Reading Scripture: the reception of Christianity not mysterious, 1696–1702

As for religion ... it is more easy to guess what he was not, than to tell what he was. Tis certain, he was neither Jew nor Mahometan: But whether he was a Christian, a Deist, a Pantheist, an Hobbist, or a Spinozist, is the Question’. Toland’s writings had ‘alarm’d all sober well-meaning Christians, and set the whole clergy against him’. Having explored how Toland lived and worked in a world of libraries and books, it is time to examine how his books worked in the public sphere. One of the persistent problems Toland faced throughout his life was the question that hung over his reputation: an anxiety that was driven by the disastrous reception of his first venture into print, a work that engaged directly with the status of the most important text in early modern culture – the Bible. If doubts voiced about the orthodoxy of Toland’s private beliefs were hardly unsurprising at the end of his career, clerical worries about the integrity of his Christian faith were also manifest before he made his mark in the intellectual firmament. As a young man, it was reported, Toland had declared that ‘Religion is a plain & easy thing, & that there is not so much in it, as Priestcraft would persuade: taking it for granted to be part of this Doctrine, that what is to be done in order to Salvation, is as easy, as what is to be known, is plain’. If libraries were good places to meet powerful people, and manuscripts were effective ways of making influential friends, Toland’s first work argued that the Bible was a non-mysterious book accessible to all rational readers. By default this was a political claim which compromised the social power claimed by the Church over their exclusive rights of interpreting revelation. Reading books, under the advice of Toland, became a political act.

The conflict between Toland’s public reputation and private faith came early in his career. Some time in early 1694 a concerned cleric had left Toland a long letter expressing anxieties that he had ‘great learning but little religion’. Toland’s outraged reply insisted that he was orthodox, confirmed by a short credo of his Christian faith. First, he claimed to believe in an ‘infinite, good,
wise and powerful Being, which in our language we call God, substantially different from the universe he created. Second, he upheld belief in Christ, foremost as a ‘perfect example’ for humanity sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, he insisted that it was the duty of all Christians to ‘live temperately, justly and piously: to love God above all things; and my neighbour as myself’. Although Toland maintained these statements as his rule of faith he was also very keen to uphold the necessity of toleration. Toland’s anonymous clerical correspondent claimed he had not intended to provoke the young scholar. The accusation of having ‘little religion’ was not meant to imply irreligion, but that ‘you were one who dealt somewhat too freely with it, a man of aspiring and uncontroubled reason, a great contemner of credulity’. Although Toland was anxious to protect his public reputation he did not hesitate to challenge these criticisms.

The anxious clergyman of Oxford had been driven to caution Toland because of the rumour of a work he was supposed to have written. That work was *Christianity not mysterious*, published without Toland’s name or details of either publisher or bookseller between December 1695 and June 1696. Draft ‘papers’ had possibly been sent to John Locke in late March 1695, via his friend John Freke. Reports about Toland’s work were widespread in Oxford through the year. Advertisements for the work appeared in the *Post-Man* in late December 1695. By early June the book was being attacked from London pulpits for its ‘most arrogant and impudent treatment of God and the Holy Scriptures’. By late June 1696 Toland placed adverts in the *Post Man* acknowledging his authorship. By August the book had been announced on the Continent. To accompany this revelation a ‘second edition enlarg’d’ was published with Toland’s name on the title-page. He revelled in the celebrity. Writing in 1702, defending his original publication, Toland insisted that he would never allow another edition of the work to see the light of day, he had ‘refus’d my Consent to make any edition of it since the second of the same year with the first 1696’. This was deceitful nonsense. In the very same year (probably after May) a third edition was published with the addition of the *Apology* (1697) Toland had written to defend himself against charges of blasphemy and irreligion.

Despite the work masquerading as the penmanship of a sincere Christian (a passage from Archbishop Tillotson had been included prominently on the title-page), the outcry of rage was immediate and intense. Within the first two years there were over twenty responses to the book, almost all by clergymen, ranging from massive single volumes to cheap ephemeral pamphlets. The response prompted more powerful legal and political institutions to react too. In mid-May 1697 the Grand Jury of Middlesex ‘presented several books as scandalous’, condemning *Christianity not mysterious* in the company of two
other anonymous works *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *A Lady’s Religion.* Toland’s book had fallen foul of one of the initiatives aroused by the drive for moral reformation that periodically convulsed the Williamite regime. In defending the sanctity of scripture and the truth of the Trinity, the presentment suggested that ‘all care possible ought to be taken for the speedy discovery of all such books’. Authors, printers and publishers should be dealt with ‘according to the utmost severity of the Laws’. All editions should be suppressed, and all future printing be prevented for the ‘time to come’.

The evidence of the presentment by the Middlesex Grand Jury is a keen illustration of how the publication of *Christianity not mysterious* perturbed the authority of public religion. Both Mary and William had issued successive proclamations reinforcing magisterial injunctions against profanity and debauchery. This drive for discipline was also advanced in the House of Commons. Reacting in particular to the explosion of irreligious works that were published as a consequence of the expiry of the Licensing Act in 1695, MPs devoted their energies to promoting legislation against blasphemy and profaneness. The proclamation issued in William’s name ‘for preventing and punishing immorality and profaneness’ attacked the ‘several wicked and profane persons [who] have presumed to print and publish several pernicious books and pamphlets’ and charged all ‘persons that they do not presume to write, print or publish any such pernicious books or pamphlets, under the pain of our huge displeasure and of being punished according to the utmost severity of the law’. Ultimately a Blasphemy Act gained the statute book in 1698.

*Christianity not mysterious* was published then into a context riven by orthodox disquiet about the connection between private immorality and public depravity. The presentation of the book, as a common nuisance, was intended to act as a ‘precedent for others to do the like’. Jean Gailhard, gentleman, a man intimate with Sir Thomas Rokeby (who had issued the directions to enforce morality that the Grand Jury had responded to) had later in November of the same year published his *The blasphemous SOCINIAN HERESIE disproved and confuted* (1697). The main body of this work painstakingly rebutted Socinian attacks upon the Trinity, although he also included a last lengthy chapter that put forward ‘some animadversions upon a book called Christianity not mysterious.’ Gailhard complained bitterly, ‘to what purpose is Popery or Idolatry expell’d, if Socinianism or Blasphemy be let in?’ While ‘Atheism, Deism, Prophaneness, Immorality, yea, and Idolatry, &c. doth bare and brazen-faced walk in our streets’ it was necessary in Gailhard’s view, to invoke ‘(extream Remedies’ to reform the nation. The ‘Devil hath his instruments of several sorts’ and had caused ‘Achans’ to trouble ‘our Israel’. Some out of pride, others ‘out of a Vain Glory or affectation of Singularity and Self conceit of Learning’ had struck at the ‘most holy Godhead it self’. The
remedy was clear: imposition of the ‘heaviest punishment to make the Pain hold a proportion with the offence’ should be enacted against blasphemers. Citing Leviticus 24.24, he insisted, that ‘The Blasphemer was by God’s immediate Command, stoned to death, by the whole congregation, because the sin and scandal were Publick, so was the punishment to be’. English law allowed the same treatment. Reciting the cases of Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman, who were both burnt for heresy, Gailhard insisted that such ‘Ishmaels’ might be ‘delivered into the Civil Magistrate’s hand’.17

Gailhard’s language was drenched in providential discourses which justified magisterial authority in restraint of the public exercise of reason in all conversation and books. He happily cited the magisterial example of the Scottish Parliament which had recently reinforced the 1661 statute against blasphemy, but also enacted further penalties against those ‘whosoever in Discourse or Writing shall deny, quarrel, argue or reason against the Being of a God, or any of the Persons of the blessed Trinity, or against the Authority of the Holy Scripture, or Providence of God in Governing the World’. A third offence would be capital. The proceeding that the Emperor Theodosius undertook against heretical Manichees or Donatists should be re-invigorated ‘at least strictly to be practised against live Socinians as dead Manichees’.18 It is unlikely that Gailhard was unaware that these Scottish statutes had been employed against the Edinburgh University student Thomas Aikenhead resulting in his execution in January 1697: the language of capital punishment was not mere magisterial rhetoric.19 For men like Gailhard then, such books were fundamentally dangerous.

At least one set of Parliamentarians rebutted Gailhard’s suggestions and defended the ‘natural right’ to the exercise of reason in the matter of belief.20 This free ‘natural right’ to the exercise of individual reason in the realm of public religion was precisely what Gailhard reviled.21 Severe and brutal execution of penalties was not ungodly, as Gailhard explained, because ‘The truth is, that Society of men are against all manner of restraint in matters of religion, they would have everyone believe and profess what seems good in his Eye; and so of the Church, which is the House of God, to make a meer Babel and confusion without order and rule, which frame will at last rend in pieces and ruin it’. What started in the Church would end in politics: ‘you thereby introduce confusion into the Church, which may soon become Anarchy in Government’.22 Men of Gailhard’s ilk were convinced that elevating human reason against the grace of God would cause ‘Bedlam’ to reign where true religion ought to exist. The full power of the law could, and should, be turned against such miscreants. In the face of such hostility and the tragic example of Aikenhead in Scotland, Toland chose to follow one of his political patrons, John Methuen, to Ireland where he had been made Lord Chancellor in 1697.23 Toland arrived in Dublin some time towards the end of March and early April.
1697: his reception was hostile. In London he had fallen foul of a minor figure Sir John Bucknall, presented only as a common nuisance. In Dublin he was pursued though the Irish Commons and his book was burnt in September 1697. He fled the country in poverty and disgrace.

Examining the public and private reception of Toland and his work will allow an evaluation of the subversive implications of the work both as an intellectual and social statement. The first place to explore this is in the reaction of Toland’s first powerful patron. Much has been written about the relationship between John Locke and Toland. It is commonly suggested that Locke had very little intellectual intimacy with the corrosive and indiscreet Toland. A close examination of the correspondence between Molyneux and Locke suggests to the contrary that Locke only chose to cut off his contact with Toland after the latter’s public behaviour had compromised any private understanding they may have had. Locke and Toland first met in early August 1693 when Toland had acted as a book carrier on his behalf. Limborch had introduced Toland as ‘an excellent and not unlearned young man ... if perchance you meet him you will find him frank, gentlemanly, and not at all a servile character’. Furly commended the book-bearer as ‘a free spirited ingenious man’ who ‘having once cast off the yoke of Spirituall Authority, that great bugbear, and bane of ingenuity, he could never be perswaded to bow his neck to that yoke again, by whom soever claymed’. This ‘free spirit’ had put Toland in difficulties regarding employment and Furly wrote on his behalf to encourage Locke ‘to be assistant to him, wherein you can; not for my sake, but for his own worth’. Nearly four years later William Molyneux again brought up the subject of Toland, this time suggesting that much of the hostility Locke’s Essay had attracted from clerical opponents like Bishop Stillingfleet was due to the misuse of his arguments by books like Christianity not mysterious.

At this time Locke expressed no hostility to Molyneux, indeed there is the suggestion, from the tone of a letter written by John Freke and Edward Clarke at the same time, that he felt some sympathy for Toland’s condition. Freke, who had subsidised Toland’s living expenses, thought that Locke would be interested enough to know that Toland having gone to Ireland, had left behind debts of some £80. On the same day Locke was sent a further letter from Molyneux giving much more detail of Toland’s conduct in Ireland. Molyneux spoke highly of Toland and especially of his relationship with Locke: ‘But that for which I can never Honour him too much is his Acquaintance and friendship to you, and the Respects which on all occasions he expresses for you’. Molyneux found Toland congenial company and took a ‘great deal of satisfaction in his Conversation’ which had not been discreet since he further commented that ‘I take him to be a Candid Free Thinker, and a good Scholar’.
Toland had, according to Molyneux, a rough reception in Dublin, ‘there is a violent sort of spirit that Reignes here, and begins already to shew itself against him; and I believe will Increase Dayly, for I find the Clergy alarm’d to a mighty degree against him’. Toland had been welcomed ‘to this Citty by hearing himself Harangued against out of the Pulpit’.28

Locke answered this letter about a month later commenting that he was ‘glad’ that ‘the gentleman … does me the favour to speak well of me on that side of the water, I never deserved other of him, but that he should always have done so on this’. Although Toland was diminished by ‘his exceeding great value of himself’, he might make a useful contribution. Indeed Locke spent some space in the letter talking about Toland ‘freely’ with Molyneux, ‘because you are my friend for whom I have no reserves’, although he introduced a caveat that ‘I say it to you alone, and desire it may go no further’. Importantly, although Locke had read *Christianity not mysterious* and was undoubtedly aware of the controversy that raged in public about its significance, he was still positive (if cautious) about his support for Toland. As he clarified to Molyneux, ‘For the man I wish very well, and could give you, if it is needed, proofs that I do so. And therefore I desire you to be kind to him; but I must leave it to your prudence, in what way and how far. If his carriage with you gives you the promise of a steady useful man, I know you will be forward enough of your self, and I shall be very glad of it’. If Toland through his actions spurned such friendship ‘it will be his fault alone’.29

By the time he replied to Locke, Molyneux was beginning to articulate doubts and ‘apprehensions’ about Toland. It was not only Toland’s vanity that perturbed him, but his lack of prudent management in his public carriage, for ‘he has raised against him the clamours of all parties; and this not so much by his Difference in opinion, as by his Unseasonable Way of Discoursing, propagating, and Maintaining it’. Contrary to the current historiography about the location of the public space of the coffee-house as one of the places for the articulation of reason, Molyneux insisted that ‘Coffee-houses and Publick Tables are not proper places for serious discourses relating to the most important truths’. Molyneux called on Locke to administer a friendly admonishment, ‘for his conduct hereafter’. Furthermore, Locke was made aware that Toland brought ignominy to him because he takes ‘a great Liberty on all occasions to vouch your patronage and Friendship, which makes many that rail at him, rail also at you’. Still, with all this disreputable behaviour, Molyneux looked upon Toland ‘as a very ingenious man, and I should be very glad of any opportunity of doing him service, to which I think myself bound by your recommendation’. Molyneux completed his comments on Toland by pondering ‘what might be the occasion of Mr T. coming at this time into Ireland’. Toland had ‘no fortune or Imploy, and yet is observed to have a subsistence; but from whence it comes no one can tell certainly. These things joynd with
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his great forwardness in appearing publick makes people surmise a thousand Fancys'. Locke’s reply to Molyneux in mid-June 1697 was blunt and to the point: ‘as to the gentleman, to whom you think my friendly admonishments may be of advantage for his conduct hereafter, I must tell you that he is a man to whom I never writ in my life, and, I think, I shall not now begin’. Toland was no intimate of Locke’s and could not expect such concern: Molyneux should consider himself discharged of any ‘over-great tenderness to oblige me’. It was left to Molyneux’s discretion ‘and therefore, whatsoever you shall, or shall not do for him, I shall no way interest myself in’. Locke terminated his discussion of Toland with the remark that he was unhappy at having spent so much ‘of my conversation, with you, on this subject’. Although Molyneux passed on information about Toland’s travails in two further letters between 20 July and 11 September giving an account of his presentment by the Dublin Grand Jury and condemnation by the Irish Commons, he provoked no further response from Locke on the subject of Toland.

In the course of his stay in Dublin, Toland had thus managed to alienate not only the local churchmen, but also Locke and Molyneux. Locke, perhaps predisposed to value Toland, was forced by the nature of his public carriage to end his support of him. Molyneux’s description of Toland’s imprudent actions suggests a man deliberately courting controversy and running himself ‘against rocks to no purpose’. Not that Molyneux suggested that ‘any man can be dispensed with to dissemble the truth, and full perswasion of his mind in religious truths, when duly called to it, and upon fitting occasions. but I think prudence may guide us in the choice of proper Opportunities’. Toland, by the gait in which he appeared ‘Publick’, compromised such prudence. Molyneux did not abandon Toland to his fate but spoke up in his defence when clerics like Peter Browne assaulted him with ‘foul language and Opprobrious Names’. In particular Molyneux rebutted what he called the ‘killing argument’. ‘Calling in the aid of the civil Magistrate and delivering Mr Toland up to secular punishment’ was a ‘matter of dangerous consequence, to make our Civil Courts judges of Religious Doctrines’. The Dublin Grand Jury, following the example of their brother jurors of Middlesex had also presented Christianity not mysterious even though not one of them had ‘ever read One Leaf in Christianity Not Mysterious’. Although no surviving copy exists, the Dublin presentment was said to be a reprint of the one reproduced by Gailhard, with a new ‘emphatical title and cry’d about in the streets’. Toland’s ‘imprudent management’ had prompted a universal outcry against him which meant that ‘twas even dangerous for a man to have been known once to converse with him’. Such was Toland’s reputation that ‘all wary men of reputation decline[d] seeing him, insomuch that at last he wanted a Meals meat (as I am told) and none would admit him to their Tables’. Toland, poor when he arrived in Ireland, was reduced to ‘borrowing from anyone that would lend him 1/2 a
Crown; and run in debt for his Wigs, cloaths and Lodging’. Faced with the burning of his work and prospective prosecution by the Attorney-General, Toland ‘fled out of this kingdom’. 36

Toland’s narrative of his time in Dublin gives a different account. He published two defences – *An Apology for Mr Toland, in a Letter from himself to a member of the House of Commons in Ireland* (1697) and *A Defence of Mr Toland in a letter to Himself* (1697). 37 Citing Jude 9, ‘We read, an archangel was not permitted to rail against the very devil’, Toland declared that he would be restrained by the message of the Gospel, in his response, even if the pulpits of Dublin handled him roughly. 38 The indictment of his book by the jurors of Dublin, who had neither read nor (if they had) understood it similarly could not provoke Toland to unchristian reaction. He was irritated though by the fact that those who held any conversation or intellectual intimacy (‘of either sex’) with Toland found themselves under suspicion as ‘proselytes’. Toland insisted his conversations with such ‘worthy persons (for he always chose the best company)’ was irreproachable. He never talked of religion, or made ‘his opinions the subject of his common talk’ indeed ‘he declin’d speaking of ‘em at all’. 39 Toland represented himself, contrary to the account found in the correspondence between Locke and Molyneux, as a discreet and careful man who kept his opinions to himself. Controversy was fanned by the industrious hostility of the orthodox rather than by his ideas.

Toland’s arraignment by agencies of pulpit, jury, court and press was merely the preamble to Parliamentary censure. By 14 August the combined forces of moral reform, embodied in the polemics of men like Handcocke and Browne, ‘concluded at last to bring his Book before the Parliament’. *Christianity not mysterious* was presented to the Committee of Religion in the Irish Parliament. 40 The matter of Toland’s book was considered by ‘a very full Committee, wherein this business was a great while debated’. It is clear from Toland’s published account that he had access to someone who participated in the Committee’s deliberations. There were ‘several persons eminent for their birth, good qualities or fortunes’ who objected to and opposed the whole proceedings ‘being of opinion it was neither proper nor convenient for them to meddle with a thing of that nature’. 41 Such scruples were ignored and the offending passages of *Christianity not mysterious* were read out and examined. Some MPs encouraged Toland in his purpose of appearing before the Committee in person to answer their charges and ‘to declare the sense of his book and his design in writing it’. To that end Toland composed a letter to the Committee defending his work and pleading for an oral examination. Again this personal appeal was rejected. The last thing the orthodox wanted was Toland to plead his cause in the forum of Parliament. 42

Although it seems likely that there was significant and vocal support in defence of Toland coming from the Whiggish anticlerical interest in the Irish
Commons, which may have included Robert Molesworth and William Molyneux, *Christianity not mysterious* was declared heretical. It was to be burnt twice (once before Parliament and once before the civic buildings). Toland was to be brought into custody by the Sergeant at Arms in order to be prosecuted by the Attorney General. All copies of *Christianity not mysterious* were to be impounded and further imports banned. Toland reported that ‘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 hand; 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’. The sentence was executed on 11 September. The public campaign against Toland did not stop there. As he commented ‘there came abroad a printed sheet’ with the specific purpose of terrifying ‘any body from appearing publicly for Mr Toland’. Any who spoke out against the ‘just prosecution or censure of it or him’ did the same as denying ‘our Saviour before men’ and should, like Toland, suffer the consequences of their wilful heresy.

Toland was to suffer yet further persecution at the hands of English priests in the early 1700s. By the later 1690s the anxieties about the consequences of the Toleration Act and the moral laxity of the nation had prompted High Churchmen like Francis Atterbury to cry out loudly and mobilise a powerful interest around the dictum of the ‘Church in Danger’. Focused upon key figures in Oxford University like Henry Aldrich and William Jane, the High Church interest organised its polemic through the reinvigorated Lower House of Convocation. Asserting the rights of Convocation to defend true religion, a full-scale counterblast was launched against irreligion. One element of this assault involved using Convocation to root out heresy and irreligion. Convened under the chairmanship of Dr William Jane, Dean of Christchurch, Oxford in February 1701, Convocation established a Committee of Religion ‘appointed for the examination of books lately published against the Truth of the Christian Religion’. The Committee pursued a vendetta against not only obvious heretics like Toland, but also the enemy within like Bishop Gilbert Burnet whose exposition of the 39 Articles was condemned along with *Christianity not mysterious*. The Committee produced a precise account of five positions against *Christianity not mysterious*, reciting exact passages and phrases from the book. Having condemned the books the Lower House of Convocation passed them on to the Upper House for judicial censure. Here the anti-heretical ambitions of the Lower House fell victim to the ecclesiological powers of the more liberal Bishops in the Upper House, who pointed out that Convocation had no legal abilities to proceed against ‘heretical, impious and immoral books’ without specific licence from the civil sovereign.

Although no further legal proceeding followed, Toland did not shirk his perceived duty of self-defence. Ordering his bookseller to supply him with all
the hostile works written against his own volume, he was dismayed ‘to see what a task I had on my hands’. Initially as he sat down to read his way through the pile of antagonistic criticism, Toland was insistent that he would not trouble ‘the Publick ... about my sentiments or private concerns’. Hearing, however, that Convocation intended to investigate him as ‘the author of an Atheistical and Detestable book’ Toland saw the necessity of a ‘Publick Defence’. While it had been mere individuals who had responded to Christianity not mysterious Toland was content to rest his pen, but confronted with institutional criticism he felt compelled to retort. He defended his right of ‘writing in a free country’ and called for the right to defend himself before the clergy. Convocation refused to call Toland, presumably not wishing to give him a public platform for trumpeting further dissent from orthodoxy. It was clear that unlike many confronted with censure, Toland actively embraced the cause of controversy. As he wrote, ‘It is not scribere est agere with me, for I have not only publisht but also own’d my books’.

Between its first and third editions (1696–1702) Christianity not mysterious was condemned and reviled by a number of different institutions and in a number of different public spaces. The Middlesex and Dublin Grand Juries had used the laws of public nuisance and the climate of moral reform to attack the book. The world of print culture had been inundated with counter blasts (and would continue to be so throughout the first half of the eighteenth century in both Great Britain and the continent). Toland had been subject to personal vilification in newspapers and broadsides. Two national institutions, one civil and one spiritual, had also turned their authority and power against the text. Toland in each case presented himself as a reasonable and adaptable controversialist, willing to defend but also to compromise. Importantly, he consistently defended his right to publish such opinion, and more importantly his duty to defend himself against both political and religious authority. It was this performance of public dissent which was almost more significant than the intellectual or theological propositions advanced by Toland in Christianity not mysterious.

Christianity not mysterious has traditionally been understood as part of the ongoing debate about the nature of the Trinity that convulsed theological discourse in the 1690s. In particular the relationship between Christianity not mysterious and John Locke’s The Reasonableness of Christianity (1695) and the critical reception of the latter work within an anti-Trinitarian context, has meant that historiography has commonly seen Toland’s work as a subversive and insidious attack upon the Trinity. It is clear that Toland exploited non-Trinitarian sources on ‘mystery’ in his book, although he refuted the label socinian. Many contemporaries also assumed that in removing mystery from religious belief Toland intended to strike a blow at the doctrine of the
Trinity. Anglican theology defended the doctrine as a matter of faith – if not contrary to reason, then certainly above rational understanding. Explaining precisely how the doctrine of the Trinity was to be understood and how it fitted into the broader texture of Protestant soteriology had bedevilled the Church in the 1690s, with many hyper-orthodox Churchmen arguing themselves into heresy in the very act of trying to defend the Athanasian Creed. Although the arguments of Christianity not mysterious had clear implications for the Trinity, Toland allowed his readers to pursue those implications for themselves: his purpose was to engage, not with the details of any specific theological doctrine, but with a more fundamental discussion of the politics of knowledge.

The epistemological context of Toland’s discussion has often led historians to indicate the intellectual intimacies between Christianity not mysterious and John Locke’s Essay concerning human understanding (1690). Certainly Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, attempted to tar Locke’s work with Toland’s intellectual consequences, much to Locke’s disgust and horror. Toland acknowledged that he had borrowed key concepts (in particular the distinction between nominal and real essences), but denied that Locke’s Essay was a fundamental influence. Reiterating this point some twenty years later Toland commented against the accusations of a clerical antagonist ‘now this is to inform all those who have not read Christianity not mysterious, that I have never nam’d Mr Locke in any edition of that book: & that far from quoting him, I have not as much as brought one Quotation out of him to support notions he never dreamed of’. Locke merely commented that Toland ‘says something which has a conformity with some notions in my book, but it is to be observed, he speaks them as his own thoughts, & not upon my Authority, nor with taking any notice of me’. Reviewing the Stillingfleet–Locke debate, Toland proudly noted that ‘The Bishop himself was forc’d at last to own, that Mr Locke & I went upon different grounds; nay he averr’d that mine were the better’.

Toland’s appreciation of his own intellectual worth undoubtedly led him to draw a sharper distinction between his own thought and that of Locke. The two men had very different purposes in their writings. Locke had devoted careful thought and attention to preserving the epistemic distinction between matters of ‘Faith’ and ‘Knowledge’ in the Essay (Book IV Chapter xviii). Toland, on the other hand, was to collapse Locke’s distinction by the assertion that ‘Faith is knowledge’. Both men pursued a resolution to the perennial debate about the legitimate ‘rule of faith’ in questions of religious belief. Locke set out to resolve a specific theological enquiry with philosophical tools: his objective was to provide a level of functional theological certainty for the true believer. Toland, as we will see, was concerned with epistemological certainty too, but the context for the performance of that certainty was not theological truth but a broader social community. Whereas Locke intended to enfranchise the human intellect with the potential competence to understand theological
propositions, Toland attempted to lay epistemological foundations for the conduct of authentic civil and social relations.

Whereas Locke’s epistemic system still looked to heaven, Toland’s was rooted in social understandings of the production of knowledge. Negotiating the different epistemological relationships between faith and knowledge held implications for both the relationship between individual conscience and public authority, but also for the important institutional nexus between believer and church. These debates were more than merely intellectual debates but constitutive of the cultural structures of social power in the period. This theme of the challenge to the epistemological competence of the Church was pronounced and highlighted in the many clerical responses to Christianity not mysterious. The central link was made between Toland’s account of the capacity of human reason and the consequent negation of clerical authority in the exposition of religious truth. As Richard Willis wrote ‘when they would convince us of the uselessness of the Clergy, they tell us that the Scripture has deliver’d our Duty in such a plain and excellent manner, that the meanest capacity may understand it without the assistance of a Teacher, or the Trouble of Thought and Study’.62 For Willis the priesthood was part of the providential means of preserving and elucidating the true word of God. Reason had to be tied to learning in order to render scripture ‘perspicacious’. Divine providence had preserved the texts of scripture and the ‘monuments and antiquities of history’, and more importantly an ‘order of men ... whose particular duty and business it is ... to understand and deliver the meaning of the Scriptures’. Such a ‘right understanding’ was to be disseminated ‘whether by Publick Preaching, or by private application to the consciences of particular persons’.63 Human reason was, in general, too fallible to understand all the mysteries of God without the aid of authority, either in the form of God’s revelation or clerical declaration.

Toland claimed that men could read and think for themselves. His opponents challenged this optimistic description of a universally proficient human reason. Matters of divine truth were often elusive to human reason. The proposition that evidence was more important in matters of belief than the injunctions of authority was also refuted. God’s authority, mediated though the Church, was and should be persuasive. John Norris, rector of Bemerton near Sarum, pursued these dual themes in his lengthy rejoinder. Toland’s work was ‘one of the most bold, daring and irreverent pieces of defiance to the mysteries of the Christian Religion that ever this Licentious Age has produced’.64 Norris appealed to his readers to deconstruct Toland’s general arguments by applying his criticisms.65 The battle of the books was on. Human reason was ‘not the measure of truth’. To suggest, as Toland and the Socinians did, that ‘nothing is to be believ’d as revealed by God, that is above the comprehension of Human Reason; or, that a man is to believe nothing but
what he can comprehend’, was either to ‘Humanize God’ or ‘Deify themselves and their own Rational abilities’. Faith, unlike reason, was certain. True faith differed from all other forms of intellectual assent because it had ‘no evidence at all, but only Authority for its ground’. Faith was an act of belief prompted by divine authority without ‘regard to Evidence’. The strength of conviction brought by such faith was superior to the testimony of the finite capacities of human reason which was merely contingent and derivative from the ‘necessary and eternal’ truth of divine reason. Since truth was ‘incomprehensible’ to human reason ‘we should not vainly go about to comprehend it, but be contented to be ignorant in many things’.

The pronouncement that authority rather than evidence was the foundation of certain belief was at the heart of Peter Browne’s censure of Christianity not mysterious. Toland had made two mistakes: the first (in logic) by insisting that ‘evidence is the only ground of persuasion’, and the second (in divinity) ‘that now under the Gospel the veil is perfectly lifted’. Revelation would ever dominate corrupt reason: ‘and therefore I say it again, in opposition to this insolent man, that I thus adore what I cannot comprehend’. Browne found fault with the anticalerical implications of Toland’s discussion of human rationality. The cognate thrust of Thomas Beverley’s reply to Christianity not mysterious can be deduced from the sub-title of his pamphlet which asserted that ‘Christianity is above Created reason, in its pure estate. And contrary to humane reason, as false and corrupted; and therefore in a proper sense, Mystery’. Toland had attempted to promote the ‘Dead Child of reason and free-will’ against the ‘living Spirituous Christianity of the Scriptures’. William Payne’s sermons against Christianity not mysterious echoed these essays by insisting on the ‘Infallibility and Authority of Divine revelation’ against the feeble claims of reason. Similarly, Oliver Hill affirmed that without the inspiration of faith and revelation natural reason was ‘nothing’. Churchmen were in broad agreement: Toland’s defence of reason against the claims of faith compromised not only godliness but their authority too.

Jean Gailhard joined in too. Human reason was ‘subject to error, a meer Chimera and fancy of man’s shallow brain’ fit only for natural knowledge ‘for supernatural it must be supernaturally endowed’. Divine knowledge was ‘the Gift of God’. Revelation transformed the disabled faculties of human understanding: ‘God gives a new Heart, a new Spirit, new Thoughts, new Affections’. Without such inspiration human reason ‘can no more know the nature of God and his attributes, than a little Bottle hold in all the water of the sea’. Making religion depend on the senses rather than faith was Toland’s sin. Faith for Gailhard was ‘a strong perswasion, grounded and built not upon reason, but upon God’s gracious and special Promises, infus’d into us by the Holy Ghost’. For Gailhard the emphasis Toland laid upon the capacity of reason led to social bedlam and anarchy. He insisted that although every private
man might read scripture they could make no ‘human private interpretation’. He acknowledged that all Protestants had the liberty to read Scriptures, but denied that this necessarily led to a right of interpretation: the conscience must be bound by a correct interpretation of Scripture established by the Church. Richard Willis reinforced these suggestions by insisting that the clergy and church were the ‘stewards of the mysteries of God’.

For the Churchmen, Toland’s arguments corroded ecclesiastical power by challenging their spiritual authority. Attempting to encourage or sanction the use of reason by private individuals was theological anathema. Indeed many of Toland’s antagonists were not only unhappy with the nature of his arguments but also with the printed form of Christianity not mysterious itself. The book allowed and invited its readers to come to their own conclusions, rather than telling them what to believe. As Oliver Hill complained, Toland left ‘his reader, like the clergymen of Rome (who arraign, Try and Condemn, then deliver to others to pronounce and execute their sentence on the patient), the conclusion to gather, which he makes ready for him’. By continually asserting that the Christian religion was mysterious Toland ‘left to the reader’ the conclusion that the Trinity was false. Peter Browne, referring to the pretensions of the work as suitable only to be a ‘sticht pamphlet ... cry’d about with Almanacks’, also protested that ‘all his Discourse is a meer rope of sand; many bold and false assertions, sly insinuations, and several things, nothing at all to the question, huddled up together on purpose to patch up a book; and amuse such persons who have just Logick enough to be imposed upon by a Fallacy, but not enough to see through it’. Toland had written a book that both in its content and form un-picked the seams of clerical authority.

Toland was portrayed as manipulating his readers, most spectacularly in his abuse of scripture citation. Browne made the charge in robust terms: ‘do but look over every text he hath quoted by way of proof, and try to make his inferences from it, and you will be satisfied that Quaker, or any other enthusiast never apply’d Scripture so impertinently’. The consequence of Toland’s insinuation would be that one must ‘lay aside your Bibles, those lively oracles, (after you have read the Historical part of them) and let Reason be your only guide’. Toland’s antagonists were profoundly aware of the process of reading and readership that underlay the power of his book. They speculated about how the reader would digest and reflect upon Christianity not mysterious: one clear implication being that Toland’s book would be read side by side with the Bible out of the purview of the clerical eye. This process of reading was perceived as potentially tremendously corrosive of cultural order. At least for the clergyman, such books did provoke revolution.

Turning to Christianity not mysterious itself it is possible to applaud the acuity of Toland’s critics. In his preface, Toland defended the right of all men to

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speak ‘their Minds in publick’. His own intellectual disposition was ‘accus-
tom’d to Examination and Enquiry’: from an early age he had been taught ‘not
to captivate my understanding, no more than my senses to any man or society
whatsoever’. His purpose was to encourage his readers to a similar liberty of
enquiry especially in matters of religion which was ‘calculated for reasonable
creatures [so] ‘tis conviction and not authority that should bear the weight with
them’. Toland wrote against claims to infallibility whether ‘popish’ or
Protestant.87 The purpose of the book was to impeach ‘all corrupt clergymen...
who make a meer trade of religion, and build an unjust Authority upon the
abus’d consciences of the Laity’. Importantly (and dangerously) Toland declared
his text was designed for the ‘vulgar’ and ‘poor’ rather than the ‘philosopher’.
He had worked hard to write with a clarity of style. He commented, ‘I have in
many places made explanatory repetitions of difficult words, by synonymous
terms of a more general and known use’. The ‘vulgar’ could ‘likewise be
judges of the true sense of things, tho they understand nothing of the Tongues
from whence they are translated for their use’.88 In parts a technical treatise
about the relationship between reason and faith, Christianity not mysterious
was persistently given a practical slant, relating such philosophical discussions
to the circumstances and practices of reading and thinking. As some of
Toland’s critics had perceived Christianity not mysterious was designed to be
read side by side with the Bible: it was as much an advice book on how to read
Scripture as a meditative dissertation.

The key themes were simple. The work unpicked deference and tutelage to
the clerical ‘Doctor’.89 The combination of epistemological confidence (every
man may believe according to his own sense) and political liberty (establishing
tolerance) would establish a system of intellectual liberty. This was central to
Toland’s lifetime project. Importantly, for Toland the liberty enshrined in this
process of enlightenment was prompted by the act of reading. The act of (free)
reading would have an effect on the social relationship between parishioner
and cleric as well as an intellectual outcome. Despite the epistemological
sophistication of Christianity not mysterious, Toland’s objective was to advance
a way of reading Scripture. His account of reason and faith suggested that true
conviction was achieved by an individual understanding the Bible, unhampered
by clerical doctrine and metaphysical mystery. Reason was the foundation of
all certitude. Knowledge was defined as ‘the perception of the agreement or
disagreement of our ideas in a greater or lesser number, whereinsoever this
Agreement or Disagreement may consist’.90

Crucially, Toland made the distinction between what he called the ‘means
of information’ and the ‘ground of persuasian’ in the construction of beliefs.
A rational assessment of the evidence, established through the ‘means of
information’, caused assent to a proposition. God had predisposed humanity
to accept and assent to proper evidence rather than capitulate before the
injunctions of authority. He had ‘put us under a Law of bowing before the light and majesty of evidence. And truly if we might doubt of anything that is clear, or be deceiv’d by distinct conceptions, there could be nothing certain: neither conscience nor God himself, should be regarded: no society or government could subsist’. Revelation was, for Toland, ‘not a necessitating motive of assent, but a means of information’. This was contrary to commonplace Protestant notions which insisted that Revelation provoked assent by authority because it was the Word of God. For Toland, belief was prompted by correct understanding created by a rational assessment of the means of information. Men should believe nothing without evidence. It was thus ‘not the bare Authority of him that speaks, but the clear conception I form of what he says, [which] is the ground of my perswasion’. Scripture must be read carefully and understood: ‘the question is not about the Words, but their sense’.

There was for Toland no difference in the rules of interpretation to be followed in Scripture than ‘what is common to all other books’. He answered theological objections. Reason was not debilitated by sin, because corruption was cultural and individual rather than implicit in the human condition: ‘there is no defect in our Understanding but those of our own creation, that is to say, vicious habits easily contracted, but with difficulty reformed’. Indulgence of our inclinations and debauched imaginations could lead us to ignorance and deceit but also could be transcended. Toland blithely redefined ‘faith’ in a similarly robust manner. The word ‘faith’ simply ‘imports Belief or Perswasion, as when we give credit to anything which is told us by God or Man’. Divine faith was of two varieties ‘either when God speaks to us immediately himself, or when we acquiesce in the words or writings of those to whom we believe he has spoken’. As he continued, again explicitly and intentionally undercutting clerical understandings of faith as a gift of divine grace, ‘all faith now in the world is of this last sort and by consequence entirely built upon Ratiocination’. All faith was thus based on understanding: citing Romans 10.17 he explained ‘Faith is likewise said to come by hearing; but without understanding ’tis plain this hearing would signify nothing, Words and their ideas being reciprocal in all languages’. Toland further illustrated this claim that faith was simply a state of believing, rather than a theological condition, by interpreting the Biblical actions of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac as an example of ‘faith’ as a process of ‘very strict reasoning’. Hebrews 11.17–19 was thus interpreted as testimony to the power of Abraham’s ability to reason about God’s intentions towards him and Isaac: this directly contradicted the commonplace citation of the incident as an example of the blind faith demanded by God’s authority.

Faith was shorthand for indicating that an individual understood what they believed. Faith was knowledge. This was not to take away from the importance
of revelation: it provided the means to inform humanity of God ‘whilst the evidence of the subject persuades us’. Reason did not exceed revelation but was the means to understand it ‘just as much as a Greek Grammar is superior to the New Testament; for we make use of Grammar to understand the language, and of reason to comprehend the sense of that Book’. Both reason and revelation came from God.\(^98\) It was precisely because of the universality of reason and the accessibility of revelation that Toland compounded his heterodoxy by continuing to insist that even the poor could achieve such ‘faith’.\(^99\)

The bulk of \textit{Christianity not mysterious} was devoted to an exegesis of scriptural passages to prove Toland’s arguments about the reasonableness of Christian doctrine. Toland scrutinised the use of the word ‘mystery’. Producing a concordance for the word showed that it was commonly used to mean something hidden and obscured, rather than incomprehensible. The New Testament always used the word in the sense of something hidden.\(^100\) Christ had taken the veil away and rendered the ‘mystery’ of religion manifest. To aid the reader, Toland then proceeded to transcribe ‘all the passages of the New Testament where the word mystery occurs, [so] that a man running may read with conviction what I defend’.\(^101\) The point was that Toland wanted his readers to examine the scriptural evidence for themselves without recourse to the assistance of the Church. He cleverly grafted his anticlerical assault upon the Church onto his lexical account of the meaning of the word ‘mystery’. Although he refused to comment in detail on the use of the word mystery in the Revelation of John, in the second edition of \textit{Christianity not mysterious} Toland expanded his extracts insisting that, as he put it, ‘that mystery is here made the distinguishing mark of the false or Antichristian Church’. As least one contemporary complained that Toland in this way made undue and insinuating reflections upon the Church of England.\(^102\)

Toland established how manipulation of the concepts of mystery had been institutionalised by the Christian clergy after the second century. As he commented ‘here’s enough to show how Christianity became mysterious, and how so divine an institution did, through the craft and ambition of priests and philosophers, degenerate into mere paganism’. Priestly fraud monopolised ‘the sole right of interpreting scripture and with it [a] claim’d infallibility, to their body’, unfortunately, as Toland noted, ‘and so it continues, in a great measure, to this day’.\(^103\) Toland wanted his readers to think and believe for themselves. As he argued, ‘how can any be sure that the scripture contains all things necessary to salvation, till he first reads it over? Nay, how can he conclude it to be Scripture, or the word of God, till he exactly studies it, to speak now of no other means he must use?\(^104\) Throughout the text there were injunctions to the reader to consult Scripture for themselves; at points Toland appealed to this extra-textual reading to confirm his own arguments.\(^105\) It was his declared intention simply to provoke the reader to pursue their own beliefs.
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rather than impose a particular view.\textsuperscript{106} As he noted ‘no particular Hypothesis whatsoever has a right to set up for a standard of reason to all mankind ... and so far am I from aiming at any such thing, that it is the very practice I oppose in this book’.\textsuperscript{107}

Toland wanted to shatter the clerical ambition of establishing a conformity of beliefs to doctrinal orthodoxy. Truth was the product of individual rationality rather than a pattern determined by eternal verities. He hoped Christianity not mysterious had been successful in ‘convincing people that all the parts of their religion must not only be in themselves, but to themselves also must appear, sound and intelligible’. That achieved, he continued, ‘I might justly leave everyone to discover to himself the reasonableness or unreasonableness of his religion (which is no difficult business, when once Men are persuaded that they have a right to do it)’.\textsuperscript{108} These arguments provoked opposition because they corroded contemporary assumptions about the relationship between private belief and public authority. Toland’s account of belief and conviction devolved authority away from public institutions into the private epistemological world of the individual conscience, scholarship and erudition. Libraries rather than churches became the spaces for making conviction. Books rather than priests became instruments of cultural value.

Unlike his clerical antagonists, Toland was confident about the possibility of building political stability upon this ground-bed of diverse and (perhaps) conflicting beliefs. For him, the origins of political authority lay in the civic pursuit of reason, rather than in merely establishing protection. One of Toland’s earliest critics had suggested that his religious doctrines, rooted so firmly in conceptions of reason, held implications for the political order, in other words that just as religion was founded in reason so would dominion be. Toland embraced and reinforced this notion in his reply.\textsuperscript{109} Civic rationality was the cultural infrastructure that Toland argued would be the consequence of freeing private conscience from tutelage to priests. Recovering from the bitter and dangerous reception conjured up by Christianity not mysterious Toland, in the later 1690s, turned to developing a more fully articulated political theory in defence of these liberties.

\textbf{NOTES}

1 A. Boyer \textit{The political state of Great Britain} XXIII (1722) p. 342.
2 BL Add Ms 5853 fo. 385.
3 \textit{Collections} 2 pp. 301–304.
5 See \textit{Correspondence} V No 29.

7 Tolandiana p. 39.
8 See Tolandiana p. 28.
9 Toland Vindicus Liberus (1702) pp. 80, 104.
10 Tolandiana pp. 92, 320.
12 J. Gailhard The epistle and preface to the book against the blasphemous Socinian heresie vindicated and the charge against Socinianism made good (1698) pp. 81–82.
16 Gailhard Epistle p. 81.
20 Anon An apology for the Parliament, humbly representing to Mr John Gailhard some REASON why they did not at his request enact Sanguinary Laws against Protestants in their last session (1697) pp. 3, 5, 6–7, 9–10.
21 Gailhard Blasphemous pp. 337, 320.
22 Gailhard Epistle pp. 5–6, 7, 13.
24 Correspondence IV 1646 p. 705.
25 Correspondence IV 1650 pp. 710–711.
26 Correspondence VI 2221 pp. 40–41.
27 Correspondence VI 2239 p. 80.
28 Correspondence VI 2240 pp. 82–83.
29 Correspondence VI 2254 p. 105–106.
30 Correspondence VI 2269 pp. 132–133.
31 Correspondence VI 2277 pp. 143–144.
32 See letters 2288 and 2311 Correspondence VI pp. 163–164, 192.
33 Correspondence VI 2269 at p. 133.
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34 Correspondence VI 2288 p. 164.
35 Toland An apology pp. 5–6.
36 Correspondence VI 2311 at p. 192.
37 Tolandiana pp. 30–32.
38 Toland An apology pp. 4–5.
40 See Journal of the House of Commons of Ireland (Dublin, 1753–91) ii p. 903.
41 Toland An apology pp. 22–23.
42 Ibid.
43 See Journal Ireland ii 1697 pp. 903–904.
44 Toland An apology p. 25.
45 The text Toland condemned was A letter to J.C. Esq upon Mr Toland’s book (Dublin, 1697).
47 See E. Cardwell Synodolia 2 volumes (Oxford, 1842) 2, pp. 701–705.
49 See Synodolia 2 p. 706.
50 Toland Vindicius Liberi pp. 1
51 Ibid. pp. 4, 6, 12–13.
52 Ibid. p. 16.
53 Ibid. p. 37.
54 G. Cragg From Puritanism to the Age of Reason (Cambridge, 1966).
58 Correspondence VI 2221 p. 40 and 2269 p. 132.
59 See Christianity not mysterious pp. 83, 87.
60 A contemporary transcription, possibly by Toland, also exists on a copy of Hare’s sermon in Cambridge University Library call mark 8.2.51#.
61 Christianity not mysterious p. 139.
63 Ibid. pp. 16, 25.
64 J. Norris An Account of Reason and Faith (1697) p. 4.
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65 Ibid. p. 5.
68 Ibid. p. 89.
69 Ibid. p. 227.
70 P. Browne A Letter in Answer to a Book intituled Christianity not mysterious (Dublin, 1697) p. 4.
71 Ibid. p. 60.
73 T. Beverley Christianity the great mystery (1696) p. 4.
75 O. Hill A rod for the back of fools: in answer to a book of Mr John Toland called Christianity not mysterious (1702) pp. 112–113.
76 Gailhard Blasphemous pp. 315–316.
77 Ibid. p. 320.
78 Ibid. p. 324.
79 Ibid. pp. 328, 332.
80 Ibid. p. 329.
81 Gailhard Epistle pp. 14–16.
82 Willis Occasional paper p. 22.
83 Hill A rod p. 18.
84 Browne Letter p. 81.
85 Ibid. p. 118.
86 A Letter to JC Esq (Dublin, 1697) p. 2.
87 Christianity not mysterious pp. iii, ix, xiv–xv.
88 Ibid. pp. xxx, xvi, xviii, xix.
89 Ibid. pp. 109–110.
90 Ibid. pp. 6, 12.
93 Ibid. pp. 34, 49.
94 Ibid. pp. 50–63 at 58.
95 Ibid. pp. 126, 127.
96 Ibid. p. 129.
98 Ibid. p. 140.
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99 Ibid. p. 141.
100 Ibid. pp. 66–72.
102 Beverley Christianity pp. 53–54.
103 Christianity not mysterious pp. 162–163, 167, 169.
104 Ibid. p. xxv.
105 Ibid. p. 108.
106 See for example Christianity not mysterious p. 126.
107 Ibid. p. 122.
108 Ibid. p. 171.