

# 1 DEISM, ENLIGHTENMENT AND MODERNITY

## Introduction

Contemporary debates about the Enlightenment have reawakened interest in early critics of Christianity and underground heterodoxy. In this context the writers known to historians as the English deists deserve to be read without the legacy of prejudice which nineteenth-century critics brought to their texts. Charles Blount (1654–93), John Toland (1670–1722), Anthony Collins (1679–1729), Matthew Tindal (1656–1733), Thomas Woolston (1669–1733), Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), Thomas Chubb (1679–1747), Thomas Morgan (d. 1743) and Peter Annet (1693–1769) were more complex and nuanced figures than much of the historiography suggests,<sup>1</sup> and also significant agents of reform in a range of important areas.

These writers have proven more difficult to interpret than general works on the Enlightenment tend to imply. The term ‘the English deists’ itself is controversial, and is used here as a label for constellationally related writers whose historical significance depends on contextually related publications.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation, which I introduced in my first volume, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (2009), and further elaborate in the present volume, directs research away from the over-unified conceptions of the older historiography, which tended to assume that the English deists were the deists in England. More recently, revisionist historiography has tended to argue either that these writers were Protestant Christians, and so not perhaps deists in any substantive sense, or that some of them (Blount, Toland, Collins, Tindal) were more radical than the term ‘deist’ suggests.<sup>3</sup> My work, in contrast, introduces a more contextual interpretation which emphasizes the multiple personae these writers exercised and the diversity of their contributions to the Enlightenment. This interpretation does not reduce either the lives or the publications of these writers to manifestations of ‘deism’. Nor do I claim to know what these writers privately believed. Instead, I emphasize the need for contextual readings of their texts.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these writers wrote texts with more than one level of meaning, and not, as historians have tended to assume, texts with a single ‘deist’ meaning.

Further, all these writers were more complex contextual figures than polemical characterizations from the period suggest. In this first chapter I revisit and clarify further my revisionist approach to these writers, the evidence for which is provided in later chapters and in my previous volume, *The English Deists*.

Most of the older historiography dealing with 'English deism', 'British deism' and 'the English deists' deploys a hermeneutic framework which assumes that these writers were deists in an exclusive identitarian sense. This hermeneutic framework, which has shaped much of the historiography in all European languages, is organized around assertions which frequently go beyond what we know. My approach to these writers, in contrast, does not assume in advance that they were deists, infidels or atheists in an exclusive identity sense. I also qualify interpretations which play down the presence of deism, resort to purely rhetorical interpretations or imply that these writers were simply Christians.<sup>5</sup> In many cases these writers wrote Protestant texts which opened Christianity to objection, or which exaggerated the sufficiency of natural religion, without any need of revelation. Their surface arguments, however, were often not deist but rational Protestant. Put simply, these writers implied more than they said, but what they implied was disputed because they did not set out their private views in their texts.

The pattern of interpretation which sees these writers as 'Infidels' trying to destroy Christianity has its origins in Christian polemic, which itself should warn us against taking it at face value. It owes much to John Leland's *View of the Principal Deistical Writers that have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century* (1754–6). In this work Leland dealt with writings 'the manifest design of which was to set aside revealed religion':

No man that is not utterly unacquainted with the state of things among us can be ignorant, that in the last, and especially in the present age, there have been many books published, the manifest design of which was, to set aside revealed religion. Never in any country where Christianity is professed, were there such repeated attempts to subvert its divine authority, carried on sometimes under various disguises, and at other times without any disguise at all.<sup>6</sup>

Leland assumed that the design of these works was evident to all, and then construed these writings as so many attempts to make objections to Christianity and to set up for natural religion in its place. Leland adopted an epistolary mode. Some authors were the subject of many letters (Bolingbroke and Hume), whereas others were treated in only one letter. He concentrated on objections to Christianity taken out of context, and drew attention to works by Christian authors which he alleged had successfully answered them. Despite his inordinate length (three volumes), he did not analyse any work in depth, or discuss all the writings of any author.<sup>7</sup>

The assumption that these writers held a single non-orthodox conception of God is harder to track, although it is implied in some apologetic works written against them,<sup>8</sup> and came to be widely accepted, partly in the light of discussions in France. It is a form of *Begriffsgeschichte*, written in the history of heresies mode, which posits organizing philosophical concepts behind the surfaces of texts. The notion that these writers were deists in a philosophic history sense needs to be treated with caution, however, because it easily builds orthodox Christian propaganda into the terms of analysis. There were deists in England, but, apart from Annet, the writers known as the English deists did not claim in print to have a special deistic conception of the nature of God. Further, the mutations of heterodox and unorthodox philosophical and religious thought cannot be understood in terms of a single pervasive 'deism'. Seventeenth-century deism was multiple, although the fact that seventeenth-century deists had held a plurality of positions was subsequently forgotten, just as the polemic against Hobbes and Spinoza as deists in the sense of 'improper theists' was confused with the views of deists setting up for natural religion with a list of universally accepted doctrines.

In *The English Deists* I emphasized that these writers need to be read in the context of Protestant Enlightenment in England, and in terms of the wider constraints of Early Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> Early Enlightenment was more pluralist, exploratory and tentative than High Enlightenment, and occurred against a background of less developed political and social conditions. This means that in construing the works of these writers there is a need to avoid over-interpretations which reduce their message to only one of the strands in the texts they wrote. The writers known as the English deists, I argued, did not necessarily have exclusive single religious identities of the kind historians have attributed to them.

In this volume I continue to elaborate this interpretation, taking account of changes in regime and the politics of publication in the course of the eighteenth century. Protestant Enlightenment became more open to the public discussion of ideas as the century passed, including ideas which had once been clandestine, and the term 'Early Enlightenment' works less well for the period 1730–60. Nonetheless, it is crucial to take account of the contextual specificities of Protestant Enlightenment in England, while recognizing that the older notion of an 'English Enlightenment' requires some qualification. Many of these writers were aware of European heterodoxy and may have seen clandestine manuscripts, and their works were characterized by a degree of non-disclosure. To this extent, both 'deist' and 'Christian' readings of their writings tend to be insensitive to the textual politics of their lives, and to the limitations on publication which they took for granted. None of these writers should be read as if they set out their private thoughts in their books.

### Multiple Personae

In the first volume of this work I attempted to undermine various myths about 'English deism'. To do so, I discussed the genealogies of deism, and the need to achieve more multivalent readings of both Herbert of Cherbury and Charles Blount and his circle if we are to appreciate the role that multiple deisms, European heterodoxy and clandestine manuscripts played in some versions of seventeenth-century deism. I then used this seventeenth-century background to read Toland, Collins and Tindal as three writers operating in the context of Protestant Enlightenment and its theological debates, but against a background of multiple deisms, heterodoxy and both clandestine and scribal publication.

The writers known as the English deists were constellationally related controversialists, working with various publics for a range of purposes. Contextual and constellational considerations make them the writers known as the English deists, not the fact that they were 'the deists in Britain',<sup>10</sup> which they were not. In the lived reality of their lives these writers entertained a range of personae in different social roles, and when addressing different audiences. Blount needs to be understood with reference to a tensional field of arguments and compartments and as the producer of multilayered dialectical texts. He was a man of the world, a philosopher, a religious radical, an Old Whig and a libertine who mixed in the highest circles and had different faces for different audiences. From an eminent country family, Blount was friendly with the poet and playwright John Dryden and may have known Archbishop Tillotson. In his political activities he was a Low Church Protestant. At a more private level he circulated classical texts and heterodox manuscripts among a circle interested in classical philosophical texts promoting esoteric materialism and Stoic pantheism. At yet another and more public level Blount published works full of insinuations against revealed religion. Nonetheless, although he was interested in multiple deisms and circulated at least two different deist systems, his activities were not reducible to deism. Blount modified Herbert of Cherbury's arguments and made use of some of his materials in his attempts to cast doubt on revealed religion. In his writings he combined political Protestantism, classicism, multiple deisms and borrowings from English, French and Italian free thought. The heterodoxy Blount promoted was not the mild extension of religious liberalism which older historians associated with 'English deism', but to a significant degree classical, international and European. However, it was not his only focus of interest.

John Toland, Anthony Collins and Matthew Tindal continued this complex pattern. They were all Protestants, heavily immersed in contemporary theological debates. Specifically, they were radical Lockeanes, who developed Locke's Ideism in a reductionist direction. They were also Whigs, who sought to restrict the power of the Church and to promote political, religious and cultural

change, where these were closely connected. Although they may have been more indebted than some of the literature suggests to the radical deisms of the seventeenth century, including the works of Blount and Gildon, and to European heterodoxy, their comportments varied with audience and context, and neither deism nor heterodoxy was their only concern or interest.

Toland was a superb strategic writer and, despite a considerable scholarly literature to the contrary, no one knows what he really believed. At one level he was a Low Churchman, respected in Remonstrant circles. As a Whig propagandist, he wrote as a Protestant, prepared if necessary to take the sacrament. Privately, he circulated scribal publications and clandestine manuscripts, but, as Justin Champion has shown,<sup>11</sup> even in these texts he offered different faces to different audiences. There were related differences in how he presented to audiences in Europe ranging from eminent theologians to Quakers to collectors of anti-Christian materials.

Toland, the civil theologian, was genuinely committed to promoting a rational Christianity, just as he was privately interested in pantheism and probably atheist arguments.<sup>12</sup> For speculative purposes, he may have accepted some transformation of classical theistic naturalism, but deism, in this classical sense, was only one of his concerns, and only pertinent in some of his identities and social roles. It was an undercurrent rather than the main purport of his writings. As a classically-educated historian, Toland pursued a range of critical inquiries designed to expose fables and myths. Like Blount and Gildon, he was steeped in European heterodoxy, esoteric materialism and Renaissance naturalism, and entertained radical ideas in many different areas.

Anthony Collins was an unbeliever, with no specific system to defend. He was involved with underground heterodoxy in Europe, collected clandestine materials and may have been interested in atheism, both as a speculative position and as a social possibility. In private, he argued on occasion against any form of revealed religion. Nonetheless, his works were more contextually aimed than this suggests, and were written dialectically at more than one level. For social purposes, Collins was a member of the Church of England who chose rational Christians as his close friends. As a Whig he was a Low Church Protestant, concerned to extend the right of free examination and impartial inquiry. As a civil philosopher, he was a 'freethinker' who relied on his own reason. As a speculative philosopher, he was a materialist who may have identified the infinite extended being within the universe, although this is uncertain.

Matthew Tindal was an outstanding civil lawyer and Senior Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, forced to take holy orders. As a Whig pamphleteer concerned to defeat the High Church party and Jacobitism, he was a Low Church Christian, even if an anti-clerical one. As a lawyer, a civil philosopher and a political theorist, Tindal was immersed in liberal Protestant thought and comported

himself as a Low Church Christian. He was also a leading advocate of Remonstrant ecclesiology in England, and adapted the Dutch concept of churches as voluntary associations to a country with an established national church. While it is possible that his interest in underground heterodoxy and free thought was more extensive than this suggests, he did not challenge orthodox Christianity directly until his last work, published when he was seventy-three. Even then he did not explicitly reject Christianity, but introduced 'Christian Deism' as a strategic position in the context of his controversy with Samuel Clarke. For most of his life, Tindal was an enemy of 'priestcraft', who encouraged his contemporaries to think freely about religion, natural philosophy and politics.

The less well-known writers in this group also defy simple compartmentalization. Thomas Woolston was a Cambridge divine and an expert on the Church Fathers, especially Origen. He became famous throughout Europe for his attack on Jesus's miracles, but in England he was widely regarded as insane. Woolston insisted, however, on his rationality and sincerity in addresses to the Chief Justice, and in conversations with eminent contemporaries. He was a more serious theological thinker than the standard interpretations suggest, and may have had his own mystical theological scheme.

Conyers Middleton, who, like Herbert of Cherbury, belongs among these writers only at times for constellational reasons, was a Cambridge divine, sometime librarian of Cambridge University, first Professor of Geology at Cambridge, a distinguished classicist and a Whig as well as a ruthless religious controversialist. A champion of Protestantism whose loyalty came to be questioned, Middleton was an Erastian who never argued for deism as an alternative to Christianity as the public religion of England. As an academic in the classical sense, his views may have been less than orthodox, and he was full of contempt for popular religion and the orthodox divines who defended its superstitions. Middleton was always concerned to discover the truth, in contrast to 'theorists' wedded to their favourite 'hypotheses'.

Finally, Thomas Chubb, Thomas Morgan and Peter Annet were popular writers of the period without influential political, legal or ecclesiastical roles. Chubb was a Low Church Protestant theologian with Arian or at least subordinationist views, a moral philosopher and a leading eighteenth-century political and social theorist. He attended his local Anglican parish church and was prominent in local debating societies. Morgan was a moral philosopher, a medical doctor, a Newtonian physico-theologian and a republican civil theologian as well as a bitter enemy of the law of Moses. Annet was a former clergyman, a school master, an educationist, a social reformer, an inventor and a poet, as well as the most notorious anti-Christian propagandist in England.

All of these writers wrote controversial texts on particular topics, but all of them were well established within their social worlds. They were not iso-

lated 'deists', but regular members of the world of Protestant Enlightenment, and respected as such by their less prejudiced contemporaries. Moreover, they deployed their personae having regard to political and social conditions in England. Collins and Tindal were able to attack Christianity more directly in the 1720s than in their earlier works, although they continued to comport themselves as Protestants and Whigs. Woolston insisted that he was a Christian, but may have had some association with those who were sympathetic to less orthodox opinions. Chubb and Morgan needed to work in the community, and always claimed to be Protestants. Even Annet, who was the most radical, began writing under Christian disguises, and was probably more circumspect as the master of an innovative school with Tory friends than he proved as a religious controversialist. All of these writers had identities as patriots, as family members, as members of professions and as Protestants which had less to do with their private religious or philosophical speculations than historians have implied.

### Multiple Deisms

To gain a more nuanced understanding of these writers, it is necessary to appreciate both the Protestant theologies in which they were immersed, and the multiple deisms and diverse heterodoxies which formed part of the background to their writings.<sup>13</sup> Much of the historiography conflates these Protestant theologies with deism, implying that these Protestant theologies were crypto-deist, which mostly they were not.

Protestant theologies were crucial for the work of these writers, and we need to know more about both the Protestant sources of the theologies they developed *and* about the multiple deisms by which they may have been influenced. Many scholars of the Enlightenment are not interested in technical theology, especially not Dutch Protestant and Catholic scholastic theology, with the result that theological issues are summarized in lay terms which theologically learned disputants would not have recognized. Further, some historians are hostile to theology and religion in principle. This bias may drive useful research, but it sits uneasily with publicists who were theological writers, informed about and involved in current theological controversies.

Reasserting the central role played by Protestant theology in the thought of all these writers, except perhaps Annet, is crucial. Further, more account needs to be taken of the diversity, technicality and the intellectual power of the Christian theologies extant in early eighteenth-century England, instead of labelling complex bodies of thought 'Socinian', 'Arian' or 'deist' because some contemporaries labelled them in this way. The rational theology several of these writers (Toland, Collins, Tindal) promoted could often be taken for rationalistic Protestantism, and they exploited this ambiguity all their lives. This rational theology did not

necessarily imply that God never intervened in the world, but only that extrinsic conceptions of divine intervention were absurd. Nor did it always rule out revelation in principle, although it insisted that what was revealed must conform to reason. Nor was it entirely without regard for rewards and punishments after death as the cases of Morgan and Chubb show.

The issue of whether to characterize the theologies these writers advanced as 'deist' theology is a difficult one, and probably allows for more than one answer.<sup>14</sup> Several of these writers developed a rational theology according to which God must have made what he required human beings to know about religion obvious to all. By the same logic, they concluded that a perfect being, infinitely happy in Himself, could not require anything of mankind except what was for their good.<sup>15</sup> These *a priori* arguments may have derived in part from anti-Calvinist doctrines of the Cambridge Platonists, who influenced Collins and Tindal, although a *bienfaisance* version of related ideas could be found among some French deists and may have been an influence on Shaftesbury.<sup>16</sup> These ideas were difficult to reconcile with Athanasian and Augustinian versions of Christianity, but they were closer to rationalist forms of Protestantism, or even scholastic theology, than most of the historiography suggests. This means that it is important not to assume in advance that the theology these writers advanced was 'deist' in an individuating sense, *viz.* based on a specific unorthodox conception of God. There may have been theology of this kind, and it may not be unfair to attribute such theology to Tindal, Chubb, Morgan and Annet, although they were not in agreement. However, the fact that the theology they advanced in their writings could often be construed as Protestant was pivotal for the contextual politics of their texts.

Consistent with this, most of these writers did not label their theology 'deism' in print. Rather they used that term for: 1. the view that God should be conceived in philosophical terms which conflicted with the anthropomorphisms of popular religion; 2. the view that natural religion was sufficient without revealed religion; and 3. for the view that revealed religion should be rejected as implausible or false, even as the cheat of priests. The first position could be adopted by thinkers with different conceptions of deity, and also, a point historians have tended to miss, by rational Christians, and something of the colour of this possibility hangs over the lives of Toland, Collins and Tindal. The second view was accepted by some Protestants and, well-phrased, appealed to some Catholics. The third view could be held by radical thinkers of many different types, including, when the example was Christianity, by Jews and Muslims, and this made a deep impact on several of these writers, especially Toland and Collins.

On the other hand, most of these writers developed theologies which tended towards deism in an analytical sense, even though they did not always share the

same substantive views. That is, theologies which minimized divine intervention and reduced religion to what reason teaches us and ultimately morality, although clearly it is crucial to notice that Collins in the 1720s did not agree with Herbert in the 1640s, just as Morgan did not agree in detail with Chubb. Hence it is wise not to conflate this *analytical deism* with either individuating deism or with the views and arguments these writers presented to their contemporaries in their texts. This is not to deny that a deist theology may have overshadowed the surface Protestant arguments in texts by Toland, Collins and Tindal. Indeed, it is possible to argue that a view of the deity as infinite, perfect and benevolent, but bound by the ontological order to conform to the law of nature, may have shaped the theology, the politics and the natural philosophy of Toland, Collins, Tindal, Morgan and Chubb.<sup>17</sup> There is some truth in this, provided that this conception of deity is not used to conceal the inter-Protestant character of their texts, or to imply that there was only one form of deism, on which these writers were agreed.

Some of these writers brought theological presuppositions to natural philosophy, and there was a significant difference between Descartes's intellectualist natural philosophy, which allowed for necessary laws of nature and eternal truths, and the voluntarism of Gassendi, Boyle and Newton.<sup>18</sup> Further, this contrast, although it can be overstated, captures an intellectualist strand of thinking found in Ralph Cudworth and some other Cambridge Platonists as well as Samuel Clarke which could be developed in a deist direction. Intellectualists were often careful to allow for the absolute freedom of God, while insisting upon elements of necessity in the world once it was created, but they left it open for others to deploy a necessitarian theism against Christian orthodoxy. This seems to have occurred in the thought of Tindal, Morgan and Chubb, all of whom adapted Clarke's intellectualism and ontological ethics, but not his more orthodox understanding of the absolute freedom of the divine will. Nonetheless, granted that scholasticism and Jesuit theology abounded in subtle technical distinctions which allowed necessity and contingency in God to be reconciled, it may be better not to assume that certain theological trends resulted in the heresy of deism, but to explore how and why certain writers pushed these theological trends in an unorthodox direction.

We still do not understand exactly how the Protestant theologies advanced by these writers related to the deisms of which they were aware, and the matter is further occluded because many historians treat deism as if it was a religious creed in its own right, which succeeded Christianity until the clever became atheists. Much of the existing literature assumes that deism *was* modern, and that deists were ahead of their Christian neighbours on a teleological scale moving from orthodoxy to unbelief. This has a relation to the truth, but is misleading. There were multiple deisms extant in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth cen-

turies, with different political correlations in different countries. Some forms Renaissance deism were revivals of ancient classical Enlightenment, and different deisms led into the future in different ways.<sup>19</sup>

In France the issue of deism flared up several times in the seventeenth century, but what was at stake varied. When in 1624 Marin Mersenne wrote his famous response to the *Quatrains*, the issue was whether pagan natural philosophy provided a coherent alternative to the superstition of 'the bigots' who postulated an arbitrary supernatural deity. When Pascal attacked the Jesuits for an excessive emphasis on works and for the notion that God bestowed sufficient grace on all, the issue was the conflict between Christian asceticism and naturalism.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, there was no clear view about who the deists in France were, and although Charles d'Assoucy described deism and Pierre Bayle referred to it in his *Dictionary* (1697), there were few discussions of individual figures. Further, although providential deists were alleged to exist, the term 'deist' was often associated with Epicureans rather than with advocates of natural religion.<sup>21</sup> French thinkers with Epicurean or Spinozist views included Bernard Fontenelle (1657–1757), Henri Boulainvilliers (1658–1722), César Chesneau Du Marsais (1676–1756), the three Levesque brothers (Louis-Jean de Pouilly, Jean de Burigny and Gérard Champeaux), Yves de Vallone (1666–1705), Nicholas Du Fresnoy (1674–1755) and Nicolas Fréret (1688–1749) among others. There was also a stream of providential deism in France which exalted natural religion in place of the superstitious religion of the priests and this stream manifested in some poets, in deistic voyages and also in the work of Robert Challe (1659–1721), who argued that a system of natural religion could be arrived at without any revealed religion. Granted that the views of individual thinkers changed over time and require detailed contextual study, a range of positions were current of which Blount, Gildon, Toland, Collins and later Bolingbroke had selective knowledge.

A plurality of deisms also appeared in the United Provinces and, in a different form and degree, in Germany. A philosophical deism for which God was the universe or Matter or the Soul of the World appeared in the United Provinces in the 1670s, allied to criticism of the Scriptures and republican politics. The Portuguese Marano Julia de Prado (c. 1612–c. 1670), who was close to Spinoza, denied providence, miracles and creation *ex nihilo*. Lodewijk Meyer (1629–81) promoted philosophy as the new religion and attacked the Scriptures in *Korte Verhandling* (1661) and *S. Scripturae Interpres* (1667). Franciscus van den Ende (1602–74), the teacher of Spinoza and the leader of a heterodox circle in Amsterdam, identified God with the universe and promoted a religion of reason. Adriaen Koerbagh (1632–69) and Johannes Koerbagh (d. 1672) defined God as an eternal being, denied miracles and immortality, and argued that no revealed religion could communicate truths beyond philosophy in *Een Ligt*

(1668), while Frederick van Leenhof (1647–1713) promoted a universal philosophical religion based on necessity and the eternity of the world.<sup>22</sup>

In England the record is also complicated, and at times confused.<sup>23</sup> In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the term 'deist' was of shifting extent. Sometimes it meant simply one who accepted that there was a God. Some deists, however, posited a first cause continuous with the ontological order and rejected revealed religion. Sometimes a distinction was made between 'deist' and 'theist', perhaps with the implication that theists accepted providence whereas deists did not.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes deism meant little more than a worthy conception of God and an emphasis on natural religion. Individual figures, however, often had compound positions and/or supported conflicting positions in different texts. Consistent with this, the radical deism discussed in England at the end of the seventeenth century was not the extension of latitudinarian and liberal Protestantism which has been the focus of most historians. When, for example, Matthias Earbery wrote his *Deism Examind and Confuted* (1697), he dealt with a young man who had studied classics, the atomism of Descartes and Gassendi and read widely in Socinian authors before discovering Spinoza, who turned him into a 'perfect Deist', after which he threw away his Bible and rejected all revealed religion as the fraud of priests.<sup>25</sup>

This young man was already fully versed in Spinozist attacks on the Old Testament passages as unworthy of God and on the case against prophecies and miracles, in a naturalist as opposed to a Christian understanding of the law of nature and in the merits of an immanentist conception of morality which had nothing to do with the superstitious idea of rewards and punishments after death. He also set out a Spinozist theology which he identified with deism. This theology stressed that reason ought to be the religion of humanity and did not require 'Historical belief', that all men were able to perceive the will of God by the light of nature, that a more perfect conception of God could be gained from natural things, that there could be no such thing as a miracle and that nothing could be regarded as a work of God but what was done according to the ordinary course of nature. In effect, his deism was necessitarian theism, for which religion was a matter of idle imagination based on fear.<sup>26</sup> This cosmology excluded an immaterial deity with an arbitrary will who intervened in the world.

Moreover, even in 1697 there were concerns that Spinoza really meant by 'God' nature or matter. There were also hints that some were proposing a cosmology based on matter and motion. Deism of this type was one of the deisms which arguably occupied Blount, who probably translated the *Tractatus* in 1689.<sup>27</sup> It was also a form of deism found in Toland's more philosophical works, and possibly also in Collins and Tindal. None of these writers, however, unlike Earbery's young man, followed Spinoza on the intellectual love of God, but then Spinoza was not their only master.

The existence of multiple deisms in England at the end of the seventeenth century – involving different technical doctrines of God, different accounts of natural religion and different conceptions of the universe – means that the intellectual climate cannot be interpreted in generic terms. Spinozists characteristically rejected a dualism between transcendence and immanence and advocated following a life of reason in a vital naturalistic universe. Their deistic naturalism did not imply atheism so much as an immanentization for which God operated within nature and human reason. Philosophical deism of this kind was present in England, but it was not identical with the exaltation of natural religion (in the sense of a few basic beliefs). Spinozists did not accept the beliefs which deists of the second sort argued were basic.

Radical deistic thought *was* present in England before 1700, but subsequently tended to be replaced by forms of deism which were nominally Christian, and it was this intra-Protestant deism which mattered until Annet rejected Christianity more explicitly in the 1740s, although even he claimed at times to be arguing for Christianity. Deism was not advanced in an unambiguous form in England for more than thirty years. After Blount, there was little coherent exposition of deism in the works of any of these writers, and when Thomas Morgan produced a major work on physico-theology, he did not call this theology ‘deism’. Of course, historians can posit a secret deism behind surface lives and published texts, just as they may claim that texts with Protestant pretensions were, everyone knew, really ‘deist texts’. This is dangerous, however, because while orthodox readers often believed that the relevant texts were deistic, this was by no means the only reaction. Further, there is a problem about proving the presence of deism from passages which some Low Church Protestants regarded as rational Protestantism. Some of these writers may have used ‘deist’ as a persona in some of their social interactions, although the evidence is thin, just as some of them seem to have expressed heterodox opinions in private. Nor did most of these writers argue for deism in their books, although Morgan and Annet did so. Toland and Collins, for example, and contrary to what one might expect from most of the historiography, did not predominantly use deistic disguises in their writings, although they were happy to argue against ‘superstition’ on perfect theist premises. Tindal clearly sympathized with deism, but it is less certain that he claimed to be a ‘Christian Deist’. Chubb admitted that he was a deist eventually, but not in a sense exclusive of Christianity, while Morgan used the Christian deist persona strategically in texts which sometimes seemed to imply that his views were more radical.

In this volume, as in the first volume of this work, I argue that these writers were *involved with* deism, although I will resist the assumption that there was only one sort of deism in eighteenth-century England and that deists were all one sort. ‘Deist’ was a persona which some of them adopted for some, but

not all, purposes at certain stages of their development. Thus Tindal did not write legal opinions or political pamphlets as a deist, just as Toland would have been politically useless if his political writings were deistic. With Morgan and Annet the persona becomes more exclusive than it was for any earlier writers, but that is my point. The notion that the deists were thinkers who tended towards a non-orthodox conception of God is broadly correct in analytical terms, but we need to remember that these writers may not have shared the same conception of God, sometimes changed their views over time, or were evasive, so that we do not know what their final conception of God was. It may therefore be too strong to make an analytical characteristic of their differing ideas the key to their theology, politics and natural philosophy.

Finally, the question of how deism helped these writers become leaders of European thought deserves more attention than it has received. Multiple deisms may have allowed thinkers to move out of supernatural religion and to envisage a world in which religion played no dominant role at a time when the vast majority of their contemporaries could not imagine this. They also may have allowed these writers to be more confident in the power of reason than most of the Christian clergy, and to rehabilitate human nature and the natural sociality of human beings in a world still darkened by broodings over universal corruption and threats of eternal damnation. They also may have helped some of these writers to envisage political and social orders organized on rational and naturalist principles. These writers, however, mediated the influence of multiple deisms with other influences, including themes associated with Radical Enlightenment and clandestinity,<sup>28</sup> and their originality often depended on trajectorial factors specific to Protestant Enlightenment in England.

### Deism and Atheism

Recently the issue of the 'atheism' of several of these writers has acquired prominence as a result of the stimulating work of David Berman, Jonathan Israel and French and Italian scholars sympathetic to irreligion.<sup>29</sup> This is a historic reassessment, which will take time to evaluate. There may well have been more radical layers to the thought of some of these writers than historians have suggested, although it is important not to read them through nineteenth-century lenses, as if words such as 'pantheist', 'atheist' and 'freethinker' had transparent and modern meanings in England in the early eighteenth century when cases of both remote and modern usage can be found.

Moreover, in some cases, contrasting deism with atheism may be misleading, since deism was often atheism's birth form in the Early Enlightenment. Thus in the early 1730s the President of Magdalene College, Cambridge, Daniel Waterland, argued that the deists denied that God intervened in the world, rejected

immortality and seemed to prefer 'pantheism' to any other system.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Berkeley claimed that they were 'atheists' who denied God, prayer and all natural religion.<sup>31</sup> These reports probably do not capture the exact technical arguments at issue, but they do warn us that the modern distinction between deism and atheism cannot always be taken for granted. Critics sometimes argued that *deists were atheists* and that *deism was atheism*. This may have captured the philosophical views of some deists more accurately than historians have until recently tended to suggest. As Radicati wrote in the early 1730s:

But to say that Deists are Atheists is false; for they are so called by the Vulgar, and by those whose interest it is to decry them; [they] admit a first cause under the names of God, Nature, Eternal Being, Matter, universal Motion or Soul. Such were Democritus, Epicurus, Diagoras, Lucian, Socrates, Anaxagoras, Seneca, Hobbes, Blount, Spinoza, Vanini, St. Evremond, Bayle, Collins.<sup>32</sup>

Radicati may have given a European rather than an English view. Nonetheless, he was in England in the 1730s and it is difficult to discount the possibility that Toland and Collins knew thinkers with views of this kind.

The problem of 'atheism' was of concern to Christian intellectuals throughout the seventeenth century, and in England, stimulated by Cudworth's typology of atheists, there were systematic attempts to rebut the atheist threat by means of the Boyle Lectures.<sup>33</sup> This threat was constructed in largely imaginary terms, and with reference to relatively few contemporary thinkers, often Hobbes and Spinoza. What contemporaries held to be improper theism was often seen as the problem,<sup>34</sup> although atheism would obviously conceal itself in other garments in a society in which it was proscribed. It is not impossible that some thinkers drew atheistic conclusions from the philosophies of Hobbes and Spinoza and that there may have been forms of heterodoxy which revived the Stratonian idea of hylozoic matter. The evidence we currently have in the form of actual publications falls short of demonstrating this, partly because the texts we have were deliberately written with Protestant surface meanings. The issue is not straightforward because, while it is frequently wrong-headed to assume that these writers only implied what they literally said in their texts, it is also dangerous to decide that we know what they wanted their readers to conclude. Thus, although it is now fashionable to read Collins and Toland as atheists, this may not capture their ranking of the issues at the time.

The case of Collins is particularly complex. Collins followed Cudworth and Bayle in seeing modern hylozoic atheism as a revival of the views of Strato and referred (once) to the fact that Spinoza had endeavoured to reduce atheism to a system.<sup>35</sup> There were also contemporary reports that he claimed to have a demonstration against the being of God. Berkeley, who may have heard him hold forth on the subject at the Grecian Tavern, associated this demonstration with

the claim that human beings could not form any proper idea of divine attributes arrived at by analogy.<sup>36</sup> There are, to be fair, hints in Collins's texts that he held that God would be an empty sound unless human beings were able to form a distinct and determinate 'idea' of Him, but it is not certain how far he pushed Locke's Ideism at this point. Berkeley may well have been right about the tendency of his arguments. However, he is a hostile witness. Berkeley regarded Collins and freethinkers generally as 'atheists', but did not engage with their actual texts, just as none of these writers engaged seriously with his technically sophisticated immaterialism, and his criticisms of the freethinkers in *Alciphron* and *Siris* elicited no major response from these writers.<sup>37</sup>

There appears to be little evidence that Collins was a public atheist, and it is certain that he often argued that particular theoretical claims were incompatible with the nature of God. Collins was an unbeliever, and it is likely that he explored atheism as a speculative hypothesis. This does not make him an atheist in an exclusive identity sense. Nor does it necessarily prove that he was a deist who became an atheist, since some deists identified God with nature or the universe. Of course, the possibility that he *was* a deist who became an atheist remains on the table. Collins may have ordered his own arguments hierarchically in a way which eliminated theism, but he did not present this hierarchy unambiguously in any of his texts. Nor does the fact that he followed Bayle in defending the toleration of atheists and in exploring a secular basis for morality show that he broke with theism entirely. There is also no proof that he abandoned theodicy. Had he done so, he would have been in conflict with Toland and Tindal. Significantly, Morgan, Chubb and Annet all assumed that he *was* a deist, and used his material in support of deist views.

This is not to deny that Collins's attack on immaterialist theism was severe and well argued.<sup>38</sup> It is also true that Collins's contributions to the possibility of philosophical atheism were decisive for the development of David Hume, but this does not mean that Collins lied for most of his life, up to and including on his deathbed. Collins was serious in different personae in his social world, and tentative about his ability to arrive at any final system. Had he proclaimed his atheism he could have lost his position as Treasurer and Deputy Lieutenant of the County of Essex and been expelled from polite society. No one who knew Collins well suggested that he was an atheist, and his closest friends tended to see his freethinking as acceptable to fair-minded Protestants. Collins was able to remain friendly with Samuel Clarke and other rational Christians for this reason. However, it is hard to believe that he did not grasp that his arguments could be reassembled as a refutation of immaterialist theism.

The case of Toland is also ambiguous. There was a movement beyond personal theism in the system he defended in *Letters to Serena* (1704) and then revised in *Pantheisticon* (1720), but Toland did not reject some sort of govern-

ing intelligence, even though his *Deus* was not separate from the universe. Even in *Pantheisticon* Toland's pantheists admitted a creator and ruler of all which could be called the mind or soul of the universe. Similarly, Toland referred to 'that Motion and Intellect that constitute the Force and Harmony of the Infinite Whole', just as he had provided for a presiding intelligence in *Letters to Serena*.<sup>39</sup> There is no clear evidence that his pantheists were atheists in a modern sense, although some of them may have been Presbyterians, and they were committed to the theodicy of a perfect universe, which made no sense on atheist premises. The view that God was nature or the universe was not atheism, but one of the best known forms of ancient classical deism. None of these writers seems to have engaged seriously with Spinoza as a metaphysician of the first rank.<sup>40</sup> Toland was aware that Bruno, Vanini and Spinoza were read as atheists in some clandestine manuscripts and could not have failed to see how easily his arguments could be reconstructed as non-theism.<sup>41</sup> It is also possible, however, to read him as proposing a deist natural philosophy for which God created matter self-active and imprinted everything into matter at the creation.<sup>42</sup> The crucial point is not to assume that we know what arithmetic Toland accepted at various times in his life. Like Collins, he left room for a range of alternatives.

The truth is that 'atheist' was not a public persona for any of these writers. There was no public space for atheism in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, even though such arguments might be rehearsed *as arguments* after dinner or in coffee houses. As long as the idea of God was held to be innate and Newtonian physics required God to act, there was a civil consensus that there was a deity. In any event, some of these writers (Morgan, Chubb) were closer to physico-theology than to the radical deism of the Renaissance. There *may* have been a Spinozist discussion group in the 1680s when Blount was promoting the *Tractatus* and it is not impossible that Tindal and even Woolston were influenced quite early by Spinozist ideas. There was a Spinozist influence on Tindal's *Rights* (1706), and Woolston *may* have had radical views in private. Toland *may* have used feints in criticizing Spinoza, and Collins *may* have secretly embraced Spinoza's philosophy as a consistent system of atheism. However, in so far as we have detailed knowledge of the private views and writing practices of these writers, the bulk of the evidence supports the multiple personae interpretation I propose. As Champion has shown, Toland did not have only one face, write for only one audience or compose passages with only one secret meaning.<sup>43</sup> Blount, baptized as an atheist by David Berman,<sup>44</sup> turns out to have been a deist and to have had multiple faces and personae.<sup>45</sup> Collins, Toland and even possibly Tindal *may* not have been conventional theists, but there is scant evidence that they rejected *every* conception of God, and some biographical evidence that they did not. Toland, for example, spoke of relying on God for his health shortly before his death.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the issue of atheism was not the radical edge for these writers it later became in France. For these writers the radical edge was the possibility that Christianity was false. All these writers were accused of trying to undermine revealed religion, and the terms 'deist' and 'deism' were often used to characterize individuals obsessed with making objections to the Scriptures and Christianity. Sometimes 'deist' captured an emergent, socially learned and contagious ethical persona in which one used philosophical conceptions of deity to ridicule supernatural religion.

The hostility to superstition and fraud involved here indicates that we are dealing with more than vague unbelief. All the writers known as the English deists were prone to adopt negative attitudes, at least at times, towards Christianity as a traditional religion, even though they sometimes claimed to believe that it was a republication of natural religion. All of them seem to have experienced *disbelief*, as opposed to the *unbelief* which tormented nineteenth-century English intellectuals. Whereas unbelief can be characterized, in general terms, as the inability to accept religious tenets, disbelief is the positive conviction that religious tenets are false, a stronger position. 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 one person's thought, just as actual lives reveal complex interactions between faith, unbelief and disbelief which resist simple summary. However, when intellectuals began to break free of religious doctrines in England, some of them arrived at disbelief, a condition in which they characterized religious doctrines and practices in negative terms.<sup>47</sup>

### Enlightenment, Modernity and Reform

It is widely accepted that the writers known as the English deists were of critical importance for the Enlightenment. However, as used by historians, the term 'the Enlightenment' is an evaluative historical category, and difficult to deploy in a precise sense.<sup>48</sup> Granted that we need to recognize many Enlightenments and outgrow accounts of Enlightenment cast as a battle between reason and religion, we can still deploy the term 'the Enlightenment' in a macro-historical sense to characterize a range of ideas, values and shifts in practical learning which occurred mainly in Europe and the Americas from about 1640 to 1830, without denying that Enlightenment on the ground was more diverse and admixed than unitative discourses about 'the Enlightenment' suggest. Most of the writers known as the English deists straddled several forms of Enlightenments, including elements of Classical Enlightenment, Hermetic Enlightenment and Radical Enlightenment. Classical Enlightenment was ambiguous in philosophical, political and even cultural terms. Peter Gay

famously argued that the Enlightenment should be understood in terms of the rise of modern paganism and, despite his numerous exaggerations, intellectuals in many European countries did embrace aspects of classical antiquity as culturally superior to Christianity.<sup>49</sup> However, classical alternatives to Christianity sometimes proved *not modern enough*, as was the case with the classical deisms which influenced these writers. The classical world practised civil religion rather than religious liberty, and integrated citizenship with military service and preparedness for war. As developments in post-revolutionary France showed, these characteristics could all be revived without necessarily advancing the cause of freedom.

Similar reservations apply to the modernizing potentials of Hermetic Enlightenment, to which some of these writers (Herbert, Blount, Toland, possibly Woolston) were attracted. While there were progressive aspects to Hermetic ideas and to the political, social and educational reforms they inspired, there were less modern features as well. Thus while Masonry promoted egalitarianism and benevolence among fellow Masons, it also promoted secrecy and a linear historical mentality which facilitated the persecution of organized religion, as it did in Portugal and some Latin American states.

The notion of 'Radical Enlightenment' also needs qualification. The term is useful as a designator for a world of intellectuals, publicists and pamphleteers interested in varieties of radical naturalism and monism and aware of the circulation of clandestine manuscripts.<sup>50</sup> It should not be taken, however, to imply that those associated with clandestine heterodoxy were radical *on all questions*, or even that they were the most important radicals in the eighteenth century. Those who brought about radical change were often not associated with Radical Enlightenment, and many of them were Christians. Nor were those involved with Radical Enlightenment, including many Huguenots, always non-Christians, even though they flirted with pantheist and materialist views. Although some of the writers known as the English deists drew on Radical Enlightenment, their reception of it was admixed with other influences, including the Christian theology in which all of them were immersed, and with which most of them were still intrinsically concerned.

To identify the writers known as the English deists one-sidedly with Radical Enlightenment, or to imply that they were proponents of atheistic materialism, lacks nuance. Blount, Gildon, Toland, Tindal and Collins were all involved with Radical Enlightenment, but their interventions were designed to fall within Protestant Enlightenment in England. It is a mistake to assume that their enemies knew their private views. This is not to deny that there was a Radical Enlightenment side to Toland and probably also to Collins and Tindal. These writers comported themselves before their contemporaries in various social and cultural

personae. In each case 'Protestant' was one of the personae they deployed, and the evidence suggests that they were serious about it.

None of this implies that these writers were *merely* rationalistic Low Church Christians. Some of them may have been close to seventeenth-century deists who equated God with nature or the universe. However, these writers did not opt for their radical persona in all contexts. On the contrary, they exercised different personae in the distributed public and private spaces of their social worlds. To read these writers as if they were European radicals in England is to misunderstand the politics of their texts. All of these writers were aware of various deisms, and probably other forms of heterodox thought as well.<sup>51</sup> Many of them were influenced by the necessitarian theism which they found in the works of neo-Stoic Roman philosophers, and this necessitarian theism, allied with developments in philosophy (mainly the writings of Spinoza, Hobbes and Locke) and the natural sciences in their lifetimes brought them into conflict with the Christianity of their youth. These writers, however, resolved this conflict in different ways. Some of them had seen clandestine manuscripts and/or had contact with European radicals.<sup>52</sup> This perspective, vigorously asserted by Margaret Jacob,<sup>53</sup> sometimes exaggerates the proximity between writers developing different views. It also easily occludes the fact that many of these writers wrote for a variety of audiences, both local and international.

Nor should Enlightenment be associated too one-sidedly with opposition to Christianity, not only because what Jonathan Israel calls the moderate Enlightenment was often not anti-Christian, but because clergy and religious thinkers played a central role in many forms of Enlightenment, as the cases of Germany, Austria and Scotland show. In many cases religious orientations were a major source of modernity, including Jansenism in France, Evangelical Christianity in America and Methodism in England.<sup>54</sup> In the same way, it is misleading to read constructions of 'secularization' into these writers and their texts. The writers known as the English deists, with the partial exception of Annet, were not arguing in print for secularization, even if this was the likely outcome in the longer term.

The writers known as the English deists also contributed to the emergence of modernity in the sense of the primacy of instrumental rationality over tradition and a mode of social organization involving the differentiation of autonomous spheres, although strong claims for their significance in this respect are rare and easily contested.<sup>55</sup> Much of the historiography assumes a close connection between Enlightenment and modernity, without making sufficient allowance for differences of context and temporality.<sup>56</sup> Recent work on modernity problematizes these associations. Traditional identifications of modernity with the realization of rationality and secularization have been questioned, along with well-known accounts of the emergence of a public sphere.<sup>57</sup> There are also dif-

facilities associated with attempts to equate Enlightenment, modernity and democracy. Democracy does not derive from Enlightenment *without more*, and modernity was not the product of Enlightenment or democracy in a simple sense. The writers known as the English deists had Enlightenment concerns and these concerns drove them to promote reforms of conception and practice which contributed significantly to the emergence of modernity, initially in England and Europe.

All of these writers advocated reform in specific areas, depending on changing political circumstances, and their involvement with reform needs to be understood contextually rather than in terms of a teleological movement of which they were, at most, only partially aware. Reform in the eighteenth century was different in each country and polity,<sup>58</sup> and their attempts to promote reform often acquired additional dimensions in countries such as Italy, France and Spain, as they did in America.<sup>59</sup> Allowing for individual differences, reform for these writers meant: 1. reforming the schemes human beings used to navigate their path through history; and 2. attempting, as opportunity arose, to eliminate tyranny, priestcraft and superstition, and to promote 'natural' political and social arrangements in their place. Reforming institutions in this way would enhance the prosperity and well-being of the nation, but it did not involve empowering masses, who in any event were unlikely to support enlightened opinions. Reform did not mean overthrowing the English constitution, setting up a new kind of society or breaking with the existing economic order. Rather these writers worked for specific reforms which, for the most part, eventually came into effect. Moreover, they argued for changes of practice and governance which individuals with widely divergent views and opinions could accept.

Here, and for reasons which partly reflected the development of capitalism and the commercial republic in England rather than France, they were sometimes more modern than more ideologically rigid writers in France and Italy, with whom they have been often, perhaps too quickly, compared. They were able to contribute more to reform than many of their contemporaries, partly because their involvement with deism familiarized them with the possibility of naturalism, both in theory and practice. Deism provided them with a framework in which to think the possibility that Christianity was false, and sometimes encouraged them to imagine a world governed by rational and natural institutions, not arrangements based on authority and tradition. However, the specific reforms they advocated depended on the contexts in which they lived.

In the longer term, many of these reforms had positive consequences for democracy. These writers did promote religious toleration and the freedom to articulate and publish unpopular opinions without censorship, but they did so in contexts in which democracy itself was not yet the issue. Eighteenth-century England was not democratic, but based upon monarchy and oligarchic rule, and

was secured by repressing Catholics by force in both Ireland and Scotland. It was not based on freedom of belief or association, but on the maintenance of Anglican hegemony and discrimination against Dissenters. In this context these writers sought to win a space for themselves within a system of coercive institutions. When the situation modified somewhat after the rise of Robert Walpole, they could be bolder, but even then they wished to remain within Protestant Enlightenment as thinkers who followed reason where it led.

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In the first volume of this work, *The English Deists*, I was concerned to qualify the existing historiography by placing more emphasis on seventeenth-century radical deism as part of the background for Herbert, Blount, Toland, Collins and Tindal. In this second volume my emphasis shifts to the eighteenth century proper, and especially to the years after Walpole's rise to power in 1721, when the political situation was more stable. In the years which followed it gradually became possible to criticize the claims made for Christianity as a revealed religion in print, although, as we shall see, even in these decades these transitions were localized in particular examples and surrounded by strategic concessions. As the century passed, there was more space for deism which no longer claimed to be 'true Christianity', but most of these writers were not deists in a non-Protestant sense so much as civil philosophers proposing more rational principles for the management of religion and politics.

In Part I of the present volume I explore how after 1720 Collins, Tindal, Woolston, Middleton, Morgan, Chubb and Annet problematized Christianity as a revealed religion, and attempted to undermine its credibility for their contemporaries. My discussions stand on its own, but readers who have worked through *The English Deists* will be better placed to appreciate how these writers expanded on themes raised much earlier, and also how their publications interacted in constellational terms. In Chapter 2 I offer revisionist readings of Collins's famous attack on the evidence of prophecies and Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730) which emphasize the inter-Protestant and theological political dimensions of these texts. In contrast to modernizing interpretations, I argue that Collins and Tindal sought to open the way for free thought inside a Protestant social world. Both were more indebted to Radical Enlightenment than the older books suggest, but they wrote dialectical texts, comported to local as well as international audiences, not clandestine manuscripts.

In Chapter 3 I examine the work of two clerical critics, Woolston and Middleton, Anglican clergymen denounced as 'infidels' in eighteenth-century polemic. In qualification of the existing literature which tends to read Woolston and Middleton as enemies of Christianity, I read them as they chose to present themselves, *viz.* as clerics who claimed to be promoting a more defensible Chris-

tianity. In both cases this claim may have been strategic, but the fact that they could make it offers a crucial perspective on the thought of the period. Both critics were serious in advancing strategic revisions of the current understanding of Christianity, whether or not this strategic revision coincided with their private thoughts on religious and philosophical questions. Moreover, both of them advanced considerations which later won some acceptance. Woolston, however, allowed himself to be co-opted to the deist cause for his own reasons, whereas Middleton was a collateral figure pursuing his own agendas.

Chapter 4 explores the achievements of Chubb, Morgan and Annet, who were major publicists of the period. Morgan and Chubb reinterpreted Tindal's 'Christian Deism' after his death in different ways. They need to be read as moral philosophers and republican writers, as well as critics of revealed religion, not least because the audiences they reached were mostly not sympathetic to irreligion. Morgan and Chubb diffused disbelief in specific theological points to a wider audience, and this immanence within current theological debate is crucial for the range and extent of their impact. Chubb may have been the Arian rationalist and radical Newtonian he appeared to be, and Morgan too had these characteristics, although in his case in his later work the suggestion of involvement with heterodoxy is stronger. With Annet, explicit disbelief in Christianity finally emerged in print. Annet has been caricatured in the existing literature as a lower-class radical of little importance. This literature cannot then explain the impact he had not only in England, but also in America and Europe. Annet was a moral philosopher, a talented innovator in several fields and a man consciously returning to classical Enlightenment.

Part II of this volume takes up the issue of the contributions these writers made to Enlightenment and to modernity, where these two categories are not the same. Both terms are to some extent performative orientations rather than strictly empirical, and hence likely to disappear when and if the projects of human creativity and freedom which they embody are discredited. Nonetheless, they allow us to make comparisons and to investigate causal relations across a wide terrain.

In Chapter 5 I explore what these writers meant by 'Philosophy', and how it enabled them to make contributions to the philosophy of religion, the development of modern doctrines of materialism, necessity and ethics, and the reform of natural philosophy. In Chapter 6 I analyse their approach to the problem of 'Religion', and show they extended their diagnosis of this problem to other areas. My discussion aims to show that these writers' cumulative contributions to reform were greater than the historiography suggests.

Chapter 7 discusses the impact of these writers not only in England but also in Europe and America. It argues that, although these writers were only partially successful in England, their achievements had a *model character* which made

them relevant in other countries, including France, Germany and America. This chapter also draws together the implications of both volumes for contemporary debates about the Enlightenment.

Taken together, these two volumes provide a revisionist interpretation of the writers known as the English deists and their historical significance. In both volumes I develop a *via media* between those, like J. G. A. Pocock, who emphasize the existence of multiple Enlightenments, and those such as Jonathan Israel who contend for a single Enlightenment of intercontinental extent. Like Pocock, I argue for different Enlightenments, but, like Jonathan Israel, whose efforts have reconfigured our understanding of the Enlightenment, I accept that there is a role for a more structural notion of Enlightenment as well. I agree with Israel that the emergence of worldly philosophy helped produce attitudes, practices and institutions later associated with modernity. My approach is more circumspect about attempting to determine the private views of individuals, and emphasizes the importance of writings which actually circulated and pamphlets which were actually published. It also registers the emergence of several republics of letters and the role of historically new media.<sup>60</sup> While not underestimating the importance of ideas, especially technical philosophical and scientific arguments, it takes account of the distinction between the complex positions elaborated by intellectuals in different texts and receptions of their ideas by different audiences and in different countries. Current work on the Enlightenment tends to divide between those who emphasize that in context individuals did not argue for the positions standardly attributed to them, and those who attend to the unfolding drama of the Enlightenment as a whole. The intellectual history I exemplify here addresses both levels of concern. The writers known as the English deists provoked a *Rezeptionsgeschichte* in which what they had hinted at but carefully not said became historically effective, but they were able to do so because they comported themselves in ways their contemporaries could tolerate, or even accept.

The writers known as the English deists played a pivotal role in the development of philosophical, religious and political ideas in the eighteenth century, both through the constellational impact of their writings in England, and through their extensive impact in Europe and America. Both the depth and diversity of their contributions need to be recognized, without reducing their activities to an allegedly pervasive 'deism', and without making their often suppositional links to underground heterodoxy more important than what they actually wrote. As constellational writers, the English deists were more significant than studies of them as isolated individuals would suggest, and both their *succès de scandale* and their more personal political and cultural projects need to be taken into account.<sup>61</sup>