1 WHO WERE THE ENGLISH DEISTS?

Introduction

This study reinterprets the significance of a group of important but neglected writers known as the English deists. It attempts to enhance the understanding of these writers by locating them in the context of unfamiliar forms of cultural life. If this is done, then it is possible to take a historically nuanced approach to their texts. To do justice to these writers and their texts, it is necessary to avoid monolithic patterns of interpretation which reduce them to resting points in a teleological history of secularization[1] and to resist locating them within a framework of changing religious identities. Instead, there is a need to problematize the notion that these writers had single religious identities – that they were *either* Christians *or* deists, and to avoid confusing the label 'deist' with a single religious identity. For these writers had multiple, and not always separable identities, sometimes without the sharp distinctions between them that a contemporary reader might assume. Here this study supplements and extends the exemplary work of Justin Champion in *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* (1992) and *Republican Learning* (2003) in ways which enrich and complicate our understanding of the Enlightenment.[2]

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The writers known as the English deists need to be read in light of the different personae and social roles which they adopted, and with regard for the multiple audiences which they addressed. The fact that all these writers were involved with deism, and all of them took deism seriously, has led many historians to assume that they had single religious identities, explicable in terms of deism. This view, though superficially plausible, is problematic, and reads Romantic conceptions of religious identity into a period in which it was lacking. The fact that these writers took deism seriously does not mean that they accepted deism as a totalizing outlook, or that they advocated deism as a religion that could replace Christianity. It means that their performances in some social roles and personae had a radical edge that alarmed their contemporaries; even they lived in a period without a settled shared cosmology.

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Charles Blount (1654–93), John Toland (1670–1722), Anthony Collins (1679–1729), Matthew Tindal (1656–1733), Thomas Woolston (1669–1733), Thomas Morgan (d. 1743), Thomas Chubb (1679–1747) and Peter Annet (1693–1769) are the writers known to historians as 'the English deists'.[3] They were not all English (Toland was Irish, Morgan was Welsh), nor were they 'the deists in England' (this class was larger), nor even the only writers called 'deists' in England in the eighteenth century. Locke, Clarke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Wollaston, Dodwell, Bolingbroke, Hume, Tillard, Strutt and Dudgeon were also sometimes mentioned.[4] In the view of eighteenth-century commentators, 'the deists' were writers who tended to undermine belief in revealed religion, while claiming to believe in natural religion. This was the parlance established by John Leland's *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers* (1754–6),[5] a language of polemic adopted by later nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians attempting to understand the 'crisis of deism' in 'the age of reason'.[6] This pattern of interpretation needs to be challenged, partly because there is substantial evidence that at least some forms of seventeenth-century deism were classical rather than Socinian or Protestant.[7]

In this first of two volumes I reread the achievements of Herbert of Cherbury, Charles Blount, John Toland, Anthony Collins and Matthew Tindal against the background of Renaissance deism, European free thought and the circulation of clandestine manuscripts. My emphasis falls on the social and political location of these writers, and the fact that they worked in contexts which were less modern in institutional terms than nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpreters tended to suppose. Specifically, these writers wrote before a modern civil society was firmly in place. The second volume of this work, *Enlightenment and Modernity: The English Deists and Reform*, focuses on the contributions made by the writers known as the English deists to the reform both of ideas and practices. In doing so, it offers new readings of the work of Thomas Woolston, Conyers Middleton, Thomas Chubb, Thomas Morgan and Peter Annet and argues that deism in England did not simply decline after 1730, as the existing historiography suggests, but took a more modern form, one less indebted to classical antiquity and the clandestine heterodoxy of the Renaissance. In this more moderate form, deism acquired a popular appeal it did not have outside elite circles until the 1730s. It also made new advances and contributed to the emergence of ideas, institutions and practices later associated with 'modernity'.

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'Deist' and 'Deism'

The standard view that these writers were trying to undermine revealed religion while promoting natural religion[8] does not take adequate account of the multiple social roles in which they were active, or the different audiences they addressed.

It preserves the myth that these writers were deists in a totalizing sense, whereas the terms 'deism' and 'deist' can only be applied to them with caution, and in limited domains. Some historians have argued that deism is indefinable because those called deists had a range of different beliefs.[9] Nonetheless, it is not possible to entirely undo how these writers were characterized in the eighteenth century because such characterizations provided the framework for debate. Hence, as in related cases such as 'Socinian' or 'Rosicrucian', it is useful to retain the labels 'deism' and 'deist', while remembering that these are vague terms of shifting import, and can encourage over-unified interpretations of particular texts.

It is not certain that the writers dubbed 'the English deists' regarded themselves as deists. Blount used the term 'deist', but not of himself. Toland denied all his life that he was a deist. Collins used it only once in print, and then of others. Tindal never claimed in print to be a deist, although he outlined the stance of a 'Christian deist', a position also adopted by Morgan. Chubb admitted that he was trying to promote deism, but refused to call himself a deist in a sense exclusive of Christianity, while Woolston and Middleton claimed to be trying to defend Christianity against 'the deists'. Only Annet claimed to be a deist in an unambiguous sense in print, and then only in a work published anonymously, the authorship of which is disputed. None of these writers declared their views in the open way many historians have assumed, and all of them engaged in practices of partial and non-disclosure. Such practices were common in their lifetimes, and were also adopted by convinced Christians such as John Locke (1632–1704).

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It is also essential to grasp that we do not know what particular individuals took deism to be, especially if what they wrote in print was dialectical, and they presented their views only in part, and with an eye to specific audiences. In the seventeenth century there were different deisms, and some of them were quite different from the vague belief in a deity and in natural religion which most historians have taken to be the essence of deism. Seventeenth-century deists could accept one or more classical conceptions of the *Deus*, and so be closer to outright naturalists or even atheists than historians have imagined. Further, there is evidence that tough-minded conceptions of this kind influenced some of the writers known as the English deists who, in some departments of their mind, were probably therefore further from traditional Christianity than historians have suggested.

'English Deism'

The notion that there was something called 'English deism', promoted by the English agnostic Leslie Stephen in his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), needs also to be called into question. Stephen devoted

a third of his text to 'English deism', and subdivided his discussion schematically into 'critical' and 'constructive' deism.[10] For Stephen, 'English deism' was a latitudinarian attitude to religion, which infected clergy and laity alike in eighteenth-century England. It was religious liberalism taken one step further, involving a combination of the rational theology of Hales, Chillingworth and Tillotson with ideas taken from Hobbes, Locke and Newton.[11] For Stephen, English deism was a rationalist assertion of natural religion from inside the English Church. It was 'English', in that it derived from the religious liberalism that flourished in the England of the seventeenth century, not from any pre-existing body of heterodoxy.[12] Here Stephen, and many historians after him, failed to distinguish between inter-Protestant surface meanings and the heterodox dimensions of these writers' books. As a result, he assimilated their inter-Protestant surface arguments to deism, and then concluded, in over-influential words, that many Christians were saying the same things only in more old-fashioned language.[13] Instead, it is necessary to relate these thinkers to both inter-Protestant surface arguments and to heterodoxy.

Stephen's approach, evoking a uniquely 'English' deism, was also geographically imprecise, in so far as the writing in question also had Welsh, Irish, Scottish, European and later Transatlantic contexts. It also encouraged localist interpretations of the origins and nature of deism in England.[14] Many historians after Stephen have retained his model, but attempted to refine its interpretation. Gerard Reedy, for example, argues that English deism derived from Socinianism, not Anglican rationalism.[15] Another distinguished interpreter, Robert Sullivan, treats deism as a convenient term to describe the revision of traditional Christian formulas which occupied so many English writers between the Civil War and the French Revolution. Sullivan makes deism identical with 'freethinking' or a 'rational theology', and sees its advocates as engaged in a theological conversation with Anglican rationalists, Socinians and Unitarians.[16] These approaches, however, retain the myth of a mild English deism, and fail to discriminate between these writers and a wide range of rationalistic Protestants. In this study I reject this reading on the grounds that it confuses the Protestant levels of these writers' texts with the interplay of less obvious meanings. It is misleading to speak of 'English deism' as merely an outgrowth of English liberal Protestant ideas, not only because some of the liberal Protestantism which influenced these writers was not English, but because some of the deism they encountered was of European origin.

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The English Church

To understand the writers known as the English deists it is also essential to revise the older image of a decadent eighteenth-century English Church. According to the older view, something like deism prevailed quite generally in eighteenth-

century England and the writers known as the English deists were only the remainders of a rationalistic latitudinarian church. Recent scholarship, however, has established that this image of a worldly, lax and compromised eighteenth-century English Church is in need of amendment.[17] The older image derived, in part, from Victorian historians who were Tractarians, evangelicals or agnostics. These writers were biased, although for different reasons, against the English church. Leslie Stephen, W. H. Lecky, Mark Pattison, James Froude, John Overton and Charles Abbey were historians of this type. Recent scholarship suggests, however, that the eighteenth-century English Church was vibrant. High Churchmanship was strong, distinctions between the High and Low Church were blurred, and religious liberalism was far less general than the older books suggest. Consistent with this, many Whig bishops were High Church men, while Dissent was weaker than later in the nineteenth century. Similarly, contrary to the older view that deism, Arianism and Socinianism were part of Low Church spectrum infecting large parts of the educated classes, more recent evidence suggests that Christianity was taken for granted as a social fact until 1720, and in a confessional state dominated by Anglican, monarchical and aristocratic cultural forms[18] even well-known infidels, such as Bolingbroke, were inclined to insist that they were Christians.[19] Consistent with this, many of these writers were constrained by livelihood or social role to be Christians, and some of them (Toland, Collins, Tindal, Woolston, Middleton, Chubb) were obliged to maintain a level of involvement with the established Church.

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Religious Rationalism

The view that the writers known as the English deists were religious rationalists also needs to be handled carefully, especially if this view is taken to imply that their rationalism made them deists, or that their rationalism was of a single sort. As Frederick Beiser reminds us, the religious rationalism of the seventeenth century should not be read in terms of a teleology of secularism.[20] If there were forms of rationalism which tended to eliminate revealed religion, they were not necessarily the rationalisms of the dominant culture. There were in fact several varieties of religious rationalism in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and these rationalisms were significantly different from one another. Not only was there no single rationalism of the type most books on the period assume, but the absence of a stable agreement about the nature of 'reason' and how it should be used on 'religion' was a crucial part of the context in which debates about reason and religion took place.[21]

One strand of religious rationalism looked back to Richard Hooker (1554–1600). In his *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1593) Hooker revived the scholastic tradition of Aquinas, and argued, against extreme Puritan biblicists,

that reason and Scripture were equal sources of religious truth. Reason, he insisted, could know the eternal law of God without revelation, and was the rule by which the Bible had to be judged.[22] There is little evidence, however, that this rationalism made anyone a deist, although it was compatible with the Catholicism from which it derived.

Another strand of rationalism was associated with the works of the Cambridge Platonists,[23] who drew both on patristic and scholastic sources, as well as on Renaissance Platonism. These thinkers accepted an intellectualist account of reason for which reason was a semi-theological intuitive power, not wholly separate from God. They held that 'reason' gave human beings access to the truth because it was, as John Whichcote famously put it, 'the Work of God'.[24] In addition, they advanced speculative philosophies of nature in opposition to the new mechanical philosophies of Hobbes and Descartes. Above all, they accepted a moral realism, according to which good and evil corresponded to differences found in the nature of things. All the Cambridge Platonists, however, were supernaturalists, and insisted on the need for grace. Similarly, although the Cambridge Platonists promoted conceptions of natural religion in an attempt to negotiate Christian religious particularisms and to provide a way to choose between competing revealed religions, their form of natural religion had strong theological connotations, and some of them went further and argued for a minimal universal theology. Joseph Glanvill, for example, distinguished between fundamental and assisting principles of religion, and argued that there were fundamental 'notices of God' imparted to all which were sufficient for salvation, but again this universal theology was grounded in divine activity and innatism.[25] On the other hand, the Cambridge Platonists rejected Calvinism and inclined towards a necessitarian theism (God was a perfect necessary being who conformed his will to what was good in itself) which could have unintended consequences, viz. the delimitation of the divine sovereignty and the exaltation of an immutable law of nature over claims based on an allegedly arbitrary divine will.

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A further strand of religious rationalism was associated with the Tew Circle, gathered around Lord Falkland. Those associated with this circle attempted to discover a basis for certainty in response to Catholicism on the one hand, and to Calvinism on the other. They claimed that human beings had a duty to examine all their beliefs according to reason, and only to believe that for which there was sufficient evidence. On this reinterpretation, someone was a Protestant by virtue of *how* they believed, not because of *what* they believed.[26] This was arguably a dangerous principle but, although members of the Tew Circle were inclined to be hostile to 'priestcraft' and adopted a critical approach to 'ecclesiastical History' this did not lead them to reject Christianity, just as their knowledge of Socinian doctrines did not make them deists. For the most part, they did not follow the Socinian critique of traditional Christian doctrines, and all of them

expected that a fair and impartial examination of the evidence would show that Christianity was true.[27]

Yet another strand of religious rationalism was associated with the group of divines called 'latitudinarians', several of whom preached in the wealthier London churches. They included Edward Stillingfleet, John Tillotson, Simon Patrick, Thomas Tenison and Gilbert Burnet. These men argued that Christianity was a rational moral religion, the truths of which were simple, few and plain, and that anyone who accepted natural religion had no reason to reject Christianity, which was established by reason, confirmed by natural philosophy, and proven by the evidence of miracles and prophecies. Some of the latitudinarians made rationalistic statements in the context of controversies with Catholics and Calvinists, which were then used against Christianity by its critics. The latitudinarians, however, were churchmen, not deists, and, although they held that there was room for 'latitude' about speculative points and institutional arrangements since no form of Church government was dictated by the nature of things or by revelation, they were not Socinians.[28] On the contrary, the latitudinarians sought to free Anglicanism from accretions in doctrine and practice, while remaining within Christian orthodoxy, broadly conceived. They were largely free of the laxity associated with them in High Church polemic.[29] The latitudinarians' project was to articulate a reasonable version of Christianity in plain language, and they rejected complex metaphors and analogies as well as Calvinist doctrines such as predestination. On the other hand, several of the latitudinarians accepted high Christologies as deists certainly did not.

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It is misleading, on the whole, therefore, to suggest that the writers known as the English deists simply took the latitudinarians' principles one step further. All the leading latitudinarians insisted on the need for revelation, displayed personal devotion to Jesus Christ, and fought for conformity to the established worship.[30] If they accepted that reason could judge faith, they did not claim that faith could be arrived at without the help of the Gospel. They also marshalled natural science in the service of Christian apologetics. Indeed, many of them used Newton's natural philosophy to establish the existence of God and providence. None of them doubted the existence of an omnipotent deity or supernatural intervention. They also took prophecies seriously, including millenarian ones, whereas many of the writers known as the English deists regarded the practice of prophecy as superstitious.

English metaphysical theology, another type of religious rationalism, was different again. Following seventeenth-century interpretations of Thomas Aquinas and Suarez, this theology assumed an ontological continuity between God and human beings. It combined a scholastic realism with apologetic attempts to demonstrate specific religious truths. Henry More (1614–87), for example, provided detailed demonstrations of the existence of God, providence and immortality in

his *Antidote to Atheism* (1653) and in his *Immortality of the Soul* (1659).[31] Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) was even more ambitious, and in his *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) attempted to demonstrate not only an eternal and immutable morality, but that many controversial religious doctrines had been established on purely rational grounds in the past. An ontological natural religion could be generated from this ontological continuism, and this natural religion could then be set up against revealed religion, but this possibility was not a prime concern for thinkers arguing against 'atheists' and 'Papists'. As in the case of atheism in France, intellectual moves which subsequently made possible arguments against Christianity were initially advanced by sincere Christians,[32] whose own rationalism was moderated by Platonic and indeed Trinitarian conceptions of reason which implied that reason participated in the Logos.[33]

Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) was the outstanding representative of English metaphysical theology, but again his complex and nuanced views have been oversimplified in much of the literature. Clarke combined *a priori* reasoning with appeals to natural philosophy, specifically Newton, whose physics he read as confirming immaterialist views.[34] He sought to demonstrate that something must have always existed, and to identify that something with a necessarily existing immaterial being. When proper attention was paid to the character of existence, it demonstrated, Clarke argued, the necessary self-existence of an eternal being, who was the intelligent, free and wise author of all else and also of our duties.[35] These were rationalist claims, aimed at 'atheists' and 'deists', and at those, such as Hobbes, who claimed that reason could not identify God's will. They were not in any individuated sense 'deistic'.

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That these various rationalisms impacted upon the writers known as the English deists to differing extents is largely correct, and it is important to note how often arguments developed in the course of intra-Christian quarrels were able to be used later against Christianity itself.[36] Nonetheless, while these writers were all inclined to rationalism, much of it of broadly Christian origin, they were not all rationalists of the same sort. Toland, Collins and Tindal were epistemological rationalists who drew heavily from Locke, especially in their theories of meaning. Tindal, Chubb and Morgan were committed to ontological realism, and used Clarke's metaphysical theology to articulate versions of 'Christian deism'. Toland, Collins and Middleton, in contrast, were fierce critics of Clarke's metaphysical rationalism, and did not derive their heterodoxy from it. Many of these writers quoted the Cambridge Platonists with approval, but, unlike the Cambridge Platonists, they meant by 'reason' a set of instrumental capacities rather than a participation in the divine life, although Tindal sometimes gestured to the Cambridge position. Likewise, apart from Morgan, these writers did not follow the latitudinarians in attempting to reconcile Christianity with natural

philosophy. On the contrary, most of them took Christianity as an external positive religion to be an assemblage of largely erroneous beliefs and practices.

This suggests that it may be misleading to suggest that 'Anglican rationalism' was the primary source of deism. None of the Anglican rationalists doubted that God was a person, although some of them, including Samuel Clarke, doubted that he could be more than one, and no major figure associated with the Tew Circle, the Cambridge Platonists or the group of divines known as the latitudinarians abandoned Christian personalism. They all had a strong sense of God's will, which even Samuel Clarke confessed was not bound by the principle of sufficient reason.[37] The writers known as the English deists, in contrast, almost all rejected Athanasian Christianity, in so far as it treated God as *a person* to whom human beings had obligations. They denied that Jesus Christ was divine and the coequal second person of the Trinity. None of them, with the possible exception of Morgan, regarded personality as a primary metaphysical category, or adhered in their theologies to the Athanasian conception of redemption.[38]

On the other hand, most of these writers did adhere to a form of ontologism for which God and humanity belonged to a single order, a position associated with at least some forms of Scotism, and present to some extent in seventeenth-century Anglican rationalists such as Ralph Cudworth. What needs to be explained, however, is why these writers radicalized this ontologism for their own purposes, while other writers did not do so, and had no difficulty in combining a sincere Christian supernaturalism with philosophical ideas which could be turned against it.

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Deism and the Natural Science

Accounts which associate the 'deism' of these writers with developments in the natural sciences should also be treated with caution.[39] Much of the existing literature promotes anachronistic conceptions of how science, politics and secularization were related in this period, as if natural science and Whig politics were allied revolutionary forces tending to promote secularization. In the early eighteenth century, however, philosophy, science, religion and politics were still under-differentiated, and scientists moved easily between mysticism, natural religion and natural philosophy. The division between the secular and the spiritual arguably had not yet emerged in its modern form. There was little developed sense of secularity, and the clergy often saw no decisive difference between religious and political matters.[40]

Historians who associate the natural sciences with secularization have often implied that there were structural connections between the sciences and religious unorthodoxy. Indeed, they have claimed that the physicist Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), the philosopher John Locke and the theologian Samuel Clarke were scientific intellectuals inclined to Arianism, or even deism. It is a

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mistake, however, to believe that these thinkers' theological opinions can be read off their scientific interests. Newton, Locke and Clarke were divided among themselves, and were more orthodox than the older literature suggests. All three were opposed to deism, and denied that it derived from their principles.

The case of Isaac Newton, which has been exhaustively studied, is particularly revealing.[41] Newton's theology and science were not deistic, but premised on the 'Lord God of Dominion', even if, like many writers labelled 'deists', he envisaged a primitive Christianity free of priestcraft.[42] Locke and Clarke were also opposed to any notion of a God who did not actively sustain the world. It seems clear from recent scholarship that Locke was a convinced Christian, indeed a believer in a world of spirits.[43] Clarke's philosophical theology is more controversial, but again he was more orthodox than nineteenth-century readers believed. Clarke held that God was entirely sovereign and was not obliged to conform his will to reason and nature. He also advocated Platonic notions of participation in the divine mind rather than a God ontologically separate from the universe.[44] It is true that Clarke's principles brought him into conflict with forms of Athanasian orthodoxy. His necessarily existing being was not easy to identify with the Trinity, and Clarke himself tended to Arianism on both metaphysical and exegetical grounds. He also placed a strong emphasis on natural religion, which revelation republished 'with Incentives to obey',[45] maintaining that 'A constant and sincere observance of all the Laws of Reason and Obligations of Natural Religion, will unavoidably lead a Man to Christianity'.[46] This Pelagian emphasis allowed some enemies of 'Revealed Religion' a leeway he did not intend, especially after the establishment of the Boyle lectures when his metaphysical theology, with its combination of *a priori* arguments and natural science, became central to Christian apologetics in England.[47] But there is no evidence that Clarke's commitment to the sciences made him less Christian.

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Similarly, there was no monolithic Newtonian–Lockean–latitudinarian alliance in England of the type sometimes alleged, just as there were no automatic links between Newtonians, Whigs and Dissenters.[48] Consistent with this, developments in the natural sciences played only a limited role in motivating individuals to become deists in early eighteenth-century England, although scientific thought became less closely allied with Christianity as the century progressed. On the other hand, most leading scientists were Christians, while the writers known as the English deists themselves took different sides in scientific controversies.[49]

Deism and Natural Religion

Just as the links drawn between science and deism have been oversimplified, so in much of the existing literature the discussion of the relationship between natural religion and deism has been rather general, mainly because inadequate

attention has been paid to the technical character of different approaches to natural religion.[50] Thus historians have generally alleged that the writers known as the English deists claimed that natural religion was a sufficient guide in matters of religion. This claim, although not incorrect, has often been interpreted as if natural religion stood for a single and self-evident body of ideas. However, there was no one understanding of natural religion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England,[51] and insufficient attention has been paid to the question of *which* natural religion these writers believed was sufficient and for *what* purpose, even though the significance of natural religion for the thought of a particular individual cannot be determined until this is clarified.

In much of the existing literature natural religion is confused with natural theology, whereas natural religion and natural theology, although sometimes intertwined, were not identical in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Natural theology attempted to establish the existence of God, but not our duties, which were revealed. Some forms of natural religion, however, did imply that religion could be derived from reason or, more broadly, reason and nature. In some cases natural religion required a kind of natural theology, but often failed to establish the natural theological claims it required. There were also important differences between Christian natural religion, which often included immortality and providence, and the esoteric 'religion of nature' found in Renaissance thinkers such as Postel, Bodin and Vanini.[52] Both were different from theistic science, of the kind found, for example, in Newtonian physics or in the physico-theologies of William Derham and John Ray. Again, these all differed from attempts to develop a theology of nature, especially one that could be used to reconstruct traditional religious doctrines.[53]

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Granted that it may take time to sort out these matters, the main point is that there was no single cult of natural religion from which deism emerged, and no necessary causal relationship between emphasizing natural religion and heterodoxy. Rather, once more account is taken of diverse versions of natural religion, many of these writers can be read as disagreeing among themselves and with their opponents about which sort of natural religion was appropriate, in which context and subject to which constraints.[54]

Heterodoxy

All these writers were involved to some extent in heterodoxy, where heterodoxy implies both opinions in conflict with established notions of orthodoxy and the circulation of ideas and manuscript materials which were more subversive of orthodoxy than anything which appeared in print. Nonetheless, heterodoxy was obviously an ambiguous phenomenon, and ideas and materials acceptable to specific groups of Christians were regarded as totally heterodox by others. This

matters because a range of educated Protestants were often interested in ideas and materials which other Christians regarded as 'atheism', and there were also significant differences between England, Holland and other European countries in this respect.

The association between the Enlightenment and heterodoxy was more complex than historians have often assumed,[55] and it may not be possible to understand the Enlightenment in terms of what the Belgian Paul Hazard called a crisis of the European mind,[56] let alone a crisis of belief. Many European thinkers in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century did not experience such a crisis, even though they dabbled extensively in heterodox materials. In England, in particular, there was not in this period the sharp sense of Christian as opposed to non-Christian views which historians have often taken for granted, partly because of the diversity of Protestant opinion in Europe. High Church and Evangelical writers were wont to denounce their opponents as pagans and atheists, but they could not conceal the fact that there was no consensus about what Christians had to believe. The fact that all Protestants were deemed heretics by the Catholic Church encouraged a certain inter-Protestant toleration in England, as it did in Holland, and those who sought to silence those with whom they disagreed were widely charged with 'persecution'.

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Disbelief

Among the many who dabbled in heterodoxy, the writers known as the English deists are conspicuous because they combined professions of Protestantism with sympathy for heterodoxy, implying both a willingness to hurt what their contemporaries understood by 'Christianity' and at least the possibility of personal disbelief. All the writers known as the English deists manifested disbelief, as opposed to the unbelief which tormented nineteenth-century English intellectuals. Neither the term 'unbelief' nor the term 'disbelief' is well defined in the existing literature. Granted that both need to be historicized and were different in different contexts and periods, disbelief is neglected as a historical category, despite the pioneering work of Alan Charles Kors on disbelief in France.[57] Kors himself uses the word 'disbelief' in an unclear sense and provides no precise definition of it. Similarly, the major book on unbelief in England, Susan Budd's *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850–1960* (1977), does not recognize a distinction between unbelief and disbelief, even though both are encompassed within its scope.

For the purposes of my argument, unbelief can be characterized, in general terms, as the inability to accept religious tenets. Disbelief, on the other hand, is the positive conviction that religious tenets are false, a stronger position. The distinction is important for my argument because it allows me to argue, in con-

tradiction to teleological accounts of heterodoxy, that disbelief may have been common *before* unbelief was widespread among intellectuals. The point should not be pressed too far, but it serves to question the conventional idea that those who became heterodox fell into unbelief.

Obviously a sharp distinction between disbelief and unbelief cannot always be drawn, and both could occur in the same person, or in different phases of the one person's thought, just as actual lives reveal complex interactions between faith, unbelief and disbelief which resist simple summary. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize the role played by disbelief in England (and probably France and Holland as well) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When intellectuals began to break free of religious doctrines in these countries, they often arrived at disbelief, a condition in which they characterized religious doctrines and practices in negative terms, and reversed their earlier trust in particular doctrines and institutions. Unbelief was often a subsequent and more painful state, in which individuals sympathized with the religious beliefs they could no longer hold, and yearned for the inspiration and coherence religious beliefs had once provided.

All the writers known as the English deists were involved with disbelief to a significant extent, even if their arithmetic at various times remains less certain. They stood out in eighteenth-century England because they entertained in print the possibility that Christianity was false. Further, all of them entertained the possibility that revealed religions were superstitious fables, frauds and impostures,[58] just as all of them expressed an animus against 'faith' that went beyond mere doubt. 'Faith' here often meant uncritical belief in the superstitious claims of priests, not personal faith in Jesus Christ, a disposition which some of these writers treated with respect, provided it was not used to legitimate beliefs contrary to reason.

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This study suggests that all these writers experienced a particular cultural transition in the form of *a reversal of trust in revealed religion*, at least as the clergy interpreted it. As subsequent chapters will show, for some of them (Blount, Annet, Tindal) the evidence suggests that such a reversal of trust was final. In other cases (Woolston, Middleton) the process of reversal was arguably underway, while in the cases of writers such as Chubb and Morgan the reversal was localized, at least for some decades, to specific manifestations of what they took to be priestcraft and superstition.

Protestant Enlightenment, Radical Enlightenment, Early Enlightenment

All these writers, with the partial exception of Herbert, can be associated with the Enlightenment, to which they made major contributions. Nonetheless, to grasp the temporality of their lives and the complex patterns of assertion and restraint found in their texts it is necessary to take due account of the

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political and social contexts in which they lived, the traditions of clandestine and scribal publication to which they may have had access, and the 'eccentric' locations of knowledge and culture with which they worked: locations which meant that extensive resources from classical Greek and Roman Enlightenment were available to them in literary texts, but also that much of the cultural capital surrounding them was in the hands of, or significantly influenced by, the Christian clergy. These writers were not living in secularized cultures, and their own careers and livelihoods often depended on clerical approval, or at least toleration. If these writers had really been the outright enemies of Christianity they were accused of being, they would have lost their jobs and ended, as two of them did, in prison. Further, without clerical toleration, it was difficult for them to access or remain in universities, to remain at the front of contemporary intellectual inquiry, and to take part in the major political and scientific controversies of the day. While these writers could and did seek other sources of information, especially in Europe, it is important to remember that it was the clergy who could lend the books, teach them foreign languages, discuss the finer details of philological and historical investigation, and comment upon contemporary advances in the sciences. It is true that more and more non-clerical forms of instruction and spaces for debate emerged as the decades passed, but those without vast personal wealth and high social standing were forced to seek patronage from churchmen, aristocrats and politicians. They were not free citizens of an international secular republic of letters, but writers dependent on Christian acceptance and toleration, without which it was difficult for them to pay their bills or buy books. To capture the ambiguities and stratagems which followed from this, I use Protestant Enlightenment, Radical Enlightenment and Early Enlightenment as convenient historical markers which can be applied for pragmatic purposes to a variety of particularistic contexts.

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All these writers lived and worked within the context of what J. G. A. Pocock has called 'Protestant Enlightenment'.[59] In this study the term 'Protestant Enlightenment' will be used in an institutional sense to refer to the emergence of less hegemonic forms of political and social organization in Protestant countries in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[60] On this interpretation, Protestant Enlightenment was a political settlement, achieved slowly and in stages, by means of which those of Protestant principles attempted to secure a range of liberties for themselves and their neighbours, and to defend 'the Protestant cause' against what they saw as aggressive ultramontane Catholicism. Actual regimes obviously conformed to such a description only in part and in different degrees, depending on the country and the decade. In England Protestant Enlightenment became a reality only in stages, and the writers known as the English deists contributed to it. To argue this is not to reduce 'Enlightenment'

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to a form of Englishness, or to agree with those, such as Roy Porter, who argue that the Enlightenment started in England. It is to insist that these writers' contributions to Enlightenment depended on English conditions,[61] even though they may in some cases have been influenced by Dutch, French and German sources.[62]

In this study the term 'Radical Enlightenment' will be used to refer to the phenomenon that some intellectuals, publicists and pamphleteers in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were interested in varieties of radical naturalism and monism. They were also often involved in the circulation of clandestine literature, and in cabals or quasi-Masonic brotherhoods of various kinds. Radical Enlightenment was associated in the seventeenth century with heterodox writers and poets and in the eighteenth century with coteries of refugees, journalists and publishers. In these circles religion based on positive doctrines and laws was often regarded with suspicion. Bruno, Spinoza and Des Périers were read, and the possibility that Moses, Jesus and Mahomet were impostors was discussed.[63] Some of these thinkers were inclined to question both the established religion and the existing political regimes in Europe,[64] although the extent of their radicalism in their public performances and political roles can be easily exaggerated.

The fact that the writers known as the English deists operated within Protestant Enlightenment means that they could be involved with Radical Enlightenment to some extent as well, provided that they conducted themselves with due civility and decorum. That these writers were involved with Radical Enlightenment should not be used to attribute single religious identities to them. Quite the contrary, their involvement with Radical Enlightenment made them more multi-faced and multi-voiced and less committed to traditional opinions on major questions. It is misleading to assume that Protestant Enlightenment excluded Radical Enlightenment, or that large parts of Radical Enlightenment were not to some degree Protestant. It is also necessary to make allowance for classical Greek and Roman Enlightenment and for Hermeticism, which were important for several of these writers, although in different degrees. The cultural influences active in the works of these writers were plural, and not yet fully integrated in a single outlook.

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In the same way, these writers can be located within 'Early Enlightenment', understood as a marker for the period in which Enlightenment begins to emerge but in forms which are less explicit than those found in the 'High Enlightenment' associated with the period after 1740, when many European intellectuals rejected Christianity entirely.[65] Early Enlightenment was ambiguous, tentative and multi-vocal. It tended to have multiple and sometimes contradictory allegiances. It was a new stage of emergent practical learning attempting to recognize and interpret itself. The use of this term does not, of course, imply a dialectical

pattern of development or that Early Enlightenment was found everywhere or took the same form in every country.[66]

Making these distinctions complicates the standard interpretations of these writers and avoids several of the dualisms which bedevil the historiography. In this study I take it for granted, as Pocock has long argued, that the Enlightenment was different in England, even as compared to Scotland and Ireland,[67] and also differed from the anti-Christian Enlightenments found in France, Portugal and Spain. That the Enlightenment took different and indeed plural forms in different places does not mean, however, that it is meaningless to speak of a single Enlightenment, defined as an advance in practical learning found in practices of government, the organization of publicity, the management of political economy and the progress of the sciences. Enlightenment in this sense was trans-contextual, as case studies of the Russian, Ukrainian, Iberian, South American, Indian, Chinese and Japanese Enlightenments make clear.

By the same logic, however, allowing a single Enlightenment as a broad characterization of advances in practical learning is not inconsistent with noting that multiple, and, in part, supervening, Enlightenments can often be found at a contextual level within particular countries. In the case of England in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries an emphasis on the structuring importance of Protestant Enlightenment as an institutional settlement is not inconsistent with acknowledging the role of Radical Enlightenment, especially in the circles in which these writers moved, or to which they had access.[68] On the contrary, Protestant Enlightenment as a structuring institutional settlement in England allowed Radical Enlightenment to be received and insinuated into theological debates in a Christianized form.

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All the writers known as the English deists lived in the horizon of emerging Protestant Enlightenment, and some of them (Blount, Toland, Collins, Tindal, Annet and possibly Woolston and Morgan as well) were also involved in Radical Enlightenment. In England Protestant Enlightenment was a successful political, economic and religious settlement which emerged after the Revolution of 1688, and then developed further despite local reversals. It had many levels, and included not only orthodox Christians, but the indifferent as well as freethinkers provided they did not flaunt their irreligion. In public, Protestant Enlightenment in England was an Enlightenment of reason, to which the clergy, lawyers and private scholars made massive intellectual and scholarly contributions. This Enlightenment operated in universities, cathedrals and Dissenting academies, as well as in law courts and parliaments. In private, Protestant Enlightenment in England was expressed in learned societies and debating clubs of several sorts, in coffee houses and in Masonic lodges, as well as after dinner in the houses of the wealthy or on their country estates. It included pious gatherings and political

meetings, as well as, at the more radical end, closed meetings and correspondence under pseudonyms. The structure of Protestant Enlightenment in England allowed for very different publics and levels of disclosure.[69]

There were crucial differences between the privileged world of university scholars and the more shadowy world of political pamphleteers, journalists and tavern orators. Moreover, underground radical movements of ideas and clandestine materials sometimes existed side by side with enlightened clerical elites, with less tension between them than a modern reader might expect. This pattern of multiple social roles, and different levels of disclosure linked to them, characterizes the lives and the books of the writers known as the English deists. These writers were all Protestants, although the exact forms of Protestantism to which they were primarily indebted varied from Arminian (Herbert, Collins) to Remonstrant (Toland, Tindal) to radical Protestant and/or Puritan (Blount, Toland, Woolston, Chubb, Morgan and Annet). This is consistent with Frederick Beiser's insistence that the thinkers of the early English Enlightenment were not 'modern Pagans', in Peter Gay's suggestive phrase,[70] but profoundly shaped by Protestant Christian thought,[71] and also with a realistic interpretation of the various republics of letters which existed in England and in Europe in their lifetimes.

On the other hand, it is also consistent with acknowledging that some of these writers were involved with classical Greek and Roman Enlightenment and even sought to revive classical philosophical opinions and to take classical political and literary achievements as models for certain purposes. Blount, Gildon, Toland and Middleton were all heavily influenced by classical Enlightenment of this type, and inclined to make unfavourable comparisons between classical culture and orthodox Christianity. In the same way, some of these writers (Herbert, Blount, Toland and to a more limited extent Annet) were interested in Hermeticism as a cultural strand which could be utilized and negotiated in private and to a lesser degree in print, but this does not imply that they were not involved with heterodoxy.

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Publishing in a Christian state in which Dissent was at best tolerated and often proscribed,[72] all these writers claimed to be Protestants, and this was not merely 'theological lying'.[73] These writers wrote for diverse and multiple audiences, and for proximate as well as for underlying purposes. They had multiple identities, and could and did adopt different stances in different social roles.[74] This has now been shown in detail for Toland,[75] but the present study suggests that this may be true of these writers more generally. The writers known as the English deists were involved in politics *as Protestants* in contexts in which politics and religion were interwoven. The Restoration re-established a regime under which the Dissenters were an illegal minority and in subsequent decades the tensions between the established Church and the Dissenters were sometimes

extreme. Matters were exacerbated when the Church of England fell into schism after Archbishop Sancroft and four hundred clergy refused to take the oath to William and Mary in 1688. Subsequent struggles between High and Low Church parties were bitter, just as the revival of militant absolutism in the 1690s produced both paranoia and apocalyptical expectations of imminent divine intervention among Protestants. In these circumstances, it mattered that someone was a firm Protestant and loyal to their country. Many were not concerned to agonize over the orthodoxy of those who met these tests, and suspected those who drummed up hysteria against Protestant writers of political motives, as was sometimes the case.[76] Locating themselves within the wider political anticlericalism that developed as a result of the established Church's ambivalent response to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the writers known as the English deists admixed political and religious concerns, just as they crossed boundaries between political and theological issues.

Constellational Writers

The writers known as the English deists can be thought of as 'constellational writers' who influenced one another and had a cumulative impact, both greater than and different from the local concerns which led them to write particular books and pamphlets.[77] As publicists, these writers intervened in a set of ongoing controversies on what contemporaries alleged was the same side, and this shaped much of their contemporary impact. Some of them were intimately connected, and drew on each other's material (Blount, Gildon, Toland, Collins, Tindal). Others shared related but distinct trajectories (Chubb, Morgan, Annet). Still others (Woolston, Middleton) were related as partners in argument, drawing on materials that appeared to subvert the claims of orthodox and especially Athanasian Christianity.[78] None of these writers claimed in print to be infidels. Instead, like the Huguenot refugees in Holland, with whom some of them had contact, they mixed Protestant and radical views freely with a pluralism which is initially unexpected because it implies that they did not choose single religious identities and extend them across all domains. Similarly, the way they presented themselves and deployed ideas and materials is best explained in terms of institutions, political conditions and discursive practices, not by reference to a single world view or philosophy to which they allegedly adhered.

My argument here implies that the work of these writers cannot be reduced to a single banned philosophical movement of the kind posited by Jonathan Israel.[79] Israel's outstanding contribution to the study of the Enlightenment has expanded our understanding of it, and of the previously neglected Dutch dimension in particular. He has also rightly insisted on structural continuities across national contexts and problematized insular accounts of 'English Enlight-

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enment' in ways which have opened up whole new vistas of research. Israel's account of the Enlightenment, however, tends to teleology and underplays the role of religious motivations in the emergence of modern politics, science and culture in Western European countries, whereas many Enlightenment figures retained some religious beliefs or were clerics, just as the Enlightenment had religious as well as irreligious origins.[80] Further, Israel's emphasis on the importance of philosophy for the Enlightenment is in need of clarification. By 'philosophy' Israel means a conception of life rather than a series of technical inquiries, and this is problematic, given his valorization of the importance of Spinoza. Israel is right to emphasize Spinoza's importance, but in my view more attention needs to be given to different strands in Spinoza's thought and to the different ways in which his ideas were taken up and utilized in different countries and contexts, often admixed with classical, Hermetic and radical Christian ideas. The pattern is twisted and complex, and even some of the Dutch thinkers to whom Israel draws attention (Lodewijk Meyer, Adriaan Koerbagh, van den Enden) may be able to be read in more institutionally nuanced terms.[81] But reservations are inevitable given the scale of Israel's achievement.

In the case of the writers known as the English deists, the hypothesis of a single philosophical movement is misleading. These writers were not united by a single philosophy, Spinozist or otherwise, even though they all tended towards a more naturalist outlook. This does not mean that they were atomistic figures. On the contrary, all of these writers entertained the possibility that Christianity was false, which is not to say that they regarded the claim that it was false as a sufficient response to the institutional reality of Christianity in their lifetimes. All of them were read by their critics as secretly heterodox, and all of them were accused of rejecting Christianity because they had fallen into incorrect understandings of natural religion.[82] Their actual views were complex, and we may never be able to determine exactly what they believed about certain topics. Their beliefs were what these writers often chose not to reveal, and their writings often offer less than a frank and full confession of their private views. Nonetheless, all these writers entertained the possibility that supernatural religion was false and helped to promote public spaces in which the credibility of Christianity, as the clergy interpreted it, was questioned. This was a major cultural achievement, and noted as such by contemporary observers in Europe, including Voltaire and Diderot. But they did not argue against Christianity explicitly, although most of them in private took a deep interest in materials that did. All these writers wrote under conditions of religious censorship and against the background of the circulation of scribal and clandestine manuscripts.[83]

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Blount, Toland, Collins and Tindal had access to such manuscripts, and it is likely that Middleton, Morgan, Chubb and Annet did so as well. Some of these manuscripts included attacks on imposture, fraud and priestcraft. A number sug-

gested the idea that all positive religions were political inventions to control and shape the masses, and/or questioned providence, immortality, miracles, creation *ex nihilo*, the book of Genesis, and the moral probity of Moses and other Old Testament characters. Some manuscripts placed Christianity in comparative contexts. Others drew attention to possible alternatives to the received accounts of the early Church. Many urged that true religion could be arrived at by reason, and was largely morality, and some manuscripts attacked the evidences commonly advanced to prove that Christianity was true. A range of these manuscripts identified God with Nature, argued that the world was eternal, and/or disseminated radical ideas about politics, education, ethics and sexuality.[84]

The circulation of such manuscripts needs to be understood in terms in the context of Protestant Enlightenment, which permitted the educated considerable liberty of thought and did not exclude Radical Enlightenment. The gentry, in particular, might think freely, and even drop out of Christianity, provided they did not communicate their sentiments to their social inferiors or cause public scandal.[85] The clergy were more constrained, and were expected to exhibit a degree of belief, but in society generally the right to form one's own judgement about the meaning and purport of the Scriptures was widely accepted, partly because the truth of Christianity was taken for granted. Freethinking about religious questions did not necessarily imply a separation from Protestantism, and the readers of these manuscripts were often prosperous Presbyterians or Huguenot refugees.[86]

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The ambiguities of early Enlightenment also determined these writers' choice of genre and their modes of publication. Hardly any of them wrote books setting out their private beliefs. Instead, they engaged with the Protestant discourses of the day, and made use of genres which were acceptable to the relevant audiences, whether theological tomes, short letters, political pamphlets or collections of literary pieces. We do not know *a priori* that these writers rejected Christianity as a revealed religion, especially since those who questioned the need for revealed religion were often not dogmatic, and recognized that it was difficult to determine the truth of such matters at this distance, given the passage of time and the extent of ecclesiastical fraud. Accordingly, the search for the truth could unite believers in external revelation and those who doubted it as fellow Protestants campaigning against 'priestcraft'. Consistent with this, this study suggests that these writers did not write deistic books explicitly setting out deism, but Protestant books with subversive implications.

Unlike other Protestant writers, however, these writers gave the impression that they meant more than they said. Writing multi-layered books and pamphlets, they took it for granted that some of their ideas were not suitable for every audience. Hence, they advanced Christian arguments directed to all readers, but also hinted at more radical possibilities which more philosophically

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minded readers might like to consider. Attempting to arrive at just notions of God before attempting to interpret the Scriptures, and exalting the sufficiency of natural religion were not inconsistent with Christianity, just as calling oneself a deist in private did not always imply one was not a practising member of the Church of England.

Unfamiliar Contextual Spaces

The key to understanding the importance of these writers then is to locate them within contextual spaces which we do not initially recognize, spaces which imply that many of the conditions for the growth of modern secular thought were not present in England in the early eighteenth century. These writers hammered out doctrines about toleration, society and the public which were relatively new, and which in turn helped to create civil society and the public sphere in European countries.[87] However, these institutions were not well established at the time. We should not assume that these writers operated in the context of a modern civil society with a defined public sphere. Rather, their contribution was, in part, to help bring such a society into being.[88] There was a highly contested array of cultural, political and religious spaces in early modern England that was very demanding for thinkers to negotiate. Moreover, they could only do so by making choices as to political and religious comportment.

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On the other hand, the activities of these writers helped create the spaces they used. When these writers ridiculed the Scriptures they changed the structure of the republic of letters, and it was the novelty that writers might ridicule sacred subjects and texts in print which focused the attention of their contemporaries, who sometimes saw a certain advance for Protestantism in allowing them to say such things. In effect, these writers contributed to conceptual emergence and the growth of practical learning.[89] In the conditions of their own day, social relations between persons of widely differing beliefs were possible, and the contemporary reader is sometimes surprised to find how easily devout Christians, hardened politicians and anti-clericals interacted and combined for specific purposes.[90] In so far as toleration and civil society emerged through these interactions, it is important to notice that later immoveable partitions between believers and sceptics were often absent.[91]

What these writers attempted to be in various social roles and personae did not amount to a departure from or an alternative to Protestant Enlightenment as a settlement to be fought for and defended. These writers sought to promote the rational examination of accepted beliefs in many areas of public culture, but they were not dogmatic about what 'freethinking' would lead a fair-minded person to conclude. They were aware that Christian scholars and natural philosophers were likely to contribute more than a little to inquiries into the truth, and they

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sought the company of those who accepted rational methods of inquiry, whatever their beliefs. Apart from Annet, the issue for them was to achieve a rational liberty and toleration within the state, not to persuade the masses that Christianity was false. Hence, these writers often approached theological questions in a spirit of irony, which critics in the nineteenth century took for satire and sarcasm. Moreover, the irony to which they resorted was often multiple-valued rather than single-valued, and did not lend itself to one-sided resolutions. By providing the milieu of limited toleration inside which more radical ideas could circulate, Protestant Enlightenment made possible highly nuanced interactions between radical and the more orthodox forms of Protestant Christianity in early modern England. In a context in which there was less common religious and political culture than historians have assumed, these writers cultivate multiple personae in order to engage with the presuppositions of different audiences. They adopted ironic and veiled rhetorics in order to address different audiences simultaneously.

Multiple Comportments

These writers had a range of comportments available to them, of which they made strategic use. A sincere Protestant might hold that natural religion was the substance of all true religion. They might also be a 'freethinker', in the sense of one inclined to submit all 'traditionary religion' to critical examination. Finally, they might be interested in 'free inquiry' into a range of philosophical questions, including the existence of God, the extent of providence, and the immortality of the soul. This does not mean that these writers were at liberty to publish their views in an unproblematic modern sense. Writing under the cover of Protestant principles in what was still an overwhelmingly Christian society, these writers were not free to speak plainly on religious questions, and they mixed free inquiry with innuendo. Richard Bentley, Samuel Clarke, William Whiston, Thomas Sherlock, Edward Gibson, Daniel Waterland, John Wesley and William Law all accused them of trickery and deception.[92] In effect, the writers who accused the clergy of fraud and imposture themselves resorted to insinuation and subterfuge. Francis Gastrell saw this paradox as early as 1708:

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> Deist: What think you of *Hobbes*, *Spinoza*, *Blount*, *T*—, *T*—, and many others now Living, who shall be Nameless, for a Reason I know.
> Sceptic: These are all *professt* Christians.
> Deist: How come you to think so?
> Sceptic: Because they plainly declare so in their Writings, as I can easily prove to you from abundance of Passages.
> Deist: Pugh, that's nothing; they were obliged to such Pretences, because they liv'd under Christian Magistrates: this was done to save their Bacon; every Body understands their Meaning.

> Sceptic: Don't they mean what they say then, in such full and express Words? Then they are Tricksters and Cheats, and are not to be believed in anything else they say: And I had thought, that a *Deist* who took upon him to Undeceive the people, had any Principle at all, it was that of *Truth*, and *Sincerity*.[93]

Gastrell's hostile judgement was not entirely misguided, in that all these writers either practised reservation or engaged in a degree of concealment, or both. They did not publish their thoughts in a straightforward sense. Further, publication in print for them was different from the development of ideas, and many of their works brought to the attention of the public materials and arguments present much earlier in scribal or clandestine manuscripts,[94] although some of these writers may have been aware of such manuscripts, and many of them wrote private texts and papers of one sort or another.[95] Nor did they always write every page of the books that appeared under their names.[96] It does not follow, however, that they did not intend the surface meanings of their texts. On the contrary, these writers may have intended *both* the surface and the implicit meanings of their texts.[97] Of course, their writing practices opened them to charges of insincerity or even wickedness, and their contemporaries complained that they planted ambiguous passages, latencies and references to objections to Christianity in their texts, even though their primary arguments were Protestant ones. Sometimes the same passages could be read as illustrating the moderate claims of the text, *and* as alerting the more sceptical reader to the possibility of a much stronger interpretation.[98] However, these writers did not generally argue from such material for a break with Christianity. Instead, they retreated to the claim that Christianity was capable of coinciding with true religion, provided it was sharply distinguished from priestcraft.

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Taking account of these writers' various social roles as philosophers, theological writers, political pamphleteers, clergy, classical scholars, historians, lawyers, university dons and public officials helps explain the political and social activities in which these writers engaged as well as their intellectual friendships. Recapturing the social and intellectual tensions which defined their social roles does not involve playing down the importance of their radical religious ideas, or underestimating the importance which the Protestant thought of the seventeenth century had for them. But it makes it possible to place them in their historical contexts, without either assimilating them to their clerical friends (who, unlike them, wrote nothing tending to diminish Christianity) or trivializing their professions of Protestantism.

Emphasizing that these writers were within Early Enlightenment draws attention to the undeveloped conditions for free publication and debate throughout Europe in their lifetimes. Placing them within Protestant Enlightenment in England leads to a more refined appreciation of the objectives which led them to write, and to a better grasp of the political and cultural regimes under which

they lived. It is also consistent with a better appreciation of their contributions to European intellectual history. Much of the older historiography treated these writers as minor pamphleteers and individual religious malcontents,[99] but again there is a need to lay aside nineteenth-century myth and denigration, and to pay more attention to the contexts in which they wrote.[100] Even Peter Gay, who was more ideologically sympathetic, concentrated on their role as critics of Christianity.[101] This study, in contrast, connects their intellectual importance and impact to the contexts which made it possible. Doing so can seem pedantic and to the modern reader implausible, since it is not difficult, given confirmed structural trajectories in intellectual history, that thinkers will eventually arrive at the positions predicted. Nonetheless, it is crucial to observe that they took time to do so, and individual thinkers often continued in ambiguity long after adopting assumptions which were fatal to more traditional views in politics and religion.

These writers were not atheists or deists in an exclusive sense, but controversialists working with various publics for a range of purposes in a period in which 'the public' was being constructed.[102] Consistent with this, all of these writers were more inclined to accept Christianity as an institutional reality than many historians suggest, partly because alternative institutions had not yet emerged, despite the promissory character of the cabals, philosophical societies and Masonic lodges with which many of them were involved. Here my interpretation emphasizes the actual state of institutions such as 'parties' and the press, and underlines the practices and forms of life in which these writers were situated rather than undeterminable debates about their inner thoughts. The same logic, however, means that these writers could be open to extremely radical currents of thought and cultural practice within restricted domains: that they could debate the merits of various forms of atheism, that they could dream of utopian social orders free from superstition and priests, that they could endorse and even practise naturalistic sexualities without rejecting the need for a Church to teach the masses their duty.

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Structural Change

Much of this study is devoted to particularistic analysis. Nonetheless, I do not deny the importance of structural transitions and constraints, even though I argue for caution in considering particular cases and contexts.

There was a shift in the course of the seventeenth century from the medieval conceptions of theology, philosophy and science to conceptions which were arguably modern, even if the precise details in each case are complex and at times contested. It is often suggested that the universe came to be construed as homogenous, that the quest for a *mathesis universalis* or universal interpretative

system led to a new prioritizing of precise and unequivocal language, that the quest for a unified system of knowledge swept away the medieval insistence on categorical distinctions between different branches of knowledge, and that the new science of the seventeenth century brought with it a new ideal of knowledge as construction. Accounts of this type often assert related changes in theology, as theology was reshaped by univocality and statements about God and his attributes were taken literally and without equivocation. For the same reason, interest in Anselm's proof of the existence of God revived, and there were suggestion that our ideas, in so far as they were clear and distinct, were the same as God's.[103] In the same way, some accounts emphasize that the understanding of science changed in the seventeenth century in relation with the Protestant insistence on the literal interpretation of the Scriptures.[104] Indeed, a lay theology written by layman for laymen emerged, in which philosophy, science and theology were not clearly distinguished.[105]

While these accounts may be too symmetrical and need to be amended in the light of micro-studies, they point to structural changes which made it harder to defend traditional Christianity. The emergence of a universe in which signs referred but things did not, the decline of Thomas Aquinas's *analogia entis*, and the rise of univocity in some forms of philosophy and in some of the sciences relying on mechanized models of the universe, placed Christianity in an unexpectedly exposed position. Univocal science and theology opened the way for systems of nature which excluded a personal God, even if it took time for these systems to emerge, indebted as they often were to one-sided interpretations of the philosophies of Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza and Newton. To this extent, allowing for complexities in particular cases and across national borders, there is some truth in the claim that the Enlightenment was partly the result of technical changes in philosophy and logic (Scotism, Terminism, nominalism) in the late medieval period. Further, these changes had major and unintended consequences with the rise of the modern natural sciences deploying the language of mathematics and aspiring to mechanical explanations. The fact that Aristotelianism continued to be important in Lutheran and Catholic countries does not detract from the fact that homogenizing conceptions of science, reductive explanations, and univocal approaches to semiosis played a part in the thought of a range of seventeenth-century thinkers who directly influenced the leaders of the Enlightenment in France, especially after 1740.

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Catalysts of Enlightenment

Despite its revisionist objectives, this study reasserts a high view of the significance of these writers for the Enlightenment. Accepting that Herbert's position was exceptional and in some respects enigmatic, the writers known as the Eng-

lish deists were important critics of traditional Christianity who influenced the development of philosophical and religious thought in France, Holland, Italy, Germany and other European countries. Moreover, their writings impacted not only in Europe, but in America. These writers were also advocates of significant political, social, legal and cultural reforms. As the Italian historian of the Enlightenment Franco Venturi suggested, they were of European significance precisely because they were able to give birth to radical alternatives from within the relative safety of Britain.[106] All of these writers raised issues which subsequently passed over into High Enlightenment, but, as has been suggested, they did so in ways which reflect the prevailing conditions of authorship and publication. This means that multiplicities and ambiguities characterize their lives as well as their texts. They made significant contributions to the cause of reform in a wide range of areas,[107] but they did so in the period of Early Enlightenment, contributing to processes of rational reflection and debate which would have massive, if often unintended, effects after their deaths. Seen from the perspective of the 1790s they were catalysts of Enlightenment, even if their stances were in their lifetimes necessarily more complex and discreet.

Conclusion

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This chapter has introduced some key distinctions for my argument. It has focused quite narrowly on England, and not addressed the problems raised by the *Aufklärung* in Germany, the features of *Illuminismo* in Italy, or the issue of the possible distinctiveness of Enlightenment in America, where active religious commitments played a major role. In Chapter 2 I introduce a less familiar interpretation of early modern deism in order to explain its background presence in the works of Toland, Collins and Tindal. My strategy is to contest the standard notion of a unified deism by exploring a plurality of different deisms, some of which were probably more radical than we have been led to expect. In Chapter 3 I reread Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury as a Renaissance philosopher with radical as well as irenical views. Herbert, I suggest, may be able to be linked with some forms of early modern deism and was probably aware of underground heterodoxy. In Chapter 4 I build on earlier chapters and read Charles Blount and his circle as involved with multiple deisms and a range of different types of heterodoxy. My reinterpretation suggests that Blount and his friends can be linked with classical theistic naturalism, including esoteric natural philosophy and pantheism, and that Blount and Gildon probably had an impact on Toland, Collins and Tindal. In Chapter 5 I read Toland, Collins and Tindal as three Protestant writers with various identities in their different social roles. I show that they were civil philosophers and republican political pamphleteers as well as critics of revealed religion. So far from having single identities as deists, they were

involved in multiple forms of deism and may have privately entertained radical philosophical ideas. These more nuanced readings imply that these writers were not publicists advancing their extreme views in civil society, but multilayered cultural performers whose activities helped to bring civil society into being. The Conclusion sums up the main arguments advanced in this volume and foreshadows the themes developed in the second volume, *Enlightenment and Modernity: The English Deists and Reform*.

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