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**DOUBTFUL DISPUTATIONS:  
CONTROVERSIES IN  
PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY  
CIRCA 1700**

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## ABSTRACT & LAY SUMMARY

This research examines how controversial culture shaped philosophical theology in England *circa* 1700. This period saw numerous debates at the intersection of philosophy (including natural philosophy) and theology. Works in this area reflected the diverse intellectual inheritance of the seventeenth century, with its creative and destructive potential. For many, this period represents an important stage in the emergence of modern Western thought, conceived of as, for instance, the culmination of the Scientific Revolution, or a nascent stage of the Enlightenment. These movements have been variously characterised, including as an orderly progression towards more secular views, or as driven by conflict – perhaps between the ‘deists’ and orthodox thinkers, or between conservatives, and ‘Moderate’ and ‘Radical’ Enlightenment. There has, however, been no systematic study of the specific disputes themselves, or their immediate social and cultural context.

This thesis aims to address this omission. It examines a series of ‘disputations’ in the broad domain of philosophical theology during this time, and explores how the culture of controversy shaped the ways thinkers participated in these and developed and presented their arguments. Part I, ‘Worlds made and destroy’d’, examines debates on the creation of the world, enlivened by efforts to combine sacred history with new physical theories of the Earth (prominently those of René Descartes, and Isaac Newton). Part II, ‘Between Faith and Reason’, explores polemical dialogues on the nature of knowledge and its limits, including those involving John Toland, John Locke and Edward Stillingfleet. Part III, ‘Matter and the Soul’, considers controversies on the nature of the soul, contrasting the polemical activities of the idiosyncratic Henry Layton with the more prominent correspondence between Samuel Clarke and the ‘deist’ Anthony Collins. The thesis concludes by reflecting on the ways in which debates in this area embodied and shaped broader intellectual change, seeking to

present a more holistic and nuanced picture of the controversies within their immediate social and cultural context, rather than as part of a 'secularisation narrative'.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas, *The summa theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: 1920).
- Bayle, *Dictionnaire* Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 3 vols. (Rotterdam: 1702).
- Bayle, *Dictionary* Pierre Bayle, *The dictionary historical and critical of Mr Peter Bayle*, trans. Pierre des Maizeaux, 5 vols. (London: 1734-1738).
- Bentley, *Boyle Lectures* Richard Bentley, *The folly and unreasonableness of atheism, demonstrated from the advantage and pleasure of a religious life, the faculties of human souls, the structure of animate bodies, & the origin and frame of the world* (London: 1693).
- Burnet, *Theory–I* Thomas Burnet, *The theory of the earth: containing an account of the original of the earth, and of all the general changes which it hath already undergone, or is to undergo, till the consummation of all things. The two first books concerning the deluge, and concerning Paradise* (London: 1684).
- Burnet, *Theory–II* Thomas Burnet, *The theory of the earth: containing an account of the original of the earth, and of all the general changes which it hath already undergone, or is to undergo, till the consummation of all things. The two last books, concerning the burning of the world, and the new heavens and new earth* (London: 1690).

- Cudworth, *True intellectual system*      Ralph Cudworth, *The true intellectual system of the universe. The first part wherein all the reason and philosophy of atheism is confuted and its impossibility demonstrated* (London: 1678).
- Descartes, *Meditations*      René Descartes, *Meditations, objections, and replies*, trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: 2006).
- Descartes, *Œuvres*      René Descartes, *Œuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 volumes (Paris: 1902).
- Hobbes, *Leviathan*      Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the matter, forme, & power of a common-wealth ecclesiasticall and civill* (London: 1651).
- Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*      Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: 2001).
- Locke, *Essay*      John Locke, *An essay concerning humane understanding* (London: 1689).
- Locke, *Correspondence*      John Locke, *The correspondence of John Locke*, edited by E. S. De Beer, 8 volumes (Oxford: 1976-1989).
- Newton, *Principia*      Isaac Newton, *The mathematical principles of natural philosophy*, trans. Andrew Motte. London: 1729.
- Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*      John Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion: the age of Enlightenment in England 1660-1750*, 2nd ed. (London: 1996).
- Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*      Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae, or, a rational account of the grounds of Christian faith, as to the truth and divine authority of the Scriptures and the matters therein contained* (London: 1662),
- Toland, *CNM*      *Christianity not mysterious, or, a treatise shewing that there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to reason, nor above it and that*

*no Christian doctrine can be properly call'd a mystery (London: 1696).*

*Thirty-nine Articles*     *Articles, whereupon it was agreed by the archbishops and bishops of both provinces, and the whole cleargie, in the Conuocation holden at London in the yere of our Lorde God. 1562. according to the computation of the Church of Englande for the auoiding of the diuersities of opinions, and for the stablishyng of consent touching true religion. Put foorth by the Queenes authoritie (London: 1571).*

*Westminster Confession*     *The humble advice of the Assembly of Divines, by authority of Parliament sitting at Westminster, concerning a confession of faith, with the quotations and texts of Scripture annexed. London: 1658.*

## INTRODUCTION

‘Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.’

– Romans 14:1

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the intellectual culture of England – and Europe more generally – was convulsed with frequent and impassioned debate. In the wake of the tumult of the Protestant Reformation, the ‘new philosophies’ of thinkers such as Descartes, and the emerging patterns of thought later associated with the Enlightenment, much would seem to be in doubt, and contestable. How might new knowledge about the features and processes of the Earth support (or potentially subvert) the Christian account of creation? What was the appropriate relationship between faith and reason? What could the properties of matter and motion tell us about the nature and fate of the human soul? These (and similar) questions impelled clerics and lay scholars to engage in vigorous, exhaustive and often acrimonious ‘controversies’ or ‘disputes’. Controversy in England *circa* 1700, and how this shaped intellectual endeavour at the intersection of philosophy and theology (‘philosophical theology’), is the subject of this thesis. In research focusing on debates about Church government, liturgy and ecclesiastical discipline in Scotland, Alasdair Raffe has analysed the ‘culture of controversy’ shaping these arguments.<sup>1</sup> This thesis identifies a similar context shaping the course of English discussions of philosophical theology.

Some three centuries later, the trajectories of these debates have particular significance to how we see the period – whether as part of a Scientific Revolution, an early stage in Enlightenment, or even as part of a long Reformation. So too, whether we discern a struggle or some other form of interaction between religious and non-religious forms of knowledge,

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair Raffe, *The culture of controversy: religious arguments in Scotland, 1660-1714* (Woodbridge: 2012), 12.

whether identified with ‘science’ or secularisation.<sup>2</sup> These disputes might be obscured in accounts of a progress towards increasingly secular or modern views that is bloodless, elegant and inevitable. They might be subsumed in theories of a constitutive conflict between progressive and reactionary forces, however defined. They might be passed over as clamorous superfluities, in efforts to understand the underlying substratum of ideas and concepts. However, despite being a ubiquitous phenomenon, there has been no systematic study of the specific disputes themselves, or their immediate social and cultural context.

This thesis aims to address this omission, and to add nuance to such broadly focused historiographical narratives. It examines the tradition of disputation and controversy in philosophical theology within the intellectual culture of early modern England *circa* 1700. It considers how this culture of controversy shaped the ways thinkers participated in these debates and developed and presented their arguments, and how this influenced broader intellectual change. In that regard, it addresses both the propositional content of these debates across the domain of philosophical theology, and the social and cultural norms and practices that shaped them. It makes the case that content alone is not sufficient to understand the causes and trajectories of these debates. In so doing, the thesis seeks to present a more faithful and nuanced picture of the controversies within their immediate social and cultural context, rather than as part of a ‘secularisation narrative’.

The remainder of this introduction will, first, examine in brief some of the interpretations of English intellectual culture, particularly with respect to the spheres of philosophy and theology, *circa* 1700, and outline the methodology of this thesis. Second, it will provide an overview of philosophical theology as an area of knowledge, some of the claims it comprehended, and some of the factors that shaped its development. Third, the introduction

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, the term ‘natural philosophy’ is used, rather than ‘science’ as the later term only attained widespread acceptance in the nineteenth century.

will contextualise the culture of controversy in which the disputes occurred. Finally, it will provide an outline of the subsequent chapters.

### ***I. Interpretations of the intellectual culture***

To contextualise this thesis, it is appropriate to consider at the outset some of the leading interpretations of the intellectual life of England in the decades *circa* 1700. This was, of course, a turbulent period, notable in England for the Revolution of 1688. In Europe more broadly, France dominated culturally and politically under the long reign of Louis XIV (1642-1715), albeit punctuated by ongoing European-wide conflicts – the Nine Years War (1688-1697), and the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714). Against this backdrop, Paul Hazard discerned a ‘crisis’ that gave birth to the modern European mind.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, while scholars have often debated the meaning and the merit of such terms, the period is quite often remembered and understood with reference to overarching conceptions of the ‘Scientific Revolution’, and ‘Enlightenment’. According to one view, the Scientific Revolution – which is said to have established the concepts, methods and institutions of modern science<sup>4</sup> – reached its apogee in the classical mechanics of Isaac Newton’s *Principia* (1687).<sup>5</sup> The period has also been seen as an early stage, and even the origin, of the Enlightenment – the current of European history associated with a constellation of such

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Hazard, *The crisis of the European mind 1680-1715*, trans J. Lewis May (New York: 2013).

<sup>4</sup> John Henry, *The Scientific Revolution and the origins of modern science* (London: 2008), 1. It has been argued that there is ‘no such thing’: Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago and London: 1996). Among the multitudinous discussions of the Scientific Revolution and its tenability are: Peter Harrison, “Was there a Scientific Revolution?,” *European Review* 15(04) (2007): 445-457; Margaret Osler (ed), *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: 2000).

<sup>5</sup> For one prominent advocate of this widely held view see: Richard Westfall, *The life of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: 2015), ix. A critical discussion of the historiography of Newton is: B. J. T. Dobbs, “Newton as final cause and first mover,” in *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution*, ed. Margaret Osler (Cambridge: 2000), 25-39.

things as reason, secularisation, progress, and liberty.<sup>6</sup> Again, the thought of Newton, as well as the influential philosophy of John Locke, and to a lesser extent, the figures known as the ‘deists’ or ‘freethinkers’, are afforded particular formative significance.<sup>7</sup> These examples may illustrate how the period is remembered, perhaps inevitably, with a focus on exceptional figures, and intellectual transformations that are seen as constitutive of modernity.

Since the nineteenth century, scholars have offered many theories of secularisation and progress, presenting the transformations in this period as part of a broader pattern encompassing the trajectory of Western thought to the present. Recent years have seen works such as Steven Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now* (2018).<sup>8</sup> Relevantly for this thesis, many of these theories have much to say on the interactions between philosophy, science (or natural philosophy as it was then called) and religion *circa* 1700. We may note in passing three theories that have been influential in the past, but which are no longer widely accepted in the historiography. First is the enduringly popular, but problematic, ‘conflict thesis’ that understands science and religion as discrete and incompatible concerns, and presents their struggle as the defining feature of Western intellectual history.<sup>9</sup> Second is Max Weber’s evocative account of the disenchantment (‘Entzauberung’) of the Western world through the

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<sup>6</sup> The historiography of the Enlightenment is immense and multifaceted. At one time, the focus was on the *philosophes* of eighteenth-century France. For example: Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment an interpretation* (New York: 1966). Subsequent decades saw an interest in ‘national contexts’, the classic work being: Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in national context* (Cambridge: 1981). Antecedents were also identified in the seventeenth century, such as: Alan Kors, *Anticipations of Enlightenment in England, France and Germany* (Philadelphia: 1987). The term ‘family of Enlightenments’ was preferred by: J. G. A. Pocock, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764* (Cambridge: 1999), 9. It has been argued that ‘early Enlightenment’ obscures more than it reveals: Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science* (Cambridge: 2017), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Newton and Locke were among the ‘principal geniuses’ identified in the *Encyclopédie* (1751-772): Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Preliminary discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard Schwab with Walter Rex (Indianapolis: 1968), 80-85.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment now: the case for reason, science, humanism, and progress* (London: 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Early statements of this view were: John William Draper, *History of the conflict between religion and science* (New York: 1874). Andrew Dickson White, *History of the warfare of science with theology in Christendom* (New York: 1896). For a general discussion of this view: John Hedley Brooke, *Science and religion: some historical perspectives* (Cambridge: 1991), 33-42.

progress of rationalisation and instrumentalization.<sup>10</sup> Third is Robert Merton's thesis, which suggests that a particular form of puritan outlook was conducive to the proliferation of experimental science in seventeenth-century England.<sup>11</sup>

Secularisation narratives have received more recent expression in a number of influential works. A leading theory is Charles Taylor's *A secular age* (2007). In that work, certain developments in natural theology are afforded a prominent place. This is because, according to Taylor, the emergence of 'providential deism' in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was a 'turning point' in the genesis of 'exclusive humanism'.<sup>12</sup> There are three aspects to this: first, an anthropocentric shift in focus to humanity, second, an increasing emphasis on an impersonal order of creation, and third, the proliferation of natural religion. While Taylor articulated some of the important changes in early modern thought, the process he portrayed is orderly, inevitable and seemingly without such phenomena as academic rivalry, eccentric theories, and unresolved arguments. A standard criticism of these approaches is that a teleological or progressivist focus has the potential to colour our sense of the interaction between philosophy (including natural philosophy) and theology in this period.<sup>13</sup> This thesis attempts to complement, and indeed to complicate, such linear accounts by revealing the more chaotic philosophical undercurrents of England *circa* 1700.

For other scholars, of course, intellectual conflict has a more central role. Jonathan Israel's account of the Enlightenment is probably the most prominent and widely debated of recent

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<sup>10</sup> Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1922): Max Weber, *Essays in sociology*, trans. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: 1946), 139.

<sup>11</sup> Robert K Merton, "Science, technology and society in seventeenth century England," *Osiris* 4 (1938): 360–632.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *A secular age* (Cambridge: 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Alexandra Walsham, "The Reformation and 'the disenchantment of the world' reassessed," *The Historical Journal* 51(2) (2008): 497–528.

years.<sup>14</sup> For Israel, the Enlightenment arose out of the ‘Philosophical Revolution’ of the late seventeenth century. It was a ‘single highly integrated intellectual and cultural movement’, and constituted the most defining step in the secularisation and rationalisation of Western (and indeed global) civilisation. At the heart of the Enlightenment was a contest between the ‘Radical Enlightenment’ and the ‘Moderate Enlightenment’. For Israel, the former stemmed from the thought of the Dutch Sephardic Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza, and its combination of a rejection of religious authority and political republicanism embodied the nascent values of ‘modernity’. The latter encompassed ‘Newtonians, neo-Cartesians, [and] Leibnitio-Wolffians’, in other words, the traditions emanating from the other canonical philosophers of the time, Newton, Descartes, Gottfried Leibniz and Christian Wolff.<sup>15</sup> In the context with which we are particularly concerned, this conflict was embodied in that between radical thought – represented by the ‘deists’ – and the moderate approach of figures within the Church of England.<sup>16</sup> While the scope and erudition of Israel’s thesis should be acknowledged, its overarching narrative and the strong emphasis on a particular set of Enlightenment values are problematic. This thesis argues that Israel’s dualistic characterisation of thought does not map well onto a detailed reading of the debates considered, and has a tendency to obscure the contradictions and complexities of individual thinkers.

In part, this thesis is prompted by Alan Kors’ *Atheism in France 1650-1729*. In that work, Kors argued that it was the mutually destructive character of controversies among Christian thinkers in France – the ‘fratricide of the faithful’ between ‘Aristotelians’, ‘Cartesians’ and

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<sup>14</sup> Israel’s thesis is set out in: Israel, *Radical Enlightenment; Enlightenment contested: philosophy, modernity and the emancipation of man 1670–1752* (Oxford: 2006); *Democratic Enlightenment: philosophy, revolution and human rights 1750–1790* (Oxford: 2011); *Revolutionary ideas: an intellectual history of the French Revolution from the rights of man to Robespierre* (Princeton: 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, v-vi, 715.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 33.

‘Malebranchists’ – rather than the work of radicals or free thinkers, which led to the emergence of philosophical atheism.<sup>17</sup> This naturally prompts the question of how controversies shaped the evolution of thought in other contexts, including in Britain. Certainly, the eighteenth century offers some suggestive anecdotes – Anthony Collins quipped that no one had doubted God's existence until Samuel Clarke tried to prove it.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Michael Buckley has claimed the origins of modern atheism lie in efforts to counter it.<sup>19</sup> While this thesis is not intended to review the theses of Kors or Buckley, it seeks to illuminate how the logic of polemical writing deployed over the course of various controversies influenced different forms of philosophical Christianity and the definition of irreligious identities such as deism.

The works of Taylor and Israel are concerned with broader trajectories of thought that take them far beyond the intellectual history of England *circa* 1700, while the work of Kors is specifically concerned with the emergence of atheism in France. A more direct comparison with this thesis is possible in the case of John Redwood's *Reason, ridicule and religion*, which represents an important exposition of ‘The Age of Enlightenment in England’, which focuses on debates over heterodox thought. In that regard, it covers similar ground, considers similar authors, and encompasses a comparable time period. Redwood is mindful of avoiding a simplistic account of the period as determined by a conflict between religion and reason.<sup>20</sup> Yet sources are at times abstracted from their context, and become part of a wider polarity between homogeneous orthodox and heterodox thought and a general trajectory towards modernity.<sup>21</sup> There is, for example, little attention to significant figures such as Stillingfleet

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Kors, *Atheism in France 1650-1729: Volume I* (Princeton: 1990), Part III.

<sup>18</sup> See Part III, Chapter 11, §4.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Buckley, *At the origins of modern atheism* (New Haven: 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*, 214. This theme is discussed more generally in Part II

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

and his engagement with Locke.<sup>22</sup> Nor does the broad sweep of Redwood's account and the profusion of thinkers considered leave much of a place for exploring their distinctive polemical positions or the specific patterns and practices of controversy itself as a major part of the intellectual life of the period. In exploring the culture of controversy, this thesis seeks to provide a more nuanced account of the debates and the particular issues that shaped them, focusing on their immediate context, rather than viewing them as representative of abstractions such as 'orthodox' and 'heterodox'. It also seeks to problematise these labels themselves as distinct and stable categories.

As the works discussed suggest, there has been particular scholarly interest in the phenomena of deism, and what is called the 'Deist Controversy'. Generally, this encompasses various debates from the late seventeenth century onwards, involving the figures known as the 'deists', 'the English deists', or 'freethinkers', most prominently, John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal. There are, of course, many different perspectives on deism and its fortunes. The term emerged first in France, and was introduced to England with Stillingfleet's *A letter to a deist* (1677), which associated it with Spinoza.<sup>23</sup> Subsequent historical usage encompassed a number of different views.<sup>24</sup> Peter Gay wrote that 'for most of his recorded history, man has been a religious animal. After deism, and partly because of it, he was so no longer.'<sup>25</sup> Other scholars have presented its impact in more circumscribed

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Marin Mersenne, *L'impiété des déistes, et des plus subtils libertins découverte et réfutée par raisons de théologie et de philosophie* (Paris: 1624). There is also an early reference to 'déisme' in: Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: 1678), 26. Edward Stillingfleet, *A letter to a deist, in answer to several objections against the truth and authority of the Scriptures* (London: 1677).

<sup>24</sup> The elasticity of the term may be seen from Clarke's definition: first, those who deny God's providence; second those who deny the reality of good and evil; third, those who deny the immortality of the soul; and fourth, those who deny Christian revelation (by asserting the sufficiency of natural theology). Samuel Clarke, *A discourse concerning the unchangeable obligations of natural religion and the truth and certainty of the Christian revelation* (London: 1706), 17-39.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Gay, *Deism: an anthology* (New York: 1968), 10.

terms.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Wayne Hudson has made the point that it was only through the debates of deism that a sense of it as an identity emerged.<sup>27</sup> There is also the issue of defining the debate. Some scholars, such as Margaret Jacob, have drawn a sharp distinction between the ‘Freethinkers’ and the ‘Newtonians’ or ‘Latitudinarians’, their more orthodox adversaries (the term ‘latitudinarian’ is also considered further below).<sup>28</sup> In contrast, for Sir Leslie Stephen, there was a continuity between the rationalising impulse of thinkers such as Archbishop John Tillotson, the philosopher Samuel Clarke (referred to as a ‘Christian deist’), and the proponents of deism.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the historiography is divided between an approach that draws a sharp distinction between ‘deism’ and orthodoxy, and one which views them as different stages within a continuous development. This is illustrative of the problem of treating such individuals collectively.

While mindful of the scholarship in this area, this thesis takes a different approach, one that is both broader in focus – in that it considers debates outside the ‘Deist Controversy’ – and narrower – insofar as it focuses on philosophical and theological issues, rather than other issues in the debate, such as Church government and politics. In this regard, the aim is to engage with the broader diversity of English thought *circa* 1700, as well as, in the case of ‘deist’ thinkers, to bring out the historically specific context of their engagement with more orthodox writers and heterodox figures who do not fit neatly into the ‘deist’ category.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*, 222.

<sup>27</sup> Wayne Hudson, *The English deists* (London: 2008). Wayne Hudson, *Enlightenment and modernity: the English deists and reform* (London: 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English revolution* (Hassocks: 1976), 34-35.

<sup>29</sup> Leslie Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century* (London: 1881), 79, 129, 139.

<sup>30</sup> Pocock emphasised the importance of history of orthodoxy in: J. G. A. Pocock, “Within the margins: the definitions of orthodoxy,” in *The margins of orthodoxy: heterodox writing and cultural response 1660-1750*, ed. Roger Lund (Cambridge: 1995): 33-70.

thesis seeks to avoid the danger of reducing the unicity of specific intellectual positions to group identity, and categories assumed to be coherent, such as the ‘freethinker’ or ‘deist’.

Another prominent interpretation of the intellectual culture of this period lays emphasis on the movement called ‘latitudinarianism’. Historically, the term was applied pejoratively to clergymen who professed a ‘freedom’ in philosophy and divinity, among them Edward Stillingfleet, John Tillotson and Simon Patrick.<sup>31</sup> However, many scholars have used the term to encapsulate a movement within the Church broadly emphasising reason, natural philosophy, and ecclesiastical moderation.<sup>32</sup> This movement is said to have emerged in the context of the English Civil War, often at the expense of dogmatic theological belief.<sup>33</sup>

Different conclusions have been drawn as to its significance. Martin Griffin has called the period from Edward Stillingfleet’s *Origines sacrae* (1662) to Locke’s *Essay* (1689) the ‘palmy days of the Latitudinarians’ rational religion.’<sup>34</sup> Barbara Shapiro has proposed an important connection between latitudinarianism and rapid developments in science in the seventeenth century.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, doubt has been cast on the extent to which this represented a discrete ideology.<sup>36</sup> The more robust defences of the term have tended to use it in a circumscribed sense.<sup>37</sup> As John Spurr has convincingly argued, there is a need for caution in using the term ‘latitudinarian’, as the category is not distinct from most

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<sup>31</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *History of his own time*, (London: 1724), I:189.

<sup>32</sup> Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 34-35.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Müller, *Latitudinarianism and didacticism in eighteenth-century literature: moral theology in Fielding, Sterne, and Goldsmith* (Frankfurt am Main: 2009), 22.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Griffin, *Latitudinarianism in the seventeenth-century Church of England* (Leiden: 1992), 108.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Shapiro, “Latitudinarianism and science in seventeenth-century England,” in *The intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century*, ed. Charles Webster (Oxford and New York: 2011), 286-316.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Kroll, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy, science, and religion in England 1640–1700*, ed. Richard Kroll, Richard Ashcraft, and Perez Zagorin (Cambridge: 1992), 1–28. Michael Hunter, “Latitudinarianism and the ‘ideology’ of the early Royal Society: Thomas Sprat’s History of the Royal Society (1667) reconsidered,” in *Philosophy, science, and religion in England 1640–1700*, ed. Richard Kroll, Richard Ashcraft, and Perez Zagorin (Cambridge: 1992), 199–229.

<sup>37</sup> Griffin, *Latitudinarianism*, Chapter 4.

mainstream Church of England clergymen.<sup>38</sup> While recognising the term may have pragmatic value in broad discussions of the period, and a party division can certainly be discerned between High Church figures and more moderate thinkers, this thesis has sought to avoid recourse to the term in focusing on the distinctive views of particular individuals.

While terms such as 'deism' and 'latitudinarianism' have some use as a pragmatic category in thinking about broad movements of thought, they may also obscure nuances. The problems may be conveniently summarised in terms of the historical 'mythologies' identified by Quentin Skinner. The use of such abstractions assumes a coherence among thinkers that is not necessarily evidenced in their writing. A term such as 'deism' is proleptic because it conflates the subsequent meaning with the original action. It is also parochial in that it assumes a correspondence between doctrines across time.<sup>39</sup> An example of this is the characterisation of someone like Toland's work as deistic: this label was originally applied as a polemical smear word; was then used retrospectively, with a far more distinct meaning, to lend a canonical status to his place within a broader movement; and was finally taken up as a historical category relating Toland to a broad range of thinkers across centuries.

A number of controversies in this period have been examined as significant intellectual episodes in their own right, including the mid-seventeenth-century controversy between Thomas Hobbes and John Bramhall, later Archbishop of Armagh,<sup>40</sup> and the debate between Samuel Clarke and Gottfried Leibniz in 1715-1716.<sup>41</sup> As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, controversies such as that between John Locke and Edward Stillingfleet (Chapter 7)

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<sup>38</sup> John Spurr, "Latitudinarianism' and the Restoration Church," *The Historical Journal*, 31(1) (1988): 61-82, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas," in *Visions of politics: volume 1, regarding method*, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: 2002), 75-107.

<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Jackson, *Hobbes, Bramhall and the politics of liberty and necessity: a quarrel of the Civil Wars and interregnum* (Cambridge: 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Ezio Vailati, *Leibniz and Clarke: a study of their correspondence* (Oxford: 1997).

and between Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins (Chapter 11) have been the subject of numerous articles. While this historiography has explored some controversies as individual intellectual episodes, this thesis endeavours to consider these more systematically as a set of related phenomena, setting these more well-known debates against less familiar ones.

Methodologically, this thesis engages in contextual reconstruction of the controversies themselves, rather than particular texts, thinkers or salient ideologies. Jonathan Israel has described his own work as a ‘controversialist’ approach to intellectual history, focusing on the links between ideas and social and political encounters, yet this is sublimated into his dualistic thesis about ‘Radical’ and ‘Moderate’ Enlightenment.<sup>42</sup> This thesis focuses more on the individual idiosyncratic confrontations of controversies, including their rhetorical and literary presentation. As a means of understanding something of the intellectual life of a period, controversies offer a unique perspective on the historically specific issues and contested character of knowledge. Historians have broadly noted the importance of controversies in the intellectual and cultural shifts of the ‘Scientific Revolution’,<sup>43</sup> and the Renaissance.<sup>44</sup> These debates vividly reveal the protagonists establishing and questioning claims about knowledge in the context of shifting and contested frameworks of evaluation. At the same time, controversies illustrate the social and cultural dimensions of knowledge, and the textual strategies that made this knowledge meaningful. Considering controversies, as opposed to discrete texts, also mitigates the danger of selectively simplifying content.

While the thesis views the texts within their immediate controversial context, it seeks to avoid a strongly social or political reading. A number of scholars have stressed the social or

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<sup>42</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment contested*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Marcelo Dascal and Victor Boantza, “Introduction,” in Marcelo Dascal and Victor Boantza (eds), *Controversies within the Scientific Revolution* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: 2011), 1-10.

<sup>44</sup> David Lines, Marc Laureys and Jill Kraye, forward to *Forms of conflict and rivalries in Renaissance Europe*, ed. David Lines, Marc Laureys and Jill Kraye (Bonn: 2015), 7-11.

political context in their interpretations of this period. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer have pioneered a ‘social history approach’, analysing movements in science and ideas in socio-political terms, and avoiding grand claims about the significance of philosophical or scientific movements across time.<sup>45</sup> Thus, for example, the debate between Leibniz and Samuel Clarke (acting as Newton’s spokesperson) was seen as driven by Newton’s fears that Leibniz would eclipse him in the Hanoverian court.<sup>46</sup> Other scholars, such as Jonathan Israel and Justin Champion, have laid stress on the political dimension in their interpretations of the intellectual culture. In his classic study of historical controversy 1660-1730, Justin Champion argued that ‘the deist controversy’ was not simply about views of reason, but driven by political and ecclesiastical positions as to the distribution of authority in society.<sup>47</sup>

Such approaches are valuable in highlighting the political and social dimensions of the controversies, as these factors are relevant, at least to some extent, in understanding the intellectual history of a period. Nor are such readings irreconcilable with the interpretation offered here – clearly there is overlap between underlying social and political factors and the immediate controversial context of the debates considered. Yet, while this thesis interprets thinkers as real people with tangible concerns, commitments and interests, it balances this with the need to take their ideas seriously. As such, it does not argue that the debates should be understood purely, or primarily, in social or political terms.<sup>48</sup> The focus is on reconstructing the debates within their controversial context, while avoiding a reading that would reduce or subordinate the nuance and individual specificity of each controversy. The

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<sup>45</sup> Their most influential contribution is: Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the experimental life* (Princeton: 1985).

<sup>46</sup> Steven Shapin, “Of gods and kings: natural philosophy and politics in the Leibniz-Clarke disputes,” *Isis* 72(2) (1981): 187-215.

<sup>47</sup> Justin Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken* (Cambridge: 1992), 11, 17.

<sup>48</sup> For a relevant critique of ‘sociological reductionism’, see: Douglas M. Jesseph, *Squaring the circle: the war between Hobbes and Wallis* (Chicago: 1999).

focus on a ‘culture of controversy’ is explained more fully in the third section of this Introduction.

## *II. Philosophical theology*

This thesis employs the term philosophical theology to describe claims of knowledge at the intersection of the disciplines of ‘philosophy’ and ‘theology’. As the term was not in currency at the time,<sup>49</sup> and is not commonly used in the historiography, it is appropriate to say something as to the rationale for this decision. As shall be seen, the interplay between the spheres of ‘philosophy’ and ‘theology’ were often complicated, contestable and dynamic. Reference to ‘philosophical theology’ is an attempt to capture a domain that is of distinct interest about this period, and to enable a broad focus on these intellectual activities, disciplinary tensions and cross-pollination. Moreover, it is employed to avoid some of the difficulties with contemporary terminology.

As a starting point, it is important to bear in mind that the terms ‘theology’ and ‘philosophy’ do not map precisely onto our modern understanding of these disciplines. As Christoph Lüthy astutely observes, our modern disciplinary divisions can be misleading or even irrelevant, often obscured by our sense that modern philosophy and modern natural science emerged through the course of the seventeenth century.<sup>50</sup> Theology was defined by Thomas Barlow, Bishop of Lincoln, as ‘Knowledge of *God*, and our Duty, and that Divine *Worship* which is due to Him.’<sup>51</sup> While in one sense it was the specific province of the clergy, every member of the religious community was invested in its claims. So too, the domain of

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<sup>49</sup> There is, occasionally, a Latin antecedent, for instance: Robert Fludd *Tractatus theologo-philosophicus*, (Oppenheim, 1617).

<sup>50</sup> Christoph Lüthy, “What to do with seventeenth-century natural philosophy? A taxonomic problem,” *Perspectives on Science*, 8 (2000): 164-195.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Barlow, *Αυτοσχεδίασματα, de studio theologiae: or, directions for the choice of books in the study of divinity* (Oxford: 1699), 1.

philosophy was considerably broader than we might think of today. This was partly because, as Richard Serjeantson explains, any learned person was expected to be conversant, to some extent, with philosophy (linked to its centrality to the undergraduate curriculum).<sup>52</sup> Whether conceived with reference to the corpus of Aristotle's works, or the (related) university arts curriculum, philosophy offered a systematic means of studying the world extending across natural philosophy, logic and ethics. Philosophy might still possess the lustre of prestige from the ancient philosophers, but one could not make a living as a 'philosopher' per se. It was thus universal amongst the learned world; its practitioners were clergyman, lawyers, and physicians among others.

Many of these thinkers were self-consciously aware of disciplinary interpenetration. Throughout the period terms such as 'natural theology', 'physico-theology', and 'natural religion' were used – albeit interchangeably and ambiguously – together with more general disciplinary references to 'philosophy' and 'theology' or 'divinity'. Each of these terms has a specific history and pattern of usage, which became more stable over the course of our period. Yet as none of these terms obtained a hegemony, and because subsequent patterns of thought have shaped their meaning for us, it seems appropriate to employ a more generic term for this thesis. A consideration of the contemporary terms nevertheless gives an insight into some of the some of the claims comprehended in this broad field of knowledge.

One prevalent expression was 'natural theology'. It has had, as Ann Blair and Kaspar von Greyerz state, 'a long history and many forms', and referred generically to knowledge of God

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Serjeantson, "Becoming a philosopher in seventeenth century Britain," in *The Oxford handbook of British philosophy in the seventeenth century*, ed. Peter Anstey (Oxford: 2013): 9-38, 10.

based on reason, rather than revelation.<sup>53</sup> As ‘theologia naturalis’, it was of ancient origin.<sup>54</sup> However, as Alexander Hall notes, it only took on a familiar meaning in the early modern period, with works such as Raymond of Sabunde’s *Theologia Naturalis* (1434-1436).<sup>55</sup> Edward Stillingfleet described ‘Natural Theology’ as ‘the great Evidences of *God’s Power, Wisdom, and Goodness* in his *Creatures*’.<sup>56</sup> Yet, the historiography has cautioned against assuming uniformity, given a ‘laxity in historical usage’,<sup>57</sup> and the pervasiveness of this tradition.<sup>58</sup> Certainly, there was no exclusive focus on the argument for the existence of God from design – as epitomised in William Paley’s later *Natural theology* (1802).<sup>59</sup> In that regard, it is important to be mindful of the diverse resonances ‘natural theology’ could assume. For Barlow, *Theologia Naturalis* was the ‘Morality, and the Religion common to all Men’.<sup>60</sup> The term ‘natural theology’ could also be used to describe the knowledge available to the prelapsarian Adam,<sup>61</sup> or pejoratively to characterise the Aristotelian philosophy of the Schools as a corruption of theology.<sup>62</sup> Alternatively, it could refer to the knowledge of God

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<sup>53</sup> Ann Blair and Kaspar von Greyerz, “Introduction,” in *Physico-theology: religion and science in Europe 1650-1750*, ed. Ann Blair and Kaspar von Greyerz, 1-20: 1.

<sup>54</sup> St Augustine references Marcus Varro (d. 27 BC): Augustine, *The city of God*, trans. William M. Green (Cambridge: 1963), 307.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander Hall, “Natural theology in the Middle Ages,” in *The Oxford handbook of natural theology* ed. Russell Manning (Oxford: 2013), 57-74.

<sup>56</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *Several conferences between a Romish priest, a fanatick chaplain, and a divine of the Church of England, concerning the idolatry of the Church of Rome: being a full answer to the late Dialogues of T. G.* (London: 1679), 255. This is broadly consistent with Bacon’s definition in: Bacon, *Advancement of learning*, II, 20-22.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathon Topham, “Natural theology and the sciences,” in *The Cambridge companion to science and religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: 2010) 59-79, 60.

<sup>58</sup> Brooke, *Science and religion*, 269.

<sup>59</sup> William Paley, *Natural theology: or, evidences of the existence and attributes of the deity; collected from the appearances of nature* (London: 1802).

<sup>60</sup> Barlow, *De studio theologiae*, 1.

<sup>61</sup> An example is Thomas Goodwin’s *Of the creatures and the condition of their state by creation* (1682): Thomas Goodwin, *The works of Thomas Goodwin*, edited by John C. Miller (Edinburgh: 1861), VII, 44.

<sup>62</sup> John Webster, variously a deprived minister and physician, described its ‘Vanity, Vselessnesse, and Hurtfulness’ in: John Webster *Academiarum examen* (London: 1654), 10.

and ethics available to civilisations who had no access to divine revelation, notably the classical Romans, or the Qing Empire.<sup>63</sup>

‘Physico-theology’ was a more recent usage, appearing amidst a proliferation of similar terminology in the mid-seventeenth century, with a distinct meaning cohering by the early eighteenth century. The first instance is in the work of Walter Charleton, whose ‘Physico-theological Labyrinth’ encompassed such issues as God’s existence, providence, and human free will, and his use of the term may serve to illustrate some of the complexities surrounding its emergence.<sup>64</sup> For Harrison, Charleton remains in the tradition of ‘natural theology’.<sup>65</sup> However, Mandelbrote reminds us that his claim to be undertaking ‘physico-theology’ should be taken seriously.<sup>66</sup> He has explained that the distinguishing point of ‘physico-theology’ is a particular metaphysical argument from final causes.<sup>67</sup> This unites the prominent forms of physico-theology over subsequent decades. Again, ‘physico-theology’ tends to be associated with a proof of God from design, a sense in which Kant later critiqued it.<sup>68</sup> This is certainly the way in which it is used in William Derham’s *Physico-theology* (1714), which offered a panoply of examples of design or contrivance in animal and human bodies.<sup>69</sup> Alongside this, it was used to describe efforts to explain biblical events, like the deluge, in terms compatible

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<sup>63</sup> Examples include: Theophilus Gale, *The covrt of the gentiles*, 2nd ed (Oxford: 1672), Book II, Chapter VIII; Gottfried Leibniz, *Discourse on the natural theology of the Chinese*, trans. Henry Rosemont, and Daniel Cook (Honolulu: 1977).

<sup>64</sup> Walter Charleton, *The darknes of atheism dispelled by the light of nature a physico-theological treatise* (London: 1652).

<sup>65</sup> Peter Harrison, “What’s in a name? Physico-theology in seventeenth-century England,” in *Physico-theology: religion and science in Europe 1650-1750* ed. Ann Blair and Kaspar von Greyerz (Baltimore 2020), 39-51.

<sup>66</sup> Scott Mandelbrote, “What was physico-theology for?,” in *Physico-theology: religion and science in Europe 1650-1750* ed. Ann Blair and Kaspar von Greyerz (Baltimore 2020), 67-77, 69.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

<sup>68</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The critique of pure reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (New York: 2003), I, Second Division, Chapter III.

<sup>69</sup> William Derham, *Physico-theology: or, a demonstration of the being and attributes of God, from his works of creation* (London: 1714).

with the discoveries of natural philosophy,<sup>70</sup> and to refer to the natural processes that might make the resurrection possible.<sup>71</sup>

In the early eighteenth century, ‘natural religion’ gave a conceptual basis for some heterodox thinkers to articulate a basis for ethics and religion generally outside established Christianity.<sup>72</sup> John Toland presented an idea of ‘natural religion’ which was later corrupted by priests.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Matthew Tindal postulated ‘a Religion of Nature and Reason... by which all Mankind must judge of the Truth of any instituted Religion whatever’.<sup>74</sup> The alleged sufficiency or otherwise of natural religion in this sense was highly contentious, and strongly debated.<sup>75</sup> Yet, there are somewhat subtler shadings, as for instance, Locke’s suggestion that Christ had come as ‘Restorer and Preacher of pure Natural Religion’ corrupted by priestcraft.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, for some writers, ‘natural religion’ could mean something more akin to natural theology –that ‘which men might know, and should be obliged unto, by the meer principles of *Reason*’ (as for natural philosopher and Bishop of Chester, John Wilkins).<sup>77</sup> It could cover arguments drawn from contemporary developments in natural

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<sup>70</sup> John Ray, *Three physico-theological discourses* (London: 1693).

<sup>71</sup> Robert Boyle, *Some physico-theological considerations about the possibility of the resurrection* (London: 1675)

<sup>72</sup> Isabel Rivers, *Reason, grace, and sentiment: a study of the language of religion and ethics in England, 1660–1780* (Cambridge: 2000), 9. Brooke, *Science and religion*, 263.

<sup>73</sup> John Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London: 1704), 129-130.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as old as the creation* (London: 1730), 60.

<sup>75</sup> Clarke’s second series of Boyle lectures was positioned against various forms of ‘deism’: Samuel Clarke, *A discourse concerning the unchangeable obligations of natural religion and the truth and certainty of the Christian Revelation* (London: 1706).

<sup>76</sup> John Locke, *The reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures* (London: 1695), 2.

<sup>77</sup> John Wilkins, *Of the principles and duties of natural religion* (London: 1675), 39.

philosophy, such as Newton's physics.<sup>78</sup> It could also intersect with the natural law tradition.<sup>79</sup>

The proliferation of contemporary terms might be seen as reflecting the complexity of attempts to address the interaction between philosophy and theology – which is, in itself, a contested area within the historiography. Peter Harrison saw 'physico-theology' as analogous to the mathematization of physics during the same period, and considered this legitimised the involvement of natural philosophers in theology, and clergymen in natural philosophy.<sup>80</sup> Harrison's account is persuasive inasmuch as he points to the widening participation of lay figures in clerical domains (and vice versa), which was a feature of the culture of controversy considered in this thesis. Some scholars have emphasised the profound interpenetration of these fields of knowledge. Thus, for Amos Funkenstein, 'science, philosophy, and theology [were] almost one and the same occupation' in the seventeenth century, forming a discourse of 'secular theology'.<sup>81</sup> Funkenstein's work evocatively brings out the creative cross-pollination of these spheres of knowledge. However, his overarching claim is something of an overstatement, even given the six unrepresentative figures that are the focus of the work – Galileo, Descartes, Leibniz, Newton, Hobbes and Vico – who varied considerably in their approaches. For many early moderns, theology and philosophy remained coherent and definable forms of human activity, even if, in the view of many, they could be intimately related.

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<sup>78</sup> George Cheyne, *Philosophical principles of religion: natural and revealed* (London: 1715). William Whiston, *Astronomical principles of religion, natural & reveal'd: in nine parts* (London: 1717).

<sup>79</sup> Jacqueline Lagree, "Grotius: natural law and natural religion," in *Religion, reason and nature in early modern Europe*, ed. R. Crocker (Dordrecht: 2001), 17-39.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Harrison, "Physico-theology and the mixed sciences: the role of theology in early modern natural philosophy," in *The science of nature in the seventeenth century*, ed. Peter Anstey and John Schuster, (Dordrecht: 2005). 165-184, 165.

<sup>81</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the scientific imagination from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century* (Princeton: 1986), 3.

The above suggests an important point that might be made about the connection of these activities with what we think of as ‘science’. Andrew Cunningham has written compellingly of the danger of taking modern conceptions of science as the object of enquiry and projecting this into the past. For him, contemporary natural philosophy was fundamentally about ‘God’s achievements, God’s intentions, God’s purposes, God’s messages to man’.<sup>82</sup> This perhaps does not give a complete picture of the competing identities natural philosophy could assume. Yet, it is hoped that the focus of this thesis on the human activity of controversy and its importance in intellectual culture has some affinity with Cunningham’s historically sensitive approach.

While the interpenetration of philosophy and theology was recognised by some, there were also clear efforts among thinkers to preserve and establish boundaries. In one sense this reflected customary ways of ordering knowledge: theology had a traditional priority, enshrined in the hierarchy of disciplines taught at the universities where, in contrast, philosophy was propaedeutic to higher studies.<sup>83</sup> It could also reflect efforts at reform. In that context, as Nicholas Jolley observes, there were a range of competing views among thinkers on the appropriate relationship between philosophy and theology, ranging from reconciliation to separation.<sup>84</sup> For some, such as Gottfried Leibniz, harmonisation was possible and desirable, and the truths of reason and faith were necessarily in consonance.<sup>85</sup> In contrast, thinkers such as Blaise Pascal reacted strongly against the sense that philosophy was

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<sup>82</sup> Andrew Cunningham, “Getting the game right: some plain words on the identity and invention of science,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 19 (1988): 365–389.

<sup>83</sup> Mordechai Feingold, “The mathematical sciences and new philosophies,” *The history of the University of Oxford: Volume IV seventeenth-century Oxford*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (Oxford: 1997), 359-448, 446. Serjeantson, “Becoming a philosopher,” 9-38.

<sup>84</sup> Nicholas Jolley, “The relation between philosophy and theology,” in *The Cambridge history of seventeenth century philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: 1998), I:363-392.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Mais comme la raison est un don de Dieu, aussi bien que la foi, leur combat seroit combattre Dieu contre Dieu’ : Gottfried Leibniz, *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme et l’origine du mal* (Amsterdam : 1710), §39.

congruent with religion.<sup>86</sup> In that regard, there was often concern that theology was in danger of being contaminated by philosophy, hence the oft-repeated critique of the corrupting power of ‘vain philosophy’, alluding to St Paul’s warning in the Epistle to the Colossians.<sup>87</sup>

In one sense, it was uncontroversial that philosophy could constitute a pious or devotional activity in itself. Thinkers such as the naturalist clergyman John Ray promoted a sense of ‘awe and reverence’ of the natural world.<sup>88</sup> The thinkers often grouped together as the Cambridge Platonists aimed to ‘amaze and to provoke wonder’.<sup>89</sup> For Boyle, contemplation of the ‘book of nature’ could have a similar function to traditional forms of worship and amount to ‘the first act of religion’.<sup>90</sup> In the secondary literature, the detailed treatments of the teleological argument in particular have been seen as establishing a sense of proximity to God,<sup>91</sup> and elevating natural philosophy to a spiritual level.<sup>92</sup>

As we have seen, the spheres of philosophy and theology *circa* 1700 reflected a complex and heterogeneous intellectual inheritance reaching back to antiquity. Yet both were also subject to a wealth of more recent developments and influences. Clearly, the ‘new philosophies’ were of considerable influence – whether those based on matter and motion (like Descartes’ philosophy), or incorporating action at a distance (such as Newton’s). Yet, while it is often conventional to see these new movements as demolishing a decrepit and homogeneous

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<sup>86</sup> ‘Dieu d’Abraham, d’Isaac et de Jacob, non des philosophes et des savants’. Blaise Pascal, *Great shorter works of Pascal*, trans. Emile Cailliet and John Blankenagel (Eugene: 2018), 117.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ’. Colossians 2: 8. Hobbes, for instance, has a chapter entitled ‘Of Darknesse from Vain Philosophy’: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 46. See also: Chapter 2, §II; Chapter 6, §II.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Raven, *John Ray, naturalist* (Cambridge: 2009), 452-480

<sup>89</sup> Scott Mandelbrote, ‘The uses of natural Theology in seventeenth-century England’ *Science in Context* 20(3), (2007), 451–480, 469.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Boyle, *Some considerations touching the vsefulnessse of experimental naturall philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: 1664), 113.

<sup>91</sup> Taylor, *Secular age*, 329.

<sup>92</sup> Harrison, “Physico-theology,” 178.

scholastic or Aristotelian tradition, the reality is rather more complex.<sup>93</sup> While Aristotelianism had been subject to an extremely effective polemic by thinkers like Descartes and Hobbes, the *libri naturales* of Aristotle, such as the *Physics*, continued to form a central part of university study.<sup>94</sup> In addition, the broader philosophical tradition of humanistic engagement with the classical world and the history of philosophy was of immense and continued importance.<sup>95</sup> As to theology, for Christians and Protestants in particular, the Bible was, of course, the fundamental source of authority.<sup>96</sup> However, an important trend was the emergence of a historical-contextual approach to the Bible. This was best known in the work of figures such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and the French Oratorian priest Richard Simon, but at another level reflected deeper currents of late sixteenth-century humanism.<sup>97</sup> In this broader context, other sources of theological knowledge, notably the early Church Fathers, continued to attract considerable interest and debate.<sup>98</sup>

The diversity of views among thinkers regarding the concepts of philosophy and theology could also be actuated by, or concomitant with, different conceptions of God and his relation to creation. One view was reflected in the ubiquitous allegory of the universe as a watch or clock, whereby ‘the Engine being once set a Moving, all things proceed according to the

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<sup>93</sup> Charles Schmitt, “Towards a reassessment of Renaissance Aristotelianism,” *History of Science* 11(3) (1973), 159-193.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Edwards, “Aristotelianism, Descartes and Hobbes,” *Historical Journal* 50 (2) (2007): 449-464.

<sup>95</sup> Mark Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in transition 1558-1642* (Oxford: 1959), 14. Levitin, *Ancient wisdom*. Phyllis Allen, “Scientific studies in the English universities of the seventeenth century,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* X (1949): 219-253, 224

<sup>96</sup> Kevin Killeen and Helen Smith, “‘All other Bookes ... are but Notes upon this’: the early modern Bible,” in *The Oxford handbook of the Bible in early modern England, c. 1530-1700* (Oxford: 2015), 1-18.

<sup>97</sup> An example is Richard Hooker’s emphasis on ‘reason’: Torrance Kirby, “The ‘sundrie waies of Wisdom’: Richard Hooker on the authority of Scripture and reason,” in *The Oxford handbook of the Bible in early modern England, c. 1530-1700*, ed. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Willie (Oxford: 2015), 164-176.

<sup>98</sup> Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian antiquity: the construction of a confessional identity in the 17th century* (Oxford: 2009).

Artificers first design'.<sup>99</sup> Historians have discerned different theological emphases on God's will (voluntarism) and God's intellect (intellectualism), and linked these with different epistemological approaches in early modern science.<sup>100</sup> Research in this area has highlighted how understandings of God shaped understandings of creation.<sup>101</sup> However, the distinctiveness of these positions and their impact is sometimes overstated and can obscure other influences.<sup>102</sup>

As we have seen, issues at the intersection of theology and philosophy occupied a diverse and important place in the intellectual life of England *circa* 1700. The use of the term 'philosophical theology' in this thesis is intended both to avoid the specific connotations associated with historical terms and to underscore the complex interaction between these distinct, yet interpenetrating disciplines. This was not in stasis, being moulded by disciplinary relationships, responding to contemporary concerns, and yet also reflecting the deeper intellectual inheritance of past centuries. The following section will explicate how controversy was a vital catalyst for these metamorphoses.

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Boyle, *A free enquiry into the vulgarly receiv'd notion of nature made in an essay address'd to a friend* (London: 1686), 11-12. Other instances include: Robert Boyle, *A disquisition about the final causes of natural things* (London: 1688), 22; Locke, *Essay*, III, VI, §3 & §9; S[imon] P[atrick], *A brief account of the new sect of latitude-men together with some reflections upon the nev[n] philosophy* (London: 1662), 19.

<sup>100</sup> Francis Oakley, "Voluntarist theology and early-modern science: the matter of the divine power, absolute and ordained," *History of Science* 56(1) (2018): 72-96. John Henry, "Voluntarist theology at the origins of modern science: a response to Peter Harrison," *History of Science* xlvii (2009): 79-113, 96. Francis Oakley, "Christian theology and the Newtonian science: the rise of the concept of the laws of nature," *Church History* 30(4) (1961): 433-457

<sup>101</sup> For example: James Force, "Newton's God of dominion: the unity of Newton's theological, scientific, and political thought," in *Essays on the context, nature, and influence of Isaac Newton's theology*, ed. James Force and Richard Popkin (Dordrecht: 1990), 75-102. Carolyn Iltis, "The Leibnizian-Newtonian debates: natural philosophy and social psychology," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 6(4) (1973), 343-377.

<sup>102</sup> Peter Harrison, "Voluntarism and early modern science," *History of Science* xl (2002), 63-89.

### ***III. The culture of controversy***

The major contribution of this thesis is to consider debates in philosophical theology in the context of the ‘culture of controversy’ in which such claims were advanced and disputed. Before tracing its outlines, it is appropriate to explain why the term is employed. The term is adopted from Alasdair Raffe, who uses it to describe the ‘range of discursive practices and forms of communication used to argue about matters of public concern’.<sup>103</sup> While culture is obviously an elusive presence, it is incontrovertible that values and practices will emerge to influence and condition behaviours, communication and views in any society. This term draws attention to the sense that debate is shaped by common constraints and conventions, over and above the motivations and actions of individual thinkers and writers.

In the first part of this chapter we distinguished our methodological approach from a purely (or primarily) social or political reading. In that sense, the concept of a ‘culture of controversy’ is intended to focus the contextualisation of the debates on their immediate influences – those factors that specifically prompted the writers to take up their pens – rather than ascribing ideas and motives to broader movements across time. While this at times overlaps with broader underlying social and political currents, the thesis does not seek to draw thematic observations or narratives that might connect such political or social factors. Rather the aim is to present an account of the controversies as individual episodes, in a way that brings out the immediate contemporary meaning of the debates for those who participated in or followed them. In so doing, this thesis illuminates the way ideas are intertwined with their expression, communication and perception, while not reducing them to mere ciphers of social and political forces.

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<sup>103</sup> Raffe, *Culture of controversy*, 12.

It is important to note that the focus of this thesis is on a particular kind of controversy. Whereas controversy might be carried on in various ways, from the written to the spoken word or through actions, this study is concerned with controversy as it took the form of print exchanges between the relatively small number of individuals within learned society (and by definition within – or at least on the edges of – elite society). Within this context, various thinkers self-consciously engaged in ‘controversy’ or ‘disputation’ with their peers. At one level, this meant simply carrying on an argument, consistent with the Latin antecedents, *controversia* and *disputatio*.<sup>104</sup> Thus, John Locke addressed Edward Stillingfleet with reference to the ‘Controversie, which you, my Lord, have Dragg’d me into’.<sup>105</sup> At a more general level, controversy could be understood, in a more diffuse sense, as comprehending broader, multivocal, debates across time. Hence, a number of late seventeenth-century writers refer to the ‘Socinian Controversy’, concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>106</sup> Clearly, the subject matter was not limited to the area of knowledge considered in this thesis, and controversies might centre on any topical matter: ecclesiological debates on the governance of the Church of England, ongoing cultural discussion of the merits of the ancients and moderns,<sup>107</sup> the political questions enlivened with the events of the 1688 Revolution,<sup>108</sup> or

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<sup>104</sup> ‘Controversy’ is defined as ‘contention in dispute’, and ‘Disputation’ as ‘disputing or contesting in words about any doubtful subject’: E[dward] Phillips, *The new world of English words: or, a general dictionary* (Cornhill: 1658). Similarly, ‘Controversie’ is equated with ‘Dispute’, which is to ‘strive, contend (either by words or blows)’: E[lisha Coles], *An English dictionary* (London: 1676). ‘Controversy’ is ‘Debate, Dispute, Variance’, to ‘Controvert’ is ‘to Dispute of, to Argue *pro* and *con*’; ‘Disputation’ is ‘a Disputing, Reasoning, or Debating’: John Kersey, *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum: or, a general English dictionary* (London: 1708).

<sup>105</sup> John Locke, *Mr. Locke's reply to the right reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his second letter [...]* (London: 1699).

<sup>106</sup> This is reflected in the titles of such works as: William Sherlock, *The present state of the Socinian controversy, and the doctrine of the Catholick fathers concerning a trinity in unity* (London: 1698).

<sup>107</sup> Perhaps the most widely known is the literary debate on the respective merits of the Ancients and the Moderns – *la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* – that found its way to Britain from France. Joseph Levine, *The battle of the books: history and literature in the Augustan age* (Ithaca and London: 1994).

<sup>108</sup> An example are the debates surrounding the justification for the 1688 Revolution: M. P. Thompson, “The Idea of Conquest in Controversies Over the 1688 Revolution,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38(1) (1977): 33-46.

religious and national history.<sup>109</sup> In that regard, this thesis does not offer a full cultural analysis of what controversy was and meant in our period. As such, it does not provide an expansive treatment of such facets as print culture, persecution and toleration or politeness. Rather, the thesis uses controversy as a means to explore the domain of philosophical theology. To that end, it is helpful to consider at the outset the range of cultural, social and legal factors that shaped it.

In entering into controversy, thinkers were typically emphatic that the purpose was to serve the truth. Many would seem to share Locke's view that 'to love truth, for truth's sake is the principal part of human perfection in this world'.<sup>110</sup> While there was an awareness that debate provided a fertile ground for pedantry, specious argument and abuse, there was also a sense of disputation as an important, if imperfect, facilitator of truth. The Roman Catholic polemicist John Sergeant wrote, in a controversy with John Tillotson, 'I receive the Alarum with great chearfulness; knowing that, if my Adversary: behaves himself well, it will – exceedingly conduce to the clearing and settling the main point there controverted.'<sup>111</sup> As Stephen Gaukroger notes, this moral dimension of intellectual honesty was central to the persona of the philosopher, and was a frequent theme in controversy.<sup>112</sup> The quest for the 'truth' often presented itself in absolute terms: it was commonly accepted at this time that there was a single unitary truth (independent of different perspectives). Many would no doubt have agreed with Pierre Charron that there is 'but one Truth, but Falshood is infinite.'<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> The career of the Bishop of Salisbury, Gilbert Burnet, offers various examples including works against Antoine Varillas, and Henry Wharton ('Anthony Harmer'). This is discussed in: Champion, *Pillars of priestcraft*, 27-31.

<sup>110</sup> John Locke to Anthony Collins, 29 October 1703, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 8: [3361], 97-99.

<sup>111</sup> John Sergeant, *A letter from the authour of Sure-footing to his answerer* (1665), 1.

<sup>112</sup> Stephen Gaukroger, "The persona of the natural philosopher," in *The philosopher in early modern Europe: the nature of a contested identity*, ed. Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger, Ian Hunter (Cambridge: 2009), 17-34.

<sup>113</sup> Pierre Charron, *Of wisdom*, trans. George Stanhope (London: 1707), II, 17.

A sense of disputation as a means to truth was something deeply embedded in intellectual life, and embodied in its exemplars. The elenctic method of Socrates in the dialogues of Plato was one of dispute and argument against his various philosophical opponents, such as the Sophists.<sup>114</sup> In Christian antiquity, St Paul had disputed the claims of Christianity with the Jews and the Pagan philosophers,<sup>115</sup> and the Christian fathers had defended their faith against the Pagans and heretics (epitomised in the life of St Augustine arguing against the Pelagians, Donatists and Manicheans). The Church of England had itself emerged through the controversies of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>116</sup>

Underlying this, the educational experience of the participants provided an important setting for the culture of controversy. The intellectual culture of early modern England was conditioned by the experience of the vast majority of its protagonists at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The universities strongly emphasised competition and emulation, in which formal disputations (*disputatio*) were central to pedagogical method. This was a legacy of the highly structured disputations of the medieval universities.<sup>117</sup> This had been the case for centuries, and reflected Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of examination of arguments in the search for truth, as it had been embedded in medieval scholarship.<sup>118</sup>

In the case of the many thinkers who were clergymen, there were additional professional reasons to partake in the culture of controversy. The significance of this role is emphasised

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas Stanley, *The history of philosophy* (London: 1655), III, 5-6.

<sup>115</sup> Acts 17. 17. This was referred to specifically in Richard Bentley's inaugural Boyle lectures: Bentley, *Boyle Lectures*, Sermon II.

<sup>116</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *The historie of the Reformation of the Church of England* (London: 1681), Preface [4].

<sup>117</sup> This is brought out in: Mordechai Feingold, "The humanities," in *The history of the University of Oxford: Volume IV seventeenth-century Oxford*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (Oxford: 1997), 211-357.

<sup>118</sup> Kors, *Atheism in France*, 84-85. Aristotle's *Topics* assumes a disputational framework, as in: Aristotle. *Posterior analytics. Topica*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, E. S. Forster (Cambridge, MA: 1960). For a discussion of Aristotle and medieval disputation: Alex J. Novikoff, *The medieval culture of disputation: pedagogy, practice, and performance* (Philadelphia: 2013), Chapter 4.

by George Bull, a leading theologian and the Bishop of St David's. Bull stated '*Polemical or controversial Divinity is Theologia armata, or that Part of Divinity which instructs and furnisheth a Man with the necessary Weapons to defend Truth against its Enemies.*'<sup>119</sup> John Edwards defended polemical writing on the grounds of both biblical authority and reason. With a soul's redemption at stake, he considered it would be an abnegation of clerical duty to be overly tolerant of erroneous thought, quoting the Scripture that one should instead '*Rebuke with all Authority, and rebuke sharply*' (Titus 1.13, 2.15).<sup>120</sup>

The culture of controversy was thus constituted in part by the shared cultural and educational experience and professional commitments of the participants. Moving away from personal motivations, the particular circumstances of the established Church were also a factor. It goes without saying that the Church of England was an extremely potent cultural and ideological force throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>121</sup> Nominally, clergymen were expected to present a unified front – for instance, the Church of England's canons forbade 'public opposition between preachers'.<sup>122</sup> Yet the Church was often beset by internal discord, and external opponents. Re-established by the Act of Uniformity (1662), it held a monopoly on public office and the universities.<sup>123</sup> Yet it had experienced an immediate schism with the nonconformists, followed by the breach with the 'non-jurors' who did not recognise William and Mary as sovereigns after the Revolution of 1688. The

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<sup>119</sup> George Bull, *A companion for the candidates of holy orders, or, the great importance and principal duties of the priestly office* (London: 1714), 15-16.

<sup>120</sup> John Edwards, *Some new discoveries of the uncertainty, deficiency, and corruptions of human knowledge and learning. [...] To which is added, A defence of sharp reflections and censures on writers and their opinions, when there is occasion* (London: 1714).

<sup>121</sup> J. C. D Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, social structure and political practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: 1985). Brent Sirota, *The Christian monitors: the Church of England and the age of benevolence, 1680-1730* (New Haven and London: 2014), 260.

<sup>122</sup> Church of England, *Constitutions and canons ecclesiastical treated upon by the Bishop of London, president of the convocation for the province of Canterbury, [...] now published for the due observation of them, by His Majesty's authority, under the great seal of England* (London: 1678), LIII.

<sup>123</sup> Through the Corporation Act 1661 (13 Cha. II. St. 2 c. 1) and the Act of Uniformity 1662 (14 Car 2 c 4).

Toleration Act of 1689 provided for freedom of worship for nonconformists in certain circumstances, but excepted Roman Catholics and those who denied the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>124</sup>

While the Church had ‘authoritie in controuersies of fayth’, Church government itself could be contentious, as in debates over the holding of the Convocations of Canterbury and York around 1701, and the Bangorian Controversy from 1716.<sup>125</sup> Dioceses were governed by their bishops, and the Church as a whole by injunctions from the crown; however, it was difficult to remove an erring clergyman. There was also a sense that a clerical career path was an attractive – even the default – option for scholarly individuals, and thus drew a range of people with diverse interests and views. With this, there was an evolving concern in the early eighteenth century that the Church hierarchy itself had departed from true religion. The Irish non-juror Charles Leslie would refer to ‘the Devil and his *Socinian-Latitudinarian* ministers.’<sup>126</sup> Henry Sacheverell wrote of ‘*Altars, and Sacraments Prostituted to Hypocrites, Deists, Socinians, and Atheists*’.<sup>127</sup> So too, the Church faced a degree of disciplinary competition from lay people offering works of philosophical theology that would formerly have been the traditional province of the clergy (something that is a theme in Chapters 6 and 7).

As the above discussion illustrates, religion and politics were frequently intertwined, and in that sense ecclesiastical politics formed part of the contextual background to the controversies. Justin Champion has portrayed historical controversy in this period as driven

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<sup>124</sup> The Toleration Act 1689 (1 Will & Mary c 18).

<sup>125</sup> *Thirty-nine articles*, Article XX. The authenticity of this Article was itself disputed, for example in: Anthony Collins, *Priestcraft in Perfection* (London: 1709).

<sup>126</sup> Charles Leslie, *The Charge of Socinianism against Dr. Tillotson considered* (Edinburgh, 1695), 2, 31.

<sup>127</sup> Henry Sacheverell, *The perils of false brethren, both in Church and state: set forth in a sermon [on 2 Cor. xi. 26] preach'd before the lord mayor, on the 5th of November, 1709.* (London: 1710), 8.

primarily by political and ecclesiastical considerations. John Toland's polemics against 'priestcraft', for example, are seen as reflecting an ongoing debate on the relationship between the priest and civil society.<sup>128</sup> This thesis seeks to present a more nuanced reconstruction, by avoiding a heavily contextualised social or political reading of the debates considered, yet the relevance of the underlying politics to the controversial context must be acknowledged.

The culture of controversy was also informed by concerns about irreligious philosophies such as 'atheism' associated with developments in natural philosophy.<sup>129</sup> While the 'new philosophies' were more often than not actuated by religious concerns, there was often apprehension about their potentially materialistic, deterministic, and / or naturalistic implications. Certainly, many texts are explicit about this concern. The age was, according to John Wilkins in 1675, 'over-run with *Scepticisme* and *Infidelity*'.<sup>130</sup> In 1691, Robert Boyle deprecated the 'great and deplorable growth of irreligion', particularly among educated 'wits'.<sup>131</sup> This concern would lead him to fund the establishment of the Boyle Lectures, held from 1692 into the eighteenth century, which often referred to these kinds of anxieties.<sup>132</sup>

The range of impugned philosophical identities that troubled these thinkers was considerable. John Edwards epitomised this in a work: 'design'd as an Antidote in this Corrupted Age against the dangerous Opinions of *Papists, Arians* and *Socinians, Pelagians* and *Remonstrants, Anabaptists, Antinomians, Deists, Atheists, Scepticks, Enthusiasts,*

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<sup>128</sup> Justin Champion, *Pillars of priestcraft*, 11, 17.

<sup>129</sup> Henry, *Scientific Revolution*, 96. Brooke, *Science and religion*, 264.

<sup>130</sup> John Wilkins, *Of the principles and duties of natural religion* (London: 1675), Preface [4].

<sup>131</sup> Robert Boyle, *The Christian virtuoso* (London: 1690), Preface [1].

<sup>132</sup> The bequest was for 'proving the Christian religion against notorious Infidels': Boyle's will was printed in: Thomas Birch, "The Life of the Honourable Robert Boyle," in Robert Boyle, *The works of the Honourable Robert Boyle* (London: 1744), I:105.

*Libertines*.<sup>133</sup> The most extreme polemical focus, ‘the atheist’, had a curious position. Alan Kors, among others, has emphasised the major place of ‘the atheist’ within the intellectual life of early modern Europe as a target, even when it was difficult to identify a specific proponent of these views, and many thinkers denied the possibility of true atheism.<sup>134</sup> During our period, the figure of the deist took on greater significance (as previously noted).

While the above factors may be taken to have stimulated intellectual controversies, many were aware of their potentially destructive character. The Bible itself had warned about ‘doubtful disputations’.<sup>135</sup> Joseph Glanvill, clergyman and proponent of the Royal Society, listed a ‘Humour of Disputing’ among the ‘greatest Enemies’ of religion, alongside such usual suspects as atheism.<sup>136</sup> Bishop Bull, cited previously, emphasised the danger of disputatious teachers.<sup>137</sup> The cultural trope of an arrogant and cantankerous intellectual disputant was encapsulated by Swift, who satirised a writer who:

swelled himself into the Size and Posture of a Disputant, began his Argument in the true Spirit of Controversy, with a Resolution to be heartily scurrilous and angry, to urge *on* his own Reasons, without the least Regard to the Answers or Objections of his Opposite; and fully predetermined in his Mind against all Conviction.<sup>138</sup>

The potentially destructive nature of disputes was also recognised among proponents of the ‘new philosophies’, who criticised the futile or specious dispute particularly associated with

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<sup>133</sup> John Edwards, *Theologia reformata* (London: 1713).

<sup>134</sup> Alan Kors, *Naturalism and unbelief in France, 1650-1729* (Cambridge: 2016), 1.

<sup>135</sup> Romans 14:1.

<sup>136</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Essays on several important subjects in philosophy and religion* (London, 1676), IV, 6.

<sup>137</sup> Bull, *A companion*, 9.

<sup>138</sup> Jonathan Swift, *A tale of a tub, written for the universal improvement of mankind: to which is added, An account of a battle between the antient and modern books in St. James's Library* (London: 1704), 245

the philosophical tradition of Aristotelian scholasticism. Thus, Hobbes in *De Corpore* (1655) disparaged philosophers who ‘do nothing but dispute or wrangle’.<sup>139</sup> In his discussion ‘Of the Abuse of Words’ in the *Essay* (1689), Locke saw the ‘Schoolmen and Metaphysicians’ as confounding language in their disputes rather than contributing to knowledge or truth.<sup>140</sup>

These citations touch on the cultural identification of argumentative practice with particular questionable intellectual outlooks, such as scholasticism, sophism and scepticism, all of which form part of the broader intellectual background to the culture of controversy.

While each of these traditions was impugned to some extent, a particular form of scepticism was widely influential. On the one hand, pointless and endless disputation was seen as an excess of ancient scepticism and something to be avoided. Thomas Sprat wrote of those ‘who will always wander; who will never leave disputing’.<sup>141</sup> On the other hand, a constructive engagement with the sceptical tradition (in a mitigated, practical sense) was quite widespread. Bayle compares philosophers to either ‘Advocates’ or ‘those, who report a Cause’. According to him, ‘The former, in proving their Opinions, hid the weak side of their Cause, and the strong side of their Adversaries, as much as they could. The latter, to wit, the Sceptics or Academics, represented the strong and the weak Arguments of the two opposite Parties faithfully, and without any Partiality.’<sup>142</sup> This tendency might also be associated with the Royal Society’s emphasis on *Nullius in verba* (on the word of no one). Robert Boyle provides an excellent example of these different currents. In *The Sceptical Chymist* (1661) Boyle defended writing ‘irresolvedly’ about natural philosophy, his work taking the form of a dialogue between ‘Gentlemen’, who are ‘very far from the litigious humour of loving to

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<sup>139</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Elementorum philosophiae sectio prima de corpore* (Londoni: 1655), 1.

<sup>140</sup> Locke, *Essay*, III, X, §6.

<sup>141</sup> Thomas Sprat, *The history of the Royal Society of London, for the improving of natural knowledge* (London: 1667), 105.

<sup>142</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Dictionary*, Volume 2, ‘Chrysippus’, 487.

wrangle about words or terms or notions'.<sup>143</sup> While these views may imply a certain distrust about the merits of philosophical controversies, all the figures cited, even the reticent Boyle, would engage in significant disputes with other thinkers.<sup>144</sup>

In addition to the personal, political and cultural dynamics considered above, material factors also played a role in shaping the culture of controversy. It is relevant to note the broad trajectory of print culture which provided a backdrop for the debates. The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century saw a significant increase in printed works and a 'more inclusive urban readership', with the ongoing, albeit gradual, decline in Latin as the language of print.<sup>145</sup> This was, of course, the period in which Jürgen Habermas discerned the emergence of the public sphere.<sup>146</sup> The Boyle lectures from 1692 were an effort to disseminate a philosophically cogent but accessible defence of Christianity that reflects this forum for ideas. The period also saw the continued evolution of the Republic of Letters (*Respublica literaria*), with learned journals directed at a wider audience, notably Pierre Bayle's *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* from 1684, and Jean Le Clerc's *Bibliothèque universelle et historique* from 1686.<sup>147</sup> Yet the period also saw increasing religious and ideological fragmentation – of which controversy was often symptomatic – which sometimes threatened the traditional values associated with the republic.

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<sup>143</sup> Robert Boyle, *The sceptical chymist* (London: 1661), 16. Shapin sees Boyle's dialogues as designed as a model for collaborative discussion and persuasion: Shapin, *Leviathan and the air pump*, 74-75.

<sup>144</sup> Boyle's dispute with Henry More is discussed in: John Henry, "Henry More versus Robert Boyle: the spirit of nature and the nature of providence," *Henry More (1614-1687) tercentenary studies*, ed. Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: 1990), 37-76.

<sup>145</sup> Thomas Munck, *Conflict and Enlightenment: print and political culture in Europe, 1635–1795* (Cambridge: 2019), 36-38.

<sup>146</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* trans. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge: 1989).

<sup>147</sup> Richard Tuck, "The institutional setting," in *The Cambridge history of seventeenth century philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, 9-32, 30.

There were also legal constraints that shaped philosophical and theological discourse. The potentially destabilising role of controversies was memorably expressed by William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle in advice given to Charles II on the eve of the Restoration in 1660. Newcastle described controversy as ‘Civill war with the Pen’ and considered it should be restricted to Latin, with publication limited to clergymen and philosophers.<sup>148</sup> While this advice was never followed, the Licensing of the Press Act 1662 provided a licencing system for books and restricted printing.<sup>149</sup> The Act lapsed between 13 March 1679 to 24 June 1685, and then finally lapsed in 1695. During this time, it was the target of campaigning by philosophers including Charles Blount,<sup>150</sup> and John Locke.<sup>151</sup> Alongside this, there were various ineffective attempts to introduce laws concerning blasphemy, atheism and profaneness, and ultimately the passage of the Blasphemy Act 1697 (9 Will 3 c 35), although this never produced a prosecution.<sup>152</sup> When Thomas Woolston was prosecuted for blasphemy in 1729 it was on the basis of a common law ruling that Christianity was ‘parcel of the Laws of England’.<sup>153</sup> Neighbouring Scotland saw the last execution for blasphemy in Great Britain, that of Edinburgh student Thomas Aikenhead in 1697.<sup>154</sup> While the legal situation was thus complex, it did cast a shadow over intellectual discussion. In these

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<sup>148</sup> Thomas Slaughter (ed.), *Ideology and politics on the eve of Restoration: Newcastle's advice to Charles II* (Philadelphia: 1984), 21.

<sup>149</sup> Act for preventing the frequent Abuses in printing seditious treasonable and unlicensed Bookes and Pamphlets and for regulating of Printing and Printing Presses (14 Car. II. c. 33).

<sup>150</sup> Charles Blount, *A just vindication of learning, or, An humble address to the high court of Parliament in behalf of the liberty of the press by Philopatris* (London: 1679). Charles Blount, *Reasons humbly offered for the liberty of unlicensed printing* (London: 1693)

<sup>151</sup> Locke's memorandum against the 1662 Act was printed in: Peter King (ed), *The life and letters of John Locke* (London: 1884), 202-209.

<sup>152</sup> Elliott Visconsi, ‘The invention of criminal blasphemy: Rex v. Taylor (1676),’ *Representations*; (2008) 103, 30-52.

<sup>153</sup> *Taylor's Case* (1676) 1 Ventris 293 (1676) 293; 86 E.R. 189; John Strange, *Reports of adjudged cases* (London: 1755), Volume 2, 834.

<sup>154</sup> Michael Hunter, “‘Aikenhead the Atheist’: The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century,” in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter, and David Wootton. (Oxford: 1992), 221-254.

circumstances, some figures adopted what James Herrick described as a ‘rhetoric of subterfuge and characterisation’.<sup>155</sup>

Finally, it is apposite to note the conventions and practices of social engagement that influenced the content and tone of the controversies. Many leading figures of the Church of England such as John Tillotson were irenic in their outlook, and Robert Boyle, for instance, wrote that he was ‘careful not to rail at my Infidels’.<sup>156</sup> One aspect of the period that has received significant attention concerns the emerging conventions surrounding polite sociability reflected in such things as the burgeoning coffee-house culture, the conception of virtuous sociability advocated by the Earl of Shaftesbury, and periodicals like the *Tatler*, and *Spectator* of Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele.<sup>157</sup> While intellectual debate could take the form of polite conversation, there were, of course, other potential analogues, which might influence the conduct of controversy in a more adversarial direction (as will be seen throughout the debates). An important part of this was a rhetorical culture linking truth and honour. In that regard, Steven Shapin has brought to attention the sense of gentility in the ‘recognition, constitution, and protection of truth’, in natural philosophy in the seventeenth century.<sup>158</sup> In the following chapters, we will see instances: Thomas Woolston wrote of an opponent who ‘comes not behind me, like other *Cowards*, to give me a secret Knock on the

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<sup>155</sup> James Herrick, *Radical rhetoric of the English deists: the discourse of skepticism. 1680-1750* (Columbia: 1997), Chapter 3.

<sup>156</sup> Robert Boyle, *Some considerations about the reconcilableness of reason and religion* (London: 1675), xii.

<sup>157</sup> Lawrence Klein “The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the progress of politeness,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18(2) (1984-1985), 186-214. Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness* (Cambridge: 1994). Lawrence E. Klein, “Coffeehouse civility, 1660-1714: an aspect of post-courtly culture in England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 59(1) (1996), 30-51.

<sup>158</sup> Steven Shapin, *A social history of truth: civility and science in seventeenth-century England* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 42

Pate, but like a courageous Champion, looks me in the Face, and admonishes me to stand upon my Guard'.<sup>159</sup>

As we have seen, thinkers *circa* 1700 approached intellectual debate and discussion in particular contexts, and sensitive to a range of conventions, potent cultural tropes, norms and expectations. The following section will summarise how the thesis has explored the nexus between philosophical theology and this culture of controversy.

#### ***IV. Outline of the chapters***

The thesis is divided into three parts, each of which considers a particular thematically linked group of controversies: debates on the creation of the world, reason and faith, and the soul. At the heart of these are chapters concerning specific disputes. Although they are typically catalysed by a specific thinker and text, the diffuse and open-ended nature of controversy leads to a wide cast of characters and interconnected debates. This is one of the important contributions of the research. Whereas some of the protagonists of the controversy are well-known (Locke), and some are relatively prominent (Toland, Burnet, Clarke), others shade into obscurity. Yet each of these polemical contributions is uniquely significant as an attempt to express a view on one of the great questions of the time informed by a particular intellectual and controversial context. While the intention has been to focus on each controversy as a discrete episode, there are multiple links and connections running between the thinkers across the chapters (whether as colleagues, friends or adversaries). Collectively, they offer a portrait of the diverse permutations of thought at the turn of the century encompassing a range of backgrounds, professional affiliations, confessional allegiances, and above all a diverse set of philosophical and theological viewpoints. Each of these parts is

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<sup>159</sup> Thomas Woolston, *Mr. Woolston's defence of his Discourses on the miracles of our saviour, against the Bishops of St. David's and London, and his other adversaries* (London: 1729) 4.

framed with an introductory chapter on the intellectual setting, which provides context and allows thematic comparison to be drawn through the specific case studies. Each concludes with a brief epilogue that looks to the legacy of the particular controversy.

The focus of Part I is the prominent debates surrounding the creation of the world and the biblical deluge centred on the late seventeenth-century cosmogonies of the figures sometimes known as the ‘World Makers’. These disputes have been seen in terms of the Scientific Revolution, and the declining authority of the Bible in the face of advances in new knowledge of the natural world. However, the diversity of controversial perspectives on these matters belies any simple reading of these debates. As Chapter 1 discusses, these disputes brought to the fore a range of issues, some venerable and some emergent. These included the appropriate interpretation of the Christian Scripture and how this sat with ancient history. They were also shaped by the dynamic context of natural philosophy, including competition between the theories of Descartes and Newton alongside lesser luminaries.

Chapter 2 considers the catalyst for these debates: the *Theory of Earth* (1684,1690) of Thomas Burnet. Burnet’s elegant synthesis of the Genesis creation narrative and Descartes’ physics centred on a dramatic reworking of the biblical deluge, and was the subject of immediate fascination generating decades of dispute that peaked around 1695-1698. The chapter brings out the diverse polemical perspectives on the work, many of which receive cursory treatment from scholars. Rather than being reducible to conveniently definable positions, the responses are testament to the diverse views in the broad domain of philosophical theology. The denunciations of the ageing bishop Herbert Croft represent a thorough rejection of attempts to integrate the Bible and natural philosophy. Yet others, such as the eclectic Erasmus Warren and naturalist John Beaumont, were more sympathetic, offering their own alternatives. As the debate wore on, Burnet’s work became a conspicuous

target, emblematic of the perceived weaknesses of Descartes' philosophy, as opposed to Newton's, and seen as a denial of God's providence. A notable feature was the potential for positions advanced on orthodox premises to take on a heterodox complexion, alongside the actual appropriation of ideas by heterodox thinkers such as the anonymous 'L. P.'. This is true of Burnet himself, whose repeated efforts to defend the *Theory* led him to views about the Bible that were unpalatable among most of his contemporaries.

The theme of Chapter 3 is the lesser-known controversy over William Whiston's *New Theory of Earth* (1696). Written during the height of the debate over Burnet's *Theory*, Whiston's work presented an account of sacred history actuated by comets, offering a more restrained approach to the Bible, and a cosmogony built around the physics of Newton. The polemics of the moderate William Nicholls and Calvinist John Edwards provide two contrasting views on the relations between the Bible and natural philosophy. Whiston has often been seen as a 'Newtonian', in contrast to the 'Cartesian' Burnet. Yet, Whiston's acrimonious debate with another follower of Newton, the mathematician John Keill, shows there is no straightforward replacement of one school of thought by another. Moreover, it illustrates the contested character of Newton's work in the decades after its publication, rather than the existence of a coherent 'Newtonian' ideology.

In considering the legacy of the controversies, Chapter 4 explores the complex aftermath of the debates and the power of controversy to shape the fate of the protagonists, their reputation and subsequent engagement with their ideas. With his career thwarted, Burnet became, for many, an exemplar of extravagant system-building and irreligion. His and Whiston's efforts to offer an integrated account of sacred history and nature provided an important precedent for other theorists, but also a warning as to its pitfalls. It would be wrong, however, to see it as a simple victory of science over religion.

At a macroscopic level, the intellectual life of England *circa* 1700 is often seen as part of the Early Enlightenment or Age of Reason. Part II takes as its subject specific controversies on the limits of what can be known, and the demarcation between reason and faith. As Chapter 5 sets out, these debates had a range of antecedents across the wider intellectual culture, including ongoing discussion of the relationship between ‘reason’ and ‘faith’, the tension between knowledge and scepticism, and broader contemporary concerns about ‘deism’ and ‘Socinianism’, which were a constant theme in polemical writing.

Chapter 6 considers the controversy provoked by John Toland’s *Christianity not mysterious* (1696). Toland and his work have a prominent place in the historiography as exemplifying radical thought and the emergence of deism in the early Enlightenment. Yet there is little space in these narratives for the individual characteristics of thinkers who wrote polemics against Toland’s work. A consideration of these writers also serves to present Toland in a different light against the backdrop of concerns about ‘Socinianism’. Influenced by Locke, Toland provided an account of ‘reason’, which provoked quite different responses from the Oxford academic Thomas Beconnsall, who saw it as over-confident and sophistic, and the millenarian Thomas Beverley, who offered a ‘Religious Account’ of reason. While Toland was often seen as pitting reason against religion, he appealed to the tradition of reformation. For the philosopher John Norris, there was a danger for this to elide into irreligion, and cause for a scholarly defence on Cartesian grounds. The debate occurred in the context of the lapse of the licencing system, and Jean Gailhard underscored the social danger of blasphemy, and called for legislative action. Toland’s attack on the ‘mysteries’ of Christianity as ‘priestly corruptions’ saw different critiques from William Payne, who called for calm, and Peter Browne, who was instrumental in shaping the reaction that saw Toland’s book burned in Ireland. This wealth of perspectives and the cross-currents between them reveal a situation not reducible to a simple conflict between politically informed ‘deism’ and reactionary

forces. Toland's self-presentation and his defences, which focused not on the content of his work, but the conduct of his adversaries, represents another theme of this chapter, underscoring the rhetorical aspects of controversy.

From the many-sided debate over Toland's work, Chapter 7 turns to a dialogue between two dominant figures of their intellectual culture, Edward Stillingfleet and John Locke. As with many controversies, this arose indirectly. In the course of a work against Toland, Stillingfleet linked him with Locke as part of a 'new way of reasoning'. Locke hoped to assuage these concerns, but Stillingfleet was intractable, and the two men engaged in a wide-ranging philosophical debate. From a discussion of the potential for Locke's account of reason to undermine the theological doctrine of the Trinity, the debate ultimately encompassed epistemic questions of reason, ideas and faith; the doctrine of the resurrection; the immateriality of the soul; and Stillingfleet's concern about Locke's 'tendency to scepticism'. This exemplifies the potential for controversy to rapidly expand to encompass an ever-widening range of issues. The correspondence is noteworthy both for its philosophical depth and for the conspicuous personal dimension, with mutual accusations of evasion, including Locke's memorable reflections on the evils of controversy itself. Indeed, the debate exemplifies the emergence of a rivalry that was by no means pre-determined by philosophical considerations alone, but which sharpened and crystallised these issues through the course of debate. It is argued that the Enlightenment characterisation of the debate between Locke as a philosopher of reason and Stillingfleet as a scholastic theologian reflects the rhetoric, rather than the nuances, of the discussion.

In Chapter 8, the thesis reflects more generally on how controversy shaped engagement with concepts of reason and faith and influenced the legacies of the thinkers involved and their works. It argues that exploring the polemical relations between these thinkers reveals a more

complex reality than the historiographical appeal to labels such as ‘deist’, ‘latitudinarian’ and ‘Cartesian’.

Part III of this thesis concerns controversies over the nature of the soul. As Chapter 9 notes, longstanding Christian and classical traditions surrounding its immortality and immateriality received their most prominent formulation in the dualism of Descartes. Yet the intellectual culture was sensitive to other countervailing currents of thought, including the naturalistic views of Epicurus and Hobbes, Christian mortalism, and medical exploration of physiology. Among the wealth of controversial literature generated in this period, two contrasting instances form the centre of the Part.

The focus of Chapter 10 is the little-known polemicist Henry Layton. An elderly country gentleman from Yorkshire, Layton’s growing doubts about the nature of the soul prompted him to write a controversial work positioned against the renowned Boyle lecturer Richard Bentley. Layton’s views developed iteratively through his private musings, biblical interpretation and engagement with an eclectic range of sources. Bentley did not reply, but Layton received a belated and hostile response from a local minister, Timothy Manlove, who equated Layton’s work with ‘atheism’. Taking this as a sign from God, Layton provided a further defence, and published a more comprehensive treatise. Layton’s efforts to understand the soul, hesitant and self-questioning, point to the centrality of controversy in the personal religious development of many contemporaries, as well as the formation of novel and unorthodox views through argument. The provincial setting of this debate also illustrates the significance of controversy outside London and the universities.

Chapter 11 examines the correspondence between Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins. Of enduring significance to philosophers as a statement of the materialist/immaterialist positions, the debate arose through Clarke’s effort to offer a philosophically decisive account of the

immaterial soul as against the notorious arguments of the High Church theologian Henry Dodwell that immortality was only conferred through the Church. In this context, Clarke argued that ‘consciousness’ could not arise from matter. Collins’ entry into this discussion represents another case where controversy took an unexpected course. Praising the value of free debate and enquiry, Collins offered his own account that consciousness may arise from a system of matter as a property of the whole system, although not its individual constituent parts. In the shadow of the claims that Collins was professing views destructive of religion, we see him exploring the boundaries of what was permissible in his intellectual culture, and how debate created discursive possibilities for thinkers to test and develop their ideas.

In Chapter 12, the thesis looks to the subsequent history of these two contrasting disputes in the long-standing discussion of the soul. Historians have often seen Collins’ debate with Clarke as symptomatic of a broader conflict between moderate ‘Newtonianism’ and radical ‘deism’. Yet, the particular positions taken by Collins and Clarke are not reducible to this division. In contrast, Layton’s works had a limited impact in later discussions; however, their place in the ongoing tradition of Christian mortalism remind us that the debate on the soul is not a simple dichotomy of religious and rationalistic views.

The conclusion reflects on the broader findings of the thesis and its contribution to the historiography. The readings summarised above reveal the centrality of controversy and dispute to the intellectual life of England *circa* 1700. The culture of controversy provided a shared context and expectations for discussion of important philosophical and theological issues, and as these examples show, actively shaped the trajectories of these debates, and the fortunes and legacies of particular thinkers. As such, the thesis presents a picture of the intellectual culture not simply reducible to disembodied ideas. Disputants were often conscious of this disjunct between the idealised pursuit of truth and the somewhat fractious reality, yet there were compelling reasons to participate. While discussion required shared

cultural resources and themes, they brought to their contests disparate interests, talents and agendas. The chapters emphasise this sense of individuals in communication with other individuals, rather than as representatives of broad historic labels and trajectories.

Collectively, this gives a picture of the diversity in philosophical theology at this time that complicates broader narratives of secularisation. In that regard, the thesis addresses broader problems in the historiography, such as the focus on 'heterodox' figures, and the reliance on terms such as 'deism', 'latitudinarianism', and 'Newtonianism'.

**PART I**

**WORLDS MADE AND DESTROY'D**

## CHAPTER 1

### INTELLECTUAL SETTING

During the last two decades of the seventeenth century, and most intensely between the years 1695 and 1700, a series of debates raged in England about Worlds ‘made and destroy’d’ – the creation of the Earth and the transformative events of the biblical deluge.<sup>1</sup> Often seen in the context of the ‘Scientific Revolution’, these debates evoked a mosaic of different issues at the intersection of theology and philosophy. To what extent was the narrative of Genesis a literal description of these events, or else ‘accommodated’ to the understanding of an unphilosophical people? Were the events it described strictly miraculous? Could they be framed in terms of the physics of René Descartes, or Isaac Newton’s *Principia* (1687)? How should such disparate sources of evidence as ancient mythology and fossils be interpreted, and what did they say about these episodes in the history of the Earth? The catalyst for the debate was clergyman Thomas Burnet’s *Telluris theoria sacra* (1681, 1689), loosely translated as *The theory of the earth* (1684, 1690). His attempt to reconcile sacred history, natural philosophy and ancient tradition excited considerable acclaim, as well as numerous critiques, and inspired two major alternative models – *An essay toward a natural history of the earth* (1695) by John Woodward, a physician and naturalist, and *A new theory of earth* (1696) by William Whiston, a clergyman and devotee of Newton’s physics – both of which prompted subsidiary debates. Collectively, these thinkers have often been grouped together as the ‘World Makers’.

This part considers the debates surrounding Burnet’s *Theory* (Chapter 2), and Whiston’s *New theory* (Chapter 3). It seeks to complement, and complicate, the works of scholars such as

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is from: Burnet, *Theory-II*, Preface [1].

Poole, Thomson and Redwood, who focus on an often homogeneous group of ‘World Makers’ or ‘Sacred Theories’, by presenting a more nuanced picture of the debates.<sup>2</sup> It emphasises the unique perspectives of those who joined the discussion – among them bishops, physicians and poets, thinkers with interests encompassing theology, natural history, physics, astronomy, and ancient history, and with a range of confessional and philosophical allegiances. In so doing, it complicates the tendency to see the debates in teleological terms – whether as cautionary instances of the influence of theology on science,<sup>3</sup> a stage in the evolution of geology,<sup>4</sup> the emergence of the Enlightenment,<sup>5</sup> or of environmental consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it reveals how polemical dialogue shaped and defined patterns of thought, including its contribution to the struggle over how Newton’s philosophy would be interpreted, the emerging reaction against ‘philosophical romance’ and a growing wariness of grand projects in philosophical theology.

This first chapter provides a brief account of the intellectual setting in which the controversies took place. It first discusses the Genesis narrative and some broader trends in the interpretation of the Bible during this period. Second, it considers some contemporary perspectives on ancient philosophical traditions, both insofar as they were used to support the

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<sup>2</sup> William Poole, *The world makers: Scientists of the Restoration and the search for the origins of the earth* (Oxford: 2017). Keith Thomson, *Before Darwin: Reconciling God and nature* (New Haven, 2005), Chapter 7. Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*, Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> James Hutton, *Theory of the earth* (Edinburgh: 1795), I:271. Andrew Dickson White, *History of the warfare of science with theology in Christendom* (New York: 1896), 216.

<sup>4</sup> Katharine Brownell Collier, *Cosmogonies of our fathers some theories of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries* (New York: 1968). E. Taylor, “The English worldmakers of the seventeenth Century and their influence on the earth sciences,” *Geographical Review* 38(1) (1948): 104-112. Roy Porter, *The making of geology: Earth science in Britain 1660-1815* (Cambridge: 1977). Paolo Rossi, *The dark abyss of time*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: 1984). Rhoda Rappaport, *When geologists were historians, 1665–1750* (Ithaca and London: 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Westfall, “The scientific revolution reasserted,” in *Rethinking the scientific revolution*, ed. Margaret Osler (Cambridge: 2000), 41-55, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Lydia Barnett, *After the flood: Imagining the global Environment in early modern Europe* (Baltimore: 2019), 89-128.

Mosaic account, and as they could be the source of alternative theories. Third, it discusses how the ‘new philosophies’ gave impetus to novel approaches in this area.

### *I. The Mosaic account*

In seventeenth-century Europe, the pre-eminent account of creation was Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Conventionally understood as God’s revelation to Moses, it portrayed how God’s work unfolded over the six days of creation (the hexameron). The Bible relates the Fall of Adam and Eve, their expulsion from Paradise, the deluge sent by God to punish the sins of humanity, and the early history of the Jewish people. As the authority and interpretation of Genesis would be a central theme in the debates considered, we turn first to the complex history concerning the interpretation of Scripture.

*Circa* 1700, most Europeans would have agreed with commentator Matthew Henry that the Bible was ‘the Book of books, shining like the sun in the firmament of learning’.<sup>7</sup> However, the Bible is a complex text, and scholars faced difficult questions as to the correct version (whether the Latin Vulgate, Greek Septuagint, or Hebrew), textual authorship, and chronology. Hermeneutical traditions had a long history, and thinkers looked to such longstanding precedents as the *quadriga*, which identified four different methods of interpretation – the historical, allegorical, tropological or moral, and anagogical.<sup>8</sup> Particularly important was St Augustine’s notion that the Scripture was ‘accommodated’ to the capacities of its human audience, given its spiritual, rather than philosophical, purpose. Essentially, God had adapted his message to take into account human flaws: ‘when he speaks through a

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry, *An exposition of the five books of Moses, Viz. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (London: 1707), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Deeana Copeland Klepper, “Theories of interpretation: The quadriga and its successors,” in *The new Cambridge history of the Bible*, ed. Euan Cameron (Cambridge: 2016), 3:418–38.

man he uses the idiom of men'.<sup>9</sup> Early modern thinkers were conscious of the discussions about accommodation among the Church Fathers, and the influential work of the medieval scholar Maimonides.<sup>10</sup> With the emergence of humanism, textual criticism and philological methods were used to understand Scripture.<sup>11</sup> From the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers emphasised the Scripture as against the authority and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, citing the notion of *Sola Scriptura*.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, Protestants and Catholics regularly accused each other of distorting the Scripture to suit their purposes,<sup>13</sup> and revived the arguments of the Greek sceptics in their debates.<sup>14</sup>

The general trajectory of scriptural interpretation across the seventeenth century might be broadly summarised in terms of a shift from an emphasis on the text of the Bible, broadly reflecting the Reformation, to a more historical-contextual approach.<sup>15</sup> This shift has principally been seen as the legacy of three subversive figures – Thomas Hobbes, Isaac La Peyrère, and Benedict Spinoza, although recent scholarship has qualified the extent of this attribution.<sup>16</sup> Hobbes argued in his *Leviathan* (1651) that the Pentateuch had been partially written after Moses' time, based on internal evidence in the text.<sup>17</sup> As Noel

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *City of God, Volume V: Books 16-18*, trans. Eva Sanford, William Green (Cambridge, MA: 1965), 268.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Benin, "The 'Cunning of God' and divine accommodation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45(2) (1984), 179-191.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Taylor, "Biblical humanism," in *The Oxford handbook of neo-latin*, ed. Sarah Knight and Stefan Tilg, (Oxford: 2015), 295-312.

<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on Scripture was present in Martin Luther's speech at the Council of Worms in 1521. See: Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York and London: 1947), 285.

<sup>13</sup> H. Porter, "The nose of wax: Scripture and the spirit from Erasmus to Milton," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 14 (1964), 155-174.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Popkin, *The history of scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: 2003), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science* (Cambridge: 2017), 119.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Morrow, *Three skeptics and the Bible: La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Reception of Modern Biblical Criticism* (Eugene: 2016). For an example where these three were linked: Richard Kidder, *A Commentary on the five books of Moses* (London: 1694), Preface, xxiv.

<sup>17</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III, XXXIII.

Malcolm observed, elements of Hobbes' approach were present in mainstream tradition. The reception of his work was, however, coloured by his other claims, including that the authority of Scripture was grounded in political authority, and his naturalistic account of miracles.<sup>18</sup>

Isaac La Peyrère might possibly have met Hobbes, as both were among the circle of scholars associated with Marin Mersenne.<sup>19</sup> Prepared during the 1640s, his *Prae-Adamitae* (1655) contended there were men before Adam (supported by a reading of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans), and suggested the deluge had been a localised, rather than universal, phenomenon. While La Peyrère's views had a particular millenarian colouring – namely that the King of France (the Prince of Condé rather than Louis XIV) would (shortly) rule the world with the Messiah – they comprehended a more extensive questioning of the authenticity and accuracy of the Bible, including effectively reconceptualising the Pentateuch as a history of the Jews.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the Dutch Sephardic Jewish philosopher Spinoza presented a far-reaching theory of Scripture in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670). Spinoza advocated the 'universal rule' that we should accept nothing as authoritative in the Scripture, that we do not 'perceive very clearly when we examine it in the light of its history'. He drew attention to the faulty and inconsistent nature of the text, and rejected Mosaic authorship.<sup>21</sup> As Richard Popkin observed, Spinoza separated understanding the Scripture from understanding truth and the universal divine law.<sup>22</sup> According to Jonathan Israel, Spinoza's approach was central to a

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<sup>18</sup> Noel Malcolm, "Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: The history of a subversive idea," in *Aspects of Hobbes*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: 2002), 383-431.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His life, work, and influence* (Leiden: 1987).

<sup>20</sup> La Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae* (1655) appeared in Britain as: Isaac La Peyrère, *Men before Adam* [...] (London: 1656).

<sup>21</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *The chief works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. Robert Elwes (London: 1891), 101.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Popkin, "Spinoza and Bible scholarship," in *The Cambridge companion to Spinoza* ed. Don Garrett, (Cambridge: 1995), 383-407, 403.

radical transformation in scholarship, and ‘the overthrow of humanist criticism’.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Anthony Grafton persuasively places Spinoza’s work in the tradition of humanism, and sees the radical character of the work as stemming from his broader philosophical agenda.<sup>24</sup>

Although these three figures remained highly controversial during our period, in the ‘World Makers’ controversy these figures remained in the background; the debates took place largely within the broadly orthodox tradition, rather than being driven by the kind of agenda in keeping with Israel’s ‘Radical Enlightenment’. Yet the historical-contextual approaches they espoused had something in common with organic developments within the Church of England.

At the time of the ‘World Makers’ controversy, the concept of accommodation was widely accepted, notably by Archbishop Tillotson, although purely allegorical readings were viewed with suspicion.<sup>25</sup> In one sense, the authority of the Bible was firmly established in the Church of England’s *Thirty-nine Articles* and the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession*.<sup>26</sup> However, as Nicholas McDowell has argued there was ‘considerable overlap between latitudinarian scholarship and radical, deist arguments about the Bible’. In particular, there was a ‘current of scepticism about the authority of the Bible as a sufficient rule of faith *within* the ‘Anglican’ tradition’.<sup>27</sup> This trend might be traced to the efforts to find a

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment contested: Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man 1670-1752* (Oxford: 2006), Chapter 16.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Grafton, “Spinoza’s hermeneutics,” in *Scriptural authority and biblical criticism in the Dutch golden age: God’s word questioned*, ed. Dirk van Miert, Henk Nellen, Piet Steenbakkers, and Jetze Touber (Oxford: 2017), 177-196.

<sup>25</sup> John Tillotson, *The works of the most reverend Dr. John Tillotson* (London 1696), 560. Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the rise of natural science* (Cambridge: 1998), 133.

<sup>26</sup> *Thirty-nine Articles*, Article VI. *Westminster Confession*, Article IV.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas McDowell, “Self-defeating scholarship? Antiscripturism and Anglican apologetics from Hooker to the latitudinarians,” in *The Oxford handbook of the Bible in early modern England, c. 1530-1700* ed. Kevin Killen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Willie (Oxford: 2015), 237-254, 239.

middle path between Roman Catholicism and the claims of more radical Protestants, such as the Puritans. Richard Hooker, a theologian foundational within this tradition, had argued that Scripture was not the ‘*onely rule*’ of human conduct. Instead, he emphasised the place of reason and ‘learned men’s judgements’.<sup>28</sup> An awareness of the potential uncertainty of the Bible can be seen in thinkers such as William Chillingworth.<sup>29</sup> Even more so, Jeremy Taylor observed that it was ‘no wonder that Scriptures look like Pictures, wherein every man in the roome believes they look on him only’.<sup>30</sup> Aware of such potential uncertainty, Edward Stillingfleet relied heavily on historical and philological arguments to establish the correct interpretation of Scripture.

Scriptural interpretation remained a contentious issue around the time Burnet was publishing the *Theory*. In *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (1678), Oratorian priest Richard Simon accepted the Bible was ‘an Abridgement of more large and ancient Records’, but employed his immense scholarship in defence of Catholicism. For Simon, unless tradition was joined to Scripture, ‘we can hardly affirm any thing for certain in Religion’.<sup>31</sup> His views were attacked by many, including fellow Catholics such as the powerful Bishop of Meaux, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet. Yet the acceptance of many of Simon’s methodological premises by figures such as Jean Le Clerc illustrate his impact on the Republic of Letters. Scriptural interpretation was also a major issue in the ‘Socinian Controversy’ over the doctrine of the Trinity from 1687.

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Hooker, *Of the laws of ecclesiasticall politie* (London: 1594), 95, 117.

<sup>29</sup> William Chillingworth, *The religion of protestants a safe way to salvation. Or An ansver to a booke entitled Mercy and truth, or, charity maintain'd by Catholiques, which pretends to prove the contrary* (Oxford: 1638). For Chillingworth, certainty is not possible in religious matters, while the Scripture is infallible, adherence is not certain. Henry van Leeuwen, *The problem of certainty in English thought 1630–1690* (The Hague: 1970). See also: Popkin, *Scepticism*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Treatises of 1. The liberty of prophesying, 2. Prayer ex tempore, 3. Episcopacie : together with a sermon preached at Oxon. on the anniversary of the 5 of November* (London: 1648), Section III, IV, 80.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Simon, *A critical history of the Old Testament. Written originally in French by Father Simon, priest of the congregation of the Oratory; And since translated into English, by a person of quality.* (London: 1682), 164.

Arthur Bury, a clergyman and Rector of Exeter College, Oxford would argue, for instance, that the Trinity was a historical corruption of Christianity.<sup>32</sup> Finally, heterodox approaches to Scripture was a central theme in the debates known collectively as the ‘Deist Controversy’. Stillingfleet controverted those with ‘a mean Esteem of the *Scriptures*, and the *Christian Religion*’, warning that Spinoza was ‘in vogue’.<sup>33</sup> Figures such as John Toland claimed to subject the Bible to the same rules of interpretation as any other book.<sup>34</sup>

## **II. Ancient philosophies**

Alongside the Bible, the study of ancient philosophy and religious belief provided an important intellectual context for the work of the ‘World Makers’ and their critics. An influential idea, generally accepted in the learned world, was that after the biblical deluge, Noah’s beliefs were diffused and suffered progressive corruption.<sup>35</sup> This was expressed variously in scholarly histories of paganism. The Dutch scholar and theologian Gerardus Vossius discerned an almost universal belief in God, that subsequently degenerated into polytheism.<sup>36</sup> For Ralph Cudworth, the varieties of ancient philosophy emanated from a true philosophy that was subsequently ‘*Mangled and Dismembred*’.<sup>37</sup> Stillingfleet saw the various pagan traditions as ‘*building errors on common truths*’.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the evidence of

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<sup>32</sup> [Arthur Bury], *The naked Gospel.: discovering I. What was the Gospel which our Lord and his apostles preached, II. What additions and alterations latter ages have made in it, III. What advantages and damages have thereupon ensued* (1690). Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London: 2003), 108.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *A letter to a deist, in answer to several objections against the truth and authority of the Scriptures* (London: 1677), Preface [4].

<sup>34</sup> Toland, *CNM*, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Levitin, *Ancient wisdom*, 8-10.

<sup>36</sup> Gerardus Vossius, *De theologia gentili, et physiologia christiana sive De origine ac progressu idololatriæ* (Amsterdam: 1642)

<sup>37</sup> Cudworth, *True intellectual system*, 51.

<sup>38</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacræ*, 9.

different philosophical and religious beliefs could be adduced to corroborate Christian accounts of creation. Moreover, as Justin Champion has persuasively argued, historical writing was an important part of the defence of religion.<sup>39</sup>

Ancient philosophy also provided striking alternatives to the Mosaic creation myth, which both provoked efforts to frame Christian cosmogonies, and were important in illustrating some of their difficulties. One such alternative was the notion of an eternally existing Earth and mankind – known principally through Aristotle’s *Physica* and *De Caelo*.<sup>40</sup> Aristotle was often criticised through the seventeenth century, and for many, such as Joseph Glanvill, the claim of an eternal world illustrated Aristotle’s impious tendencies.<sup>41</sup> However, Aristotle’s works were foundational in the universities; moreover, as Yushi Ito has noted, there was a popular academic theory of cyclic geological change that echoed the idea of the eternal world.<sup>42</sup> In *Origines Sacrae* (1662), Stillingfleet sought to refute the theory both through a historical account of its origins, contrasting its novelty with earlier Greek philosophy and the even older belief systems of the Near East, as well as arguing that it was not rationally coherent.<sup>43</sup> The Aristotelian theory provided an important context for Burnet, who saw it as a ‘stone’ standing in the way of his theory.<sup>44</sup>

An even more notorious theory of the Earth’s origins was offered in Epicurean naturalism. The most important source, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* (c. 55 BC), postulated that the

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<sup>39</sup> Justin Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken* (Cambridge: 1992), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. P. Wicksteed, F. Cornford (Cambridge, MA: 1957), I:BookVIII. Aristotle. *On the heavens*. Translated by W. Guthrie (Cambridge, MA: 1939), Book I, Chapter X.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Scepisis scientifica: Or, Confest ignorance, the way to science; in an essay of the vanity of dogmatizing, and confident opinon. With a reply to the exceptions of the learned Thomas Albius* (London: 1665), Chapter XXII.

<sup>42</sup> Yushi Ito, “Hooke’s cyclic theory of the earth in the context of seventeenth century England,” *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 21(3) (1988): 295-314, 300.

<sup>43</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 429

<sup>44</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 34.

universe is an infinite void containing innumerable atoms in motion, and through their occurrences (striking against one another) the frame of the present world and heavenly bodies came into order, along with the generation of life and humankind. Again, this theory was a major cultural presence, both as a canonical statement of ‘atheism’, but also because of the adoption of atomist or corpuscular physics. For Stillingfleet, the notions of ‘*matter* and *motion*’ provided more intelligible explanations of many phenomena than the conceptual structures of traditional Aristotelian physics. However, he rejected the view that there is only matter and motion in the world, and that the only principle shaping the origin of the world was ‘the casual concourse’ of atoms.<sup>45</sup>

The ‘World Makers’ found support for their hypotheses about the origins of the Earth in various ancient traditions. As Dmitri Levitin has observed, Burnet’s work shifted these discussions, which previously occurred in a principally clerical and scholarly context, to the sphere of natural philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

### ***III. The new philosophies***

The intermingling of theological and philosophical accounts of creation was not without precedent. Attempts to interweave the *Genesis* creation narrative and natural philosophy already constituted a conspicuous theme in seventeenth-century intellectual culture.

Hexameral commentaries were widespread in the patristic and medieval period. More recently, John Milton had drawn on contemporary natural philosophy in his account of creation in *Paradise Lost* (1667). Encyclopaedic works such as the *Speculum mundi* (1635) of Church of England clergyman John Swan elaborated on the text of Genesis with natural

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<sup>45</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 461-466.

<sup>46</sup> Levitin, *Ancient wisdom*, 346-349

philosophy – both the Aristotelian corpus and material from more recent theorists such as Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler – and remained important.<sup>47</sup> More controversially, the century had already seen attempts by thinkers influenced by the Swiss physician Paracelsus to provide alchemical accounts of creation.<sup>48</sup>

A particularly important precedent for Burnet's *Theory* was Descartes' cosmogony, set out in the *Principia philosophiæ* (1644), a work intended to replace Aristotelian textbooks. For Stephen Gaukroger, this work 'made the Earth an object of natural– philosophical/scientific investigation for the first time', and was foundational in transforming understandings of the age and nature of the Earth.<sup>49</sup> Descartes considered that space is entirely full of different kinds of matter (a plenum). He theorised that the planets were located in vortices (circling bands of very small particles). The account of the formation of the Earth in Part IV (*De Terra*) was couched with some equivocation – God might have created the Earth supernaturally, but Descartes was interested in the processes that could account for its formation. He speculated that the Earth was formerly a collapsed star, which eventually entered orbit around the Sun. He outlined four active processes to explain phenomena of the Earth (such as gravity), construed according to vortex theory.<sup>50</sup>

The reception of Descartes' theories in England was a complex matter. Scholars have generally discerned a pattern of initial enthusiasm, followed by growing disillusionment.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John Swan, *Speculum mundi: Or A glasse representing the face of the world shewing both that it did begin, and must also end: the manner how, and time when, being largely examined.* (Cambridge: 1635).

<sup>48</sup> An example was: Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi, maioris scilicet et minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica historia* (1617-1624). Norma Emerton, "Creation in the Thought of J.B. van Helmont and Robert Fludd," in *Alchemy and chemistry in the 16th and 17th centuries*, ed. Piyo Rattansi and Antonio Clericuzio (Dordrecht: 1994), 85-101. With such interventions in mind, Francis Bacon had cautioned against attempts to found natural philosophy on Genesis: Francis Bacon, *Instauratio magna* (London: 1620), LXV.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes' system of natural philosophy* (Cambridge: 2002), 161.

<sup>50</sup> Descartes, *Principles*, 267.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Jolley, "The reception of Descartes' philosophy," in *The Cambridge companion to Descartes* (Cambridge: 1992), 393-423. Douglas Jesseph, "Mechanism, scepticism and witchcraft: More and Glanvill on

Descartes' theory of the Earth was enthusiastically received (at least in some respects) by the Cambridge philosopher Henry More. In his *Conjectura cabbalistica* (1653), More accepted Descartes' idea that the Earth and other planets are collapsed suns as 'plainly' consistent with the Mosaic account.<sup>52</sup> Glanvill further speculated on the implications of Cartesian philosophy for the structure and fate of the Earth.<sup>53</sup> In *Origines Sacrae* (1662), Stillingfleet was more critical, identifying the 'Cartesian Hypothesis' as an attempt to explain the origin of the Universe '*from the meer Mechanical Laws of motion and matter*'. While Stillingfleet acknowledged that Descartes never meant his theory to support 'Atheism', he had concerns that it might be put to this use. He argued that a Cartesian system would require a Deity, and maintained that '*matter is no self-moving principle*'.<sup>54</sup> At a more technical level, the Dutch physicist Christiaan Huygens discerned many of the problems of Descartes' physics and communicated them to the Royal Society.<sup>55</sup> One criticism that emerged in this period was the sense of Descartes as a 'philosophical romancer'. This is encapsulated in Glanvill's concern that Descartes theorised about an '*Imaginary World*'.<sup>56</sup>

Less dramatic but nonetheless important for debates on the creation and the deluge, were the wide-ranging enquiries of the late seventeenth-century naturalists. There was burgeoning interest in this field, promoted by figures like the physician Sir Hans Sloane.<sup>57</sup> Often, natural history was seen as a pious activity in itself, something embodied in the work of naturalists

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the failures of the Cartesian philosophy", in *Receptions of Descartes: Cartesianism and anti-Cartesianism in early modern Europe* edited by Tad M. Schmaltz (2005), 184-199.

<sup>52</sup> Henry More, *Conjectura cabbalistica or, a conjectural essay of interpreting the minde of Moses, according to a threefold cabbala: viz. literal, philosophical, mystical, or, divinely moral* (London: 1653).

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Lux orientalis* (London: 1661), 164.

<sup>54</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 466

<sup>55</sup> J. Milton, "Laws of nature," in *The Cambridge history of seventeenth century philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: 1998), I, 680-701, 689.

<sup>56</sup> Glanvill, *Scepsis scientifica*, Address [19].

<sup>57</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*, 116-117.

such as John Ray.<sup>58</sup> Touching the present purpose was the ongoing debate as to whether fossils had an inorganic or organic origin, a question that interested such thinkers as Robert Plot, Martin Lister, Niels Steensen and John Ray.<sup>59</sup> John Woodward's *Essay* (1695) would grow out of, and intersect with, his interest in fossils.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the debates surrounding the 'World Makers' were shaped by the reception of Newton's *Principia* (1687), especially at a later stage. Newton's work needs little introduction, often described as effecting a 'revolution' in understanding the universe. His work 'discloses the Newtonian system of the universe – regulated by gravity, by the action of a general force, of which one particular manifestation is the familiar terrestrial weight.'<sup>61</sup> The *Principia* did not deal with the creation or the deluge. Newton had of course, taken immense care to rigorously focus on experimentally observed properties. Famously, he claimed in the second (1713) edition not to frame hypotheses ('Hypotheses non fingo').<sup>62</sup> At the same time, Burnet sought Newton's views on his work, and Whiston self-consciously positioned his *New theory* (1696) in terms of Newton's physics. Yet, as shall be seen, both Burnet and Whiston were criticised on the basis that their theories were inconsistent with the rigour of Newton's work.

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<sup>58</sup> John Ray, *The wisdom of God manifested in the works of the creation* (London: 1691).

<sup>59</sup> Rossi, *Dark abyss*, 3-6.

<sup>60</sup> John Woodward, *An attempt towards a natural history of the fossils of England* (London: 1729).

<sup>61</sup> Newton, *Principia*, 392. I. Bernard Cohen, *Revolutions in science* (Cambridge and London: 1985), 164.

<sup>62</sup> Alan Shapiro, "Newton's optics and atomism," in *The Cambridge companion to Newton*, ed. I. Bernard Cohen and George Smith (Cambridge: 2002), 227-255.

## CHAPTER 2

### NATURE, FROM FIRST TO LAST:

#### THE CONTROVERSY OVER BURNET'S *THEORY* (1684-1699)

Then was *Moses* a meer Gypsy, the Patriarchs, Prophets and Apostles Juglers and Deceivers; and, I tremble to say it, the Son of God, Christ Jesus the Saviour of the World an Arrant Impostor; and thus the Author has brought his Eggs to a fair Market; for here we have all Religion, Virtue and Morality pelted out of the World with one rotten Egg thrown by a *Left-handed Philosopher in Holy Orders*.

– Lovell (1696)<sup>1</sup>

Thus was the verdict of Archibald Lovell on one of the most controversial books of the late seventeenth century. Little is known about Lovell; he translated a range of French works, but fell upon hard times, becoming a pensioner of the Charterhouse, a London charitable foundation, which included an alms-house and school. Yet he felt compelled, despite ‘want of Sight and Friends’, to join the chorus of voices against a work he likened to ‘a Bomb, or Granado-Shell’, and which he saw as threatening the Scripture with a ‘Deluge of Vain and Atheistical philosophy’.<sup>2</sup> The man at whom this was directed was Thomas Burnet, a Church of England clergyman, besides the Master of the Charterhouse. Between 1681 and 1690, Burnet propounded a striking account of the origins and transformations of the Earth. His work encompassed two parts in Latin and English versions – *Telluris theoria sacra* (1681, 1689) and its loose translation *Theory of the earth* (1684, 1690). It is important to note the ongoing relevance of the Latin original, particularly to the broader European debate over the

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald Lovell, *A summary of material heads which may be enlarged and improved into a compleat answer to Dr. Burnet's Theory of the earth digested into an essay by a pensioner of the Charter-House* (London: 1696), 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 20-25.

work. However, as the thesis is concerned with English language debates, its focus is on the English version.<sup>3</sup>

Burnet claimed, in a dedication to Charles II, to have ‘retrieved a world that had been lost for some thousands of years’. In prose of majestic grandeur, he interwove an unconventional interpretation of Genesis with the vortex physics of Descartes, drawing on his researches into ancient philosophy. His work excited considerable attention – Isaac Newton commented, in some respects not unfavourably, on an early version,<sup>4</sup> Joseph Addison celebrated it in an ode,<sup>5</sup> and Burnet seemed set for high office, enjoying the patronage of Archbishop Tillotson until his death in 1694. Yet by the time Lovell was writing, Burnet was increasingly beset: critics such as Herbert Croft and Erasmus Warren had characterised the *Theory* as an ‘abuse’ of Scripture,<sup>6</sup> the naturalists John Beaumont and John Woodward had identified a plethora of issues.<sup>7</sup> To crown this, the *Theory* had been welcomed by ‘deists’.<sup>8</sup> It was later excoriated as a ‘romance’ by Newton’s follower, the Oxford mathematician John Keill.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Burnet called the English version ‘not so properly a Translation as a new Composition upon the same ground’: Burnet, *Theory–I*, Preface [1].

<sup>4</sup> Two letters survive: Isaac Newton to Thomas Burnet, 24 December 1680, and Thomas Burnet to Isaac Newton, 13 January 1680/1, in Isaac Newton, *The correspondence of Isaac Newton*, ed. H.W. Turnbull (Cambridge: 1966) II:319-321.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Addison, *Two poems: viz. I. On the deluge, Paradise, the burning of the world, and of the new heavens and new earth. An ode to Dr. Burnett. II. In praise of physic and poetry. An ode to Dr. Hannes*. (London: 1718).

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Croft, *Some animadversions upon a book intituled, The theory of the earth* (London: 1685). Erasmus Warren, *Geologia, or, A discourse concerning the earth before the deluge wherein the form and properties ascribed to it, in a book intituled The theory of the earth, are excepted against* (London: 1690).

<sup>7</sup> John Beaumont, *Considerations on a book, entituled The theory of the earth, published some years since by the learned Dr. Burnet* (London: 1693). John Woodward, *An essay toward a natural history of the earth* (London: 1695).

<sup>8</sup> L. P., *Two Essays sent in a Letter from Oxford* (London: 1695). Charles Blount, *Oracles of reason* (London: 1693).

<sup>9</sup> John Keill, *An examination of Dr. Burnet’s Theory of the earth, together with some remarks on Mr. Whiston’s New theory of the earth* (Oxford: 1698).

Much of the historiographical interest in the controversy has centred on Burnet's *Theory* and its place in the history of science.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Dickson White alleged that Burnet waged 'theological war against a scientific method in geology'.<sup>11</sup> Recent historians have been more sympathetic. For Ernest Tuveson, it evidenced a 'stirring of a new spirit.'<sup>12</sup> Richard Westfall saw the correspondence between Burnet and Isaac Newton specifically as evidence of the increased authority of science at the expense of the Bible.<sup>13</sup> This chapter seeks to complicate these narratives of Burnet's place in secularisation.

Not all historians have focused on Burnet's place in the history of science. Some works have brought out the rich undercurrents of the debate, such as Dmitri Levitin in the context of Burnet's engagement with ancient philosophy,<sup>14</sup> and Scott Mandelbrote who has examined the correspondence between Newton and Burnet as to the interpretation of Genesis, in light of exegetical tradition and social context.<sup>15</sup>

This chapter considers the controversy as a whole, with attention to its immediate intellectual and cultural context. The focus is not Burnet's *Theory* itself, but rather the diverse controversial perspectives on the work. In interpretations with a broader focus, such as the work of John Redwood, these controversialists tend to be treated as a homogeneous background to key thinkers like Burnet and broader shifts in thought.<sup>16</sup> However, their

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<sup>10</sup> There is no published book length discussion of Burnet's *Theory*, though there is a recent PhD dissertation: Thomas Rossetter, "The Theorist: Thomas Burnet and his sacred history of the earth," PhD diss. (Durham University, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Dickson White, *History of the warfare of science with theology in Christendom* (New York: 1896), 216

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Tuveson, "Swift and the world-makers," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 11(1) (1950), 54-74, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Westfall, "The scientific revolution reasserted," *Rethinking the scientific revolution*, ed. Margaret Osler (Cambridge: 2000), 41-55, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science* (Cambridge: 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Scott Mandelbrote, "Biblical Criticism and the Crisis of Late Seventeenth-century England," in *The Books of Nature and Scripture*, ed. James Force and Richard Popkin (Dordrecht: 1994), 149-178.

<sup>16</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*, 116.

polemical responses give a diverse picture of how different thinkers navigated the tensions between separation and integration of philosophy and theology. As will be seen, responses to Burnet's *Theory* comprised a spectrum of views, rather than being reducible to neatly defined positions. In many ways the debates were shaped as much by the presentation of ideas and their appropriation by heterodox thinkers, as by the content of ideas themselves.

The first section outlines Burnet's life, and gives a synopsis of his *Theory*. The second section considers different views on Burnet's efforts to integrate philosophy and theology. The third considers the protagonists' disagreements about the place of Scripture in understanding the natural world. The fourth explores the engagement of naturalists with Burnet's work, including how it clashed with a prevailing conception of the world as reflecting an infinitely wise and good creator. The chapter concludes with the debate as it concerned whether the creation and the deluge should be accounted for in terms of miracles, or natural laws, in the context of the rise of Newton's physics, and the eclipse of Descartes'.

### ***I. Burnet and his 'system of natural providence'***

In the two parts of the *Theory*, Burnet expounded an all-encompassing history of the world which extended from the creation of the Earth out of chaos to its final portended destruction. The *Theory* was 'call'd *Sacred*', Burnet explained, because it was 'not the common Physiology of the Earth', but concerned only 'the great Turns of Fate, and the Revolutions of our Natural world' depicted in the Scripture.<sup>17</sup> This schema was epitomized in the frontispiece to the first English edition, which depicted Christ above seven circles, each

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<sup>17</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, preface, [1].

illustrating a phase in world history, with a quotation from Revelation – ‘I am Alpha and Omega’ – emphasising his providential superintendence of this cycle.<sup>18</sup>

Born in Croft, Yorkshire, in 1635, Burnet’s education and early career centred on the University of Cambridge. He was admitted to Clare Hall in June 1651, shortly before the end of the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> Mid-seventeenth-century Cambridge was an essentially humanist institution, and has often been associated with two interrelated movements, ‘Latitudinarianism’ and ‘Cambridge Platonism’.<sup>20</sup> Historians such as John Gascoigne and Luciano Malusa have seen Burnet in these terms.<sup>21</sup> Yet as Scott Mandelbrote and Dmitri Levitin have argued, his views do not fall neatly into these categories, and it is difficult to account for his views based on the influence of his contemporaries.<sup>22</sup>

Burnet began his studies under William Owtram and John Tillotson (later his patron). Burnet became acquainted with the Master of Clare Hall, Ralph Cudworth. When Cudworth became Master of Christ’s College in 1654, Burnet followed him, becoming a Fellow of Christ’s in 1657, before attaining his M.A. in 1658.<sup>23</sup> Cudworth’s influence on Burnet’s emergence as a philosopher was significant, but difficult to quantify. While sharing Cudworth’s critical scholarly interest in ancient philosophy and religion, Burnet disagreed on several aspects and

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<sup>18</sup> Revelation 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13. Verse 22:13 continues – ‘I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last’, which further illustrates Burnet’s meaning.

<sup>19</sup> R. Heathcote, “An account of the life and writings of the Rev. Thomas Burnet, LL. D.,” in Thomas Burnet, *The sacred theory of the earth* (London: 1759), I:xvii.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Hutton, “The Cambridge Platonists,” in *Blackwell Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. S. Nadler (Oxford: 2002), 308-319.

<sup>21</sup> John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: 2002), 66-67. Luciano Malusa, “The First General Histories of Philosophy in England and the Low Countries,” in *Models of the History of Philosophy: From its Origins in the Renaissance to the ‘Historia Philosophica’* ed. Giovanni Santinello (Dordrecht: 1993), 161-370.

<sup>22</sup> Mandelbrote, “Biblical criticism,” 155. Levitin, *Ancient wisdom*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> Heathcote, “An account,” xvii.

developed his views in a sweeping and more publicly accessible direction.<sup>24</sup> Descartes' theories were particularly topical at Cambridge, and were of significant interest to Cudworth and another important figure at Christ's College, the idiosyncratic philosopher Henry More, who was drawing connections between Descartes' physics and the book of Genesis.<sup>25</sup> Burnet was influenced by this atmosphere, yet his emphasis on orderly mechanism was different from More's focus on spiritual agents.<sup>26</sup> By the early 1660s, Burnet was lecturing on Descartes.<sup>27</sup> Burnet travelled on the continent from 1671, as governor to the Earl of Wiltshire, and then with the Earl of Ossory, visiting the Alps and Apennines, the majestic scenery of which featured memorably in his work.<sup>28</sup> During his travels, Burnet began work on the *Theory*, the first part of which was published soon after his return to England.

The first part of the *Theory* concerned the destruction visited by the biblical deluge, and the present world (Book I), before looking to the formation of the Earth and Paradise (Book II). According to Burnet, the Earth was formed out of Chaos about six thousand years before his time.<sup>29</sup> He explicitly contrasted this with Aristotle's account of the eternal world, which he

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<sup>24</sup> Cudworth expounded a relatively circumscribed view about the derivation of pagan theology from monotheism in Chapter IV of the *True Intellectual System*. Burnet would later develop a theory centred on the development of tradition passed on from Noah's children, which supported his views about the antediluvian earth. Levitin, *Ancient wisdom*, 86, 184-188.

John Gascoigne, "The wisdom of the Egyptians' and the secularisation of history in the age of Newton," in *The uses of antiquity: The Scientific Revolution and the classical tradition*, edited by Stephen Gaukroger (Dordrecht: 1991), 171-212.

<sup>25</sup> More encouraged the reading of Descartes in: Henry More, *The immortality of the soul, so farre forth as it is demonstrable from the knowledge of nature and the light of reason* (London: 1659), preface §15. He wrote that 'truths [of Descartes and Plato] were ever lodged in the Text of Moses': Henry More, *A collection of several philosophical writings* (London: 1662), preface xix.

<sup>26</sup> In some ways, Burnet's approach was something of a mix of the two approaches to natural theology identified in: Scott Mandelbrote, "The uses of natural theology in seventeenth-century England," *Science in Context* 20(3) (2007), 451-480.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Sharp, *The life of John Sharp, D.D. Lord Archbishop of York*, ed. T. Newcome (London: 1825), I: 10-11

<sup>28</sup> Heathcote, "An account," xvii.

<sup>29</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 2.

argued was contrary to reason and destructive of God's providence.<sup>30</sup> The Earth formed out of a primordial chaos that 'mingled' the elements of 'Air, Water and Earth'. Over time, the heaviest parts sank due to gravity, forming the primordial Earth. Importantly, the operative principles governing this process were 'Laws established in Nature by the Divine Power and Wisdom' – as opposed to God's direct action.<sup>31</sup>

Burnet's account was heavily indebted to Descartes' cosmogony. In the *Principia philosophiae* (1644), Descartes hypothesised that God created matter and motion, and the action of corpuscles against one another produced heavens organised into vortices around stars.<sup>32</sup> Descartes had stressed the speculative nature of his theory – a different account had after all been given in Genesis. However, Burnet claimed his account was 'not an Idea only', but really occurred.<sup>33</sup> According to Gabriel Gohau this was 'what truly separates' Descartes and Burnet.<sup>34</sup> However, this is overstating this matter, as thinkers like Stillingfleet were already treating Descartes as offering an explanation of the origin of the Earth, rather than a thought experiment.<sup>35</sup>

Burnet hypothesised that the first Earth had a smooth surface, with the greater part of water contained inside it (rather than in seas or rivers).<sup>36</sup> These features provided the conditions for the biblical paradise,<sup>37</sup> yet also afforded the mechanism for the cataclysmic events of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 339.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 35-36

<sup>32</sup> René Descartes, *The philosophical writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: 1985), I:177-292, Part III & IV. See: Peter Harrison, "The influence of Cartesian cosmology in England," in *Descartes' Natural Philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, John Sutton (London: 2002), 168-192.

<sup>33</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Gabriel Gohau, *A history of geology*, trans. Albert Carozzi and Marguerite Carozzi (New Brunswick and London: 1990), 47.

<sup>35</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, §3.

<sup>36</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 42-44.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 47.

deluge. The deluge has a strikingly dominant place in Burnet's work, receiving considerably more attention than the Fall of Adam and Eve. This was one of the not infrequent instances in such controversies where a thinker's fervent preoccupation with a particular aspect of Christian belief produced radical conclusions. Burnet presented his apologetic task as 'extremely difficult, if not impossible', citing calculations of the prodigious amount of water required for the deluge (both his and those of Marin Mersenne).<sup>38</sup> Not only did Burnet purport to answer those who suggested the deluge was not universal (like Isaac La Peyrère), he argued that this catastrophe transformed the Earth into its present form. Burnet supposed that the crust of the Earth gradually weakened, and at the time 'appointed by Divine Providence', collapsed, performing 'that great execution upon a sinful World'.<sup>39</sup>

According to Burnet, the present Earth emerged following the subsidence of these waters. For him, the dramatic irregularity of the seas and mountains were the 'ruins' of the antediluvian world. They were, like the remains of temples and amphitheatres, artefacts of ancient greatness.<sup>40</sup> This vision of a damaged world was in stark contrast to the widespread emphasis on the beauty and order of creation as evidence of God's wisdom and care.

For Burnet, the *Theory* was supported by the scriptural authorities (rightly interpreted), corroborated in the echoes of ancient philosophical tradition, consonant with the principles of (Descartes') natural philosophy revealed, and evidenced in the fabric of the Earth. Yet mindful of its grand claims, Burnet pre-emptively attacked '*narrow Spirit*' and '*Littleness of Soul*', and emphasised that any criticism should reflect not 'presumptions and prejudices', but 'explicit proof and evidence'.<sup>41</sup> Burnet evinced 'full belief' in his work, stating that he would

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<sup>38</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 8-9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 47, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, preface [1]-[5].

be ‘oblig’d’ to any who ‘by solid reasons will show me in an Error’.<sup>42</sup> The controversy over the following decades may have given him cause to regret such an invitation.

## **II. ‘Philosophy and vain deceit’**

Beware lest any man spoil you through Philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

– Colossians 2:8

St Paul’s warning was, for Burnet’s critics, a forceful reminder of the potentially corrosive influence of philosophy in the sphere of theology.<sup>43</sup> Yet there were compelling reasons to seek harmonisation between the truths of the natural world and the Scripture (as discussed in the Introduction), and many thinkers agreed with Burnet that ‘Truth cannot be an Enemy to Truth’.<sup>44</sup> In synthesising sacred history and philosophy, Burnet’s approach was not unprecedented; however, his boldness and confidence and the accessibility of his work to a wide audience accentuated its impact. As we shall see, those responding to Burnet’s work expressed diverse perspectives on the appropriate relationship between philosophy and theology.

A sympathetic, if not unquestioning response to the *Theory* was that of Anglo-Irish diplomat Sir Robert Southwell, who detailed his musings in a wide-ranging 1684 dialogue.<sup>45</sup> One protagonist described an excitement that ‘seemed as Revelation’, expressing ‘delight’ at Burnet clearing the ‘unanswerable’ difficulties in the biblical account.<sup>46</sup> However, his

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>43</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, 101. Robert St Clair, *Abyssinian philosophy confuted* (London: 1697), preface [18].

<sup>44</sup> Burnet, *Theory–I*, preface, [3].

<sup>45</sup> The dialogue was printed in: William Poole, “Sir Robert Southwell’s dialogue on Thomas Burnet’s Theory of the earth: ‘C & S discourse of Mr Burnetts Theory of the Earth’ (1684): Contexts and an Edition,” *The Seventeenth Century* 23:1 (2008): 72-104.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 86.

interlocutor was concerned about the implications of the *Theory* for the Mosaic account, even if he could not solve its ‘difficultyes or seeming impossibility’s’.<sup>47</sup> Southwell thus suspended judgment on Burnet’s particular combination of philosophy and theology.

In contrast, the first published English response to Burnet’s work – the *Animadversions* (1685) of the Bishop of Hereford, Herbert Croft – was distinctly hostile. Over eighty-two years old and with failing eyesight, Croft was a chaplain to Charles I before the Civil War, and was made a bishop by Charles II soon after the Restoration. Croft corresponded with Burnet to ‘reclaim him from his Errours’, but found him ‘stiff and pertinacious’. Moreover, he rebuked the Church and universities for their reticence in addressing Burnet’s ‘rare Moonish Inventions’, an omission that motivated his treatise.<sup>48</sup>

According to Croft, Burnet had improperly mixed sacred history with philosophical ‘fansie’. Often, he expressed this in the context of the Scripture: ‘Vain man would be wise’, Croft wrote, quoting Job 11:12, ‘tho man be born like a wild asses colt.’<sup>49</sup> Burnet had, he felt, presumptuously sought to judge God’s works, and at the source of this was ‘Pride and Vanity’.<sup>50</sup> This was by no means reflective of simple hostility to philosophy or reason. Part of the issue was that Burnet had not tempered his philosophy with appropriate ‘reason and moderation’.<sup>51</sup> While Croft reassured his audience that ‘true Reason, or true Philosophy’ would not spoil anyone, he cautioned against ‘vain and deceitful Reason and Philosophy’.<sup>52</sup> Croft did not specify what ‘true Philosophy’ is, although he stated ‘the first Principle of my

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, preface [1].

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, Title page.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 101.

Philosophy is, To believe the Scriptures'.<sup>53</sup> For him, Burnet's 'trivial experiments' had no place in evaluating Genesis.<sup>54</sup> Croft complained that Burnet wrote of Moses and St Peter as philosophers, 'but truly they may well scorn the Title'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Croft reasserted the primacy of scriptural authority on creation, and the ancillary role of philosophical enquiry. For Burnet, Croft was too retrograde and immoderate to merit a reply: the work was written 'neither like a Gentleman: nor like a Christian: nor like a Scholar. And such Writings answer themselves.'<sup>56</sup>

In the years since the publication of the first part, Burnet was ascendant, despite Croft's polemic. He became Master of the Charterhouse in 1685 with the assistance of his patron, the Duke of Ormond. As Master, he resisted James II's demands to appoint a Catholic as pensioner, an event that formed a minor episode in the events prior to the Revolution of 1688. After the Revolution, and following Tillotson's elevation to Arch-episcopal office, Burnet became Chaplain-in-Ordinary and Clerk of the Closet to William III. As the first part of the *Theory* looked to the past, the second part published in 1689 and 1690, dealt with future events prophesied in the Scriptures, providing a physico-theological treatment of the conflagration of the world and God's final judgement, informed by millenarianism.<sup>57</sup>

In this context, the *Theory* attracted a further controversial response, Erasmus Warren's *Geologia* (1690). An otherwise obscure clergyman, Warren was the Rector of Worlington, Suffolk. In one sense, Warren's work exemplified the varied (and at times confused) influences that could be brought to bear on the topic. Burnet wrote, of one chapter, 'He

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 99-100.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Burnet, *An answer to the late exceptions made by Mr. Erasmus Warren against The theory of the earth* (London: 1690), 85.

<sup>57</sup> Burnet, *Theory-II*. M. Jacob and W. Lockwood, "Political millenarianism and Burnet's Sacred theory," *Science Studies* 2(3) (1972), 265-279.

disputes first one way, and then another, and, at last, determines nothing.’<sup>58</sup> John Keill later quipped that Warren wrote ‘the greatest Volum against’ the *Theory* and had ‘spoken the least sense’ about it.<sup>59</sup> As such, the work exemplified the conflicting and multifarious currents of contemporary philosophical theology.

As a ‘Philosophic *Scheme*’, Warren found the *Theory* partially acceptable, but was concerned ‘as it relates to the Doctrine of the *Bible*, and so bears the Title, *Sacred*’. The dispute was not simply about the origin of the world, but whether to prefer ‘sacred and *revealed Truths*; or gay, but groundless *Philosophic Phancies*’.<sup>60</sup> Warren began his discourse with a eulogistic statement to philosophy, including its value in proving the existence of God and his providence, vindicating the gospel, and proving the immortality of the soul (all commonplace tropes of natural theology).<sup>61</sup> It was, however, possible to ‘abuse’ philosophy, Warren warned, either by treating it too lightly, or by ‘straining it too much, and stretching it too far’.<sup>62</sup> He compared philosophy to an artful statue that might become an idol.<sup>63</sup> For Warren, this was the fault of Burnet’s *Theory*: its philosophy was ‘not justly regulated, and kept within due Limits.’<sup>64</sup> However, undeterred by his warnings about Burnet’s ‘abuse’ of philosophy, Warren offered an alternative explication of the deluge.

Warren’s work embroiled him in a voluminous controversy with Burnet – despite the latter’s observation that ‘short follies, and short quarrels, are the best’.<sup>65</sup> Burnet’s criticisms of

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<sup>58</sup> Burnet, *Answer*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Keill, *Examination*, 22.

<sup>60</sup> Warren, *Geologia*, preface [5].

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 4-12.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 35-36.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> Burnet, *Answer*, 1.

Warren's alternative theory exemplify the vexed nature of this issue. This was an undertaking Burnet apparently relished, writing of Warren that 'if some blows smart a little, he must not complain, because he begun the Sport.'<sup>66</sup> Burnet drew particular attention to Warren's equivocations about the relationship of philosophy and the Mosaic account, noting Warren both claimed the traditional view of the deluge was rational, and asserted his own theory of a more limited flood, even while hesitating whether this was meant to be 'true and real'.<sup>67</sup> Burnet concluded that Warren himself was guilty of offering '*a meer fancy, and groundless figment.*'<sup>68</sup>

The contestable character of the disciplinary boundaries between philosophy and theology remained a theme throughout the controversy. The notion that Burnet's *Theory* was a 'fancy' of philosophy resonated – in a different context – in the critiques of Robert St Clair, and John Keill, figures more directly engaged with natural philosophy, who encouraged its separation from sacred history, and associated philosophical 'fancy' specifically with Descartes. For others the problem lay not in Burnet's vision, but in his execution of it, something embodied in the work of John Woodward and William Whiston. The contemporary responses to Burnet were thus divided between those who preferred to see a separation between theological and natural philosophical endeavours, and those tantalised by the possibility of their integration (even if there was scope for vigorous disagreement on how this might occur). As such the picture is one of diversity within a typically clerical context. The tensions in this area may be seen more particularly in the debate as it concerns Burnet's handling of the Scripture.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 68-70.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 77.

### *III. Scriptural accommodation and abuse*

While Burnet referred frequently to Genesis, he also emphasised a different scriptural authority – 2 Peter – to support his system.<sup>69</sup> Peter wrote of ‘scoffers’ who will doubt the promise of Christ’s coming because ‘all things continue as they were from the beginning’:

For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water:

Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished.<sup>70</sup>

For Burnet, these verses alluded to the previous structure of the Earth, and revealed a sense of sacred history radically interrupted by the catastrophic deluge. He suggested that the 2 Peter account was more important than Genesis in understanding the ‘whole Circle of Time and Providence’, seeing this as scriptural support for his explanation of the deluge.<sup>71</sup>

While Burnet’s approach went too far for many of his contemporaries, one figure who had at least some sympathy for what he was doing was Newton. In the winter of 1680-1681, Burnet provided Newton with what appears to have been an early version of the *Theory*, and two letters from their correspondence survive, covering both physical and scriptural matters.<sup>72</sup>

Newton implicitly assumed the legitimacy of Burnet’s attempts to seek philosophical explanations for creation; and agreed with Burnet that Moses had accommodated the text of the Scripture to his audience, accepting that ‘he described realities in a language artificially

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<sup>69</sup> Kerry Magruder, “Thomas Burnet, biblical idiom, and seventeenth-century theories of the earth,” in *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic religions: Up to 1700* ed. Jitse van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote (Leiden: 2008), 1:451-490.

<sup>70</sup> 2 Peter 3:3-4.

<sup>71</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 24.

<sup>72</sup> Newton, *Correspondence*, 324.

adapted to the sense of the vulgar'. However, Newton affirmed that he did not think Moses' 'description of the creation either Philosophical or feigned'.<sup>73</sup>

In contrast, Croft castigated Burnet's approach, expressing his 'great offence to see the Sacred Scriptures so abused, as to be made props to support such a rotten tottering building, as [Burnet's] Theory'.<sup>74</sup> Croft criticised Burnet for focusing on 2 Peter rather than Genesis, as well as for misinterpreting these texts, and relying on pagan sources. In so doing, he emphasised the historical (as opposed to moral) character of the Mosaic account. For Croft, Moses was 'the onely true Historiographer for the Worlds Creation', dismissing the 'vain opinions of Heathen Poets or Philosophers' as 'Igues fatui'.<sup>75</sup>

Croft spent much of his early career controverting Catholicism, and his criticism of Burnet harkened back to these debates. At the height of concerns surrounding the 'Popish Plot', Croft summarised his advice to his flock as 'stick close to the Scriptures, Gods Holy Word, which was our only Rule of Faith'.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, recusancy had been an ongoing problem in his diocese, and that same year, Croft oversaw the dismantling of a covert Jesuit college.<sup>77</sup> Croft considered Burnet's views were amenable to the 'Papists', who distorted the Bible to support their 'Superstitions', and the 'Atheists' by rendering the 'Word of God... so uncertain and questionable'.<sup>78</sup> This sense of Scripture being corrupted and distorted was paralleled in the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 332

<sup>74</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 144-145.

<sup>76</sup> Herbert Croft, *The legacy of the right reverend father in God, Herbert Lord Bishop of Hereford: To his Diocess. Or A short determination of all controversies we have with the Papists, by Gods Holy Word*. (London: 1679), preface [2].

<sup>77</sup> Herbert Croft, *A short narrative of the discovery of a college of Jesuits* (London: 1679). Hannah Thomas, "The Society of Jesus in Wales, c.1600–1679", *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 1(4) (2014): 572-588.

<sup>78</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, preface [29].

*Terrae prodromus theoricus* (1691) of Scots surgeon Matthew Mackaile. Mackaile quoted various scriptural warnings as to those who ‘corrupt the Word of God deceitfully’.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, for many of his critics, Burnet’s defence of sacred history undermined and distorted the Scripture. Yet for Burnet, conscious of recent advances in philosophy, it was a ‘dangerous thing to engage the authority of Scripture in disputes about the Natural World, in opposition to Reason’. He cited the cautionary example of St Augustine as someone who, for all his learning, argued against the existence of the Antipodes, despite himself warning against opposing Scripture to natural knowledge.<sup>80</sup> A prominent feature of Burnet’s attempt to solve this problem was his adoption of a strong form of accommodationist hermeneutic. Briefly, Burnet considered the text of Genesis was accommodated to the understanding and capacities of the ‘vulgar’ audience. Burnet considered there were some physical facts reflected in the text of the Scripture, but its particular style and purpose complicated a literal reading. The Scripture, as it concerned the origin of the world was ‘lofty, and sometimes abrupt, and often figurative and disguis’d’.<sup>81</sup> The narrative was, as Burnet wrote to Newton, ‘Ideal or Moral’ rather than historically or philosophically precise.<sup>82</sup>

In his *Geologia* (1690), Warren objected to Burnet’s accommodationist approach, seeking to reconcile a literal interpretation of Moses with a defence of his philosophical credibility.

While noting the Scripture makes clear that God ‘gave Being to all’, Warren accepted that it does not give details of the Earth’s formation, leaving this to philosophy. Yet, ‘the *Idea*’s we frame’ must be consistent with Scripture,<sup>83</sup> and ‘no *Mystical* or *Cabbalistic* sense is to be

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<sup>79</sup> Matthew Mackaile, *Terrae prodromus theoricus. Containing, a short account of, Moses philosophizans. Or, The old (yet new) and true, Scripture theory of the earth* (Aberdeen: 1691). 2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2.

<sup>80</sup> Burnet references *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Book I, Chapter 19 at Burnet, *Theory–I*, preface [3]. Augustine opposed the Antipodes in: Augustine, *City of God*, XVI, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Burnet, *Theory–I*, 63.

<sup>82</sup> Newton, *Correspondence*, 324.

<sup>83</sup> Warren, *Geologia*, 46.

approved of, that overthrows or nulls the *Literal* one.<sup>84</sup> Warren, of course, had no difficulty in finding examples where Burnet had departed from the text of the Bible. One instance was the Bible's references to rivers in Paradise, which if Burnet was right, rendered its words 'meer Figure and Falshood'.<sup>85</sup>

In his *Answer* (1690), Burnet sought to clarify his approach to accommodation, and put into perspective its implications. For Burnet, citing Warren's accusations, the case was:

'Whether, to go contrary to the Letter of Scripture, in things that relate to the natural World, be *destroying the foundations of Religion: affronting Scripture: and blaspheming the Holy Ghost.*'<sup>86</sup> In his view, interpretation needed to be sensitive to the specific subject matter in question. For Burnet, matters of Revelation were 'without the cognizance and comprehension of humane reason', and the literal sense was appropriate.<sup>87</sup> Other things fell 'under the view and comprehension of Reason, more or less', and it was appropriate to examine the literal sense but recede from this where it was 'manifestly contrary' to reason. Thus, no one followed literally Christ's injunction 'If thy right Eye offend thee, pluck it out' (Matthew 5: 29-30). Finally, there were matters that 'belong to the Natural World', and in these instances, one might depart from the Bible where they are 'inconsistent with Science, or experience'.<sup>88</sup> For Burnet, dogmatic literalism would render the Scripture an absurdity, as for example, the Scripture's reference to 'God's *Right Hand*'.<sup>89</sup> Even since antiquity, thinkers such as Origen and Augustine had argued that giving corporeal aspects to God was

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 286.

<sup>86</sup> Burnet, *Answer*, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 82-84.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 11.

metaphorical.<sup>90</sup> Again, part of the issue was focus and presentation. Stillingfleet's defence of the flood, for instance, questioned what 'universal' meant, but was restrained and probabilistic, rather than emphatic.<sup>91</sup>

Burnet developed his exegetical approach further in his *Archaeologiae philosophicae* (1692), and in so doing, brought into even sharper focus some of its concerning features.<sup>92</sup> Burnet had already foreshadowed this work in the *Theory*, explaining that he considered 'Moses' Cosmopoeia' was given 'as a Lawgiver, not as a Philosopher', and that he intended to show this in another work, not proper for the vernacular.<sup>93</sup> To this end, Burnet embarked on further research into the history of philosophy and theology.<sup>94</sup> *Archaeologiae philosophicae* (1692) was more than a simple defence of the *Theory*, encompassing a 'general cultural history of philosophy'.<sup>95</sup> Burnet developed his thesis of Moses as a political 'Lawgiver', analogous to those of other cultures, who offered a fabulous account of creation in order to instil the ancient Hebrews with religion. This work had other striking features including an impertinent retelling of the dialogue between Eve and the Serpent.<sup>96</sup> With this, Burnet had firmly established his reputation for heterodoxy.

Indeed, a number of radical thinkers drew on Burnet's hermeneutics as part of their own philosophical agendas. One such figure was Charles Blount, often identified as a 'deist', who

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<sup>90</sup> David Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *The Harvard Theological Review* 83(2) (1990): 105-116.

<sup>91</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 539.

<sup>92</sup> *Archaeologiae philosophicae: sive doctrina antiqua de rerum originibus* (1692). The work was translated (in part) as: Thomas Burnet, *Archaeologiae philosophicae: or the ancient doctrine concerning the originals of things* (London: 1729).

<sup>93</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 196-197

<sup>94</sup> Levitin describes this being reflected in Burnet's annotations to a copy of the 1689 Latin version of the *Theory*, which reveal his enquiries into a wide range of ancient and contemporary sources: Levitin, *Ancient wisdom*, 183-184.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 185.

<sup>96</sup> Burnet, *Archaeologiae philosophicae*, xiv.

took up the theme of scriptural accommodation in connection with miracles.<sup>97</sup> Blount's *Oracles* (1693), published by Charles Gildon after his friend's suicide, contained a miscellany of essays, including a vindication and translations of parts of Burnet's *Archaeologiae philosophicae* (1692). Blount considered this demonstrated the inconsistency of aspects of the creation history with reason and philosophy, revealing that it was a 'pious Allegory', accommodated to the vulgar.<sup>98</sup>

Burnet's views of Scripture also found endorsement in the *Two Essays* (1695) of the anonymous 'L. P.'. The work is often attributed to another 'deist' John Toland.<sup>99</sup> Rhoda Rappaport has argued strongly that the evidence for this is 'feeble'.<sup>100</sup> While Mara van der Lugt has discerned a number of thematic continuities that point to Toland's authorship,<sup>101</sup> our view is that the case for Toland's authorship is not a very strong one. According to L. P., the 'Age is bent upon a Rational Religion' – it was increasingly acceptable for thinkers, among them Copernicus, Galileo and Descartes, to depart from the Scriptures in the sphere of natural philosophy, because these were adapted to 'the vulgar Idea's of that Time and Nation'. In this regard, L.P. argued, Burnet's detractors should be 'asham'd' of their 'unjust Calumnies'.<sup>102</sup> The first of the two essays opposed the 'common' views of the creation and the deluge, arguing for a naturalistic interpretation without the need for miracles. Among other things, L. P. criticised the system of Burnet's rival 'World Maker' John Woodward,

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<sup>97</sup> Charles Blount, *Miracles, no violations of the lavvs of nature* (London: 1683).

<sup>98</sup> Blount, *Oracles*, 2-3.

<sup>99</sup> Instances include: Robert Sullivan, *John Toland and the deist controversy: a study in adaptations* (Cambridge, Ma: 1982), 6; David Berman, "Disclaimers as offence Mechanisms in Charles Blount and John Toland," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford: 1992).

<sup>100</sup> Rhoda Rappaport, "Questions of evidence: An anonymous tract attributed to John Toland," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58(2) (1997), 339-348, 348.

<sup>101</sup> Mara van der Lugt, "The true Toland? Inquiry into the religious writings of an irreligious mind," MA diss. (Erasmus University, 2010), 13-15.

<sup>102</sup> L. P., *Two essays*, Apology, i-ii.

who had endeavoured to reassert the miraculous within the deluge. Moses was acknowledged as a great and wise legislator, but one that ‘adapted his *History of the Creation and Deluge*’ to this role.<sup>103</sup>

The use made by Blount and L. P. of the *Theory* represents a recurring theme in the culture of controversy – the appropriation of ideas to new contexts. L. P.’s views of Scripture as being ‘Mysterious, Allegorical and Enigmatical’, pointed to one extreme direction in which Burnet’s views could be taken; and the trenchant criticism of Croft to another.<sup>104</sup> Yet for most thinkers, including Newton, the situation could not be neatly subsumed into a choice between Scripture or natural philosophy. Complicating this, there was, of course, much room for debate about the natural world itself, and the coherence of Burnet’s views about the physical Earth.

#### ***IV. The ruins of creation***

We have still the broken Materials of that first World, and walk upon its Ruines...

And this unshapen Earth we now inhabit, is the Form it was found in when the

Waters had retir’d, and the dry Land appear’d.

– Burnet (1684)<sup>105</sup>

Burnet’s *Theory* had its exotic features – a uniform, featureless first world, utterly and devastatingly transformed by the deluge. Even in its day, many found the physical claims of this system difficult to accept, though there were intelligent readers who found merit in it, including the Astronomer Royal, John Flamsteed, who wrote it was ‘not very improbable’.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, Epistle Dedicatory [1].

<sup>106</sup> John Flamsteed to Richard Towneley, 22 March 1681, in *The correspondence of John Flamsteed, The first Astronomer Royal*, ed Eric Gray Forbes, Lesley Murdin, Frances Wilmoth (Bristol: 1997), 1:780-781.

At a late stage in the controversy, John Keill drew on Newton's mathematical physics to attack Burnet's *Theory*; however, there were numerous other natural philosophical perspectives. These made a variety of arguments, drawing on developments in the earth sciences and other areas of natural philosophy. One common theme concerned Burnet's sense of the Earth as misshapen 'Ruines', which inverted the usual emphasis on the beauty and contrivance of God's creation, reminding us how, for many of these figures, natural history and natural philosophy were deeply connected with a particular theological vision of the world.

One naturalist perspective on Burnet's work was that of John Beaumont. A Roman Catholic physician from Somerset, Beaumont was interested in local mining operations, and developed an extensive collection of geological specimens. He contributed to *Philosophical Transactions* and became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1685, discussing philosophy with Robert Hooke when he was in London (indeed, the *Considerations* (1693) was dedicated to Hooke). On the title page of his work, he quoted Lactantius (in Latin) that 'God has given wisdom to all alike, that they might be able both to investigate things which they have not heard, and to weigh things which they have heard'.<sup>107</sup> Beaumont related that, though Burnet's *Theory* had been 'long extant', he had become aware of it in recent years, and while praising Burnet's 'Learning', and 'Ingenuity', formed various objections. Whereas Croft (among others) focused on divinity, Beaumont proceeded 'in a Philosophical way', although

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<sup>107</sup> This translation is from: Lactantius, *The divine institutes*, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (eds), *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 7* (Buffalo: 1886), Book II, Chapter 8.

acknowledging that it was impossible to treat the matter ‘without a Scripture ground’.<sup>108</sup> He also drew idiosyncratically on ancient philosophy and religion.<sup>109</sup>

Beaumont examined the *Theory* chapter by chapter (a common approach among controversialists); yet this still afforded him latitude to unfold his own contrasting vision of the Earth, strongly influenced by his interest in natural history. One feature was his sympathy for the views of Aristotle, something he shared with many thinkers interested in the earth sciences.<sup>110</sup> Beaumont suggested that Burnet was overly dismissive of Aristotle’s theory of an eternal world. While he ‘wholly acquiesce[d]’ to the view that the world was formed six thousand years ago, Beaumont still thought one should ‘give the Point its due Latitude’, noting many philosophers and the Greek doctors of the Church held such a view (as Richard Simon noted).<sup>111</sup> Beaumont commented that, if one were going to depart from Moses, he was more inclined to think the World eternal, or at least the time of creation ‘wholly inscrutable by Man’.<sup>112</sup> Whereas Burnet argued that primordial chaos accreted into a perfectly smooth and spherical Earth, Beaumont thought this would not be something chaos could ever produce, being ‘a strongly fermented Masse’, containing ‘the infinite variety of seminal Principles of a contrary Nature’.<sup>113</sup> Given the nature of this chaos, Beaumont considered it would necessarily have produced diverse features such as mountains and seas,

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<sup>108</sup> Beaumont, *Considerations*, preface [1].

<sup>109</sup> As such, in commenting on Burnet’s historical thesis that the ancients had preserved traditional knowledge, Beaumont suggested instead that this reflected their independent discoveries from the ‘Contemplation of the Earth’. Beaumont, *Considerations*, 3-4. See: Levitin, *Ancient wisdom*, 197-198.

<sup>110</sup> Ito, “Hooke’s cyclic theory,” 305-306.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

though he added he would ‘conclude with *Aristotle*, that the Sea and Land have chang’d places’ over time.<sup>114</sup>

Beaumont criticised Burnet’s departure from the traditional vision of creation as reflecting the wisdom and benevolence of God, and his comments on marine life in particular illustrate the nexus between his theological and natural philosophical concerns. Beaumont questioned why a perfect creator would ever have created oceanic animals in an ‘embrionate imperfect state’, besides dooming ‘the poor Fishes (which least deserv’d it)’, to a lengthy imprisonment beneath the surface of the Earth. Beaumont supported this argument with a discussion of the varying habits of different marine animals, emphasising the sense of such creatures as perfectly created for their environment.<sup>115</sup> So too, Beaumont took issue with Burnet’s view that the ‘unshapen’ irregularity of mountains evidenced a primordial cataclysm, rather than reflecting the wisdom of a benevolent deity. Mountains are, Beaumont contended, essential for ‘diversifying Effects on the Earth’, and various animals and plants are specifically adapted to them.<sup>116</sup> As such they were both ‘ornamental’ and necessary for nourishing the Earth.<sup>117</sup>

Beaumont was not the only thinker to take issue with Burnet’s negative view of creation. Southwell and Warren expressed similar concerns about the state of ante-diluvian animals.<sup>118</sup> If Burnet was correct, Croft wrote, ‘neither these Heavens nor this Earth can declare unto us the glory of God’.<sup>119</sup> So too, Matthew Mackaile accused Burnet of writing ‘most

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>115</sup> Beaumont, *Considerations*, 51-53.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 58-59.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>118</sup> Southwell, ‘Dialogue’ (1684), 89. Warren, *Geologia*, 224. Burnet, *Answer*, 51-52.

<sup>119</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, 60.

undervaluingly of our present Earth'.<sup>120</sup> Only a few days after Beaumont's work received imprimatur for printing, Richard Bentley defended the providential ordering of the World tilted on its axis, as against Burnet's 'imagin'd' view that this would have produced a perpetual spring, in the final of the Boyle lectures for 1692.<sup>121</sup> This was a theme in the subsequent criticisms of William Nicholls, who took Burnet to task for traducing the present world (and thus God's providential design).<sup>122</sup>

Beaumont's work had eccentricities of its own, specifically in its approach to ancient philosophy, which reflected his particular form of Catholic mysticism. Indeed, he subsequently became noteworthy for his defence of the existence of spirits, based, in part, on his own experience of visitations.<sup>123</sup> His *Considerations* (1693) was seasoned with somewhat eclectic notions, such as the Paracelsian alchemical tradition, which proved rather credulous and unpalatable to his fellow naturalists.<sup>124</sup> While John Ray felt Beaumont had 'fundamentally overthrown' Burnet's *Theory*, he was perplexed by his frequent references to the 'mystical and allegorical Physiology of the Ancients'.<sup>125</sup> Having set out to discredit Burnet's theory, Beaumont found himself entangled in criticism of his own unorthodox views, albeit from a natural philosophical, rather than theological, perspective, defending himself against the view that he had proceeded 'from Enthusiasm'.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Mackaile, *Terrae prodromus theoreticus*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Bentley, *Boyle Lectures*, Sermon VIII, 22.

<sup>122</sup> William Nicholls, *A conference with a theist part II* (London: 1697), 188-190.

<sup>123</sup> John Beaumont, *An historical, physiological and theological treatise of spirits* (London: 1705).

<sup>124</sup> Beaumont maintained that the classical poets, the magi and the druids had access to the 'Prophetick Mysteries' (hidden knowledge about the universe, including the Christian religion): Beaumont, *Considerations*, 170.

<sup>125</sup> Charles Raven, *John Ray* (Cambridge: 1986), 430.

<sup>126</sup> John Beaumont, *A postscript to a book published last year entituled Considerations on Dr. Burnet's Theory of the earth* (London: 1694), 1.

Despite the unconventionality of Beaumont's work, it prompted further scrutiny of Burnet's *Theory* amongst the virtuosi of seventeenth-century natural philosophy. Hooke gave an account of Beaumont's work to the Royal Society on 8 March 1693,<sup>127</sup> and a summary appeared in *Philosophical Transactions* in September.<sup>128</sup> Subsequently, John Flamsteed and Burnet exchanged letters, in which Burnet attempted to defend his views on the figure of the Earth.<sup>129</sup>

Another naturalist who turned his attention to the issues raised by Burnet was John Woodward. Born in 1665, Woodward was a physician, Professor of Physic at Gresham College since 1692 and a Fellow of the Royal Society. In his *Essay* (1695), he offered a rival system to explain the events of the deluge. According to Woodward, 'Observations are the only sure Grounds whereon to build a lasting and substantial Philosophy'.<sup>130</sup> His studies of fossils had convinced him that they were 'spoils of once living Animals' and not stones, a reflection on a debate that had involved men like Robert Hooke and Martin Lister.<sup>131</sup> Woodward made two observations about these fossils – first, the stratification of fossils, the largest being the deepest in the Earth, and second, the ubiquitous presence of marine fossils, including on mountains.<sup>132</sup> On this basis, Woodward hypothesised that God had suspended or attenuated the effect of gravity, resulting in the dissolution of the Earth and causing a universal flood consistent with the Scripture.

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<sup>127</sup> J. Barry, *Witchcraft and demonology in south-west England, 1640-1789* (Basingstoke: 2012), 136.

<sup>128</sup> "An account of books", *Philosophical Transactions* 17(203), (1693), 888-892.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas Burnet to John Flamsteed, 6 December 1693, in: Forbes et al, *The correspondence of John Flamsteed*, 2:498-501.

<sup>130</sup> Woodward, *Essay*, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 15. Robert Hooke, *Micrographia: or Some physiological descriptions of minute bodies made by magnifying glasses* (London: 1665), 112; and Martin Lister, "A Letter of Mr. Martin Lister, Written at York August 25 1671," *Philosophical Transactions* 6(76) (1671), 2281-2284

<sup>132</sup> Woodward, *Essay*, preface [3]-[5].

Woodward contrasted his theory with Burnet's at several points, including his claims that the world is 'deformed and irregular'.<sup>133</sup> For him 'both the Ancients and Moderns' attested to the variety of the Earth's features being 'not only ornamental to the Earth, but a Proof of the Wisdom of the Creator'.<sup>134</sup> In contrast to Burnet, Woodward asserted there is nothing 'incommodious and Artless, or useless and Superfluous, in the Globe'.<sup>135</sup> In concluding his work, Woodward argued that Moses' account is consistent with '*this* which we have from *Nature*', whereas Burnet's work 'differs from both'. The existence of the seas before the deluge was proved, he wrote, both from fossils of sea fish, and the Mosaic text.<sup>136</sup>

Over the following years, Woodward's system received criticism, most notably from John Arbuthnot, who among other things, drew attention to Woodward's unattributed use of the work of the Danish naturalist (and later Bishop) Niels Steensen.<sup>137</sup> Yet for many of his contemporaries, as William Poole states, Woodward's *Essay* (1695) had the advantage of offering persuasive naturalist evidence for the deluge, while preserving a domain for miracles.<sup>138</sup> The place of miracles was itself at issue in the controversy, as will be explored in the next section.

## V. *Newtonian miracles and Cartesian romance*

Apart from adopting Descartes' physics, Burnet agreed with his conception that natural laws governed creation with little, if any, direct intervention from God. Burnet was wary of

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>137</sup> John Arbuthnot, *An examination of Dr. Woodward's account of the deluge, &c. with a comparison between Steno's philosophy and the doctor's, in the case of marine bodies dug out of the earth* (London: 1697).

<sup>138</sup> Poole, *The World Makers*, 65.

ascribing the deluge to God's miraculous intervention to punish humanity, citing St Augustine that 'we are not rashly to have recourse to the Divine Omnipotence upon any account'.<sup>139</sup> Far from detracting from the power of God, Burnet felt an ordered Universe proceeding from natural processes was more reflective of God's greatness.<sup>140</sup> Employing the widespread analogy of God as a clockmaker, Burnet argued the 'better Artist' had no need to continuously adjust his work.<sup>141</sup> Such a far-reaching emphasis on nature was one of the most contentious aspects of Descartes' system – Blaise Pascal was unable to 'forgive' Descartes that he had 'no further need of God' than to 'set the world in motion' – and this was echoed in the debate over the *Theory*.<sup>142</sup>

According to Croft, Burnet's efforts to explain miracles were effectively an attempt to 'bind up Gods hands and manacle them'.<sup>143</sup> However, Croft did not link this with a systematic philosophical agenda. At times, Croft considered Burnet appeared to be 'a kind of Deist', leaving everything to the course of nature, at other times, he saw Burnet as treating nature as 'a kind of joynt Deess with God'.<sup>144</sup> Croft did not make any apparent connection with Spinoza's work – his concern seemed to be more general, paralleling that of Robert Boyle about thinkers such as Henry More,<sup>145</sup> or that about the views of the Italian philosopher Vaninus (Lucilio Vanini).<sup>146</sup> Ultimately, Croft saw Burnet's offer to explain miracles in

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<sup>139</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 13

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>142</sup> Blaise Pascal, *The thoughts of Blaise Pascal*, translated by W. Trotter (London: 1904), Section 2, 77. Similar concerns were expressed in: Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 466.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>144</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, preface [25].

<sup>145</sup> Robert Boyle, *A free enquiry into the vulgarly received notion of nature* (London: 1686), 38-40.

<sup>146</sup> Thomas Tenison, *The creed of Mr. Hobbes examined in a feigned conference between him, and a student in divinity* (London: 1670), 11.

‘Intelligible and Rational ways’ as ‘fictitious and Romantick’.<sup>147</sup> This point was further brought out, in Croft’s view, in the concessions Burnet made to God’s extraordinary providence in the world. Having emphasised the cataclysmic nature of the deluge, Burnet discerned God’s ‘extraordinary and miraculous Providence’ in preserving Noah’s Ark, ‘a Vessel, so ill man’d’, from being ‘dash’d against the Hills, or overwhelm’d in the Deeps.’<sup>148</sup> For Croft, this entailed ‘a far greater Miracle, than any we require in Moses’ Deluge.’<sup>149</sup>

Another line of criticism was that Burnet’s system made the deluge into an unavoidable fatality of nature. According to Warren, the deluge was ‘a Judicial act’ sent to punish the world for its ‘very great and epidemical Sins’.<sup>150</sup> For Warren, it was hard to reconcile God’s providence and goodness with the idea that he would have ‘laid a cruel Train of unavoidable Death, for Millions of his Innocent or Penitent Creatures’.<sup>151</sup> In his *Answer* (1690), Burnet argued that it was pointless to speculate on such issues as whether mankind might not have degenerated.<sup>152</sup> According to Burnet a natural process was consistent with God’s providential role as ‘Author and Governor of the Natural World, as well as of the Moral’. As God, in his omniscience knew the future, he disposed the world accordingly.<sup>153</sup>

As already noted, one way of attacking Burnet’s totalising efforts to explain sacred history was to criticise it as an exercise in speculative philosophical ‘fancy’. This was linked with a specific critique of Cartesian thought in the criticisms of Robert St Clair, a physician who

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<sup>147</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, 75.

<sup>148</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, 66.

<sup>149</sup> Croft, *Animadversions*, 125.

<sup>150</sup> Warren, *Geologia*, 121.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>152</sup> Burnet, *Answer*, 17.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 18

was formerly an assistant to Robert Boyle.<sup>154</sup> His work, *The Abyssinian Philosophy Confuted* (1697), contained a sizable attack on Burnet, as a prelude to a translation of ‘Petrus’ (Bernardino) Ramazzini’s natural philosophical work *Of the Wonderful Springs of Modena*. Alluding to Acts 19, St Clair characterised Burnet and Descartes as ‘men of *Ephesus*’ who had made ‘Shrines’ to ‘Hypothetical Philosophy’. According to him, they ‘make Systems of the World, prescribe Laws to Nature, without ever consulting her by Observation and Experience’. He likened Burnet to a spider weaving cob-webs, employing an analogy of Francis Bacon.<sup>155</sup> With this in mind, he rehearsed many of the existing concerns about the *Theory*, among them the notion that Burnet had disowned the Power of God in his account of creation.

Burnet’s work was written as the enthusiasm for Descartes’ philosophy – always somewhat qualified in England – was waning, and on the cusp of the appearance of Newton’s *Principia* (1687). Unsurprisingly, Newton’s work was a major presence in the late stages of the controversy surrounding Burnet’s *Theory*, yet there were quite different visions of what this would mean. William Whiston’s approach was to develop an alternative system based on Newton’s physics, as shall be seen in the following chapter. In contrast, John Keill employed Newton’s vigorous mathematical and physical methods to expose the flaws in Burnet’s physics. In so doing, Keill developed and expanded the existing leitmotif of Burnet’s work as ‘romance’ and fancy’. However, in contrast to the deistic vision of Newton’s work that emerged with the *philosophes*, Keill drew on his work to assert biblical

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<sup>154</sup> There are few biographical details available. Michael Hunter, *Boyle Studies: Aspects of the life and thought of Robert Boyle (1627-91)* (London and New York: 2015).

<sup>155</sup> St Clair, *The Abyssinian philosophy*, preface [5]. Francis Bacon, *The two bookes of the proficience and advancement of learning divine and humane* (London: 1605), I:20.

literalism and the miraculous character of the creation and the deluge as against Burnet's systematic attempt to account for these in terms of Cartesian physical causes.

Born in Edinburgh, to an influential High Church family, Keill commenced his studies at Edinburgh University with the mathematician David Gregory. Gregory, who was among the first to include some of Newton's work into his teaching, found his position in Edinburgh difficult following the 1688 Revolution, but managed to obtain the Savilian Professorship of Astronomy at Oxford in 1691. Likewise, Keill moved to Oxford, receiving an M. A. at Balliol College in 1694. During this time he composed *An Examination* (1698), which was the 'Product of some leisure hours' at the College.<sup>156</sup> No doubt it was also a project designed to appeal to influential High Church figures at Oxford such as Roger Mander (to whom it is dedicated) and Henry Aldrich.

In dramatic contrast to Burnet, Keill declared the 'impossibility of all *Natural* and *Mechanical* explications of the deluge', and attributed this to the omnipotent act of God.<sup>157</sup> This embodied a theological emphasis on God's omnipotence, and a clear place for miracles as the 'great & wonderful works' that demonstrate God's 'Dominion and Power' over all of creation. For Keill, miracles were central to the Christian religion: to convince believers of biblical truth, and to demonstrate the divine mission of Moses and the Apostles.<sup>158</sup>

Keill observed that the *Theory* could be controverted with 'Reason and Philosophy', or on the authority of Moses'. For Keill, the latter would have 'no force' against Burnet who he caricatured as denying the Mosaic account on the basis that it was invented to 'please and amuse the Jews'.<sup>159</sup> Hence Keill focused predominately on natural philosophy. Many of

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<sup>156</sup> Keill, *Examination*, Dedication [1].

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 30-33.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

Keill's objections had been raised already in the debate – he touched on themes such as Burnet's account of formation out of chaos, and the 'wisdom and contrivance' of Burnet's paradisiacal world.<sup>160</sup> Keill attacked Burnet for his lack of regard for final causes, 'the true principles of *Natural Philosophy*': for example, his failure to consider God's providential design and contrivance of mountains.<sup>161</sup> Keill presented his arguments with a particular focus and analytical force, and supported them with his impressive command of contemporary natural philosophy, drawing on his familiarity with Newton's works, but also those of Galileo, Boyle and Kepler.<sup>162</sup> Perhaps most devastatingly, he drew attention to the outmoded nature of vortex physics, which 'being ruined, the whole *Cartesian* system must of necessity fall to the ground', confirming Burnet's work as 'a wild chimera'.<sup>163</sup>

For Keill, much of the blame could be attributed to Descartes who was, after all, 'the first world-maker this Century produced'.<sup>164</sup> He attacked his 'want of due observations', and his theories as 'false, and disagreeable to nature', accusing them of presumptuously trying to 'give a true account of all the Phaenomena's in nature'.<sup>165</sup> Descartes' other 'great fault', was that 'he made no use at all of Geometry in Philosophy'.<sup>166</sup> But for Keill, Descartes was only one of the most prominent instances of the generally dismal history of philosophical enquiry. In writing his *Examination* (1698), Keill was conscious of the broader contemporary discussion on the value of ancient and modern learning – the 'Battle of the Books', or the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns. Yet Keill was scathing about each alike: the

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 170-176.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 52-54. Descartes had rejected the search for final causes in physics in: Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation IV, Part I.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 5-14.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 17-19.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 15.

‘ridiculous fancies’ of the ancients had been followed by the moderns who, he wrote ironically, have ‘discovered Nature in all her works’: such thinkers as Spinoza, Burnet’s old colleague Henry More, Thomas Hobbes and Nicolas Malebranche.<sup>167</sup>

Keill’s work prompted a further defence – the *Reflections upon The theory of the earth* (1699).<sup>168</sup> As no author was indicated on the text, it is appropriate to briefly comment on authorship. While Burnet was referred to in the third person as ‘the Theorist’ throughout, the style was consistent with his previous works. In addition, there is some confirmatory evidence for his authorship from the early eighteenth century.<sup>169</sup> The majority of scholarly opinion is that it is Burnet’s work, and an alternative attribution, to Thomas Beverley, has little to support it.<sup>170</sup> In that regard, our view is that Burnet was the author.

Burnet, with perhaps some optimism, characterised the physical objections to the *Theory* as pedantries that did not overthrow its key propositions. If one is to ‘pick out a loose stone here or there;’ Burnet wrote, ‘this will not weaken the Foundation’.<sup>171</sup> However, it is difficult not to find Burnet at a disadvantage against Keill’s mathematical physics throughout this work. Perhaps most interesting is that Burnet took particular notice of two themes – miracles, and final causes – which underscored the Cartesian provenance of his views. As to the first of these, Burnet denied that he had attributed the creation and deluge solely to ‘material and mechanical Causes’, emphasising the superintendence of providence.<sup>172</sup> That

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 1-10.

<sup>168</sup> [Thomas Burnet], *Reflections upon The theory of the earth, occasion’d by a late examination of it. In a letter to a friend* (London: 1699), 3.

<sup>169</sup> The work was reprinted in the fifth edition of 1722, together with an advertisement from the bookseller referring to correspondence with a friend of Burnet’s that the work was genuine, see: Thomas Burnet, *The sacred theory of the earth: containing an account of the original of the Earth* (London, 5<sup>th</sup> edition: 1722). Burnet’s biographer had no doubts about attribution: Heathcote, “An account,” xxxi.

<sup>170</sup> An overview of this point and the evidence for attributing the work to Burnet is discussed in: Rosseter, “The theorist,” 307-308.

<sup>171</sup> Burnet, *Reflections*, 3.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 6.

said, while it may be the ‘shortest and easiest way’ to explain these in purely miraculous terms, Burnet considered it a failure not to pursue physical explanations.<sup>173</sup> He emphasised that ‘God is the God of Nature, and the Laws of Nature are his Laws’.<sup>174</sup> As to final causes, Burnet accepted the contemplation of them in nature can serve useful ‘moral purposes’, but doubted whether they can add much to understanding.<sup>175</sup>

Appearing some eighteen years after the publication of the Latin *Theory* and fifteen after the English version, the *Reflections* (1699) was Burnet’s last word in the controversy. Yet by this stage, his views were increasingly discredited. Keill evoked this in his response, again reiterating the failings of Cartesian physics, which were ‘known to every body that pretends to Philosophy now a days.’<sup>176</sup> A battle over the implications of Newton’s philosophy would be at the centre of the next ‘World Makers’ controversy – the debate over Whiston’s *New theory of Earth* (1696), which we consider in the following chapter.

Burnet’s compelling literary style, sweeping vision, and provocative ideas across a range of themes of philosophy and theology, ensured his work was among the most conspicuous of the late seventeenth century. Examining the disparate controversial responses reveals the varied educational, professional and church party contexts which informed them. While Burnet has been characterised as a secularising influence, we have seen a more complex picture of the interplay between his work and its different criticisms, including from a natural philosophical angle and the growing critique of philosophical ‘fancy’. We have also seen how the controversy provided a forum for the appropriation of ideas in different directions (as in the varied cases of Warren, Beaumont, Woodward, Whiston, Blount and L. P.) - a theme that

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>176</sup> Keill, *Examination*, 127.

recurs throughout this thesis. This dynamic debate attests to the vitality of contemporary philosophical theology and its protean character, reflecting not only the prominent legacies of Descartes and Newton, but also Aristotle, natural history and ancient philosophy. So too, it reveals a debate not driven by ‘radical’ thought, but within Christianity.

## CHAPTER 3

### STARS FALLING FROM HEAVEN:

#### WHISTON'S *NEW THEORY* AND ITS CRITICS (1696-1700)

As Thomas Burnet, beset by his many critics, fought to defend his *Theory* (1684, 1689), other thinkers pursued his ambitious aim of synthesising the sacred history of the creation and the deluge, pagan tradition, and natural philosophy. One of the most notable instances was *A new theory of earth* (1696). Its author, William Whiston, was a young clergyman and fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge, who had enthusiastically embraced the ‘wonderful Discoveries’ of Isaac Newton’s *Principia* (1687), and saw in them the solution that had eluded Burnet. His system, which he dedicated to Newton, hypothesised that the creation and the deluge had been brought about by providentially positioned comets, and another of these celestial bodies would bring about the end of the world. While Whiston took evident care in attempting to avoid some of the hazards that had vexed Burnet, his work excited a number of controversial responses, including from two quite different Church of England clergymen William Nicholls,<sup>1</sup> and John Edwards.<sup>2</sup> Most prominently, the *New theory* was attacked by John Keill, the Oxford academic who had assailed Burnet, who combined immense regard for Newtonian physics with biblical literalism.<sup>3</sup> Whiston’s detailed effort to defend his work – A

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<sup>1</sup> William Nicholls, *A conference with a theist part II* (London: 1697).

<sup>2</sup> John Edwards, *Brief remarks upon Mr. Whiston’s New theory of the earth* (London: 1697)

<sup>3</sup> John Keill, *An examination of Dr. Burnet’s Theory of the earth, together with some remarks on Mr. Whiston’s New theory of the earth* (Oxford: 1698)

*Vindication* (1698)<sup>4</sup> –prompted a further exchange with Keill,<sup>5</sup> bringing out two very different interpretations of Scripture and natural philosophy after Newton.

There has been less scholarly interest in this debate than that over Burnet's *Theory*. Much of the attention has focused on Whiston as an exemplar of 'Newtonianism'. This reflects the work of Margaret Jacob, who presented Whiston as one of a group of 'Newtonian' figures (including his fellow Boyle Lecturers Richard Bentley and Samuel Clarke) who, she argued, established a social ideology of liberal Protestantism combined with Newton's theories.<sup>6</sup> James Force characterised Whiston as a 'Newtonian' thinker, who sought rapprochement between science and religion, and shared Newton's exegetical approach,<sup>7</sup> and views of divine providence.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, for Michael Hunter, Whiston's disagreements with Keill suggest that the 'Newtonian lobby' was rather more 'inchoate',<sup>9</sup> a point that will be illustrated in this chapter. One complicating factor is Newton's views, and Stephen Snobelen has explored the tension between Newton's reticence over the implications of his work, and the unabashed publicity courted by Whiston.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the focus on the 'Newtonian' Whiston and (to

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<sup>4</sup> William Whiston, *A vindication of the New theory of the earth from the exceptions of Mr. Keill and others with an historical preface of the occasions of the discoveries therein contain'd, and some corrections and additions* (London: 1698).

<sup>5</sup> John Keill, *An examination of the Reflections on the Theory of the earth together with a defence of the remarks on Mr. Whiston's New theory* (Oxford: 1699). William Whiston, *A second defence of the New theory of the earth from the exceptions of Mr John Keill* (London: 1700)

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English revolution* (Hassocks: 1976), 18.

<sup>7</sup> James Force, *William Whiston, Honest Newtonian* (Cambridge: 1985).

<sup>8</sup> James Force, "Newton's God of Dominion: The unity of Newton's theological, scientific, and political thought," in *Essays on the context, nature, and influence of Isaac Newton's theology*, ed. James Force and Richard Popkin (Dordrecht: 1990), 75-102, 80; James Force, "The God of Abraham and Isaac (Newton)," in *The books of nature and Scripture*, ed. James Force and Richard Popkin, (Dordrecht: 1994), 179-200. James Force, "Providence and Newton's Pantokrator: Natural law, miracles, and Newtonian science," in *Newton and Newtonianism: New Studies*, ed. James Force and Sarah Hutton (New York: 2004), 65-92.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hunter, *Science and society in Restoration England* (Cambridge: 1981), 185.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Snobelen, "William Whiston, Isaac Newton and the crisis of publicity," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 35(3) (2004), 573-603. I am aware of Snobelen's PhD thesis Stephen Snobelen, "William Whiston: Natural philosopher, prophet, primitive Christian," PhD diss. (University of Cambridge, 2000); however, I have been unable to access a copy of this.

a far lesser degree) Keill, the contributions of Edwards and Nicholls have received very little attention.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter examines a further instance of controversy setting the agenda for intellectual endeavour and catalysing new ideas through Whiston's appropriation of Burnet's approach and Newton's physics. However, attention to this work and its development also serves to highlight the differences in position between Whiston and Burnet, adding complexity to more broadly focussed accounts of the 'World Makers'.<sup>12</sup> So too, engagement with the individual perspectives of Keill, Edwards and Nicholls attests to the diversity of views on philosophical theology. The chapter argues that the complex reception of Newton's work, as exemplified by Keill's criticisms of Whiston, does not support claims of a clear and coherent 'Newtonian' ideology.

The chapter first provides a brief biographical account of Whiston, the development of his *New theory* (1696), and some of its principal features. Second, the chapter turns to consider Whiston's approach to reconciling the Mosaic account with reason and natural philosophy, and the contrasting views of Nicholls and Edwards as to his departures from the text. Third, it considers the strongly opposing views of the two 'Newtonians' Keill and Whiston as to whether the creation and deluge were miraculous events. Finally, it considers the debate over Whiston's vision of a providentially ordered universe.

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<sup>11</sup> Force, for instance, does not mention Edwards in his book, and Nicholls only once in passing: Force, *William Whiston*, 80.

<sup>12</sup> As noted in Chapter 1.

## I. *Whiston and his New Theory*

He is, it seems, a man of very quick and ardent spirit, tall and spare, with a pointed chin, and wears his own hair. In look he greatly resembles Calvin. He is very fond of speaking, and argues with great vehemence.

– von Uffenbach (1710)<sup>13</sup>

Such was Whiston to the eyes of the German scholar Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach in August 1710. A little over a month later, Whiston was deprived of the Lucasian professorship of mathematics and expelled from Cambridge University for his notorious anti-trinitarian views.<sup>14</sup> The *New theory*, however, belonged to an earlier period of his life. Whiston was born in the small village of Norton Juxta Twycross in Leicestershire on 9 December 1667. His father, Josiah Whiston, was a local clergyman, assiduous in his duties and very pious, but in ill-health, blind and in debt. While remaining within the Church, he was conflicted over the unfolding efforts of the Church of England to rein in the dissenters including his pious brother and his prominent acquaintance Richard Baxter. Whiston assisted his father as an amanuensis, and in his will the father expressed the wish for his son to enter the ministry. Steeped in biblical commentary, fortified with a calling from an early age, and acutely aware of the voice of conscience, these difficult circumstances no doubt had bearing on Whiston's subsequent career.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Mayor (ed.), *Cambridge under Queen Anne: illustrated by memoir of Ambrose Bonwicke and diaries of Francis Burman and Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach* (Cambridge: 1911), 187.

<sup>14</sup> William Whiston, *An account of Mr. Whiston's prosecution at, and banishment from, the University of Cambridge* (London: 1718). Eamon Duffy, "'Whiston's Affair': the trials of a Primitive Christian 1709–1714," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27(2) (1976), 129-150.

<sup>15</sup> William Whiston, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Mr. William Whiston* (London: 1749). Maureen Farrell, "The life and work of William Whiston," (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 1973), 1.

Commencing in 1686, Whiston undertook his university studies at Clare Hall, Cambridge (as Thomas Burnet had done some thirty-five years before).<sup>16</sup> While Descartes' thought was still a prominent presence, awareness of Newton's work was spreading, and this provided the immediate context to the development of the *New theory*. Whiston wrote of his interest in the 'new philosophies' and, in particular, Descartes' theories from his arrival at Cambridge, which he referred to as 'alone in Vogue with us'.<sup>17</sup> Around this time, Whiston also became aware of Burnet's work. He described falling into an 'exceeding liking of the main part' of Burnet's 'ingenious and remarkable' *Theory*. Indeed, Whiston undertook a vindication of Burnet's *Theory* during the course of his first degree.<sup>18</sup>

Following this early fascination, Whiston became aware of Newton's *Principia* (1687), and set himself with 'the utmost Zeal to the Study of Sir *Isaac Newton*'s wonderful Discoveries'.<sup>19</sup> These 'deeper researches' led him to repudiate Burnet's *Theory*. Not only could it 'not be justify'd by the Principles of sound Philosophy', but it did not 'upon better consideration, agree with the accounts in the Holy Scriptures'.<sup>20</sup> Whiston said the thought had occurred to him – around 1692-1693 – that a comet might pass close to the Earth, and alter its axis. At first his approach focused on modifying Burnet's *Theory*, but later he gave his 'Thoughts a greater freedom about the occasions of the Deluge'. It occurred to him that a comet might be linked to the deluge. When Woodward's *Essay* (1695) appeared, Whiston read this 'with a great deal of eagerness and solicitude', and it is cited numerous times in his work. By May 1695, Whiston had a 'hasty imperfect draught' of his own work, which he

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<sup>16</sup> Whiston achieved his B.A. in 1690 and M.A. in 1693, and was elected Fellow in 1691. He was ordained in 1693 by William Lloyd, Bishop of Coventry and Litchfield, a strong supporter of the 1688 Revolution, who stimulated Whiston's interest in biblical chronology and prophecy. Whiston then returned to the University and continued his studies.

<sup>17</sup> Whiston, *Memoirs*, 35-36.

<sup>18</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, preface [1].

<sup>19</sup> Whiston, *Memoirs*, 35-36.

<sup>20</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, preface [2].

sent to Newton, as well as classical scholar and clergyman Richard Bentley and polymath Christopher Wren. The *New theory* was published the next year.

As the long title of his work suggests, Whiston's work aimed to show that the scriptural account of the creation, the deluge, and the conflagration were 'perfectly agreeable to Reason and Philosophy'. According to James Force, the *New theory* constituted 'an attack on the deism, pessimism, and Cartesian rationalism' of Burnet.<sup>21</sup> This characterisation gives an inaccurate impression of Burnet (who was not a deist), and Whiston's relation to his work. While elements of the *New theory* were critically positioned against Burnet, in many respects Whiston continued and appropriated Burnet's approach – as Burnet's influence on the genesis of the *New theory* and its very name would suggest. Certainly, there are conspicuous differences, both stylistically and in philosophical approach. Whiston did not express his system with the portentous lyricism of Burnet. One might also contrast the frontispiece to Whiston's work – a relatively austere depiction of his 'Systema Solare' – with the baroque cycle of Burnet's *Theory*, embellished with volant cherubim. So too, Whiston's work was set out in a highly structured fashion, echoing the analytical methods of mathematics, and the approach of Newton in particular. Thus, after a lengthy preliminary discourse addressing Moses' narrative, Whiston outlined a series of 'Lemmata' or propositions drawn from natural philosophy (Book I), a series of 'Hypotheses' regarding natural causes present in Sacred History (Book II), and an account of 'Phaenomena' drawn from the Bible (Book III), and finally presented his 'Solutions' (Book IV).

Comets were topical: the Great Comet of 1680 – also known as Newton's Comet or Kirch's Comet – appeared dramatically in November 1680 and was seen in the night sky for months.

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<sup>21</sup> Force, *Honest Newtonian*, 13

Whiston remembered seeing the comet as a boy.<sup>22</sup> It was a major presence in Newton's *Principia* (1687), which David Hughes has called, in part, 'a textbook on comets'. Newton drew on John Flamsteed's calculations and Edmond Halley's insight as to trajectory to show the comet's elliptical path, and used it to introduce his account of gravity.<sup>23</sup> A different celestial visitor, appearing in 1682, became known as Halley's Comet. Drawing on Newton's work, Halley identified that the comet had appeared in 1531 and 1607.<sup>24</sup> As will be discussed, comets have a central place in Whiston's account of the creation, the deluge, and the conflagration. And, for Whiston, like Burnet, recent insights into the natural world – rightly understood – offered the prospect of an apologetic defence of Christianity, which was threatened by the apparent divergence of the Scripture and natural philosophy, a division, it was imperative to reconcile.

Whiston drew a distinction between the creation of the universe out of nothing, and the six days' works of Moses.<sup>25</sup> He cited biblical commentator Simon Patrick, Bishop of Ely as someone who had 'allow'd' this as an interpretation, something that illustrates Whiston's connection with an older generation of Arminian theologians both as intellectual antecedents and a source of legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> According to Whiston, the 'Ancient Chaos, the Origin of our Earth, was the Atmosphere of a Comet' (Hypothesis I). This, he argued, was consistent with the Mosaic account, ancient tradition, and natural observations. Whiston considered a comet as a 'Fluid, or System of Fluids', which corresponded with Moses' account of God moving 'upon the face of the waters'. So too, it was consonant with pagan traditions of chaos, such

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<sup>22</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, preface [3].

<sup>23</sup> David Hughes, "The Principia and comets," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 42 (1988), 53-74.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund Halley, *A synopsis of the astronomy of comets* (London: 1705).

<sup>25</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Patrick, *A Commentary Upon the first book of Moses, called Genesis* (London: 1704), 4. Whiston himself mentioned his early attachment to Patrick, Henry Hammond and Hugo Grotius in: Whiston, *Memoirs*, 9.

as the Phoenician description of a ‘dark and stormy *Atmosphere*’. It also provided the cause for the Earth’s central fire (Whiston agreed with Woodward that there were strong grounds for this). Whiston considered this chaos of heterogeneous matter then arranged itself under the influence of gravity to take the form of the Earth.<sup>27</sup>

Whiston postulated that the Earth’s initial orbit was circular, not elliptical, and that the Earth did not rotate diurnally (i.e. it was geographically divided between permanent day and night).<sup>28</sup> These heavenly arrangements provided, in Whiston’s view, the conditions amenable to Paradise, which he located at the ancient ‘joynt Course of the Rivers Tigris and *Euphrates*’.<sup>29</sup> In the context of the six days of creation, Whiston again offered a mix of natural and extraordinary causes. He supposed that the formation of animals and plants was ‘the immediate Workmanship of God’, being ‘unaccountable by the mechanical Laws of Matter and Motion’.<sup>30</sup> However, Whiston observed suggestively that the generation of animals was an area about which little was known, and that the conditions of Paradise offered the ideal conditions for the production of these creatures.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Burnet’s hypothesis of a structural collapse, Whiston considered that a comet was also the agent which effected the deluge. Following the chronology of Archbishop James Ussher, Whiston dated the deluge to 27 November 2349 BC.<sup>32</sup> According to Hypothesis X, a comet passed just before the body of the Earth.<sup>33</sup> Not only would the comet, in Whiston’s view, have brought about the rain described in the Scripture, its presence would

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<sup>27</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 69-76.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 76, 80.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 225-226.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

also cause the ‘breaking up [of] the Fountains of the great *Abyss*’ beneath the surface of the Earth.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly some years before, Edmond Halley had proposed to the Royal Society the idea that the shock of a comet may have caused the deluge.<sup>35</sup> Whiston wrote that he was not aware of this until his correspondence with Newton, and he never proceeded to consult Halley on this matter.<sup>36</sup>

Whiston speculated that the end of the world would be brought about in a ‘General Conflagration’ caused by another comet, which would alter the Earth’s annual motion, and bring it into the path of the Sun, bringing his system to a close.<sup>37</sup> Before proceeding to some of the main themes in the subsequent debate, it should be noted that the general outline delineated above passes over much of the diverse minutiae of Whiston’s schema. While it is impossible to consider in detail, for instance, his account of where Noah’s Ark ultimately rested, these illustrate something of the comprehensive nature of his attempt to integrate Scripture and natural philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

## II. *‘Hypotheses upon the ruines of the Sacred Text’*

One major theme in the controversy was the interpretation of the Mosaic account. Whiston, like Burnet, professed an accommodationist reading of Moses in order to ground his theories, or as one critic said, to build ‘Hypotheses upon the ruines of the Sacred Text’.<sup>39</sup> Compared to Burnet, however, Whiston was cautious. He framed his theory with a lengthy preliminary

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 303.

<sup>35</sup> Edmond Halley, “Some considerations about the cause of the universal deluge, laid before the Royal Society, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1694,” *Philosophical Transactions*, 33 (1724-1725), 118-123.

<sup>36</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, preface [9].

<sup>37</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 368.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 119-123.

<sup>39</sup> Edwards, *Brief remarks*, 31

discourse on the ‘Nature, Stile, and Extent of the Mosaick History of the Creation’, which informed a careful and detailed exposition of his scriptural hermeneutic. This was apparently written after the *New theory* itself, something that might suggest its defensive purpose.<sup>40</sup> In a similar fashion to Burnet, Whiston wrote that his purpose was to ‘account for the Creation of the World, agreeable to the description thereof in the Book of *Genesis*’.<sup>41</sup> He was mindful of the ‘perplexities and contrarieties’ facing this issue, ascribing them to two opposing trends in interpreting the Scripture. First, there was ‘the common and vulgar’ view, which interpreted Moses with no consideration of ‘Nature, Reason, Philosophy, or just *Decorum*’. Such an account, Whiston observed without much delicacy, was absurd and incoherent. Second, one could effectively characterise the Scripture as a ‘meer Popular, Parabolick, or Mythological relation’.<sup>42</sup> Whiston commented that his readers would be aware of the dangers of this approach from a recent author, namely Burnet.<sup>43</sup> With this in mind, Whiston sought to propose a theory sufficiently close to the ‘Letter of Moses’ and yet without contradicting ‘Divine Wisdom, Common Reason, or Philosophick Deductions’.<sup>44</sup> As against extremes, Whiston presented his approach as a ‘third or middle way’.<sup>45</sup>

Like Burnet, Whiston emphasised the purpose of the sacred history in setting out his interpretative approach: ‘The Mosaick Creation is not a Nice and Philosophical account of the Origin of All Things; but an Historical and True Representation’.<sup>46</sup> As Dmitri Levitin noted, Whiston’s approach to scriptural accommodation was phenomenalist, insofar as he

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<sup>40</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, preface [8].

<sup>41</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Burnet is unnamed, but this is confirmed in a marginal note to the 1734 edition.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

saw the Mosaic account as literal from the perspective of the observer.<sup>47</sup> With reference to the ‘capacities of the *Jews*’, Whiston saw the Mosaic account as akin to ‘*An Historical Journal or Diary*’ recorded by ‘*an honest and observing Spectator on the Earth*’.<sup>48</sup> Whiston evinced a great confidence in the compatibility of the sacred history and natural philosophy. Where contradictions arose, ‘Wise Men’ should ‘carefully... compare Nature with Scripture’, confident there will be the ‘greatest harmony’.<sup>49</sup> That aside, there would be major departures from the ‘vulgar’ view. Again, Whiston’s comments place him in a broader Church of England tradition – for instance, Simon Patrick had already made ‘concessions’ departing from the Mosaic account, which Whiston suggested were more significant than any required by the *New theory*.<sup>50</sup>

The first major commentator on Whiston’s *New theory* was Church of England clergyman William Nicholls. Born in 1664, he received his education at Oxford, and obtained his D.D. in 1695. During this time, he held clerical posts as the rector of Selsey in Sussex, and chaplain to Ralph, Earl of Montague. Nicholls’ thoughts on Whiston were published in *A conference with a theist Part II* (1697). This work was written as a dialogue – a form Nicholls felt would better ‘excite Attention’ among infidels – between two gentlemen, the deist *Philologus* (‘fond of learning’), and the Christian *Credentius*. In *Part I*, Nicholls attacked the notion of the eternity of the world and defended the Mosaic history, as well as attacking the views of Thomas Burnet and Charles Blount as to the Fall of Adam and Eve. In

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<sup>47</sup> Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science* (Cambridge: 2017), 195.

<sup>48</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 67-68.

*Part II*, which concerns the sufficiency of natural religion, *Philologus*'s scepticism about the deluge prompts a general discussion of the theories of Burnet, Woodward, and Whiston.<sup>51</sup>

In his work, Nicholls praised Whiston for having 'avoided most of the Difficulties' of Burnet's *Theory*, and besides for showing 'extraordinary Mathematical and Philological Learning'.<sup>52</sup> Yet, he considered the 'chief fault' of the *New theory* is that Whiston has 'stuck more to Mr. *Newton*'s than *Moses*', and has been too 'fond and credulous' as to his theory of the comet. Nicholls gave a number of examples, including that Whiston's theory suggested the comet was the result of mechanical laws, rather than a punishment of God; Whiston's reinterpretation of the six days of creation into six years; and his account of two courses of rain when the Scriptures only relate one.<sup>53</sup> To add to this, he considered there were problems in Whiston's natural philosophy. However, Nicholls found himself embroiled in similar issues regarding his own account of the deluge.

'Well!', says *Philologus* following a discussion of the different theories, 'Now you see how these great Wits are miserably at a loss, to explain this unaccountable History'. The only purpose of the account, he quipped, was to 'make the Jews stand in fear of the Deity'.<sup>54</sup> Over the following pages, Nicholls appealed to the more traditional claim that there is a convincing argument that the deluge took place from the consensus of ancient tradition (such as those of the Babylonian, Phoenician, Assyrian, Greek and Latin peoples), which is supported by the presence of shells and other evidence in fossils.<sup>55</sup> In this context, Nicholl had *Credentius* offer his own eclectic view. He posited that there subsists an immense amount of water

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<sup>51</sup> Nicholls, *Conference*, 184-186.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 192-193.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 197-198

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 198-202.

under the Earth's surface, and that 'God by a Miraculous power sucked out part of this Abyss' to bring about the deluge.<sup>56</sup> In keeping with the nature of the controversy, Nicholls found it necessary in his 'Preface' to defend his own suggestions as to the creation and the deluge. He mentioned that they are simply 'possible Theories' rather than 'exactly True', and placed his work in the tradition of an earlier generation of writers such as the Bishop of Chester, John Wilkins, who had sought to demonstrate the plausibility of the size of Noah's Ark in 1668.<sup>57</sup> Yet in the charged atmosphere of the controversy, he would be grouped among those who 'weave their own Threads with those of Moses'.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps the most scathing response to the *New theory* was from John Edwards. Like Whiston, family background shaped his career as a polemicist. Born in 1637 in Hertford, Edwards was the son of Thomas Edwards, a Presbyterian non-conformist, notable as the author of *Gangræna* (1646), a catalogue of the 'errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices' of his time.<sup>59</sup> Dewey Wallace has speculated that his father's early death and unfinished work may have been a formative influence.<sup>60</sup> While Edwards conformed to the Church of England, he shared his father's combative style and pervading concern about heresy. From 1653, Edwards was educated at St. John's College.<sup>61</sup> The Master of St. John's during this time was the Calvinist theologian Anthony Tuckney, until he was forced out in 1661 following the Restoration.<sup>62</sup> Edwards was ordained (1662), and held a series of clerical roles over the following years. He later returned to St. John's College, but vexed relations

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, preface [4]. John Wilkins, *An essay towards a real character, and a philosophical language* (London: 1668).

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Brown, *Twelve dissertations out of Monsieur Le Clerk's Genesis* (London: 1696), preface [4]-[5].

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Edwards, *Gangræna* (London: 1646).

<sup>60</sup> Dewey Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660–1714: Variety, persistence, and transformation* (Oxford: 2011), 206.

<sup>61</sup> He received his B.A (1658), became a Fellow (1659), and attained an M.A (1661).

<sup>62</sup> Wallace, *English Calvinism*, 206.

with his fellow academics – who did not share his Calvinist views – led to him to resign. From 1683, Edwards was the vicar of St. Peter's, Colchester. In 1686, in ill-health and with strained relations with his parishioners, he retired and devoted himself to study and writing.

Over the following years, Edwards published voluminously, many of his works controverting his contemporaries, notably other Church of England intellectuals such as Whiston, John Locke, and Samuel Clarke.<sup>63</sup> In these works, Edwards presents as an interesting figure, devoted to the Church of England and its hierarchy, yet in internecine conflict with many of its leading thinkers, and obdurate in his adherence to a vision of Christianity that was increasingly liminal among leading figures of the Church. As this might imply, controversy was central to his literary identity. Criticised as ‘a Stranger to Civility and Decency, to Candour and Moderation’, Edwards observed that ‘the *Words of the Wise are as Goads and as Nails*’.<sup>64</sup> He defended his approach as consistent with the Bible and controversial tradition, and considered ‘*soft Words*’ were not charitable to those in the wrong.<sup>65</sup>

In the present case, Edward's principal *casus belli* concerned Whiston's attempt to accommodate Moses' narrative to natural philosophy. Like Nicholls, Edwards considered Whiston had placed more emphasis on reconciling his account with Newton than with Moses; as he put it, ‘abandoning the literal Sense, or the genuine meaning of the *Mosaick Creation*’.<sup>66</sup> In his *Brief Remarks*, Edwards strongly repudiated the accommodationist arguments used by Burnet and Whiston, presenting these in an incendiary caricature. Burnet and Whiston, Edwards suggested, presented the ancient Jews as ready to accept ‘any Story of

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<sup>63</sup> John Edwards, *Some thoughts concerning the several causes and occasions of atheism [...] and on a late Book entituled “The reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures”* (London: 1695).

<sup>64</sup> John Edwards, *Some new discoveries of the uncertainty, deficiency, and corruptions of human knowledge and learning. [...] To which is added, A defence of sharp reflections and censures on writers and their opinions, when there is occasion* (London: 1714), 185. Ecclesiastes 12:11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

<sup>66</sup> Edwards, *Brief remarks*, Dedication [4].

a Cock and a Bull’, and as ‘Idiots and Blockheads’, who had no understanding of philosophy.<sup>67</sup> Edwards proceeded to attack some of the ways Whiston had departed from the Scriptures. His main concerns related to the creation, including Whiston confining creation to that of the Earth, rather than the heavens; the notion that the sun, moon and stars were created before the Earth; and his interpretation of ‘days’ as ‘years’.<sup>68</sup> For Edwards, the only difference between Whiston and Burnet was in degree of explicitness. Whereas Burnet was flagrant in undermining the Mosaic history, Edwards wrote that Whiston went about this on the sly – ‘craftily and sophisticatedly’.<sup>69</sup> It is clear too that Edwards had deism much on his mind, and Whiston’s approach, he contended, was conducive to promoting deistic theories, particularly in someone who, after all, should know better as a clergyman.<sup>70</sup>

While some of Edwards’ perceptions of natural philosophy are particularly striking (most obviously his scepticism about the Copernican theory), it is important to emphasise that his attitude to contemporary natural philosophy was more complex than outright hostility. His earlier *Cometomantia* (1684), written in the aftermath of the Great Comet of 1680, helps us to elucidate the differences of approach between Edwards and Whiston.<sup>71</sup> The comet was widely seen as a sign or cause of evil, which provided the catalyst for Pierre Bayle’s attack on popular superstitions and the authority of tradition,<sup>72</sup> In that regard, the comet of 1680 has

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 2, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 8-16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 6, 8.

<sup>71</sup> [John Edwards], *Cometomantia, A discourse of comets shewing their original, substance, place, time, magnitude, motion, number, colour, figure, kinds, names, and more especially, their prognosticks, significations and presages* (London: 1684).

<sup>72</sup> *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1682): Pierre Bayle, *Miscellaneous reflections occasion’d by the comet which appear’d in December 1680* (London: 1708). One might contrast his views with John Milton’s description, fifteen years earlier, of a comet ‘That fires the length of Ophiuchus huge / In th’ Arctick Sky, and from his horrid hair / Shakes Pestilence and Warr’: John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: 1667), Book II, 709-711.

been heralded as something of a symbol for the emergence of Enlightenment thought.<sup>73</sup> Yet while he reasserted the place of comets as portents, Edwards supplemented this with works on the nature of comets, such as those of Johannes Kepler. His emphasis, though, was on their providential role, including as presages. Not only does God speak through the Scripture, Edwards explained, but also through reason, ‘the Course of Nature’, and ‘Acts of Providence’.<sup>74</sup> In another work, Edwards gave his own version of the argument from design, drawing on a wide range of contemporary natural philosophy as to the ‘Excellent Contrivance’ of the Heavens and the Earth, and the ‘Wonderful Formation’ of the human body.<sup>75</sup> Finally, Edwards was not absolutely opposed to scriptural accommodation. He acknowledged that aspects of the Bible were accommodated to the vulgar. He gave as an example, echoing Calvin and others, Genesis 1:16, which states ‘*God made two great Lights*’, which as he noted is not an exact description of the sun and the moon.<sup>76</sup> These examples might serve to further contextualise Edwards’ position, and engagement with contemporary issues.

While Edwards saw the creation as ‘an Extraordinary and Miraculous exertment of Divine Power’, he did not wish to abandon the idea of Moses as a philosopher.<sup>77</sup> In *Brief Remarks*, Edwards asserted that Moses was himself a ‘Divinely Inspired Philosopher’, who gave the essentials of natural philosophy, though this thesis is not particularised in any detail.<sup>78</sup> Why

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<sup>73</sup> Howard Robinson, *The Great Comet of 1680: A study in the history of rationalism* (Northfield: 1916). Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 333-334. Paul Hazard, *The crisis of the European mind 1680-1715*, trans. J. Lewis May (New York: 2013), 155-160.

<sup>74</sup> Edwards, *Cometomantia*, 98.

<sup>75</sup> John Edwards, *A demonstration of the existence and providence of God, from the contemplation of the visible structure of the greater and the lesser world* (London: 1696).

<sup>76</sup> John Edwards, *A discourse concerning the authority, stile and perfection of the books of the Old and New Testament* (London: 1694), 2:51. Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the first book of Moses, called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: 1948), 85.

<sup>77</sup> Edwards, *Brief remarks*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, Dedication [3].

then, he pondered, were Whiston and others like him abandoning Moses? One explanation he considered had to do with the vastness of the universe, lately revealed by early modern astronomers. For Edwards, thinkers such as Whiston seemed to be beguiled by the idea of other inhabited worlds in the universe, reviling Moses' focus on the Earth as a comparatively small planet in the vast cosmos. In this context, they rejected the drama of the Mosaic worldview, centred on the Earth as '*made for the use of Man*'.

A further explanation Edwards countenanced was Moses' lack of consonance with the 'strict laws of the *Mechanick* or *Corpuscular Philosophy*'.<sup>79</sup> For Edwards, lack of consistency with these newly discovered laws was not a sufficient argument for departing from the Mosaic tradition. This reflected both his strong adherence to Moses, and also a scepticism about the new claims of natural philosophy, which he saw as somewhat 'Modish'.<sup>80</sup> Edwards had an acute awareness of the fallibility of human knowledge, and the potential for error, something epitomised in a late work, which was a catalogue of 'uncertainty, deficiency, and corruptions' of knowledge and learning.<sup>81</sup> This points to two broader themes that will be further explored in Part II of this thesis: epistemological arguments about the limits of human knowledge, and their relation to socio-cultural norms about intellectual modesty and temperance.

In the broader context of the debate, Edwards advocated the alternative theory of John Woodward, who he felt had more closely adhered to Moses, encouraging him to take up the refutation of Whiston, and 'rifle his several *Hypotheses*'.<sup>82</sup> That said, he criticised Woodward himself in correspondence, and the two fell out.<sup>83</sup> Whiston did not respond

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 20-29.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, Dedication [6].

<sup>81</sup> Edwards, *Some new discoveries*.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, Dedication [1].

<sup>83</sup> This is discussed in: Joseph Levine, *Dr. Woodward's shield: history, science, and satire in Augustan England* (Ithaca and London: 1977), 66-69.

specifically to Edwards. It is unclear if he knew of the book, or whether he considered its tone too immoderate or its philosophical attitude too unrelatable to merit a response. It certainly does not offer the type of natural philosophical objections to the *New theory* that Whiston was preoccupied with in his various attempts to defend the work. Indeed, William Nicolson, a churchman who followed the controversy, wrote to Woodward that he considered Edwards' remarks to be 'declamation, rather than a solid reply'.<sup>84</sup> Nicolson's comments to Woodward show how uncontroversial accommodation arguments were for at least some Church of England clergymen; the issue was often one of degree. For Nicolson, it was 'mighty misfortunate' that the 'new Theorists' attacked each other, when they agreed with each other that 'the old vulgar exposition is not to be stood to'.<sup>85</sup> That said, he became increasingly disenchanted with the controversy as it wore on.<sup>86</sup>

As with Burnet, we see that the criticisms of Whiston's work adopted a range of nuanced positions, rather than rejecting his attempted synthesis of Scripture and natural history outright. While, for his critics, Whiston certainly took his accommodationist reading too far, this was a matter of degree rather than substance, and (at least for Edwards) derived as much from suspicion of the new philosophies as from theological concerns. As we will see in the next section, Whiston – like Burnet – was also criticised from a natural philosophical perspective.

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<sup>84</sup> William Nicolson to John Woodward, 4 December 1697, in William Nicolson, *Letters on various subjects* (London: 1809), 90

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>86</sup> See Chapter 4, §I.

### III. A 'peculiar fondness' for miracles

A central issue in reconciling the Mosaic account and natural philosophy, was of course, the place of miracles. Whiston's approach was: 'That which is clearly accountable in a natural way, is not without reason to be ascrib'd to a Miraculous Power.'<sup>87</sup> In contrast, Burnet's somewhat stronger claim was that 'we must not flie to miracles, where Man and Nature are sufficient'.<sup>88</sup> There were some exceptions and caveats to Whiston's views, yet the *New theory* aimed to explain many of the phenomena described in the Scripture in natural terms, namely through providentially interposed comets.

That the creation and the deluge were miracles, completely irreconcilable with the principles of natural philosophy, was the overarching theme of the most influential critique of Whiston's *New theory* – that of John Keill, the Oxford mathematician introduced in Chapter 2. Keill's refutation of Whiston's work appeared as part of his *An Examination* (1698), which is also, indeed principally, a caustic attack on Burnet's *Theory*. Whiston clearly considered Keill a foe worthy of his steel – his *Vindication* (1698) focused on Keill's arguments, and Whiston took them seriously to the point of altering aspects of his own theories. Keill's refutations were also deemed sufficiently pertinent that they were republished in a second edition in 1734, and were a major influence on how the figures who he styled the 'World Makers' were subsequently seen. While Keill has already been introduced, some further details may contextualise his disagreements with Whiston, with whom he shared such an acclamatory regard for Newton's physics.

As previously noted, Keill had studied at the University of Edinburgh under David Gregory. Gregory was one of a group of figures often termed 'Tory Newtonians', as they combined a

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<sup>87</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 95.

<sup>88</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, viii.

strong interest in Newton's theories, were religiously inclined towards the High Church, and held Jacobite sympathies. This is in contrast to the more canonical 'Newtonians' identified by Margaret Jacob – men such as Whiston, who were associated with the Low Church and Whig politics.<sup>89</sup> The Scottish context of these thinkers shaped their particular attitude: in the wake of the 1688 Revolution, there were robust efforts to assert Presbyterian control of institutions such as the University of Edinburgh, and Gregory, for one, found his position increasingly untenable.<sup>90</sup> Fortuitously, with the support of Newton and Flamsteed, Gregory became Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford in 1691.<sup>91</sup> According to a later story, Halley was said to be the only man 'that has less religion than Dr Gregory'.<sup>92</sup> Keill, like Gregory, moved to Oxford, where he attained an M.A. at Balliol College in 1694, and later lectured on Newton's philosophy. It was during this time that he composed *An Examination* (1698).

Even as he fired off his initial volley, Keill showed considerably more respect for Whiston than for the much-maligned Burnet. Keill acknowledged he had 'made greater discoveries, and proceeded on more Philosophical Principles' than other theorists. He was clearly impressed by Whiston's arguments that placed a comet passing the Earth at the time of the deluge.<sup>93</sup> That said, for Keill, there were insurmountable problems with the *New theory*. As with Burnet, however, Keill's approach was not to engage with the theological niceties of particular interpretations of Moses, rather he focused on the merits of Whiston's use of natural philosophy. Consistent with his treatment of Burnet, he offered no positive theory

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<sup>89</sup> Anita Guerrini, "The Tory Newtonians: Gregory, Pitcairne, and their circle," *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986): 288-311.

<sup>90</sup> John Friesen, "Archibald Pitcairne, David Gregory and the Scottish origins of English Tory Newtonianism, 1688–1715," *History of Science* 41(2) (2003), 163–91.

<sup>91</sup> Dmitri Levitin, "Edmund Halley and the eternity of the world revisited," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 67 (2013): 315-329.

<sup>92</sup> Guerrini, "Tory Newtonians," 299.

<sup>93</sup> Keill, *Examination*, 177.

against Whiston, apart from an insistence on the literalism of the Mosaic account, something which placed him in a position of comparative strength. He invited any response from Whiston involving ‘clear and distinct reasoning from Mechanical Principles’, writing that he expected that someone of Whiston’s ‘Candor and Sincerity’ would not respond to him with a ‘mist of words’.<sup>94</sup>

In his *Vindication* (1698), Whiston chose to see Keill as accepting ‘the main Point’ of his work – and his own role as convincing Keill of the details. Indeed, Whiston commented that he found Keill’s attack ‘a little surprizing’, and speculated that if it were not for his ‘peculiar fondness’ for ‘unaccountable Miracles’, Keill would have written him a private letter.<sup>95</sup>

Predictably, Keill prickled at these comments. ‘I know no Miracles I am fond of,’ he fumed, ‘save those mention’d in Scripture’. Nor should this seem peculiar, Keill continued, since until ‘this Age of Worldmakers’, Christians considered them ‘such works, as could never be produced by the Laws of Nature and Mechanism.’<sup>96</sup> As to writing privately about his reservations, Keill saw no reason to do so – ‘whatever any one publishes is submitted to the judgement of its Readers, and any one of them may take the same liberty in publishing Remarks upon it’.<sup>97</sup>

One issue that ran through the dispute between Keill and Whiston was whether a comet could answer the biblical description of creation. According to the Scripture, the ancient chaos ‘*was without form, and Void, and that Darkness was upon the face of the Deep*’. However, as Keill pointed out, all the natural observations of comets emphasised their brightness and luminosity. While Whiston thought the settling atmosphere would veil the comet in

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>95</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, 1.

<sup>96</sup> Keill, *Defence*, 166-167.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 165.

darkness, Keill considered this was contrary to Scripture insofar as it presents the darkness as the ‘very Original state’<sup>98</sup> For Whiston, Moses was not referring to the previous state of the comet. Moreover, having returned from the ‘vast and cold Regions beyond *Saturn*’ the comet would burn with less intensity.<sup>99</sup> Rather than attempt to prove his own interpretation of the Mosaic narrative, Keill raised further questions as to the physical character of comets.<sup>100</sup>

Even accepting that the hexameral creation might have unfolded over six years, Keill pointed out that this might not provide enough time for a creation according to mechanical processes.<sup>101</sup> Keill estimated that the settling of particles to form the Earth required some thousands of years.<sup>102</sup> Acknowledging this was an ‘Argument of Good force’, Whiston had two suggestions. The concept of ‘day’ could potentially (again) be extended. Alternatively, it might be that the ‘Laws, Properties, and Operations of Bodies’ in the atmosphere of comets would be different to those upon the Earth.<sup>103</sup> Keill found this response completely unsatisfactory. Any theory – even Thomas Burnet’s – could be maintained on such grounds.<sup>104</sup> In fairness, Whiston offered some explanation. He cited phenomena – like Saturn’s rings – that are difficult to account for. Moreover, as God had fixed ‘several *arbitrary* Laws’, he might have ordained different ones for other systems.<sup>105</sup> Whiston saw this kind of appeal to God’s omnipotence in framing the laws of nature as consistent with the approach of Newton’s *Principia*.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Keill, *Examination*, 179-181.

<sup>99</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, 2-3.

<sup>100</sup> Keill, *A defence*, 166-171.

<sup>101</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 79-104.

<sup>102</sup> Keill, *Examination*, 183.

<sup>103</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, 4-5.

<sup>104</sup> Keill, *Defence*, 173

<sup>105</sup> Whiston, *Second defence*, 6

<sup>106</sup> He refers to the ‘*Fiat*, Command, Power, and Efficiency of Almighty God’ in: *New theory*, 225.

Keill also identified some unusual consequences of Whiston's theory of the deluge. In his view, the vapours of the comet would, on passing the air, be at once turned into water, with the consequence that there would be an immediate inundation rather than the forty days of rain referred to in the Book of Genesis.<sup>107</sup> Whiston conceded that much of the rain would come down on the first day, yet he reassured his audience that there would remain 'sufficient for the most violent Forty days Rain imaginable'.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, even accepting 'so many impossibilities', Keill pointed to the difficulties in removing the waters of the deluge. Keill estimated it would take 17,864 years before the twenty-two oceans of water could be removed through the fissures, assuming a velocity the same as rivers.<sup>109</sup>

This debate brings out some of the complexities surrounding the influence of Newton and the reception of his theories. As has already been noted, Whiston conspicuously positioned his *New theory* in terms of Newton's physics, drawing links between his work and Newton's, and dedicating the work to Newton. These were underscored in his *Vindication* (1698), which emphasised that Newton's work inspired the *New theory*, and that Newton reviewed the work.<sup>110</sup> James Force has argued that Whiston's approach to the Scripture was a 'truly Newtonian method of biblical exegesis'.<sup>111</sup> That said, it is unclear to what extent Newton approved of the *New theory*. As Stephen Snobelen has noted, links with Newton were partly strategic.<sup>112</sup> Buchwald & Feingold have identified that there is reason to doubt the widespread view that Whiston was on very close terms with Newton until the mid-1710s. They note that Whiston's claim in his *Memoirs* (1749) that Newton 'well approved' his *New*

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<sup>107</sup> Keill, *Defence*, 190-191.

<sup>108</sup> Whiston, *Second defence*, 17.

<sup>109</sup> Keill, *Defence*, 207.

<sup>110</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, preface [7]-[8].

<sup>111</sup> Force, *William Whiston*, 32.

<sup>112</sup> Snobelen, "Crisis of publicity," 76.

*theory* is much stronger than the limited endorsement of the comet theory mentioned in 1728.<sup>113</sup>

As the outline of the debate makes clear, Keill saw no inconsistency in attacking the *New theory*, or any incompatibility between Newton's natural philosophy and biblical literalism. Indeed, he challenged Whiston expressly on Newton's alleged approval, writing 'I dare venture to say Mr. *Newton* wont engage for the truth of all his Theorems'.<sup>114</sup> For Stephen Gaukroger, Keill was 'more consistently Newtonian' than Whiston.<sup>115</sup> Likewise, Simon Schaffer has remarked on the 'irony' that Keill wished to maintain a separation of the miraculous and the natural.<sup>116</sup> As shall be further discussed in Chapter 4, in his critiques of Burnet and Whiston, Keill presented a rival vision of natural philosophy that radically separated itself from the Scripture, one that proved influential over the following decades.

#### ***IV. 'Art and Contrivance, Order and Providence'***

The previous discussion illustrates the immense gulf between Whiston and Keill as to miracles. While the two could understand each other as far as physics was concerned, there was a certain degree of incommensurability in their thinking as to God's relationship to creation. In this regard, Keill's quite straightforward insistence on biblical miracles contrasted with Whiston's emphasis on divine providence. Whiston's approach was also noteworthy as it has been seen as part of a broader trend. According to James Force, a

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<sup>113</sup> Jed Buchwald and Mordechai Feingold, *Newton and the origin of civilization* (Princeton: 2013), 334.

<sup>114</sup> Keill, *Defence*, 164.

<sup>115</sup> Stephen Gaukroger, *The collapse of mechanism and the rise of sensibility: Science and the shaping of modernity, 1680-1760* (Oxford: 2010), 38.

<sup>116</sup> Simon Schaffer, "Halley's atheism and the end of the world," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 32(1) (1977): 17-40, 28.

‘Newtonian Synthesis of General and Special Providence’ emerged in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, which is linked with Newton, Whiston, Bentley and Clarke.<sup>117</sup>

With his *Lemmata*, Whiston set out an account of a universe governed by uniform laws of matter and motion, which would ultimately lead to his treatment of comets. He took care throughout to make clear what his vision of mechanical philosophy was not, asserting the dualism of soul and body, and affirming God’s governance of creation as against the ‘Epicureans’. Central to this was Whiston’s notion of God’s providence in the natural world, ‘not merely a Conservation of its being’, but a constant, uniform, active Influence or Energy’.<sup>118</sup> A specific instance was gravity. With reference to Bentley’s account of gravity in his Boyle Lectures of 1692, Whiston suggested this: ‘depends entirely on the constant and efficacious, and, if you will, the supernatural and miraculous Influence of Almighty God.’<sup>119</sup>

Whiston also took care to stress that the creation was not simply the result of the ‘Laws of Mechanism’, it was caused by God, and overseen by his ‘Care and Providence’.<sup>120</sup> Whiston emphasised the difficulty of determining ‘how far, and in what particulars, a supernatural or miraculous Interposition of the Divine Power is concern’d; and how far the Laws of Nature, or Mechanical Powers ought to be extended’.<sup>121</sup> There were various matters – including the creation of matter *ex nihilo*, God’s framing of the Laws of Nature, and the creation of Adam and Eve – that Whiston considered were the specific actions of God.<sup>122</sup> The changing of the

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<sup>117</sup> James Force, “Hume and the relation of science to religion among certain members of the Royal Society,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45(4) (1984): 517-536

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>120</sup> Whiston, *New theory*, 218.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 222-228.

Chaos into a planet was an ‘instance of the immediate Power, or at least of the peculiar Providence of God’.<sup>123</sup>

As in the case of Burnet’s *Theory*, one concern was that Whiston’s schema was fatalistic. Nicholls raised particular concerns about the implications of the *New theory* for God’s justice. Whiston, he argued, imputed ‘this great Catastrophe to the necessary Laws of a Comets *Trajection*’, rather than God punishing ‘the Sin of Mankind’.<sup>124</sup> At a later point he was even more explicit – such a view would assert ‘a Fatality of sinning’, and this would ‘destroy all Religion, Free-Will, and the Goodness of God’. This would suggest the deluge depended ‘upon the just and providential Power of God, which over-ruled the Power of Nature’.<sup>125</sup> Whiston was not particularly concerned by this objection. He observed that as God foresaw the Fall of Adam, so he foresaw the punishment, and disposed the comet accordingly.<sup>126</sup>

Keill did not engage with the subtle points of Whiston’s views of providence. However, he attempted to show that Whiston’s theory was inconsistent with a providential order. This exchange is interesting as one of the rare cases where controversial writing prompted a change to a theory. Keill took issue with Whiston’s idea that the diurnal rotation of the Earth did not commence until after the Fall, providing the circumstances that would ensure an Earthly Paradise. He pointed out that the extreme variation in temperature between the two halves of the Earth in day and night would render it unendurable to its unfortunate inhabitants, and ‘a fitter representation of Hell and its Torments, than of that state of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>124</sup> Nicholls, *Conference*, 193.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>126</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, 30-31

happiness'.<sup>127</sup> In responding to Keill, Whiston modified his *Theory* to involve the Earth in an elliptical orbit until the Fall, which would ameliorate this situation.<sup>128</sup> His hopes to convince Keill were not fulfilled. 'I shall not trouble my self with new answers as often as he thinks fit to contrive new Hypotheses', he replied, adding that much of the Earth would yet be uninhabitable.<sup>129</sup>

The debate between Whiston and Keill ultimately reached an impasse. In Keill's *Defence* (1698), he described the *New theory* as 'confuted', and taunted the 'fondness' of Whiston for his work.<sup>130</sup> Whiston commented that the responses of Keill and others to his *New theory* had 'occasion'd me to *correct some Parts, to confirm others, and to improve the whole,*' but he felt the 'principal Foundations' remained strong. As such, the dispute between Whiston and Keill ended, like many debates with something of an aporia – two questions that Whiston posed in concluding *A Second Defence* (1700). He had already done so in his *Vindication* (1698), but they were 'wholly past over in silence'. He continued, 'I shall Reprint them here *again*; and if he make another Rejoinder, *again* desire his free and ingenuous Answer'. First, noting Keill's acceptance that a comet did really pass at the time of the deluge, Whiston questioned what other purpose this could have served. For Whiston, it was incredible that a comet passing in such a way, an incalculably rare event, 'had no hand at all in the Deluge! — *Credat Iudaeus Apella.*'<sup>131</sup> The use of the Latin quotation – Let the Jew Apella believe it – is itself interesting, its original context in Horace being to mock superstition.<sup>132</sup> Second, Whiston questioned how various effects that produced the deluge

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<sup>127</sup> Keill, *Examination*, 193-195.

<sup>128</sup> Whiston, *Vindication*, 11-13.

<sup>129</sup> Keill, *Defence*, 181-182.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

<sup>131</sup> Whiston, *Second defence*, 20-21.

<sup>132</sup> Horace, *Odes and epodes*, trans. Niall Rudd (Cambridge, MA: 2004), Book I, Ode V.

could have been avoided upon such a comet passing. After all, he wrote, ‘We are not now in a *Cartesian Vortex*, where Fancy and Contrivance can introduce or hinder any effect at pleasure’.<sup>133</sup> Again, Whiston sought to put the onus of proof on Keill. In so doing, he attempted to undermine a key strength of Keill’s refutation: that it concentrated on the negative case, rather than positing an alternative. While modern readers may discern in Keill’s work something analogous to the kind of rigour that we would expect from analysing physical theories, one can see why Whiston’s work was appealing to an educated Christian readership, who welcomed the proposition that Genesis accorded with the latest knowledge about the world. While Keill’s work can resonate with us in its pugnacious rigour, these questions underscore that Whiston’s work raised (and sought to address) very real and difficult questions for Christian natural philosophers of his era.

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<sup>133</sup> Whiston, *Second defence*, 21.

## CHAPTER 4

### EPILOGUE

In his defence of the concept of the ‘Scientific Revolution’, Richard Westfall contrasted the correspondence between Newton and Burnet with Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino’s condemnation of the heliocentrism of Galileo Galilei sixty-five years earlier. In the one case, Westfall wrote, the Catholic Church employed Scripture ‘to judge scientific opinion’; in the other, both Burnet and Newton ‘used science to judge the validity of the Scripture’. Burnet, according to Westfall, maintained that the scriptural creation narrative was a ‘fiction’, and Newton argued it accorded ‘with what science... would lead us to expect’. Westfall saw this as evidence of the increasing ‘authority of science over the intellectual life of Europe’, which constituted the ‘whole meaning of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century’.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to broad narratives of secularisation, this part has revealed the complex and contested interaction of natural philosophy and religion during this period, shaped by the culture of controversy. Viewing these debates within their controversial context brings out a diverse picture of cross-pollination, rather than a clear dialectic over the place of natural philosophy in explaining the creation of the Earth.

We have seen how a ‘culture of controversy’ coloured and shaped the course of the debate in a number of ways. Burnet’s work set the agenda, fascinating his contemporaries as much for his compelling rhetoric and literary style as for the provocative – and topical – ideas he put forward. By contrast, Whiston took Newton as his model, carefully crafting his work to avoid the criticisms levelled at Burnet. Appropriation of ideas to different contexts was a

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Westfall, ‘The Scientific Revolution reasserted,’ in *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution*, ed. Margaret Osler (Cambridge: 2000), 41-55, 50.

major feature, most strikingly by Blount and ‘L. P.’, as were the rhetorical aspects of the debate from polite engagement, to scorn and ridicule. In some cases – Croft for Burnet and Edwards for Whiston – silence was considered an appropriate response to immoderate polemic.

By viewing the debates within their controversial context, we have also touched on social and cultural factors that give a more immediate sense of the disputants’ experience. This extended to family background, as we have seen with Edwards and Whiston, and there was a not unfamiliar disjunct between the older generation – men like Croft – and younger thinkers. The educational context – notably the proliferation of the ‘new philosophies’ amidst a ferment of learning – catalysed different approaches, in which Descartes and Newton were prominent; yet thinkers also indulged in ‘rambles betwext *D. Cartes* and *Moses*, the *Rabbies*, the *Septuagint*, the *Platonists*, *Magnetisme*, *striate Particles*, and *praeexistence of Souls*’.<sup>2</sup> We have seen the range of religious positions extending to ‘deists’ like Blount, but centred on divisions within the Church of England. Lay figures within philosophical theology were also conspicuous in drawing on their own professional interests, yet intriguingly they could be more dogmatic about the Bible than the clergy, such as the mathematician Keill, and physician Woodward.

In this chapter, we will consider the legacy of the debates, and how our reading has complemented the existing historiography. The first section looks to aftermath and enduring legacy of the controversies, and how this was shaped by the controversial context. We consider how the culture of controversy mediated ongoing shifts in what was permissible, discreditable and meritorious. Against a backdrop informed by party conflict within the Church, Burnet’s work ultimately featured in his stalled career, while Whiston’s careful

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Burnet, *An answer to the late exceptions made by Mr. Erasmus Warren against The theory of the earth* (London: 1690), 85.

rhetoric largely spared him a similar fate (until his later heterodox activities). We also look at the way the controversy shaped the important developing critique of ‘philosophical romance’. The second section of this narrative assesses how this reading of the debates complements – and adds complexity to – accounts of the ‘World Makers’ within narratives of secularisation and disenchantment. This picture stands in contrast to broad narratives of a drift towards secularisation, as well as arguments that the period can be conceived as a fundamental conflict between discrete orthodox and radical movements.<sup>3</sup>

### I. *‘Philosophick Romances’*

Men of this Humour and Character call such Theories as these, Philosophick Romances... Where there is variety of Parts in a due Contexture, with something of surprizing aptness in the harmony and correspondency of them, this they call a Romance; but such Romances must all Theories of Nature, and of Providence be.  
– Burnet (1685)<sup>4</sup>

The debates considered evidence the contextual presence and power of controversy in the intellectual culture of England in our period, including its social implications. While Burnet was mentioned at one point as a possible candidate for the Primacy, his reputation collapsed amidst the ongoing controversy. Burnet resigned his positions as Chaplain-in-Ordinary to William III and Clerk of the Closet in 1695, and returned to the Charterhouse. Partly, this occurred in the context of increasing concerns about ‘deism’ and the acclaim that Burnet’s work had received from the ‘deists’ cannot have helped. Furthermore, as Scott Mandelbrote has described, shifts in political and ecclesiastical power, and a reaction against

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<sup>3</sup> Introduction, §I.

<sup>4</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, preface [4].

Burnet's patron, Archbishop John Tillotson, were factors in his fall.<sup>5</sup> Tillotson had, according to one contemporary, been 'persecuted by Malice to his Grave'.<sup>6</sup> For High Church figures like Charles Leslie, the hermeneutics of Tillotson placed him effectively with the 'Socinians' and 'deists'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, over subsequent decades, Burnet's association with impiety was epitomised in a popular ballad – 'The Battle Royal' – in which he proclaims the view that 'Gods, sir, there were none', and 'That all the books of Moses / Were nothing but supposes'.<sup>8</sup>

The complex interaction of philosophical content and cultural context in shaping reception is reflected in the comparative trajectory of Whiston's career. The years following the *New theory* (1696) brought success, with Whiston succeeding Newton as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics in 1702, and delivering the prestigious Boyle Lectures for 1707.<sup>9</sup> Keith Thomson has observed that Whiston could have been 'fired' for his views; however, the reality was that his careful presentation, as well as links to figures like Newton, produced a very different result.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, Whiston's heterodox views as to the Trinity earned him increasing notoriety, and he was deprived of his professorship and expelled from the University.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Snobelen has argued convincingly that Whiston's subsequent break with Newton reflected a tension between Newton's esoteric views, and Whiston's open

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<sup>5</sup> Scott Mandelbrote, "Biblical criticism and the crisis of late seventeenth-century England," In *The books of nature and Scripture*, ed. James Force and Richard Popkin, 149-178.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *A discourse of the pastoral care*, 4th ed. (London: 1713), preface [15].

<sup>7</sup> Charles Leslie, *The charge of Socinianism against Dr. Tillotson considered* (Edinburgh: 1695).

<sup>8</sup> William King, *The original works of William King* (London: 1776), I:221-222.

<sup>9</sup> William Whiston, *The accomplishment of Scripture prophecies* (Cambridge: 1708).

<sup>10</sup> Keith Thomson, *Before Darwin: reconciling God and nature* (New Haven, 2005), 158.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Snobelen and Larry Stewart, "Making Newton easy: William Whiston in Cambridge and London," in *From Newton to Hawking: A history of Cambridge University's Lucasian Professors of Mathematics* ed. Kevin Knox and Richard Noakes (Cambridge: 2003), 135-170, 149.

publicity of anti-Trinitarianism.<sup>12</sup> He continued to propound his views through the course of his long life, eventually leaving the Church of England, he became something of a liminal figure – ‘Poor half-mad Whiston’ according to Leslie Stephen.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this, the continuing interest in Burnet and Whiston’s work was reflected in their extensive publication histories.<sup>14</sup> Collectively, their works were recommended reading within the universities during the early decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Gottfried Leibniz developed his own speculations on the origin of the Earth from Burnet’s work in the early 1690s.<sup>16</sup> John Locke followed the controversy, owning a copy of all the principal texts.<sup>17</sup> When William Molyneux asked him for the ‘Opinion of the ingenious’ on Whiston’s work, Locke said it was spoken of with ‘great Commendation’, which he felt it deserved. Writing at a time when his *Essay* (1689) was under attack from Bishop Stillingfleet, Locke found much sympathy with Whiston as one of the ‘builders’ beset by the ‘finders of faults, the confuters and pullers down’.<sup>18</sup>

Far from being an abstruse academic confrontation, the debates made an impression on broader literary culture. Burnet’s praise of modern learning, alongside Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686), sparked Sir William Temple’s

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Snobelen, “William Whiston, Isaac Newton and the crisis of publicity,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 35(3) (2004), 573-603.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century* (London: 1881), 129.

<sup>14</sup> There were seven editions of Burnet’s *Theory* by 1759, four of Woodward’s *Essay* by 1726, and six of Whiston’s *New theory* by 1755.

<sup>15</sup> William Poole, *The world makers: Scientists of the Restoration and the search for the origins of the earth* (Oxford: 2017), 72-73.

<sup>16</sup> Gottfried Leibniz, *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnizens Protogaea Oder Abhandlung Von der ersten Gestalt der Erde und den Spuren der Historie in den Denksmaalen der Natur* (Leipzig: 1749).

<sup>17</sup> Peter Anstey, “Locke and Cartesian cosmology,” *Locke and Cartesian philosophy* ed. Philippe Hamou and Martine Pécharman (Oxford: 2018), 33-48, 45.

<sup>18</sup> John Locke to William Molyneux, 22 February 1697, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2202], 6.

reflections on this subject, prompting the ‘Battle of the Books’.<sup>19</sup> Other responses were more critical. Alexander Pope and John Arbuthnot satirised Burnet and others as ‘Martinus Scriblerus’, who has discovered the ‘Mechanical Explication of the Formation of the Universe, according to the Epicurean Hypothesis’.<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Swift depicted the ‘World Makers’ and their system-building in the figure of an enraged ‘disputant’ spider who has constructed a cobweb mansion, only to have it torn to pieces.<sup>21</sup> As such, in their wider cultural reception, the ‘World Makers’ emerged as figures of hubris, and academic excess. One of the most powerful responses to the controversy, and one that would gain traction as the century advanced, was a developing critique of ‘romance’ in natural philosophy: one that gave a particular characterisation to Newton’s thought, and contrasted this quite explicitly with that of Descartes. This sense of Descartes as a fanciful system-builder was present in some early responses to his work; however, it would take new force in the late seventeenth century.<sup>22</sup> Through Keill’s criticisms, Burnet, in particular, came to represent what was wrong with the Cartesian tradition. For Keill, Burnet’s *Theory* was not ‘true Philosophy’, though ‘They who read it as an Ingenious Romance will still be pleased with their Entertainment.’<sup>23</sup> Keill put forth similar sentiments in his *Introduction to Natural Philosophy*.<sup>24</sup> As a textbook, this would be an influential presence through the eighteenth

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<sup>19</sup> William Temple, *Miscellanea. The second part in four essays* (London: 1690), 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Pope, *Memoirs of the extraordinary life, and works, and discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus* (Dublin: 1741).

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Swift, *A tale of a tub, written for the universal improvement of mankind: To which is added, An account of a battel between the antient and modern books in St. James’s library* (London: 1704), 242-248. Gregory Lynall, *Swift and science: The satire, politics, and theology of natural knowledge, 1690–1730* (Basingstoke: 2012), Chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Part I, Chapter 1, §III.

<sup>23</sup> John Keill, *An examination of Dr. Burnet’s Theory of the earth, together with some remarks on Mr. Whiston’s New theory of the earth* (Oxford: 1698), 176.

<sup>24</sup> John Keill, *Introductio ad veram physicam seu lectiones physicae* (Oxford: 1702). This was translated as: *An Introduction to Natural Philosophy: or philosophical lectures read in the University of Oxford, Anno Dom. 1700*. (London: 1720), 10.

century.<sup>25</sup> A similar sentiment was reflected in Roger Cotes' Preface to the second edition (1713) of the *Principia*, which provided one of the defining statements of Newton's thought. With reference to Descartes and his followers, Cotes warned that 'those who fetch from hypotheses the foundation on which they build their speculations, may form indeed an ingenious romance, but a romance it will still be.'<sup>26</sup>

Thus in one sense the legacy of the controversy can be characterised as a chilling – or at least cautionary – effect on subsequent discourse. Certainly, the controversies marked a high point of interest in cosmographical writing, and subsequent works were less central to English intellectual culture.<sup>27</sup> Yet despite the ongoing criticism of the 'World Makers' for mixing theology and philosophy and engaging in 'philosophical romance', they continued to provide a starting point for later cosmogonies across the continent.<sup>28</sup> As the eighteenth century progressed, the criticism of philosophical romance became part of a standard account of the 'World Makers', with developments in the earth sciences serving to further highlight their shortcomings. After reviewing the theories of Descartes, Burnet and Whiston, the editors of the *Universal History* (1744) endorsed Moses' account as the 'only authentic and genuine history of the creation'.<sup>29</sup> The Comte de Buffon praised the ambition of Burnet and Whiston, but thought their work demonstrated the danger of blending natural philosophy with

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Schofield, *Mechanism and materialism: British natural philosophy in an age of reason* (Princeton: 1969), 27.

<sup>26</sup> Newton, *Principia*, Mr Cotes' preface [2].

<sup>27</sup> Two examples are: Edmund Dickinson, *Physica vetus et vera* (Rotterdam: 1703). [John Hutchinson], *Moses's principia. Of the invisible parts of matter; of motion: of visible forms; and of their dissolution, and reformation* (London: 1724).

<sup>28</sup> For instance: Georges-Louis Le Clerc, *The Epochs of Nature*, trans. Jan Zalasiewicz, Anne-Sophie Milon, and Mateusz Zalasiewicz (Chicago and London 2012), 26. Immanuel Kant, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseyns Gottes* (Königsberg: 1763), 111. Immanuel Kant, *Essays and treatises on moral, political, and various philosophical subjects* (London: 1799), II:279.

<sup>29</sup> George Sale et al (eds), *An universal history, from the earliest account of time to the present* (Dublin: 1744), 1:73-85.

theology.<sup>30</sup> For the astronomer Roger Long, the ‘World Makers’ offered ingenious theories, but held ‘low and mean notions of the Divine Omnipotence’.<sup>31</sup> As such, the ‘World Makers’ were increasingly grouped together as part of a cautionary tale about intermingling philosophy and religion.

The controversial reception of the ‘World Makers’ work can thus be seen as redefining the boundaries of what could be considered a legitimate philosophical activity. Burnet’s extravagant and bold interdisciplinary exercise became a cautionary tale of the perils of excess in philosophical theological projects. In turn, this coloured emerging expectations about how ‘orthodox’ Newtonian natural philosophy should be presented. In contributing to the growing opposition of Newtonian philosophy to Cartesian, the ‘World Makers’ controversy helped to define the legacy of Newton’s work and the developing critique of ‘romantic’ philosophy, something that echoes in our own demands of scientific rigour. The controversy also demonstrates the force of the rhetorical and eristic dimensions of debate: as noted above, the reception of Burnet can be contrasted with that of the more cautious Whiston, while the powerful rhetoric of Keill, with its appeal to sober rationality, can be seen to cast a long shadow.

## ***II. Biblical authority, science and the Enlightenment***

‘The world is extremely malicious, as well as inconstant’, observed William Nicolson – a divine and antiquary who became the Bishop of Carlisle in 1702 – ‘so that neither the Empires of Monarchs nor Philosophers can last for ever’.<sup>32</sup> Commenting on the controversy

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<sup>30</sup> Georges-Louis Le Clerc, *Buffon’s Natural history containing a theory of the earth, a general history of man, of the brute creation, and of vegetables, minerals, & c* (London: 1797), 128-129, 153-154.

<sup>31</sup> Roger Long, *Astronomy* (London: 1742-64), vol. 2: 594.

<sup>32</sup> William Nicolson to Edward Lhuyd, 31 January 1698 in William Nicolson, *Letters on various subjects* (London, 1809), 1:104.

over what he mordantly termed ‘Dr. Burnet’s roasted egg, Dr. Woodward’s hasty pudding, or Mr. Whiston’s snuff of a comet’, Nicolson could not foresee which of them ‘would ‘carry the day’. The Earth had been ‘pretty quiet till Copernicus gave it a whirl’, with his theories succeeded by those of Tycho Brahe, the vortices of Descartes and Newton’s physics.<sup>33</sup> His interest, tempered with a measured scepticism for the ‘refiners upon the Creation and the Deluge’ affords an interesting contemporary perspective of the controversy, and the vicissitudes of philosophical theology, that stands at odds with any simplistic account of ‘Scientific Revolution’.

The view that the Scripture creation narrative was ‘fiction’ (ascribed to him by Westfall) does not adequately express the nuances of Burnet’s position, nor does James Force’s characterisation that Burnet was effectively a ‘deist’.<sup>34</sup> Burnet used emerging natural philosophical knowledge to elucidate elements of Scripture that he considered had been hitherto obscure. This does not mean he saw natural philosophy as eclipsing religion. The *Theory* was written, as Burnet emphasised, with a ‘sincere intention to justify the Doctrines of the *Universal Deluge*, and of a *Paradisiacal* state’.<sup>35</sup> While his proposals represented a drastic re-imagining of central Christian claims, they remained fundamentally within that context. Indeed, in departing from accepted wisdom, Burnet was consciously responding to the risk of irreligion arising from the perceived inconsistency of the Christian Scripture with ‘Science and Philosophick truth’, something that ‘breeds and nourishes Atheism.’<sup>36</sup> Burnet’s construal of Moses’ account as ‘Ideal or Moral’, as he wrote to Newton, may have been seen by many of his contemporaries as undermining religion; however, it proceeded from his

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 103-104.

<sup>34</sup> James Force, “The Newtonians and deism,” in *Essays on the context, nature, and influence of Isaac Newton’s theology*, ed. James Force and Richard Popkin (Dordrecht: 1990), 43-73, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Burnet, *Theory-I*, preface [3].

<sup>36</sup> Burnet, *An Answer*, 19.

insistence on the mutual importance and interdependence of the ‘books’ of Scripture and nature. For Burnet, ‘Truth cannot be an Enemy to Truth, God is not divided against himself’.<sup>37</sup> From Burnet’s perspective there was a teleological plan unfolding, but one shaped by providence. Burnet cited the existence of the Antipodes as one instance where Christianity had assimilated new knowledge about the world.<sup>38</sup> In similar terms, Burnet saw his *Theory* as a providential discovery, at a time when the culmination of the six thousand years of world history was imminent, observing ‘only when the second World is drawing to an end, we begin to discover that there was a first’.<sup>39</sup>

The integration of the ‘World Makers’ into narratives of secularisation is also complicated by a close consideration of the specific controversial responses they provoked. Redwood wrote Burnet’s work was ‘guaranteed to upset clerics and conservatives alike’.<sup>40</sup> Keith Thomson stated that Burnet ‘offended the deists with his science and the scientists with his religion’, yet interpreting the debate in these broad categories does not do justice to the complexities of the debates or the individuality of the thinkers involved.<sup>41</sup> Certainly, some warnings were dire: Warren charged that Burnet ‘has assaulted Religion, and that in the very foundation of it.’<sup>42</sup> Yet these contemporary criticisms must be considered within their polemical context – if some like Herbert Croft, John Edwards and John Keill advocated biblical literalism, clergymen like Nicholls and Warren offered their own alternatives. Clearly, there was considerable room for debate about philosophy as well as religion, including its appropriate sources, methodologies, premises, and most salient results. A major impact of Burnet’s

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<sup>37</sup> Burnet, *Theory–I*, preface [3].

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, preface [2].

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

<sup>40</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> Keith Thomson, *Before Darwin*, 152-153.

<sup>42</sup> Erasmus Warren, *Geologia, or, a discourse concerning the earth before the deluge wherein the form and properties ascribed to it, in a book intituled The theory of the earth, are excepted against* (London: 1690).

*Theory* was in inspiring the contributions of Woodward and Whiston (amongst others), but these works are far from a homogeneous whole. Similarly, it was possible for Keill, as a Newtonian mathematician, to rigorously repudiate the flaws in Burnet's physics - yet this was in support of his argument that only God's extraordinary intervention could account for creation and the deluge. We have also seen in the dispute between Keill and Whiston that there was nothing clear, homogeneous and inevitable in the use of Newtonian physics in this context – rather, the debate constituted, in part, a disagreement between 'Newtonians' as to the implications of his work.

This dynamic engagement with Scripture and natural philosophy was reflected more broadly in the intellectual culture. Robert Hooke speculated that the parting of the Red Sea by Moses was caused through a providential gust of wind.<sup>43</sup> Nehemiah Grew suggested that 'a kind of Meteor' led the Jews to the Holy Land.<sup>44</sup> Recent historiography has underscored the complexities of the nature and perception of heterodoxy in this context. Edmond Halley has been depicted as a heterodox figure, who pursued scientific consistency at the expense of religion. However, Dmitri Levitin places his theological idiosyncrasies in the context of the pertinent distinction between different opinions about the eternity of the world and the supra-biblical age of the world, observing that Halley was still attached to a biblical framework.<sup>45</sup>

It is also important to recognise that the endeavours of Burnet, Whiston and others, while bold and creative for their time, were not completely new. The Christian faith had long sustained existing tensions from the synthesis achieved by early Christianity between the God

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Hooke, *The posthumous works of Robert Hooke* (London: 1705), 423.

<sup>44</sup> Nehemiah Grew, *Cosmologia sacra: or a discourse of the universe as it is the creature and kingdom of God*. [...] (London: 1701), 200.

<sup>45</sup> Edmond Halley, "Some considerations about the cause of the universal deluge, laid before the Royal Society, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1694," *Philosophical Transactions*, 33 (1724-1725), 118-123. Simon Schaffer, "Halley's atheism and the end of the world," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 32(1) (1977): 17-40. Dmitri Levitin, "Edmund Halley and the eternity of the world revisited," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 67 (2013): 315-329.

of Abraham and the ordered and harmonious universe of the Greek philosophers. Burnet and his interlocutors would thus have seen themselves as refreshing a debate which had endured for centuries and taking part in God's providential plan, rather than embarking on a course that would undermine the foundations of Christian orthodoxy.

**PART II**  
**BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON**

## CHAPTER 5

### INTELLECTUAL SETTING

I think we may come to lay down the measures and *boundaries between Faith and Reason*; the want whereof, may possibly have been the cause, if not of great Disorders, yet at least of great Disputes, and perhaps Mistakes in the World.  
– Locke (1689)<sup>1</sup>

As Locke’s observation suggests, the relationship between ‘*Faith and Reason*’ was a contentious matter in late seventeenth-century Europe. This Part centres on two ‘great Disputes’ in this domain. The first – the controversy over John Toland’s *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) – concerned the place of ‘reason’ and ‘mystery’ in religion. Toland’s work allied itself closely with Locke’s theory of knowledge, and both Locke and Toland were addressed together in criticisms levelled at the work by the Bishop of Worcester, Edward Stillingfleet. This prompted the second debate we consider – the ensuing correspondence between Locke and Stillingfleet, which ranged widely over the demarcation between reason and faith, the nature of the soul, and the limits of what can be known.

Given our commonplace conceptions of this era as the ‘Age of Reason’ or the Enlightenment, it is tempting to see the discussions in terms of a polarity between religious and secular ways of understanding the world. Toland has been seen as the progenitor of English ‘deism’, and Locke as a foundational figure of the Enlightenment, and an expositor of empiricism. In this context, little attention is paid to their opponents, or the specific controversial context in which their ideas were received, interpreted and defended. Viewing these debates in the context of the culture of controversy, we see a picture that is far more complex than broad

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<sup>1</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV, XVIII, §1.

tropes about the period imply. The thinkers involved – and the positions they adopt – do not fall neatly into categories such as Israel’s characterisation of a ‘Radical Enlightenment’. As Locke’s quotation suggests, these disputes emerged in the context of longstanding discussions on many of these topics, covering a range of issues at the intersection of theology and philosophy, besides forming flashpoints for broader concerns regarding often ambiguous fears over ‘deism’, ‘Socinianism’ and ‘scepticism’. This chapter provides a brief contextual account of the philosophical and theological issues and controversies involved. First, the chapter considers ongoing tensions between the quest for knowledge and doubt. Second, it considers the prominence of ‘reason’ *circa* 1700, and different views on its limitations as a tool for attaining knowledge. Third, it draws together these themes with a brief consideration of Locke’s theory of knowledge.

### ***I. Knowledge and doubt***

I was very much disturbed at those perpetual Disputes of *Philosophers*, upon all Subjects; and in Expectation of the great Advantages of *Philosophy*, which were so much boasted of, Knowledge of *Truth*, and Tranquillity of Mind: I was much surprized to find my self plunged in the thick Darkness of invincible Ignorance, and Debates of which I could see no End.

– Pierre-Daniel Huet (1723)<sup>2</sup>

Written in the 1690s and published posthumously to considerable scandal – he was after all a Roman Catholic bishop – Huet’s views provided an eloquent statement of philosophical doubt amidst the diverse range of competing claims to knowledge *circa* 1700. Dissatisfied in turn with the Aristotelian tradition, the ‘new philosophies’ of Descartes and Gassendi, and

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Daniel Huet, *An essay Concerning the weakness of the human understanding*, trans. E. Combe (London: 1723), xl.

with Plato, Huet embraced a form of scepticism about knowledge, while remaining committed to Christian faith. His thoughts point to the ongoing and fertile engagement with sceptical doubt across the early modern period, something which was an important theme in our debates.

Scepticism had its origins in two schools of Hellenistic philosophy. For the Academics, certainty was unattainable, and thus all knowledge was merely probable. In contrast, the Pyrrhonians argued that we have no good reason to think some statements more probable than others, they are all 'equipollent'. Hence, the Academic sceptic sought to approximate the truth by approaching questions from all sides (what the humanists called argument *in utramque partem*) while the Pyrrhonian sceptic suspended judgment entirely. While scepticism faded as an intellectual force in antiquity, it revived with Reformation debates on the 'Rule of Faith', received a captivating expression in Michel de Montaigne's 'Que sçais-je?', and thereafter was a major presence in the new philosophies.<sup>3</sup> In the controversy between Stillingfleet and Locke, scepticism would be significant, first, because it could be employed polemically to describe destructive forms of unbelief; and second, because of its widespread influence, including on both these men. Appositely, Pierre Bayle would write that all contemporary philosophers were sceptics to some extent.<sup>4</sup>

Of all early modern responses to doubt, the most famous is Descartes' attempt to 'raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations'.<sup>5</sup> This quest for knowledge in the face of hyperbolic doubt resulted in the 'cogito ergo sum' of the

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<sup>3</sup> The leading discussion of early modern scepticism is: Richard Popkin's *History of scepticism*. See also: Luciano Floridi, "The rediscovery and posthumous influence of scepticism," in *The Cambridge companion to ancient scepticism* ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: 2010), 267-287.

<sup>4</sup> In 'Pyrrhon' [B], Bayle wrote : 'Ainsi tous ces Philosophes sont à cet regard Académiciens et Pyrrhoniens.' Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, III :2430.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 9 ; Descartes, *Œuvres*, VII :17.

*Meditations* (1641). Rejecting the senses as unreliable, Descartes appealed to pure intellection, focusing on ideas that are ‘Clear’ (*clara*) and ‘Distinct’ (*distincta*).<sup>6</sup> As discussed in Part I of this thesis, Descartes’ views were seldom accepted uncritically or unselectively in England. Moreover, it is important to note, as Michael Ayers has emphasised, Descartes’ philosophy did not mark a discontinuity with the past, but was itself shaped by discussions of epistemology in such sources as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Augustine.<sup>7</sup> That said, his terminology and language shaped philosophical discussion, even among thinkers who could hardly be labelled Cartesian, hence for instance, the repeated references to ‘clear and distinct’ perception in Stillingfleet’s *Origines Sacrae* (1662).

The approach among many thinkers has been described as ‘constructive’ or ‘mitigated’ scepticism.<sup>8</sup> The label has limitations – many were appalled at ‘scepticism’, even if they made use of its methods, and furthermore the label suggests an overly homogeneous approach – yet it highlights some of the efforts to engage with knowledge, with an acceptance of uncertainty. Two important early figures were Marin Mersenne and Pierre Gassendi, who were among the ‘learned men’ who contributed objections to the *Meditations* (1641), and who, in different ways, sought to defend our capacity to establish knowledge despite an awareness of its fallibility. Both figures exerted significant influence – such as Gassendi on Locke – but this has been obscured by the judgement of later generations that their voluminous dense productions are virtually unreadable.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, broadly

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<sup>6</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 35 ; Descartes, *Œuvres*, VII :62. The idea was further set out in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644): René Descartes, *The philosophical writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: 1985), I:177-292,207; Descartes, *Œuvres*, VIII:21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Ayers, “Theories of knowledge and belief,” in *The Cambridge history of seventeenth century philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: 1998), II:1003-1061

<sup>8</sup> The expression originated in: David Hume, *Philosophical essays concerning human understanding* (London: 1748), 250-251. The term has been applied in leading works such as: Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, Chapter 7.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Kroll, “The Question of Locke’s Relation to Gassendi,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45(3) (1984), 339-359.

comparable views were expressed by leading figures within the Royal Society during the second half of the seventeenth century, including Robert Boyle, John Wilkins, and Joseph Glanvill.

John Wilkins self-consciously eschewed both ‘Scepticism’ and ‘Dogmatism’ in his treatment of knowledge. While ‘*absolute* infallibility’ was a matter for God; ‘certainty’ was possible. This comprehended ‘*Mathematical and Physical Certainty*’, which was limited only by the natural fallibility of human faculties, and ‘*Moral Certainty*’, which Wilkins called ‘indubitable’ as it would ‘not admit of any reasonable cause of doubting’, and might be established from the evidence of testimony or experience.<sup>10</sup> Stillingfleet’s approach was broadly similar. He emphasised the ‘uncertainty of natural knowledge’, and deficiency of historical records. However, writing of the ‘Certainty of the Writings of Moses’, he emphasised that some questions were not suitable for ‘*Mathematical demonstration*’, but with appropriate evidence we can come to a ‘*moral certainty*’, which will be sufficient for anyone who is not pursuing doubt to the point of madness.<sup>11</sup>

Controversies on knowledge were shaped by philosophical and confessional positions, such as that between Joseph Glanvill and Thomas White in the 1660s and 1670s. Glanvill emphasised the uncertainty of knowledge, attacking the ‘dogmatism’ associated with traditional Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>12</sup> White, a Roman Catholic priest and philosopher, often known by his alias ‘Blackloe’, accused Glanvill (and Gassendi) of reviving scepticism – a ‘Monster snatcht from the Teeth of Worms and Insects’ – and aimed to apply ‘publick Cauterization... to that Tumour’. White’s work was not quite a panegyric to Aristotle – he

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<sup>10</sup> John Wilkins, *Of the principles and duties of natural religion* (London: 1675), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *The vanity of dogmatizing, or, confidence in opinions manifested in a discourse of the shortness and uncertainty of our knowledge, and its causes* (London: 1661).

advised his readers to ‘neither disclaim and detest Aristotle, nor superstitiously adore and embrace him’ – yet he saw value in the traditional structure of learning that Aristotle’s works afforded.<sup>13</sup> Glanvill repudiated the ‘Fanatick’ excesses of Pyrrho.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Glanvill was content to be associated with scepticism, in the sense that ‘Sceptick’ is applied to those who ‘dare dissent from the Aristotelian Doctrines’, and the ‘*Free Philosophers*’ who ‘seek Truth in the Great Book of Nature’ rather than ‘the Writings and Opinions of Philosophers’.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to taking on the tropes of the ancient sceptics, debates on knowledge were often coloured by theological considerations. Peter Harrison has argued that early modern discussion of truth and error, knowledge and doubt, were intimately shaped by views of the Fall of Man.<sup>16</sup> Glanvill, for instance, framed his views on the uncertainty of knowledge in the context of the Fall.<sup>17</sup> In casting these developments in anthropological rather than epistemological terms, Harrison provides a striking perspective, complicating the historiographical emphasis on ‘reason’. Yet it would be hazardous to emphasise this for every thinker, particularly those more receptive to metaphysical traditions coming from France.

Similarly, different emphases on God’s omnipotence or wisdom (‘voluntarism’ or ‘intellectualism’) informed these discussions. Robert Boyle was one thinker whose voluntarist theology shaped his specific views about knowledge and doubt. Boyle saw God’s omnipotence as defining the contingent nature of creation, writing ‘the laws of nature, as they

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas White, *An exclusion of scepticks from all title to dispute* (London, 1665), preface [4].

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Essays on several important subjects in philosophy and religion* (London: 1676), Essay 2, 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Harrison, *The fall of man and the foundations of science* (Cambridge: 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Glanvill, *Vanity*, Chapter II.

were at first arbitrarily instituted by God, so, in reference to him, they are but arbitrary still.’<sup>18</sup> As we shall see in the following section, for Boyle, doubt is therefore a constant qualification to any knowledge we might gain about the natural world. In contrast, clergyman George Rust wrote there was ‘no Heresie more deserving an *Anathema*’ than the view that held the ‘Reasons of things to be contingent and Arbitrarious’.<sup>19</sup> In that regard, Rust argued ‘the Christian Religion is such as contains in it nothing contrary to Right Reason’.<sup>20</sup>

## II. Reason and mystery in religion

As the positions of Boyle and Rust imply, long-standing efforts to negotiate the place of ‘reason’ and its limits provided another important context for our debates. As the sobriquet ‘Age of Reason’ implies, historians have emphasised the cultural ascendance and even ‘sovereignty’ of reason in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> According to John Redwood, ‘Reason was the method and nature the high court of appeal for all eighteenth-century arguments’.<sup>22</sup> Rhetorically, there is some truth to this: one conspicuous feature was the widespread appeal to ‘reason’ as a justification for belief, whether by the ‘free-thinking’ Anthony Collins,<sup>23</sup> prominent churchmen such as Richard Bentley,<sup>24</sup> or even

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Boyle, “An appendix to The Christian virtuoso”, in Robert Boyle, *The works of the honourable Robert Boyle*. Volume VI, 673-716, 714.

<sup>19</sup> George Rust, *A discourse of the use of reason in matters of religion shewing that Christianity contains nothing Repugnant to right reason, against enthusiasts and deists*, trans. Henry Hallywell (London: 1683), Rust associated this with the views of Calvinist theologian Johannes Szydlovius (Jan Szydowski). Szydlovius was also discussed in: Ralph Cudworth, *A treatise concerning eternal and immutable morality*, ed. Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: 1996), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Rust, *Discourse*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Beiser, *The sovereignty of reason: the defense of rationality in the early English Enlightenment*. (Princeton: 1996), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Collins, *Free thinking*, 5

<sup>24</sup> Bentley, *Boyle Lectures*, Sermon I, 2

High Church polemicists such as Charles Leslie.<sup>25</sup> This was visibly the case both for religious and philosophical views. Peter Harrison has emphasised the distinctive trend of endeavouring to resolve competing religious claims through an ‘impartial view’, ‘comparison’, ‘evidences’, ‘grounds and reasons’, something that reveals the commitment, at least in principle, of thinkers to debate on these terms.<sup>26</sup> However, the role of reason *circa* 1700 was more complicated and contested than Redwood implies, ranging from figures associated with ‘deism’ and/or ‘Socinianism’, through to those who saw reason as inherently fallible and always subordinate to Revelation.<sup>27</sup>

While we might intuitively assume a dichotomy between reason as the province of philosophy, and faith as that of religion, this was not a clear or uncontested matter.<sup>28</sup> Many leading figures within the Church of England placed significant stress on Christianity as a ‘reasonable’ religion, and this has been seen as one of the defining features of ‘latitudinarianism’.<sup>29</sup> A major impetus behind this was the need to articulate an alternative to the Roman Catholic rule of faith. William Chillingworth advocated a form of Protestantism consistent with natural reason, as against appeals to the authority of apostolic tradition. For him, there were aspects of Christianity ‘above reason’, an idea that has a long tradition.<sup>30</sup> However, Catholic doctrines such as transubstantiation were simply ‘against it’.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> William Kolbrenner, “The charge of Socinianism: Charles Leslie's High Church defense of “True religion”,” *Journal of The Historical Society* 3 (2003): 1-23.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Harrison, “Science and secularization,” *Intellectual History Review* 27:1 (2017): 47-70, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Baker, *Reflections upon learning wherein is shewn the insufficiency thereof, in its several particulars, in order to evince the usefulness and necessity of revelation* (London: 1700), 230.

<sup>28</sup> Stillingfleet and Locke themselves make for interesting examples. Stillingfleet wrote that there is ‘not then any such *contrariety* between the *foundation* of *faith* and *knowledge*, as the *Schoolmen* have perswaded the *world*’: *Origines sacrae*, 232. Locke wrote that ‘use of the word *Reason*, wherein it is *opposed to Faith*’ is ‘in it self a very improper way of speaking’, but it was ‘common Use’: *Essay*, IV, XVI, ‘§24.

<sup>29</sup> John Spurr, “‘Latitudinarianism’ and the Restoration Church,” *The Historical Journal*, 31(1) (1988): 61-82.

<sup>30</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, for instance, wrote of faith transcending reason: Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q1, V.

<sup>31</sup> Chillingworth, *Religion of Protestants*, 377. A leading discussion of Chillingworth is: Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘The Great Tew Circle’, in Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans: seventeenth century essays*, rev. ed. (Chicago: 1988), 166-230.

Stillingfleet's own earlier work continued and reflected these traditions. He continued the polemical campaign against Catholics like John Sergeant, and offered a vision of Christianity that purported to be consistent with reason – as the long title makes clear, his *Origines Sacrae* (1662) offered 'A rational account of the grounds of Christian faith'.

As the distinction between things 'above', and things 'against' or 'contrary' to reason suggests, most thinkers eschewed an absolute emphasis on 'reason' or 'faith'. Indeed, the historiographical emphasis on rational religion may be said, with justice, to have obscured other aspects of English thought in this period. As Gerard Reedy reminds us, for many of these figures 'the hard core of revelation, that which revelation specifically reveals' remained inviolable.<sup>32</sup> Robert Boyle, who is relevant not only as a leading natural philosopher and secular theologian, but as someone with links to both Stillingfleet (who had been his confessor) and Locke (who had assisted with his experiments), espoused a conditional view of reason.<sup>33</sup> Jan Wojcik has presented a portrait of Boyle's thought not so much as an exemplar of a 'rational religion and rational science', but as conditioned by his theological emphasis on the provisional character of God's creation.<sup>34</sup> Boyle expressed his concern about various forms of unbelief, and stated that he had asked of reason, like Joshua at Jericho, 'Art thou for us, or for our Adversaries?'.<sup>35</sup> Boyle emphatically saw Christianity as a reasonable religion, and insisted on its consonance with natural philosophy. Yet a constant theme is the imperfect and fallible character of natural knowledge, the 'limitedness and

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<sup>32</sup> Gerard Reedy, *The Bible and reason: Anglicans and Scripture in late seventeenth-century England* (Philadelphia: 1985), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Regarding Stillingfleet as Boyle's confessor, see: Michael Hunter, "Casuistry in action: Robert Boyle's confessional interviews with Gilbert Burnet and Edward Stillingfleet, 1691," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44(1) (1993): 80–98. Michael Hunter, *Robert Boyle 1627-1691 scrupulosity and Science* (Woodbridge: 2000), 80-81.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Wojcik, *Robert Boyle and the limits of reason* (Cambridge: 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Joshua 5.14. Robert Boyle, *Some considerations about the reconcileableness of reason and religion* (London: 1675), vii.

weakness of our humane Intellects'.<sup>36</sup> Such views reflected an awareness of the imperfection of 'reason' as the means of human enquiry, which (like its product, human knowledge) could be coloured by such things as scepticism, stress on the Fall, or theological voluntarism.

From this viewpoint, figures like Boyle frequently expressed concern about those who afforded too high a place to, or too uncritical a regard for, reason. In the decades around 1700, many of reason's strongest advocates were found among the figures typically grouped together as the English 'deists'. Charles Blount, for instance, called reason the 'sovereign Rule and Touchstone' of the mind.<sup>37</sup> However, this idea is perhaps set out most clearly by the opponents of deism: Matthias Earbery linked it with the view that 'Your *Reason* ought to be your Only Religion'.<sup>38</sup> Whether, and to what extent, 'deism' was a challenge to Christianity, or driven by a reforming impulse from within it, is a matter of debate; likewise, whether it was principally an English phenomenon, or of continental provenance.<sup>39</sup>

While 'deism' is afforded significant attention for its perceived place in the emergence of secular modernity, there was another important context in which, for many, an emphasis on reason could be taken too far: that of 'Socinianism'. 'Socinianism' takes its name from the Protestant theologian Fausto Sozzini ('Socinus') (1539-1604) who emphasised reason over tradition and dogma, and saw Christ as a human figure (rejecting the Trinity). However, the term was used promiscuously in polemical writing. Victor Nuovo and Hugh Trevor-Roper have noted that 'Socinian' could refer specifically to a follower of Socinus; broadly to someone who privileged reason over dogma in interpreting Scripture (allegedly a Socinian

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<sup>36</sup> Boyle, *Reason and religion*, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Blount, *Oracles*, preface [3].

<sup>38</sup> Matthias Earbery, *Deism examin'd and confuted, in an answer to a book intituled, Tractatus theologico politicus* (London: 1697), 12.

<sup>39</sup> Israel, for instance, reacts against a conventional view of deism as a 'home grown' and 'insular' phenomenon: Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 601-602.

agenda); or even more generally as a pejorative term for theological liberalism.<sup>40</sup> It had, for instance, been applied to William Chillingworth and John Tillotson. As Chapter 6 will show, concerns about ‘Socinianism’ were central in discussions surrounding the most famous of the ‘deists’, John Toland, qualifying the perception of him as a modernising figure.

The Trinitarian Controversy, Socinian Controversy or Unitarian Controversy, as it is variously known, saw the re-emergence of the debate on the relationship between God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. The triune nature of God (or ‘Trinity’) was conventionally considered to be a ‘mystery’ of Christianity, and the notion of ‘mysteries’ itself thus became vigorously contested. This was an exegetical and theological debate, but one that enlivened philosophical issues. While its content may strike many moderns as obscure, the cultural moment of the debate may be appreciated – as Brent Sirota has observed – by noting that it entangled five bishops and involved two condemnations from Oxford University, a royal directive from William III and a statutory response.<sup>41</sup>

‘Unitarianism’, which took on prominence with Stephen Nye’s work, was often used as a homonym, although its proponents, like Nye, frequently sought to distinguish themselves from the theology of ‘Socinianism’. Unitarianism, the view that God is one, sought to offer ‘an accountable and a reasonable Faith’. In contrast, Nye considered the Trinitarian view of the triune nature of God to be ‘absurd, and contrary both to Reason and *to it self*, and therefore not only false, but *impossible*’. There was, he wrote caustically, ‘*an Error in counting or numbring*’.<sup>42</sup> Against Stillingfleet, who appealed to the idea of ‘mystery’ to defend the doctrine, Nye wrote that ‘we have a *clear and distinct Perception*, that they are not

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<sup>40</sup> Victor Nuovo, “Locke’s theology,” *English philosophy in the age of Locke*, edited by M. A. Stewart (Oxford: 2000), 183-215, 211. Trevor-Roper, “The Great Tew Circle”, 166-230, 188-189.

<sup>41</sup> Brent Sirota, *The Christian monitors: The Church of England and the age of benevolence, 1680-1730* (New Haven and London: 2014), 27.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Nye, *A brief history of the Unitarians, called also Socinians* (1687), 25-26.

*Mysteries, but Contradictions, Impossibilities, and pure Non-sense.*<sup>43</sup> Provoking a multitude of different responses, the debate was characterised not only by heterodox interpretations of the Trinity, but by division among the defenders of orthodoxy, who were themselves at odds as to the basis and justification for the doctrine.<sup>44</sup>

The Trinitarian debates were an important context for the controversies involving Stillingfleet, Toland and Locke – as well as much of the radical thought of the eighteenth century. As noted above, Stillingfleet was a major figure in the Trinitarian debates. Locke had already been charged with ‘Socinianism’ by John Edwards, who took issue with his *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695).<sup>45</sup> Locke maintained a certain reticence about his views, and much is written as to the extent to which he subscribed to ‘Unitarian’ or ‘Socinian’ theology.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the accusation most often made about John Toland was that he was a ‘Socinian’ rather than a ‘deist’.<sup>47</sup> All this might underscore the complex inheritance of different historical influences and their presence in a polemical context.

### **III. Locke’s Essay, knowledge and belief**

While Locke and his great work – the *Essay* – require little introduction, given their prominence through to the present day, it is useful to recall how they responded to the themes

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in: Edward Stillingfleet, *A discourse in vindication of the doctrine of the Trinity* [...] (London: 1697), ii.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Dixon, *Nice and hot disputes: the doctrine of the Trinity in the seventeenth century* (Suffolk: 2003), 209.

<sup>45</sup> John Locke, *The reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures* (London: 1695). John Edwards, *Some thoughts concerning the several causes and occasions of atheism* [...] and on a late Book entitled “*The reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures*” (London: 1695).

<sup>46</sup> John Marshall, ‘Locke, Socinianism, “Socinianism”, and Unitarianism’, in *English philosophy in the age of Locke*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: 2000), 111-182.

<sup>47</sup> Sullivan, *John Toland*, 109.

introduced above. At the time he took up his pen against Stillingfleet, Locke was in his sixties, and had been living for some years in the household of Sir Francis Masham, and Lady Damaris Masham, his friend and philosophical discussant. Born to a Puritan family in 1632 in Wrington, Somerset, Locke was educated first at the Westminster School, and then at Christ Church Oxford. According to his friend, Jean Le Clerc, Locke found ‘little Satisfaction’ in the ‘Peripatetick’ curriculum, but was stimulated by reading the philosophy of Descartes.<sup>48</sup> From his time at Oxford, Locke studied medicine and chemistry, and associated with prominent physicians and natural philosophers, including Boyle, Thomas Willis, Richard Lower, and Thomas Sydenham.<sup>49</sup> Locke met Anthony Ashley Cooper (later the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury) in 1666, became his personal physician, and through him, was involved in Whig politics. Locke began the *Essay* in 1671, and worked on it intermittently for almost twenty years. It was published on his return from self-imposed exile in the Dutch Republic (following his alleged involvement in the Rye House Plot against Charles II). Locke’s thoughts on human understanding were prompted initially by a conversation on morality and revealed religion.<sup>50</sup> It would be difficult indeed to provide an adequate precis of the many facets of Locke’s *Essay* (1689), which as one historian has put it, is ‘open-ended, compromising, and often irregular’.<sup>51</sup> It concerns the basis and limits of human

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<sup>48</sup> Jean Le Clerc, *The life and character of Mr. John Locke, author of the Essay concerning humane understanding*, trans. T. F. P. Gent (London: 1706), 2-3.

<sup>49</sup> Following the arrival of Robert Boyle (1627-1691) in Oxford in 1656, Locke assisted in his research on chemistry and physiology of blood, and was considerably influenced by Boyle’s work. The results of this work were – Robert Boyle, *Memoirs for the natural history of human blood, especially the spirit of that liquor* (London: 1684) – which was dedicated to the ‘very Ingenious and Learned Doctor J– L–’. During the course of his medical studies, Locke was also involved with such notable physicians Thomas Willis (1621-1675), and Richard Lower (1631-1691).

<sup>50</sup> According the ‘Epistle to the Reader’, the origin of the *Essay* was in a philosophical discussion with Locke’s friends ‘on a subject very remote’ (morality and revealed religion). Given the difficulties the subject presented, Locke proposed that it would be necessary to examine the human understanding before addressing this. The meeting has been dated to the winter of 1671: G.A.J. Rogers, ‘The Intellectual Setting and Aims of the *Essay*,’ in Lex Newman (ed), *The Cambridge companion to Locke’s “Essay concerning human understanding”* (Cambridge: 2007), 7-32, 7-8.

<sup>51</sup> Kevin Cope, *Criteria of certainty: truth and judgment in the English Enlightenment* (Lexington: 1990), 94.

understanding, seeking ‘to enquire into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge’, as well as ‘the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent’.<sup>52</sup> Locke’s epistemological outlook has often been described as ‘empiricist’, because of his view that it is ‘experience’ on which ‘all our Knowledge is founded’.<sup>53</sup> According to him, experience is either ‘sensation’ (the external world) or ‘reflection’ (the mind). The term ‘idea’ is central: knowledge is ‘nothing but *the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*’.<sup>54</sup> In that regard, he takes what has been called an ‘atomic’ or ‘corpuscular’ approach to knowledge.<sup>55</sup>

A principal concern of Locke’s work was the limitations of knowledge. This is alluded to in a quotation on the title page from Cicero (himself something of a sceptic), that it is better to ‘confess you do not understand’.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, the revised edition published at the time of the debate with Stillingfleet foreshadowed an additional, more religious, context quoting Ecclesiastes 11:5 – ‘thou knowest not the works of God, who maketh all things’.<sup>57</sup> These paired quotations provide a salient example of the different contexts doubt could take, whether philosophical or theological in nature, and prefigure the more adversarial side to the *Essay* (1689). Locke criticised philosophers who undertake ‘Enquiries beyond their Capacities’, and ‘raise Questions and multiply Disputes’, without ‘any clear Resolution’, and ultimately arrive at ‘a perfect Scepticism’. For him, it was better to focus on the ‘Capacities

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<sup>52</sup> Locke, *Essay*, I, I, §2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, II, I, §2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, IV, 1, §2

<sup>55</sup> Peter Anstey, *John Locke and natural philosophy* (Oxford: 2011), 85.

<sup>56</sup> A contemporary translation is: ‘How much more commendable were it for you (*Velleius!*) freely to confess you do not understand what really you do not; then blindly to Dance after a Fellow that fumbles out such Wretched stuff as This, which cannot but be distastful to your very self!’: Cicero, *Cicero’s three books touching the nature of the gods done into English* (London: 1683).

<sup>57</sup> Locke, *An essay concerning humane understanding*, 4th ed. (London: 1700).

of our Understanding’ and the ‘Extent of our Knowledge’.<sup>58</sup> Locke famously referred to himself as an ‘Under-Labourer’, ‘removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge’, presenting himself as an ally of the new sciences, and of men such as Sydenham, Boyle, Newton, and Christian Huygens.<sup>59</sup> Locke, for instance, devoted significant time to refuting the prevailing theory of ‘*innate Notions*’, the idea that we are born with certain knowledge.

Locke’s account of the limitations of knowledge provided the context for his discussion ‘Of Faith and Reason, and their distinct Provinces’.<sup>60</sup> For Locke, ‘*Reason*’ involved the discovery of ‘Certainty or Probability’, which the mind arrives at through ‘Deductions made from such *Ideas*, which it has got by the use of its natural Faculties’. In contrast, ‘*Faith*’ was ‘Assent’ based, not on ‘Deductions of Reason’, but the ‘Credit of the Proposer, as coming immediately from GOD’ (Revelation).<sup>61</sup> Locke thought that, in cases where ‘we have clear Evidence from our *Ideas*’ then ‘Reason is the proper Judge’, and Revelation may not invalidate it.<sup>62</sup> That said, there are many things where we have ‘very imperfect Notions’, and such things ‘beyond the Discovery of our natural Faculties, and above Reason, are, when revealed, *the proper Matter of Faith*’.<sup>63</sup> As shall be seen in the following chapters, his approach proved both stimulating and contentious among his contemporaries.

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<sup>58</sup> Locke, *Essay*, I, I, §7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, Epistle to the Reader [4].

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, XVIII.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, IV, XVIII, §2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, IV, XVIII, §6.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, IV, XVIII, §7.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE DEEP THINGS OF GOD: THE CONTROVERSY OVER *CHRISTIANITY NOT*

#### *MYSTERIOUS* (1696-1702)

Yet it cannot but look mighty odly to indifferent Persons, that all the *Dissenters* from the Establish'd Church, that the *Papists* who pervert Christianity it self, that several declar'd *Socinian*, ay and *Iacobite* Pamphlets should escape the burning Zeal of those, who so furiously prosecute one young Man only for the suspected Consequences of his Book, as if the very Being or Destruction of all *Religion* depended upon the fate of him, or his Writings.

– Toland (1697)<sup>1</sup>

Writing in September 1697 – immediately before his work was burnt at the order of the Irish House of Commons – John Toland vividly portrayed the intensity of contemporary outrage occasioned by his *Christianity not mysterious* (1696). Taking up many of the questions introduced under our theme of 'Between Faith and Reason', and drawing on Locke's theory of knowledge, Toland offered a provocative account of reason and religion. His book forcefully attacked the traditional concept of Christian mysteries, and the clergy who professed them. The resulting controversy was one of the most tumultuous of our period, involving a panoply of responses from thinkers across different confessional and philosophical allegiances, employing a range of polemical strategies. It also has a conspicuous, if tangential, place in the historiography. With it, according to a traditional view, the 'Deist Controversy' burst forth – Sir Leslie Stephen wrote that Toland's work was

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<sup>1</sup> John Toland, *An apology for Mr. Toland in a letter from himself to a member of the House of Commons in Ireland* (London: 1697), 30.

‘The signal gun which brought on the general action’.<sup>2</sup> *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) has been seen as redefining the relationship between reason and religion in the context of a broader ‘European debate about knowledge’.<sup>3</sup> For Charles Taylor, Toland ‘captured and pushed to its full conclusion, a broader trend’, marking an important milestone in the emergence of a more secular world, where the ‘sense of mystery fades’ before the advance of reason.<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Israel sees Toland as someone who made a ‘substantial’ contribution to ‘Radical Enlightenment’.<sup>5</sup> The presentation of the debate outlined above, however, is inadequate for several interconnected reasons.

Partly this reflects an overwhelming focus on Toland himself.<sup>6</sup> No doubt this owes something to his fascinating and mercurial life as, to quote his epitaph, ‘an assertor of Liberty/ A lover of all sorts of Learning/ A speaker of Truth’.<sup>7</sup> For many years, he was seen in a questionable light – Stephen described him as ‘a mere waif and stray’.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Justin Champion has depicted Toland as a principled and politically focused reformer who deftly navigated his intellectual culture and cultivated connections with a powerful elite,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century* (London: 1881), 105. Frederick Beiser, *The sovereignty of reason: the defense of rationality in the early English Enlightenment*. (Princeton: 1996), 221.

<sup>3</sup> R. Emerson, “Latitudinarianism and the English deists,” in *Deism, masonry, and the Enlightenment: essays honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge* ed. Leo Lemay, (Newark: 1987), 19-48, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A secular age* (Cambridge: 2007), 222-223.

<sup>5</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 613.

<sup>6</sup> Toland was relatively neglected until the 1980s, but has received significant attention: Robert Sullivan, *John Toland and the deist controversy: a study in adaptations* (Cambridge, Ma: 1982); S. Daniel, *John Toland: his methods, manners, and mind* (Montreal: 1984); Robert Rees Evans, *Pantheisticon: the career of John Toland* (New York: 1991); Justin Champion, *Republican learning: John Toland and the crisis of Christian culture, 1696–1722* (Manchester: 2003); Daniel Fouke, *Philosophy and theology in a burlesque mode John Toland and the way of paradox* (New York: 2007); Michael Brown, *A political biography of John Toland* (London: 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel, *John Toland*, 19; Pierre des Maizeaux, “Some memoirs of the life and writings of Mr. John Toland,” in *A collection of several pieces of Mr. John Toland: now first publish’d from his original manuscripts: with some memoirs of his life and writings*, ed. Pierre des Maizeaux (London 1726), lxxxvii.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen, *English thought*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Apart from his interactions with Locke and Leibniz, this included political leaders such as Eugene of Savoy, Sophia of Hanover, Robert Harley, Sir Robert Molesworth, and the third Earl of Shaftesbury. Champion, *Republican learning*, 18.

concluding that ‘We still live in a modernity shaped by [his] afterlife.’<sup>10</sup> In this general context, Toland’s opponents receive little attention, and, when they do, tend to stand as ciphers for retrograde or conservative views. While Champion’s account of Toland’s character and intellectual originality is compelling, it tends to understate his links with earlier thinkers and traditions. Champion is also primarily concerned with Toland as a political figure – and indeed much of Toland’s later life was preoccupied with political questions. However, in the immediate debate on *Christianity not mysterious*, these remained subordinate to theological and philosophical issues.

Also problematic are the various characterisations of Toland. He has been described as a canonical ‘deist’<sup>11</sup>, ‘the most notorious freethinker of all’,<sup>12</sup> and as already noted, an exemplar of ‘Radical Enlightenment’:<sup>13</sup> someone who, in combining subversive philosophical views with a radical republicanism, is typically seen in modernising terms. As this thesis has argued, characterisations of figures like Toland in terms of identities like ‘deist’ are problematic. While this term does arise in the debate, the polemical context is fundamental. Only decades later was the term confidently attributed to Toland – and with it, his complexities and contradictions as a thinker and their development over time were concealed. Toland’s connection with deism, as Robert Sullivan has argued, remains ‘elusive’.<sup>14</sup> As this chapter will discuss, the immediate debate had more to do with contemporary concerns about the various rationalising forms of Protestant Christianity (often pejoratively referred to as ‘Socinian’).

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<sup>10</sup> Champion, *Republican learning*, 254.

<sup>11</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule, and religion*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English revolution* (Hassocks: 1976), 210.

<sup>13</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 613.

<sup>14</sup> Sullivan, *John Toland*, 204-234.

The emphasis in this chapter is not as much on Toland (or how he is best categorised), but on the controversy, and the multiple, fragmented, and heterogeneous perspectives on *Christianity not mysterious* (1696). Certainly, there is a wealth of material. In the years following its publication, Toland's work provoked a storm of refutations, and was the subject of institutional proceedings in Middlesex (1696), Ireland (1697), and the convocation of the Church of England (1700-1701). Those purporting to refute the work included clergymen of diverse standings and interests, comprising figures closely connected to the Church of England hierarchy, namely William Payne<sup>15</sup> and the Bishop of Worcester, Edward Stillingfleet,<sup>16</sup> a non-juror clergyman (Edmund Elys<sup>17</sup>), and those within the reformed tradition like the vehement polemicist Jean Gailhard.<sup>18</sup> These thinkers brought to the debate their own philosophical and theological agendas – ranging from the Church of Ireland academic Peter Browne,<sup>19</sup> who embraced a broadly scholastic project, to the philosopher John Norris,<sup>20</sup> whose eclectic views drew on contemporary French philosophy. Each has its distinct rhetorical voice, from the sardonic Oxonian Thomas Beconsall,<sup>21</sup> to the millenarian Thomas Beverley, awaiting the end of the world in 1697.<sup>22</sup> Yet these works are vastly

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<sup>15</sup> William Payne, *The mystery of the Christian faith and of the blessed Trinity vindicated and the divinity of Christ proved in three sermons preach'd at Westminster-Abbey upon Trinity-Sunday, June the 7th, and September 21, 1696* (London: 1697). (“MCF”)

<sup>16</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *A discourse in vindication of the doctrine of the Trinity* [...] (London: 1697).

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Elys, *A letter to the Honourable Sir Robert Howard together with some animadversions upon a book intituled, Christianity not mysterious* (London: 1696).

<sup>18</sup> Jean Gailhard, *The blasphemous Socinian heresie disproved and confuted* [...] with animadversions upon a late book called, *Christianity not mysterious, humbly dedicated to both houses of parliament* (London: 1697). (“BSHP”)

<sup>19</sup> Peter Browne, *A letter in answer to a book entitled Christianity not mysterious* (Dublin: 1697).

<sup>20</sup> John Norris, *An account of reason & faith in relation to the mysteries of Christianity* (London: 1697). (“ARF”)

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Beconsall, *The Christian belief wherein is asserted and proved, that as there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to reason, yet there are some doctrines in it above reason, and these being necessarily enjoyn'd us to believe, are properly call'd mysteries: in answer to a book intituled, Christianity not mysterious* (London: 1696).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Beverley, *Christianity the great mystery. In answer to a late treatise: Christianity not mysterious* (London: 1696). (“CGM”)

overshadowed by the focus on Toland, even though many clearly struck a chord (there were three editions of Browne's work between 1697 and 1703, and fourteen of Norris' between 1697 and 1790). This chapter will attempt to bring forth a sense of these views on philosophy and theology circa 1700.

In examining the controversy, this chapter will loosely follow the three divisions of Toland's work, although these are intimately intertwined. The first section, after briefly introducing Toland, explores the polemical rhetoric of his claims about reason, contrasting two responses to his account of '*Reason, and its Properties*'. The second section turns to Toland's argument that there is 'no Doctrine of the Gospel contrary to *Reason*', exploring the rigorous philosophical response of John Norris, and that of Jean Gailhard, who decried Toland's 'blasphemy' and called for legal action. The third section looks at Toland's contentious claims that there is nothing mysterious in Christianity, and that the 'mysteries' of Christianity were Priestly corruptions, focusing on two different critiques from the Church of England and Ireland (the irenic William Payne and the trenchant Peter Browne). Finally, the chapter looks to the debate in the context of wider concerns of 'deism', 'Socinianism' and heresy, complicating the sense that the debate was driven by a 'radical', secularising and fundamentally political agenda.

### ***I. The 'Zealous Advocate for Reason'***

I hold nothing as an Article of my Religion, but what the highest Evidence forc'd me to embrace. For being educated, from my Cradle, in the grossest Superstition and Idolatry, God was pleas'd to make my own Reason, and such as made use of

theirs, the happy Instruments of my Conversion.

– Toland (1695).<sup>23</sup>

In the preface to *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), Toland offered his readers a glimpse of the experiences that shaped his philosophical outlook, colouring this as a response to the corruptions of Roman Catholicism. This coalescing of religious reform and reason would define his life and work. As would seem fitting for such an author, the little that is known of the circumstances of his early life is not without an air of the enigmatical. Born on 30 November 1670, in county Donegal in Ireland, he was alleged by some to be the son of a Roman Catholic Priest (though this has been doubted), and by others, a French soldier.<sup>24</sup> His christened name was, according to Toland, actually Janus Junius but, subjected to much teasing, he began using John as a boy.<sup>25</sup> At first supported by the Church of Ireland, Toland studied at Glasgow University, and obtained an M. A. from Edinburgh University, apparently on 30 June 1690, the day before the Battle of the Boyne.<sup>26</sup> During this time, Toland associated with the Scots Presbyterians. Relocating to London, there were hopes within the dissenting community that Toland would become a minister. With this in view, and at their expense, he travelled to Leiden. The Dutch Republic was a conducive and stimulating environment, and Toland came into contact with figures including Jean Le Clerc, notable for his critical exegesis of the Bible, and Philip Van Limborch, an advocate of reason in religion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Toland, *CNM*, viii-ix.

<sup>24</sup> des Maizeaux, “Memoirs,” v.

<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps questionable that a Roman Catholic Priest agreed to this: H. Nicholl, “John Toland: religion without mystery,” *Hermathena* 100 (1965), 54-65.

<sup>26</sup> Toland, *Apology*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Sullivan, *John Toland*, 4.

Returning to England in 1693, with letters of introduction to Locke from his friend, the Quaker merchant Benjamin Furly, Toland was apparently already publicising his friendship with the philosopher. He spent some time in London with Locke and his friends, though the extent of this has been hard to quantify.<sup>28</sup> According to John Biddle, there is evidence that Locke read a manuscript copy of part of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) at this time.<sup>29</sup> Toland moved to Oxford, where he had access to the libraries and an atmosphere of philosophical conversation and debate. There, according to his biographer, he showed ‘his inclination for Paradoxes, and the pleasure he took in opposing traditional and commonly receiv’d Opinions’.<sup>30</sup> Again, the ever-itinerant Toland returned to London. With the lapse of the Licensing Act in the Spring of 1695, there was greater latitude for publishing, and the first copies of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) appeared around Christmas of that year.

While Toland’s work is associated most often with modernising movements such as deism, it was, more directly, an intervention in the divisive contemporaneous debates taking place surrounding Unitarianism and Socinianism. Because of this, Stephen was wrong to see Toland as fundamentally a new phenomenon. With reference to these wider discussions, Toland wrote that there is ‘nothing that Men make a greater Noise about’ than the question of the Christian mysteries.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, his work was likely written specifically as a response to Robert South’s 1694 sermon on ‘Christianity Mysterious, and the Wisdom of God in making it so’.<sup>32</sup> Noting the broader ‘Rule of Faith’ debates as to the appropriate basis or authority of religious belief, Toland canvassed some of the possible ways of resolving this matter. One

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>29</sup> John Biddle, “Locke’s Critique of Innate Principles and Toland’s Deism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37(3) (1976), 411-422.

<sup>30</sup> des Maizeaux, *Memoirs*, xii.

<sup>31</sup> Toland, *CNM*, 1

<sup>32</sup> Robert South, *Twelve sermons upon several subjects and occasions* (London: 1698), vol. 3: 259. Jeffrey Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England* (Manchester: 2009), 21-22.

might look to the teachings of the ancient Church Fathers, the authority of the Pope, or the literal sense of the Scripture, each of which, he considered, had problems. For Toland, the answer was clear – ‘Reason is the only Foundation of all Certitude’.<sup>33</sup> It was, according to Toland, ‘not less from God than *Revelation*; ‘tis the Candle, the Guide, the Judg he has lodg’d within every Man that cometh into this World.’<sup>34</sup> And as this suggests, a commitment to ‘reason’ occupied a central rhetorical place in Toland’s work and his entire philosophical outlook.

In the first section of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), Toland offered an account of reason and its properties. For Toland, ‘the Soul acting in a certain and peculiar Manner, is Reason.’<sup>35</sup> The ‘Matter and Foundation of all our *Reasoning*’ are ‘simple and distinct Ideas’. With reason, these simple ideas are compared and compounded into ‘complex Ideas’. Knowledge then, is ‘nothing else but *the Perception of the Agreement or Disagreement of our Ideas in a greater or lesser Number, whereinsoever this Agreement or Disagreement may consist.*’<sup>36</sup> In framing this theory, Toland borrowed much from Locke, whom he referred to as ‘an excellent modern Philosopher’ and ‘the great Man’.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, he took forward Locke’s claim that ‘we can have knowledge no farther than we have ideas’.<sup>38</sup> Yet there were conspicuous differences, including Toland’s impetuous presentation. Locke’s sense of ‘Reason’ involved the discovery of ‘Certainty or Probability’.<sup>39</sup> However, for Toland, ‘Reason’ is equated with ‘Demonstration’. There was little place for Locke’s sense of

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<sup>33</sup> Toland, *CNM*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 141. (‘Reason’ as a candle echoed Proverbs 20:27, and was prominent in works such as Nathaniel Culverwell, *An elegant and learned discourse of the light of nature* (London: 1654).)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 82, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV, III, §1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, IV, XVIII, §2.

fallibility, and his sense that we often lack certain knowledge, but make do with probabilities. For Toland, one either knows the truth, or is plunged into error. He claimed ‘*since PROBABILITY is not KNOWLEDGE, I banish all HYPOTHESES from my PHILOSOPHY*’.<sup>40</sup> The controversial responses to Toland reveal a range of different attempts to refute his account of reason.

One of the first critiques to appear was *The Christian belief* (1696) of Thomas Beconnsall. Born in 1664, Beconnsall was a fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford, and ‘a strange Hypochondriacal Person’ according to the diarist and antiquarian Thomas Hearne.<sup>41</sup> Like many of those responding to Toland, Beconnsall begins his refutation with an account of his own attempt ‘to fix or state the several Measures and Principles of Human Knowledge’.<sup>42</sup> This he defined in terms of the objects of knowledge, and the means by which one can come to these – the Experience of the *Senses*, the Experience of the *Mind, Humane* and *Divine Revelation*. For Beconnsall, it was inappropriate to ‘advance one Rule or Standard’ without regard to the nature of the object, or the means of knowing it, and conflating these together was an underlying problem in Toland’s work.<sup>43</sup>

In canvassing the various types of knowledge, Beconnsall emphasised their limitations. Even with the objects of sense, where our ideas are ‘comparatively clear and exact’, we remain in difficulties. He wrote of ‘Ideas tinged with material Adumbrations’ that are the ‘Glass upon the Mind through which we see darkly’, alluding to 1 Corinthians 13:12, a verse often cited among Toland’s opponents.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Beconnsall emphasised how little we know of

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<sup>40</sup> Toland, *CNM*, 14-15.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Hearne, *Remarks and collections of Thomas Hearne* (Oxford: 1885), I:231.

<sup>42</sup> Beconnsall, *Christian belief*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Beconnsall, *Christian belief*, 3-4. Gailhard, *BSHD*, 327.

‘Spiritual substances’, quoting Toland’s ‘Great man’, Locke, who had held that we cannot know if the soul is immaterial or not.<sup>45</sup> Touching on another theme that resonated among Toland’s critics, he highlighted the distinction between the knowledge we can have of finite things, and that of infinite things such as God. Finally, Beconnsall emphasised that ‘Matters of Revelation lye at a great distance from us’, and ‘all our Discoveries rest on the good Will and Pleasure of GOD.’<sup>46</sup>

It would be impossible to divorce the philosophical content of the debate from the provocation occasioned by Toland’s flamboyant braggadocio, or as Toland himself put it ‘That any Upstart, but of Yesterday, should pretend to overthrow what cost the Antients so much Time and Breath to establish, and themselves so great Pains and Charges to learn’.<sup>47</sup> Beconnsall was no exception to this, referring to Toland as the ‘*Zealous Advocate for REASON*’, and ironically styling him variously as the ‘*Infallible Reasoner*’ and ‘great Reasoner’.<sup>48</sup> Frequently, he likened Toland to the ancient Sophists, whose ingenious arguments masked amoral purposes, a complaint echoed in other responses.<sup>49</sup>

Beconnsall’s work also illustrates that the discussion of ‘reason’ was not purely an epistemological question, but one coloured by theology. This is particularly true of another of the early responses to Toland, Thomas Beverley’s *Christianity the great mystery* (1696). Beverley was a somewhat idiosyncratic figure. An independent minister, he had received an MA at King’s College, Aberdeen, in 1643 and spent a considerable period in prison, where he

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<sup>45</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV, III, §6.

<sup>46</sup> Beconnsall, *Christian belief*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Toland, *CNM*, x.

<sup>48</sup> Beconnsall, *Christian belief*, 1, 8, 24

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 24, 42. References to sophism include: Browne, *Letter*, 149, 163, 205. Gailhard, *BSHD*, 322.

corresponded with the prominent dissenter Richard Baxter.<sup>50</sup> From the 1680s he unleashed a torrent of publications, suffused with a millenarian vision that the world would end in 1697. These views were informed by a virulent anti-Catholicism, animated by the European predominance of France under Louis XIV, and the events that ultimately saw the deposition of James II, and the accession of William II & III and Mary II in the 1688-9 Revolution. It was in this context that he approved of Thomas Burnet's *Theory of Earth* (1684,1690).<sup>51</sup> Indeed, *Christianity the great mystery* (1696) is coloured by Beverley's conviction that '*It is the very Last of the Last Time*', and his sense of the prophetic.<sup>52</sup>

Beverley saw the relationship between religion and philosophy as potentially destabilizing. He wrote of his contemporaries as '*Divided between a Nominal Faith, and a Philosophy, that is indeed Vain, and Science, Falsly so Called.*' He considered Toland's views would gratify '*the Deists, as the Men of Reason, and Virtuoso's, as they would be Thought, in Religion.*'<sup>53</sup> Yet, despite the gulf of incommensurability between the two men, they had enough in common that Beverley contemplated a meaningful debate, such that '*All may Rest on the Merit of True Reason.*'<sup>54</sup> That is, he sought to occupy, in his own way, the domain of natural theology. Indeed, at the start of his work Beverley identified various points of agreement with Toland, including his acknowledgement of '*the Divine Original of the Gospel*', that '*Faith is no Implicit, Sequacious [compliant or servile], Blind Assent*' but founded in reason, and that there are '*no Real Contradictions*' in Christianity. Beverley also found common ground with Toland's recurring commentary on Roman Catholicism, or the '*Depths of*

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<sup>50</sup> Warren Johnston, "Beverley, Thomas (d. 1702)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004. Accessed 23 April 2021. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-66364>

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Beverley, *The prophetical history of the Reformation; or the Reformation to be reform'd; in that great re-Reformation: that is to be in 1697. According to the divine table, or vision of it* (London: 1689), 41.

<sup>52</sup> Beverley, *CGM*, 'To the Truly Christian Readers'.

<sup>53</sup> Beverley, *CGM*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

Sathan' as he puts it.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, Beverley discovered much that was offensive in *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), including Toland's often flippant tone about religion, his 'Sallyes of Wit, or Satyre'.

Against Toland, Beverley advocated his own vision of 'reason' – reasserting 'Reason, on a Religious Account', as against the 'Pride and Supercile of *Philosophy*'. For him, Toland's account of balancing and comparing ideas leaves out an important quality of 'true' reason. Beverley expressed this somewhat allusively. True reason has a 'Holiness' and 'Purity', it has an 'Inward and also *Prophoric*' (enunciative<sup>56</sup>) sense, and an 'Energy' that imprints itself on rational beings. He had in mind various scriptural expressions of 'Wisdom', 'Knowledge' and 'Truth'. According to him, reason may be the infinite reason of God, or the finite wisdom of his creatures, which ascend in 'several Scales and Degrees'. Beverley's language suggests the absorption of Platonic material into his views.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, Beverley's emphasis on the rectification of reason through divine grace is more clearly consistent with the Reformed tradition. In any event, it is quintessential for him that we are in the sphere of created reason, and the 'Fallen Condition of Man'.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to the eternal reason of God, Beverley emphasised the vitiated nature of human understanding. He wrote of 'a Broken, Shatter'd, Ship wrack'd *Reason*, whose *Light* is *Darken'd in its very Heavens*', and the 'Poor Relicks, Fragments, and Broken Pieces of *Reason*'.<sup>59</sup> Beverley noted that 'some great Principles of Truth and *Reason*' remain

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>56</sup> The terms 'Endiathetic' and 'Prophoric' were used by the Stoics to distinguish the Word (Logos) that exists in thought, and that which is uttered. Subsequently the expressions are found in Philo, and in various Patristic writings. Irenaeus, *The treatise of Irenaeus of Lugdunum against the heresies; a translation of the principal passages, with notes and arguments*, translated by F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock (London: 1916), 50, 70.

<sup>57</sup> Cudworth references 'a *Scale* or *Ladder* of Beings in the Universe': Cudworth, *True intellectual system*, 556. As did: Henry More, *Philosophical poems* (Cambridge: 1647), 19.

<sup>58</sup> Beverley, *CGM*, 1314.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 30-32.

accessible, but likens this to ‘a kind of Rude Draught’.<sup>60</sup> In this regard, there are many truths of God that will appear to be ‘above *Reason* to Fallen Lost Man’.<sup>61</sup> With this, Beverley explained the widespread presence of heresy and error – especially given the influence of the ‘*Father of Lyes*’.<sup>62</sup> According to him, ‘every Age hath Risen up in this presumption upon their own *Reason*’.<sup>63</sup>

## ***II. The ‘Ship-wrack’ of Faith***

Holding Faith, and a good Conscience; which some having put away, Concerning Faith have made Ship-wrack.

– 1 Tim. 1:19<sup>64</sup>

The responses of Beconnsall and Beverley, among others, illustrate the diverse approaches to ‘reason’ in English thought *circa* 1700, and its centrality as a cultural concept. This prominence is exemplified in Archbishop Tillotson’s statement, quoted on Toland’s title page, that ‘We need not desire a better Evidence that any Man is in the wrong, than to hear him declare against Reason, and thereby to acknowledg that Reason is against him’.<sup>65</sup> With this we turn to the sense, among many, that Toland had undermined or jeopardised the relation between reason and religion.

Justin Champion has suggested that *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) ‘shattered the complacent ‘reasonableness’ of mainstream Anglican theology’, a statement that in itself

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Norris, *ARF*, title page.

<sup>65</sup> John Tillotson, *Works* (London: 1722), I:19.

elides the diverse and often divided nature of that tradition.<sup>66</sup> Certainly, Toland felt the common claim of his contemporaries that there was no contradiction between reason and the gospel, was belied by their concession that these might ‘seem’ to clash.<sup>67</sup> He argued that it is absurd for anyone to accept ‘any real or seeming Contradictions in Religion’. In so doing, he again drew on, and developed, many of the tropes common among English Protestant thinkers, suggesting the rejection of reason would lead to either the ‘ridiculous Fables’ of Roman Catholicism, or to ubiquitous doubt, and ‘inevitable *Scepticism*’.<sup>68</sup> Christianity, he argued, was meant to be ‘rational’ and ‘intelligible’, and if some of Toland’s consequences seem strained (such as his suggestion that Abraham’s decision to sacrifice his son was a case of ‘very strict Reasoning’) these reflect an extension of the views of people like Tillotson.<sup>69</sup> While Toland was conscious of what might be said on the ‘pravity’ or limits of human reason, he argued this conflated reason with the obstacles and temptations that might impede its use. Toland’s approach might be summed up in his characteristic interpretation of Colossians 2: 8:

You shall hear nothing more frequently in their Mouths than these Words of the Apostle, *Beware lest any Man spoil you by PHILOSOPHY and vain Deceit...*

Ridiculous! as if Reason and Truth were Vanity and Craft! By *Philosophy* is not here understood *sound Reason*, (as all Interpreters agree) but the Systems of *Plato*, of *Aristotle*, of *Epicurus*, of the *Academicks*, &c. many of whose Principles are directly repugnant to common Sense and good Morals.

One thinker who was concerned by Toland’s approach but who nonetheless professed a highly philosophical version of Christianity, was John Norris, whose reference to a ‘Ship-

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<sup>66</sup> Champion, *Republican learning*, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Toland, *CNM*, 25-26.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 26-37.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 132. Tillotson, *Works*, 17.

Wrack' of faith commenced this section. Norris was born in 1657, studied at Winchester College, then Exeter College, Oxford, from 1676, taking a BA in 1680, before becoming a fellow of All Souls. He subsequently lived a quiet country life as the rector of Bemerton, near Salisbury, regularly publishing philosophical works, which combined an eclectic interest in both the Platonic and scholastic traditions, with an active (and, it is fair to say, potentially unfashionable) interest in the contemporary French philosophy of thinkers such as Descartes, Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Nicole, and above all Nicolas Malebranche.<sup>70</sup>

In the preface to *An account of reason & faith* (1697), Norris strikes a relatively measured tone, lamenting the excesses of controversial writing that is more 'Duelling or Prizing than Disputing', and aspiring to a 'Christian Temper and Moderation as becomes the Search of Truth'.<sup>71</sup> Yet in the introduction to his work, Norris set his response to *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) on a more dramatic stage, noting the 'Conjectures' of those who consider the end times are approaching, a world where religion has become 'intirely Corrupt, and all over *Anti-christianiz'd*', and '*Religious Scepticism*' triumphs. He was reminded of the biblical verse 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'<sup>72</sup> This provided the backdrop to his attempt to refute 'one of the most Bold, daring and irreverent pieces... that even *this* Licentious Age has produced'.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, however, Norris' work was a voluminous and scholarly production, and one concerned not so much with pursuing all of Toland's objections to Christian mystery, but in making a comprehensive positive argument for the consonance of the Christian mysteries with reason.

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Acworth, "Norris, John (1657–1712), Church of England clergyman and philosopher." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 23 Dec. 2020. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-20277>. W. Mander, *The philosophy of John Norris* (Oxford: 2008), 4-13.

<sup>71</sup> Norris, *ARF*, preface [1].

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 1-8. Luke 18:8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, preface [4].

Norris argued that the underlying error of the Socinians (with whom he groups Toland) was their uncritical esteem for human reason, so much so that they effectively ‘*Deify*’ their own ‘Rational Abilities’.<sup>74</sup> Norris considered that the Socinians’ basis for rejecting the mysteries of Christianity was, in its final analysis, a belief ‘*That their Reason is the Measure of all Truth, and that they can comprehend all things.*’<sup>75</sup> With this in mind, Norris provided his own account of reason and faith, drawing characteristically on a wealth of philosophical sources. Human reason, he argued, is not the measure of all truth, and the incomprehensibility of a thing is not a concluding argument for it not being true.

Norris’ efforts to defend the place of faith is particularly interesting in light of his allegiance with Descartes, who, after all, laid such emphasis on reason. Norris noted that some might think his work ‘propitious’ to Socinianism, or see him as a ‘*Socinian in disguise*’.<sup>76</sup> Norris sought to reconcile the existence of Christian mysteries with the Cartesian emphasis on the doctrine of ‘clear and distinct’ ideas.<sup>77</sup> He contended that one might believe ‘an Incomprehensible thing’, and still comply with the maxim of assenting only to what is ‘Clear and Evident’. In particular, while matters of faith may be ‘Internally Inevident’, there is ‘External Evidence’ (whether from reason or scriptural authority) to support their assent, and the external evidence provides a basis for concluding that the beliefs in question can be judged true according to the non-human standard of truth.<sup>78</sup>

For Norris, the danger presented by thinkers such as Toland was not to destroy religion, but to etiolate it. In his conclusion, addressed to the ‘Socinians’, he eloquently presented a vision

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 277.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 143

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 276-277.

of religion deprived of mystery. Referencing 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, he wrote ‘where are those *Deep things of God*, that Eye hath not seen nor Ear heard, nor have enter’d into the Heart of Man’. In such conditions, religion would ‘make but a very little Figure in Proportion to its Pomp and External Splendor, and indeed will almost dwindle down into Nothing.’ It would become ‘a mere System of Precepts, and Rule of Life’.<sup>79</sup>

Interestingly, Norris saw his theory of reason and faith as consistent with the works discussed in the first part of this thesis – the theories of Thomas Burnet, John Woodward and William Whiston. Norris’ work included a post-script informing his readers that, following its completion, he had the ‘pleasure’ to read Whiston’s *New theory* (1696). He wrote of his delight to see ‘so great a Master of Reason and Philosophy express so awful and reverential a regard to Religion in general’.<sup>80</sup> Certainly, Norris did not think that Burnet and Whiston, whom he calls ‘two Mighty *Genius*’s’, were paving the way for deism. While Norris was not finally decided on the merits of the two theories, the important point for him was showing the Mosaic account of creation was ‘not really of so desperate a Nature’.<sup>81</sup> This was encapsulated in a quotation from Whiston that ‘The Measure of our present knowledge ought not to be esteem’d ... [a] Test of Truth’.<sup>82</sup>

A contrasting response to Toland’s views about reason was Jean Gailhard’s. A French Protestant émigré to England, there is little known about his background. Gailhard appeared to have had wide interests, writing, among other things, on the education of children and on the affairs of the Italian states.<sup>83</sup> However, his main energy was devoted to theological

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 333-334.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 339.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 340.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 343-344.

<sup>83</sup> Jean Gailhard, *The compleat gentleman, or, Directions for the education of youth as to their breeding at home and travelling abroad in two treatise* (London: 1678); Jean Gailhard, *The present state of the princes and republicks of Italy with observations on them* (London: 1671).

polemic, in which he railed against both Roman Catholicism and ‘Socinianism’ with commensurate fury. His *The blasphemous Socinian heresie disproved and confuted* (1697) continued this pattern. Gailhard’s work was dedicated to the Houses of Parliament, and called for action – ‘for God's sake... take pity on the Nation, and as far as God will enable you, purge, wash, and cleanse it from blasphemous Opinions and wicked Practices’.<sup>84</sup> This language of ‘purgation’ was a frequent theme in Reformation-era polemics, but less common *circa* 1700.<sup>85</sup> Gailhard’s frequent citations from the Old Testament and ominous tone cast him as something of a prophet railing against the corruption of his time. Gailhard observed that Scotland had passed blasphemy legislation in 1695 and cited this as an example to be emulated (he does not appear to have been aware of the execution of Thomas Aickenhead in January 1697).

Against Toland, Gailhard sought to reassert the proper place of ‘human’ reason versus faith and revelation. Gailhard found some agreement with Toland ‘against all human Authority’, and affirmed that it is the ‘Duty and Concern’ of every man to exercise reason in faith and religion.<sup>86</sup> Yet, he distinguished the ‘true and sound Reason’ of God, from reason that is ‘meerly human, subject to Error, a meer Chimera and Fancy of Man’s shallow Brains’.<sup>87</sup> Just as it was unsound to repose authority in the Pope or a collective body, it was foolish to repose it in individual reason. For Gailhard, the subordination of human reason to the Scripture simply reflected that there is ‘more and better Reason in God than in Man’.<sup>88</sup> To make faith and religion depend on the reason of each individual, was ‘to build upon the Sand, to make

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<sup>84</sup> *BSHD*, “To the Lords and Commons” [25].

<sup>85</sup> Nicholas Terpstra, *Religious refugees in the early modern world: an alternative history of the Reformation* (Cambridge, 2015), 74-132.

<sup>86</sup> Gailhard, *BSHD*, 316.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 315.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 316.

the infallible depend upon the fallible, and confound matters of Faith with those of Fact.’<sup>89</sup>

While Gailhard focused on theology, he supplemented his views with philosophical argument. Gailhard accepted that ‘Nothing comes under the Intellect but what hath been under the Sense’, a phrase often associated with Locke, but mirrored in works of scholastics like Aquinas, and widespread by the time of Gassendi.<sup>90</sup> Often the senses can be deceived, and by extension, so can the mind. Gailhard analogised reason with sight, suggesting it will only be reliable in certain conditions, defined not so much by the Cartesian concept of clear and distinct ideas, but ‘upon the mainness of the Evidence confirmed by a continual Experience’.<sup>91</sup>

Like Norris, Gailhard discerned a moral failure behind *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), and ‘Socinians’ generally, of ‘Pride, Vanity, and Presumptuousness’.<sup>92</sup> In a characteristic declamation, Gailhard compared the Socinians to various perfidious biblical figures – Absalom, Jezebel and finally King Herod, whose ‘Robes were glorious when he sat upon his Throne... but very soon after they were full of Worms.’<sup>93</sup> This, he implied, would be the fate of those who purported to be ‘more knowing and wiser than *David* and *Solomon*’.<sup>94</sup> In concluding his work, Gailhard called on his hapless Socinians to ‘create a new Heart, and renew a right Spirit’, darkly prophesying that ‘now they be never so shameless and brazen-faced, yet at last they certainly shall be confounded’.<sup>95</sup> Again, Gailhard struck a threatening note against ‘These Huffs and Hectoring Champions, for Reason against Faith and

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<sup>89</sup> Gailhard, *BSHD*, 316-317.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 318. Locke, *Essay*, II, I, §33. Paul Cranefield, “On the origin of the phrase ‘Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu’,” *Journal of the history of medicine and allied sciences* 25(1) (1970): 77-80.

<sup>91</sup> Gailhard, *BSHD*, 318-319.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 339.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 321.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 324.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 344.

Revelation’, quoting the Bible that ‘*This shall ye have of mine hand ye shall lie down in sorrow*’.<sup>96</sup>

### **III. *Mystery unveiled***

[H]ere’s enough to shew *how Christianity became mysterious*, and how so divine an Institution did, through the Craft and Ambition of *Priests and Philosophers*, degenerate into meer *Paganism*.

– Toland (1696)<sup>97</sup>

In the final section of his work, Toland made a sustained attack on the notion of ‘mystery’, and brought to a zenith the anti-clericalism that permeated his work. He provided an analysis of the word ‘mystery’, discussing its role in the Pagan religions, notably as an instrument of priestly control. Toland noted the explicit references to ‘mystery’ in the Gospels. However, he argued that ‘mystery’ in the Bible means ‘*a thing intelligible in it self,, but so vail’d by others, that it could not be known without special Revelation.*’<sup>98</sup> From his perspective, ‘the Vail is actually taken away’ with Revelation, and ‘Doctrines so reveal’d cannot now be properly call’d Mysteries’.<sup>99</sup> Aside from this, Toland identified a different, more pernicious form of ‘mystery’, which was a corruption developing in the early Church, partly as a result of competition with Jews and Pagans, and the interpenetration of many of them into Christianity. This was a novel variation of a widespread Protestant view of the corruption of the church. For Toland, ‘*Christianity was put upon an equal Level with the Mysteries of Ceres, or the Orgies of Bacchus*’.<sup>100</sup> It found fertile ground with the ‘litigious Disputes, and

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<sup>96</sup> Gailhard, *BSHD*, 327. Isa. 50.1

<sup>97</sup> Toland, *CNM*, 163.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 73

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 153

vain Subtilties’ of the philosophers.<sup>101</sup> But above all, it suited the interests of the priests, the ‘Riches, Pomp, and Dignities of the *Clergy*’.<sup>102</sup>

For many, Toland’s views on the notion of ‘mystery’ were highly inflammatory. However, the responses were not universally trenchant, and William Payne’s *The mystery of the Christian faith* (1697) took a relatively moderate approach. Of all the responses, this work had perhaps the most official imprimatur. Born in 1650, Payne studied at Magdalene College, Cambridge and became a Fellow there in 1671. He was subsequently involved in controversial writing against the Catholics and the non-jurors, who accused him of being a ‘latitudinarian’. He nonetheless became a popular and prominent preacher in London. As *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) began to cause consternation, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tenison, tasked Payne with answering the work.<sup>103</sup> Payne’s attempt to answer the ‘bold Objections of some modern *Deists* and *Socinians*’, and Toland in particular, took the form of three sermons delivered at Westminster Abbey in 1696.<sup>104</sup> This might illustrate that the preached word was still important, and that printing was not the only way of making an intervention in a controversy.

Payne’s text was ‘Holding the Mystery of the Faith in a pure Conscience’ (1 Tim. 3. 9.), which prompted him to emphasise the Christian faith as a mystery, and what it meant to hold it in ‘pure Conscience’. Referencing the apparently endless vicissitudes of the Socinian controversy, he began with the question of whether ‘ordinary Christians’ were to believe the ‘Mysterious, and Abstruse Doctrines of Christianity’, even when even the learned were unable to agree. The Christian faith, he stated, was not like the Pagan mysteries that confined

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 154

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>103</sup> [William Payne], *A letter from Dr. P. to the Bishop of R---* in vindication of his sermon on Trinity Sunday (London: 1696), 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

knowledge to the ‘*Mystae*’ and ‘*Adepti*’, but was incumbent on all.<sup>105</sup> Payne emphasised that the Christian Faith was not knowable without Revelation and the coming of Christ, and that it remained ‘Incomprehensible to our Reason’, even after this. However, he stressed that ‘the Difficulty and Incomprehensibleness and Mysteriousness’ was not an argument for unbelief.<sup>106</sup> Payne emphasised the ‘Mysterious and Incomprehensible’ character of many other things. For him, there was no sense that natural philosophy was bringing about the disenchantment of the world. Rather, the ‘Visible Nature’ and the ‘Material World’ demonstrated mystery in their very complexity, ‘every Fly, and Mite, and Insect, and every Spire of Grass we tread on, is beyond all our Knowledge and Phylosophy’.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, Payne accentuated how much remained mysterious in relation to such things as the human mind, the arts and sciences, natural religion, and Revelation generally.

Distinctively, Payne also discussed how the Christian faith was to be held ‘in a pure Conscience’. Partly he took issue with Toland’s epistemology, in particular, the claim that Revelation is ‘*Not a motive of Assent but only a means of Information*’ (i.e., that we still must judge it based on the evidence of the thing revealed, rather than assent to it because of its inherent authority).<sup>108</sup> This was, in fact, one of the few times that Payne sought to directly refute Toland. His characteristically moderate approach to the controversy is illustrated in his view that ‘We must hold this Mystery of Faith with a Christian good Temper’. Specifically, he saw the danger that ‘over-earnestly disputing’ would lead only to ‘useless Opinions, and over nice and subtle Controversies’.<sup>109</sup> His point may underscore the sense that, amidst the

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<sup>105</sup> Payne, *MCF*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 42

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 60-61.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 65-67.

apparent conflict of controversial writing, there was room for different voices advocating co-existence and compromise.

While Payne's work may seem relatively uncontentious, it evoked a certain amount of consternation in the vexed atmosphere of the Trinitarian debates. Following the delivery of his sermons, Payne was 'amazed' to receive a letter from a group of clergymen, led by Thomas Sprat, the Bishop of Rochester, noteworthy for his role in the Royal Society. There was various hearsay about certain expressions Payne had used in relation to the Trinity, notably an allegation that he had described Christ and the Holy Ghost as deities only in an 'equivocal' sense.<sup>110</sup> Ultimately after meetings and representations Payne seems to have satisfied those concerned that his words had been distorted, but he found it necessary to write a vindication of his sermons, even though they had not been published (they were published after his death the following year).<sup>111</sup> In so doing, Payne defended his efforts to give a straightforward and intelligible approach to the controversy, 'before it fell into the Hands of Nice School men, who perplex and entangle every thing.'<sup>112</sup> We might compare Toland's own concern about '*Scholastick Jargon and all the metaphysical chimeras of its Authors*.'<sup>113</sup> Conspicuously upset, Payne criticised 'Perverse and Angry Men, tyed up to their own Models and narrow Systems', who he saw as agitating the debate for their own purposes.<sup>114</sup> According to Payne, 'If there were a true Spirit of Christian Charity, Love and Good Will among us, our Differences and Dissentions about the Trinity would quickly be at an end'.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Payne, *A letter*, 1-3.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, Postscript.

<sup>112</sup> Payne, *A letter*, 2.

<sup>113</sup> Toland, *CNM*, xi

<sup>114</sup> Payne, *A letter*, Postscript, 8.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, Postscript, 13-14.

In March 1697, Toland returned to Ireland after twelve years, with prospects of working for John Methuen, the newly appointed Lord Chancellor of Ireland.<sup>116</sup> The mood was inauspicious. In a letter to Locke, William Molyneux wrote that he valued Toland as a ‘Candid Free Thinker, and a Good Scholar’, but warned of ‘a Violent sort of spirit that Reignes here’.<sup>117</sup> In this context, Peter Browne took up the defence of the Christian mysteries, but with a fury in sharp contrast to the conciliatory spirit of Payne. While his background is obscure, Browne was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, graduating with a BA in 1686. He spent some time in London, where he was ordained, before returning to Ireland, obtaining an MA at Trinity and becoming a Fellow. Browne borrowed *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) from his patron, the Archbishop of Dublin, Narcissus Marsh. As the book ‘hath made some noise; and that the Author is countenanc’d, and encourag’d by some Men of Sence’, Browne was asked to respond. Marsh added that it would be ‘no neglect in a Shepherd to leave his feeding of the Lambs, and go aside for a while, to beat off any thing that comes to devour or infect them’.<sup>118</sup> With that, Browne composed *A letter* (1697), receiving Marsh’s imprimatur in May 1697.

Consistent with the timescale above, *A letter* (1697) is a somewhat hasty and unstructured production, and Browne often sounds impatient about a man who was ‘not worth my trouble’, though ‘the *Cause* is richly so’.<sup>119</sup> Browne made no attempt to disguise his open hostility to Toland’s ‘poyson’, descending frequently to personal abuse.<sup>120</sup> To a large extent, Browne dismissed Toland’s campaign against the Christian mysteries as an elaborate swindle, replete

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<sup>116</sup> Sullivan, *John Toland*, 7-10.

<sup>117</sup> William Molyneux to John Locke, 6 April 1697, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2240], 82-83

<sup>118</sup> Browne, *Letter*, 2.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 239.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

with ‘Cheats and Fallacies’, and ‘specious trifling’.<sup>121</sup> Toland, he suggested, created a simply meretricious opposition between reason and evidence and the Christian mysteries. He saw Toland’s title itself as intended to ‘raise a Notion’ that Christianity as generally professed ‘is a Religion made up of dark aenigmatical Allusions, and absurd irrational and unintelligible Notions; or else of the plainest things wrapt up in mysterious Rites and Ceremonies’.<sup>122</sup> In contrast, Browne agreed with Payne that Christianity is a religion of lucid simplicity, accessible to all believers. Thus, he wrote ‘between these two expressions, *Christianity not Mysterious*, and, *There are no Mysteries in Christianity* The first is very true, and the last is absolutely false.’<sup>123</sup>

Like many of Toland’s critics, Browne gave his own epistemological justification for the Christian mysteries. This reflected an intellectual position within the broad scholastic tradition, but also critically engaged with Locke’s philosophy.<sup>124</sup> For Browne, the term ‘Mystery’ had a dual quality. Through Revelation we understand something that was hidden from us. Yet, there is a part of it that we are ‘wholly ignorant’ of, and it is impossible to attain a notion of. As such, Browne noted that Christians know they will be ‘*chang’d into the likeness of Christ*, but can have no notion of how this will occur’.<sup>125</sup> Browne, like Toland, saw the criteria of ‘clear and distinct ideas’ as the ‘*foundation of all our knowledge and assent*’. However, he disagreed that one must have a clear and distinct of idea of everything that one assents to.<sup>126</sup> At a broader level, Browne was unswerving in his reassertion of the

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 6, 55.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Kenneth Pearce, “Peter Browne on the metaphysics of knowledge,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 88 (2020): 215–237,

<sup>125</sup> Browne, *Letter*, 14–15.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 32.

Church of England as a religion of reason, arguing ‘our whole Christian Faith is grounded upon the *strictest Retiociation* [sic].’<sup>127</sup>

In his prominent account of Toland, Justin Champion has emphasised the political implications of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) as a challenge to clerical authority over the truth.<sup>128</sup> Such a concern was particularly evident in Browne’s response – he was appalled by Toland’s claims that the ‘mysteries’ were a corruption of priestcraft. He wrote of Toland ‘loading the *Clergie* in general with *Reproaches*, and charging them with most detestible *Frauds* to serve the vilest ends’.<sup>129</sup> Browne discerned an ulterior purpose that ‘makes the *Clergy* and *Laity* two opposite Parties, and endeavours to raise in them jealousies and suspicions’.<sup>130</sup> For him, Toland’s work itself demonstrated the value of the clergy, else all religion would ‘degenerate into Barbarity and Heathenism’.<sup>131</sup> In this sense, Champion was quite right to draw attention to the social and political implications of Toland’s work. Yet a strongly politicised reading such as Champion’s risks giving this debate a particular modern complexion;<sup>132</sup> it is important to remember that these exchanges occurred – as the last quotation suggests – with an eye to deep rooted protestant concerns about pagan and papal corruption.

Underscoring the pernicious potential of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), Browne, like Gailhard, invited the question of ‘How far Men in Power, according to their several stations, are oblig’d to intermedle in point of *Conscience*’.<sup>133</sup> On this point, Browne did not go

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>128</sup> Champion, *Republican learning*, 69-80.

<sup>129</sup> Browne, *Letter*, 203.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>132</sup> As such, he wrote that ‘men could read and think for themselves’, ‘Toland wanted to shatter the clerical ambition of establishing a conformity of beliefs’: Champion, *Republican learning*, 80, 86.

<sup>133</sup> Browne, *Letter*, 208.

unsatisfied. In September 1697, the Irish Commons condemned Toland's work as heretical and ordered that it be burned, and required Toland be arrested and prosecuted.<sup>134</sup> Browne himself did well out of the controversy, shortly afterwards receiving a promotion; Toland, with his usual panache, apparently boasted that he had made Browne a bishop.<sup>135</sup>

#### ***IV. The 'Hue and Cry of Heresy'***

In the *Committee* it was mov'd by one that Mr. TOLAND himself should be burnt, as by another that he should be made to burn his Book with his own hands; and a third desir'd it should be done before the Door of the House, that he might have the pleasure of treading the Ashes under his feet.

– Toland (1697)<sup>136</sup>

With Toland's description of the 1697 proceedings of the Irish House of Commons we turn from the specific philosophical issues of the controversy to its relationship with broader concerns about irreligion and heresy. Certainly, Toland knew *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) would be provocative, and to some extent, actively courted the attention – he was a young man with limited means, and wished to establish his place in the Republic of Letters with a striking publication. While his work had an eye to providing a preliminary defence of his views, Toland often cultivated a creative ambiguity. Thus, Toland positioned his work in terms of the reforming plea to return to the original pure Christian religion that had been such a feature of Protestant Christianity since the Reformation. The preface meaningfully praised the 'Defenders of Truth, only for Truth's sake,' and deplored those who beset them.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Sullivan, *John Toland*, 9.

<sup>135</sup> Arthur Winnett, *Peter Browne: provost, bishop, metaphysician* (London: 1974), 19.

<sup>136</sup> Toland, *Apology*, 25-26.

<sup>137</sup> Toland, *CNM*, iv.

Unfortunately, he observed, much of religion is abused with ‘Ambition, Impiety, and Contention’, and those who speak for truth are pursued with the ‘Hue and Cry of Heresy’.<sup>138</sup> In Toland’s declamatory conclusion, he observed that the term ‘Heretic’ was applied to St Paul (Acts 24:14), and reiterated that he would ‘acknowledg no ORTHODOXY but the TRVTH’.<sup>139</sup> Against those who thought that his views might lead some to become ‘Atheists and Deists’, Toland observed that there were a small number, ‘dazl’d by the sudden Splendor of the Truth’, who became atheists and libertines in the days of the Protestant reformers Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, but this could hardly be weighed against those who were saved from the ‘Superstition’ of Rome.<sup>140</sup>

*Christianity not mysterious* (1696) cast something of a shadow over Toland’s life. While those who called for rigorous action against him – Peter Browne and Jean Gailhard among them – were disappointed, the threat was palpable. Indeed, Robert South dedicated the third volume of his *Sermons* to Archbishop March, praising the Irish Parliament which ‘sent [Toland] Packing, and without the help of a *Faggot* soon made the Kingdom *too Hot* for him’.<sup>141</sup> Over the following years Toland published two further books responding to the controversy. The first – *An Apology for Mr. Toland* (1697) – was written in September 1697 in the midst of proceedings against him in Ireland ‘the day before his Book was resolv’d to be burnt by the Committee of Religion’. The work did not offer any comprehensive philosophical defence, or ‘enter into the Merits of the Cause’. Toland remarked it would be ‘endless labour to make *Answers* severally’ to his critics.<sup>142</sup> Rather, it was a counter attack on the ‘notorious’ actions of the Irish Parliament and clergy, most prominently Peter Browne,

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, v-vi.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 173-174.

<sup>141</sup> South, *Sermons*, Vol. 3, dedication [8].

<sup>142</sup> Toland, *Apology*, 3.

and an attempt to address some of the major allegations against his work. In this context, Toland quite carefully presented himself as the rather incredulous target of malign and irrational forces: something embodied in the quotation from Claudian on the title page (in Latin) – he is close to the gods, whom reason, not wrath, moves.

Of the various contemporary terms used to describe Toland's views, the most common was 'Socinianism', though the connection drawn was usually indiscriminate rather than specific, consistent with the way the term was often used in the late seventeenth century. The title of Stillingfleet's *Vindication ... with an answer to the late Socinian objections...* (1697) indicated such a link. Gailhard suggested that Toland 'was one of them here among us', though his chapter on Toland oscillated between specific discussion of Toland and what the 'Socinian' was said to believe.<sup>143</sup> Browne called Toland's work 'a Branch of that bitter Root of *Socinianism*', though he expressed some indecision over what Toland was and represented.<sup>144</sup> Payne referred to the 'Socinians, and other Adversaries to Mysteries'.<sup>145</sup> Norris frequently referenced 'Socinianism' even if, again, his concerns went somewhat broader to encompass shadings into other erroneous forms of belief.<sup>146</sup>

In *An Apology* (1697), Toland dismissed the claims of 'Socinianism'. Somewhat disingenuously, he pointed out that he had said nothing about the Trinity (though one might wonder what mysteries he had mind). He questioned whether there were really any Socinians in England, apart from the 'Unitarians', who he observed, had a different theology to Sozzini.<sup>147</sup> However, Toland's trump card was the surprise of the Unitarians themselves at

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<sup>143</sup> Gailhard, *BSHD*, 102, Chapter IX.

<sup>144</sup> Browne, *Letter*, 205, 96, 199.

<sup>145</sup> Payne, *MCF*, 35, 38.

<sup>146</sup> Norris, *ARF*, 7.

<sup>147</sup> It should be noted that, while Toland points to such a group, their existence was rather inchoate. The term was used in the title of some controversial works of the 1690s, but the 'Unitarians' as a group emerged in the later eighteenth century from radical dissent.

being linked with Toland, as manifested in an anonymous reply to Stillingfleet's *Vindication* (1697), attributed to Stephen Nye. Toland quoted Nye's view that Stillingfleet 'carpt only at a few Passages' of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), and 'mangl'd and deform'd' these beyond recognition. More tellingly, Nye reproved Stillingfleet for providing no response to the Unitarian arguments against the Trinity, writing 'to these he says not a word, but only falls upon Mr. TOLAND'S Book; *in which, or for which we are not in the least concern'd.*'<sup>148</sup>

Of course, 'deism' and 'atheism' were also much in the mind of Toland's opponents, even if the concern was more that he opened the way for these views. This is encapsulated in Norris' comment that 'as from a *Socinian* 'tis easie to commence a *Deist*; so he that is once a *Deist* is in a hopeful way to be an *Atheist*'.<sup>149</sup> While Toland observed that 'Atheism' was an 'atrocious and unnatural Crime', he saw little need to respond to simple abuse.<sup>150</sup> Likewise, the particular charge of 'deism' itself received little consideration in *An Apology* (1697).

Toland commented that his friends had demanded evidence of this accusation, and 'the ready Answer always was, that truly they had never read the Book, and by the Grace of God never would'.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, Toland reiterated, whether sincerely or otherwise, that his work was ultimately a demonstration of '*the Verity of Divine Revelation against Atheists and all Enemies of Reveal'd Religion.*'<sup>152</sup> While Toland was to become known as the archetypal English 'deist', these contemporary exchanges underscore that this was an attribution that only crystallised at a later stage.

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<sup>148</sup> Toland, *Apology*, 41. [Stephen Nye], *Agreement of the Unitarians, with the Catholick Church: being also a full answer, to the infamations of Mr. Edwards; and the needless exceptions, of my Lords the Bishops of Chichester, Worcester, and Sarum, and of Monsieur De Luzancy* (London: 1697), 54-55.

<sup>149</sup> Norris, *ARF*, 7, 28-29

<sup>150</sup> Toland, *Apology*, 19-20.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 33-34.

These concerns about irreligious belief took place against the generally fractious backdrop of late seventeenth-century Protestantism. Part of the concern about Toland, as he noted with a certain amusement, was the claim he sought to establish a movement or sect of his own. Sir William Handcock, who held the judicial office of Recorder of Dublin, called on the Parliament to ‘protect the CHURCH from all its Enemies, but particularly from the TOLANDISTS’<sup>153</sup> Likewise, Browne speculated ‘he designs to be no more than Head of an ordinary Sect, but to be as famous an Impostor as Mahomet’.<sup>154</sup> For his part, Toland dismissed the view that he was a ‘rigid *Nonconformist*’. While he acknowledged the attraction the dissenters’ views held in his youth, he had come to see an essential concord between different Protestant groups, including the Church of England, putting aside, of course, certain indifferent matters.<sup>155</sup> A further example may underscore the protean character of these affiliations. Toland noted references to his book in *A letter to a convocation-man* (1697) by Francis Atterbury. A High Church clergyman, later the Bishop of Rochester, and eventually a counsellor to ‘James III’, Atterbury referred to a ‘universal Conspiracy amongst a sort of Men, under the Style of Deists, Socinians, Latitudinarians, Deniers of Mysteries, and pretending Explainers of them, to undermine and overthrow the Catholick [Church of England] Faith.’<sup>156</sup> Toland observed that Atterbury’s polemic placed him in the ‘good Company’ of leading figures within the Church of England, namely the Bishop of Salisbury, Gilbert Burnet, and the late Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>154</sup> Brown, *Letter*, 196.

<sup>155</sup> Toland, *Apology*, 18-19.

<sup>156</sup> Francis Atterbury, *A letter to a convocation-man, concerning the rights, powers, and priviledges of that body* (London: 1697), 6.

<sup>157</sup> Toland, *Apology*, 21

The broadly Christian context in which Toland presented his work, and the polysemous way it was received, is something that is worth underscoring, given the frequent representations of him as a modernising or secularising hero of intellectual liberty. Justin Champion, while providing a vivid portrait of Toland's engagement with intellectual culture, tends to draw very starkly the unicity of Toland's views in contrast to the 'broad agreement' of those opposing him.<sup>158</sup> This account has attempted to bring out the sense that, alongside the often-passionate rhetoric, many of these interlocutors were engaged in a more sensitive and thoughtful effort to engage with reason and its limits. Champion is quite right to highlight the '*performance of public dissent*' as a prominent feature of this debate alongside the intellectual content of Toland's work, yet what this dissent meant was itself contentious throughout the controversy, as the different perceptions we have seen of Toland as reformer, protean heretic, and charlatan make clear.<sup>159</sup>

With its independence of outlook and rhetorical flair, it is easy to appreciate how *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) become one of the more memorable works of our period. This chapter has sought to frame this in the context of controversy, bringing out the different philosophical and theological views involved, but with attention to the polemical rhetoric and social context of these discussions. Consideration of the surrounding responses to the work, and the contrasting figures who authored them, offers a fuller and more diverse picture of contemporary views about reason and faith. Ultimately, it is unhelpful to understand Toland's work as a rational assault on religion. As Toland himself pointed out, much of it could be interpreted as consistent with other streams of English thought. Much of the heat of the controversy might be traced to Toland's deliberately provocative style. The work (and its reception) could be contrasted in this respect with Locke's *The Reasonableness of*

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<sup>158</sup> Champion, *Republican learning*, 80.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

*Christianity* (1695), which covered much of the same ground and was published the same year, but lacked the exuberant provocation of Toland's work.<sup>160</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, Locke subsequently acted to distance himself from Toland and the implications of his work.

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<sup>160</sup> In contrast to *Christianity not mysterious*, Locke's work received the critical attention of only one polemicist: John Edwards.

## CHAPTER 7

### A TENDENCY TO SCEPTICISM:

#### LOCKE & STILLINGFLEET (1696-1699)

'Twas loudly exclaim'd, that Mr. *Locke* intended to destroy Religion, nevertheless Religion had nothing to do in the Affair, it being a Question purely Philosophical, altogether independent on Faith and Revelation.

– Voltaire (1733)<sup>1</sup>

John Locke was, according to Voltaire, someone who recognised and defended the appropriate boundaries between faith and knowledge, and their corresponding spheres of religion and philosophy. In contrast, Voltaire discerned the potential to conflate these in Locke's most prominent controversial opponent – the Bishop of Worcester, Edward Stillingfleet – who, 'entred the Lists...., but was defeated; for he argued as a Schoolman, and *Locke* as a Philosopher'.<sup>2</sup> In such passages, Voltaire voiced an immediately recognisable conception of Locke, one that accords with our sense of him as a foundational thinker of the Enlightenment or Age of Reason – someone who 'prepared from afar the light which gradually, by imperceptible degrees, would illuminate the world' – contending with a moribund exemplar of theological conservatism.<sup>3</sup> This chapter, however, aims to give a more complex and multifaceted sense of the debate between these two leading thinkers. It does this through examining the dynamics of their ever-widening polemical dialogue between 1696, when Stillingfleet grouped Locke with Toland as proponents of a 'new way of

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<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, *Letters concerning the English nation* (London: 1733), 101.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1766): Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Preliminary discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard Schwab with Walter Rex (Indianapolis: 1968), 74.

reasoning' in his *Vindication* (1697),<sup>4</sup> and Locke's final voluminous defence of his work, published a few months before the bishop's death on 27 March 1699.<sup>5</sup>

Locke was the most influential British philosopher of his age, and his reputation overshadows his contemporaries and his disputes with them. The historiography has typically portrayed the controversy as a clash between two epistemological systems – often defined by a conflict between the nascent 'empiricism' embodied in Locke's thought, and the traditional views attributed to Stillingfleet.<sup>6</sup> The debate has also been seen in the broader context of a trend towards Christianity 'gradually transmuted by larger infusions of rationalism', with Locke leading to Unitarianism, and inevitably Toland.<sup>7</sup>

These depictions are problematic in several ways. The characterisation of Locke as 'rationalist' or 'latitudinarian' does not adequately capture the probabilistic and sceptical aspects of Locke's thought. Martin Griffin saw the long-term impact of Locke's thought as corroding the 'Latitudinarian system', which, theologically, he shared.<sup>8</sup> However, such broad-brush descriptions of Locke (and Stillingfleet) do not do justice to their complex views of 'reason', often informed by both scepticism and different theological positions on knowledge. Similarly, conceptualising Stillingfleet as a Cartesian or Aristotelian, does not account for the eclectic character of his thought. There has also been a disproportionate focus on Locke: John Redwood afforded minimal treatment to Stillingfleet,<sup>9</sup> and Matthew Stuart described the controversy as 'a contest between a great philosopher and a considerably less

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *A discourse in vindication of the doctrine of the Trinity* [...] (London: 1697), 234.

<sup>5</sup> John Locke, *Mr. Locke's reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter* [...] (London: 1699).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Ayers, *Locke: epistemology and ontology* (New York: 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century* (London: 1881), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Griffin, *Latitudinarianism in the seventeenth-century Church of England* (Leiden: 1992), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*.

than great one'.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the controversy between Locke and Stillingfleet involved two sophisticated thinkers and arose in the context of a range of intersecting intellectual circumstances across contemporary natural philosophy, metaphysics, and theology.

This chapter endeavours to show that the debate was both more and less than what is seen in these broad-brush depictions: a multi-faceted, contingent and wide-ranging squabble between two proud and knowledgeable men, conscious of their professional standing and legacies; a clash of personalities as much as ideas. In so doing, it highlights the participants' attitudes to, and reflections on, controversy that afford a richer sense of the dispute as an intellectual episode. Through considering the broader culture of controversy, it sheds light on the subtler differences of philosophy and theology that were strengthened and entrenched in debate. At a distance of some centuries, it is possible to discern multitudinous factors enlivening the dispute: a general drift towards rational religion,<sup>11</sup> the Trinitarian controversy,<sup>12</sup> the eclipse of Aristotelian physics in the face of the new experimental natural philosophy,<sup>13</sup> the influence of the philosophy of Descartes and 'Cartesianism',<sup>14</sup> the 'reasonable' Christianity of the 'Latitudinarians',<sup>15</sup> and the presence of emerging potentially irreligious intellectual traditions, whether 'deistic', 'atheistic', or 'sceptical'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Stuart, 'The correspondence with Stillingfleet,' in *A companion to Locke*, edited by Matthew Stuart (Chicester: 2015), 354-370," 369.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen, *English thought*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> M. Stewart, "Stillingfleet and the way of ideas," *English philosophy in the age of Locke*, ed. M. Stewart (Oxford: 2000), 245-80.

<sup>13</sup> Ayers, *Locke*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Lennon, *The battle of the Gods and Giants: the legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715* (Princeton: 1993), 253-366.

<sup>15</sup> Griffin, *Latitudinarianism*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Popkin, "The philosophy of Bishop Stillingfleet," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9(3) (1971): 303-319, 316-317.

Even among early modern debates, the controversy between Stillingfleet and Locke followed a rather unruly trajectory. The correspondence as outlined was voluminous and wide-ranging, and, as it evolved, included a significant amount of rhetoric, repetition and acrimonious pedantry. The focus of the philosophical and theological discussion shifts variously throughout the correspondence, responsive both to Stillingfleet reframing and broadening his criticisms, and Locke's different approaches to defending his work. Prompted by Stillingfleet's criticism of Locke (grouping him with Toland) in his *Vindication* (1696),<sup>17</sup> Locke wrote to Stillingfleet to clarify his position: *A Letter to the Right Reverend Edward Ld Bishop of Worcester* (1697) (*Locke-1*). Stillingfleet responded later that year with his *Answer to Mr. Locke's Letter* (1697) (*Stillingfleet-1*),<sup>18</sup> which was followed by Locke's *Mr. Locke's Reply* (1697) (*Locke-2*),<sup>19</sup> Stillingfleet's *Answer to Mr. Locke's Second Letter* (1698) (*Stillingfleet-2*),<sup>20</sup> and finally, Locke's *Reply to the Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter* (1699) (*Locke-3*). At this point, Stillingfleet's death in November 1699 brought the correspondence to a close.

In examining the controversy, this chapter follows a loose chronology, focussing on the key themes as they emerged, but with attention to how controversy catalysed and expanded issues and sharpened divisions. The first section of this chapter introduces Stillingfleet, emphasising the centrality of controversy to his career, and the immediate catalyst for the debate. The second section turns to Stillingfleet's charge that Locke's account of 'substance' undermined the Trinity. The third section explores the widening of the debate to encompass broader issues, including the nature of the soul. This is continued with an account of Locke's

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<sup>17</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> Stillingfleet, *The Bishop of Worcester's answer to Mr. Locke's Letter* [...] (London: 1697).

<sup>19</sup> John Locke, *Mr. Locke's reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Letter* [...] (London: 1697).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *The Bishop of Worcester's answer to Mr. Locke's second letter: wherein his notion of ideas is prov'd to be inconsistent with it self, and with the articles of the Christian faith* (London: 1698).

relation to ‘scepticism’. Finally, the chapter reviews the characterisations of the two men as shaped by their controversy.

### I. *Stillingfleet and the ‘new way of reasoning’*

[S]ome may think it the first Part of Wisdom not to begin in such Disputes (and I am of their Mind if they did not touch the Christian Faith).

– Stillingfleet (1698)<sup>21</sup>

Before proceeding to the controversy, it is appropriate to consider Stillingfleet and the concerns he brought forward in prosecuting this dispute, as well as the circumstances that prompted this – namely the Socinian Controversy. (Locke and his great work – the *Essay* – have been introduced previously.<sup>22</sup>) At the time he was writing the *Vindication* (1697) that started the whole affair, Stillingfleet had been a foremost intellectual presence in the Church of England for decades. Born in 1635 in Dorset, he was educated at St John’s College, Cambridge from 1648.<sup>23</sup> He worked as a tutor, before receiving the Rectory of Sutton in 1657. Stillingfleet established his reputation with two early publications: his *Irenicum* (1659), which sought to facilitate unity among Protestant groups, and *Origines Sacrae* (1662), an enormously erudite work concerned with defending the historical creditability of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> He subsequently attained various ecclesiastical positions. Stillingfleet supported the revolution of 1688, and was one of a group of ‘latitudinarians’ to benefit from this, being appointed as the Bishop of Worcester in 1689.

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<sup>21</sup> *Stillingfleet*–2, 178.

<sup>22</sup> See Part II, Chapter 5, III.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Bentley, “The life and character of that eminent and leaned prelate, the late Dr. Edw. Stillingfleet, Lord Bishop of Worcester,” in *The works of that eminent and most learned prelate, Dr. Edw. Stillingfleet, late Lord Bishop of Worcester* (London: 1710), I:3.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *Irenicum a weapon-salve for the Churches wounds* [...], 2nd ed. (London: 1662).

While Stillingfleet looms large in the work of church historians such as John Spurr, he is less conspicuous in that of intellectual historians, despite being a leading figure. As noted previously, Stillingfleet is generally seen as a proponent of ‘latitudinarianism’. Yet, as we shall see, this is another situation where broad historical generalisations do not do justice to the individuality of a significant thinker. Certainly, as Robert Carroll has emphasised, Stillingfleet devoted much of his life to advocating a philosophical position that asserted the ‘reasonableness’ of Church of England Christianity, based on natural religion and its historical creditability.<sup>25</sup> Stillingfleet also maintained an interest in developments in natural philosophy; for instance, he had encouraged Boyle’s apologetic efforts.<sup>26</sup> Yet, as M. A. Stewart has argued, Stillingfleet’s approach was eclectic.<sup>27</sup> While Stillingfleet was influenced by Descartes, he increasingly saw the limitations of the Cartesian worldview, particularly towards the end of his life.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps above all, he set significant stress on the patristic tradition.<sup>29</sup>

It might be added that, while Locke was to be Stillingfleet’s antagonist, he was in many respects religiously conservative. In some ways, his views had much in common with our sense of ‘latitudinarianism’. Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) purported to identify a central core of Christianity, seeking a position that eschewed dogmatic principles and that aimed to be acceptable to all Christians, regardless of sectarian views.<sup>30</sup> Yet as the controversy would reveal, Stillingfleet was attached to a more expansive vision of what true

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Carroll, *The common-sense philosophy of religion of Bishop Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699)* (The Hague: 1975), 39.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Hunter, *Robert Boyle 1627-1691 scrupulosity and science* (Woodbridge: 2000), 80.

<sup>27</sup> Stewart, “Way of ideas,” 256-257.

<sup>28</sup> Lennon, *Gods and Giants*, 354-357.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Cornwall, “The search for the primitive Church: the use of early Church Fathers in the High Church Anglican tradition, 1680-174,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 59(3) (1990): 303-29, 305.

<sup>30</sup> John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As delivered in the Scriptures* (London: 1695).

Christianity ought to be. With this in mind, our focus will be on bringing out the nuances and individual character of Stillingfleet's writing in this controversy, rather than seeing him purely as an exponent of latitudinarianism. In particular, we see Stillingfleet not merely as an abstract embodiment of this ideology, but rather as a pugnacious defender of his own personal beliefs about what the Church should and should not be.

Over the course of his long career, Stillingfleet was, to quote Bentley, 'an invincible Champion of the Church of *England*', habitually waging disputes with Roman Catholic apologists, the 'deists', and the 'Socinians'.<sup>31</sup> Bentley celebrated him as a victorious hero of intellectual conflict, who braved 'the impetuous Assaults' of an 'enraged Enemy'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, at times Stillingfleet cast himself quite strikingly in bellicose terms. In a work against the Catholic priest Thomas Godden, he wrote it was 'no unpleasant entertainment' to see his many opponents, 'some with piteous moans and outcries, others grinning and only shewing their teeth, others ranting and Hectoring'. Like one of Homer's heroes, Stillingfleet 'reserved' Godden for special attention, having 'shaken off the lesser and more *barking* Creatures'.<sup>33</sup> Yet while disputes constituted much of his work, Stillingfleet was also able to see a negative side to controversy, once suggesting that it 'helped as much to the finding out of *Truth*, as the *fighting* of two *Cocks* on a *dunghil* doth the *finding* out the *Jewel* that lyes there.'<sup>34</sup>

Stillingfleet's *Vindication* (1697) was a further attempt to defend the orthodox account of the Trinity against various '*Socinian Pamphlets*'. Chapter X specifically addressed *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), in which Toland argued against the 'mysterious', or existence of

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<sup>31</sup> Bentley, *Life and character*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *A defence of the Discourse concerning the idolatry practised in the Church of Rome in answer to a book entituled, Catholicks no idolators* (London: 1676), Dedication [16].

<sup>34</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacræ*, 429.

things ‘above reason’, in religion, and was strongly suspected of targeting the Trinity. Stillingfleet criticised Toland’s account of ‘Reason’ and the implications of his views.<sup>35</sup> He noted Toland’s debt to Locke, and it was, therefore, the theological inferences drawn from Locke’s theories that saw Stillingfleet group him together with Toland as ‘Gentlemen of this new way of reasoning’.<sup>36</sup>

Discussion of knowledge and its limitations would be a theme that would develop throughout the debate (and will be considered later in this chapter); however, passing over this, Stillingfleet’s first reference to Locke’s philosophical views was to the critical account of the notion of ‘substance’ given in the *Essay*.

## ***II. Substance and the Trinity***

For the modern reader, the concept of ‘substance’ is elusive; however, it was fundamental to Aristotelian physics as received in the early modern period,<sup>37</sup> and remained central to more recent thinkers, including Descartes and his followers.<sup>38</sup> Equally, ‘substance’ was relevant to understandings of theological concepts such as the Trinity and transubstantiation, and featured in Stillingfleet’s own engagement with these issues.<sup>39</sup> Throughout his publications, Stillingfleet sought a middle course on the ‘mysteries’ of Christianity, attacking the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (that the bread and wine became in ‘substance’ the body and

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<sup>35</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 232. Toland, *CNM*, 8, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 234.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle (384-322BC) discussed ‘οὐσία’ (being/beingness) in his *Categories* and *Metaphysics*, which was transmitted to medieval scholastics and the early moderns as the Latin ‘*substantia*’.

<sup>38</sup> It is, for instance, integral to Descartes’ famous cogito argument. See: Peter Markie, “The Cogito and its importance,” in *The Cambridge companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: 1992), 140-173, 160.

<sup>39</sup> Stewart, “Way of ideas,” 248-249.

blood of Jesus) as ‘Non-sense’ and ‘Contradiction’,<sup>40</sup> but defending the Trinity against the charge that ‘three to be but one’ was an absurdity.<sup>41</sup>

The *Vindication* (1697) reflected these ongoing concerns. As knowledge of the Trinity depended on ‘Knowledge of the Nature of *Substance*, and *Person* and the *Distinction* between them’, this philosophical category, and one’s capacity to have ‘*clear Ideas*’ about it, was central to Stillingfleet’s defence of the doctrine in rationalistic terms (‘in point of reason’).<sup>42</sup> Toland, for his part, wrote little about substance, though he said it was impossible to conceive the essence of any substance in the world, something which he thought undercut one possible argument to support the existence of mysteries.<sup>43</sup> Locke, however, in the *Essay* belittled ‘substance’ as an obscure and philosophically inefficacious notion.<sup>44</sup> The *Essay* commented on ‘substance’ at a number of points:<sup>45</sup> there was some variation in the strength of Locke’s criticism,<sup>46</sup> and it is fair to say, some lack of clarity in his terminology.<sup>47</sup> For Locke, ‘substance’ emerges as a customary supposition based on the ‘simple *Ideas*’ the mind receives. It takes the form of a ‘*Substratum*’ to those ideas that are known, but itself remains indistinct – becoming, for the thinker, ‘something, he knew not what’. Substance is ‘nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those qualities, we find existing.’<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *The doctrine of the Trinity and transubstantiation compared as to Scripture, reason, and tradition* (London: 1688), 35.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 233.

<sup>43</sup> Toland, *CNM*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II, XXIII, §2.

<sup>45</sup> The principal sections are: Locke, *Essay*, I, IV, §18; II, XIII, §17-20; and II, 23, §1-5.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathon Bennet, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: central themes* (Oxford: 1971), 59-63.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Millican, “Locke on substance and our ideas of substances”, in *Locke and Leibniz on substance*, ed. Paul Lodge, Tom Stoneham (New York: 2015), 8-27, 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II, XXIII, §1-2.

In this context, Stillingfleet put forward a critique of Locke's views of 'substance', and the epistemological system on which he based these. Noting Locke's notion that 'substance' emerges through custom, Stillingfleet questioned the consonance of this with a basis in sensation or reflection (as required in Locke's system). For Stillingfleet, the scepticism of Locke and his followers – among whom he numbered Toland – 'had almost discarded *Substance* out of the reasonable part of the World'.<sup>49</sup>

Given Stillingfleet was a 'Man of Great Name', Locke's friend the Irish natural philosopher William Molyneux suggested he 'give some Answer'. Far from foreseeing an extensive campaign, Molyneux predicted this would be 'no difficult task', and might take a circumscribed form, such as notice in the next edition of the *Essay*.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Locke's *A Letter to the Bishop of Worcester* (1697), which was already written, was a conciliatory response. Locke referred to the 'great Honour' that Stillingfleet bestowed any of his 'valuable Minutes' on the *Essay*.<sup>51</sup> He clarified that 'there is not to be found any thin[g] like an Objection against the Trinity' in the work. He offered a detailed reply to the points Stillingfleet raised, and while he promised to 'condemn and quit' any of his views contrary to Revelation, he said he did not perceive any such thing in the *Essay*.<sup>52</sup>

Turning to 'substance', Locke sought to explain the origin of 'substance' as 'a complex idea.'<sup>53</sup> Locke clarified that he did not 'deny or doubt' the existence of 'substance'. He acknowledged that he thought 'meanly' of the *idea* of substance, considering it to be

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<sup>49</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 234.

<sup>50</sup> William Molyneux to John Locke, 3 February 1697, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 5 [2189], 766-767.

<sup>51</sup> *Locke-I*, 1-2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

imperfect, inadequate and obscure.<sup>54</sup> Yet, he continued, ‘substance cannot be discarded; because all simple ideas, all sensible qualities, carry with them a supposition of a substratum to exist in, and of a substance wherein they inhere’.<sup>55</sup>

Locke’s account of ‘substance’ has been seen as advancing the views of the mechanical philosophy against Aristotelianism.<sup>56</sup> There are different opinions as to how far-reaching Locke’s views actually were. Jonathon Bennett has portrayed Locke as having a ‘doubleness of attitude’, divided between the customary view and rejecting ‘substance’ on empirical grounds.<sup>57</sup> Michael Ayers has suggested Locke only actually recognised the unknown and unknowable mechanical particles as substratum.<sup>58</sup> Certainly, Locke suggested that his comments regarding substance— far from being radical – were consistent with a level of doubt present in the scholastic tradition, writing that the ‘whole Tribe of Logicians’ concurred in his views.<sup>59</sup>

Despite Stillingfleet’s imputation, Locke avoided any definitive pronouncement on the Trinity throughout the controversy. Challenged to own the doctrine ‘as it had been received in the Christian Church’, Locke pointed out that that itself was a complex question. One might take ‘a short way to Orthodoxy’, but this would mean being ‘bold with Truth’.<sup>60</sup> The question of Locke’s personal views on the Trinity and association with ‘Socinianism’ is longstanding. In a balanced account, John Marshall convincingly argued it is likely but not

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<sup>54</sup> Quoting the *Essay*, II, XIII, Locke wrote – ‘we have no Idea of what it is. But only a confus’d, obscure one, of what it does’: *Locke-I*, 11-13.

<sup>55</sup> *Locke-I*, 9-10.

<sup>56</sup> Edwin McCann, “Locke on Substance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding”* ed. Lex Newman (Cambridge: 2007): 157-191, 191.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathon Bennett, “Substratum,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4(2) (1987):197-215.

<sup>58</sup> Ayers, *Locke*, 2:39-50.

<sup>59</sup> Locke referred to Franco Burgersdijk and Robert Sanderson among them: *Locke-3*, 381.

<sup>60</sup> *Locke-3*, 7-8.

definite that Locke did not believe in the Trinity, but rightly emphasised his focus on the ‘duty to search’ of a philosopher focused on probabilities rather than specific doctrinal positions.<sup>61</sup> Complementing this, Victor Nuovo considers Locke was not a ‘Socinian’ insofar as he was not a follower of Socinus or someone who adopted a Socinian agenda, but sees Locke as part of a broad tradition of theological liberalism (including Socinus, Grotius, Hooker and the Tew Circle), who were often suspected of Socinianism.<sup>62</sup>

In the absence of any direct attack on the Trinity, the disagreement about substance was an obscure catalyst for a controversy of such magnitude. The chapter in question in the *Vindication* was a rather diffuse collection of objections, and Stillingfleet overemphasised the connection between Locke’s treatment of substance and the conclusions being drawn by Toland. What is more, Stillingfleet apparently held Locke in ‘great esteem and respect’ before they fell out.<sup>63</sup> The entire episode was not so much an inevitable clash between irreconcilable systems, but also a matter of ill chance, with the coincidence of several frames of complexity. To begin with, Locke’s explanation of ‘substance’ was both complex and debatable – Stillingfleet could be forgiven for not following all its subtleties. This was compounded by Toland’s uncompromising exposition of his own views. Finally, Stillingfleet drew his own implications from both Locke’s and Toland’s work and, by the time the debate arose, held preconceptions of where it all tended that he was unwilling to relinquish.

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<sup>61</sup> John Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism, “Socinianism”, and Unitarianism,” in *English philosophy in the age of Locke*, ed. M Stewart, (Oxford: 2000), 111-182;

<sup>62</sup> Victor Nuovo, “Locke’s theology,” in *English philosophy in the age of Locke*, ed. M.. Stewart (Oxford: 2000), 183-215.

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Berkeley to John Locke, c. 18 February 1697, in: Locke, *Correspondence*, 5:785.

### III. *The implications of Locke's theories*

In connection with his concerns about 'substance', Stillingfleet's *Vindication* (1697) drew attention to a number of perceived implications of Locke's *Essay* (1689), including for what we can know about the nature of the soul, and the existence of God itself. In *Origines Sacrae* (1662), Stillingfleet had emphasised the dependence of the 'Principles of all Religion' on the immortality of the soul.<sup>64</sup> Yet, while Locke argued his views were consonant with Christianity, Stillingfleet remained dissatisfied, embroiling them further in debate.<sup>65</sup>

For Stillingfleet, Locke's theory of knowledge made it 'impossible to prove a Spiritual Substance in us' and thus, to evidence the immateriality of the soul.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Locke observed in the *Essay* (1689) we 'possibly shall never be able to know, whether Matter thinks, or no'. Thus, it was possible there may be 'given to Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think,' or alternatively, 'joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial Substance'. Locke did not see this as at odds with Christianity (indeed various radical protestants expressed such views). He explained it was within the omnipotent power of God to order either alternative, and emphasised the difficulties in assessing and resolving this question.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps anticipating objections, Locke underscored that he did not wish to 'any way lessen the belief of the Soul's Immateriality'. He wrote that 'All the great Ends of Morality and Religion, are well enough secured, without philosophical Proofs of the Soul's Immateriality', namely through the resurrection.<sup>68</sup> Locke's assurances in this regard were not sufficient for Stillingfleet. Throughout his writings, Stillingfleet argued that the soul was

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<sup>64</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 360, 411. Stillingfleet devoted six sermons to this: Edward Stillingfleet, *Fifty sermons preached upon several occasions* (London: 1707), Sermons XLI-XLVI.

<sup>65</sup> The longstanding debate over the soul is discussed at: Chapter 9, §II.

<sup>66</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 232.

<sup>67</sup> 'Christian mortalism' is discussed further in Part III.

<sup>68</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV, III, §6.

naturally immaterial and immortal, and afforded this a central place in his apologetics against figures like Hobbes and Epicurus.<sup>69</sup>

In responding to Stillingfleet, Locke emphasised that he considered it was ‘in the highest degree probable’ that the soul was immaterial. He did not feel that much could be added to his comments in the *Essay* about this not being necessary to Religion, (due to God’s power to annex immortality to matter). However, he further supported his position with a scriptural authority, namely 1. Corinthians 15: 53, ‘For this Corruptible must put on Incorruption, and this Mortal must put on Immortality’.<sup>70</sup> Locke also included a discussion of usages of ‘Spirit’ in the Scripture, as well as in Cicero and Virgil to support his uncertainty surrounding this issue.<sup>71</sup>

While Locke did not entirely accept Stillingfleet’s position, his response was one of conciliatory explanation rather than disagreement. Yet Stillingfleet’s rejoinder was uncompromising and even personal. In his *Answer to Mr. Locke’s Letter* (1697), he described Locke’s letter as ‘A *Complaint* of me, and a *Vindication* of your self’, entrenching his position with an insistence that Locke was in error.<sup>72</sup> Locke told Molyneux that the controversy was ‘a matter of serious moment beyond what I could have thought’.<sup>73</sup>

Again, Stillingfleet paid significant attention to the question of the soul, emphasising his dissatisfaction with any position that relied on immortality based on God’s will, rather than ‘*Souls Immortality by Nature*’.<sup>74</sup> He criticised Locke’s philological account of the use of

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<sup>69</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 365.

<sup>70</sup> *Locke–1*, 67.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 68-72.

<sup>72</sup> *Stillingfleet–1*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> John Locke to William Molyneux, 3 May 1697, in: Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2254], 107.

<sup>74</sup> *Stillingfleet–1*, 56, 60.

‘Spirit’ in scriptural and classical texts.<sup>75</sup> Stillingfleet rephrased Locke to present his own view: ‘the *great ends of Religion and Morality* are best secured by the Proofs of the *Immortality of the Soul* from its *Nature and Properties*; and which I think prove it *Immaterial*.’ Stillingfleet acknowledged the capacity of the omnipotent deity to ‘give *Immortality* to a *Material Substance*’. However, he considered this view would cast doubt on immortality, as this would depend wholly upon God’s intervention contrary to nature. For him, the material soul was really ‘nothing but *Life*; or Matter put into Motion’, this would make a ‘plain Absurdity’ of the idea that God preserved life after death.<sup>76</sup> Stillingfleet equated these views of the soul’s materiality with those expressed in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. He went on to question what implications Locke’s views might have on such matters as the Resurrection, and free will, which he argued were absurd without an immaterial soul.<sup>77</sup>

It should be emphasised that Locke was not arguing, either directly or indirectly, for materialism. Rather his argument was about the limitations of human knowledge – that the nature of the soul is not something that could be known with certainty. Locke’s agnosticism about the soul points to the importance of Locke’s religious commitments, the radical protestant undercurrents of Locke’s thought, and an important aspect of his legacy at odds with his reputation as a modernising influence.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, there is evidence that Locke inclined towards mortalist views.<sup>79</sup> Yet while some historians are decided in viewing Locke

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 54-55.

<sup>77</sup> *Stillingfleet–1*, 55, 65, 73-74.

<sup>78</sup> B. Young, “‘The soul-sleeping system’: politics and heresy in eighteenth-century England,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45(1) (1994): 64-81. This is explored in Part III.

<sup>79</sup> ‘I must confess by *Death*... I can understand nothing but a ceasing to be, the losing of all actions of *Life* and *Sense*’: John Locke, *The reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures* (London: 1695), 6.

as a mortalist, his approach also reflected an emphasis on probability rather than certainty and a scrupulous avoidance of dogmatic position.<sup>80</sup>

Another aspect in the debate on the soul reflected different views about God's relationship to creation. Locke suggested the effect of Stillingfleet's views were to 'to set Bound's to God's Omnipotency', and would render impossible aspects of the Scripture.<sup>81</sup> Stillingfleet equated Locke's appeal to God's omnipotence with arguments used by Catholics to defend the doctrine of transubstantiation (or any absurd position).<sup>82</sup> For John Henry, Locke placed a 'voluntarist' emphasis on God's absolute power and will, against Stillingfleet's 'intellectualist' account of God's providence.<sup>83</sup> Yet it is possible to over-emphasise this distinction, given Locke and Stillingfleet's appeal to arguments in a controversial context to support their existing positions.

The complexities of this matter were reflected in the thinkers' attitudes to Descartes. Locke attributed Stillingfleet's views to a Cartesian account of God's providence, pointing out during the controversy that there was 'no Body, before *Des Cartes*, that ever pretended to shew that there was any Contradiction' in an omnipotent deity being able to confer a thinking power on matter.<sup>84</sup> Stillingfleet's position, however, was not reducible to Cartesianism. Not only did Stillingfleet accuse Locke of following in Descartes' path as a proponent of the 'way of Ideas',<sup>85</sup> his re-writing of *Origines Sacrae* (1702) reveals an increasing concern about

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<sup>80</sup> Liam Dempsey, "John Locke, 'Hobbist': of sleeping souls and thinking matter," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 47:4 (2017): 454-476. Diego Lucci, *John Locke's Christianity* (Cambridge: 2020), Chapter 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Locke-3*, 413. Locke references Balaam's ass: Numbers 22: 21-28.

<sup>82</sup> *Stillingfleet-1*, 78.

<sup>83</sup> John Henry, "Voluntarist theology at the origins of modern science: a response to Peter Harrison," *History of Science* xlvii (2009): 79-113, 96.

<sup>84</sup> *Locke-3*, 411.

<sup>85</sup> *Stillingfleet-2*, 66.

Descartes' influence towards the end of his life.<sup>86</sup> So too, while Stillingfleet and Locke expressed positions consistent with 'intellectualism' and 'voluntarism', this was relative to each other rather than absolute. As such, Stillingfleet would take a position more consistent with voluntarism in his critique of Descartes.<sup>87</sup>

Beyond the immateriality of the soul, Stillingfleet questioned whether Locke's theories undermined arguments for the existence of God himself.<sup>88</sup> Stillingfleet noted that Locke had indeed offered with '*Mathematical Certainty*' a proof of God's existence,<sup>89</sup> however, he questioned why Locke had passed over 'the Argument from the *clear and distinct Idea of God*',<sup>90</sup> a reference to the 'Ontological Argument' put forward by Descartes, and developed earlier by Anselm, that held that the idea of God is of a supremely perfect being and, as existence is perfection, this cannot be excluded from God.<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, Stillingfleet attacked Locke's attitude to the argument from universal consensus on the existence of God. In his critique of the notion of 'innate ideas' in the *Essay*, Locke had cited evidence from the exploration of the New World to suggest that the inhabitants had 'no Notion of a God'.<sup>92</sup> Stillingfleet questioned the accuracy of the sources Locke had relied on in reaching this view. More broadly, he challenged Locke's motivations for taking issue with an argument so widely accepted.<sup>93</sup> Stillingfleet had prepared a more detailed account of his views in the unfinished revised version of *Origines Sacrae* (1702), which was published

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<sup>86</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 7th ed. (Cambridge: 1702), 78.

<sup>87</sup> Jeffrey Wigelsworth, "Edward Stillingfleet's theological critique of Cartesian natural philosophy," *History of European Ideas*, 46:8 (2020): 1150-1164.

<sup>88</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 246.

<sup>89</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV, X, §1.

<sup>90</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, 246-247.

<sup>91</sup> The main statement is the fifth meditation: Descartes, *Meditations*, 35. Anselm, *Proslogion with the replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, ed. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: 2001), viii.

<sup>92</sup> Locke, *Essay*, I, III, §8.

<sup>93</sup> *Stillingfleet-1*, 89.

posthumously, defending this argument, and suggesting testimony from the Spanish and Portuguese was unreliable, given their interests in colonising the New World.<sup>94</sup>

As we have seen, the debate, sparked by Toland's use of Locke's theory, expanded to encompass a multiplicity of issues of ever greater complexity. For Stillingfleet, the arguments Locke used in affirming the existence of God (and those he passed over) again raised the suspicion that he was destroying accepted knowledge and effectively undermining Christianity.

#### IV. 'Certainty by reason, by ideas, and of faith'

That your own Grounds of Certainty, tend to Scepticism; and that in an Age wherein the Mysteries of Faith are too much exposed by the Promoters of Scepticism and Infidelity, it is a thing of dangerous Consequence to start such new Methods of Certainty, as are apt to leave Men's minds more doubtfull than before.  
– Stillingfleet (1698)<sup>95</sup>

As the debate went on, Stillingfleet increasingly characterised Locke as promoting philosophical scepticism. The *Vindication* (1697) referred to general concerns about the Socinian debate leading to 'Scepticism and Infidelity' without connecting this to Locke;<sup>96</sup> the first response to Locke would suggest his thought 'promoted' scepticism;<sup>97</sup> yet according to Stillingfleet's final letter, Locke 'overthrows all that which hath been accounted *Science* and

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<sup>94</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae* (1702), 78.

<sup>95</sup> *Stillingfleet-2*, 20.

<sup>96</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication*, xlvi, 2.

<sup>97</sup> *Stillingfleet-1*, 23, 38, 125.

*Demonstration*, and must lay the Foundation of *Scepticism*'.<sup>98</sup> Stillingfleet summarised these concerns at the very end of his last response to Locke in 1698:

What I have now done, I thought it my Duty to do, not with respect to my self, but to some of the Mysteries of our Faith; which I do not charge you with opposing, but with laying such Foundations as do tend to the Overthrow of them; of which we have had too much Experience already; and may have more, if your Way of Certainty by Ideas should obtain.<sup>99</sup>

Locke, perplexed by the shifting nature of Stillingfleet's arguments, protested that if Stillingfleet's concerns were genuine, he should have raised them at the outset. Locke complained about the 'strange way your Lordship has brought me into this Controversie; your gradual Accusations of my Book, and the different Causes your Lordship has assigned of them; together with Quotations out of it, which I cannot find there'.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, the nature of certainty, and knowledge through reason and faith (touched on in the themes above) was an ongoing theme in the discussion.

In the years prior to the controversy, Locke and Stillingfleet had both had occasion to consider the concepts of reason and faith and the relation of these to knowledge of both natural and theological matters. As previously noted, Stillingfleet's philosophy had afforded a central place for 'reason', which he put forward against what he saw as the over-reliance on faith (fideism) of opponents such as English Catholic Priest John Sergeant.<sup>101</sup> Conversely, Stillingfleet defended the 'mysterious' in Christianity against those who – like Toland –

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<sup>98</sup> *Stillingfleet*–3, 107.

<sup>99</sup> *Stillingfleet*–2, 177.

<sup>100</sup> *Locke*–3, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Sergeant had advocated a revised form of Aristotelian philosophy. He had written *Sure footing in Christianity, or rational discourses on the Rule of Faith* (London: 1665). Edward Stillingfleet, *Several conferences between a Romish priest, a fanatick chaplain, and a divine of the Church of England, concerning the idolatry of the Church of Rome: being a full Answer to the late Dialogues of T. G.* (London: 1679).

subjected religion entirely to reason. Meanwhile, Locke's *Essay* sought to demarcate the respective domains of faith and reason, with a view to attacking religious 'enthusiasm'.<sup>102</sup>

During the course of the discussion surrounding the immateriality of the soul, Locke and Stillingfleet debated whether there could be 'certainty' as to this issue. Locke argued it was only 'highly probable', whereas Stillingfleet insisted one could be 'certain' through reason. Locke rejected the phrase 'certainty of faith'. Locke stated to Stillingfleet: 'I humbly conceive that the certainty of faith...has nothing to do with the certainty of knowledge.' Locke continued that 'Faith stands by itself, and upon grounds of its own'.<sup>103</sup> Locke also suggested that Stillingfleet's claims that his theories undermined the certainty of Christianity itself amounted to the position that: 'Divine Revelation abates of its Credibility in all those Articles it proposes proportionably as Humane Reason fails to support the Testimony of God.'<sup>104</sup> Locke thus accused Stillingfleet of subjecting Christian revelation to the standards of human reasoning.

Regarding knowledge of natural philosophy, Locke emphasised that 'how far so ever humane industry may advance useful *experimental* Philosophy in *physical Things, scientific* will still be out of our reach'.<sup>105</sup> Thus, knowledge in the strict terms of 'scientia' is unachievable. Elliot Rossiter links Locke's account of knowledge with his views of providence.<sup>106</sup> Rossiter noted Locke's view of natural philosophy as a religious endeavour that would reveal God's providential design in creation, and at the same time his view that God providentially placed limits on the capacity for knowledge, to check human pride.

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<sup>102</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV, XVIII.

<sup>103</sup> *Locke-2*, 95.

<sup>104</sup> *Locke-3*, 418-419.

<sup>105</sup> Locke, *Essay*, IV, III, §26.

<sup>106</sup> Elliot Rossiter "Locke, providence, and the limits of natural philosophy," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (2014), 22:2, 217-235.

Stillingfleet's views as stated elsewhere were, in many respects, compatible and even akin to Locke's. However, the controversy sharpened and defined the distance between them. At the very beginning of *Origines Sacrae* (1662), Stillingfleet emphasised the impact of the Fall on human knowledge. While Stillingfleet praised the search for knowledge and truth, he saw this as the '*recovery of some precious Jewels which were lost out of sight, and sunk in the shipwrack of humane nature.*'<sup>107</sup> Over the course of subsequent paragraphs, Stillingfleet provided some comments as to his views of human knowledge before and after the Fall. As to the former, Stillingfleet repeatedly emphasised the 'perfection' of faculties at that point.<sup>108</sup> Stillingfleet asserted that the '*soul of man*' was created with the capacity to discover truth 'by a *light set up in his understanding*'. Stillingfleet elaborated this point with reference to Plato's notion of anamnesis; in particular that '*all knowledge is remembrance, and all ignorance forgetfulness*'. Stillingfleet re-conceptualised this with reference to the Fall, stating that '*forgetfulness*' should be taken to mean '*loss*' and '*remembrance*' the '*recovery of those notions and conceptions of things*' possessed in the '*pure and primitive state*'.<sup>109</sup>

As the foregoing shows, Locke and Stillingfleet reached different conclusions on what can be known about theological matters, yet both recognised the limited and fallible nature of human reason. Stillingfleet and Locke also concurred on the interrelatedness of faith and reason, although they construed this relationship differently. Thus, both men found it natural to use religious language and concepts in delimiting the horizons of knowledge. Stillingfleet, however, placed greater emphasis on the role of reason in discussing theological concepts. Stillingfleet's 'common sense' approach reflected some of his broader interests: in his

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<sup>107</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 1.

<sup>108</sup> Stillingfleet states that '*the understanding was the truest Microcosm, in which all the beings of the inferior world were faithfully represented according to their true, native, and genuine perfections*': 'There was not then so vast a *difference* between the *Angelical* and *humane* life'; 'man's *knowledge* as it respects his *fellow-creatures*' was '*fully known*': Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 3.

<sup>109</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 2.

capacity as Bishop, he was involved in ecclesiastical proceedings, and was more generally associated with the legal community, including Sir Matthew Hale, and Lord Chief Justice Vaughan.<sup>110</sup> In this regard, Robert Carroll observed that Stillingfleet's works take a form analogous to a legal brief, setting out numerous arguments that seek to establish the reasonableness of his views.<sup>111</sup>

In contrast, Locke's views reflect a more circumscribed account of what can be known. While Locke was committed to a Christianity of personal revelation, he placed additional constraints on what properly could be considered to constitute the Christian religion. Thus, as Nicholas Jolley noted, Locke's position on reason and faith in the *Essay* resulted in a 'shrinking of the sphere of knowledge and the corresponding expansion of the sphere of belief'.<sup>112</sup>

#### V. *A schoolman versus a philosopher*

While later figures like Voltaire would contrast the 'empiricism' of Locke with the alleged 'scholasticism' of Stillingfleet, the latter's relation to advances in natural philosophy was not that of the Aristotelian reactionary. There are some points in the controversy when the merits of the philosophical tradition of Aristotle were discussed, and compared with the 'new philosophies'. In his *Answer to Mr. Locke's Second Letter*, Stillingfleet sounded a cautionary note about emphasis on mathematical and material systems in philosophy 'of which we have

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<sup>110</sup> Bentley, *Life and character*, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Carroll, *Edward Stillingfleet*, 17.

<sup>112</sup> Nicholas Jolley, "Locke on faith and reason," in *The Cambridge companion to Locke's "Essay concerning human understanding"* ed. Lex Newman, (Cambridge: 2007), 436-455, 439

a remarkable Instance in the System of *Des Cartes*.<sup>113</sup> In response, Locke attacked Stillingfleet:

I will crave leave to say, That the secluding Mathematical Reasoning from Philosophy, and instead thereof reducing it to Aristotelian Rules and Sayings, will not be thought to be much in favour of Knowledge against Scepticism.<sup>114</sup>

It is important to see statements of this kind in the context of the polemical dialogue in which they occur. Despite Locke's comments outlined above, Stillingfleet did not uncritically adopt traditional philosophical positions. Indeed, he himself criticised Locke on this point: 'I leave to you the Honour of this *Scholastick Language*, which is always most proper when there is nothing under it.'<sup>115</sup>

While Stillingfleet did appeal to elements of scholastic philosophy to support his views of substance, he followed what he called the 'great improvement' in natural philosophy closely,<sup>116</sup> and sought to ensure this furthered the ends of, and did not compromise, Christianity. In furtherance of this objective, he had encouraged Boyle's apologetic efforts,<sup>117</sup> and had suggested Bentley as the inaugural Boyle lecturer.<sup>118</sup> In his revised edition of *Origines Sacrae* (1702), Stillingfleet distinguished between those who 'proceeded in the way of *Experiments*, which do great service' and those who formed speculative '*Mechanical Theories*'.<sup>119</sup> Stillingfleet showed a particular interest in the work of the 'very Learned and Judicious Mathematician' Newton, whose account of gravity he conceptualised as 'a force

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<sup>113</sup> *Stillingfleet-2*, 148.

<sup>114</sup> *Locke-3*, 350.

<sup>115</sup> *Stillingfleet-1*, 121.

<sup>116</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae* (1702), 107.

<sup>117</sup> Hunter, *Robert Boyle*, 80.

<sup>118</sup> John Dahm, "Science and apologetics in the early Boyle lectures," *Church History* 39(2) (1970), 172-186, 178.

<sup>119</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae* (1702), 107.

given and directed by Divine Power and Wisdom'.<sup>120</sup> In this sense, both Locke and Stillingfleet were actively engaged with the new natural philosophy, with their differences often actuated by their religious ideology (for instance, reflecting the distinction between Locke's voluntarist views and Stillingfleet's intellectualism, as discussed above).

As has been underscored throughout the chapter, it is important to remember that the controversy had a formal as well as substantive dimension. Controversy heightened differences, and fragmented apparent harmony. Nowhere was this more apparent than Locke's final response, a work frequently preoccupied with the evils of disputation, of which Stillingfleet represented the exemplar. Locke wrote of the 'great ravage made on Charity and Practice, without any gain to Truth or Knowledge', commenting that 'the World in all Ages has received so much harm, and so little advantage from Controversies in Religion'.<sup>121</sup> Yet he did, through the controversy, adroitly position himself as concerned with the truth alone, not the vanity of victory, or the authority of 'great Names'.<sup>122</sup> In contrast to the 'Men of Arms, in the Commonwealth of Letters', Locke wrote 'I had no Thoughts of War, my Eye was fixed only on Truth'.<sup>123</sup>

In the history of philosophy, Locke has been remembered as an empiricist, Stillingfleet as a proponent of scholasticism, and their controversy, as a symptom of the unravelling of the Christian world view. This has the potential to create a misleading view of Stillingfleet's views, and distort understanding of Locke. A closer consideration of the two men reveals many commonalities in their views, and highlights that theological considerations were a

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 125-126.

<sup>121</sup> *Locke*-3, 415

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 2, 242.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 345.

major motivation for their differences. This will be explored further in the final chapter of this part.

## CHAPTER 8

### EPILOGUE

I thought it became me to re-instate *Reason* in her *Sovereignty* over *Fancy*; and, to assert to her the *Rightful* Dominion Nature had given her over all our *Judgements*, and *Discourses*.

– Sergeant (1697).<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation, taken – not from Toland or Locke – but from one of the latter’s polemical opponents, the Roman Catholic priest John Sergeant, illustrates the widespread cultural currency of ‘reason’ *circa* 1700, and its mutable character. This part has considered controversies about faith and reason (broadly construed). A contest between these domains has traditionally been seen as emblematic of the Age of Reason and the dawn of the Enlightenment, in which Locke and Toland have often taken on heroic modernising roles.

While both of these disputes have received attention with a view to understanding the thought and contribution of these two thinkers, the approach of this thesis has been to focus on the controversies as intellectual episodes in themselves. In examining the multifaceted polemical engagement of Toland and Locke with their contemporaries, it has sought to explore how the culture of controversy shaped engagement with these issues, and the importance of the dynamic of controversy in understanding the debates. We have seen the subtle and varied engagement with ‘reason’, whether in terms of its rhetorical appropriation by Toland, or reflections on its limitations and potential abuse among his varied opponents. Without dismissing the philosophical differences between Locke and Stillingfleet, I have argued that

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<sup>1</sup> John Sergeant, *Solid philosophy asserted, against the fancies of the ideists: or, the method to science farther illustrated with Reflexions on Mr. Locke's Essay concerning human understanding* (London: 1697), Dedication [8].

the expanding debate was also driven by the dynamics of controversy, which reinforced and coloured the content of the dispute.

On their own terms, these controversies reveal a more complicated picture of the main proponents – Toland, Locke and Stillingfleet – and their respective philosophical and theological positions than the historiography would suggest. Viewed in this context, the thinkers involved can be seen in a more complex and ambiguous light than the use of categories such as ‘deist’, ‘latitudinarian’, ‘Cartesian’, or ‘scholastic’ would suggest. The chapter on Toland has also brought to the fore the range of different respondents to his work, who are not reducible to mere background.

This epilogue supplements the above chapters in exploring the legacy of the two controversies into the eighteenth century. The first section of this chapter will examine how the controversial context influenced the reception of Toland’s work, its intersection with broader political debates, and his reputation as a proponent of ‘deism’. The second section turns to the way the controversy between Locke and Stillingfleet coloured the reputation of these two major figures of the intellectual culture.

### ***I. ‘Railing when Reason fails’***

In the years following the burning of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) and his return from Ireland, Toland’s life centred primarily on politics. He associated with leading Whigs such as Robert Molesworth and Lord Shaftesbury, nurtured ambitions of political office, and advocated Whiggish and republican views in his frequent publications. In this context, the controversy had a further afterlife, being picked up in the internecine struggles within the Church of England, something that illustrates the potential for philosophical debates to take on a political and ecclesiastical colouring.

In 1701, Toland was part of the delegation that presented the Act of Settlement, ensuring a Protestant succession, to Sophia, Electress of Hanover (the mother of the future George I). However, returning from Germany, Toland was ‘Surpriz’d’ to find himself again under attack. The renewal of the controversy reflected an evolving political and ecclesiastical situation within the Church of England. Since ancient times the Church had convened Convocations (assemblies), constituted into an upper house (the bishops), and a lower house (the clergy). Since 1688, there had been increasing division between the two on a number of religious and political issues. Historians have identified the bishops as predominantly ‘latitudinarian’ and Whig, whereas among the clergy High Church and Tory views prevailed. In this context, Archbishop Tillotson (until 1694), and Archbishop Tenison (thereafter), had brought into question the right of the lower house to meet, until, following a print campaign led by men like Atterbury, it was eventually convened in 1700-1701.<sup>2</sup> The lower house promptly brought proceedings against Toland’s book, on the ground that it was: ‘writ with a Design to subvert the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Faith; there being in it divers Principles and Positions that manifestly tend to that purpose.’<sup>3</sup> Behind this was the charge that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishops had failed to act against ‘heretical, impious, and immoral Books’, and beyond this, an attempt to assert the power of the clergy against them.<sup>4</sup> In this charged atmosphere, Toland corresponded with the Lower House, and ultimately published a further defence of his views, *Vindicius Liberius* (1702).

Toland’s present political prospects, and the risks and opportunities that accompanied them provided the immediate context for *Vindicius Liberius* (1702). Consistent with his previous

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Greig, “Heresy hunt: Gilbert Burnet and the convocation controversy of 1701,” *The Historical Journal* 37(3) (1994): 569-92.

<sup>3</sup> [Henry Aldrich], *A narrative of the proceedings of the Lower House of Convocation, relating to prorogations and adjournments* (London: 1701), 51-52.

<sup>4</sup> Toland, *Vindicius liberius*, 2. Gareth Vaughan Bennett, *The Tory crisis in church and state 1688-1730: the career of Francis Atterbury Bishop of Rochester* (Oxford: 1975), 58-59.

practice, Toland showed a certain panache in attacking his critics, as when he likened them to ‘TIBERIUS, or such other *Tyrants*.’<sup>5</sup> Yet, in many respects, the work professed moderation. Some aspects of *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) were now ‘explain’d’ and some were ‘correct’d’. Against the ‘horrible Charge of *Atheism*’, Toland emphasised his belief in the immortality of the soul, the rewards of doing good, and the punishment of the wicked.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Toland was emphatic about his status within the Church of England, ‘as finding it after due Consideration to be the best in the World, tho in many Respects coming short of Perfection.’<sup>7</sup> So too, he promised at one point to the Prolocutor of the Lower House, ‘I have firmly resolv’d never hereafter to intermeddle in any religious Controversies’.<sup>8</sup> *Vindicius Liberi* (1702) marked Toland’s final attempt to defend *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), but not an end to his notoriety. The following years would see him often in Germany, where his conversations, including with Gottfried Leibniz, led to another controversial work, the *Letters to Serena* (1704).

Toland remained a controversial figure in England until his death in 1722. While he eschewed the label of ‘deist’ or ‘atheist’, he was one of the figures around which the ‘deist’ identity crystallised later in the century, something that attests to the power of controversial writing to shape tradition.<sup>9</sup> Toland was included in John Leland’s motley grouping along with Lord Herbert, Hobbes and later writers such as Lord Bolingbroke and David Hume, although he received comparatively little attention.<sup>10</sup> Philip Skelton also included Toland in

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<sup>5</sup> Toland, *Vindicius liberius*, 34

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 106

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> John Toland, *A collection of several pieces of Mr. John Toland: now first publish’d from his original manuscripts: with some memoirs of his life and writings*, ed. Pierre des Maizeaux (London 1726), 302.

<sup>10</sup> John Leland, *A view of the principal deistical writers that have appeared in England in the last and present century*, 4th ed (London: 1764), Letter IV.

his own different group.<sup>11</sup> As these examples suggest, the concept of ‘deism’ emerged over time and reflected contemporary issues. Indeed, Toland professed belief in miracles and in revelation (both of which would have excluded him from Stillingfleet’s own definition in *A Letter to a Deist* (1677)).<sup>12</sup> Rather, as we have seen, his work can more readily be understood as forming a position within the Socinian controversy (a form of dissenting Protestantism). In many respects, the legacy of the ‘deists’ is one of defeat.<sup>13</sup> In 1790, Edmund Burke would write ‘Who, born within the last 40 years, has read one word of Collins, and Toland, and Tindal, and Chubb, and Morgan, and that whole race who called themselves Freethinkers?’<sup>14</sup> As noted in Chapter 6, Toland remained largely ignored and forgotten until the 1980s, when historians such as Margaret Jacob and Robert Sullivan rekindled an interest in his work.<sup>15</sup> More recently, this has been reflected in the work of Jonathan Israel, who sees Toland as an exemplar of ‘Radical Enlightenment’, as against his opponents, who are grouped together as moderate or conservative thinkers.<sup>16</sup> A common theme in the historiographical treatments is the insistence that these debates must map on to some overarching tension between opposing schools of thought, of which they are significant examples.

The characterisation of Toland as a ‘deist’ and advocate of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ does not bear close consideration, as discussed above. As this Part has shown, this interpretation of Toland is problematic in several ways. In the case of Toland, the tendency of modern historiography to classify him as a ‘deist’ oversimplifies the confluence of theological

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Skelton, *Ophiomaches, or, deism revealed*, 2nd ed (London: 1751).

<sup>12</sup> Stillingfleet’s work is addressed to ‘a particular Person, who owned the *Being and Providence of God*, but expressed a mean Esteem of the *Scriptures*, and the *Christian Religion*’: Edward Stillingfleet, *A letter to a deist, in answer to several objections against the truth and authority of the Scriptures* (London: 1677).

<sup>13</sup> J. C. D Clark, *English society 1688–1832: ideology, social structure and political practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: 1985), 273.

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the revolution in France* (London: 1790). 133.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Sullivan, *John Toland and the deist controversy: a study in adaptations* (Cambridge, MA: 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 613.

influences that underpin his work, and misses the undertones of his reforming agenda. The self-conscious way in which Toland presented himself as a revolutionary or reforming figure (and later as a martyr for truth in the face of overwhelming criticism) should not be taken entirely at face value. As has been observed, much of this rhetoric may be seen as reflecting the need of a young and impecunious scholar to capture an audience and attract patronage. It should not be forgotten that Toland presented himself in a far more conservative light when it suited him. In the 1702 *Vindicius Liberi*, Toland emphasised his credentials as a member of the Church of England, and sought to pass off the controversy surrounding his *Christianity not Mysterious* as due partly to misunderstanding and partly to youthful exuberance. The modern reading of Toland also does too little credit to Toland's opponents, dismissing as uninspiring reactionaries a diverse group of thinkers with a range of interesting positions.

## II. *Locke and the 'cassocked tribe'*

As we have seen, Toland's conspicuous work prompted a number of rapid – and emphatic – contemporary rebuttals as diverse thinkers sought to contribute their particular views. In contrast, Locke's *Essay* did not attract significant theological criticism in the first seven years of its existence. However, the controversy with Stillingfleet prompted a spate of further critiques, a not unfamiliar phenomenon as we have seen from the case of Thomas Burnet. The situation clearly troubled Locke in his final years. He remarked that following the controversy, the 'cassocked tribe of theologians has been wonderfully excited'.<sup>17</sup> The note of anguish and frustration with which Locke responded to further correspondence, referencing

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<sup>17</sup> John Locke to Philippus Van Limborch, 29 October 1697 in: Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2340], 246.

his ill-health and disinclination to embark on further debates, affords a reminder of the tangible impact protracted controversy could have.<sup>18</sup>

As in the debate over Toland, controversy afforded the medium for a range of thinkers to advance their own particular views. In a preface addressed to the universities, John Sergeant acknowledged the ‘wit’ and ‘genius’ of Locke, remarking that only the ‘*Invincible Force of Truth*’ gave him hope of victory.<sup>19</sup> For Sergeant, both Locke and Descartes were ‘ideists’, and against them he advocated the ‘solid’ principles of Aristotle’s philosophy. The less systematic reflections of John Norris reflected his own particular philosophical synthesis of Malebranche and Plato.<sup>20</sup> In his *Anti-scepticism* (1702), clergyman Henry Lee reflected on Locke’s place among broader currents of thought. For Lee, his contemporaries ‘pretend to be Lovers of and Searchers after *Truth*’, but were actuated by a presumptuous quest for novelty, conducive only to ‘*inextricable Doubts*’ and ‘*endless Dispute*’. He felt this explained the appeal of Locke’s work to the ‘*inquisitive Genius* of this Age’, as well as the ‘World Makers’ discussed in Part I.<sup>21</sup> Richard Bentley, the great classicist, polemical writer, and Stillingfleet’s protégé, echoed Lee’s concerns in his foreword to the collected edition of Stillingfleet’s works in 1710. Although Bentley acknowledged the merits of the *Essay* and the praise it had attained in the ‘*Affections of the Studious*’, he continued to maintain a cautionary position that the work might lead to ‘*Scepticism*’, ‘*neglect of Reveal’d Religion*’, and principles inconsistent with religion.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Locke to Daniel Whitby, 17 January 1699, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2536], 548-549.

<sup>19</sup> Sergeant, *Solid philosophy*, preface [5]

<sup>20</sup> John Norris, *Practical discourses upon the beatitudes of our lord and saviour Jesus Christ* (London: 1699).

<sup>21</sup> Henry Lee, *Anti-scepticism: or, notes upon each chapter of Mr. Lock's Essay concerning humane understanding with an explication of all the particulars of which he treats, and in the same order* (London: 1702), Epistle Dedicatory [2].

<sup>22</sup> Richard Bentley, “The life and character of that eminent and learned prelate, the late Dr. Edw. Stillingfleet, Lord Bishop of Worcester,” in *The works of that eminent and most learned prelate, Dr. Edw. Stillingfleet, late Lord Bishop of Worcester* (London: 1710), I:26.

Viewing the debate between Locke and Stillingfleet in its controversial context also brings out the personal and social considerations which played a part in shaping it. It is evident that Locke had an interest in defending his orthodoxy and reputation in a dispute with a leading figure of the Church of England hierarchy. Molyneux encouraged Locke to respond to Stillingfleet (even if he found Stillingfleet's tactics improper), but simply derided other critics: John Edwards was a 'Poor Wretch', who 'Deserves no Notice',<sup>23</sup> John Sergeant 'unintelligible', and John Norris an 'inconvincible Enemy'.<sup>24</sup> So too, personal temperament played a role in the controversy – Burnet described Stillingfleet as haughty,<sup>25</sup> and Le Clerc's biography included a quotation from an anonymous friend of Locke stating 'If he was subject to any Passion, 'twas Anger'.<sup>26</sup> While difficult to particularise this factor, it undoubtedly contributed to the reluctance on the part of both men to concede ground, as well as a certain amount of evasion and rhetoric in the dispute.

Locke's associates presented the dispute as owing to the obtuseness and bellicosity of Stillingfleet, rather than raising any valid intellectual points, something that reminds us that contemporaries saw the correspondence in a controversial context. Le Clerc praised 'the Strength of Mr. Locke's reasonings, and his great clearness and exactness'; he trenchantly criticised Stillingfleet for taking issue with a philosopher 'whose Notions he neither understood, nor the Thing it self about which he Disputed'.<sup>27</sup> Molyneux complained of the 'Obstinacy' of Stillingfleet and his desire to have 'the last Word', characterising him as an 'Old Souldier in Controversys' who feared defeat would 'wither all his former Laurels'.<sup>28</sup> It

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<sup>23</sup> William Molyneux to Locke, 6 April 1697, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2240], 83.

<sup>24</sup> William Molyneux to Locke, 4 October 1697, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2324] 219-220

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *History of his own time*, (London: 1724), I:189.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Le Clerc, *The life and character of Mr. John Locke, author of the Essay concerning humane understanding*, trans. T. Gent (London: 1706), 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> William Molyneux to John Locke, 4 October 1697, in Locke, *Correspondence*, [2324], 220.

should be noted that there was not a simple division between clerical and lay opinion. Clergyman Samuel Bold deplored the ‘downright sophistry’ of Stillingfleet, and later published a work in Locke’s defence.<sup>29</sup> The Bishop of Salisbury, Gilbert Burnet suggested the dispute was ‘unworthy’ of Stillingfleet.<sup>30</sup>

The controversy also attracted interest in Europe. Leibniz, who wrote an extensive critique of Locke, followed the debate, and raised similar concerns about the implications of Locke’s philosophy.<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bayle characterised Stillingfleet as defending the ‘fundamental Article of Philosophical Orthodoxy’ that matter cannot think. However, he noted approvingly Locke’s ‘recourse to the Almighty Power of God’, and while he considered it philosophically correct that the soul was immaterial, he also concurred with Locke that this was not the province of philosophy, but of religion, which properly concerned faith in the ‘Immortality of the Soul, Heaven, Hell, & c’.<sup>32</sup> The *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres* observed with interest the unfolding debate between Locke and Stillingfleet, but refrained from awarding victory to either side.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to Toland, Locke’s *Essay* was afforded a prestigious place in the pantheon of intellectual culture. This is perhaps best exemplified by his inclusion in the dedication of the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772) referenced in the previous chapter.<sup>34</sup> In this context, the

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<sup>29</sup> Samuel Bold to Awnsham [and John?] Churchill, 15 December 1697, in: Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6: [2359], 270. Samuel Bold, *Some considerations on the principal objections and arguments which have been publish'd against Mr. Lock's Essay of humane understanding* (London: 1699).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in: Carroll, *Edward Stillingfleet*, 99-100.

<sup>31</sup> Leibniz’s *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* was not published until 1765: Gottfried Leibnitz, *New essays concerning human understanding*, trans. Alfred Langley (New York: 1896).

<sup>32</sup> The article on ‘Dicaearchus’ [L]: Bayle, *Dictionary*, II:662.

<sup>33</sup> Jaques Bernard ed., *Nouvelles de la république des lettres mois d'Octobre 1699* (Amsterdam : 1699), 363-385. Jaques Bernard ed., *Nouvelles de la république des lettres mois de Novembre 1699* (Amsterdam : 1699), 483-513.

<sup>34</sup> Jean le Rond d’Alembert, *Preliminary discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard Schwab with Walter Rex (Indianapolis: 1968), 74.

controversy with Stillingfleet came to be perceived as emblematic of the intellectual developments of the late seventeenth century. Modern historiography has been more sympathetic to Stillingfleet; however, it has continued to focus on the influence of Locke's epistemology, and its place in the emergence of the Enlightenment.

While Stillingfleet made some limited references to 'deist' views in the correspondence, this should not necessarily be equated with the 'deism' that emerged during the course of the subsequent Enlightenment. For the most part, Stillingfleet wrote about the promotion of 'Scepticism and Infidelity'.<sup>35</sup> At the extreme end of this, Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) were identified. However, Stillingfleet's concerns arose from his on-going concern about anti-Trinitarian Christianity, and this remained a major presence in the controversy. Similarly, Locke's arguments in the controversy reveal a more complex mix of theological and philosophical concerns than might be expected. It is clear that the theory of knowledge Locke put forward in the *Essay* was profoundly influenced by the natural philosophical tradition, including the Experimental Natural Philosophy professed by Boyle,<sup>36</sup> and Bacon's notion of 'natural histories' that would advance knowledge through careful and meticulous observation.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, there is a very real extent to which Locke's 'empiricism' – like that of Boyle and Bacon – was actuated by religious ideology. Thus, Locke's sense of the horizons of what can be known is shaped by his theological views, rather than his empiricism alone. Similarly, his views on the soul are reflective of his voluntarism. As we have noted, Locke's overall approach to the relationship between reason

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<sup>35</sup> Stillingfleet, *Answer to Mr. Locke's Letter* (1697), 23, 38, 125. Stillingfleet, *Answer to Mr. Locke's Second Letter* (1698), 20, 30-31, 107, 123, 177. A contemporary dictionary defines 'Scepticism' as 'the Opinion of Scepticks, g. Philosophers contemplating things and leaving them in suspense, professing they know nothing': E. Coles, *An English Dictionary* (London: 1685), 257.

<sup>36</sup> G.A.J. Rogers, "The intellectual setting and aims of the *Essay*," *The Cambridge companion to Locke's "Essay concerning human understanding"* ed. Lex Newman (Cambridge: 2007), 7-32, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Anstey has identified Bacon's notion of 'natural histories' as an influence on Locke's methodology: Peter Anstey, "Locke, Bacon and natural history," *Early Science and Medicine* 7 (1): (2002), 65-92.

and faith had much in common with ‘latitudinarianism’ – placing his views much closer to his antagonist, Stillingfleet, than might be expected.

It is also hard to see Locke as the thoroughgoing advocate of reason, when in many respects Stillingfleet argues as the rationalist and system-builder, whereas Locke comes across as something of a sceptic (one of the charges levelled against him by Stillingfleet). In this respect, the claim of continuity between Locke and Toland does not sit well – particularly as Locke greatly reduces the sphere of ‘knowledge’ (as opposed to faith).

The epistemological reading also misses much of the personal and social dimension which can be perceived by viewing the works in their controversial context. In many ways, all these men were drawn into a debate that expanded beyond their control. Locke, having had aspersions cast on his religion by an extremely senior member of the Church of England, found it impossible not to seek to clear his name, while Stillingfleet, unwilling to resile from his position, ‘rumaged’ the *Essay* ‘to find new and more important Faults’ (as Locke put it).<sup>38</sup> Leslie Stephen sums the situation up nicely when he imagines Toland ‘chuckling with all the vanity of gratified mischief’ to have set off such a confrontation.<sup>39</sup> Yet Toland was not to have the last laugh: his ambitious theme coupled with a flamboyant turn of rhetoric was to bring a certain degree of celebrity, but would also haunt him throughout the rest of his career.

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<sup>38</sup> *Locke*–3, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Leslie Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century* (London: 1881), 111.

**PART III**

**MATTER AND THE SOUL**

## CHAPTER 9

### INTELLECTUAL SETTING

The *foundations* of all *religion* lie in *two* things; *that there is a God* who rules the world, and that the *souls of men are capable of subsisting after death*.

– Stillingfleet (1662)<sup>1</sup>

A perennial issue *circa* 1700 – and one touched on in previous chapters – was the nature of the human soul. The dominant position was that the soul, usually equated with the mind, was immaterial in substance and by nature immortal. While this view largely prevailed, it was not without opponents. John Locke suggested it may not be possible to know if matter can think or not, which he defended against Bishop Stillingfleet between 1697 and 1699. The ever-provocative John Toland put forward a theory of active matter in discussions with Pierre Bayle and Gottfried Leibniz between 1702 and 1704.<sup>2</sup> Alongside this, thinkers including Henry Dodwell, Henry Layton and William Coward produced controversial works arguing that the soul was material and mortal. Anthony Collins, often considered a ‘deist’, and Samuel Clarke debated the issue between 1707 and 1708.

These controversies are most often seen as part of broad histories of philosophical concepts such as personal identity,<sup>3</sup> consciousness,<sup>4</sup> and materialism.<sup>5</sup> These synthesising histories look mainly to the content of the discussions, often with a focus on the perceived modernising contribution of figures such as the ‘deists’ and the physiologists. This is further

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<sup>1</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 360-361

<sup>2</sup> Bayle, *Dictionary*, II:660, ‘Dicaearchus’ [L].

<sup>3</sup> John Barresi and Raymond Martin, *The naturalization of the soul: self and personal identity in eighteenth century* (London: 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Udo Thiel, *The early modern subject* (Oxford: 2011).

<sup>5</sup> John Yolton, *Thinking matter: materialism in eighteenth-century Britain* (Minneapolis: 1983).

complicated by a tendency in the historiography to accept the apparent polarity in these debates at face value, as well as to view the polemicists in their relation to one grand idea or concept. As such, Jonathan Israel characterises the debate between Collins and Clarke as part of a broad struggle over a Spinozist ‘Radical Enlightenment’.<sup>6</sup> In reconstructing specific controversies – and the often-nuanced positions expressed in them – this thesis complicates such interpretations. Many writers framed their work as an ‘orthodox’ refutation of a perceived irreligious ideology. In that regard, they tended to group heterodox opponents together as professing a coherent and defined set of views, encompassing Hobbesian and atheistic theories of matter and motion. Thus, an apparent polarity emerges in the writings of the period between ‘orthodox’ belief and ‘heterodox’ views, which belies the diversity present, both in heterodox views – which ranged beyond simple ‘deism’ – and in the orthodox positions adopted. It also obscures the way that orthodoxy shifted and developed over time, as well as the claims that heterodox views themselves made to the authority of the past (often claiming to represent an uncorrupted view of the soul, which had subsequently been lost). One historian who avoids many of these difficulties is Ann Thomson, who provides a sensitive treatment of the different cross currents of philosophy and theology through the long eighteenth century. In eschewing an overly political emphasis on debates and reliance on labels such as ‘deism’, Thomson refocuses consideration on specific natural philosophical (especially medical) and theological issues.<sup>7</sup>

Like Thomson, this thesis seeks to avoid overly political readings and labels. However, aside from not sharing her focus on the overarching patterns of Enlightenment, the thesis also differs in its focus on the controversial context. In looking more deeply at the controversial

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<sup>6</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 614-619.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Thomson, *Bodies of thought science, religion, and the soul in the early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: 2008), Introduction.

patterns and conventions that informed these discussions, this Part brings out the important place of controversial culture in shaping the agenda and trajectories of these debates. Controversial rhetoric tends to obscure the sense that there were various different engagements with theological tradition, rather than a unified category of disbelief. What is at issue is more than just the ideas themselves; it is also their cultural presence, and the social implications and meanings attached to maintaining them. These themes are epitomised in quite contrasting instances considered in the following chapters: the controversial career of the little-known polemicist Henry Layton, and the more famous debate between Collins and Clarke.

This chapter provides a brief account of the intellectual setting in which controversies on the nature of the soul took place *circa* 1700.<sup>8</sup> The chapter discusses the view that the soul was immaterial and immortal, and its most influential expression in the work of René Descartes. It then examines some of the major alternative approaches, the dissenting tradition of Christian mortalism, ancient and early modern philosophical theories about thinking matter, and developments in medicine and physiology.

### *I. The immortal and immaterial soul*

We minister to Souls. Souls! Methinks in that one Word there is a Sermon.

Immortal Souls! Precious Souls! One whereof is more worth, than all the World

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<sup>8</sup> More detailed overviews include: Daniel Garber, “Soul and mind: life and thought in the seventeenth century,” in *The Cambridge history of seventeenth century philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: 1998), I:759-795; Thomas Ahnert, “Soul and mind,” in *The Routledge companion to eighteenth-century philosophy*, ed. A. Garrett (London and New York: 2014), 297-319.

besides, the *Price of the Blood of the Son of God*.

– Bull (1714)<sup>9</sup>

In these words, George Bull, the Bishop of St David's, emphasised the profound nature of the responsibilities of clerical office. Our discussion will focus principally on philosophical and scholarly views of the soul; however, Bull's comments underscore that these occurred in a context deeply embedded in religious belief. The immortality of the soul was intimately connected with a sense of God's justice, and Christian beliefs about the afterlife. After death, the righteous would go to Heaven, where according to the *Westminster Confession*, they would 'behold the face of God in light and glory'. The wicked would be cast into 'torments and utter darknesse'.<sup>10</sup> Stillingfleet's statement that all religion depended on the immortality of the soul (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) illustrates the centrality of the doctrine of the immortal, immaterial soul among orthodox thinkers and the emphasis they placed on defending this notion.

There was a broad consensus on the immortal soul. While the Scripture did not directly endorse the doctrine, various passages seemed suggestive. Christ at his crucifixion told the penitent thief, 'Verily I say unto thee, to day shalt thou be with me in paradise'.<sup>11</sup> Many esteemed pagan authors, Plato and Cicero among them, had apparently ascertained it on philosophical terms, even though, for their early modern readers, they lacked the benefit of Christian Revelation.<sup>12</sup> The immortality of the soul had been affirmed by the Roman

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<sup>9</sup> George Bull, *A companion for the candidates of holy orders, or, the great importance and principal duties of the priestly office* (London: 1714), 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> *Westminster Confession*, Chapter XXXII.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 23:43.

<sup>12</sup> Plato's most famous statement on the soul was the *Phaedo*: Plato, *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo*, trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Harvard: 1971). Cicero discussed the soul in: Cicero, *Tusculan disputations*, trans. J. King (Cambridge, MA: 1927).

Catholic Church – the Fifth Lateran Council had decreed in 1513 that the soul’s immortality was demonstrable by reason.<sup>13</sup>

The notion that the soul was immortal was strongly connected with the view that it was immaterial. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, this view was widely held by thinkers following in the tradition that synthesised the philosophy of Aristotle – including his *De Anima - On the Soul* (c. 350 BC) – and Christianity. The most influential account was given by St Thomas Aquinas, who argued that the human soul (the intellect or the mind) is something incorporeal and subsistent. This was on the basis that the mind or intellect had an operation apart from the body, in particular, its capacity to know the nature of other bodies.<sup>14</sup> The cultural presence and power of the Aristotelian tradition had diminished in the face of the self-conscious new philosophies. Yet, it was not a case of decline only, but also of enduring relevance, both in the universities, and among many thinkers - one such figure being Henry Layton, who will be discussed in the next chapter.

The most prominent early modern account of the immaterial soul was that of René Descartes. In his *Meditations* (1641), Descartes had postulated a strict distinction between body (*corpus*), defined by extension (*res extensa*), and the soul, or mind (*mens*) defined by thought (*res cogitans*). Descartes reasoned that one can have a ‘clear and distinct’ idea of oneself merely as a thinking thing, and thus thought can exist without body.<sup>15</sup> Descartes advocated this proof as one of the major advantages of his philosophy generally,<sup>16</sup> and his views were

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<sup>13</sup> Garber, “Soul and mind,” 761.

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 75, 2.

<sup>15</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: 2006), 44; Descartes, *Œuvres*, VII:78. This is reiterated in the *Principia philosophiae* (1644): René Descartes, *The philosophical writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: 1985), I:177-292,210; Descartes, *Œuvres*, VIII:25.

<sup>16</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, Dedication.

endorsed by leading dualist thinkers in England such as Kenelm Digby and Henry More.<sup>17</sup>

While profoundly influential, certain issues became apparent in Descartes' position, and remained relevant through subsequent debates.

There was an apparent tension between Descartes' efforts to explain almost everything in mechanistic terms (including animal life and human physiology) and his singular exception for the soul. He likened the human body to a watch ('horloge') and artificial fountain ('fontaine artificielle'),<sup>18</sup> and characterised animals as 'bête-machines' (machines and automata, without thought and consciousness).<sup>19</sup> The case of animals was the subject of extensive discussion. Henry More asserted, albeit 'not confidently', that animals would enjoy the afterlife.<sup>20</sup> Bayle later observed that the argument that animals are automata was 'hard to maintain', though 'otherwise very advantageous to religion'.<sup>21</sup> Another issue was that the radical distinction between soul and body postulated by Descartes made it difficult to explain their union in a human person. More, for instance, expressed concerns about these issues in his correspondence with Descartes, and ultimately developed an account of the soul as a more active presence.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kenelm Digby, *Two treatises in the one of which the nature of bodies, in the other, the nature of mans soule is looked into in way of discovery of the immortality of reasonable soules* (Paris: 1644).

<sup>18</sup> Descartes, *Œuvres*, XI:120.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Harrison, "Descartes on Animals," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42(167) (1992), 219-227. John Cottingham, "'A brute to the brutes?: Descartes' treatment of animals,'" *Philosophy* 53(206) (1978), 551-559.

<sup>20</sup> Henry More, *The immortality of the soul, so farre forth as it is demonstrable from the knowledge of nature and the light of reason* (London: 1659), 302-303.

<sup>21</sup> Bayle, *Dictionary*, IV:901.

<sup>22</sup> Leonora Cohen, "Descartes and Henry More on the beast machine—A translation of their correspondence pertaining to animal automatism," *Annals of Science* 1:1 (1936): 48-61. John Henry, "A Cambridge Platonist's materialism: Henry More and the concept of soul," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 49 (1986): 172-195. John Henry, "Medicine and pneumatology: Henry More, Richard Baxter and Francis Glisson's Treatise on the energetic nature of substance," *Medical History* 31 (1987): 15-40.

## II. *Christian mortalism*

While there was widespread agreement on the immortal soul, there was also an undercurrent of doubt within Christianity, now often called ‘Christian mortalism’. Christian mortalism has a long history and encompassed views that the soul sleeps after death (psychosomnolence) or that it properly dies (thnetopsychism).<sup>23</sup> It was argued that there was no unequivocal scriptural authority for the view that the soul is by nature immortal, the principal emphasis in the Scripture being on the bodily Resurrection of the dead, rather than the soul’s immortality.<sup>24</sup> Prior to the early modern period, this had been the focus of Christian thinkers, and a number of the Church Fathers speculated that the soul was mortal, or that it ‘slept’ until Judgement Day.<sup>25</sup> In more recent times, the Fifth Lateran Council, referred to previously, had condemned the view that the soul is by nature mortal in the context of various heretical philosophical views (those of Pietro Pomponazzi and thinkers influenced by Ibn Rushd, known as Averroes).

The Protestant emphasis on *sola Scriptura* (the Scripture as the sole authority) sharpened this issue, and there was a long dissenting tradition of Protestant mortalism, stemming from the debates of the Reformation. According to some interpreters, Martin Luther believed that the soul slept after death.<sup>26</sup> Mortalism was professed by some of the more liminal figures of the Reformation, such as Fausto Sozzini.<sup>27</sup> Such views, however, received a decisive refutation

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<sup>23</sup> See: Norman Burns, *Christian mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Harvard: 1972).

<sup>24</sup> Thomson, *Bodies of thought*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> One example is: Tatian, “Address to the Greeks,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Grand Rapids: 1956), 59-84, 70-71.

<sup>26</sup> Bryan Ball, *The soul sleepers: Christian mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestley* (Cambridge: 2008), 30. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s theology: its historical and systematic development*, trans. Roy Harrisville (Minneapolis: 1999), 329.

<sup>27</sup> Ball, *Soul sleepers*, 37.

from Jean Calvin.<sup>28</sup> For certain periods, the Calvinist position was affirmed in England.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it was professed in the *Westminster Confession*, prepared during the Civil War, and still current for Presbyterians in our period.<sup>30</sup> The *Thirty-nine Articles*, however, was silent on the immortal soul.

Christian mortalism remained an important presence in our period, alongside other heterodox views. Brian Young has traced a long tradition of heterodox thought from the debates over this issue in the 1640s and 1650s, enlivened by radical versions of Protestantism, through to the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Young reminds us of the enduring importance of this strand of ‘ultra-Protestantism’, and cautions against assuming a ‘Latitudinarian hegemony’ in our period.<sup>32</sup> This is particularly pertinent given the overarching tendency to associate materialist views, such as ‘Lockeanism’, with ‘modernising’ influences like deism and the speculations of the physiologists.

Christian mortalism has been seen to encompass figures such as the ‘Leveller’ Richard Overton,<sup>33</sup> John Milton,<sup>34</sup> and Lodowick Muggleton.<sup>35</sup> The historiography has associated

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Calvin, *Psychopannychia* (Strasbourg, 1542). A translation is: Henry Beveridge (trans), *Tracts of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: 1844).

<sup>29</sup> For example, Article XL of the *Forty-two Articles* (1553), see: Gerald Bray (ed), *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: 2019)

<sup>30</sup> *Westminster Confession*, Chapter XXXII.

<sup>31</sup> B. Young, “‘The soul-sleeping, system’: Politics and heresy in eighteenth-century England,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45(1) (1994): 64-81.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> R[ichard] O[verton], *Man wholly mortal; or, a treatise wherein 'tis proved, both theologically and philosophically, that as whole man sinned, so whole man died; contrary to that common distinction of soul and body* (London: 1646).

<sup>34</sup> In the posthumously published *De doctrina Christiana*: John Milton, *A treatise on Christian doctrine compiled from the holy Scriptures alone* trans. Charles Sumner (Cambridge: 1825), 279-280.

<sup>35</sup> John Reeves and Ludowick Muggleton, *Joyful news from heaven: or the last intelligence from our glorify'd Jesus above the stars* (1706), 3-33.

mortalist views, albeit not definitively, with Newton<sup>36</sup> and Locke.<sup>37</sup> It would also prompt the polemical writings of Henry Layton between 1692 and 1705 (considered in the next chapter) and the controversial writings of physician and poet William Coward between 1702 to 1706. Similarly, the theological controversy over the mortalist *Epistolary Discourse* (1706) of Henry Dodwell ignited the debate between Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins (considered in Chapter 11).<sup>38</sup>

### III. 'Atheism' and thinking matter

Ancient philosophy, in particular that of Epicurus, provided a source of more radical antitheses to orthodox views. As Alan Kors observes, Epicurean philosophy had a major presence within the learned Christian world as a source of naturalistic arguments against the dependence of creation on God.<sup>39</sup> These views were principally known through *De rerum natura* of Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius.<sup>40</sup> In this work, Lucretius expounded a naturalistic account of the universe, in which 'All consists of *Body* and of *Space*'.<sup>41</sup> Framed in these terms, the soul was composed of particles of matter, and would dissolve at death.<sup>42</sup>

These ancient views continued to impress themselves vividly and to demand refutation for Christian thinkers. Thus, a debate between the 'Theists' (Aristotle, Pythagoras and Socrates)

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<sup>36</sup> Force felt that circumstantial evidence supported this view, though it is not directly addressed in Newton's published or unpublished works: James Force, "The God of Abraham and Isaac (Newton)," in *The books of nature and Scripture: recent essays on natural philosophy, theology and biblical criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza's time and the British Isles of Newton's time* ed. James Force and Richard Popkin (Dordrecht: 1994), 179-200.

<sup>37</sup> Chapter 7, §III.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Dodwell, *An epistolary discourse: proving, from the Scriptures and the first Fathers, that the soul is a principle naturally mortal; [...]* (London: 1706).

<sup>39</sup> Alan Charles Kors, *Epicureans and atheists in France, 1650-1729* (Cambridge: 2016), 2.

<sup>40</sup> The most prominent translation was: Lucretius, *T. Lucretius Carus, the Epicurean philosopher: his six books De rerum natura done into English verse, with notes*, trans. Thomas Creech (Oxford: 1682).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, I, 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, III, 80.

and the ‘Atheists’ (Strato, Epicurus and Anaximander) was depicted on the title page to the *True intellectual system* (1678) of Ralph Cudworth. For Cudworth, the denial of immaterial substances was tantamount to atheism: ‘all *Atheists* are mere *Corporealists*, that is, acknowledge no other *Substance* besides *Body* or *Matter*.’<sup>43</sup>

These efforts to refute Epicurus coincided with an increased interest in ancient atomism, alongside the emergence of mechanical philosophies that incorporated physical theories based on matter and motion (whether the corpuscular views of Descartes, the atom matter theory of Gassendi, or Hobbes’ account of body in plenum). As such, engagement with these sources could take more exploratory forms, such as the dialogue presented in Walter Charleton’s *The immortality of the human soul* (1657), which restaged his own discussions of the matter.<sup>44</sup> Charleton himself was a major figure in the dissemination of Epicurean atomism in England. John Evelyn, who translated sections of *De rerum natura*, was attracted by elements of the philosophy of Epicurus, though his approach was one of syncretism rather than unalloyed enthusiasm.<sup>45</sup>

The most infamous early modern proponent of the material soul in Great Britain was Hobbes. While he did not use the term, Hobbes has been called a materialist, insofar as he contended that everything that exists is a body, whether at motion or at rest. Hobbes did not explain in detail how matter might account for the mind. However, he argued that the claim that there is an immaterial substance is absurd and self-contradictory: ‘*Substance incorporeall* are words,

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<sup>43</sup> Cudworth, *True intellectual system*, 134-135.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Charleton, *The immortality of the human soul, demonstrated by the light of nature in two dialogues* (London: 1657). Emily Booth, *A subtle and mysterious machine: the medical world of Walter Charleton (1619-1707)* (Dordrecht: 2005), 57.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Hunter, *Science and the shape of orthodoxy* (Woodbridge: 1995), 90-91.

which when they are joined together, destroy one another, as if a man should say, an *Incorporeall Body*'.<sup>46</sup>

Despite his irreligious reputation, Hobbes presented his arguments as consistent with Christianity, arguing that his views about 'spirit' accorded with the Bible.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, he claimed his view was in fact less atheistic than the orthodox position, as it gave real being to God.<sup>48</sup> As Jon Parkin observes, the immediate reception of Hobbes' *Leviathan* was more complex than universal condemnation.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, Hobbes found critics, such as John Bramhall (later Archbishop of Armagh), who contended that his views were 'destructive to all religion'.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, by the early years of the eighteenth century, Hobbes' thought had come to be seen as virtually the antithesis of Christian philosophy.

The continued preoccupation with refuting the idea of thinking matter is evidenced in the Boyle Lectures. Epicurean atomism was attacked in the lectures of Richard Bentley in 1692, who condemned the view that it was possible to reduce thought to matter, or to some combination of matter and motion.<sup>51</sup> Bentley would be followed by lecturers in similar vein, such as John Harris in 1698 and Samuel Clarke.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXIV, 207.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Considerations upon the reputation, loyalty, manners, & religion of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London: 1680), 30-31.

<sup>49</sup> Jon Parkin, "The reception of Hobbes's *Leviathan*," in *The Cambridge companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: 2007), 441-459.

<sup>50</sup> John Bramhall, *The catching of Leviathan, or the great whale* (London: 1658).

<sup>51</sup> Bentley, *Boyle Lectures*, Sermon II.

<sup>52</sup> John Harris, *The atheistical objections against the being of a God and his attributes fairly considered and fully refuted in eight sermons* (London: 1698).

#### IV. *Physiology and animal souls*

Polemicists tended to interpret heterodox views on the soul as the intellectual descendants of Hobbes and Epicurus. However, there was also engagement with the soul in the spheres of medicine and physiology.<sup>53</sup> As John Henry notes, physiological and medical literature was another potential source of views that tended towards philosophical monism.<sup>54</sup>

One instance was the Oxford physiologist Thomas Willis. In his *De Anima Brutorum* (1671), Willis sought to understand the soul in physiological terms. He conceived of a human as ‘a Two-soul’d Animal’, possessing an incorporeal ‘rational’ soul, as well as a corporeal ‘animal’ soul, which animals also possess.<sup>55</sup> Willis compared the soul with the ‘most subtil Contiguous particles’ of fire, which is constantly in motion and continually regenerating. Willis distinguished his view of matter as ‘disposed towards Animation, by the Law of Creation’ from a view of matter as drawn together by ‘Fortuitous Concurrence of Atoms’, a reference to the views of Epicurus.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, his work reduced most cognitive functions to a physiological basis, leaving only a limited role for the immortal soul.

While seventeenth-century theologians did not generally criticise medical theories,<sup>57</sup> Henry More and Ralph Cudworth expressed concern about these approaches, emphasising that ‘mechanism’ (physical or chemical processes) was not sufficient to account for the soul, and stressing the importance of the immaterial soul.<sup>58</sup> More insisted on the impossibility of

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Hall, *Ideas of life and matter; studies in the history of general physiology, 600 B.C.-1900 A.D* (Chicago: 1969).

<sup>54</sup> John Henry, “The matter of souls: medical theory and theology in seventeenth-century England,” in *The medical revolution of the seventeenth century*, ed. Roger French, Andrew Wear (Cambridge: 1989), 89-113.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Willis, *De anima brutorum quae hominis vitalis ac sensitiva est* (Oxford: 1671). Thomas Willis, *Two discourses concerning the souls of brutes*, trans. S. Pordage (London: 1683), preface 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> See: Henry, “Matter of Souls”, 88-89.

<sup>58</sup> More, *Immortality*, 220. Henry, “Matter of souls”, 106-107.

reducing the capacity of thought to the matter of the brain, which for him, was equivalent to locating thought 'in a Cake of Sewer or a bowle of Curds.'<sup>59</sup>

There were many viewpoints and perennial issues in the debate on the soul. Clearly for many thinkers, there were compelling reasons to believe in the existence of the immortal and immaterial soul. However, the heterogeneous character of the intellectual traditions on the soul, the ambiguous statements of the Scripture, and the tendency to seek mechanical or physiological explanation continued to enliven opposing views.

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<sup>59</sup> Henry More, *An antidote against atheisme, or, an appeal to the natural faculties of the minde of man, whether there be not a God* (London: 1653), 37.

## CHAPTER 10

### A SEARCH AFTER SOULS:

#### LAYTON'S CONTROVERSIES (1692-1698)

Henry Layton was an improbable font for views his opponents called 'monstrous degeneracy' and 'poyson'.<sup>1</sup> A septuagenarian Yorkshire country gentleman and member of the Church of England, who was known for his piety, he nevertheless maintained, through a series of anonymous works, that the soul was material and mortal. This was an opinion that, for many of his contemporaries, was tantamount to 'atheism'. Such a view was espoused in the second Boyle lecture of Richard Bentley, which Layton sought to refute,<sup>2</sup> resulting in an exchange between Layton and Presbyterian minister Timothy Manlove.<sup>3</sup> While this controversy covered considerable ground and was waged with evident passion, it remains a relatively obscure episode in the intellectual life of late seventeenth-century England, and has not received significant attention in the historiography. Principally, Layton and his work constitute a minor footnote in the history of materialism. Bentley's nineteenth century biographer called Layton's *Observations* 'a feeble piece, which attracted no attention'.<sup>4</sup> More recently, John Yolton described Layton as a 'prolific but not overly impressive

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Manlove, *The immortality of the soul asserted, and practically improved [...] with some reflections on a pretended refutation of Mr. Bentley's sermon* (London: 1697), preface [3].

<sup>2</sup> [Henry Layton], *Observations upon a sermon intituled, A confutation of atheism from the faculties of the soul, aliàs, Matter and Motion cannot think* (n.p.: n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> [Henry Layton], *Observations upon a short treatise, written by Mr. Timothy Manlove, intituled, The immortality of the soul asserted and printed in octavo at London, 1697* (n.p.: n.d.), 1.

<sup>4</sup> James Henry Monk, *The life of Richard Bentley* (London: 1830), 35

pamphleteer'.<sup>5</sup> Against this general trend, Ann Thomson and Michelle Pfeffer have highlighted his place in discussions of Christian mortalism.<sup>6</sup>

The debate nevertheless reveals much about the controversial culture of the period. Layton is an interesting figure. As something of an autodidact and a member of an older generation, his case reminds one of the diversity of positions on philosophical theology at the turn of the seventeenth century. It illustrates that heterodox or irreligious thought in this period is not reducible to a simple category of secularising 'deism' or 'atheism'. It also lends colour to some of the individual dimensions, personal struggles and contingent sources that informed these controversies. Unlike many of the debates considered in this thesis, Layton's controversial works were not prompted by engagement with the new philosophies or advances in natural philosophy, but rather by his own personal engagement with the Scripture. Furthermore, it is an example of a debate carried on in a setting removed from the London – Cambridge – Oxford ambit, being largely centred on rural Yorkshire. It shows us that, while the intellectual culture of the time was largely grounded in these centres, it also stretched beyond them, and even in local settings controversy was an important element. In Layton we see a picture of someone with unique religious views, grappling with his own doubts and using the tools at his disposal – including that of published controversy – to find his own path. Yet within this rural and individual setting, we see echoes of the themes of diversity and incremental pluralism discussed elsewhere in this thesis. As Ann Thomson has suggested, Layton's case shows the potential for individual polemical writing on the immortal soul to enliven unorthodox views within the Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Yolton, *Thinking matter: materialism in eighteenth-century Britain* (Minneapolis: 1983), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ann Thomson, *Bodies of thought science, religion, and the soul in the early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: 2008). Michelle Pfeffer, "Christian materialism and the prospect of immortality," in *Science without God? rethinking the history of scientific naturalism*, ed. Peter Harrison and Jon Roberts (Oxford: 2019), 148-161.

<sup>7</sup> Thomson, *Bodies of thought*, 98.

The chapter first introduces Layton, his nascent doubts about the immortal soul, and his ‘search’ for the truth. His works reveal how his idiosyncratic views emerged from controversial engagement with an eclectic range of thinkers, shaped by his legal background. The second section considers Bentley’s Boyle lecture rhetorically positioned against ‘atheist’ theories of the material soul, which prompted Layton’s appearance as a controversialist. It examines the content of Layton’s response, and the various ways he positioned his work rhetorically against Bentley. The chapter then turns to Manlove’s intervention in the debate, and his principal argument based on the ‘noble’ nature of the soul. In concluding, the chapter considers how the dispute stimulated Layton’s increasingly atypical views about aspects of the Scripture and the historical origins of the theory of the immortal soul, against the broader social and ecclesiastical context of managing dissent.

### *I. Layton’s doubts and researches*

Lamentably, there are only limited biographical details available on the life of Henry Layton.<sup>8</sup> He was born in 1622, and lived in Rawdon in Yorkshire, where his family manor house, Layton Hall, still stands. Francis Blackburne described him as ‘a Gentleman of an ancient family and a handsome estate’. His father, Francis Layton (1576/7–1661) was master of the jewel-office to Kings Charles I and II, and was fined and imprisoned for his support for the Royalist cause during the Civil War. Layton was educated at Oxford and Gray’s Inn and was called to the Bar, although he limited his activities to ‘good offices, among his neighbours without fee or reward’.<sup>9</sup> Ralph Thoresby visited Layton, whom he called an

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<sup>8</sup> Dario Pfanner, “Layton, Henry (1622–1705), writer on theology,” *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford: 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Francis Blackburne, *A short historical view of the controversy concerning an intermediate state and the separate existence of the soul between death and the general resurrection* (London: 1765), 75.

‘accomplished gentleman’, who ‘lives piously’.<sup>10</sup> Apart from his works on the soul, Layton wrote a work on *Observations Concerning Money and Coin* (1697).<sup>11</sup>

Despite the paucity of material on Layton’s life, his published works afford details of the circumstances that informed his dissenting opinion on the soul, and his appearance as a controversialist. These details are interesting in revealing the way the available literature on the soul might stimulate unorthodox views, as well as something of the atmosphere of discussion and debate among his associates in country Yorkshire. Layton related that he:

fell into some doubt concerning the Nature of this sort of Soul, and thereupon began to enquire after the true Constitution of it: And finding himself strongly inclined to think it perishable, and extinguishable at the Death of the Person; he had several Disputations with himself, and others.<sup>12</sup>

In these circumstances, Layton researched his subject energetically – he stated that during the Summer of 1690 he practised ‘Monastick Discipline, reading within Doors, and labouring the Ground abroad’.<sup>13</sup>

Layton’s researches resulted in an embryonic treatise – the *Search after souls* – that may give a sense as to how Layton saw his work on the soul (at least at the end of the process). The title alluded to the precedent of the biblical Solomon, who was a ‘great Searcher after Knowledge’.<sup>14</sup> While Solomon recognised the limitations of knowledge, he was not discouraged. Layton admired that Solomon valued ‘*Knowledge as Silver*’, and shared Solomon’s aspiration that knowledge would lead him to ‘*Fear of the Lord; and to find the*

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph Thoresby, *The diary of Ralph Thoresby* (London: 1830), I:398

<sup>11</sup> [Henry Layton], *Observations concerning money and coin* (London: 1697).

<sup>12</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a Short treatise*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 25-26.

<sup>14</sup> [Henry Layton], *Search after souls* (London: 1698?), 1. Ecclesiastes, 7: 25.

*Knowledge of God* (Proverbs 2). In these invocations of Solomon, we find an exemplar that resonated with Layton, and epitomised the values Layton considered important for his own search – to be ‘diligent’, conducted ‘with a great desire’, ‘importunate and solicitous’.<sup>15</sup>

Layton’s search for the truth about the soul led him to engage with an eclectic grouping of sources. The *Search after Souls* takes, as its starting point, the *Dying Thoughts* (1683) of dissenting minister Richard Baxter and provides a commentary on this work from its beginning to the end.<sup>16</sup> Intertwined with this are lengthy digressions on other philosophers and theologians. The resulting work is somewhat polyphonic, with something of the feel of an advocate calling and examining witnesses. Apparently, the organising theme for Layton’s sources was at least partly expediency: he placed his consideration of the soul against several texts that he had within his ‘Possession or Reach’.<sup>17</sup>

Layton remarked that Baxter’s thesis falters or ‘stumbles’ upon Solomon’s statement that ‘*things fall out alike to Men and Be[a]sts; as the one dies, so dies the other*’.<sup>18</sup> Layton considered the distinction between animal and human souls as a problem running through Baxter’s work.<sup>19</sup> Layton felt Baxter’s reasons for believing in the immortal, immaterial soul were unconvincing. In Layton’s view this flowed from a gap in knowledge: from want of understanding how the ‘Parts and Spirits of the Body’ act to give sense, intellect and so on, men ‘Introduce, or Invent a Forreign Government and Governor’. In this light Layton called

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1-3.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Baxter, *Richard Baxter's dying thoughts upon Phil. I, 23 written for his own life and the latter times of his corporal pains and weakness* (London: 1683).

<sup>17</sup> Layton, *Search after souls*, 170.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 277.

on the proponents of such a view to take on themselves the onus of proof in establishing the nature of the soul.<sup>20</sup>

One view that Layton paid significant attention to was Aristotle's account of the 'psyche' (soul) in *De Anima - On the Soul* (c. 350 BC).<sup>21</sup> For many of his contemporaries, Layton's interest in Aristotle would have seemed somewhat old-fashioned and out of touch with the dominance of the mechanical philosophies. Layton, however, 'ransacked the Treasures' of Aristotle's work, which he called 'the best furnished' for his purpose. While Layton appreciated there is level of equivocation on this topic in Aristotle's work, he was most convinced by a construction of Aristotle's arguments and analysis of the soul as only acting in the body through the animal spirits.<sup>22</sup>

Layton's investigations also involved early modern theories of the soul, including the most influential of these - René Descartes'. Layton found the account advanced by Descartes unconvincing, dismissing his thought experiments about being a disembodied mind.<sup>23</sup> He also paid attention to two other works broadly in Descartes' tradition: the *Two treatises* (1644) of Sir Kenelm Digby, clearly influenced by Descartes, but more focused on the limitations of mechanical theories in accounting for the operations of the soul, and the *Immortality of the Soul* (1659) of Henry More. While these are all important works, retaining prominence today, there is a degree of eclecticism in Layton's selection, reflecting the library to which he had access. Thus, he also defined his position in relation to lesser-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *On the soul*, trans. W. Hett (Harvard: 1957), 205. The *Search after souls* contains a lengthy summary of Aristotle's account of the soul from 44-77.

<sup>22</sup> Layton, *Search after souls*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 78.

known treatments of the soul: that of the Reformed theologian Girolamo Zanchi, the Jesuit Franciscus de Oviedo, and another Jesuit, Guy Holland's *The prerogative of man* (1645).<sup>24</sup>

Layton circulated *Search after Souls* among his acquaintances, although it would not be published for some years. It seemed only 'very few' were willing to examine the work, apart from 'a Neighbour-Minister, who did undertake to Dispute and Argue this Point.'<sup>25</sup> This resulted in the Second Part of *Search after Souls*, which responded to the Minister's objections. Apparently, after their exchange, Layton's interlocutor was 'rather tired than satisfy'd by this Encounter', and drew his opponent's attention to a lately printed sermon on the subject, which might give him 'some Satisfaction or Light concerning it.'<sup>26</sup>

## II. Bentley and the 'Atheist'

The work in question was the second of Richard Bentley's inaugural Boyle lectures delivered in 1692 – the first of an annual series of sermons, established in the will of the eminent natural philosopher Robert Boyle for 'proving the Christian religion against notorious Infidels'.<sup>27</sup> Bentley was born in Oulton, Yorkshire (as it chanced, not far from Layton Hall). He had received his education at St John's College, Cambridge, 1676, taking a B.A. in 1680 and M. A. in 1683. Bentley's later works would establish him as one of the great classical scholars of his age. However, he was, at the time, chaplain to the bishop of Worcester, the aforementioned Edward Stillingfleet (indeed, it seems possible that it was Stillingfleet who

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<sup>24</sup> Girolamo Zanchi, *De operibus Dei intra spatium sex dierum* (Neustadt: 1602). Franciscus de Oviedo, *Cursus philosophicus* (Lyon : 1640). [Guy Holland], *The prerogative of man: or, the immortality of humane soules asserted against the vain cavils of a late worthlesse pamphlet, entituled, Mans mortality* (Oxford: 1645).

<sup>25</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a Short treatise*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See: Thomas Birch, *The life of the honourable Robert Boyle* (London: 1744), 353-354.

suggested him as the Boyle lecturer).<sup>28</sup> Bentley's lectures on *The Folly and Unreasonableness of Atheism* encompassed a number of themes. Perhaps most memorable was his attempted integration of Newton's physics into arguments for the existence of God. Bentley's works provided a foundation for his academic and ecclesiastical career, and according to his biographer, excited applause that was 'loud and universal'.<sup>29</sup>

It was, however, the second sermon, *Matter and Motion cannot Think*, that particularly attracted Layton's attention.<sup>30</sup> Bentley sought to defend the claim that there is an immaterial substance – the soul – which is essentially distinct from the body.<sup>31</sup> In so doing, he attacked, in particular, the view that thinking, willing and perceiving could be produced through 'some Modification' of matter, which he called the 'Opinion of every Atheist and counterfeit Deist'.<sup>32</sup>

Consistent with the approach of many apologists, Bentley assumed a close association between 'atheism', 'Epicurean' philosophy, practical immorality, and disbelief in the immortal soul. The text for *Matter and motion cannot think* is Acts 17:27, which, as Bentley explained, is taken from a discourse of St Paul to the Athenians, delivered after an encounter with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.<sup>33</sup> In a recent study, Katherine Calloway drew attention to the importance of St Paul as a rhetorical model for Bentley's own confutation of

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<sup>28</sup> John Dahm, "Science and apologetics in the early Boyle lectures," *Church History* 39(2) (1970), 172-186

<sup>29</sup> Monk, *Richard Bentley*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> The sermon was first printed as: Richard Bentley, *Matter and motion cannot think, or, a confutation of atheism from the faculties of the soul* (London: 1692), hereafter '*Sermon II*'. The sermons were reprinted together in: Bentley, *Boyle Lectures*. Layton's page references indicate that he had the former.

<sup>31</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> 'That they should seek the Lord, if happily they might feel after him, and find him; though he be not far from every one of us: for in him we Live, and Move, and have our Being.'

philosophical ‘atheism’.<sup>34</sup> Here Bentley picked up an ongoing theme in the controversies, which has been touched on previously, claiming that early modern ‘atheists’ were ‘corrupted through Philosophy and vain deceit’, like St Paul’s opponents.<sup>35</sup>

This theme was an important one for Bentley, and the figure of the ‘atheist’ emerges as an ominous presence in his lectures. He suggested darkly in one sermon, that it is ‘design’d and endeavour’d’ that atheism is to become ‘universal’ through Britain. The consequences, Bentley wrote, would be significant for ‘Love for our Country and Loyalty to our Prince... all that is laudable or valuable in the World.’<sup>36</sup>

In his efforts to confute the ‘atheists’, Bentley focused entirely on proving the immortal nature of the soul from the evidences of nature and reason. His rationale for this is made clear in the first of his sermons – the Scripture would clearly have ‘no force’ with such people; however, Bentley was confident that ‘the mighty Volumes of visible Nature, and the everlasting Tables of Right Reason’ would offer compelling evidence for religion.<sup>37</sup> Bentley would follow this strategy regarding the soul with reference to a concept of matter, which he said was professed by atheists. Bentley agreed with the atheists to the extent that ‘a true Notion and Idea of Matter’ is nothing but ‘Extension’, which is ‘impenetrable and divisible and passive’.<sup>38</sup>

For Bentley, this concept of matter was: ‘providentially one of the best Antidotes against their other impious opinions: as the Oil of Scorpions is said to be against the poison of their

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<sup>34</sup> Katherine Calloway, *Natural theology in the scientific revolution: God's scientists* (London and New York: 2016), 124

<sup>35</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Bentley, *Boyle Lectures*, Sermon I, 34.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 16-17.

Stings.<sup>39</sup> For Bentley, even atheists agreed that this definition of matter will allow ‘no inherent Faculty of Sense and Perception’. Otherwise, the absurd result would be that an object such as a stone could be a rational creature.<sup>40</sup>

Bentley then considered other possible ways matter alone might be argued to account for the soul. The common theme to his argument is that qualities such as colour, warmth and softness do not subsist in matter, but are ideas and sensations in something else, namely the immaterial soul. In that light, Bentley contended that the ‘Gross Substance of the Brain’, and the ‘Animal Spirits’ could not of themselves account for thought. Nor, he contended, can ‘Motion and Agility’ of these parcels of matter give rise to thought. Such a link between velocity and cognition would be absurd, else ‘Ship under sail must be a most intelligent Creature’.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Bentley dismissed the view that a ‘particular sort of Motion, as of the Animal Spirits through Muscles and Nerves’ could support Sense and Perception, nor the action of the particles of the animal spirits.

Throughout his sermon, Bentley assumed an increasingly exasperated and trenchant rhetoric regarding the possibility of a material soul. There are ‘no greater *Fools* than Atheistical *Wits*’, he wrote, and scoffed that the idea of thinking atoms would exceed the ‘Incredibility all the Fictions of *Aesop's Fables*’.<sup>42</sup>

Having considered *Matter and motion cannot think*, Layton’s view was that Bentley had failed in his efforts to provide a proof of the soul’s immateriality. Layton took pause from his more general researches into the soul, and prepared a controversial response with the intention ‘to excite Mr. B. to the communicating his fuller Thoughts to the World concerning

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

this Subject,’ and to ‘Summon and Provoke the said Mr. B. to a better and more full Performance’.<sup>43</sup> Layton’s text followed Bentley’s page by page, giving at times a somewhat querulous and unsystematic impression.

At a basic level, Layton disagreed with the conception of the soul as defined in *Matter and Motion cannot Think*. Bentley had referred to ‘something in our Composition, that thinks and apprehends’.<sup>44</sup> In that sense, the soul was equated with thought, as was the view of Descartes. Layton, by contrast, saw thought as something that arose from ‘the whole Composition of Soul and Body by a divine and admirable Contexture united’.<sup>45</sup> Layton stated that this should be ‘no news to our Preacher’, citing the views of his ‘Master Aristotle’ on this matter (a status that Bentley had never given the Greek philosopher).<sup>46</sup>

One key reason Layton found Bentley’s arguments unconvincing related to his account of matter. Layton did not subscribe to Bentley’s characterisation of inert matter, without any self-moving power, observing that ‘Wind and Fire are Matter, and yet Self-movers’.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, it appears that underlying his views was the classical theory of four elements. He wrote, at one point, that he assumed Bentley thought ‘three of the Elements, viz. Water, Air, and Fire were no parts of Matter; which I pass for an apparent mistake’.<sup>48</sup> As Layton later stated in his *Search after Souls*, he considered it was a gross error to take the view: ‘That no Matter, or Thing consisting of Matter, can have a Principle of Motion or Activity in it self, or of moving any other Matter whatsoever.’<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Layton, *Search after souls*, 33. Layton refers, in particular, to Henry More.

Layton offered some suggestions as to what the material basis of the soul consists in. He stated that he saw the ‘glowing Particles of Blood, called Spirits’ as not, in themselves sentient, but that they constituted the ‘Active Principle of Life, Motion, Sense and Understanding in Man and Beast’.<sup>50</sup> Layton acknowledged the physiologists had not ascertained how the vital parts of the body acted, but he saw them as: ‘Excited and Actuated by that Flame and Glowing, of that which is called the *Flammula Vitalis*’.

Layton saw this vital flame as ‘perpetually nourished and maintained’ through respiration, and envisaged:

the Spirits raised and kindled in and about the Heart, mount continually to the Head, where in the Brain, and the Ventricles of it, and Motion or Conveyance of the Arteries thereunto belonging, the Common Sense is furnished, and excited to Act upon all Objects presented, and to Lodge them in the Phantasie and the Memory, whence they may be recalled and presented again to the common Sensorium, or Judicial Power, that it may consider them better, or work with them, or upon them, as far as its own Capacity, or Intellect, can advance it self in the Powers and Practices of Arts and Sciences.<sup>51</sup>

One notable aspect of Layton’s approach to the issue is the degree of uncertainty he attached to claims surrounding the soul. Bentley stated that we could be as sure of the immortality of the soul ‘as of any Mathematical Truth whatsoever; or at least of such as are proved from the Impossibility or Absurdity of the contrary’.<sup>52</sup> Layton’s later antagonist Manlove referred to the ‘force of plain evidence’.<sup>53</sup> Layton, in contrast, repeatedly affirmed that he was willing to

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<sup>50</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Layton, *Search after souls*, 8-9.

<sup>52</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 164.

be persuaded with compelling arguments. He wrote that he would be ‘ready to submit to Truth made visible in any intelligible manner whatsoever’.<sup>54</sup> Indeed this is a theme that runs through his later publications.

Contrary to what Bentley may have suspected, Epicurean atomism did not feature among the principal sources for Layton’s views. In his later *Search after souls*, Layton mentioned that he had once met Hobbes, but had never spoken to him or read his works, nor did he appear particularly appalled to share his views.<sup>55</sup> As previously mentioned, Layton drew on Aristotle’s notion of life as the ‘compositum’ of body and material spirits. Layton’s work against Bentley also drew on the work of Oxford physiologist Thomas Willis, who had analysed the corporeal ‘animal’ soul ‘which is Common to Brute Animals with Man’.<sup>56</sup> The existence of animal souls was itself a central issue in the discussion, with examples focusing on the comparative case of animals and automata featuring conspicuously in Layton’s arguments.

Bentley’s approach in *Matter and Motion cannot Think* was to deny that the debate surrounding animals had any relevance to the existence of the immaterial soul. It was possible, it seemed, that animals might have immaterial souls; however, these might be immortal, or they might be annihilated at death. Alternatively, if animals were ‘bare Engines and Machins’ this would simply reveal the skill of the divine artificer. Animals would be like the idols described in Psalm 115: 6 (*‘they have eyes and see not; ears, and hear not; noses, and smell not’*), or the watch that the Emperor of China was said to mistake for a living thing;

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<sup>54</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Layton, *Search after souls*, Part II, 13-14.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Willis, *Two discourses concerning the souls of brutes*, trans. S. Pordage (London: 1683), 1.

however, they show the ‘infinite distance’ of skill ‘betwixt the poor mortal Artist, and the Almighty Opificer’.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast, Layton considered the status of animals and automata was critical to the question of the soul. He said, of Bentley’s two alternatives, ‘if either of these Opinions be true, the whole Fabrick of Nature and Science would thereby be drawn into very great Differences and Alterations’.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the first argument he put forward against Bentley was the case of plants and animals. The former ‘grow, flourish and fructifie by a Material Spirit’, the latter ‘act sensibly and knowingly by a like Spirit’. Therefore, according to Layton, ‘man may perform all his natural Functions by the like means of a Material Spirit’.

As to the Cartesian view of animals as automata, Layton considered this contrary to the ‘common sense of Mankind’. He questioned if anything could be ‘more absurd’ than:

boldly and seriously to affirm that a Dog or a Horse doth neither hear, see, smell, taste, nor even feel, when they are whipt, spurr’d or beaten; and that Beasts have neither Love, Wrath, Fear, Expectation or Desire; these Assertions appear so contrary to Mens daily experience, and therefore so absurd.<sup>59</sup>

As Layton wrote in his *Search after souls*, he felt it was clear that there was a ‘great Congruity’ between the physiology of humans and animals – their ‘Parts, Frame, and Composition’.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in considering the ‘Internal Powers’ of humans and animals, Layton discerned many commonalities, which he discussed at some length, drawing on examples from classical history but also, it would seem, his own experience from his estate. Animals, he claims, have similar senses and affections. Some, such as horses, give evidence

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<sup>57</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 29-30.

<sup>58</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Layton, *Search after souls*, 27.

of memory. Others ‘have Phantasies’ based on the fact they are sometimes agitated in dreams. For Layton, it appeared some animals even have capacities that suggest intellect, in support of which he cited instances, for example, where dogs have shown kindness to their dead masters, and allegedly discovered their murderers.<sup>61</sup> For Layton, the diversity of animal life ‘springs from the motions and actings of a Material Spirit, and the force and power of a Natural Flame’.<sup>62</sup> Layton considered the distinction of human intelligence was owing to differences in physiology. In this regard, he stated that humans’ ‘Spirits are more pure and subtil’, the material ‘more fine and copious’, and the receptacles and organs better adapted to receiving these. Again, Layton discerned God’s wisdom in contriving human intelligence in this way.<sup>63</sup>

Layton, like Descartes, drew a connection between animals and automata. However, for Layton, the capacity for machines to resemble animals lent credence to the argument that matter might sustain thought, in a way that went beyond what Willis and others had suggested. Layton sought to draw Bentley’s attention to the power of human arts to create machines capable of motion, calling on him to ‘Witness *Architas* his Dove, and *Regiomontanus* his Eagle’.<sup>64</sup> In the latter case, the fifteenth-century scholar Regiomontanus – Johannes Müller von Königsberg – was said to have constructed a mechanical eagle and a fly, which ‘flew at their full liberty in the Air, to a certain and considerable distance’. Layton noted that men did not believe this could be accomplished without an immaterial spirit, and attributed this to conjuration and ‘Daemons’. Possibly Layton had been reading the *Mathematicall Magick* (1648) of John Wilkins, who discussed

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>64</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 5.

these ‘volant automata’.<sup>65</sup> In any event, he emphasised that, just as machines may be arranged to move, so with divine contrivance, animals and humans would be capable of life and thought. Certainly, the relevance of these machines impressed him, given he returns to the examples in his response to Manlove,<sup>66</sup> and his commentary on Broughton’s *Psychologia*.<sup>67</sup>

Returning to Layton’s response to Bentley, the work concluded with an invitation to further debate the issue. Adopting the combative language not infrequently employed in controversy, Layton wrote that he was:

ready to submit to the Rules and Authority of Scripture, and to be tried by them, as well as by the Rules and Experiments extracted from Nature and Reason: he will then, I hope, make use of that Holy Book to fortifie his Tenet, and *descendere in arenam*, armed with his best Forces drawn out of all Garisons and Magazines, fit for such a design.<sup>68</sup>

At the same time, Layton reasserted the grave purpose of debate as a means to ascertaining the truth of the nature of the soul. Of Bentley or any other opponent, he wished that ‘Truth may be his aim’ and, with reference to 1 Esdras 4:38, that it ‘*may endure, be strong, and live, and conquer for evermore*’.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> [ohn] W[ilkins], *Mathematicall magick. or, the wonders that may be performed by mechanicall geometry* (London: 1648), 191.

<sup>66</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 34-35.

<sup>67</sup> [Henry Layton], *Observations upon a treatise intit’led Psychologia* (London: 1703), 65-66.

<sup>68</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 19

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

### III. Manlove's intervention

Bentley did not respond to Layton's work, 'perhaps,' Layton later speculated, because he was 'taken up with Occasions of more Concernment, or neglecting the Summons of so short a Pamphlet, and so unknown an Author'. Layton, meanwhile, resumed the 'pursuit of his former Inquiries concerning the Soul', and was referred, by another Minister, to a further treatise contending for the soul's immateriality, the *Pneumatologia* (1685) of Presbyterian Minister John Flavel.<sup>70</sup> Layton further incorporated material into his treatise in response. Some months after the completion of Layton's treatise, he sought its publication in London. However, the printers would not bear the 'Charge and Hazard of such a Publication of the Work of a Nameless Author' for less than fifty pounds. Reflecting that publication would likely obtain only the 'evil Surmises of Men possessed with the contrary Opinion, and their hard Speeches, and Reproaches', Layton confined his treatise, somewhat ignominiously, to a box, where according to him, it may well have remained.<sup>71</sup>

It was an intervention from Timothy Manlove that reopened the controversy. Manlove was a dissenting Minister, who had originally carried on a successful practice as a physician.<sup>72</sup> In 1694, Manlove became Minister of the Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds, within ten miles of Layton's home. Ann Thomson observes that it is possible that he may have personally known Layton, although this does not seem clear from the texts.<sup>73</sup> As its title suggests, Manlove's work – *The immortality of the soul asserted and practically improved* (1697) – was primarily directed at Layton (in answer to his response to Bentley), but also encompassed a broader defence of the doctrine of the immaterial, immortal soul. In this

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<sup>70</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Gilpin, *The comforts of divine love preach'd upon the occasion of the much lamented death of the reverend Mr. Timothy Manlove. With his character, done by another hand.* (London: 1700), [3]

<sup>73</sup> Thomson, *Bodies of thought*, 98.

connection, the work included a preface, written by notable non-conformist clerics John Howe and Matthew Sylvester, who praised Manlove's efforts in addressing what they characterised as '*monstrous degeneracy*' and '*poyson*'.<sup>74</sup>

From the outset, it is clear Manlove shared many of Bentley's concerns about the doctrine of the material soul. The work began by praising 'sound Philosophy', but lamenting the '*many Pretenders*' to philosophy.<sup>75</sup> Like Bentley, Manlove had in mind 'atheists' and 'Epicureans', of whom he would agree that they are typically inspired by moral corruption. Manlove pointed to the concrete example of the notorious rakish poet and courtier, John Wilmot, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester. Rochester was said to have lamented on his death bed: 'that absurd and foolish Philosophy, which the world so much admired, propagated by the late Mr. Hobbs, and others, had undone him, and many more, of the best parts in the Nation'.<sup>76</sup>

As to Layton's views, Manlove discerned a connection with Epicurean atheism, even if this was somewhat confused, describing the response to Bentley as 'a medly of *Epicurean Dreams and Christian Doctrines*'.<sup>77</sup> Given Layton had advanced 'so far into the Tents of *Epicurus, Lucretius, Hobs*, and others of our trifling *Atomists*', Manlove wondered why he went no further. Perhaps he might 'yet be within call', or at least refutation of his views might 'prevent others from being infected with the like Contagion'.<sup>78</sup>

Manlove's *Immortality of the Soul Asserted* is a relatively lengthy production. One chapter focused on the 'full and clear' evidence from the Scripture for the immortality of the soul, with others setting out arguments from natural reason and the testimony of the ancient

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<sup>74</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the Soul Asserted*, preface §I-2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Parsons, *A sermon preached at the funeral of the Rt Honorable John Earl of Rochester*, (Oxford: 1680), 26.

<sup>77</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

philosophers. In gathering this miscellany together, Manlove's argumentative strategy was quite different to that of Bentley, who offered a single, focused 'proof' from the definition of matter.

It is not possible to consider the substance of all Manlove's arguments. However, his argument from the 'noble' character of the soul appeared first in the book, and is also a theme that underlined a number of his specific responses to Layton. It may thus give a sense of his general approach. Manlove's concise form of the argument was: 'The noble Faculties, and Capacities of the Soul, argue that its Original is higher than our Author is willing to allow of, and that its Nature is immortal.'<sup>79</sup>

Manlove cited a range of evidence to support this claim under seven subpoints, with a mix of contemporary and classical anecdotes by way of illustration. First, he emphasised how with the 'vital, active Power' of the soul, one's thoughts might wander over the Earth or from one idea to another. Such a power was evident to him in such circumstances as sleep, and even in deathbed confessions (the Earl of Rochester's case being once more the example cited). Second, Manlove offered as evidence the eagerness of the soul's '*pursuits after Knowledge*', which extended beyond matter and the senses, encompassing, for instance, the mathematical speculations of figures like Archimedes, or Descartes. Third, Manlove reflected that the 'self-determining power' of the will, its capacity to discern good from evil, argued for its immortality. The fourth argument was the capacity for the soul to reflect on its own acts (conscience). Fifth, Manlove argued the soul has the power of rectifying the mistakes that sense and imagination commit. Sixth, the soul was said to restrain and control the '*Passion and Concupiscence*' inherent in the animal spirits. Finally, Manlove contended that there is a natural apprehension of the soul's immortality, which was shared not only by '*Civilised*

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 29.

*Greeks and Romans*’, but also ‘Barbarous *Scythians, Indians, &c.*’.<sup>80</sup> Throughout his discussion of these points, Manlove argued that the existence of an immortal, immaterial soul is far more consistent with these phenomena than any materialistic explanation. One source that Manlove drew on was Stillingfleet’s *Origines Sacrae* (1662).<sup>81</sup> The latter had argued that the ‘noble and refined nature’ of the soul evidenced its immortality, which was perhaps what prompted Manlove’s ‘noble Faculties’. Stillingfleet’s rhetorical question – ‘Can atoms dispute whether there be Atoms or no?’ – is quoted, and in a number of places Manlove paraphrased Stillingfleet’s arguments (as Layton noted in his reply).<sup>82</sup>

One might have thought that Manlove, as a physician, would engage directly with Layton’s detailed discussions of animal spirits. However, like Bentley before him, Manlove denied the relevance of the debate on animal souls.<sup>83</sup> His reason, however, is somewhat different. Even if animal souls are material, Manlove considered, there is a clear distinction between human and animal souls – ‘the *Humane Soul* is much more excellent’.<sup>84</sup> That said, Manlove accepted that it may be going too far to say animals are automata (as suggested by Descartes), as there is ‘something in them which looks *like Reason*’. Nevertheless the ‘higher Operations of the Souls of Men’ have ‘more *immediate* and *direct* reference to Immortality’.<sup>85</sup>

Ultimately, Manlove considered this debate irrelevant and accused Layton of attempting to ‘carry the Controversy into the dark’.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 25-48.

<sup>81</sup> Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae*, 411-418.

<sup>82</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 25.

<sup>83</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 95.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 96.

By the time he became aware of Manlove's work, Layton had lost his sight, and was working with the assistance of an amanuensis.<sup>87</sup> He discerned, at some level, a certain providence in Manlove's intervention. In his response, he compared his situation to a number of biblical occurrences – God had stirred up Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, to end the Babylonian captivity; so too he had raised various adversaries against Solomon, to prompt him to return to God's service. This, Layton said, 'applies to his present Condition, finding the Spirit of Mr. *M.* stirred up against him', giving him 'a Provocation and a kind of necessity' both to respond, and to publish the treatise that he had been labouring on.<sup>88</sup> In this context, Layton published *Observations upon a Short Treatise* (1697), which responded to Manlove, as well as *A Search after Souls* (1698?) and *A Second Part of a Treatise Intituled A Search after Souls* (1698?).

Layton's *Observations upon a Short Treatise* (1697) is itself a substantial text, several times larger than his critique of Bentley. Indeed, as the work continued Layton's previous approach of commenting page by page on Manlove's work, substantially all of the existing themes in the debate remained at issue. One of these was the perennial early modern quarrel about God's omnipotence.

In *Matter and Motion cannot Think*, Bentley had written that 'Omnipotence it self cannot create cogitative Body', i.e., thinking matter. He explained that this was no 'imperfection in the power of God', rather the ideas of matter and thought were simply incompatible.<sup>89</sup> In response, Layton reminded Bentley of the miracles described in the Scripture. The capacity of matter to think appeared to him eminently possible in that context:

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<sup>87</sup> Layton referred to himself as '*Captus Oculis*' and requiring the work to be read to him: Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 7.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 29.

that *Aaron's* Rod laid upon the Tabernacle was dry Wood, and seemed to be under an incapacity of bearing Fruit; and yet in the morning, by Divine Power, it had budded, and brought forth Blossoms and yielded Almonds.<sup>90</sup>

It is apparent from other statements in Layton's work that he did not think God miraculously endowed matter with the capacity for thought. However, his efforts to contradict his opponents as much as possible can create that impression. Certainly, that was the construction Manlove placed on Layton's statements. Thus, Manlove accused Layton of desperately appealing to God's omnipotence to support his theory – he wrote that Layton's views require '*the supposition of a continued course of Miracles*', and that his opponent was 'forced to fly to a miraculous Power'.<sup>91</sup> For Manlove, Layton had conflated God's '*ordinary works*' and '*extraordinary miraculous Works*'.<sup>92</sup> He questioned whether it was a valid way of arguing, to 'prostitute the Doctrine of the Divine Power, to serve the ends of every trifling Hypothesis, falsely called Philosophy?'<sup>93</sup> Rather, he wrote, it should be 'part of a Philosopher humbly to contemplate' nature.<sup>94</sup>

In his response to Manlove, Layton accepted 'That to Prove by Miracles is unphilosophical'. Considering the two options in dispute, he contended that his own view only required 'one wonderful Work', that is God's wisdom and power in producing life 'by his Skilful contexture of Matter and [material] Spirit together'.<sup>95</sup> In contrast, he accused apologists for the immortal soul of 'the coining of Miracles for the maintaining of the same.'<sup>96</sup> Layton had

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<sup>90</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 63-64.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>95</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 73.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 74-75.

already attacked Bentley's work on that point. Bentley had appealed to God's omnipotence to account for the connection between the matter of the body, and the immortal soul. Unable to determine that 'invisible Bands and Fetters unite them', he wrote that this must be resolved in terms of the 'sole Pleasure and *Fiat* of our Omnipotent Creator'.<sup>97</sup> Layton objected that this type of argument 'shews us no Evidence that it is, or ever was' God's pleasure.<sup>98</sup>

#### ***IV. Heresy, dissent and authority***

The polemical context in which Layton engaged with the doctrine of the soul and articulated his unusual views prompted him to engage more broadly with his relationship to the categories of orthodoxy and heresy. Having publicly questioned a central orthodox tenet, Layton was challenged by his opponent to reconcile his views with established Christianity. While in some cases Layton attempted to do so, in others he was remarkably obstinate and willing to draw quite unusual implications from his theories. Yet Layton continued to see himself as a true exponent of the Church of England. The controversy is an excellent example of the contested (and shifting) boundaries of orthodoxy and the relation of heresy and dissent to the State and the Church of England.

The discussion between Manlove and Layton saw the Scripture become a direct matter of discussion. Clearly, different verses could point either way. Manlove emphasised Matthew 10: 28, 'fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul'.<sup>99</sup> Layton preferred Luke 12:4, 'Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do; but fear him, who after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell.' His justificatory argument was curious. He compared the 'Persons and Qualities' of St Matthew

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<sup>97</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 32

<sup>98</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 16.

<sup>99</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 17.

and St Luke. Matthew, he observed, was a publican, and ‘might easily be carried away by the common Opinion’ about the soul. Luke, however, was ‘a Knowing and Learned Physician’ and therefore more accurate.<sup>100</sup> While Layton had no doubts about the veracity of the Scripture, it is extremely striking to see a pious man seeking to undermine the credibility and respectability of one of the Evangelists.

Another area where Layton was willing to pursue a questionable line of enquiry was the historical origin and proliferation of views on the soul. Manlove had appealed to the preponderance of opinion on the immortal soul amongst philosophers and different peoples, arguing that the soul has ‘a natural apprehension of its own Immortality’.<sup>101</sup> In response, Layton put forward a historical thesis that this doctrine in fact appeared with the pre-Socratic philosopher Pherecydes of Syros (6<sup>th</sup> Century BC). The reference to Pherecydes did not require any really specialised research. Cicero had said in the *Tusculanae disputationes* (c. 45) that Pherecydes was the first extant author to defend the immortality of the soul.<sup>102</sup> This was noted in works such as the *History of philosophy* (1655) of Thomas Stanley (1625-1678).<sup>103</sup> Once conceived, Layton considered the view was ‘greedily received and cultivated’, with the ‘Weaker Sex’ being particularly culpable.<sup>104</sup>

Challenged to explain how the opinion of the soul came into being, Layton replied that it gratified ‘ambition’. It was also, according to him, a ‘useful Instrument of Government amongst Men’, notably prior to Christ promulgating the idea of the Resurrection. Layton explicitly compared the doctrine of the immortal soul to the geocentric model of the Earth

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<sup>100</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 14.

<sup>101</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 25-48.

<sup>102</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan disputationes*, translated by Andrew Peabody (Boston: 1886), 29.

<sup>103</sup> Stanley, *History of philosophy*, 119.

<sup>104</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 41.

and the widespread idolatries of other civilisations.<sup>105</sup> Here, Layton's arguments had led him to a potentially subversive position. Similar arguments had been employed by Reformation thinkers against the pagan-derived 'Priestcraft' of the Roman Catholic Church; however, Layton took these further to cast doubt on a widely accepted doctrine of the Church of England.

It should be added that Layton's views of the 'corruption' of Christian belief find a parallel in the work of the figures usually known as the 'deists'. Charles Blount had taken a similar approach in his *Anima Mundi* (1679).<sup>106</sup> In that work, Blount purported to analyse pagan theories of the immortal soul, with the implied suggestion that Christian claims were poorly evidenced. Some years after Layton, John Toland would take up the historical account of the soul in his *Letters to Serena* (1704). Toland wrote that it might 'sound strange' to speak of the immortal soul as an 'Opinion'.<sup>107</sup> Like Layton, Toland saw the theory represented in Pherycedes, and 'Afterwards PLATO and the rest greedily imbrac'd this Doctrine'.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, Toland would trace its origins to pagan Egypt.<sup>109</sup> Anthony Collins related similar ideas in his work.<sup>110</sup> The idea of the pagan origin of the immortality of the soul would linger on throughout the eighteenth century, for example it is expounded by the materialist philosopher Joseph Priestley.<sup>111</sup> It is interesting that Layton's position concurred so closely with such thinkers, given how far removed his overall views were from theirs; something that serves to highlight that unorthodox views took a range of different forms in this period.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>106</sup> Charles Blount, *Anima mundi, or, an historical narration of the opinions of the ancients concerning man's soul after this life* (London: 1679).

<sup>107</sup> John Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London: 1704), Letter II, 21.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, Letter II, 28-29.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, Letter II, 40.

<sup>110</sup> Anthony Collins, *A discourse of free-thinking* (London: 1713), 152.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An history of the corruptions of Christianity* (London: 1782), Part V.

Throughout the correspondence there was a parallel debate about what role, if any, political power should have in regulating these kinds of discussions. In *Matter and Motion cannot Think*, Bentley had doubted whether ‘rational Discourses only’ could address those who argued against the immortality of the soul. Rather ‘a vigorous Execution of good Laws’ was required to ‘reclaim the profaneness of those perverse and unreasonable Men.’<sup>112</sup> Bentley’s statements in this sermon were perhaps principally rhetorical, though there were potential implications for figures such as Layton. William Coward, who like Layton argued against the immateriality of the soul, was to have his work burnt by the common hangman in 1703 as contrary to the doctrine of the Church of England, and subversive to the Christian Religion.<sup>113</sup>

For Layton, Bentley’s attitude was comparable to that of other notorious persecutors of unorthodoxy: the biblical King Saul, the ancient Romans, the Roman Catholics, the Ottoman Empire, and the then King of France, Louis XIV, who had revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685. For him, Bentley’s views would mean the philosophical view that ‘hath most worldly Power shall do best’. Moreover, the appeal to ‘Persecution and Punishment’ betrayed that Bentley ‘hath no great confidence in the force of his own Argument’. Layton emphasised the fallibility of such views; one should remember, he wrote, ‘the Opinion cried up to day, may fall to morrow’. This, he argued, should prompt ‘Moderation and Forbearance’ to those who hold differing beliefs – ‘our mistaken, and therefore dissenting Brethren’ – so long as they do not encourage ‘ill Practice or Course of Life’.<sup>114</sup> Again we see an interesting parallel with thinkers associated with deism, such as the idea of free thinking professed by Anthony Collins. Layton’s appeal to this sense of tolerance and free expression illustrates the

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<sup>112</sup> Bentley, *Sermon II*, 26.

<sup>113</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons* (London: 1803), Volume 14, 379-380.

<sup>114</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a sermon*, 17.

longstanding roots such ideas have in English intellectual culture, and that their provenance is not necessarily secularising in nature.

Manlove took up the theme of ‘dissent’ in his response to Layton, pointing out that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was an accepted precept within the Church of England, reflected in such things as the Order for the Burial of the Dead.<sup>115</sup> For Manlove, there was no point of difference between what he called ‘*sober* Dissenters’ and the Church of England ‘so important’ as that between himself and Layton, or so conducive to the ‘ill Practice’ Layton had mentioned.<sup>116</sup> (He, like Bentley, saw disbelief in the immaterial, naturally immortal soul as incompatible with moral or social life.)<sup>117</sup> Manlove’s defence of ‘dissent’ is interesting, as the term was typically used vaguely and pejoratively. Manlove himself, as a Presbyterian, was termed a ‘dissenter’ by Layton. However, English Presbyterians at this time tended to see their church as offering a model of national church government, rather than seeing themselves as dissenters, although by the 1710s, there was a growing tendency to prioritise individual conscience over subscription to confessions of faith.

Layton expanded on the topic of ‘dissenters’ in his response, expressing a palpable distaste for their views. He dismissed their differences with the established Church as ‘Things of very small moment in themselves, but [which] are blown up by the Wind of Phantasie’, and of no real significance to religion. Layton suggested with some asperity that, given dissenters objected to the Church of England’s forms of worship as being too similar to those of Roman Catholicism (the ‘Whore of *Babylon*’), they might also reject the immortality of the soul, likewise maintained by the Catholics. For Layton, the dissenters were ‘like Froward and very Ill-natured Children’ rejecting their mother. They were ‘wasps’ destroying hives where they

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<sup>115</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 77.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

have been ‘preserved and nourished’. In contrast, Layton emphasised that the Church of England did not ‘require so strict an Adherence to the Points of Doctrine or Discipline’. It was sufficient to ‘submit to Her Orders generally’.<sup>118</sup> Again we see an interesting shift in the thinkers’ claims to (or rejection of) orthodoxy: Manlove the Presbyterian is cast as a dissenter, while Layton is both emphasising his place within the Church and insisting on his freedom and moral duty to hold his own views – much as we might suspect of a ‘dissenter’.

Dissatisfied with Manlove as a sparring partner, Layton declared that he still sought a meaningful debate on the soul – he ‘did ever, and does still desire a sober knowing and Canvas of his Opinion.’<sup>119</sup> This led him to put forward an eccentric suggestion for solving the controversy. In Christian antiquity, the Greek Churches had called Pope Eleutherius to resolve their divisions. Appealing to this example, Layton wished ‘to incite and stir up’ Bishop Stillingfleet to ‘Treat fully and purposely’ of the soul.<sup>120</sup> Layton described approvingly how in English legal proceedings counsel argue a case before judges. Layton proposed that Stillingfleet ‘Examine the particulars’ of his case, outlined in his treatises, and give his answers on the subject. Layton then promised that, whatever the result, he would ‘hereafter be silent’ and leave off disputing.

He knows that the said Bishop has Defended the Opinion of the Immortality, in his Writings: But he takes the Bishop for a Person of great Integrity, and that he is as Old, and likely as near Death as himself: He knows of himself, That the whole Kingdom of *England* offered him, to give a false Verdict in this, or the like Case,

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<sup>118</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 81.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

would be utterly despise[d] by him: And he conceives full as well of the Bishop;  
and therefore dare remit the Point now in Dispute, to his Determination.<sup>121</sup>

Layton also proposed, as an alternative, ‘a National Synod, or Convocation’ that might debate the nature of the soul.<sup>122</sup> These proposals would seem characteristic of a figure at once doubtful and obstinate, deeply attached to the Church of England, and yet scrupulous about the truth, besides a certain naivete as to the practicality and desirability of such undertakings.

These proposed conferences, however, were never to be. Whether Stillingfleet was aware of Layton’s work or not, he died on 27 March 1699. Moreover, Layton does not seem to have been aware that Stillingfleet was – between 1697 and 1699 – involved in his own controversy with Locke, which in part, touched on the immortality of the soul. Manlove had himself threatened that any further work from Layton ‘may expect a Reply’.<sup>123</sup> However, this also was not to be. Manlove moved to Newcastle upon Tyne in 1699, and died quite suddenly of fever in August of that year (aged thirty-six).

Layton died in 1705. His nephew published a two-volume collection of Layton’s works under the title of *A Search after Souls* (1706), while distancing himself from the ‘paradox of the soul’s mortality’.<sup>124</sup> It is worth repeating Layton’s closing remarks in the final volume, which attest to the centrality of controversy to his quest for the truth:

My Desire and Prayer to God is, That he will by his good Providence and Spirit  
direct such, as out of a Pious Inclination, and for Love to Truth, shall in Peaceable  
and Christian Manner, undertake the Rectification of those Errours which shall be

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<sup>121</sup> Layton, *Observations upon a short treatise*, 73.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>123</sup> Manlove, *Immortality of the soul*, 163.

<sup>124</sup> Letter from William Smith to Ralph Thoresby, 27 August 1709, in *Letters of Eminent Men, Addressed to Ralph Thoresby* (London: 1832), vol. II, 193-195.

with clearness detected in this Treatise: And that he will finally discover to us what is the very Truth in the Point here disputed. And to an Answerer I shall conclude with *St. Paul 2 Tim 2.7. Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding [in this] and in all things*; especially enable thee for the Discovery, declaring and proving of the Truth in this Point.<sup>125</sup>

Layton's desire for someone to engage with his work was largely left alone by other thinkers, yet the debate on the soul would be taken up by more conspicuous figures in the following years.

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<sup>125</sup> Layton, *A Search after souls* (1706), 188.

## CHAPTER 11

### LIFE AND IMMORTALITY TO LIGHT:

#### COLLINS & CLARKE (1707-1708)

Jesus Christ, who hath abolish'd Death, and hath brought Life and Immortality to  
Light through the Gospel.

– 2 Tim 1: 10

[W]hen I have laid [Plato] aside and begin to reflect in my own mind upon the  
immortality of souls, all my previous sense of agreement slips away.

– Cicero<sup>1</sup>

The quotations above, paired together on the title page of Anthony Collins' *A Reply to Mr. Clark's Defence* (1707), reiterate some of the themes of this Part: the first affirming the scriptural basis for belief in a state beyond death, and the second raising a sense of doubt about the nature of the soul based on reason. They also represent two pillars of orthodoxy – the Scripture and Cicero – recast by a rather ambiguous figure.<sup>2</sup> Collins, whose name does not appear on the text, was a young and wealthy member of the landed gentry, later known as a 'free-thinker' and 'deist'. He took up these questions in his correspondence with Samuel Clarke, of similar age, but already one of the leading philosophers of the Church of England, an exponent of Newton's works, and a staunch advocate of the view that the soul was immaterial. Their debate, which ran between 1707 and 1708, is often seen as one of the most canonical on the nature of the soul in the history of philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan disputations*, trans. J. King (Cambridge, MA: 1927), Book I, 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> For Collins' 'appropriation' of Cicero, see: Giovanni Tarantino, "Collins's Cicero, freethinker," in *Atheism and deism revalued heterodox religious identities in Britain, 1650-1800*, ed. Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci and Jeffrey Wigelsworth (New York: 2014), 81-100.

Historians have seen the controversy as a significant episode in the emergence of a modern outlook on the soul, providing the background for thinkers such as Berkeley and Hume,<sup>3</sup> defining the debate over materialist theories of the mind,<sup>4</sup> reformulating traditional issues metaphysically,<sup>5</sup> and shaping views of what it is to be conscious of the self in a modern sense.<sup>6</sup> These are illuminating studies on the emergence of concepts that are of relevance today. Yet in focusing primarily on this content, the debate is often set outside its original controversial context. This is particularly tempting, as the dense philosophical reasoning of the debate has a morphological similarity to how such a discussion might be carried on today. There is, in that regard, a tendency to focus on disembodied concepts, divorced of their human actors and the culture of controversy in which the debate occurred. This chapter attempts to address this.

An associated issue is the tendency to see the controversy as symptomatic of a broader conflict in European intellectual culture between modernising ‘radical’ influences and orthodox Christianity. Scholars such as Jeffrey Wigelsworth and Margaret Jacob have contrasted Clarke’s approach, characterised as a ‘Newtonian’ synthesis of natural philosophy and Christianity, with that of Collins, who is seen as a proponent of ‘deism’ or a ‘free-thinker’.<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Israel considers Collins to be a representative of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ specifically stemming from Spinoza.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars, such as Jacopo Agnesina, see Collins as an atheist.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, James O’Higgins located Collins in ‘the debated ground where

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<sup>3</sup> James Ferguson, *The philosophy of Dr. Samuel Clarke and its critics* (New York: 1974), 10.

<sup>4</sup> William Uzgalis (ed), *The correspondence of Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins, 1707-08* (Toronto: 2011), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Barresi and Martin, *Naturalization of the soul*, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Udo Thiel, *The early modern subject* (Oxford: 2011), 229.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English revolution* (Hassocks: 1976), 162. Jeffrey Wigelsworth, “The sleeping habits of matter and spirit: Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins on the immortality of the soul,” *Past Imperfect*, 9 (2001-2003): 1-24. Jeffrey Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England* (Manchester: 2009), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 614-619.

<sup>9</sup> Jacopo Agnesina, *The philosophy of Anthony Collins: free-thought and atheism* (Paris: 2018), 47.

left-wing Protestantism shaded off into absolute unbelief'.<sup>10</sup> Ann Thomson, who wrote comparatively little on the controversy, characterises Clarke as a 'latitudinarian', and sees Collins as 'push[ing] the argument against an immaterial soul towards a secular position'.<sup>11</sup> Again, this thesis argues that the particular positions taken by Collins and Clarke are not reducible to these broad historical forces and antagonisms. Rather, the debate reflects their personal strivings to attain a true understanding of the soul, and was (at least for Collins) exploratory in nature.

As was the case with Locke and Stillingfleet, the controversy between Clarke and Collins was precipitated by the writings of a third party; in particular, *An Epistolary Discourse* (1706) of Henry Dodwell, which argued that the soul was naturally mortal.<sup>12</sup> Clarke critiqued Dodwell in his *Letter to Mr Dodwell* (1706).<sup>13</sup> Collins took up the argument in his *A letter to the learned Mr. Henry Dodwell* (1707),<sup>14</sup> where he sought to demonstrate 'the Inconclusiveness' of arguments for natural immortality, including the 'principal Argument', namely the soul's immateriality.<sup>15</sup> Clarke provided a more detailed rationale in *A defense of an argument* (1707) (*Clarke-I*).<sup>16</sup> Collins, however, remained unconvinced, issuing *A reply to Mr. Clark's Defence* (1707) (*Collins-I*).<sup>17</sup> The correspondence continued throughout 1707

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<sup>10</sup> James O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins: the man and his works* (The Hague: 1970), 199.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Thomson, *Bodies of thought science, religion, and the soul in the early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: 2008), 130.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Dodwell, *An epistolary discourse: proving, from the Scriptures and the first Fathers, that the soul is a principle naturally mortal; [...]* (London: 1706).

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A letter to Mr Dodwell; wherein all the arguments in his Epistolary discourse against the immortality of the soul are particularly answered, and the judgment of the Fathers concerning that matter truly represented* (London: 1706).

<sup>14</sup> The second edition is: Anthony Collins, *A letter to the learned Mr. Henry Dodwell; containing some remarks on a (pretended) demonstration of the immateriality and natural immortality of the soul, in Mr. Clark's Answer to his late Epistolary discourse, &c.* (1709).

<sup>15</sup> Collins, *A letter to the learned Mr. Henry Dodwell* (1707), 6

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A defense of an Argument made use of in a Letter to Mr Dodwell, to Prove the Immateriality and Natural Immortality of the Soul* (London: 1707).

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A reply to Mr. Clark's Defence of his letter to Mr. Dodwell with a postscript relating to Mr. Milles's Answer to Mr. Dodwell's Epistolary discourse* (London: 1707).

and 1708, with Clarke's *A Second Defense* (1707) (*Clarke-2*);<sup>18</sup> Collins' *Reflections on Mr. Clark's Second Defence of his Letter to Mr. Dodwell* (1707) (*Collins-2*),<sup>19</sup> Clarke's *A third defense* (1708) (*Clarke-3*),<sup>20</sup> and Collins' *An Answer to Mr Clark's Third Defence* (1708) (*Collins-3*).<sup>21</sup> Clarke began *A fourth defense* (1708) (*Clarke-4*) with the observation that 'Of repeating the same things over and over again, there is no End'.<sup>22</sup> Despite his pessimism, Clarke's work proved to be the final episode in the controversy.

The first section of this chapter introduces Clarke and the overarching debate surrounding Dodwell's work, and delineates his particular theory of the soul and emphasis on 'consciousness'. The second section turns to Collins, his intervention in the broader dispute, and his arguments for the possibility of thinking matter. The third section explores attempts to appropriate natural philosophy – and Newton's physics in particular – in the context of the controversy, and argues against the tendency to see Clarke's contribution as an instance of 'Newtonianism'. This line of discussion is further expanded in the final section, which considers the way controversy provided a catalyst for Collins' evolving views in the context of Clarke's claims that they were destructive of religion. We argue that equating Collins' approach to a systematic deist or atheistic endeavour is unhelpful, obscuring the developing and provisional character of his views through debate.

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<sup>18</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A second defense of an argument made use of in a Letter to Mr Dodwel, to prove the immateriality and natural immortality of the soul in a letter to the author of A reply to Mr Clarke's Defense, &c.* (London: 1707).

<sup>19</sup> The second edition is: Anthony Collins, *Reflections on Mr. Clark's Second defence of his Letter to Mr. Dodwell* (London: 1709).

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A third defense of an argument made use of in a Letter to Mr Dodwel, to prove the immateriality and natural immortality of the soul in a letter to the author of the Reflexions on Mr Clarke's Second defense, &c.* (London: 1708).

<sup>21</sup> [Anthony Collins], *An answer to Mr Clark's Third defence of his Letter to Mr Dodwell* (London: 1708).

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A fourth defense of an argument made use of in a Letter to Mr Dodwel, to prove the immateriality and natural immortality of the soul in a letter to the author of the Answer to Mr Clark's Third defense, &c with a postscript, relating to a book, entitled, a Vindication of Mr Dodwel's Epistolary discourse, &c.* (London: 1708).

## I. *Proof from a 'single consideration'*

At the time of his correspondence with Dodwell and Collins, Samuel Clarke was in his early thirties. Yet he had a distinguished career within the Church of England, accompanied by a body of work that reveals his extensive interest in contemporary advances in natural philosophy, and his determined efforts to provide a philosophically rigorous defence of the Christian religion. Born in 1675, Clarke attended Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, from 1690, and took his degree in 1695. He excelled at the disputations that had a key place in the curriculum.<sup>23</sup> Alongside classical languages and philosophy, Clarke took a strong interest in natural philosophy. Clarke's tutor, John Ellys, was well acquainted with the philosophy of Descartes, described as the '*Established Philosophy*'.<sup>24</sup> However, Ellys was also a friend and astronomical assistant of Sir Isaac Newton.<sup>25</sup> In these circumstances, Clarke devoted himself to the study of Newton's recently published work, beginning an association that would colour much of his career.<sup>26</sup>

Clarke's first publication reflected – and shaped – the legacies of both Newton and Descartes. This was a Latin translation of the *Traité de physique* (1671) of the Cartesian philosopher Jacques Rohault, which subjoined annotations drawn from Newton's physics, and became an important University text.<sup>27</sup> William Whiston, whose friendship with Clarke dated from that time, apparently suggested this approach. Whiston also introduced Clarke to the Bishop of Norwich, John Moore, and when Clarke entered the Church of England, he became a

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<sup>23</sup> James Ferguson, *Dr Samuel Clarke: an eighteenth century heretic* (Kineton: 1976), 3-6

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Hoadley, "The preface, giving some account of the life, writings, and character of the author," in *The sermons of Samuel Clarke D.D. Late Rector of St. James's Westminster* (London: 1742).

<sup>25</sup> John Gascoigne, "Politics, patronage and Newtonianism: the Cambridge example," *The Historical Journal* 27(1) (1984), 1–24, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Hoadley, "Preface", i.

<sup>27</sup> J.B. Shank, *The Newton wars and the beginning of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: 2008), 112.

chaplain to the Bishop.<sup>28</sup> Over the subsequent years, Clarke authored a number of works, including in response to John Toland's *Amyntor* (1699), which raised doubts about the canon of the Scripture.<sup>29</sup> More important, however, was Clarke's extensive and influential defence of natural and revealed Christianity delivered in the Boyle lectures for 1704 and 1705. In 1706, the year he wrote against Dodwell, Clarke published a translation of Newton's *Opticks* (1704) into Latin.<sup>30</sup> This reflected his growing association with Newton, who gave him the princely sum of £500 (£100 for each of Clarke's children) in appreciation. To crown this pattern of advancement, he was appointed one of the Chaplains-in-Ordinary to Queen Anne.<sup>31</sup>

During the years immediately prior to the Clarke-Collins dispute, the longstanding debate surrounding the soul continued. The previous chapter has noted Henry Layton's ongoing publications. Pierre Bayle reported his discussions of materialism with Leibniz and Toland in the second 1702 edition of his *Dictionnaire*.<sup>32</sup> William Coward, a maverick physician, provoked a storm of criticism with his *Second thoughts* (1702), which claimed the notion of the immaterial soul was 'a plain heathenish invention', and offered arguments for a material soul, including from his physiological studies.<sup>33</sup> The work received a number of refutations, including the *Psychologia* (1703) of John Broughton, chaplain to the Duke of Marlborough,<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> William Whiston, *Historical memoirs of the life and writings of Dr. Samuel Clarke including certain memoirs of several of his friends* (London: 1748), 2-3.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Clarke, *Some Reflections on that Part of a Book called Amyntor, or, The Defence of Milton's Life, which Relates to the Writings of the Primitive Fathers and the Canon of the New Testament in a Letter to a Friend* (London: 1699).

<sup>30</sup> Isaac Newton, *Optice: sive de reflexionibus, refractionibus, inflexionibus & coloribus lucis*, trans. Samuel Clarke (London: 1706).

<sup>31</sup> Ferguson, *Samuel Clarke*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Bayle, *Dictionary*, II:660, 'Dicaearchus' [L].

<sup>33</sup> Coward initially published the work as: 'Estibius Psychalethes', *Second thoughts concerning human soul, demonstrating the notion of human soul as believed to be a spiritual, immortal substance united to a human body to be a plain heathenish invention* ([London]: 1702). The second edition is: [William Coward], *Second thoughts concerning human soul, demonstrating the notion of human soul as believed to be a spiritual, immortal substance united to a human body to be an invention of the heathens and not consonant to the principles of philosophy, reason, or religion* (London: 1704).

<sup>34</sup> John Broughton, *Psychologia, or, an account of the nature of the rational soul* (London: 1703).

as well as being burnt by the public hangman.<sup>35</sup> Toland, after a period focusing on political writings, offered his own contribution to the debate with *Letters to Serena* (1704). While the work remained ambiguous about the immortality of the soul, Toland's insistence that motion was inherent to matter threatened to undermine immateriality. Indeed, the defence of the soul (and the existence of free will) had been one of the many themes of Clarke's Boyle Lectures, which emphasised that perception and intelligence, thinking and willing, were distinct qualities, and not reducible to matter and motion.<sup>36</sup> These claims he positioned against the views of Hobbes and Spinoza, as well as Toland.<sup>37</sup>

It was, however, quite a different thinker that prompted the dispute between Clarke and Collins. Born in 1641, Henry Dodwell, was a High Church Anglo-Irish theologian and scholar. Sir Leslie Stephen described him as 'bewildered with excessive reading and crammed with obsolete theological curiosities.'<sup>38</sup> Yet he was, as Jean-Louis Quantin compellingly argued, a leading intellectual of his time, and 'a systematic thinker, determined to push principles to their extreme consequences.'<sup>39</sup> Dodwell had embarked on the path to priesthood at Trinity College, Dublin; however, his scruples about subscription to the Athanasian Creed led him to resign his Fellowship. Quantin characterised the result as a state of 'vicarious priesthood': prevented by his personal scruples from undertaking that office, he became an unordained champion of priesthood, a role that perhaps accounted for the 'abstract extremism' of his views.<sup>40</sup> Subsequently the Camden professor of history at Oxford,

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<sup>35</sup> Thomson, *Bodies of thought*, 126.

<sup>36</sup> Clarke, *Demonstration*, 108, 188.

<sup>37</sup> The long title of the work makes the focus on Hobbes and Spinoza explicit. The section dealing with Toland is: Clarke, *Demonstration*, 45-59.

<sup>38</sup> Leslie Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century* (London: 1881), 283.

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Louis Quantin, "Anglican scholarship gone mad? Henry Dodwell (1641-1711) and Christian antiquity," in *History of scholarship: a selection of papers from the seminar on the history of scholarship held annually at the Warburg Institute*, eds. Christopher Ligota, and Jean-Louis Quantin (Oxford: 2006), 305-356, 355.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 337-341.

Dodwell was deprived of his position for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary, and retired to his estate. He published *An Epistolary Discourse* (1706) to widespread consternation from High and Low Churchmen alike. Dodwell argued that the soul is naturally mortal, largely based on his interpretation of the Christian Scriptures and the Church Fathers. To add to this, Dodwell contended that immortality is given at divine pleasure, offering the idiosyncratic view that only the episcopacy possesses the power to confer this. While Dodwell's work may be placed in the context of 'Christian mortalism', his disagreements with men like Coward and Layton underscore that this was not a homogeneous group.<sup>41</sup>

*An Epistolary Discourse* (1706) was an admittedly abstruse production. It is difficult to disagree with Edward Gibbon who, while praising Dodwell's immense learning and scrupulous attention to detail, observed that the 'worst of this author is his method and style; the one perplexed beyond imagination, the other negligent to a degree of barbarism.'<sup>42</sup>

Dodwell's views emerged somewhat obscurely from his commentaries on different theological views. Dodwell emphasised the distinction between 'soul' and 'spirit'. He criticised the 'precarious fancy of *Des Cartes*' that radically separates thought from matter.<sup>43</sup>

For Le Clerc, Dodwell's views represented a 'very dark, intricate and confus'd kind of Platonism'.<sup>44</sup> Yet as Dodwell said, his focus was on construing Church authorities, not philosophical reason.<sup>45</sup> In any event, Dodwell closed his work with a statement that he was

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<sup>41</sup> Coward argued both Dodwell and Clarke were wrong: [William Coward], *The just scrutiny: or, a serious enquiry into the modern notions of the soul* (N.p. N.d.), 95.

<sup>42</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Miscellaneous works*, edited by John Holroyd Lord Sheffield (London: 1837), 431.

<sup>43</sup> Dodwell, *Epistolary discourse*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Jean Le Clerc, *An abstract and judgement of Dr Clark's (Rector of St. Jame's) polemical and controversial writings* (London: 1713), 82-83.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian antiquity: The construction of a confessional identity in the 17th century* (Oxford: 2009), 410.

‘willing to hear’ what others might say on his theory.<sup>46</sup> Dodwell often receives limited reference in philosophically focused accounts of the Collins-Clarke debate.<sup>47</sup> However, it should be remembered that, at the time, it was peripheral to the debate over Dodwell’s work, the magnitude of which may be judged by the volume of refutations.<sup>48</sup>

For Clarke, Dodwell’s case was symptomatic of a broader problem: men of great reputation and learning advancing ‘Extravagant Hypotheses’, often with ‘too little Judgment’, ultimately undermining important religious doctrines.<sup>49</sup> Clarke acknowledged Dodwell’s belief in the afterlife. Yet he warned that other readers of his book – ‘Libertines’ of ‘loose Principles, and vitious Lives’ – might conclude that the soul will perish, and thus be fortified in their wickedness.<sup>50</sup> Effectively, Clarke sought to remind Dodwell of the moral consequences of his writings.

Clarke’s response focused on biblical interpretation and discussion of the Church Fathers. A brief discussion of the philosophical basis for the immateriality of the soul from ‘Consciousness’ was to form the basis of his correspondence with Collins. After criticising Dodwell for offering a confused account of the nature of the soul, and considering the question not as ‘a Serious Person’, but with the ‘Raillery of an Unbeliever’, he referenced the ‘noble Faculties’ of the soul, and the arguments of the ‘wisest and most considerate Men in all Ages’ (a point that paralleled Manlove’s work against Layton). That aside, Clarke

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>47</sup> An example is: Agnesina, *Anthony Collins*, 47-62.

<sup>48</sup> Edmund Chishull, *A charge of heresy, maintained against Mr. Dodwell’s late Epistolary discourse* (London: 1706). John Turner, *Justice done to human souls, in a short view of Mr. Dodwell’s late book, entitled An epistolary discourse* (London: 1706). S. E. *Human souls naturally immortal* (London: 1707). Thomas Milles, *The natural immortality of the soul asserted and proved from the Scriptures* (Oxford: 1707). Daniel Whitby, *Reflections on some assertions and opinions of Mr. Dodwell, contained in a book intituled An epistolary discourse, etc* (London: 1707). John Norris, *A philosophical discourse concerning the natural immortality of the soul occasioned by Mr Dodwell’s late Epistolary discourse.* (London: 1708).

<sup>49</sup> Clarke, *Letter to Mr. Dodwell*, 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 5.

contended that the immortality of the soul was ‘demonstrable from a single consideration, even of bare Sense or Consciousness itself’.<sup>51</sup>

Clarke’s argument from consciousness was brief and not stated with perfect clearness – something that resulted in confusion in the early stages of the controversy. It found more detailed and coherent explanation in his response to Collins. In that, Clarke observed that ‘*Matter*’ is ‘divisible’, consisting of ‘separate and distinct parts’.<sup>52</sup> As such, the hypothesis of thinking matter would require every particle of matter to consist of innumerable separate and distinct Consciousnesses’.<sup>53</sup> For Clarke, this was absurd, and contradicted the notion that the soul was, as he argued, ‘undeniably one Individual Consciousness’.<sup>54</sup> Clarke also noted an argument that God might, in his infinite power ‘superadd’ consciousness to matter,<sup>55</sup> a possibility previously countenanced by Locke.<sup>56</sup> However, he considered the particles of matter would in that case remain necessarily distinct, and ‘cannot be themselves the Subject in which that individual consciousness inheres’.<sup>57</sup>

While Clarke’s views were consistent with the traditional dualism of Descartes, his focus on ‘consciousness’ was of more recent provenance. Ralph Cudworth argued that ‘no *Organization or Modification* of Matter whatsoever, could ever produce *Consciousness* and *Self-Perception*, in what was before Inconscious’.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, ‘consciousness’ was

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, [30]. This page is misnumbered as ‘33’.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>56</sup> The term ‘superadd’ is used by Locke to describe God specifically adding a property to something. See: Locke, *Essay*, IV, III, §6.

<sup>57</sup> Clarke, *Letter to Mr. Dodwell*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> Cudworth, *True intellectual system*, 871.

significant in Locke's *Essay* (1689).<sup>59</sup> Clarke's passage on consciousness was the focus of Collins' intervention, and the debate itself a sign of its growing conceptual prominence.<sup>60</sup>

## II. *The 'free-thinker' and thinking matter*

Now, methinks, (and these are often old men's dreams) I see openings to truth, and direct paths leading to it; ... it is for one of your age, I think I ought to say for you yourself, to set about it, as a work you would put into order, and oblige the world with.

– Locke to Collins (1703)<sup>61</sup>

Anthony Collins was just a year younger than Clarke, born in 1676 in Heston, Middlesex. Both his father and grandfather had been lawyers.<sup>62</sup> Collins was educated at Eton College, and then King's College, Cambridge, though he did not take a degree. His tutor at Cambridge was Francis Hare, later Bishop of Chichester. Collins studied law at the Middle Temple, but never practised. His wealth, together with his wife's, was substantial, and enabled him to live as a gentleman scholar, and amass one of the largest private libraries in England.<sup>63</sup>

Serendipitously, Collins' property in Essex brought him into contact with Locke. They became friends and corresponded warmly from the spring of 1703 until Locke's death in 1704. Locke made clear his respect for Collins' intelligence and ability, and offered his encouragement in philosophy, writing that 'nothing calls me so much back to a pleasant sense

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<sup>59</sup> This is particularly evident in the chapter on 'Identity and Diversity' included in subsequent editions, see: Locke, *Essay* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), II, XXVII.

<sup>60</sup> Uzgalis, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>61</sup> John Locke to Anthony Collins, 29 October 1703, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 8: [3361], 97-98.

<sup>62</sup> O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 3. For a more recent study of Collins' library, see: Giovanni Tarantino, "The books and times of Anthony Collins (1676–1729)," in *Varieties of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-Century English radicalism in context*, ed. Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan (Farnham: 2011), 221–240.

of enjoyment...as your good company.’<sup>64</sup> Collins’ letters with Locke reveals their mutual interest in contemporary debates over the soul. Their correspondence noted the debate on *Second Thoughts concerning Human Soul* (1702), though Collins thought little of the arguments put forward by both Coward and Broughton.<sup>65</sup> There is reference to arguments about animal souls put forward by John Norris,<sup>66</sup> and the work of Pierre Bayle.<sup>67</sup>

While Collins’ connection with Locke is striking, the range of potential influences on his work should be noted. Jonathan Israel argued against the separate or insular development of English ‘deism’, seeing Collins as fundamentally shaped by Spinoza.<sup>68</sup> However, this does not do justice to the breadth of influences, including Locke, Bayle, Cicero, and his abiding interest in Socinianism.<sup>69</sup> From at least 1704, Collins was acquainted with John Toland, yet while they have been grouped together they do not appear to have been close. Indeed, on the death of Toland, Collins appears to have been primarily concerned about recovering a number of books which Toland had never returned.<sup>70</sup>

Dodwell’s *An Epistolary Discourse* (1706), and Clarke’s refutation, afforded Collins an occasion to put forward his own reflections on the nature of the soul. As such, we see another instance of polemical appropriation of ideas changing the course of an existing debate, something that was a theme in Dodwell’s career.<sup>71</sup> Collins maintained ‘the Inconclusiveness’ of arguments for natural immortality, including the ‘principal Argument’,

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<sup>64</sup> John Locke to Anthony Collins, 30 June 1703, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol 7: [3311], 25.

<sup>65</sup> The letter, dated 30 June 1703, is quoted in: O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> John Norris, *An essay towards the theory of the ideal or intelligible world* (London: 1704).

<sup>67</sup> O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 615-617.

<sup>69</sup> O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Quantin, “Anglican scholarship”, 308

namely ‘the Supposition of [the soul]’s Immateriality’.<sup>72</sup> It is curious that Collins came to the defence of someone like Dodwell. As a High Church non-juror, Dodwell’s views were vastly different from those of Collins, who was conspicuously anti-clerical and focused on reason as opposed to traditionary authority. Some historians have portrayed Collins as cunningly using this debate as a way of advocating essentially deistical thought.<sup>73</sup> Yet, taking into account his widespread interest in debates about the soul, including its connections with Socinianism and Christian mortalism, his intervention should perhaps be seen as more complex and exploratory, rather than pursuant to a blatantly irreligious agenda.

In contrast to Clarke’s cautionary statement on speculative thought, Collins’ declared it was ‘unreasonable’ to imagine any dangerous consequence to examining received opinion, and emphasised a ‘duty to follow’ the light of reason.<sup>74</sup> This engagement with ‘reason’ and ‘free-thinking’ was a theme emerging throughout his career – he had already anonymously published on ‘reason’,<sup>75</sup> and later became infamous for his *Discourse on free-thinking* (1713). As such, Collins praised the ‘noble Example of Freedom and Liberty’ in Dodwell’s work, which showed the consistency of ‘Zeal for Religion, with Liberty of Thinking’ (though he parenthetically noted that mortalist views had once been established doctrine). So too, Collins emphasised Dodwell’s piety, charity and patience.<sup>76</sup>

Collins put forward a number of arguments to defend his view that consciousness could inhere in matter, and that it was not logically necessary to suppose the existence of an immaterial soul. One complicating factor in this early exchange was that Collins mistook the

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<sup>72</sup> Collins, *Letter to Mr. Dodwell*, 6

<sup>73</sup> Ferguson, *Samuel Clarke*, 38. Thomson, *Bodies of thought*, 129-130.

<sup>74</sup> Collins, *Letter to Mr. Dodwell*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> [Anthony Collins], *Essay concerning the use of reason in propositions the evidence whereof depends on human testimony* (London: 1707), 23.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

emphasis Clarke placed on ‘Individuality or Distinctness’ as a basis for consciousness.

Collins did, however, question Clarke’s reasoning more generally as to why an ‘Individual Being’ cannot inhere in a system made up of parts: ‘Why may not several Particles of Matter, when united in one System, become an Individual Being...and consequently be a subject capable of Thinking?’<sup>77</sup> Collins attempted to make the case that consciousness may arise from a system of matter as a property of the whole system, but not its individual constituent parts (essentially what philosophers would subsequently term an ‘emergent property’).<sup>78</sup>

In concluding his letter to Clarke, Collins sought to assuage any potential attack on his religious credentials, emphasising that his arguments related only to ‘Uncertainty in point of Reason’. He clarified that his objections were to the strength of the philosophical arguments put forward to support the immortality of the soul, rather than to the doctrine of immortality itself, and wrote that he was ‘not the less certain of Man’s Immortality from the Gospel of Christ’. Clearly conscious of the potential irreligious construction that could be put on his position, Collins sought to present the discussion as purely philosophical and distinct from any religious implications. In this context, he called for any response to avoid ‘Suspicious Expressions’.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to the brevity of his remarks to Dodwell, Clarke’s first response to Collins provided a more rigorous and detailed account of his theory of the soul. He began by outlining his views of qualities and their relation to substance, enumerating three categories: ‘Qualities really inhering in the Subject...; or Modes produced by it in some other Substance; or else mere abstract Names’.<sup>80</sup> First, a ‘quality’ could be something that ‘*strictly* and

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 10-12.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>80</sup> *Clarke-1*, 13.

*properly*' inhered in the substance, such as magnitude or motion. In this case, the power or quality was the sum or aggregate of the individual parts.<sup>81</sup> Secondly, a quality could be one of what Clarke said are '*vulgarly* looked upon' as '*Individual Powers*, resulting from and residing in the whole System, without residing particularly in each or any of its single and original Parts.'<sup>82</sup> Clarke explained these are 'only *Effects* occasionally produced by it in some other Substance, and truly Qualities or Modes of that other Substance'. Thus, for instance: 'the *Sweetness of a Rose*, is well known not to be a Quality really inhering in the Rose; but a *Sensation*, which is merely in him that smells it.'<sup>83</sup> Thirdly, Clarke noted there are qualities which are '*merely abstract Names* to express the *Effects* of some determinate Motions of certain Streams of Matter', such as electrical phenomena and magnetism. The most prominent of these is gravity, which Clarke suggested cannot be explained without God's continued action on the universe.<sup>84</sup>

Clarke considered – and assumed Collins agreed – that 'Consciousness' or 'Thinking' must be supposed to be 'a *Power* or *Quality* truly and *really inhering* in the Thinking Substance it self' (the first category of qualities).<sup>85</sup> On this basis, it 'must inhere in all and every one of the Particles of that System'.<sup>86</sup> Otherwise, Clarke considered it would be impossible for consciousness to arise from matter, this would be a contradiction: 'an *Effect* to be produced without a *Cause*'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> He stated, 'every Power or Quality, that is or can be *inherent* in any System of Matter, is nothing else than the Sum or Aggregate of so many Powers or Qualities of *the same kind*, inherent in all its parts': Clarke, *Clarke-1*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Clarke-1*, 10, 11.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 12-13.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

The particular form of Clarke's argument might be compared with earlier proponents, such as Henry More's influential work *Immortality of the soul* (1659), in which he defended philosophical dualism based on his account of matter and its properties. For More, there are some '*immediate properties*' that so closely inhere in a thing that the cause or reason cannot be comprehended. In the case of 'matter', the immediate properties were '*actual divisibility*' or '*discerpibility*' and '*impenetrability*'. In contrast, the immediate properties of 'spirit' were '*penetrability*' and '*indiscerpibility*'. There are clear parallels with Clarke's account of qualities; however, More still premised his work on the older notion of 'substance'.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, Clarke's analysis owes much to Locke's terminology of primary and secondary qualities.<sup>89</sup>

While Clarke's initial response was relatively matter of fact, Collins was palpably delighted to have a willing (if somewhat grudging) interlocutor. Again, he praised the 'Freedom and Liberty' of England which gave scope for 'examining the Grounds and Reasons of prevailing Opinions'. He also recognised Clarke's politeness in focusing on the philosophical arguments, rather than straying into accusations or invective. Clarke, he wrote, 'sets so unusual Example of fair dealing in Controversy'.<sup>90</sup>

Despite these flamboyant expressions of esteem, Collins obstinately pursued his arguments. He accused Clarke of *argumentum ad ignorantiam* – arguing that his account of consciousness was true, on the basis that it had not been proved false. He stated that Clarke assumed 'a System of Matter has, and can have only Powers of one sort of kind,' without

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<sup>88</sup> More considered that '*The Subject, or naked Essence or Substance of a thing*' was unconceivable – such a thing, stripped of properties, 'vanishes into nothing', into '*Undiversicated Substance*': More, *Immortality of the Soul*, 10, 11.

<sup>89</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II, VIII.

<sup>90</sup> *Collins-1*, 4.

proving there could not be powers of a different kind.<sup>91</sup> For Collins, there was ‘no Contradiction to suppose a Power arising from Matter, without belonging to the Parts of which the Whole consists.’<sup>92</sup> With reference to an analogy of the different pieces of a clock, Collins suggested there may be ‘different Powers in the single and separate Parts of a System of Matter, but uniting in one Operation or Power to operate are the Cause of the Existence of that Power’.<sup>93</sup> Collins noted the capacity of matter to produce various different configurations: ‘the same Parts of Matter become Parts of *Dung, Earth, Grass, Corn, Sheep, Horses, Men, &c.* and act their Parts under these Mutations’.<sup>94</sup>

These opening works largely set the principal themes and tone for the debate. Unlike some of the more wide-ranging controversies, the discussion remained centred on the immateriality of the soul, with both writers consciously striving for clarity and intelligibility. The polite tone of the conversation, if at times strained, was also a feature throughout the controversy, in contrast to the often-venomous attacks directed at Dodwell.<sup>95</sup> Yet, as was often the case, the controversy actuated further issues for consideration as the two thinkers sought to engage with the implications of each other’s arguments and reinforce their own positions. What had begun with a brief page or two in Clarke’s letter to Dodwell was a pamphlet by the time of the initial exchange with Collins, and the length and detail of the arguments continued to grow as the controversy ran its course.

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<sup>91</sup> *Collins-1*, 12-13.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>95</sup> Dodwell lamented this in: Henry Dodwell, *A preliminary defence of the Epistolary discourse, concerning the distinction between soul and spirit* (London: 1707), preface [1].

### ***III. Newtonianism and natural philosophy***

In abstract and *Metaphysical Speculations*, it is hardly possibly that any thing should ever be so clearly expressed, or so strongly proved; but Those who are not very much versed in such Inquiries, will perpetually be apt to misapprehend what is said; and Men of Wit and Parts will always be able to raise new Difficulties, and perplex their Readers with intricate and endless Disputations.

– Clarke (1707)<sup>96</sup>

As above, Clarke began his second reply to Collins by expressing his increased frustration with the controversy. Since Collins, in his view, had only rehearsed the same objections, Clarke commented that he might well have left it to the ‘judicious and impartial Reader’ to decide the question. However, the ‘Candour and Ingenuity’ with which his opponent had argued his case, induced him to make a further attempt to give ‘satisfaction’.<sup>97</sup> With this, we turn to consider their engagement with natural philosophy, and in particular, Newton’s work. This illustrates the struggle to appropriate natural philosophy in a controversial context, a consideration that complicates a simplistic account of ‘Newtonianism’ in opposition to ‘deism’.

One basis on which Clarke attacked Collins’ claims was that they did not accord with natural philosophy. While Collins asserted that the ‘*Matter of which an Egg consists, doth intirely constitute the young one*’, Clarke argued this was contrary to anatomy and natural philosophy:

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<sup>96</sup> *Clarke*–2, 1.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

It being as impossible that the Organized Body of a Chicken should by the Power of any Mechanical Motions be formed out of the unorganized matter of an Egg; as that the Sun, Moon and Stars, should by mere Mechanism arise out of Chaos.<sup>98</sup>

A further issue relating to natural philosophy was the question of animal souls. Collins suggested that if the soul is immaterial, this would have the consequence of placing the animals in ‘the same Condition with Man, and made capable of eternal Happiness’.

Alternatively, Collins considered the logic of Clarke’s view would suggest animals were ‘mere Machines’ (as associated with the philosophy of Descartes) or else ‘annihilated upon dissolution of their Bodies’.<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, Clarke’s response was that ‘all Sensible Creatures have certainly in them something that is Immaterial’; however, he did not agree with Collins’ inference that this meant they would either be ‘capable of Eternal Happiness as well as Man’ or be ‘annihilated’.<sup>100</sup> Clarke eschewed speculation on what might happen to the souls of these creatures, but observed that an ‘Omnipotent and infinitely Wise God’ might have ‘more ways of disposing of his Creatures’, including potentially ‘a State of entire Inactivity’.<sup>101</sup> Curiously, in his own response to Clarke, Willian Coward reported that the two had discussed this matter and Clarke had suggested that animals might participate in the General Resurrection, perhaps becoming residents of ‘*Saturn, Mars, or Jupiter*’.<sup>102</sup>

It is interesting that this argument was passed over so quickly. One might expect that a supposedly ‘modernising’ force such as Collins would be particularly interested in recent developments in physiology and anatomy, and their implications for life and the soul. Yet

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>99</sup> Collins, *Letter to Mr Dodwell*, 14-15.

<sup>100</sup> *Clarke-I*, 26.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>102</sup> Coward, *Just scrutiny*, 97.

Collins appears to have been more interested in ongoing debates in philosophy and theology rather than the natural world. He did not provide a technical discussion of, for instance, the physiology and natural philosophy of the brain in his attempts to defend the possibility of material consciousness.<sup>103</sup> This bears comparison with Layton, who – despite his eccentric views and Christian mortalism - was very interested in these developments; or Coward, who drew on his acquaintance with physiologists such as Francis Glisson,<sup>104</sup> Thomas Willis, and William Harvey.<sup>105</sup> Again, this underscores the importance of seeing figures like Collins on their own terms, rather than as exemplars of particular ideological movements.

The discussion on the relationship between consciousness and matter also led Clarke and Collins to the nature of gravitation, itself a conspicuous subject in the wake of Newton's law of universal gravitation. While one of the central achievements of the *Principia* (1687) was to offer a mathematical description of gravitation, Newton did not, at least initially, account for its cause in theological or philosophical terms.<sup>106</sup> However, by the time of the controversy, Newton's physics had taken on a significant role in the philosophical and theological views of a number of influential clergymen within the Church of England. Richard Bentley had argued in his Boyle Lectures that gravity 'proceeds from a higher principle, a Divine energy and impression'<sup>107</sup> and Newton had endorsed Bentley's interpretation of his theories in correspondence with him.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, in his own Boyle

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<sup>103</sup> Collins' immense library was eclectic but centred on works about philosophy, religion and theology. In the natural philosophy, the works of Boyle, Newton, and Bacon were well represented. See: O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 28-29; Tarantino, "Books and times," 228.

<sup>104</sup> William Coward, *The grand essay: or, a vindication of reason and religion against impostures of philosophy* (London: 1704), 43-46.

<sup>105</sup> Coward, *Second thoughts*, 102.

<sup>106</sup> The second edition of the *Principia* would include the celebrated statement: Hitherto we have explain'd the phaenomena of the heavens and of our sea, by the power of Gravity, but have not yet assign'd the cause of this power.'

<sup>107</sup> Bentley, *Boyle Lectures*, Sermon VII:32.

<sup>108</sup> Newton corresponded with Bentley on lectures prior to publication (See: H.W. Turnbull (ed), *The correspondence of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: 1961), III,2 33-236,238-241,244,246-256).

Lectures, Clarke had sought to refute Toland's claim in *Letters to Serena* (1704) that motion was essential to matter by arguing that gravity was actively impressed by God.<sup>109</sup> The thrust of these arguments was to reaffirm God's providential superintendence and governance over creation, as against mechanism or chance. Clarke reiterated this position emphatically. In discussing his system of qualities, Clarke argued gravity was inherent to matter, but the 'Effect of the continual and regular Operation of some other Being upon it'.<sup>110</sup>

Collins, in contrast, suggested that it was entirely possible that matter gravitates of itself 'by virtue of Powers originally plac'd in it by God' – it was intrinsic to matter.<sup>111</sup> Collins 'admir'd that Gravitation should be esteem'd a matter of such difficulty among Philosophers', stating his view that it was 'one mode, viz. a tendency towards a Centre' among the 'constant motion and perpetually striking' of matter.<sup>112</sup>

Clarke lamented that Collins' understanding of Newton's physics was so fundamentally unsound that he had 'erred so very grossly, in the first Foundation of all Natural Philosophy'.<sup>113</sup> Clarke went on to state 'it has been demonstrated even Mathematically, that Gravitation cannot possibly arise from the *Configuration and Texture of the Parts of Matter*, and from the *circumambient impelling Bodies*.'<sup>114</sup> Clarke's statements make clear the significance of immaterial powers as evidence of the existence of God, 'leading us even with

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<sup>109</sup> Toland, *Letters to Serena*, 163-239. Clarke, *Demonstration*, 45-59.

<sup>110</sup> *Clarke-1*, 13.

<sup>111</sup> *Collins-1*, 24. *Collins-2*, 28.

<sup>112</sup> *Collins-2*, 29.

<sup>113</sup> *Clarke-3*, 75.

<sup>114</sup> *Clarke-3*, 74.

Mathematical Certainty... to the Author of all Power, the *Great Creator and Governour of the World*.<sup>115</sup>

In reply, Collins cited Robert Boyle's view that gravity was inherent in matter.<sup>116</sup> It is interesting that (some twenty years after Boyle's work) Clarke castigated this view as unorthodox and potentially irreligious. (Indeed, colleagues such as William Derham continued to blithely write much the same thing.<sup>117</sup>) At the time of the debate with Collins, Clarke assumed an orthodox role: defending a traditional position that had been accepted Church doctrine for centuries. Brian Young highlights the way Clarke tacitly drew together Socinian mortalism and non-juror as extremes between which orthodox theology could define itself.<sup>118</sup> Yet it is not the case that Clarke reflected a clear, coherently self-evident 'Newtonian tradition'. Clarke expounded Newton's physics in a particular way: he can be seen as someone who was actively reshaping and redefining the orthodox tradition (alongside, but not always in concert with, people like Bentley, Whiston and Derham) to encompass Newtonian natural philosophy, and in doing so, superseded views such as Boyle's. Interestingly, Newton's views, as far as they can be ascertained, appear to have been somewhat closer to Collins than Clarke (despite having approved Bentley's formulation): John Henry convincingly argued that Newton's own view of gravity was of a

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<sup>115</sup> Clarke-3, 80.

<sup>116</sup> Collins-3, 86. Boyle, *Free Enquiry*, 7 and 66.

<sup>117</sup> William Derham, *Astro-theology, or, a demonstration of the being and attributes of God: from a survey of the heavens* (London: 1714), 150.

<sup>118</sup> B. W. Young, "'The soul-sleeping system': politics and heresy in eighteenth-century England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45(1) (1994): 64-81, 77.

power or virtue that God ‘superadded’ to matter (rather than being an essential property, or due to God’s constant activity in the manner Bentley and Clarke proposed).<sup>119</sup>

In a wider sense, the debate illustrates the potential for different interpretations of Newtonian physics, consistent with different theological or even irreligious views. Collins’ interest in the *Principia* and attempts to draw on it were not unusual. Historians have referred to an unfolding interpretative battle over the implications of Newton’s philosophy, often seen in terms of a contest between ‘Newtonians’ and ‘deists’.<sup>120</sup> Yet early controversies reveal a multiplicity of different interpretations, rather than a dichotomy between these two positions. While thinkers naturally formed themselves into groups for the purposes of cooperation or competition, the way these alliances and identities were formed and shifted is rarely reducible to two positions. In the case of the ‘Newtonians’, William Whiston, Samuel Clarke and John Keill were all associates of Newton and exponents of his work, yet, as we saw in Chapter 3, Whiston and Keill disagreed strongly on both the philosophical and theological implications of Newton’s work. As Brian Young has suggested, there is ‘no simple demarcation of attitudes to Newton and Newtonianism’.<sup>121</sup>

Hence, the designation of Clarke as a ‘Newtonian’ in the debate should also be treated with caution. Clarke used his credentials as an associate of Newton to position his arguments concerning natural philosophy and to outmanoeuvre Collins. Yet, while Newton was a major influence, the debate with Collins shows Clarke appealing to numerous other sources and ideas shared with his contemporaries, such as Ralph Cudworth’s work on the nature of the

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<sup>119</sup> John Henry, “‘Pray do not ascribe that notion to me’: God and Newton’s gravity,” in *The books of nature and Scripture: recent essays on natural philosophy, theology and biblical criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza’s time and the British Isles of Newton’s time* ed. James Force and Richard Popkin (Springer: Dordrecht, 1994),

<sup>120</sup> Wigelsworth, *Deism*, Chapter 3. Jacob, *Newtonians*, 211. Shank, *The Newton Wars*, 128.

<sup>121</sup> Brian Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in eighteenth-century England: theological debates from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: 1998), 162-163.

soul. His Newtonian views were not the driving force for the debate (his initial response to Dodwell was based on scriptural interpretation and the Ancient Fathers), and his mode of arguing was generally Socratic and based on reason, rather than an assertion of a Newtonian world view. While Clarke's interest in Newton's natural philosophy pervades his arguments, it would be misleading to view the debate only in these terms.

#### ***IV. Arguments destructive of religion***

[O]n occasion of the *Boylean* Lecture, the Existence of God is often made a Question (which otherwise would be with few any Question at all).

– Collins (1708)<sup>122</sup>

With Collins' infamous quip about the efforts of the Boyle Lecturers to establish a philosophically compelling defence of Christianity, we turn to the ways Clarke and Collins engaged with religion and irreligion. In the course of the debate, Clarke drew two implications out of Collins' account of the soul that he saw as 'destructive' of religion – the problems it posed for personal identity, and for free will. Collins' responses reveal the potential for dispute to provoke further questions and stimulate novel positions, illustrating the way a culture of controversy enlivened intellectual change. Close attention to these conversations also complicates existing interpretations of the protagonists: the correspondence does not support a clear picture of Collins as a systematic deistic thinker, as

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<sup>122</sup> *Collins*–3, 88.

he is most often categorised,<sup>123</sup> or as a speculative atheist, as David Berman,<sup>124</sup> and Jacopo Agnesina have argued.<sup>125</sup>

We turn first to personal identity. Through the course of the correspondence, Clarke and Collins expressed different accounts of personal identity consistent with their different versions of the basis of ‘consciousness’. Clarke’s argument about the nature of the soul is premised on ‘consciousness’, which he believed is a ‘simple Idea’ and as such, more easily understood through experience rather than an analytical definition.<sup>126</sup> He clarified, as against Collins, that ‘consciousness’ signifies not thinking, but ‘the *Reflex Act by which I know that I think*’.<sup>127</sup> However, Clarke saw personal identity as something deeper. As Udo Thiel summarised it: ‘consciousness or memory presupposes personal identity and thus cannot constitute it’.<sup>128</sup> Clarke saw personal identity as something requiring a particular subject, which could not be the matter of the brain or animal spirits, given they would be in ‘perpetual flux and change’.<sup>129</sup> This led him to the conclusion that personal identity must inhere in an immaterial substance: the soul.

For Collins personal identity was based on consciousness, which itself is supported by the matter of the brain or animal spirits. In so doing, Collins further developed Locke’s account of personal identity.<sup>130</sup> He argued there was no absurdity to ‘annex human Consciousness to

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<sup>123</sup> Peter Gay, *Deism; an anthology* (Van Nostrand, 1968). Wigelsworth, “Matter and spirit,” 1-24. Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 223.

<sup>124</sup> David Berman, “Anthony Collins and the question of atheism in the early part of the eighteenth century.” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, vol. 75, (1975) 85–102.

<sup>125</sup> Agnesina, *Anthony Collins*, 185.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>128</sup> Thiel, *Early modern subject*, 231.

<sup>129</sup> *Clarke-2*, 15-16.

<sup>130</sup> Locke, *Essay*, I, IV §IV. As previously noted, Locke added Book II, Chapter XXVII (‘Of identity and diversity’) to subsequent editions.

so flux a Substance as the Brain'.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, Collins saw in such flux an explanation of the operation and fallibility of memory.<sup>132</sup>

For Clarke, Collins' views led to undeniable 'Absurdities'.<sup>133</sup> Clarke described this account of consciousness as 'very gross and palpable a Fallacy', and his third reply to Collins made clear his concerns about its implications.<sup>134</sup> The thrust of Collins' account was to make '*Individual Personality* to be a mere *external imaginary Denomination*.'<sup>135</sup> It would, he argued be 'destructive of Religion; leaving no room for Reward or Punishment'.<sup>136</sup> This would mean that, if God was to add consciousness to 'the same particles of Dust' (at the Resurrection), this would 'not be a *Restoration* of the *same Person*, but a Creation of a *new one*'.<sup>137</sup>

While Collins did not accept the labelling of his views as irreligious, he was willing to engage with some of the interesting implications pointed to by Clarke. Drawing on his legal background, he proposed a scenario in which he was charged with a murder, having been 'seiz'd with a short Frenzy of an hour'. For Collins, 'The mad Man and the sober Man are really two as distinct Persons as any two other men.'<sup>138</sup>

A further aspect of Collins' approach which Clarke considered 'destructive' towards religion, were the implications of thinking matter for free will. Clarke considered this in the context of his classical understanding of how matter moves. He observed that if thinking was merely 'a

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<sup>131</sup> Collins-2, 22.

<sup>132</sup> Collins-2, 22.

<sup>133</sup> Clarke-4, 51.

<sup>134</sup> Clark-2, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Clarke-3, 65.

<sup>136</sup> Clarke-3, 91.

<sup>137</sup> Clarke-3, 88.

<sup>138</sup> Collins-3, 66.

certain Mode of Motion' in a system of matter, then since every Determination of Motion depends necessarily upon the Impulse that causes it', thought must be necessitated by external causes, and there would be no 'Liberty, or a Power of Self-Determination', as in the case of a clock or watch.<sup>139</sup>

Collins objected to Clarke's particular characterisation of his views; however, he rejected the argument that a denial of self-determination was destructive of religion. In his view, the analogy of a clock or watch was accurate. Collins went on to explain his particular views about necessity, writing that: 'there cannot exist in any intelligent Being, nor do we enjoy any other liberty than *a Power to do as we will, and forbear as we will*'. Collins' views of necessity were informed by his account of cause and effect:

when I will, or prefer going abroad to staying at home, that act of Volition or Preference as much determines me to act according that *Preference*, if it is in my power to go abroad; as Locks and Bars will hinder me from acting according to that Preference. The only difference is, that in one case I am necessitated to act as I will, and in the other case to act contrary to my Will.<sup>140</sup>

Clarke's claim that this necessitarianism was irreligious, prompted a somewhat mischievous response from Collins, who conflated necessitarianism with predestination – the notion that all events are willed by God. Collins observed that the latter was established in 'many *Confessions of Faith*', remarking that there 'are more Calvinists than Arminians' among the Reformed churches.<sup>141</sup> Considering the Catholic church, Collins drew his readers' attention to the theological movement of the Jansenists, among whom he numbered 'the most acute and ingenious *Persons*' to profess that faith, namely Antoine Arnauld, Blaise Pascal, and

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<sup>139</sup> *Clarke*-3, 86.

<sup>140</sup> *Collins*-3, 56-57.

<sup>141</sup> *Collins*-3, 58-59

Pierre Nicole. Finally, Collins observed that Calvinists were not uncommon within the Church of England, its foundational articles were Calvinist, and in this regard, he might defer to Church authority in support of his arguments.<sup>142</sup>

Collins' comments on these two themes – personal identity and free will – formed an important part of his third and final letter to Clarke, which appeared in 1708. Collins accused Clarke of 'apparent Desertion of his Argument', but felt a discussion of various 'Incidental Points' would be of interest to 'Lovers of Truth'. In this text, Collins again asserted his commitment to reason on the title page, quoting Manilius to the effect that 'Reason is never deceived nor ever deceives'.<sup>143</sup> At the end of his work, Collins expanded his attack on Clarke's views to the '*obscure and defective*' proof of God offered in Clarke's Boyle Lectures.<sup>144</sup> He described the 'Atheism' of Spinoza as the view that 'there is no other Substance in the Universe but Matter, which *Spinoza* calls *God*', and grouped this with the views of Xenophanes, Strato and certain Chinese philosophers.<sup>145</sup> Collins went on to suggest that the way to refute these, rather than the approach taken by Clarke, was to prove the creation of matter *ex nihilo*. However, he wrote that such a task was beyond him, and more suited to the Boyle Lecturers.<sup>146</sup> These ambiguous pronouncements might be taken in a number of ways, from an implicit endorsement of Spinozist monism, to a sceptical view that proof is impossible.

Establishing the precise nature of Collins' religious views is a vexed question, particularly given the danger of imposing contemporary understandings of deism and atheism onto an

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<sup>142</sup> *Collins-3*, 59-60.

<sup>143</sup> Neque decipitur ratio, neque decipit unquam. Manilius, *Astronomica*, translated by G.P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: 1977), 92-93.

<sup>144</sup> *Collins-3*, 87. Clarke, *Demonstration*, 38.

<sup>145</sup> *Collins-3*, 89-90.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

eighteenth-century context. The ways in which Collins' views were perceived by later contemporaries and historians, and how this has influenced the interpretation of the debate, will be discussed further in the next chapter. However, it is useful first to discuss the theological aspects of Collins' views as they emerged from the correspondence itself.

While Agnesina claims that Collins' atheism was 'crystal-clear', this ignores the complexities of controversial engagement and the broader context of his work.<sup>147</sup> Certainly, Collins did not identify as a 'atheist' or 'deist' in his published works,<sup>148</sup> and there were obvious reasons for him not to do so – this would have endangered his position as a Justice of the Peace, and exposed him to legal difficulties.<sup>149</sup> Yet, in the context of this debate, it is hard to see Collins as having a clearly defined or systematic deistic or atheistic position. Another construction is that Collins was exploring ideas with potentially a number of different lines of thought in mind. In that regard, it is relevant to highlight the influence of Locke's emphasis on the search for truth, and the sceptical Pierre Bayle. The title page of *Collins-2* included quotations from the Greek philosopher Dicaearchus and Cicero, who feature in Bayle's discussion of the immortality of the soul in 'Dichaearchus',<sup>150</sup> and Collins quoted Bayle later in that text.<sup>151</sup> Sceptical thinkers – among them Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne and Bayle – were a prominent presence in his library.<sup>152</sup> Likewise, Cicero construed as a 'Free-Thinker' and an '*Academick* [sceptic]' was clearly an exemplar.<sup>153</sup> Writing in another context, Collins

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<sup>147</sup> Agnesina, *Anthony Collins*, 192.

<sup>148</sup> Collins also made the point that various members of the Church of England have been accused of Socinian, deistic, or atheist views: Collins, *A discourse of free-thinking*, 85

<sup>149</sup> Berman, "Question of atheism," 90.

<sup>150</sup> Bayle, *Dictionary*, II:661, 'Dicaearchus' [L].

<sup>151</sup> *Collins-2*, 17.

<sup>152</sup> Tarantino, "Books and times," 231.

<sup>153</sup> Collins, *Discourse of Free-thinking*, 139. Tarantino, "Collins's Cicero," 81.

wrote ‘I have no system to defend’.<sup>154</sup> As we have seen, Collins did not shy away from potentially irreligious implications of his arguments; yet neither did he set out to argue a coherently deistic or ‘Spinozist’ position.

At the time of his correspondence with Locke in 1703-1704, Collins professed Christianity, though an animosity to the clergy is apparent. He verged on the irreverent - this chapter has already noted Collins’ ironical reference to Christian accounts of necessitarianism. A more definitive break appears to have occurred with his *Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), which rejected the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Yet within this spectrum, there is much in Collins’ thought that draws on, and is situated within, a Christian tradition. Collins frequently employed quotations and precedents from within the Church of England to support his views— thus, he cited Stillingfleet in stating ‘every person must search and examine the several doctrines, according to his best ability, and judge what is best for him to believe and practise’.<sup>155</sup> Certainly, Collins saw his views as developing one particular trajectory of thought within the Church of England (and the Reformed tradition generally), that privileged reason and the pursuit of truth. In his *A Discourse of Free-thinking* (1713), he provided a brief discussion of figures he considered to be proponents of free-thinking, including Socrates, Cicero and the biblical Solomon, culminating in Archbishop Tillotson, of whom he wrote that ‘all *English Free-Thinkers* own [him] as their Head’.<sup>156</sup> As ever with Collins’ writing, there may be a mischievous element to this claim; yet it nevertheless portrays his sense of the potential synergy between his own views and certain tendencies within the Church of England.

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<sup>154</sup> Anthony Collins to Pierre des Maizeaux, 9 February 1717. Quoted in: Edward Bloom and Lillian Bloom, “Introduction,” in Anthony Collins, *A discourse concerning ridicule and irony in writing* (Los Angeles: 1970), i-xv.

<sup>155</sup> Collins, *Grounds and reasons of the Christian religion*, v.

<sup>156</sup> Collins, *Discourse of free-thinking*, 171.

Interestingly, one might also locate Clarke within this tradition, as someone who affirmed ‘That Liberty of inquiring after Truth’ as the ‘highest Obligations in reason and Conscience’, upon which ‘All *valuable Knowledge* and all *true Religion* Essentially depends.’<sup>157</sup> Clarke defended as his doctoral thesis the position that the Christian religion contains nothing contrary to reason.<sup>158</sup> This might be compared with Collins’ claim that: ‘*all but Enthusiasts, must think true Theology consistent with reason, and with experience.*’<sup>159</sup> Despite their numerous disagreements, both men shared an emphasis on reason and logical analysis and a common aspiration to the truth.

*Collins–3* concluded with the remark that he was ‘very much surpriz’d’ at Clarke insinuating that he believed too little, and stated of Clarke: ‘I verily think he neither *believes too little*, nor *too much*; but that he is perfectly and exactly Orthodox, and in all likelihood will continue so.’<sup>160</sup> Despite Collins’ assertion, Clarke cannot be considered to have professed an orthodox version of Christianity. Clarke’s Boyle Lectures had themselves drawn criticism that they were essentially irreligious in nature,<sup>161</sup> a fact that recalls Stephen’s characterisation of Clarke as a ‘constructive deist’, essentially substituting a philosophical system for traditional Christianity.<sup>162</sup> From the publication of *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712),<sup>163</sup> Clarke would become embroiled in the Trinitarian controversy, which only

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<sup>157</sup> Samuel Clarke, *Remarks upon a book, entituled, A philosophical enquiry concerning human liberty* (London: 1717), 46.

<sup>158</sup> Whiston, *Memoirs*, 18.

<sup>159</sup> [Anthony Collins], *A philosophical inquiry concerning human liberty*, (London: 1717), v.

<sup>160</sup> *Collins–3*, 94.

<sup>161</sup> William Carroll, *Remarks upon Mr. Samuel Clarke's sermons, preached at St. Paul's against Hobbs, Spinoza, and other atheists* (London: 1705).

<sup>162</sup> Stephen, *English thought*, 169.

<sup>163</sup> Samuel Clarke, *The Scripture-doctrine of the Trinity* (London: 1712).

subsided when he agreed to draw a discrete veil over his theological views on this matter.<sup>164</sup>

James Force considered Clarke to have occupied a ‘middle ground’ between the two epistemological poles of natural and revealed religion.<sup>165</sup>

Consideration of the particular views of the two protagonists as they emerge through their controversy illustrates that the debate cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between orthodox ‘Newtonian’ and heterodox ‘deist’ beliefs. On the one hand, Clarke’s presentation of himself as a spokesperson for the orthodox position is fragile, given the debate is flavoured by his personal interests and occasionally idiosyncratic views. On the other hand, while Collins defines himself against the ‘orthodox’ Clarke, the way in which he does so is not an unequivocal attempt to occupy a *prima facie* deistic position. Rather, we see someone who is engaging with several existing strands of thought – sometimes creatively, sometimes mischievously – but nevertheless claiming to be consonant with a true account of Christianity. Part of the problem in defining Collins’ views is that he was not a systematic thinker; at no point did he attempt to present a totalising account of his worldview. Rather his approach to this debate – like his literary career – focused on critiquing others. In this sense, Collins is emblematic of how the polemical culture shaped the way people developed and expressed their philosophies.

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<sup>164</sup> For a discussion of this, see: Thomas Pfizenmaier, *The trinitarian theology of Dr. Samuel Clarke (1675-1729): context, sources, and controversy* (Brill, 1997), 185.

<sup>165</sup> James Force, “The Newtonians and deism,” in *Essays on the context, nature, and influence of Isaac Newton’s Theology*, ed James Force and Richard Popkin (Dordrecht: 1990), 46.

## CHAPTER 12

### EPILOGUE

To look over this Controversy, as managed by the *Deists*, within the Compass of a few Years, gives a Man a sort of Image of the Arts of *Defence in War*; where an Enemy retires by degrees from *Outwork* to *Outwork*, and is no sooner dislodg'd from one *Post*, but he takes shelter in another.

– Ditton (1729)<sup>1</sup>

The controversies considered in this Part – between Layton and his adversaries, and between Collins and Clarke, not to mention those discussed in passing involving Toland, Bayle, Locke and others – occurred in the context of a longstanding debate about the soul. We have seen how they encompassed issues from natural philosophy, medicine and metaphysics, but also revealed the enduring relevance of the Bible, the patristics, and classical authorities.

Centuries later, many of the issues remain extant, albeit reframed. Eminent biologist Francis Crick wrote of the ‘astonishing hypothesis’ that neurons and their constituent molecules could account for consciousness.<sup>2</sup> In that regard, it is unsurprising that historiographical interpretations often focus on the continuities between these early modern debates and the present, for example as part of a ‘Radical Enlightenment’.<sup>3</sup> Ann Thomson has provided nuanced accounts of the theological debates over the course of this period, yet her focus is on

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<sup>1</sup> Humphry Ditton, *The new law of fluids, or, a discourse concerning the ascent of liquors, in exact geometrical figures between two nearly contiguous surfaces: to which is added the true state of the case about matter's thinking, wherein it is shewn, how very near that controversey now is, to a full and compleat decision* (London: 1729).

<sup>2</sup> Francis Crick, *The astonishing hypothesis: the scientific search for the soul* (New York: 1995), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 614-619.

the overarching trajectory of secularisation and specifically the place of heterodox thinkers and medical learning in that context.<sup>4</sup>

The approach of this Part has been to reconstruct specific controversies in this broad domain. The focus has been on the local rationality of the debates – how they made sense to the particular individuals involved, in their immediate intellectual and controversial context. We have seen how, in different ways, controversial culture shaped the agenda for the debates, providing a catalyst and forum for Layton’s pious ‘search after souls’, and Collins’ exploration of a range of issues at the margins of unbelief. We have seen the mutual interdependence of standing and presentation in defining reception – Collins elegantly appropriated an existing debate, deploying topical arguments on ‘consciousness’; the unknown Layton’s anfractuous and digressive works were largely ignored. We have seen the range of rhetorical positioning and presentation to enliven a sense of how thinkers understood themselves and what they were doing. Looking at this iterative process helps to give a better explanation of how ideas changed over time, such as Collins’ speculations on the emergence of consciousness. Not only does this attest to the diversity and range of possible positions, this analysis has implications for our broader interpretations of the period. It shows how our understanding of the outcomes and legacy of debates can be enriched by the sense that they develop in dialogue, rather than as disinterested debates. We turn to these issues in the final chapter of this Part.

In the first section, we look to the subsequent careers and debates of Collins and Clarke, and contemporary perceptions of them. We argue that our sense of a historical opposition between the ‘deist’ and ‘Newtonian’ emerged through the engagement of these thinkers in a

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Thomson, *Bodies of thought science, religion, and the soul in the early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: 2008). Other works are noted in Part III, Chapter 9.

polemical context. In the second section, we turn to the less prominent legacy of Henry Layton's Christian mortalism. The presence of forgotten views like his and Dodwell's, and their legacy through the eighteenth century in debates around Christian 'mortalism' are a powerful reminder of the diversity of views surrounding the soul *circa* 1700 at odds with the polarities postulated by historians such as Israel.

### ***I. Champion for the Deists***

Despite its complexities and ambiguities, the aftermath of the debate between Collins and Clarke illustrates the potential for controversial rhetoric to colour perceptions of thinkers and their intellectual culture. Collins was already being characterised as a 'deist' as the controversy with Clarke unfolded, and a general consensus arose about his irreligious tendencies. The Irish non-juror and Jacobite Charles Leslie was inclined to see Collins as someone allied with Matthew Tindal, as part of a broader irreligious group. He described Collins as a 'constant Champion for the *Deists* and all the *Sectarists* of the Age', 'a true Disciple and Follower of Mr. Lock', and questioned whether he had 'argu'd' himself into atheism.<sup>5</sup> Whiston characterised Collins as an 'unbeliever'.<sup>6</sup> John Witty considered he was a 'deist', stating he was one of those '*whose Names will be had in Honour by those who abhor Christianity*'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Leslie, *The second part of the wolf stript of his shepherds cloathing: in answer to a late celebrated book intituled The rights of the Christian Church asserted wherein the designs of the atheists, deists, Whigs, commonwealths-men, &c. and all sorts of sectarists against the Church, are plainly laid open and expos'd.* (London: 1707), 25.

<sup>6</sup> William Whiston, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Mr. William Whiston* (London: 1749), 182.

<sup>7</sup> John Witty, *The first principles of modern deism confuted in a demonstration of the immateriality, natural eternity, and immortality of thinking substances in general, and in particular of human souls* (London: 1707), xvi.

While ‘deist’ and even ‘atheist’ were polemically applied to Collins – like a number of his contemporaries – others placed different constructions on his views. For Jean Le Clerc, the Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the Remonstrant Seminary in Amsterdam, it appeared that Collins was a friend of Mr Dodwell, and that his intervention was a sophistic exercise intended to distract public attention from Dodwell’s apparent defeat at the hands of Clarke: to ‘change and alter the Scene, where his Learned Friend made so indifferent an Appearance’. Le Clerc thus dismissed Collins’ intervention as a ‘Metaphysical Dispute’ of ‘no Moment or Importance’ intended to ‘divert the Publick’, rather than providing a viable philosophical alternative. According to Le Clerc, Collins relied on ambiguity of expression and metaphysical niceties in his attempts to prolong the argument.<sup>8</sup>

While the controversy between Clarke and Collins ended in 1708, the philosophical issues that were its subject continued to resonate through their respective careers. Whiston wrote that ‘about the Year 1711’ both Clarke and Collins met to engage in ‘frequent but friendly Debates about the Truth of the Bible and Christian Religion’, along with Whiston himself and Tindal.<sup>9</sup> Collins further established his notoriety with *A Discourse of Free-thinking* (1713), which carried further a theme already present in the correspondence with Clarke.<sup>10</sup> Aside from his debates with Clarke, there is a pattern in Collins’ publication history in which a publication of a Church of England writer (albeit usually an eccentric one) was used as a dialogic starting point to develop and expound his philosophical views. Just as Dodwell would provide a foil for Collins’ views on the soul, Archbishop King afforded a basis for

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Le Clerc, *An abstract and judgement of Dr Clark’s (Rector of St. Jame’s) polemical and controversial writings* (London: 1713), 100-101.

<sup>9</sup> Whiston, *Memoirs*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> It was refuted in: Richard Bentley, *Remarks upon a late discourse of free-thinking* (London: 1713); Jonathan Swift, *Mr. C-n’s Discourse of free-thinking put into plain English, by way of abstract, for the use of the poor* (London: 1713); and Benjamin Ibbot, *A course of sermons preach’d for the lecture founded by the honourable Robert Boyle Esq.* (London: 1727).

discussing the nature of God,<sup>11</sup> and Whiston for analysing biblical prophecies.<sup>12</sup> This of itself attests to the importance of controversy in the intellectual life of England *circa* 1700. Like a number of ‘deists’, Collins’ Whiggish politics and anti-authoritarianism have received attention; however, his entry against Clarke and Whiston illustrates his focus on philosophy and theology rather than politics.<sup>13</sup>

In the wake of Clarke’s famous dispute with Leibniz in 1715-1716, Clarke and Collins engaged in a further controversy on free will. Collins further detailed his views on necessity, elaborating on the earlier correspondence with Clarke.<sup>14</sup> Clarke wrote a refutation,<sup>15</sup> which was also appended to his published correspondence with Leibniz.<sup>16</sup> Collins’ correspondence indicated that he had prepared a reply, but decided not to publish this due to concern about potential civil action from Clarke.<sup>17</sup> In a final encounter, Collins and Clarke would express contrasting views on the biblical prophecies.<sup>18</sup> This would bring to a close the interchange between the two, who died within six months of each other – Clarke on 17 May 1729, and Collins on 13 December 1729.

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Collins, *A vindication of the divine attributes, in some remarks on his Grace the Archbishop of Dublin’s sermon intitled “Divine predestination consistent with the freedom of man’s will* (London, 1710).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Collins, *A discourse of the grounds and reasons of the Christian religion* (London: 1724).

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Tarantino, “The Books and Times of Anthony Collins (1676–1729),” in *Varieties of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English radicalism in context*, ed. Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan (Farnham: 2011), 221–240, 237.

<sup>14</sup> [Anthony Collins], *A philosophical inquiry concerning human liberty*, (London: 1717).

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Clarke, *Remarks upon a book, entituled, A philosophical enquiry concerning human liberty* (London: 1717).

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A collection of papers, which passed between the late learned Mr. Leibnitz, and Dr. Clarke, in the years 1715 and 1716* (London: 1717).

<sup>17</sup> James Dybikowski, ed. *The correspondence of Anthony Collins (1676–1729), Freethinker* (Paris: 2011), 281.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A discourse concerning the connexion of the prophecies in the Old Testament and the application of them to Christ* (London: 1725).

Following Collins' death, the *Universal Spectator* praised his public attendance at worship, strict morality, charity and administration of justice as a JP.<sup>19</sup> However, the view he was a deist, or even atheist, was firmly established. Collins – in the guise of the Greek sophist Alciphron – was central to Berkeley's dialogue *Alciphron: or, the minute philosopher* (1732). Berkeley gave biographical details directly drawn from Collins' life: he is portrayed as someone who once studied at the Temple, travelled abroad and came into wealth, now living on his estate in 'splenetic Indolence'.<sup>20</sup> Despite this apparent homogeneity of position, Berkeley's own conception of irreligious thought is itself ambiguous. Under the conception of the 'free thinker', Berkeley comprehends the identities of 'Atheist, Libertine, Enthusiast, Scornor, Critic, Metaphysician, Fatalist, and Sceptic'. David Berman has seen in Berkeley's observations a confirmation that Collins was an atheist.<sup>21</sup> However, Berkeley's rather vague references suggest we should not expect too much clarity within these categories; rather these labels are used polemically and promiscuously, and do not necessarily correspond to how these terms are viewed in a modern sense. Berkeley warned that it 'must not be imagined, that every one of these Characters agrees with every individual Free-thinker'. For Berkeley, the real problem in defining the 'free thinker' was not any of the categories described above, but rather their specific beliefs about the soul.<sup>22</sup>

Clarke gained further advancement in the wake of the debate, obtaining the desirable Rectory of St James in Westminster in January 1709. Shortly after, he obtained a Doctor of Divinity from Cambridge, receiving accolades for his disputation with Henry James, Regius Professor

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<sup>19</sup> [Henry Baker], *Universal spectator, and weekly journal*, "From my House in the Minorities," 22 August 1730.

<sup>20</sup> George Berkeley, *Alciphron: or, the minute philosopher in Seven Dialogues, containing an apology for the Christian religion, against those who are called free-thinkers* (Dublin: 1732), 3.

<sup>21</sup> David Berman, "Anthony Collins and the question of atheism in the early part of the eighteenth century," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 75 (1975): 85–102,

<sup>22</sup> Berkeley, *Alciphron*, Advertisement [1].

of Divinity.<sup>23</sup> Over subsequent decades, a widespread consensus emerged among more orthodox thinkers that Clarke had provided a canonical – and successful – defence of the immaterial soul. For Bishop Hoadley, in his account of Clarke’s ‘Life, Writings, and Character’ just after his death, Collins had put forward ‘All that could plausibly be said against the *Immateriality of the Soul*, as well as the *Liberty of Human Actions*.’ Hoadley praised Clarke’s erudition and clarity in defence of these crucial matters, which ‘shew’d Him greatly superior to his Adversaries in *Metaphysical* and *Physical* Knowledge, and made Every Intelligent Reader rejoyce’.<sup>24</sup> Clarke’s arguments were employed and recrafted by writers such as Samuel Colliber,<sup>25</sup> Bishop Butler,<sup>26</sup> Caleb Fleming,<sup>27</sup> and John Whitehead.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most striking legacy of Clarke’s thought, however, is the extent to which it informed the opposing philosophy developed by David Hume, as Paul Russel has argued.<sup>29</sup> In this broader context, Clarke was often linked with Newton. One of Clarke’s contemporaries observed that ‘what he has writ against Collins and others is all the fruits of his conversations with Sir Isaack.’<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Whiston remarked that Clarke’s work was ‘generally no other than Sir *Isaac Newton*’s Philosophy; tho’ frequently applied by Dr. *Clarke*, with great Sagacity, and to excellent purposes.’<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> James Ferguson, *Dr Samuel Clarke: an eighteenth century heretic* (Kineton: 1976), 40.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Hoadley, “The preface, giving some account of the life, writings, and character of the author,” in *The sermons of Samuel Clarke D.D. late Rector of St. James’s Westminster* (London: 1742), v.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Colliber, *Free thoughts concerning souls: in four essays* (London: 1734).

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Butler, *The analogy of religion, natural and revealed, to the constitution and course of nature* (Dublin: 1736), 16.

<sup>27</sup> Caleb Fleming, *A survey of the search after souls, by Dr. Coward, Dr. S. Clarke, Mr. Baxter, Dr. Sykes, Dr. Law, Mr. Peckard and others* (London: 1758).

<sup>28</sup> John Whitehead, *Materialism philosophically examined, or, the immateriality of the soul asserted and proved, on philosophical principles* (London: 1778).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Russell, “Hume’s *Treatise* and the Clarke-Collins controversy,” *Hume Studies* 21(1) (1995), 95-115.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Woodrow quoted in: Wigglesworth, “Matter and Spirit,” 24.

<sup>31</sup> Whiston, *Memoirs*, 95

As Clarke was affirmed by orthodox writers, so Collins' arguments were endorsed in radical works of subsequent decades. Samuel Strutt credited Collins with a 'Demonstration' that matter was capable of thought.<sup>32</sup> However, Collins' views attracted more interest in Europe, following an anonymous French translation of his letters against Clarke published in 1759.<sup>33</sup> In that regard, Collins influenced the atheistic materialism of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron D'Holbach.<sup>34</sup> One particularly striking commentary on Collins (and Clarke) is that presented in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (1791) of Jacques André Naigeon, often seen with D'Holbach as a member of the 'Coterie Holbachique'.<sup>35</sup> Pointedly, Naigeon observed that not every philosopher was to be mentioned in his work, only those who had been of use in the progress of enlightenment and truth ('au progress des lumières & de la vérité'). Therefore, he explained, there was an article on Collins, but not on Clarke, who was more theologian than philosopher ('plus théologien que philosophe'), and thus more fittingly numbered among the enemies of reason ('ennemis de la raison').<sup>36</sup> Again, Naigeon's eulogistic perception of Collins illustrates the potential for historical debates to be appropriated to current philosophical positions.

The reception of the debate between Collins and Clarke in their lifetimes and in the decades beyond illustrates how others within the intellectual culture increasingly saw deistic and Newtonian standpoints as entrenched. The debate became recast as an inevitable clash between fixed and distinct positions, defined by their philosophical content. Yet a closer look

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<sup>32</sup> Samuel Strutt, *A philosophical enquiry into the physical spring of human actions, and the immediate cause of thinking* (London: 1732), 4.

<sup>33</sup> O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 202-203. [Anthony Collins], *Essai sur la nature et la destination de l'ame humaine* (Londres, 1759).

<sup>34</sup> V. W. Topazio, *D'Holbach's moral philosophy* (Geneva: 1956). O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 221.

<sup>35</sup> This is discussed critically in: Alan Kors, "The myth of the Coterie Holbachique," *French Historical Studies* 9(4) (1976), 573-595.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques André Naigeon, *Encyclopédie méthodique philosophie ancienne & moderne* (Paris 1791), I :749.

at this debate has shown how these identities were forged and shaped through the controversial culture. While Clarke is widely identified as a ‘Newtonian’, we have seen that the theological interpretation of Newton’s work that he presents is by no means the only possible one (or necessarily the most convincing, or that held by Newton himself). Similarly, viewing Collins as a systematic deist in the style of Spinoza obscures his links with radical Protestantism, with Locke and with Bayle’s scepticism, and ignores the more exploratory nature of his work. It is therefore risky to take these labels, and the historical forces they represent, at face value; rather they must be considered within the polemical context in which they are deployed.

## *II. The mortalist*

As it concerns philosophical discussion and debate among less prominent figures in a provincial setting, Layton’s controversy with Bentley and Manlove affords a picture of a dimension of seventeenth-century intellectual life not well represented in the records. The debate illustrates both the caustic anti-atheistic rhetoric and the different approaches brought to bear by orthodox apologists, from Bentley’s confident Cartesian proof to Manlove’s miscellany of arguments. These works epitomise the theological controversy in its local setting: not a grand contest of different belief systems, but a set of differing philosophical perspectives formed in individual and idiosyncratic ways, which evolve through polemical dialogue.

In Layton’s vacillating trajectory from doubter to polemicist through his engagement with apologetics on the immortal, immaterial soul, we can see how controversial culture influenced the agenda and course of debates. Clearly, he was subject to opposing impetuses: the apparent difficulty in getting a publisher, the palpable risk to his reputation, his ongoing doubt, his commitment to ascertaining the truth, and the delight he took, at least at times, in

arguing his case. In this regard, the controversial culture in which Layton wrote was a factor in stimulating and shaping his heterodox views, as his dialogue with other thinkers led him to unfold his position. Certainly, in the years following his response to Manlove, Layton lost some of his reticence about publication. He produced a series of treatises essentially commenting on various apologetic works on the immaterial soul.<sup>37</sup> Among these, was detailed a correspondence with an interlocutor in 1702, probably Henry Dodwell, who sought to distinguish his own mortalist views from Layton.<sup>38</sup>

Layton's interventions never resulted in the public notoriety that accompanied William Coward's work, nor did they influence subsequent thinkers in such a fashion as the debate between Clarke and Collins. That said, Layton was sometimes read and cited throughout the eighteenth century. His work was considered in Fleming's *A survey of the search after souls* (1758), though Fleming mistakenly thought Coward was the author.<sup>39</sup> Layton was also a figure of interest in the subsequent revival of Church of England mortalism involving the Bishop of Carlisle, Edmund Law, and his associate Francis Blackburne.<sup>40</sup> As such, he formed part of the enduring tradition of mortalism linking the heresies of the Civil War era with the eighteenth century, as described by Brian Young.<sup>41</sup> Young's work may overstate the sense that mortalism represented a cohesive 'ultra-protestant' tradition, yet it provides a compelling reminder of the enduring importance of heterodox Christian views. In that regard, this thesis brings out the diversity of some of the figures involved and their dynamic interactions with more orthodox figures. Writing of Dodwell, Jean-Louis Quantin refers to 'a

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<sup>37</sup> These were printed together with [Henry Layton], *Arguments and replies in a dispute concerning the nature of the humane soul* (London: 1703).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Henry Dodwell is identified as the correspondent in: Francis Brookesby, *The life of Henry Dodwell* (London: 1715), 39.

<sup>39</sup> Fleming, *Search after souls*, Chapter III.

<sup>40</sup> Edmund Law, *Considerations on the theory of religion* (London: 1774), 189.

<sup>41</sup> B. W. Young, "'The soul-sleeping system': politics and heresy in eighteenth-century England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45(1) (1994): 64-81.

‘grey area’ where radical orthodoxy was no longer discernible from extreme heterodoxy’, and the same might be said of Layton.<sup>42</sup>

Thinkers such as Layton and Dodwell are typically passed over in accounts such as Israel’s that discern a conflict between a secularising ‘Radical Enlightenment’ and orthodoxy. In forgetting Layton, and others like him, historians attempt to reduce history to its most essential features – the great contests and grand patterns that are considered constitutive of our modern outlook. Thus, in looking to debates on the soul, our tendency is to focus on influential concepts such as materialism, personal identity and consciousness, and privilege the perceived role of groups such as the ‘deists’. Debates that relate to these – such as that of Clarke and Collins – are reinterpreted in modern terms, while debates that fit less well – such as Layton – are passed over. In so doing, a number of interesting figures and themes are lost, and the individual situations of people striving to make sense of the great issues of their time are obscured.

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<sup>42</sup> Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian antiquity: the construction of a confessional identity in the 17th century* (Oxford: 2009), 410.

## CONCLUSION

Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

– 1 Corinthians 1:20.

The domain of philosophical theology in England *circa* 1700 was one of conspicuous dynamism and vitality, something echoed, if not fully accounted for, in our broad conceptions of the ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘Scientific Revolution’. This thesis has examined this aspect of the intellectual culture through an analysis of a series of specific controversies, embedded in a broader thematic account of three subjects – the creation of the World (Part I), the relationship of faith and reason (Part II), and the nature of the soul (Part III). This enquiry has taken an integrative approach – it has looked both at the propositional content of these debates across the domain of philosophical theology, and at the controversial context that shaped them.

At a broad level, this thesis has complemented – and complicated – overarching accounts of philosophical theology in this period. While Charles Taylor has advanced a theory of a drift towards secularisation, driven by providential deism, the situation revealed in these debates is one of vibrant conflict and disagreement, rather than the gradual metamorphosis of a Christian world view into modernity.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Israel has seen debates in this period as driven by a conflict between ‘Moderate’ and ‘Radical’ Enlightenment; however, these categories do not neatly fit the participants in these debates.<sup>2</sup> A more localised account is given by Alan Kors, who identified a ‘fratricide of the faithful’ as shaping the emergence of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A secular age* (Cambridge: 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.

atheistic thought in France in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> While this thesis has shown that polemic discussion was a catalyst for change, its outcome in England in our period was to promote pluralist diversity, rather than polarised fratricide.

This conclusion will look at the implications of this thesis, what its achievements are and how it adds to previous interpretations. First, it has identified and examined a shared ‘culture of controversy’, underlying the motivations and actions of individual thinkers in the debates. Second, by viewing the debates through this lens, the thesis has added nuance to previous historiographical understandings of philosophical theology in this period, highlighting the diversity and specificity of the views presented, and questioning the tendency to rely on categories of thinkers, and broad historical movements. The first part of this conclusion draws out how the culture of controversy shaped the diverse debates considered here. The second part explores the broader contribution of the thesis to previous understandings of the period.

### *I. The culture of controversy*

The disparate disputes examined in this thesis are linked together by a culture of controversy that served as a major forum for discourse on philosophical theology in this period. We have seen how controversy was a ubiquitous presence in the lives of the philosophers and theologians *circa* 1700. These thinkers invested heavily in this aspect of intellectual life, devoting significant time and ingenuity to carrying on their arguments in response to criticism. Indeed, one biographer of John Toland wrote of his life as being essentially the sum of ‘the History of his Books and Disputes’.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a significant figure within the

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Kors, *Atheism in France 1650-1729: Volume I* (Princeton: 1990), Part III. Alan Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650-1729* (Cambridge: 2016).

<sup>4</sup> John Toland, *A collection of several pieces of Mr. John Toland: now first publish'd from his original manuscripts: with some memoirs of his life and writings*, ed. Pierre des Maizeaux (London 1726), iv.

Church, like Stillingfleet, devoted much of his career to controversies ‘against’ (as his protégé and biographer Richard Bentley wrote) ‘several different sorts of Adversaries, *Deists*, *Socinians*, *Papists*, *Dissenters*, & c.’<sup>5</sup> In that broad sense, this thesis has sought to restore the centrality of published controversy in our understanding of the period, and specifically in the domain of philosophical theology.

The thesis has argued that the culture of controversy was not peripheral or extraneous to the debates, but helped shape the trajectory of philosophical and theological discussion. It would be reductive to suggest that the participants in these debates were discussing such matters purely as a matter of social or political expediency. Controversies were, after all, a forum for the creation, exchange and appropriation of the ideas discussed. We have seen how participants in that culture cared about their ideas: how they sought to influence their colleagues and the broader public through public critiques, published sermons, dialogues and other texts. We have seen how they criticised opponents, offered imaginative alternatives and found – sometimes unlikely – alliances.

Yet, this thesis has argued that the reasons for these disagreements, and their particular trajectories, are not determined solely by the propositional content of the arguments, but also by the culture of controversy described here. The specific philosophical and theological views put forth are not enough to explain why people had these discussions at this time, or the choices they made and strategies they adopted. A clear example is the controversy between Locke and Stillingfleet, where conflict was by no means inevitable, but was catalysed by external developments and progressively escalated, ultimately resulting in the two men sharpening and defining their views against one another. In the Introduction we

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Bentley, “The life and character of that eminent and learned prelate, the late Dr. Edw. Stillingfleet,” in Edward Stillingfleet, *The works of that eminent and most learned prelate, Dr. Edw. Stillingfleet, late Lord Bishop of Worcester: together with his life and character*, ed. Richard Bentley (London: 1710), 42.

considered the range of social, cultural and legal factors that underlay the culture of controversy. We now draw together what the thesis has revealed about how the culture of controversy shaped the conduct – and legacy – of the debates considered here.

Controversy was fundamental in setting the agenda. In many cases, key works like Locke's *Essay* (1689), Burnet's *Theory* (1684), and Toland's *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) defined the issues at stake. Controversy requires shared material, and in an intellectual culture where the participants had so much in common, the controversies tended to centre around a constellation of shared but contestable cultural concepts. There was both an element of inevitability and contingency to this. As we have seen across the chapters, controversies often had deep roots. In Part III, for instance, we have seen how debates on the soul reflected the legacy of past centuries, including echoing the precedents of Plato, Cicero and Solomon. Yet the way thinkers such as Dodwell, Clarke, Layton, Coward and Manlove brought their own novel combinations of ideas and shifts of emphasis produced a wealth of different positions. Often the debates drifted towards common cultural themes: How does God interact with the world? What are the limits of human knowledge? Given the conceptual emphasis on natural laws (general providence), what role, if any, should be accorded to direct intervention (special providence)? The culture of controversy thus set a field for discussion around a discrete set of important cultural issues, and provided a forum for contestants with disparate interests and intellectual talents, yet with a shared context and expectations for the discussion, and a shared commitment to a unitary vision of the truth.

It is implicit in the above that the culture of controversy relied upon shared cultural knowledge, and in this sense constrained who had standing to participate. Like the Republic of Letters, it was not quite a monarchy or a democracy.<sup>6</sup> It is true to say that the intellectual

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Goldgar, *Impolite learning: conduct and community in the republic of letters, 1680-1750* (New Haven and London: 1995), 116.

life of England was dominated by a small (often clerical) elite, linked with the two universities. Yet these figures were not monochromatic in their backgrounds, views and professional interests: in addition to attracting established figures like Stillingfleet, controversy was a way for younger clergymen like Clarke and Whiston to prove themselves. There was also (some) potential for outsiders with a diverse range of opinions to participate (such as Toland and Layton). In one sense, the success (if not unalloyed) of young writers such as Toland illustrates that institutional authority was not a precondition for contribution. Yet many writers found their presence contested: not only did Toland expound pernicious ideas, as Peter Browne complained, he was among ‘those of a mixt sort of learning; Persons of a miscellaneous education’.<sup>7</sup> Others were in an ambiguous position – the Calvinist John Edwards clearly represented a lonely figure at odds with the moderate Church of England hierarchy, yet in many ways his views were probably more representative of parishioners generally.<sup>8</sup> Of course, some would colour this ‘outsider’ status as disinterested credibility: for example, Henry Layton presented his texts as coming from someone who, in advanced age, had concern only for the truth about the soul.

Yet, as this thesis has sought to demonstrate, the relative standing of participants itself coloured the presentation and reception of their arguments. For figures such as Stillingfleet, standing was self-evident, and their position obliged them to address heterodoxy in whatever form it might arise. For relative outsiders such as Toland, who needed to establish a reputation, there was a premium on innovation and novelty (in Toland’s case even a frisson of heterodoxy). Another avenue for lesser-known theorists to participate was through ambitious attempts to ‘solve’ long-established problems, such as Burnet. In both cases the controversial culture provided a path to recognition, but perhaps also induced some theorists

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Browne, *A letter in answer to a book entitled, Christianity not mysterious* (Dublin: 1697), 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Part I, Chapter 3, §II.

into overpitching their work and provoking a widespread reaction, with dramatic consequences.<sup>9</sup> As a counterpoint, Layton's case illustrates the material constraints on participation for less charismatic outsiders: we have seen the challenges in securing publication, the failure of his earnest attempts to engage with Richard Bentley, and the relative disregard for his digressive and anfractuous works.

In this regard, it is apposite to say something about the other practical – and legal – constraints implicit in the forum of published controversy. Legal sanctions were seldom deployed, yet legal risk shaped action and shaded into social risk. This coloured engagement with sensitive issues like the Trinity, where one might contrast the degrees of risk aversion among figures like Whiston, Clarke, Locke and Newton.<sup>10</sup> It also informed the often-indirect or evasive approach of thinkers such as Collins.<sup>11</sup> One defining event was the lapsing of pre-publication censorship in England in 1695. Toland's *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) was one exploration of this new domain, with a striking mix of boldness and equivocation. While Toland's likening of his opponents to the agents of the Inquisition was an exaggeration, his tumultuous career illustrates that participants in these debates often took significant risks to their reputation and future prospects.<sup>12</sup> Among his opponents, there was clearly also a moral and professional duty to combat a new iteration of pernicious thought. In this regard, the culture of controversy provided a basis for participants to navigate the boundaries of what would be permissible, and we have seen how these elements of social and legal control shaped the content and reception of what was said: the repositioning of Burnet's work as

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<sup>9</sup> See: Part I, Chapter 3, §V; Part II, Chapter 6, §IV.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 4, §II; Chapter 7, §II, Chapter 11, §IV.

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 11, §IV.

<sup>12</sup> John Toland, *An apology for Mr. Toland in a letter from himself* (London: 1697), 10, 26, 47.

romantic literature rather than serious philosophy, the cautious and defensive tone of Whiston, or Toland's contrite and relatively humble explanation for his own earlier work.

These material constraints on the content of the debate were augmented by softer sociocultural ones: the controversial context provided an impetus for works to be both persuasive and appealing to the intended audience. In this regard, we have seen throughout the thesis a tension between a broadening readership and the expectations of elite culture. Our period saw an expanding audience for publications, encompassing an appetite for the great philosophical and theological questions. Both for the clergy and laity, it was materially important to appeal to a wide readership. Thus, the Boyle Lectures of Richard Bentley and Samuel Clarke were written in an accessible style, and were intended to convince reasonably educated laymen rather than specialised scholars. In a more partisan vein, John Toland's work addressed a broad readership, eschewing the 'leading Men', who 'make plain things obscure'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, theology and philosophy had long been, and to a large extent remained, the province for highly educated elites, who needed to make arguments that were convincing for other elites. Toland wrote caustically of the 'insuperable Labyrinths of the Fathers', yet he was careful to show his ability to navigate them.<sup>14</sup> The tension between the competing demands of the scholarly caste and the educated population at large was structurally reflected in the trend to English rather than Latin, something embodied in the interplay of these in Thomas Burnet's publications. It is perhaps also fair to say many readers would have felt the best books tell you what you know already, and the incessant repetition of arguments against the 'atheist' and 'Papist' attested to this. One example was

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<sup>13</sup> *CNM*, xi.

<sup>14</sup> *CNM*, xxii, Section III, Chapter 3.

Timothy Manlove's pastiche of conventional arguments about the soul, which to a large extent ignored the subtleties of Layton's opposing arguments.<sup>15</sup>

In many cases, the expectations of elite knowledge led to an escalating need to marshal erudition and reasoning in support of one's position. In an intellectual culture in which religious and philosophical truth was expected to cohere at some level, these iterative defences could result in an increasingly wide-ranging and diffuse field of subjects. For Stillingfleet, his debate with Locke was like the ebullient Springs of Modena: '*Letters become Books, and small Books will soon rise to great Volumes*'.<sup>16</sup> From brief passages in the *Vindication* (1697), their debate closed with a 452-page response from Locke, and one wonders to what lengths Stillingfleet would have gone to reply, had he not died that year. At the same time, figures such as Locke and Stillingfleet could be at odds as to what was worth arguing about, and Locke's impatience with linguistic arguments about the meaning of substance in the classics represented a case in point. In that regard, a tension between ancient knowledge and the 'new philosophies', appeals to first principles and erudite knowledge, was a feature of the controversies.

We have reflected above how the controversial context influenced who would participate in the debates, what would be discussed, and which arguments would be permitted (or encouraged). A related, and fundamental, way the controversial context influenced these debates was through the rhetorical strategies adopted by the polemicists: the way these thinkers set out their own arguments, and how they characterised (or appropriated) those of their adversaries. This has been a recurrent motif throughout the thesis.

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<sup>15</sup> Part III, Chapter 10, §III & IV.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *The bishop of Worcester's answer to Mr. Locke's second letter wherein his notion of ideas is prov'd to be inconsistent with itself, and with the articles of the Christian faith* (London: 1698), 3.

We have frequently encountered the polemical appropriation of ideas as a phenomenon – as in the case of Burnet by Blount and ‘L. P.’, and Dodwell by Collins. In such cases, a shift of emphasis or change of context could bring about a radical change in meaning, and could result in very real consequences for the thinkers. Subjected to a deluge of criticism, figures like Burnet and Toland came to exemplify particular pitfalls for their contemporaries that not infrequently coloured, sometimes defined and even distorted, their positions for posterity. Conversely, we have seen how ideas could be ascribed to thinkers, such as Stillingfleet’s grouping of Toland’s views with Locke (compelling Locke to attempt to clarify or defend himself, or risk the reputational consequences). This could occur both in a direct polemical sense, or less directly in the context of humour or satire. Another approach was simply to impugn the intelligence or sanity of an opponent (Croft speculated of Burnet that ‘either his Brain is crackt... or his Heart is rotten’).<sup>17</sup>

In connection with this, the culture of controversy encouraged the rhetorical use of ideological and partisan identities. Often these were applied promiscuously and ambiguously, as when Stillingfleet accused Locke of a ‘tendency’ to scepticism. Yet this rhetoric was also significant in defining and colouring the divergence of these identities, and had an impact on how the legacies of the debates – and the thinkers – played out. Hence, we see the gradual emergence of what it meant to be a ‘deist’. This label was a rhetorical slur, rather than a serious accusation, in the debates covered concerning Toland and Collins, but crystallised in subsequent decades.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, we have seen characterisations of Locke as a ‘sceptic’, Stillingfleet as a disputatious ‘schoolman’ and Clarke as Collins’ orthodox

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert Croft, *Some animadversions upon a book intituled, The theory of the earth* (London: 1685), preface [18]-[19]

<sup>18</sup> In works such as: John Leland, *A view of the principal deistical writers that have appeared in England in the last and present century* (London: 1754).

opponent – all labels used in a polemical context, which are not well supported by a closer examination of the figures and debates involved.

While disputants used strong rhetoric to colour and discredit one another's ideas, outright abuse was generally frowned upon (in the Introduction we noted the impact of emerging conventions surrounding polite sociability). We have noted some instances, such as Croft's descriptions of Burnet; however, this might be contrasted with the vitriol that characterised some early modern controversies,<sup>19</sup> or contemporary pamphlets more peripheral to the elite world.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, the culture of controversy can be seen as part of the ongoing cultural negotiation between what Alexandra Walsham has described as 'politeness' and 'persecution'. As Alexandra Walsham has observed, persecution and toleration were not seen as opposites in the modern sense.<sup>21</sup> In some cases a 'charitable hatred' for sin and error was seen as preferable to an indulgent toleration, as in Jean Gailhard's plea to Parliament, in response to Toland's work, that the 'Sword is put into your Hands *for a terrour to evil workes*'.<sup>22</sup> Yet there was an emerging emphasis on polite and tolerant engagement with opposing views. In a broad sense, as Mark Knights has argued, notions of politeness encouraged the cooling of partisan dispute in this period.<sup>23</sup> We have seen examples of this

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<sup>19</sup> One might compare this situation with mutual accusations of lying and sexual perversion in some debates between fifteenth century Italian humanists. See: Jeroen De Keyser, "Francesco Filelfo's feud with Poggio Bracciolini," in *Forms of conflict and rivalries in renaissance Europe*, ed. David Lines, Marc Laureys and Jill Kraye (Bonn: 2015), 13-27. Or, with the violent language used in the religious pamphlets of the Marprelate controversy: John Lyly, *Pappe with an hatchet, alias, a figge for my God sonne, or cracke me this nut, or a countrie cuffe, that is, a sound boxe of the eare, for the idiot Martin to hold his peace, seeing the patch will take no warning*. (London: 1589).

<sup>20</sup> For example: Francis Bugg, *Jezebel withstood, and her daughter Anne Docwra, publickly reprov'd, for her lies and lightness in her book, stiled, An apostate conscience, &c* (London: 1699).

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable hatred: tolerance and intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester: 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Jean Gailhard, *The blasphemous Socinian heresie disproved and confuted [...] with animadversions upon a late book called, Christianity not mysterious, humbly dedicated to both houses of parliament* (London: 1697), preface [9]

<sup>23</sup> Mark Knights, *Representation and misrepresentation in later Stuart Britain: partisanship and political culture* (Oxford: 2005).

throughout the thesis, in the self-conscious politeness of Collins and Clarke, or the efforts of Locke to maintain a civil – if strained – tone, despite growing frustration. We have also seen instances where a lack of politeness was cited as justification for not engaging in debate, as in Burnet’s refusal to answer Croft. In that regard, the expectation of dialogue and conversation rather than polemical diatribe can be seen as contributing to de facto pluralism in the intellectual culture, and encouraged a recognition that consensus was not always possible (a theme that will be picked up below).

While polemical rhetoric could influence the course of debates, and their legacies, it also affords some insight into the meaning and resonances that the debates had for the thinkers themselves. It is thus worth noting that the controversies here were characterised by various idioms and patterns for conducting argument. Not infrequently, disputants analogised their activities with physical conflict. Yet this imagery appears to have been dwindling in this period (which can be contrasted with the colourful and provocative titles of the mid-seventeenth century).<sup>24</sup> Increasingly, interlocutors aspired to a disinterested and polite dialogue in which the participants act in good faith to establish the truth (in keeping with the emphasis on politeness described above). Clearly, the inheritance of religious history also provided a source of multitudinous tropes – the wise priest, the prophet denouncing corruption, and the principled reformer. By no means did these patterns represent exclusive methods of conducting debate. Rather, these were cultural resources that the disputants could draw on, and they often moved fluidly from one to another. Thus, Henry Layton represented himself as, at different points, a duellist ‘descending into the arena’, a devout religious convert ready to suffer anything for the truth, and a doubtful old man willing to be convinced

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<sup>24</sup> One example is: Henry More, *The second lash of Alazonomastix, laid on in mercie upon that stubborn youth Eugenius Philalethes, or, a sober reply to a very uncivill answer to certain observations upon Anthroposophia theomagica, and Anima magica abscondita* (Cambridge: 1651).

by a reasonable explanation of the prevailing view.<sup>25</sup> So, too, it is not uncommon to see participants in this debate appealing to, or casting themselves in the tradition of their heroes or exemplars, whether Cicero, Solomon or St Paul. Thus, while it might be tempting to draw a general conclusion that the trajectory of controversy was shaped by norms of politeness, the ongoing picture was one of diversity, where robust and combative imagery was not unknown. This brings to the fore the lived experience of the intellectual culture, which is not reducible to the march of ideas alone.

The above paragraphs describe a number of ways in which the culture of controversy subtly shaped and influenced the course of the debates considered (and their legacies). We might also reflect more generally on its impact on the broader intellectual culture. The immediate outcome of these controversies was rarely a decisive victory or complete defeat: more typical was the muddy truce. Indeed, a thread running through many of these debates is the tension between the idealised expectation of debate as a means of establishing the truth, and a reality so often subject to the vicissitudes of human folly and fallibility. Writing in 1720, Bernard Mandeville castigated the ‘vain Speculations and empty Cavils’ of contemporary disputes, echoing a concern expressed widely throughout the thinkers considered.<sup>26</sup> In some ways, controversy in our period produced a greater reluctance to pursue ambitious philosophical and theological projects. After the diverse and contentious experimentation of men like Burnet and Whiston with ‘physico-theology’, the intellectual culture would largely agree on the merits of the argument from design. So too, the vibrant metaphysical speculation of the time could be cast in a cynical light: one contemporary response to Leibniz and Clarke’s

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<sup>25</sup> Part III, Chapter 10, §II.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *Free thoughts on religion, the Church, and national happiness* (London: 1720), 77-78.

debate that it was simply ‘a dispute about words’.<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that this sense of disillusionment is strikingly dissonant with our conception of the early Enlightenment.

This is not to say that the enduring legacy of the culture of controversy was purely a chilling one. While controversies could be a spur to traditionary reaction, they also catalysed the proliferation of new ideas. Collins’ account of the soul as emerging from matter represented a fascinating conceptual development. So too, the emphasis on ‘consciousness’ between him and Clarke contributed to the growing focus on this concept that persists to the present day.<sup>28</sup> In many ways, the culture provided a forum for many of the novel ideas of the time, including people associated with the later emergence of ‘deism’ and other transformations in thought. In this regard it is helpful to return to Kors’ idea (in relation to France 1650-1729) of a fratricide of the faithful’. It is clear that atheistic thought does not emerge in the same way from these controversies, or receive the same expression. The controversies considered here also lacked the identification of clear factions that Kors describes. While there are undercurrents of interest in Descartes and Aristotle (two of the ‘parties’ described by Kors) there is a much greater eclecticism among the participants in the debate; the picture is fundamentally one of diversity rather than cohesive groupings.

Yet Kors’ depiction of internecine debate within learned Christianity that lays the conditions precedent for the emergence of atheism does have some resonance with the controversies portrayed here. The thinkers appealed to a variety of factors to support their philosophical positions (reason, consistency with biblical and classical authority, consistency with aspects of mechanical philosophy and Newton’s natural philosophy, and experience), which tended to expose and heighten tensions between their views. While apologetic polemicists might

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Ainsi cet Article ne fera plus qu’une dispute de mots. On ne s’est pas bien entendu’: *Nouvelles de la république des lettres Mois de Janvier et Fevrier* (1718), 56.

<sup>28</sup> Part III, Chapter 11, §II.

rebuke their opponents, they did not silence them, and in some cases stimulated further discussion. The structures of controversy promoted the expression, and tolerance, of de facto pluralism, and eroded both the authority of Christian doctrine and the notion of a universally accepted version of reason and truth. By seeking to specify and realign the interface between orthodox thought and natural philosophy, the controversies incrementally opened up a space for debate and reimagination of new possibilities within a broadly Christian worldview. With this reflection, we turn to a consideration of how our reading of the controversies has added to previous interpretations of the period.

## ***II. Historiographical implications***

By viewing the debates through the lens of controversy, the thesis has added nuance to previous historiographical understandings of philosophical theology in this period, highlighting the diversity and specificity of contemporary views, and questioning the tendency to rely on categories of thinkers, and broad historical movements.

At a broad level, controversies have received relatively limited, sporadic and indirect attention.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, as noted in the Introduction, there are works that give it some emphasis, such as John Redwood on the debates of Enlightenment England,<sup>30</sup> Justin Champion on controversies over historical argument,<sup>31</sup> and Israel's thesis on the contest between 'Radical' and 'Moderate' Enlightenment. Yet all of these consider controversies as episodes subordinated within a broader narrative. This thesis has endeavoured to provide a more in-depth engagement with what these controversies meant and involved for the

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<sup>29</sup> As an example, controversy is mentioned for example, principally in a theological context in Stephen Menn, "The intellectual setting," in Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (eds.), *The Cambridge history of seventeenth century philosophy* (Cambridge: 1998), I:33-86.

<sup>30</sup> Redwood, *Reason, ridicule and religion*.

<sup>31</sup> Justin Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken* (Cambridge: 1992).

participants, beyond being symptomatic of broader trajectories of thought. In this context, there is a broader methodological point to be made as to what difference a focus on controversy makes to our understanding of intellectual history.

Published controversies do not, like most texts, represent a coherent whole. Rather, by their nature, they represent a series of communications between individuals, but also presuppose an appeal to a broader audience. To focus on these controversies is to set a certain stress on intellectual culture as a system of communications, something dynamic rather than static.

We are accustomed to see the history of ideas as one where truth is to be discovered, falsity to be overthrown, as we converge progressively in overarching knowledge. In that sense, an intellectual history focused on controversy may seem unsatisfying. There is seldom any clear outcome. There were few instances where someone changed their mind in a controversy – Whiston’s partial acceptance of Keill’s arguments being one example.<sup>32</sup> Controversy is something that cascades into probabilities and dubieties, like the ever-widening and evolving debate between Locke and Stillingfleet. Often, there was a profusion of argumentation that we might see as peripheral or extraneous to the key issue in dispute. So too, our perceived historical categories are less distinct and tangible once their polemical context is unravelled.

Yet to more fully understand an intellectual culture, we must give attention to the character of individual thinkers and examine these within their contemporary web of communications and social relations. In our desire to understand intellectual culture on its own terms, it is worth remembering that it exists in these often tangled, disordered exchanges, as well as in the canonical texts. Works like Locke’s *Essay* (1689) and Newton’s *Principia* (1687) speak to us across the centuries. Yet, while they are works of genius, they cannot be considered representative: much more typical of intellectual life were polemic works in dialogue with

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<sup>32</sup> Part I, Chapter 3, §IV.

each other. It is through greater attention to the patterning and nature of these interactions, and the rhetoric being employed, that we can better understand the philosophical content of these discussions. A focus on the culture of controversy avoids reducing the debates to our sense of the trajectory of the past towards modernity. Instead, we see the plurality of theological and philosophical positions adopted by thinkers of this time. We see their ingenuity in responding to new knowledge and ways of thinking, and their shared commitment to a Christian project that was, at least in principle, universal. In that regard, it is hoped that the previous chapters contribute to a more complete picture of the intellectual culture by focussing on what one historian has described as a ‘singularity of experience and scholarly endeavour, and not on convenient philosophical abstraction’, but one also tempered by a sensitivity to the cultural patterns and constraints that formed the immediate context.<sup>33</sup>

Importantly, consideration of controversy shifts our focus to include the rhetorical and the eristic as well as the strictly logical aspects of philosophical discussion. Implicit in this is the view that philosophical debate is not isolated and autonomous from its rhetorical and literary presentation.<sup>34</sup> In seeking to reconstruct the controversies, this thesis has sought to bring out the particular presentation of ideas and arguments. The plangent eloquence of Burnet, Whiston’s axioms and propositions, Toland’s cavalier appeal to ‘reason’ above ‘authority’ – these are all constitutive of their work and their personal voice (and how this coloured their reception). Collectively, they attest to the vitality and diversity of the intellectual culture. In this regard, the case studies have emphasised a sense of thinkers passionately advancing views vested with religious and emotional significance, rather than disinterestedly testing

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<sup>33</sup> Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science* (Cambridge: 2017), 546.

<sup>34</sup> Such a point has been made in respect of experimental science: Charles Bazerman, *Shaping written knowledge: the genre and activity of the experimental article in science* (London: 1988). Alan G. Gross, *Starring the text: The place of rhetoric in science studies* (Carbondale: 2006). Tina Skouen and Ryan Stark (eds), *Rhetoric and the early Royal Society: a sourcebook* (Leiden: 2014).

their academic theories. In a context in which claims about reason, evidence and impartiality proliferate and colour our sense of an ‘Age of Reason’, we have sought to be faithful to the emotional resonance that these contests produced.

In considering how this thesis contributes to our understanding of the intellectual life of the time, it is perhaps worth returning to the most prominent conceptualisations of this period – as part of the ‘Scientific Revolution, the ‘Early Enlightenment’, or the ‘Age of Reason’. These are clearly complex and contested terms, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider them fully. Yet it is obvious that they remain a powerful presence both in popular conceptions of the period and scholarly historiography and shape what is claimed and assumed about the period. Such overarching conceptions are complicated when viewed in light of the specific thinkers and controversies examined in this thesis. For example, Burnet’s theory has been perceived as an instance of the emerging authority of ‘science’ at the expense of religion. However, consideration of the surrounding debate reveals the complex cross-pollination of theology and natural philosophy, and the contested views within the intellectual culture as to how these disciplines related. Certainly, Burnet and Whiston’s efforts to offer an integrated account of sacred history and nature did not amount to a simple triumph of ‘science’ over religion.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the canonisation of Locke as the proponent of Enlightenment philosophy (as against his clerical adversaries) is not supported in his labyrinthine debate with Stillingfleet, in which the two men took up subtle positions on the intersection of reason and faith, often drawing on biblical precedents, and the ongoing theological question of God’s relationship to creation.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, this thesis has sought

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<sup>35</sup> Part I, Chapter 4, §III.

<sup>36</sup> Part II, Chapter 7.

to complicate, and show the limitations of, overarching narratives of philosophical theology in this period.

The thesis also demonstrates the danger of seeing change in philosophical theology in this period as driven by a new cultural emphasis on ‘reason’ (an interpretation that lies behind a preoccupation with deism in the historiography). Certainly, there is a widespread appeal to ‘reason’ among the thinkers discussed, though it would be fair to say this had been a feature in European intellectual culture – and English philosophical and theological writing – for some time, reaching back into the Middle Ages.<sup>37</sup> We can also see some shifting ground from appeals to religious authority to appeals to the shared language of reason. In this sense, reason is often portrayed as a *lingua franca* for discussions, to enable a shared system of evaluation even with the atheist (for example, both Bentley and Toland stated that they would couch arguments in terms of reason in order to convince an atheistic reader unlikely to be swayed by scriptural authority).<sup>38</sup> At the same time, behind its apparent dominance, there was a vast scope for different views of reason and its limitations (as we explored in Part II). There is significance in some of the emerging claims about reason, which would position it as the arbiter of religious matters – notably John Toland’s claim that there is nothing ‘above Reason’ in the Christian gospels. Yet this thesis has shown that these views, and conclusions we may draw about their secularising or deistic tendencies, should be treated with caution and construed within their polemical context. We need to be mindful of the potential for views to be interpreted within other traditions, such as the Socinian context: that is, as a form of radical Protestantism rather than falling outside of Christianity. We should also be mindful that such claims as Toland’s were robustly resisted, and the specific positions

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<sup>37</sup> The notion of the Middle Ages as an ‘age of reason’ has been argued in: Edward Grant, *God and reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: 2001), 7.

<sup>38</sup> Part II, Chapter 6, §I. Part III, Chapter 10, §II.

adopted by thinkers were often nuanced and complex.<sup>39</sup> An example of this is the position of Locke, who, despite his status as a canonical Enlightenment figure, took a measured sceptical view of knowledge and reason, in contrast to his clerical adversary, Stillingfleet. So too, this thesis has shown how claims about ‘reason’ were an important rhetorical strategy. As in the political discussions studied by Mark Knights, an emphasis on reason ‘delegitimized opponents whilst justifying impartiality’.<sup>40</sup> The widespread historiographical emphasis on reason as a driving force in philosophical theology in this period should therefore be viewed with caution: while the period saw a renewed focus on the role and importance of reason, this was not uncontested, nor was it necessarily new, secularising or unchristian.

This thesis has also cast doubt on the idea of a single constitutive conflict in the development of philosophical theology at this time, epitomised in Israel’s account of ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ Enlightenment. While Israel’s view is that by the 1680’s ‘the main issue’ was ‘between faith and incredulity’, the immense importance of debates within Christianity – those over Burnet’s *Theory*, Stillingfleet and Locke, and Dodwell’s mortalism – show this is not the case.<sup>41</sup> Controversy often sharpened and defined division. However, far from being a dualistic battle between the proponents of reason and the proponents of traditional authority, the case studies considered in this thesis show a polyphonic debate where people assumed different positions cutting across both of these, with nuanced claims about what reason was and its limits. While figures such as Toland and Collins are seen as exemplars of ‘Radical Enlightenment’, their intellectual backgrounds are more complex and varied than this would suggest. Toland identified himself more in the tradition of Christian reform, whereas Collins’ interest in the sceptical tradition is at odds with the more rationalistic claims associated with

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<sup>39</sup> Part II, Chapter 6.

<sup>40</sup> Knights, *Representation and misrepresentation*, 348.

<sup>41</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 4.

Radical Enlightenment. In many respects the rationalism of Collins' interlocuter, Clarke, was closer to that of Spinoza, the purported fountainhead of 'Radical Enlightenment'. We have also seen the ongoing vitality of heterodox figures within a broadly radical Protestant tradition.

In a similar vein, the thesis has complicated a tendency to see the controversies as primarily driven by politics, for example in Justin Champion's or Margaret Jacob's work.<sup>42</sup> Doubtless there is a sense in which questions of reason intersect with questions of authority and who has standing to speak on matters of religion, and in this sense, there is a political vein which runs through the debates. Yet is an overstatement to see the debates purely in terms of the distribution of authority, or to see political or ecclesiastical position as determinative of theological or philosophical views. Thus, we see Keill's unexpected combination of High Church beliefs with Newtonianism, the reluctant heterodoxy of Henry Layton, or the curious relationship of someone like John Edwards or Henry Dodwell with the established Church. Similarly, thinkers such as Collins or Toland have been strongly linked with whiggish or republican views, yet the political interests of these figures do not provide a complete explanation of their works. Certainly, it is hard to see politics in evidence in many of the debates presented here, such as that between Locke and Stillingfleet.

As a related point, the perspective offered in this thesis addresses a tendency in the historiography to focus on heterodox thought, as for instance deism, as the perceived precursor to modern philosophical views. Rather than existing in a binary, there is much ambiguity and interpenetration between orthodox and heterodox views in the controversies. As we have seen in the controversy between Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins, a straightforward division of roles is misleading, and does not do justice to the ambiguous

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<sup>42</sup> Margaret Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English revolution* (Hassocks: 1976).

relationship of both thinkers to the complexities of tradition. Clarke, whose status as a voice for orthodoxy was belied by the heterodox undercurrents of his philosophy, is a reminder of Pocock's observation that orthodoxy was not necessarily a 'mere rejection of tensions', but could comprehend ingenious attempts to uphold the coherency of an existing tradition.<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, Henry Layton is an example of someone who, despite being castigated for heterodoxy, sought to place his views in the context of what he considered to be an older – and more legitimate – Christian tradition. Where thinkers characterised their opponent's views as heterodox, this was often a device to differentiate themselves from colleagues with whom they had much in common, and to present themselves in the continuity of a longstanding Christian tradition (we might look to Stillingfleet in his debate with Locke, or Clarke with Collins). In such cases, debate could serve to sharpen and even define the distinctions between the two outlooks. Conversely, orthodoxy could be portrayed as something like apathy, as in Collins' closing riposte that Clarke was 'perfectly and exactly Orthodox'. In this sense, orthodoxy and heterodoxy were not static definitions, but more positions that people might adopt or reject on different occasions.

One advantage in focusing on controversy is to shift the focus to lesser-known figures of the intellectual culture, and bring balance to our understanding of the period. A figure like John Toland is relatively well-known, as is his *Christianity not mysterious* (1696). Yet focusing on the wider controversy, brings out the breadth of different positions. This is not to undermine the sense that some texts did command especial prominence, but to highlight that what they meant was seldom static or uncontested. The methodology of this thesis entails observing particular episodes from many different vantage points.

Linked to this, this thesis has highlighted the diversity of views, and the eclectic nature of the positions adopted, something which underscores the problem of using terms such as ‘deism’, ‘latitudinarianism’, and ‘Cambridge Platonism’ in understanding the intellectual culture of this time. To a certain extent, such terms will always have a pragmatic role in macroscopic analysis of the period and its place in world history. However, historians should be vigilant and sensitive to their limitations, particularly in seeking to avoid anachronisms such as the ‘Deist Controversy’. It has been a common theme throughout this thesis to complicate particular categorisations of thinkers as ‘deist’ (Toland and Collins), ‘Newtonian’ (Whiston and Keill), ‘Cartesian’ (Burnet) and ‘latitudinarian’ (Burnet and Stillingfleet). In doing so, the thesis also complicates accounts of how these ‘groups’ have influenced or driven change in philosophical theology in this period. For example, historians have traditionally seen Toland as an early deist influence in philosophical theology, an account which misconstrues the context of this debate, and in particular the contemporary concerns about Socinianism. Similarly, as we have seen in respect of Whiston’s *New theory* (1696), the account of a homogeneous Newtonianism driving advances in philosophical theology is not supported in the sources considered here, which reveal significant disagreements over the interpretation of Newton’s thought.

More generally, this thesis has emphasised the diversity of English thought *circa* 1700 emerging through the complexity and nuances of the debates. One illustration of this is the variegated engagement with Aristotelian philosophy, despite the perception it had fallen into desuetude by our period.<sup>44</sup> We have seen, in the debate between Locke and Stillingfleet, both anti-Scholastic rhetoric and more subtle engagement with this tradition.<sup>45</sup> We have also seen

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Schmitt, “Towards a reassessment of Renaissance Aristotelianism,” *History of Science*; 11(3) (1973): 159-193.

<sup>45</sup> Part II, Chapter 7.

figures like Peter Browne who preserved the philosophical system of Aristotle, albeit dispensing with the terminology,<sup>46</sup> while others such as Henry Layton looked to Aristotle as a starting point from which to proceed.<sup>47</sup> Another illustration is the continuing influence of Calvinist views. As Stephen Hampton has noted, and sought to refute, there is a view that the Church of England had ‘effectively thrown off the shackles of her Reformed inheritance’.<sup>48</sup> Yet figures such as the Calvinist divine John Edwards continued to be significant participants in controversy.<sup>49</sup> Again, the situation is not one of the simple replacement of one school by another, but complex cross-pollination and eclecticism. Indeed, to borrow from another context there was often more of the tinkerer than the engineer in many of the writers considered.<sup>50</sup>

This thesis has sought to complicate overarching narratives of how these debates contributed to Enlightenment or secularisation. This is not to say that the controversies examined here had no place in wider intellectual change. We have seen that the culture of controversy was an important part of the dynamic context of natural philosophy and theology during this period, and a catalyst for shifts in understanding. As such, the controversies (and how they were argued) can be viewed as playing a part in broader transformations in thought, including the later emergence of ‘deism’ and other heterodox views. Yet the defining feature remains one of diversity and multiplicity, rather than the emergence of clear factions or the kind of breakthrough that might accord with broader secularisation narratives.

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<sup>46</sup> Part II, Chapter 6, §III.

<sup>47</sup> Part III, Chapter 3, §I.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Hampton, *Anti-Arminians: the Anglican reformed tradition from Charles II to George I* (Oxford: 2008), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Part I, Chapter 3, §II.

<sup>50</sup> François Jacob, “Evolution and tinkering,” *Science* 196(4295) (1977): 1161-1166.

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