dissent, as shown in Robert Webb's second essay (Chapter 12).

This flexible Scottish 'moderatism' was of utmost importance to the development of Enlightened Dissent in England, as we see from the close personal and institutional links studied in the essays by Stewart (Chapter 3), Martin Fitzpatrick (Chapter 4) and David Wykes (Chapter 5).¹³ Yet relations were exceedingly complex. For one thing, the philosophical core of Hutcheson's and Turnbull's ideas was to a large extent formulated in the context of one of the early encounters between Church and Dissent after 1689. In Ireland, high Anglicanism, evangelical Dissent and Scots Calvinism met head-on in the 1690s yet, by the 1720s, the Irish stage had seen notable formulations of latitudinarianism and Enlightened Dissent, as well as Hutcheson's most important work. For both historical and doctrinal reasons, therefore, it is of great importance to include this Irish seed-time in our study of Enlightened Dissent, as Stewart's essay shows.

The complexity and ambiguity of the connection between Dissenters and Scots are compounded by the fact that so many on both sides felt

¹² See Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (fn. 3) ch. 2.

¹³ See also Peter Jones, 'The Polite Academy and the Presbyterians, 1720–1770', in John Dwyer, Roger A. Mason and Alexander Murdoch, eds., *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 156–78.

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able to make some form of compromise between evangelical enthusiasm and Hutchesonian benevolism.¹⁴ Consequently, it remained uncertain to what extent they would see society as a contractual association of individual spirits or as a moral collective for the exercise of virtue. The tendency of Dissenters to opt for the former and to seek political freedom to participate in governance, and of Scots Moderates to trust moral education to civic virtue in the service of the common good, often needed the forceful intrusion of momentous political events to be sharply crystallised. The American and French Revolutions were, of course, the events to do this, and we see these issues laid out in Fitzpatrick's analysis of the correspondence of the Dissenting banker Samuel Kenrick and the Scots minister James Wodrow (see Chapter 4).

The complexity went much further. Richard Price presented Rational Dissent's most forceful case for a vigorous participatory politics, as Fitzpatrick also reminds us. But Price did so on the basis of an – ultimately Neoplatonic – idea of the human mind as inherently active and sociable, and both the philosophy and the associated politics had more than a little in common with the foremost of Scottish Common-Sense thinkers, Thomas Reid.¹⁵ The most notable other leader of Rational Dissent, Joseph Priestley, adopted a materialist and associationist philosophy and used it as the premise for a forceful individualistic ideal of political liberty, which Alan Tapper presents in Chapter 11. At the centre of Priestley's political thought was the sharpest articulation of the apolitical side of Dissenting ideals, namely that both moral and material economy could best be pursued with only minimal interference by government.¹⁶

Irrespective of philosophical differences, Dissenters in practice pursued the participatory ideal through practical political and social involvement for its realisation.¹⁷ This was, in many ways, forced upon

¹⁴ See Ned C. Landsman, 'Presbyterians and Provincial Society: The Evangelical Enlightenment in the West of Scotland, 1740–1775', in John Dwyer and Richard B. Sher, eds., *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 194–209.

¹⁵ See Henri Laboucheix, *Richard Price as Moral Philosopher and Political Theorist*, trans. S. and D. Raphael (Oxford, 1982), pp. 73–4. For Price, see *Political Writings*, ed. D.O. Thomas (Cambridge, 1991). For Reid's politics, see 'Some thoughts on the utopian system', in his *Practical Ethics. Being Lectures and Manuscripts on Natural Religion, Self-Government, Natural Jurisprudence, and the Law of Nations*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Princeton, NJ, 1990), pp. 277–99.

¹⁶ Priestley's central political ideas are now accessible in *Political Writings*, ed. Peter N. Miller (Cambridge, 1993). Important discussions of the relationship between Priestley's theology and politics include Mark Philp, 'Rational Religion and Political Radicalism', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 4 (1985), 35–46, and Martin Fitzpatrick, 'Heretical religion and Radical Political Ideas in Late Eighteenth-Century England', in Eckhart Hellmuth, ed., *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 339–74.

¹⁷ Cf. the work of James Bradley mentioned below.

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them by the circumstances in which they had been placed by the law in the wake of the settlement in 1689. This legal framework for Dissent and the response to it by Dissenters through legal practice and jurisprudential thought is analysed by Wilfrid Prest in Chapter 7.

While Enlightened Dissent's not insignificant legal contribution has been little discussed, the question of its more general socio-economic and political impact has been the subject of controversy. In the much-discussed '*ancien régime* thesis' of Jonathan Clark a direct theoretical link is asserted between religious heterodoxy and political radicalism, an argument that is interestingly revised and developed in Waterman's essay (Chapter 8). At the same time Clark suggests that the Rational Dissenters who presented this politico-religious heterodoxy constituted a small intellectual élite of marginal men.¹⁸ By contrast, James Bradley has maintained that while Dissenters were indeed politically influential, it was Dissent over a wide front that led to political activism and radicalism, that the role of Price, Priestley and their associates has been exaggerated, and that in regard to politics it is of little use to discriminate between the various Dissenting denominations.¹⁹ In a wide-ranging survey of the issues raised by these and many more scholars, John Seed (Chapter 6) argues that in its heyday from the end of the 1770s to the end of the 1790s, Rational Dissent was a significant force in English public life which cannot be considered marginal. Its very success in integrating with the established order, however, led to deep ambiguities. On the one hand, it muted democratic, let alone more egalitarian, tendencies and made sure that Rational Dissent on the whole was very much part of the conservative Enlightenment indicated above. On the other hand, the fact that the legal and political basis for the Rational Dissenters' success was so tenuous tended in the opposite direction, namely towards a search for radical reform. The picture is further complicated by the fact that it is often difficult to fathom the extent to which apparent radicalism is simply dressed-up anti-authoritarianism resulting from Dissent's traditional anti-clericalism, a point stressed in Robert Hole's recent work.²⁰

¹⁸ Jonathan Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 5. Cf. also Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986), ch. 6.

¹⁹ James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-Conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990). Cf. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown and Public Opinion* (Macon, GA, 1986).

²⁰ Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760–1832* (Cambridge, 1989). Concerning anti-clericalism and its political implications, see also J.A.I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992).

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Institutionalised Dissent began with the great ejection in 1662 of ministers, university dons and schoolteachers who refused to accept the Book of Common Prayer, and the ministry and education remained the defining factors in Dissent. The rationalising of parts of Dissent must therefore in large measure be understood as the rationalising of the clerical training. This is a recurrent theme in several of the following essays, but David Wykes provides a concentrated assessment. In a major revision of the now-dated standard literature,²¹ Wykes concludes that, significant though they were, the colleges linked with Rational Dissent proper have been overrated in their significance both for Rational Dissent and for education in general. At the same time, however, he adds much evidence to the point made in several contexts in these studies, that the dividing lines between Orthodox, Enlightened and narrowly Rational Dissent were often extremely blurred. Dissenting colleges were decisive in spreading this broader and vaguer rational or intellectual approach to religion, which remained a coherent style well into the nineteenth century, as Robert Webb shows in a close analysis of the central ideal of rational piety (Chapter 12).

Generally speaking, we may say that the rational religion which was the basis for a broad spectrum of Enlightened Dissent shared with orthodox Dissent some belief in original sin and with radical Rational Dissent some trust in the powers of humanity to alleviate the effects of such sin through individual self-betterment and piety fostered by rational social and institutional arrangements. Variations on these themes sustained a wide field of ambivalent Dissent that was open to many different influences. Much work has been done on the rise of evangelicalism and its transformation of Dissent,²² but there has been relatively little investigation of the extent to which Dissenters managed to combine evangelical piety with Enlightenment ways, such as the acceptance of scientific progress and the pursuit of politeness. Recently, however, David Bebbington has stressed the importance of the issue and Robert Webb's essay on rational piety (Chapter 12) mounts a spirited campaign on it.²³

For the Rational Dissenters who rejected original sin, self-betterment and piety were no longer a compensatory mission but a fulfilment of

²¹ See references in notes 3 and 4 to Wykes's essay (Chapter 5).

²² See for, example, Deryck W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People: Itinerancy and the Transformation of English Dissent, 1780–1830* (Cambridge, 1988).

²³ See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), ch. 2. Cf. also the fine discussions in John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1991), esp. of Priestley, pp. 177–81.