Introduction

RELIGION AND HISTORY FROM RESTORATION TO ENLIGHTENMENT

When Hilkiah the high priest found the original complete book of the Mosaic Law, he was not reprimanded and discouraged from producing it but had it carried immediately by Shaphan the scribe to good King Josiah, and found presently a reformation according to it undertaken by him.¹

Religion is the pillar on which the great fabric of the microcosm standeth. All humane societies, and civil associations, are without Religion, but ropes of sand, and stones without mortar, or ships without pitch.²

That religion doth now consist, not so much in obeying the dictates of the Holy Spirit, as in defending Men’s own fantastical opinions; Charity is now no part of religion, but discord and implacable hatred pass under the masque of Godly zeal.³

Writing in the late 1670s to the libertine Rochester, Charles Blount (1654–93), early deist and Freethinker, commented upon Averro’s idea that the whole world was deceived by religion, ‘for supposing that there were but three laws, viz. that of Moses, that of Christ, and that of Mahomet: either all are false, and so the whole world is deceived; or only two of them, and so the greater part is deceived’.⁴ This idea of religion as the political device of the three great impostors is most commonly attributed to the radical French treatise Le Traité des trois imposteurs published in 1719. The French text is considered by scholars of eighteenth-century ideas to be one of the primary documents of Enlightenment Freethought; or as the introduction to the treatise succinctly commented, ‘a complete system of

¹ W. Whiston, Primitive Christianity reviv’d (5 volumes, 1711–12), I: Appendix: An Account of the Convocations Proceedings with Relation to Mr Whiston’, 3.
³ B. Spinoza, A Treatise Partly Theological and Partly Political (1689), 156.
⁴ C. Blount, The Oracles of Reason (1693), 123–4, and following.
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atheism.⁵ As the title of the work suggests, the author (or authors) of the work indicted all organized religion (Judaism, Islam and Christianity being merely the main examples) as fictional imposture. All religion is the combination of human ignorance, historical circumstance and priestly corruption. Priests and monarchs have (and by implication always have) created false revelations to gain political obedience from an ignorant and fearful laity. Prejudice, passion and fear were the components of popular belief: theology was human contrivance. As one historian has commented, the Traité was a digest of all the most radical irreligious arguments of the period.⁶ In both the published and clandestine work, the sacred histories of Moses, Christ and Mohammed are given a Machiavellian turn.⁷ The theologies of the Judaeo-Céstian orthodoxy were exposed as corrupt opinion rather than transcendent divine truth: the orthodox idea of the soul, of heaven and hell, and the very conception of a divinity, were products of the ‘absurd imagination’. The ‘empire of fable’ described the nature of all organized religion rather than the empire of truth.⁸ In France this work was perennially popular throughout the eighteenth century and has perhaps become identified as the epitome of the Voltairean assault upon the Church of the ancien régime. In English historiography the work is virtually unknown.⁹

⁵ In the manuscript collection of the British Library there is an early eighteenth-century text titled ‘The Famous Book De tribus Impostoribus’, an edition ‘faithfully Englished – with a preface, annotations and additions’. See Bl. Stowe 47. There is also a late eighteenth-century French manuscript and a Latin version ‘De Tribus Imporistoribus’, dated 1709. See BL Sloane 2039 and Add. 12064. The only other known English manuscript is in the Bamberger Collection at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati: it is a variant of the Stowe item in a different hand.

⁶ See I. O. Wade, The Clandestine Organisation and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1730 (Princeton, 1938), chapter 5. Importantly on the authorship of the Traité see S. Berti, ‘The first edition of the Traité des trois imposteurs, and its debt to Spinoza’s Ethics’, in M. Hunter and D. Wootton (eds.) Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment (Oxford, forthcoming). For a thorough examination of the Traité, see S. Berti, Trattato dei Tre Impostori. (La Vita e lo Spirito di Spinoza) (Turin, in press). Many thanks to the author for allowing me to see a copy of this text which will be translated into English and published by Van Gorcum, Assen.

⁷ See N. Machiavelli, The Discourses (Harmondsworth, 1978), and The Prince for a political account of Moses and the Italian Church: for the English background, see F. Raab, The English Face of Machiavelli (1964).

⁸ Stowe 47, folios 27v, 30r.

⁹ This is even more intriguing than it might at first appear: importantly, as Popkin and others have shown, there was an orthodox worry about the existence of such a work in the 1650s and 1660s. Indeed, Richard Smith’s ‘Observations on the Report of a Blasphemous Treatise by some affirmed to have been of late years published in print of Three Grand Impostors’, written and circulated prior to 1671, bears some striking resemblances to the introductory dissertation that traditionally accompanied the French treatise. See R. H. Popkin, ‘Spinoza and the Conversion of the Jews’, in C. de Deugd (ed.), Spinoza’s Political and Theological Thought (Amsterdam, 1984); J. A. I. Champion, ‘Legislator, Impostors and the Political Origins of Religion’, in S. Berti, F. Charles-Daubert and R. H. Popkin (eds.), Contexts of
Why then, given that the concern of this book is to examine the confrontation between priest and Freethinker in England between 1660 and 1730, have I started with a brief account of a French work published in 1719? My point is historiographical. Analyses of the *Traité des trois imposteurs* are almost exclusively Francocentric if not Francophone. Although the most recent scholarship has indicated that the composition of the treatise is a bricolage of classical, Renaissance and materialist sources (ranging in time and place from the Roman Cicero, the Italian Vanini, to the English Hobbes), discussions of the intellectual context which generated the work describe it as uniquely Continental. The only discussion of the treatise with reference to England is to be found in the speculations of M. C. Jacob concerning the involvement of the radical Republican writer John Toland (1670–1722) with the Franco-Dutch coterie that was involved, if not in the composition, then certainly in the circulation of the *Traité*.10 The lack of emphasis upon the English connection is puzzling; and not just for chauvinistic reasons. The conundrum has, I believe, two elements. First, this lack of emphasis is a reflection of the paucity of sources: as noted above, there are only two surviving English translations of the *Traité*, compared with a massive distribution in France.11 Given the profound irreligion of the text, it seems odd that so few copies exist in England, but even more curious that there is little or no reference to the existence of such a radical work, even by hostile orthodox contemporaries. While it is perhaps valid to argue that the *Traité* was not a specific source that radicals in England had access to, or even that Churchmen needed to rebut, it is certainly not acceptable to argue that the central ideas of the work were elusive in England. The second element in the conundrum is that the main components of the *Traité* were manifest in England prior to the publication of the French work in 1719. The radical and public discourse against ‘priestcraft’ conducted by Republicans like Toland against the Church of England between 1680 and 1720 pre-empted the *Traité* in developing ideas of organized religion as imposture, and the political accounts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It will be the ambition of this book to argue that if there was a discourse directed against the English clergy by a body of radical Republican theorists that publicly pre-empted the clandestine literature of French atheism, then it is perhaps time to re-examine the commonplace characterization of the nature of what has been succinctly identified as the ‘crisis’ of the European mind and the ‘origins’ of the Enlightenment as a Continental rather than English moment.

The period from the Restoration to the early years of the Hanoverian

11 See Wade, *Clandestine Organisation*, 124–41; the research of S. Berti and F. Charles-Daubert will bring the location of manuscripts in Europe up to date.
monarchy has been commonly termed an age of transition, from the prerogatives of faith to the claims of reason. According to this interpretation the shackles of established religion were unlocked, banishing the dark shadows of superstition and Christian mystery. Recent work has tended, at least in dealing with the political and institutional conflicts of the period, to reject this proleptic and whiggish vision by reaffirming the centrality of religious controversy. While there has been much scholarly endeavour in delineating the evolutions, contortions and contradictions of civil political ideas during the period, there has been only a frugal examination of the arguments and languages of religious thought.

Contemporary intellectual history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is preoccupied with the history of liberty, and with issues of political sovereignty and obligation. One result of this pattern in the history of political thought has been the concentration upon the great texts of the period. For example, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) has been treated almost exclusively as a founding text of modern political philosophy: this interpretative enterprise has been possible because only Books I and II (the

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12 See G. R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason* (1963); this commonplace is also the premise of much work undertaken upon studies in the origins of the Enlightenment, such as P. Gay's magisterial but flawed *The Enlightenment An Interpretation*, (2 volumes, 1967-), see especially vol. i: *The Rise of Modern Paganism* 149, 313, 319–28, 338–9, 343, E.g. 'In Great Britain the Anglican Church had been deprived of most of its power after the Restoration, even over its own affairs'; see also R. Zaller, *The Continuity of British Radicalism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, *Eighteenth-Century Life* 6 (1980–1); J. H. Pruett, *The Parish Clergy under the Later Stuarts* (Illinois, 1978), 2. For a more sensitive study see R. Porter and M. Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981).

13 See, for example, G. A. Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Queen Anne* (1967); J. Miller, *Popery and Politics 1660–1688* (Cambridge, 1973); W. Speck, *Tory and Whig: The Struggle in the Constituencies 1701–1715* (1978); G. V. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis in Church and State. The Career of Francis Atterbury* (Oxford, 1975). The most recent contribution to a re-emphasis upon the importance of religious affairs is J. C. D. Clark's *English Society 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1985), which, although laudable in its willingness to take religious polemic seriously, has certain dubious methodological pronouncements which mar the value of the work.

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political parts) of Leviathan have been the subject of investigation at the expense of the second half of the work which deals with (in modern terms) the marginal issues of theology and is thus considered theoretically redundant for the concerns of modern secular society. Modern history of political thought (even given Pocock’s, Dunn’s and Skinner’s injunctions on the necessity of a rigorous contextualism) studies politics in a modern sense: theology, religion and the Church are excluded from this secular idiom.

Between 1660 and 1730 the Church of England retained its social power. The Restoration in 1660 was heralded by a reassertion of the political role of the Church. Francis Atterbury, in sermonizing upon the blessed memory of the martyred Charles I, gave an apt description of Anglican perceptions of the Restoration. He wrote, ‘At last the storm ceased, the clouds dispersed, and the sun shone out again in his strength; the Royal family returned, and with it our old constitution in Church and state.’ The Clarendon Code enshrined the principles of Anglicanism with severity. The cause of monarchy and Church were firmly riveted together against all challenges.

The Church reacted sternly against any attempt to loosen its monopoly of clerical authority. The dynamic between the claims of a liberty for religious

15 Please note, throughout this book I use the C. B. Macpherson (Penguin) edition of Leviathan.
18 See D. Witcombe, Charles II and the Cavalier House of Commons (Manchester, 1966) and D. Lacey, Dissent and Parliamentary Politics in England 1661–1689 (New Jersey, 1969). See G. Burnet, History of My Own Times, I, 93, where Burnet reported Charles II’s opinion that ‘he thought government was a much safer and easier thing where authority was believed infallible, and the faith and submission of the people was implicit’. 
toleration, the idea of comprehension within a broad Church settlement, and arguments for the necessary exclusivity of the Anglican Church, provided the axis for both religious and political disputes during the period. The accession of William and Mary the close identification between Church and state became blurred: after the failure of Lord Nottingham’s comprehension scheme, the 1689 Toleration Act established some measure of religious liberty. Many churchmen lamented the decline of their monopoly of theological and moral discipline, but the Church of England still remained a potent if threatened force in society. This book is concerned with the intellectual confrontation between those who defended, and those who attacked, the position the Church held in society. It is the intention of this work to focus in detail upon the religious nexus of debate identified in the clash between Freethinker and priest over the nature of true religion. The relationship between Church and state, and the very definition of these institutions, was a catalyst of political change. Debates about the nature of monarchical sovereignty necessarily intersected with discussions about the competence and independence of the Church. Conformity to the Church settlement was analogous to political obedience, while theological innovation was often considered a form of secular sedition. To define the sacerdotal competence of the priest in a certain manner held implications for conceptions of civil authority. To argue for one form of Church government was to negate the legitimacy of a related form of civil administration. There was no conceptual separation between issues of Church and state, religion and politics.

Issues of theological belief and religious duty permeated almost every facet of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century life. The child was ushered into the world with the incantations of religious ceremony. The pace of life, be it rural or urban, was set by theological co-ordinates. Catechisms, prayers, festivals and Holy Communion marked the passage of the religious year. The focal


20 For a useful introductory survey, see B. Reay, ‘Popular Religion’ in B. Reay (ed.), Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England (1985). For a late manifestation of popular religious enthusiasm, see the case of the French Prophets. Thomas Emes was led by spiritual fervour to proclaim his own resurrection just before his death on 22 December 1707. Emes’ prophecy of his regeneration on 25 May 1708 convinced Sir Richard Bulkeley along with many thousands of others. On the expected date over 20,000 people assembled at Bunhill Fields: the government was so intimidated that troops were sent to quell the threat of insurrection. See H. Schwartz, The French Prophets (1980), especially 79–124; R. Porter, ‘The Rage of Party: A Glorious Revolution in English Psychiatry?’ Medical History 27
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point of this society was the Church and the parson. The sermon confirmed both the injunctions of Christ and the political order in the minds of the congregation. The distribution of the Eucharist was symbolic of the moral, social and political status of the individuals in a community.21 The Church was teacher (the pulpit was the most effective means of communication with the populace), landowner and judge.22 As Richard Steele wrote in 1713 on the extent of clerical authority: ‘You have almost irresistible power over your congregations for circumstances of education and fortune place the minds of the people, from age to age, under your direction.’23

The hegemony of the Church and churchmen (of whatever theological complexion) did not go unchallenged. While there were furious debates within Anglican circles between High Church and Erastian versions of Church government, there were also assaults upon the idea of a Christian confessional state from without. This book intends to examine how radicals like Henry Stubble, Charles Blount and John Toland set about undermining the clerical edifice, and to explore the historical polemics they mustered in their assault on Christianity. These men congregated in the coffee-houses, the republics of Freethought, rather than before the priestly pulpit, to discuss subversive manuscripts such as Stubble’s account of the history of Mahomet, or the clandestine Spaccio della bestia trionphante written by Bruno and circulated by Toland.24 John Toland (1670–1722) is one of the most
important figures of this tradition. He travelled widely throughout Britain and abroad. His foreign visits took him to The Hague, Rotterdam and Hanover. The list of his patrons, colleagues and associates is a pantheon of radicalism including, for example, Spencer Compton, later the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Republican Rector William Stephens, Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal, the ‘atheistical’ Lord Macclesfield, John Methuen, the Duke of Newcastle, the printer John Darby, the City of London Alderman, Sir Robert Clayton, and most importantly, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper. As will be illustrated below, Toland’s contribution to the anticlerical attack took a variety of forms. He collaborated with other writers, for example with John Trenchard and Walter Moyle in the standing army debate, and with Shaftesbury in tracts of the late 1690s. He was a central figure in the circulation and translation of subversive manuscripts.

As a biographer and editor of works, Toland is an interesting and important figure. In particular his editions of Milton, Ludlow, Sidney and Harrington between 1697 and 1700 point to the political traditions he applauded. As well as contributing to the Standing Army debates, the issue of occasional conformity, the Hanoverian succession, and the Sacheverell affair, Toland complemented these political works with his own original researches, writing extended dissertations upon theology, natural philosophy, druidical religion and the metaphysics of antiquity. These works were both published and secretly disseminated. Like the earlier Freethinker, Charles Blount (d. 1693), Toland combined the talents of the plagiarist with originality of purpose. Toland’s relationship with such men as the Earl of Shaftesbury and the commonwealthsman Robert Molesworth is testimony both to his political commitments and his undervalued importance in the political and religious controversies of the period.

The task of this book will be, then, to explore this ‘age of transition’ not in the sense of discussing the ‘birth of modernity’, but examining how the
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Freethinkers set out to challenge the sanctity of the Church. That is to explore what literary or intellectual means the radicals employed to attempt to render the clerical vision moribund.27 Implicit in this investigation will be the insistence that the Christianity or Anglican identity of the period was not simply entertained as a collection of propositional beliefs. Religious belief was a complex fabric of doctrine, devotion and institution. It was not enough to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles, worship by the Book of Common Prayer or believe in the Trinity. Christian belief also included and absorbed ideas about the legitimacy of government by bishops, the sanctity of Churches, and the truth and authority of the Scriptures. There was, as Greenleaf has commented in another context, a ‘hinterland of beliefs’. For the radical Freethinker, however, the whole panoply of corrupt religion (be it Jewish, Christian or Muslim) was reduced to the issue of the authority of the priest and the clergy: the very notion of sacerdos. Their objection was practical rather than philosophical. As Thomas Pope Blount wrote ‘these Spiritual Machiavellians’ corrupted civil society: ‘their chief business is to give a helping hand towards making Princes Arbitrary’.28 All the radical objections against Christianity came to a head in their hostility to the role of the Church in politics. For example, in this light, we might read Hobbes’ Leviathan (1651) as an indictment, not of disobedient subjects, but of disobedient priests who challenged their ghostly authority against the civil sovereign. Priesthood, not divine ontology, was the rub. Rather than deny God, as this book will show, the radicals were concerned to debunk the false authority of the Church. In examining the discontinuity between the age of faith and the age of reason, the investigation at least for the English context will not address how the voice of reason constructed philosophical and propositional arguments against the existence of God, but how a group of like-minded Republicans compiled a coherent strategy for arraigning the ‘political’ power of the Church of England.29

Commencing with a disenchantment with the authority of the priest, the radical polemic against priestcraft tended to redefine traditional conceptions of the exclusive ‘truth’ of Christian belief. This development provided the foundation for what would later become known as an anthropology of religion or the modern idea of Religionswissenschaft.30 This study will then eschew the traditional epistemological investigation of the radical assault

28 T. P. Blount, Essays on Several Subjects (1691), 12, 52.
29 The premise that Freethought or Enlightenment rested upon a rational conception of God (or the non-existence of God) is central to the recent arguments of Kors and Wootton. See note 40 below.
30 See P. Harrison, ‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge, 1990), passim.
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upon the Church in favour of (in a very loose sense) a sociological examination of the conflict. Thus, the intention is not to assess the veridical nature of either radical or clerical statements about God, Scripture or organized religion, but to examine the confrontation in terms of competing human claims to the authoritative interpretation in these issues. The clash between Freethinker and cleric ultimately concerned who gave the more credit-worthy account of the truth – rather than the truth itself. Let me clarify the point. Many recent studies have insisted that the achievement of late seventeenth-century English thought was the epistemological separation of reason and revelation. As Emerson has written, English deism belongs ‘to a European debate about knowledge more than to an English debate about social and political order ... the deistic controversy was about the shape, size, and character of the intellectual world and about how one was to know it’.\(^{31}\) In this reading of the crisis the achievement of deism was to absolve and correct the epistemic sin of the age of faith. Elevating the claims of reason and logic, the writings of Locke (the Essay Concerning Human Understanding) and Toland (Christianity Not Mysterious) simply showed contemporaries that theological mystery was wrong. This pointed out the Church capitulated to the logic of reason. In contradiction to this view, it will be the argument of this book that this interpretation is in some sense a misreading of the ‘political’ context of post-Reformation debates about knowledge. The conflict was not just about the competing epistemological hierarchy of revelation and reason but about who or what institution held the authoritative interpretation of truth. Charles Blount, paraphrasing Hobbes’ thought, pointed to the general issue when he commented:

When we believe another man’s Revelation, not from the reason of the thing reveal’d but from the Authority and good opinion of him to whom it was so revealed, then is the speaker or enthusiast the only object of our Faith, and the honour done in believing, is done to him only, and not to him that revealed it: so on the contrary, if Livy says the Gods once made a Cow speak, and we believe it not; herein we distrust not God, but Livy.\(^{32}\)

The issue was, as Blount commented, about ‘the Authority and good opinion’ of the speaker, rather than ‘the reason of the thing reveal’d’. The question that the radicals posed was not ‘what is the truth’ but rather ‘how have the priesthood gained a monopoly over what is considered and accepted as the truth’. This was not a purely epistemic debate but attempted to address


\(^{32}\) C. Blount, The Last Saying and Dying Legacy of Mr Thomas Hobbs of Malmesbury (1680).