The English deist movement:  
a case study in the construction of a myth

The essence of this chapter is that it is not possible to understand the development of the myth of the English deist movement without grasping the politico-religious context of late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century England and the growing role of public opinion and opinion-makers within it. Some preliminary remarks on the major elements of the politico-religious configuration of late Tudor and Stuart England are therefore necessary.

Post-Restoration context

It is accepted amongst historians that it is difficult to comprehend the vicissitudes of early modern English religious life without reference to the Puritans (staunch Calvinists). They campaigned against the hierarchical and Erastian nature of Anglicanism, proposing instead an independent presbyterian non-hierarchical Church polity based upon the biblical example of the simple, pure apostolic Church. Regardless of the fact that one of the main aims of the Puritans was to create an independent Church free from the stains of politics and mundanity, in effect their aims were of course highly political: the ending of the state–Church relationship and the monarch as the head of that Church. Tudor and Stuart monarchs naturally viewed the possibility of an alternative Church as a threat to their dominance of such a vital organ of social, political, economic and religious legitimation. Not surprisingly, then, when the Puritans began to set up a rival, underground Church, Queen Elizabeth repressed and destroyed it. She did so because a free, egalitarian Church was not then within the bounds of an acceptable political configuration. Leaving aside the various divisions in the debate over
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the exact nature of the English Civil Wars, few if any historians doubt that the Puritan apostolic ideal of a presbyterian-style Church significantly informed not only religious debate in the those wars, but also important elements of political debate and action. Indeed deep divisions within the parliamentary camp were not a little to do with presbyterianism and its implicit egalitarian political model.

Most commentators, however, have also asserted that Puritanism was shattered or splintered in the 1640s, and as a consequence it irrevocably lost the power to mount a cohesive challenge to Anglicanism. This statement is technically true. Anyone who has read even a brief summation of the 1640s English experience will know that several radical Protestant groupings emerged, and some of the gentry who might otherwise have been included in the Puritan camp or were sympathetic to it became, under the pressure of political events, more conservative. The problem, therefore, is not that the demise of Puritanism as a cohesive force has been exaggerated or distorted. A difficulty arises, however, with regard to the misleading interpretation or assumptions made by historians about the ensuing decades in relation to one of the most important Puritan ideals, its presbyterian polity.

Few theologians will argue that presbyterianism is a distinctive theological outlook, simply because its grass-roots organizational form can and has been adopted by several Protestant movements or sects before and after the Puritans. Thus, the statement that the Puritan movement became shattered in the Civil Wars does not necessarily tell us a great deal about the fortunes of presbyterianism as an ecclesiastical polity. We know that presbyterianism was alive and well as an ideal at least in most post-Restoration Dissenter thought. Yet historians searching for the roots of the English Enlightenment rarely focus on presbyterianism. Nevertheless, in Restoration Stuart England, it was this implicitly anti-absolutist aspect of Dissenter thought which helped to furnish the dissenting message with polemical force and brought Dissenters into conflict with the state, for instance through their refusal to take the Anglican Oath of Allegiance and Supremacy. Clearly this was not perceived as a phantom menace to the Restoration regime, for the Stuarts brutally persecuted the Scottish presbyterians or Covenanters, and issued a series of punitive acts – the Clarendon Code – against Dissenters in England, resulting in the deaths of some 500 Quakers in prison.¹
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Against the perceived quasi-popery of Anglicanism, and by association its tendency to aid and abet the absolutist tendencies of the Stuarts, Dissenters continued to advance their ideas of an independent, non-hierarchical and thus uncorrupted clergy. As was the case with the Puritans, Dissenters, although numerous, were of course a minority of the population, but, as in the 1640s and 1650s, minority aspiration could move demographic mountains or at least make them shake. One of the centrally important factors here is that the Dissenters were – as were the Puritans – often relatively prosperous and well educated and naturally had some aspirations of the civic kind. Yet the series of post-Restoration punitive acts included a bar on civic appointments to Dissenters. We have here, therefore, in terms of the origin of the English deist critique of the Church in the politico-religious crisis of the 1680s and 1690s, a confluence of religious, political and economic issues that was of great moment indeed.

It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of the last decades of the seventeenth century in the development of vital and enduring facets of British history. It may seem strange to newcomers to this field that while it is freely acknowledged that the intense politicization of religion in the Restoration period led to the emergence of the stable two-party political system – claimed as one of the greatest of England’s achievements and gifts to world politics – the influence of religion in the development of the Enlightenment has nevertheless been traditionally downplayed. Yet, even a cursory examination of the main events of the period indicates that the same public intensification of the nexus between politics and religion that supposedly gave the world the two-party system also played a fundamental role in producing the broad intellectual climate so conducive to the development of the English Enlightenment. In short, the Stuart Restoration of 1660 was a return to a very different situation from that which Charles I had sought to defend: Parliament had the right to sit every three years and still effectively controlled the supply of funds necessary for any large-scale military or civil undertakings. In effect, England had a limited monarchy. In order to regain the primacy of the monarchy, as it was traditionally perceived and observed in contemporary France, it was necessary to cow the Anglican Parliament, but this was difficult while Parliament controlled essential financial purse strings. Both Charles II and James II looked back upon the claimed prerogatives of Charles
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I with some envy and greatly admired those of Louis XIV of France. In essence, the solution seemed simple, even if daunting in prospect: England had to be returned to a more centralized regime similar to that of France, where the monarch’s claims were staunchly supported by its very influential Catholic Church. The fact that Stuart admiration for France soon turned to collaboration is denied by few academics today, for the documentary evidence is overwhelming.

Charles II and James II accepted a very substantial pension from King Louis in return for timely suspensions of ‘difficult’ (i.e. anti-French) parliaments and a series of secret pro-French treaties in defiance of the will of Parliament. These acts are traditionally referred to as the Secret Diplomacy, but can be quite justly understood as treason, in which the Stuarts were selling themselves to France in return for financial independence from Parliament. If the term treason appears to be too strong to apply to a king, then we should ponder the Dover Treaty of 1670, in which Charles demonstrated he was prepared to make use of a foreign army, if needed, in his struggle to re-establish the Roman religion in England. The problem for the Restoration Stuarts was that pro-Catholic sympathies, publicly known to be evident at court and in the King’s political outlook, were of course not only heretical, but technically treasonable. England, as most other states of the period, was confessional in nature, and the state religion was the only permitted public religion. Of more importance perhaps was the perceived nature of international popery, of which France – the traditional and much hated foe of England – was the dominant example. In the perception of the public at large, including intellectuals, popery meant absolutist tyranny, the defiling of true religion, the imposition of superstition over reason, and obedience to a foreign despotic power in Rome. The Stuarts, therefore, faced a tricky situation, in which they could only proceed with their project of regaining ‘traditional’ monarchical prerogatives in secret and with much caution. Although prevented by Parliament, both Charles II and James II made attempts to rehabilitate Catholicism, and their actions contributed to a growing division between the Court and the Country (or pro-court and anti-court) factions, which was soon to provide the basis for the birth of the Tory and Whig parties.

In 1672 England and France jointly declared war against the only other significant European Protestant power, the United Provinces. It was publicly understood that the official reason for war –
threatened trading interests – was in good part an excuse for alliance with expansionist France. William of Orange of the United Provinces, married to Mary the daughter of King James, was well informed of the overwhelming antagonism of English public opinion – especially strong in London – against alliance with France. In 1673, through his agent Moulin, he caused a subversive pamphlet to be widely distributed in England: *England’s Appeal from the Private Cabal*. This was propagandistic dynamite, for it portrayed government policy as having been dangerously pro-Catholic for some time, and the Dutch war as part of a popish conspiracy. These accusations contributed to a wave of anti-Catholic hysteria that dominated public thought and parliamentary business of that year. As a consequence, Charles was forced to abandon legislation designed to increase tolerance of Catholicism and, instead, assent to legislation reaffirming restrictions upon them. The emergence of public opinion as a political force and the politicization of religion were thus two sides of the same coin.

With a public now more convinced than ever that the King was in conspiracy with popish forces, the pervasive anti-popish hysteria of 1673 did not fully abate in the following years. As a consequence, the wildest tales of conspiracy circulated and gained credence and Charles was even forced to order all non-householding Catholics to leave the city for the duration of the 1674 parliamentary session. Throughout the 1670s these crises (as we shall see, similar in their impact in some respects to mid-eighteenth-century French politico-religious crises) continued, with public opinion a centrally important factor. In 1677, for example, Andrew Marvell’s *Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* burst ‘like a bombshell over the country’. Public opinion also played a crucial role in some of the most dramatic events in early modern English history, which were shortly to follow. In the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–81 (the nearly successful attempt to prevent Catholic James II from succeeding Charles II), Parliament, in effect, came close to instituting an elective monarchy. As a result of this deep and enduring politico-religious polarization, Europe’s first permanent political parties were born: Whigs and Tories, the former tending to represent Dissenter and parliamentary interests, and the latter favouring High Church Anglicanism and the royal court. These were momentous times, and the culmination of them was certainly the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when the Catholic James II was
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‘advised’ by politicians and prelates to vacate the throne to be replaced by the Protestant William of Orange.

It is important to recognize that these various crises had an international dimension. The vast increase in international contact made possible by massively increased trade – crucially, including printed matter – meant that international news could travel more quickly than ever and inform public opinion. It is of course true that isolated country areas could still remain relatively uninformed, but this discussion is focused upon the centres of cultural production, predominantly the cities. It was to these cities that the news of the bloody continental oppression of Protestants arrived. In France, Louis wanted to finish his project of centralization, and although he had already been persecuting the Huguenots in the decades leading to 1685, in that year he revoked the Edict of Nantes which had given Huguenots some protection in law, and cruelly billeted dragoons upon them. The resultant savagery forced a huge refugee exodus, tens of thousands of whom came to England, and many to London. In 1686 Vittorio Amedeo II, the Duke of Savoy, forcefully expelled the Vaudois – revered by Protestants – from their Piedmontese valleys. Closer to home, the bloody persecution of Scottish presbyterians continued. From the point of view of Protestants, liberal Catholics and other observers, religious toleration had been sacrificed yet again to political expediency. I wish to assert, then, that the 1680s were years of what was publicly understood by many English and Scottish contemporaries as a European crisis of politico-religious freedom.

As I have written elsewhere, in securing a Protestant succession by the ousting of the Catholic James and the invitation of the Protestant William of Orange, expectations of greater tolerance to non-Anglican Protestants had been mightily raised. They were, however, mostly dashed by the very limited scope of the 1689 Toleration Act, which did not remove the severe restrictions and disabilities upon Dissenters and left the Anglican Church’s privileged relationship with the state untouched. Perhaps the most anachronistic factor to survive the settlement, one reeking of Church–state collusion, was the continued obligation on all to pay the tithe for the upkeep of the Anglican clergy. So, amongst many of the most well educated yet disadvantaged Dissenters, the failure of the Toleration Act to end discrimination ensured that the 1680s crisis of the Church continued into the 1690s and beyond. In late-seventeenth-century Eng-
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land, presbyterian ideals of Church government were still diffuse amongst the various Nonconformist tendencies. As anti-Catholicism could serve to unite most Protestants, so the presbyterian ideal of a simple non-hierarchical Christian ministry served to unite the numerous and varied army of Dissenters. Presbyterian ideals provided a powerful theological paradigm from within which to launch devastating attacks on all established Church hierarchies and by extension on regimes or Churches perceived to support the tyranny of popery or elements of it. In short, one of the reasons for the endurance of the presbyterian ideal was its ability to express political opposition of the dissenting, well-educated middling sort to the status quo.

For most Dissenters, then, the corruption of ‘right religion’ was embodied – and so presupposed – in the very concept of an established hierarchical sacerdotal caste. As regards their critiques of the Church and its history, however, the dividing line between Dissenters, other religious dissidents and so-called deists can often seem unclear. Both Dissenters and deists (as traditionally understood), for example, rejected all or most of the history of the Christian priesthood as an example of the corrupting influence of all established hierarchical priesthoods. On the level of polemic, then, the difficulties of distinguishing Dissenter from deist can be significant. In any case, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there is no reason to suppose that a term such as deism, coined as a religious insult, should possess any precise significance.

Deists and Dissent confused

Deists have traditionally been regarded as radicals who rejected revelation as proof for religion and propagated a rational or natural religion, the evidence for which lay in the qualities (especially reason and conscience) of an unchanging human nature and the frame of nature itself. This outlook also entailed a radical critique of the place of the Church within belief, and usually of the motivation and historical conduct of the priestly caste. Writing about ‘natural religion’ and evidence for God in the frame of nature (including human nature), however, was not the preserve of deists. To define those who wrote about natural religion as deistic or quasi-deistic serves to exclude perhaps most of those who wrote about natural religion: Christians who were interested in broadening what
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had hitherto been the accepted range of theological debate. This was precisely the ground of the complaints from many more conservative Christians: that Anglicanism was undergoing change, becoming more latitudinarian (in the lower case sense of the term), that is to say less exclusively focused on traditional theological matters and frames of reference. As Mossner long ago wrote, ‘[s]o prevalent had the spirit of Latitudinarianism become in England by the close of the seventeenth century that it was not uncommon for divines accepted as orthodox to treat of Natural Religion in the body of a theological work and then to add, as it were, an appendix on Revealed Religion. A writer failing to add this codicil was likely to be denounced as a Deist’, even if in polite terms (for an indicative bibliography of Protestant works sympathetic to natural religion see my Appendix below). Writing of Christian sermons of which he disapproved, for instance, in his Natural Religion Insufficient (1714), Thomas Halyburton did just that when he argued that often ‘heathen morality has been substituted in the room of Gospel holiness. And ethics by some have been preached instead of the Gospels of Christ.’ High Church thinkers were particularly concerned to combat the growing trend to discuss evidence for religion in nature alongside more traditional revelatory proofs, and were happy to pin the most pejorative label upon those more liberal in religious outlook. From their criticism and dire warnings of impending catastrophe in the Church, it can seem – quite misleadingly – as if Anglicanism was in danger of disintegrating and that deism was a real threat. As we shall see below, however, this possibility of misapprehension was partly the result of design, for there were those with motives for talking up deism.

The reality, however, is that deists were very few in number and could not possibly have constituted a movement disposing of decisive influence on theological and moral developments in the manner usually attributed to them. Hence Enlightenment studies has always faced a ‘shortfall’ in the numbers of deists, and historians have compensated for this difficulty by positing underground movements, secret societies, and making vague allusions to those who wrote on natural religion. But we must be clear here: writing on natural religion did not have any necessary connection to deistic belief. Discussion of natural religion was a feature of the political and scientific age, and we ought to be very surprised indeed if the dominant (Christian) culture – quite unexceptionally assimilating
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and adapting to new philosophical and scientific developments – did not produce a weighty body of thought upon it.

Amidst the vagaries of who exactly were deists, we might profitably focus on a relatively recent claim made by Roy Porter in his Enlightenment Britain and the Creation of the Modern World (2000). Porter argues that deists came in many colours. As a consequence, readers are effectively asked not to question his implicit assertion that it is possible to align anyone who wrote on natural religion with the likes of Voltaire. In talking up the numbers of deists, Porter chooses to cite William Wollaston as a deist. Why Wollaston in particular? Perhaps one reason for citing Wollaston is the sales figure for his Religion of Nature Delineated (1724), which Porter cites as ‘impressive’: 10,000 copies. Yet, apart from the fact that he wrote Religion of Nature Delineated, in which he builds on the morality theory of the Christian writer and critic of deists Samuel Clarke, no one has ever adduced any significant evidence that William Wollaston was not a more or less orthodox Christian. At this point, Porter’s thesis seems strange, for, on the one hand, he argues strongly that the English Enlightenment was conservative in nature, yet he describes how – via the most circumstantial evidence – deism had wide support. It hardly needs stating that anecdotal evidence of anticlerical jokes, ‘raillery and even sacrilege’ substantiates little, least of all the existence of wide support for deism. Daily’s comment that Latitudinarians were the strongest advocates of deism, while at least outlandish if not astounding, is the logical outcome of this tendency.

After Wollaston’s initial 1722 private printing of the Religion of Nature Delineated, selling 10,000 copies of the 1724 edition was certainly impressive for the period. But more to the point, of what is that figure indicative? If the work and audience were deist, this would be very impressive. But there is no indication that the work was perceived in this manner. It is difficult to deny, however, that the figure indicates both the appetite for the topic and its Christian acceptability amongst the mainstream educated public. If we wish to think of deism on this scale, however, then we are faced with the prospect of identifying massive swathes of respected, learned and even eminent clergy and many, many more pious Protestants as deists, making rather a mockery of the term in its current accepted usage. Instead, we should perhaps be prepared to accept that the Enlightenment was far more Lockean-Latitudinarian or even
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Newtonian-Dissenting than it ever was deist. Given the evident confusion over the definition of deism and therefore how deists might be detected, the question of what they shared in common with other religiously non-orthodox thinkers is an important one.

Dissenters, independent religious dissidents and deists could all excoriate established Church hierarchies in a similar manner. So much so, in fact, that their critiques of Christianity could, to the unwary observer, seem quite similar. The result is that some Dissenters and other religious dissidents have been turned into deists. A Robert Howard’s History of Religion (1694) provides an instructive example. In this work the Whig Member of Parliament (MP) Howard (1626–98) illustrates how the Church was corrupted almost from the beginning by priestcraft. But, like other Protestants, he emphasizes how the state adoption of Christianity by Emperor Constantine (early fourth century) was a significant turning point in the hold of priestcraft upon the Church: ‘Yet they [Roman Christians] were no sooner freed from those Miseries [of state oppression], but they practis’d upon others all the Mischiefs and Crimes which themselves had suffer’d, and had inveigh’d against’. This was a weighty, if implicit, parallel with the contemporary Anglican state-Church treatment of Dissenters, and naturally struck a very loud chord among his dissenting audience. After discussing the craft of Roman pagan priests, Howard confirms he has endeavoured to show how these pagan practices and powers were retained and even exceeded by the Church of Rome. He contends popes took their ‘Pattern from the Heathen Priests’ and ‘this same Method of Priest-Craft is continu’d in the Church of Rome: the Romish Saints and Angels answer to the Demons and Heroes, Deify’d by the Heathen Priests; and their Idol of Bread, Divinity infus’d into crosses Images, Agnus Dei’s and Relicks, correspond to the Pillars, Statues and Images consecrated by Pagan Priests’.

It has been argued that Howard’s work is deist in orientation and that he projects the priestcraft charge against all priesthoods, but what exactly is meant by ‘priesthoods’? If the term is used to denote clerical hierarchies typified by the Anglican or Catholic clergy, its usage in relation to Howard’s analysis is correct. But this is not the same as abandoning the concept of the Christian ministry. As we know, prevalent in dissenting circles was adherence to, or at least sympathy for, a very different concept of the Christian ministry. Consequently we can safely assert that Howard would certainly
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have been more sympathetic towards non-hierarchical priesthoods than he was to Anglicanism or Catholicism.

Howard, like many thousands of other Dissenters and religious dissidents, was enraged at what he regarded as the evident popish chicanery and oppression of the Anglican Church and thus wished to jibe implicitly at Anglicanism whenever possible. Consequently, Howard argued that the Christian Church could be considered the heir to the priests of pagan Roman, and even ‘among the most Reform’d Christians ... Methods of Priestcraft’ are pursued. He was, however, apologetic on behalf of the Church fathers, and left readers in no doubt as to his Protestantism, giving evidence of his piety in excess of ploys necessary to throw any censor off the trail. He also wrote, in typical Protestant fashion, that the Church of Christ is to be found in believers, and cited the Latitudinarian Archbishop of Canterbury John Tillotson (1630–94) as the model of a ‘plain and certain way to Salvation’.

None of these points suffice to indicate Howard was a sceptic or a deist. On the contrary, there is manifest proof in his work that he was an anti-Trinitarian Dissenter, possibly a Unitarian. Hence it was that Howard wrote his History of Religion anonymously, for anti-Trinitarian thought had not been included in the 1689 Toleration Act at all and remained proscribed. For sceptics of the period, Howard’s analysis could be construed as a free gift, even a home goal for Christianity. Many High Churchmen and other staunch Anglicans were solicitous to misconstrue and misrepresent the work of Howard and others as a call to deism. In their attempt to stem the reaches of the dissenting tide, how better to discredit dissent than bracket it with the vague catch-all, but ultimately anti-Church, label of deism, which we know was then closely linked to the term atheism? By so doing, Anglicans could credibly be seen to act as defenders of the faith and so bolster or help to maintain the dominant position of Anglicanism in the minds of the faithful.

As we shall see, to tar all opponents with the same brush was not an unusual tactic for an established Church facing growing competition. For some twentieth-century historians the conflation of Dissenters and more radical thinkers has at times meant that the search for what might be termed ‘modern attitudes’ became a little easier, simply because the hunters were able to identify more heads to pursue. Only in rabidly anti-Catholic and overtly pro-Protestant accounts of priestcraft, such as Henry Care’s periodical A Pacquet...
The Enlightenment and religion of Advice from Rome (1678–83), was there no possibility of ‘confusion’ between pro- and anti-Christian critics. The problem of audience – the conceptual and material circumstances and indeed motives of a readership – has rarely been of such pivotal importance as it was in the last decade of the seventeenth and first decades of the eighteenth century. Howard’s considerable dissenting audience would have understood his position without difficulty – if not from elsewhere in his book, then from his deliberately unguarded anti-Trinitarian comments.13

In Priestcraft distinguished from Christianity (1715), written by the critic, playwright and polemicist John Dennis (1675–1734), there is also the possibility of ‘misapprehension’.14 His lengthy pious arguments and language register are clearly those of a dissenting Protestant and, like Howard’s, go far beyond any dissimulation or platitudes necessary to placate or mislead a censor. He believes Satan has inflamed the heart of humanity with ‘self-love’ and destroyed ‘the Empire which Heaven had set up in his soul, which was an empire of Reason and Law’. Thus some Christian teachers do ‘contaminate the Doctrine of Christ by their own Inventions, and the Doctrines of Devils’. These antichristians have ‘opposed [themselves] to the Lord’s Anointed, i.e. to Christ’. Dennis states his attack is not upon the ‘Pious, Learned and Numerous body, who are truly Christian Priests of the Church of England’. However, such encomiums are accompanied by an overview of the Church in some respects more radical than Howard’s. Dennis describes how there was more virtue in the times of ancient paganism than since the coming of the Saviour, excepting the first and primitive times of Christianity, ‘when the Supreme Magistrate was not as yet Christian [i.e. pre-Emperor Constantine], and the Christian Priests were yet undebauch’d by worldly Power and Greatness’.15

Just as Puritans had earlier demonstrated their Calvinist, Presbyterian credentials by publicly appearing the most consistent and implacable opposition to Rome and Anglicanism, so now did Howard, Dennis and other Dissenters display their own brand of piety through the vehicle of their hostility to the corruption of the Christian ministry in general. Times and circumstances had changed, and it was only to be expected that the polemical strategy of dissenting Protestants would reflect those changes. For such thinkers, the enemy of right religion was then more than ever the Anglican Church, and seemingly anti-Catholic critique increasingly
The English deist movement became more of a vehicle for conveying anti-Anglicanism rather than an end in itself.

In The Natural History of Superstition (1709), written by the Whig MP John Trenchard (1662–1723), is as radical an indictment of the Christian ministry as one is likely to find in early-eighteenth-century England, although one essentially the same as that of Howard or Dennis. The title alone has led some historians to consider it an undoubtedly deist work. This is not the case, for Trenchard’s defence of revelation and providence, his condemnation of papists, and other comments – which go far beyond the need to placate any censor – inform us that he was of the dissenting type and not a deist as has been claimed. He relates how the frauds of priests, visions of enthusiasts, impostures of pretended prophets, forgeries of papists, and the follies of ‘some who call themselves Protestants ... have so far prevailed over genuine Christianity’. One late-nineteenth-century commentator has, however, argued that Trenchard was certainly not a deist. He was so labelled by his opponents on account of his ‘unsparing attacks’ on the ‘High Church party’. Indeed, given the dissenting orientation of the works of Trenchard, Dennis and Howard, it is difficult to accept that their intention ‘was to fragment the narrow Christocentric view of the past’. On the contrary, these men wished to cleanse the Christian priesthood by prompting a return to an original Christocentric and apostolic form of Church government.

In the politico-ecclesiastical tension of late-seventeenth-century England, some Dissenters and fellow travellers, caught in a vice between Catholicism and Anglicanism, were prepared to state the maximum case for the historical corruption of the Christian ministry. What had been the traditional pre-Constantinian point of demarcation for an early Church that was not yet entirely corrupt and so still salvageable, was increasingly abandoned. Little or nothing was thus left of the priesthood’s historical legitimacy, only the apostolic Church itself. The product of this deepening critique of the Christian ministry was the illegitimate birth of the Enlightenment view of Church history – illegitimate because, although deists and sceptics came to share a very similar historical analysis with dissenting writers, they did so with diametrically opposed intentions. Peter Gay has noted that rational Anglicanism and deists ‘saw the universe as rational ... both despised enthusiasm and mysticism, both were critical of the written tradition ... Yet they were separated
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by a chasm as impassable as it was narrow.21 If liberal Anglicanism is understood to be Latitudinarianism, then Gay’s assessment is unsustainable. Yes, they were divided by a chasm, but far from a narrow one: even Latitudinarian Anglicans viewed the Anglican Church as legitimate, while deists and many Dissenters could agree with the analysis of such writers as Trenchard, Dennis and Howard.

John Toland and Christianity not Mysterious

At the time of writing Christianity not Mysterious (1696), John Toland was a Dissenter. He enjoyed the patronage of London Presbyterians from 1690 to 1696,22 and eventually came to espouse the outlook of the Unitarians. After 1696, we know Toland went on to dismiss the concept of or at least cease to believe in the reformability of the Christian ministry. Just a few others, including Matthew Tindal and Anthony Collins, also did so. Such a departure was, however, still a potentially risky business. What prompted them to do so? It was clear to Dissenters that the Anglican Church was content to retain much of its privileged position and would continue to defend its relationship with the state. This was no empty fear, for the Occasional Conformity Act of 1711 (repealed 1719) was to restrain Dissenters from qualifying for government posts by receiving the sacrament in the Anglican Church. Church reform increasingly seemed nothing but a utopian project.

The debate as to how practically free or comparatively repressive was the English state–Church regime in the 1680s and 1690s I shall pass over with but brief comment. From their copious writings, we know very many Protestants certainly considered religious tyranny to exist still, and that very pressing religious matters needed resolution. If, by the 1690s, religious persecution and discrimination were less bloody in England, they were still a reality. In any case, as Goldie has noted, ‘by the early 1680s the church party, gradually acquiring the new name of Tory, had launched what was, with the possible exception of the 1580s, the most ferocious religious persecution of England’s Protestant era’,21 and such measures produced lasting impressions. Hence I cannot entirely agree with Pocock’s view that the English Enlightenment was less radical than in France because there was no clerical tyranny to be crushed.24 The bitterness evoked by Restoration politico-religious reality is evident in John Locke’s Letter Concerning Toleration (1689), where he wrote that
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kings and queens of post-Reformation England had been ‘of such
different minds in points of religion, and enjoined thereupon such
different things’, that no ‘sincere and upright worshipper of God
could, with a safe conscience, obey their several decrees’. Bennet
has also commented that, after 1688, ‘it was clear even to the most
detached observer that ... [the] clergy and laity were involved in a
radical reappraisal of the whole role of the national Church in Eng-
lish society’. An important factor in the practical reality of that
reappraisal was much greater press freedom after 1694, when Eng-
land’s became one of the freest presses of Europe, although there
was still a need for some caution. Nevertheless, the relative press
freedom enabled Dissenters and other discontents to wage a more
public campaign against the established Church. Although greater
press freedom was of course welcomed, it did not signify to Dissent-
ers a relaxation of intolerance, but rather the chance to voice pub-
licly deep grievances.

The political and religious turmoil of the 1690s was not of the
same scale as that of the 1640s. The political and social disruption
was insufficient to generate radical and active popular movements
as had existed in the Civil War period. Nevertheless, the strife and
bitterness were such that they still provided the essential ingredients
for a considerable degree of political and religious alienation. The
religious response of the 1690s and the first years of the next
century was thus narrower in terms of social class, less politically
radical (one searches in vain for Diggers) and dominated by well-
educated men. As a result, the polemical expression of political and
religious dissatisfaction was less diverse. Yet it was expressed in a
polemic that was theoretically and historiographically much more
well-founded, and of sufficient intellectual depth to appeal to the
frustrated scholar. The response to the 1690s crisis was, therefore,
potentially damaging to the legitimacy of the established Church as
much amongst the well-off as amongst the poorer but attentive,
educated and more liberal Anglicans. For some, the scandal of re-
newed religious turmoil was the cause of disaffection from Christi-
nity towards deism, or at least accounted for the deism scare. In
the work of a writer identified only as D. E., _The Prodigious Ap-
pearance of Deism in this Age Modestly Accounted for in a Letter
from a Deist to his Friend_ (1710), it is explained how the divided
nature of British Protestantism is incompatible with Christian truth.
He laments how each side justifies its own case by perversion of
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scripture and ‘tricks and subterfuges’. He condemns their self-interest and the prostitution of religion ‘to palliate the most enormous pretences’. The ‘inveterate Spite and Malice’ of religious disputes of the various tendencies, ‘openly blazed and published’, are to him proof that all Protestant parties are guilty of bringing Christianity into disrepute.27 It is not possible to determine whether this letter really was written by a deist or by a deeply disaffected Dissenter of the non-Trinitarian type, and it does not help us determine whether, in reality, significant numbers of deists did exist. Its value to us, however, lies in its estimation of the damage done to Protestant piety by politico-religious conflict.

Some years before the letter of D. E. and in the year of the publication of John Toland’s *Christianity not Mysterious*, the Whig cleric William Stephens provided a similar explanation for supposed disaffection from Protestantism. In his often-cited *An Account of the Growth of Deism in England*, Stephens opined that having seen ‘that Popery in all its Branches was only a device of the Priesthood, to carry on a particular Interest of their own’, some gentlemen ‘could not forbear to see that these Protestant parties [Anglicans and the ‘Presbyterian Kirk’] under the pretence of Religion, were only grasping at Power’. As a consequence, he explained, some gentlemen refused to countenance both parties.28 Such letters are of limited value as evidence of religious reality – and certainly not for the existence of a deist movement or real religious change. After all, we know that clerics were prone to overstating the case for their own ends. Yet this letter has been cited as important evidence of the ‘transformation of the Puritan into a whig’, that in the transition to Whiggism the religious polity of presbyterianism was abandoned for a secular or civil deistic outlook.29 It is ironic that both Porter and Goldie argue for a conservative rather than radical Enlightenment, yet both wish to claim that Dissenters such as Howard, Dennis and Trenchard, and Protestants like Wollaston, were deists.30 There is good evidence for asserting that Howard and Toland for a time were Unitarians or sympathetic to that outlook, but we ought to remind ourselves that very little is known about early Unitarianism in England.31 We can confidently say, however, that Unitarianism, in principle, entailed a rejection of most or all forms of Trinitarian thought, that is to say rejecting Protestantism and Catholicism – something we know Isaac Newton did in his posthumous *Observations on the Prophecies of Daniel and the
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Apocalypse of St John (1733). We also know that Newton’s chronology of priestcraft was very similar to that of such thinkers as Trenchard, Dennis and Howard.\(^{32}\) Rejection of the traditional Christian ministry, then, is no necessary sign of deism.

It seems that Unitarians grew in number in late-seventeenth-century England, although to say that this ‘seriously challenged the Church of England’\(^ {33}\) is to misrepresent the situation. Indeed, considering the very small numbers of Unitarians known to us, Champion’s estimation that the presence of varieties of Arianism, Socinianism and Unitarianism was a serious problem is also perhaps to overstate the situation.\(^ {34}\) In addition, we know little, for instance, of the nature of the relationship between Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian Dissenters. Certainly Unitarians (or Socinians as they had often been known), although sometimes persecuted and expelled, had been part of the Protestant Church in continental Europe. There is little or no evidence, therefore, that late-seventeenth-century English Unitarians were hostile to simple Church polities such as presbyterianism. Indeed, in 1773 when John Lindsey seceded from the Anglican Church, an independent presbyterian-style Unitarian Church was initiated. In any case, the targets central to Unitarian polemic were the established clerical hierarchies which were accused of instigating and perpetuating the worst aspects of priestcraft. In short, it cannot be assumed that the accounts of priestcraft in the works of such writers as Trenchard, Dennis, Howard and (at the time of writing Christianity not Mysterious) Toland are meant to demonstrate the impossibility of simple, priestcraft-free Church polities. As a consequence, neither can it be assumed that such writers were necessarily deistical or advocating a classically inspired civil religion.

Toland did go on to espouse deistical views, although the exigencies of politics seem to have bestowed that label upon him rather too early. The son of a Catholic priest, he converted to Protestantism at the age of sixteen and in 1688–89 went to Scotland to study. There he witnessed the ‘Bloody Persecution of the Church of Scotland, and must have been an eye witness of many tyrannical and relentless scenes’.\(^ {35}\) Following his relocation to London, espousing the Presbyterian cause, he could not see why ‘men who were sound Protestants on both sides, should barbarously cut one another’s throats’.\(^ {36}\) Nevertheless, like most dissenting Protestants, he was not about to offer toleration to all and sundry – certainly not to atheists.
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and Catholics. In his anti-Catholicism, Toland was in very good liberal company. As a typical reforming Protestant, John Locke (who championed toleration as a natural right) also excluded Catholics and atheists from his pleas for toleration, as did a whole range of eminent men from poets to bishops. In politics, Catholicism was inseparable from the threat of Catholic absolutism, the sort it had been feared James II wanted to introduce and which was then perceived to exist in the France of Louis XIV. Catholicism could only be tolerated in private. Toland's anti-Catholic views, like those of most other Protestants, were based upon a mixture of religious conviction and a widely shared understanding of the – real or received – Catholic threat to life and liberty. Catholic rulers were either subject to the priestcraft of the Catholic Church, or as in France were perceived to be in cahoots with popery. This politico-religious stance was also promoted for nationalistic ends, something hardly surprising, given that King Louis declared war on England in 1689, which endured until 1697. This was the bleak and often fearful outlook which enabled Protestants to detect no contradiction between the suppression of Catholicism on the one hand and earnest pleas for religious toleration on the other.

Toland was Whig in outlook for much of his life. He was, therefore, in favour of a limited monarchy, that is to say a monarch whose actions were limited by Parliament. Yet Toland has been described by some historians as a radical republican. For much of his active intellectual career, however, he was patently not a republican in the usual twentieth-century sense of the word, which pits monarchicalism diametrically against republicanism. In 1697, one year after the publication of his Christianity not Mysterious, Toland broke publicly with the cause of Dissent. That shift did not, however, indicate a political transition towards republicanism in the modern sense of the word. It is difficult to see how a radical republican could write a such a work as The Memorial of the State of England, in Vindication of the Queen, the Church, and the Administration (1705). If Toland ever became a radical republican in the modern sense, it seems it was after 1705.

Like many other Dissenters and radicals, throughout his life Toland was concerned to promote and ensure the Protestant succession in England as a counter to the threat of European Catholic hegemony. The heart of the Whig historical view, at that time synonymous with the general Protestant scheme, depicted Europe’s fall...
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from the glory of ancient Rome to the superstition and tyranny of
the medieval Catholic Church. In this scheme, the Reformation
had partly broken the Church’s stranglehold on European culture
and political life. But Catholicism was not yet fully defeated, and
had to some extent revived in the Counter-Reformation. Thus, for
most Protestants, the future for religious toleration and political
freedom for the whole of Europe was manifestly not yet assured.
Despite Dissenter hostility to the Anglican Church and its relation-
ship with the state, the principle of advocating a Protestant succe-
sion – free Christian Europe against antichristian tyranny, light
against darkness – was a principle then almost inviolable. Six years
after his break with Dissent, Toland left his readers in no doubt as
to his Protestant, anti-Catholic orientation. In his Vindicius liberius
(1702), he replied to accusations of heterodoxy by stating that he
considered himself a member of the ‘establisht Religion’, and, al-
though it is not perfect, it is the best religion in the world. He does
not adhere to any particular ‘society’, but has joined with all Protes-
tants against the superstition, idolatry and tyranny of ‘Popery’. He
is a ‘true Christian’ and as such cites his ‘conformity to the public
Worship’, which proves him a ‘good Church man’.

No longer tied
to the dissenting cause, without embarrassment he could now af-
ford to be seen paying at least public lip-service to the ‘establisht
Religion’. Yet that affirmation was, if not altogether true or hon-
estly pious, not just lip-service, for Toland, as most freethinking
radicals, was still committed to the maintenance of some form of
national Church for the good of public order.

All this, however, was yet to come, for now we must now ask if
the content of his Christianity not Mysterious supports the tradi-
tional view that it was the work of a deist. Several scholars, includ-
ing myself, consider Christianity not Mysterious to be a reforming
Dissenter work, and as a consequence one should expect to find an
unmitigating hostility to the history of the Christian hierarchy cen-
tral to its contents. In the preface, Toland wrote that he was raised
in the ‘grossest superstition and idolatry’. Contrary to the often re-
peated claim (or sometimes assumption) that Christianity not Mys-
terious categorically rejected revelation, Toland also explained how
the instructions of Jesus Christ were clear and convincing, contrast-
ing Jesus’s simple clarity with the intricate and ineffectual declama-
tions of the scribes or priests. Whilst this statement may be
insufficient to indicate a Trinitarian outlook, it is at least broadly
consonant with that of a Unitarian. As a Unitarian, he could of course praise the moral and spiritual humanity of Jesus, without necessarily accepting the revelation of Jesus or indeed His miracles and those of others. Like Trenchard, Howard and Dennis, Toland’s aim was to show how ‘Christianity became mysterious,’ and how so divine an Institution did, through the Craft and Ambition of the Priests and Philosophers, degenerate into mere paganism’. It was the ‘Contradictions and Mysteries’ charged to Christianity which caused so many Christians to become deists and atheists. Then, wishing to emphatically underline his reformist stance, he observed he was only doing that which the Reformation had set out to achieve, namely laying bare priestcraft.42

As in the works of Trenchard, Dennis and Howard, in Toland’s work there is little or no analysis specifically targeted at the papacy and the Catholic Church. This should be no surprise. Indeed, this phenomenon has been one of the factors that has led some historians to consider Christianity not Mysterious a work of deist inspiration, that is to say attacking the very concept of the Christian ministry. Dissenters such as Toland felt no need to reiterate the common-or-garden critique of the medieval or contemporary Catholic Church. It was the one facet of English Protestant thought which was not accompanied by widespread and damaging controversy. Catholic priestcraft was an uncontentious subject, a given, something safely relegated to the conceptual anti-Catholic evidence supplied by the Protestant readership. When polemicists such as Toland had other, more pressing concerns, why devote valuable space to an argument that had already, long ago, achieved hegemony. Thus, when the frauds of pagan priests are described, the comparison with the medieval Church, Catholicism and Anglicanism was usually understood. Dissenting writers usually failed to exempt the Anglican Church from the devastation of their priestcraft allegations, or gave only a polite nod to the difference between Catholicism and Anglicanism. The less the explicit exemption of Anglicanism, the more the worst horrors of priestcraft – without loss of critical efficacy – could be tacitly attributed to Anglicanism. This tactic of guilt by implicit association had been exploited earlier in the seventeenth century by many writers, including Henry Ainsworth and Herbert of Cherbury,43 and was a tactic too efficacious in the battle for right religion to be easily abandoned. Unsurprisingly, then, Toland did not exempt Anglicanism from the blistering invective of his Christi-
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*Anity not Mysterious*, allowing its scourge to be applied implicitly in full measure to the Anglican Church. Convocation (the government of the Anglican Church) was, therefore, absolutely correct when it noted in 1711 that ‘Priests without Distinction ... [had been] traduc’d, as Imposers on the Credulity of Mankind’. The bonus of this tacit comparative technique was that the burden of contemporary proof (including space) for charges against Anglicanism was avoided. In addition, and certainly most importantly, the possibility of arousing the public ire of Church and state was reduced. Even when it was aroused, specific and official charges were made more difficult to formulate and prosecute if the indictment of Anglicanism was understood rather than made explicit.

In *Christianity not Mysterious*, therefore, the indictment Toland formulated against the primitive Church was meant to be fully applied by his readers to the Anglican Church, yet elements of piety beyond the need to mislead any censor are also apparent in his thought. In historical summary, Toland argued it was the motive of ‘their own Advantage ... that put the Primitive Clergy upon reviving Mysteries [and] they quickly erected themselves into a separate Body’. Utilizing the language of piety appropriate to his religious outlook, he then relates how soon distinctions of rank and orders in the clergy and other usurpations made their way ‘under pretence of *Labourers in the Lord’s Vineyard*. These priests ornamented ceremony and rite with ‘Extravagancies of Heathen Original’. Thus, the Eucharist was ‘absolutely perverted and destroyed’ and is ‘not yet fully restor’d by the purest Reformations in *Christendom*’. Matters became worse, almost incurable, when Emperor Constantine endorsed Christianity. As a result the multitudes flocked to Christianity from ‘politick considerations’, and the Christian priesthood was enriched with the endowments and benefices of the pagan priests, flamens and augurs. When philosophers became Christians, a further degeneration was set in train, because the erroneous opinions of philosophers entered Christianity, and the simple precepts of Christ became intelligible only to the learned. He explained how

Decrees or Constitutions concerning *Ceremonies and Discipline*, to increase the Splendor of [the clergy] ... did strangely affect or stupify the Minds of the ignorant People; and made them believe they were in good earnest Mediators between God and Men, that could fix Sanctity to certain Times, Places, Persons or Actions. By
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this means the Clergy were able to do anything; they engross’d at length the sole Right of interpreting Scripture, and with it claim’d Infallibility, to their Body.  

In the years after 1697 Toland drew away from his reforming stance. Even after abandoning his dissenting ideals, Toland of course had no need to retract or regret almost anything contained in his reforming work Christianity not Mysterious. His Dissenter historiography continued to serve his more radical aims very well indeed, and is something that has helped to produce or reinforce the impression that Toland was a deist in 1696. Later deistical writers such as Tindal and Collins used the critique of Toland, Dennis, Howard and others as the historical and sociological foundation for their own various politico-religious attacks upon the Church. To the frustration of many staunch Anglicans, public opinion also doggedly refused to assent to stricter controls on dissenting publications that were so potentially damaging to Anglicanism. The Printing Act had not been renewed in 1694 for various reasons, but primarily simply because public opinion was against it, and neither Whig nor Tory trusted each other with its partisan implementation. Between 1695 and 1698 four modified versions of the Act were presented, but Parliament could come to no agreement. Attempts to revive it continued and anxious messages were sent from the throne, but none were successful.

Early modern politico-religious propagandists and modern historians

According to some modern writers, however, the situation was far, far more grave: ‘[b]y 1680, the virulent sceptical movement known as Deism asserted itself in British cities and universities … a popular religious and rhetorical movement’. Apparently – and this claim is not unusual – ‘by 1720 Deism was widespread in British cities, posing a serious threat to social and religious stability … [it was a] war waged for the religious mind of Britain and eventually of Europe and the Colonies … A rising tide of skepticism, heresy, blasphemy, and atheism swept the realm as the foundational presuppositions of Christianity were assaulted.’ Even more sober commentators have been seduced by the fog of myth and confusion on the question of deism, one even venturing to assert that on the ‘deist side the number of petty scribblers was immense’. To some of those look-
ing closely at the evidence, these claims may seem to have a touch of rhetoric about them. It is ironic, therefore, that the term rhetoric features so prominently in the title of Herrick’s work. As Herrick has been forced to admit – despite the efforts of Margaret Jacob – the occasional speculation that the size of the deist movement has been hidden from posterity by its exploitation of secret societies such as the Masons cannot be proven. Indeed, apart from the most scanty, even circumstantial evidence for such a situation is mostly lacking, and his proposition – via Berman – that radical publicists such as Charles Blount should be seen as ‘vehicles of a subversive, threatening social unconsciousness’ is unfounded.

We must assume, for it is not explicitly stated, that for Herrick the date 1680 is significant because of the work of Charles Blount. Yet an analysis of the post-1680 figures of this supposed virulent deist movement cited by Herrick amount only to twelve over a period of about seventy years. It is unfair, of course, to single out one particular historian on this subject, for, as we have seen in previous chapters, many modern historians face the same dilemma: placing the square peg of the supposed deist movement into the round hole of the actual evidence. How can we explain the consistent claims for the existence of a deist movement when the paucity of evidence for its existence is clear? The answer is that historians have been hampered by their own research agendas and have adopted an insuffi-

Although not denying the existence of an Enlightenment deist movement, Popkin has, however, commented on the tiny number of active deists in Europe in the years immediately preceding the Enlighten-ment. He has noted that ‘in fact, it is unclear whether there was more than a handful of Deists in England, France, or the Netherlands in 1688’. This fact – and it can hardly be disputed – is nev-

evertheless of no real importance for Popkin, for he continues: ‘[h]owever, the views attributed to them ... played a most important role in providing a basis for religious and political toleration in England, in the British American Colonies, and later in Revolutionary France’. So, uncomfortable as Popkin’s assertion might seem to be for some historians, it can still be considered by some as not neces-

ary as damaging as it might be. This is because, in effect, Popkin’s claim is that several tiny deist cogs managed, by degrees, to turn the comparatively vast wheel of the early European and English colo-
nial Enlightenment by the force of their argument. It might well be
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the case that it is possible to detect general similarities between some of the arguments for political and religious pluralism in Enlightenment England, America and France, and those expressed by some supposedly early deists. This does not per se, however, prove influence at all; it merely means that some similarities have been detected and does not of necessity settle the question as to why similarities might exist. Much earlier, in his The Church and the Age of Reason (1960), Cragg helped provide the basis for the views of later thinkers by arguing that deists disposed of undoubted influence. It is true that Cragg admitted that ‘the Deists were not a large group, and never formed a party in any formal sense’. Nevertheless, for him, ‘it was clear that they appealed to an extensive reading public. Hence their works elicited a large number of replies. One of Collins’ pamphlets inspired thirty-five answers, Tindal’s Christianity as Old as the Creation at least one hundred and fifty. For a couple of decades (1720–40) the interest in the debate was intense. Then it suddenly waned.’

Locating a research tool to measure influence is the historiographical equivalent of the search for the Holy Grail. Popkin’s and Cragg’s forthright statement of historical influence is, of course, merely their opinion. It is based on a particular, yet common perspective in which deists and their views had a major public and private impact on the intellectual life of eighteenth-century Europe, and by the force of their thought brought about toleration and thus modern religious pluralism. It is this reading of the past that I wish to challenge in this and subsequent chapters on France and Italy.

Cragg himself never mentions by name any more deists than those few we have already identified. Confusingly, he does, however, implicitly talk of deism as a movement or something like it, as for instance when he notes that ‘Deism, though worsted in the controversy, really collapsed through its own inherent weakness’. If there were just a few writers across several decades, what was there to collapse? If, on the other hand, he is referring to the influence of the deists, evidence of such influence must be brought forward and critically examined. His evidence concerning the scale of the public debate can more convincingly be construed as evidence to the contrary: evidence of isolation in the face of general animosity. What he and other writers do not make sufficiently clear, or at least properly assimilate into their overall assessment of the available evidence, is
that these replies/answers were of course trenchantly hostile. Most copies of deist works were undoubtedly purchased by enemies of deism and those interested in public scandal rather than supporters. It is difficult to escape the conclusion, therefore, that large print runs or sales figures of texts do not necessarily indicate support for the authors’ views. It goes without saying that, in order to mount a hostile reply, one must at least read the offending text. If deists could, with some caution, publish their views, so could supporters cautiously publish their support; consequently we must ask where are the pro-deist publications demonstrating the existence of a deist movement and/or influence? The point is this: in an age still unused to the questioning in public of the central tenets of its official faith, those who saw themselves as public defenders of the faith and/or fighting for recognition in the ecclesiastical world could hardly be expected to ignore the publication of ‘blasphemous’ texts.

In pursuit of an answer to the question of how the bogey of a deist movement was manufactured in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, we can profitably pose the question of how and why John Toland – at the time of the publication of his *Christianity not Mysterious* – was publicly transformed from a Unitarian into a deist. As we have already noted, in 1696 Toland was known as a Unitarian and was supported by a Quaker leader. In 1697 the Latitudinarian John Locke was unhappy that his friend Toland did not bid him farewell and obtain proper introductions before he departed for Dublin in order to serve as secretary to the new Chancellor of Ireland, John Methuen. But it would not be long before politico-religious pressure forced Locke to effectively repudiate Toland as a deist. Prior to Toland’s departure for Dublin his *Christianity not Mysterious* was condemned in England as injurious to orthodox Christianity. It is true that Toland’s reputation had preceded him to Ireland and hostility to him had been aroused in some quarters. *Christianity not Mysterious* inevitably seemed more outrageous in a provincial capital than in London. As Sullivan has illustrated, ‘commonly, Irishmen took it [Christianity not Mysterious] as a Socinian production … which prompted the archbishop of Dublin to inspire a pamphlet which called on the civil arm to “suppress his Insolence”’. It cannot be said, however, that this was the cause of Toland’s prosecution and hurried flight from Ireland. The key – but usually overlooked – factor was political in nature. Just as Methuen was appointed, there arose in Ireland a
bitter political polemic against England, or specifically against the Whigs who had dominated the administration since 1695. ‘When, at the end of summer, the chancellor’s enemies considered a means of striking at him, his visible and controversial dependent [Toland] seemed a convenient stick.’ Consequently, the Irish Commons condemned Toland’s work as heretical, ordered it burnt by the hangman and Toland to be arrested and prosecuted.

As the (failed) prosecution was primarily political in intent, it is not surprising that in his account of that parliamentary session the Bishop of Derry, William King, takes note of only three religious actions – all penal measures against Catholics – and does not mention Toland at all. As he later wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, ‘Toland’s prosecutors’ real “design was against some greater persons, that supported him”’. Now, in good part thanks to politics, Toland had notoriety (and thus a potentially greater audience for his works), but he also

became a pawn in the political struggle between the ascendant Latitudinarians and the emerging High-Church party for control of the Church of England. The [High-Church] insurgents, appointing themselves the church’s defenders against both external and internal enemies, found in Toland a notorious figure whom they could identify with the most threatening of these foes…. he was … made a Socinian cat’s-paw with which the High-Church majority of the lower house of convocation of 1698 could strike at the Whiggish and Latitudinarian upper house.58

In their efforts to further their own partisan interests, the furore High Churchmen could raise against ‘heretics’, even if contrived, could be effective in forcing Latitudinarians and other theological liberals into retreat in order to preserve their political well-being. In this type of political climate, it is no wonder Locke began to feel the need to distance himself from his one-time friend and his now seemingly so dangerous opinions. In an attempt to discredit Socinianism (Unitarianism), some Anglicans had linked it with deism, for deism was understood to be virtually atheism, the worst enemy of Christendom. While Locke did not actually denominate Toland a deist, ‘he tried to nudge his readers into including the Irishman among these notorious, if obscure, heretics’.59 Locke and other determined assailants were certainly successful. From the 1690s a public image of an organized deist/atheist threat became part of the politico-religious landscape in both intellectual and more popular circles.
The English deist movement

Aside from the fear of France, deism was the public bogey of the day and continued to be so into the 1730s.

The dominant explanation for the decline of English deism amongst historians today remains more or less that of Cragg: ‘Bishop Butler’s monumental work, The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature [1736], was the most formidable and the most decisive work that the deist controversy called forth. On essential matters it virtually ended the debate; skirmishing continued for some years, but it was clear that the fundamental issues had been settled.’60 Amongst the few recent historians who significantly diverge from the Butler-triumphant explanation is Roy Porter and his ‘laicization’ thesis. We have seen already that Porter argues for a conservative English Enlightenment, yet one populated with numerous radical deists who were ‘novel, incisive and influential’. On the decline of deism, he argues that the deists were less read later in the century because they had already achieved their aims and that ‘threats to a gentleman’s privilege of being religious on his own terms’ from High Churchmen and other enthusiasts ‘had been resisted, had withered away or were becoming marginalized to the “lunatic fringe”’. Crucially, ‘legislation won toleration for Protestants’ when Convocation was pro-rogued in 1717.61 The problem here is the difficulty of reconciling this account with those of historians who, as we have seen, argue that the crescendo of the supposed deist movement in terms of numbers and influence occurred in the 1730s. Given that there is little evidence that the deist movement ever existed, debate on the chronology of its victory or defeat is of no great consequence except in one respect, for Porter’s ‘victory of deism’ view is predicated on a thesis of a relatively weak Church. Yet, as we shall see below, there is no consensus amongst historians on the weak Church thesis, and it has been increasingly challenged.

Returning to the Butler-triumphant-over-deism thesis, if, as we know, deist writers were a mere handful over half a century and most of the leading writers died in the years preceding Butler’s polemic, should we not consider this a factor in their decline? Tindal, Collins and Woolston all died, for example, in the years 1729–33. Given this rather intractable fact, if we accept that the coterie of deists never managed to attract any significant number of followers or any real broad interest aside from the negative type or sensation hunters, is it surprising that the deist controversy petered out sooner
rather than later? We may even say that, even if it had existed, for it to have continued for much longer would have been unlikely. Interestingly, it is rarely mentioned in Enlightenment studies that, even on the Anglican side, there has never been unquestioned acceptance of the idea that the Christian knight Butler single-handedly defeated the deist threat. Mossner long ago argued that even to pose the question in that manner is misleading, and Butler’s analogical method was anyway not original.

As we have seen, the evidence of replies to works or propositions is not, in itself, sufficient proof of the existence of one historical reality rather than another potentially contrary one, and the ability of the historical record to portray or be made to portray one rather than another we must surely take for granted. In the eighteenth century, nowhere was this more the case than in the politico-ecclesiastical world, which was capable of systematically raising issues more of concern to itself and its interests than to those of the wider public. As, for example, Walsh and Taylor have noted (not in support of the revisionist thesis I present here), ‘[r]ecent historians have generally focused on political causes of disturbance in the Church, but this is to ignore the capacity of clergymen, as a highly specialized profession, to worry about issues of morality and theology which did not concern the laity to the same degree’. In short, they could ‘overreact’ and publicly ‘sound the alarm’ when not entirely necessary. As Cragg himself long ago put it, ‘Church leaders tended to be more aware of their foes than of their friends’. The implications of this realization are important: subjects of public debate and degrees of heat upon them could, therefore, potentially exist more or less independently of public concern.

What, however, constituted a foe of the clergy? This is a question which cannot be given a one-dimensional answer, simply because to ask about foes of the Church and clerical overreaction is to approach the crucial interface between politics and religion. To imagine that in eighteenth-century Britain there were not constituencies of political and religious interest at times happy to describe deism as a threat greater than it really was is to imagine the impossible. Since the late Restoration period and before, the Church-in-danger cry had contained a profoundly political element. This could hardly be otherwise, because the Tory constituency of interest was principally Anglican and often High Church in orientation, and that of the Whig party significantly dissenting in orientation. At the
more strident end of the spectrum, that cry could be used, especially by High Church Tories, to associate its opponents with immorality, irreligion and political irresponsibility, and even to cast aspersions on their national loyalty. Perhaps more subtly and certainly more pervasively, the Church-in-danger cry could be raised as a means of prompting declarations of loyalty and so tend to isolate those perceived to be less staunch in their fidelity to Anglicanism. For varied politico-religious reasons, then, the public domain could conjure up a deist threat where non-existed. As Mossner commented some sixty years ago, ‘the deist was subject not only to *odium theologicum*, but to legal and popular censure as well. The name of deist became a fashionable bogey indicative of evil character.’

Using external threat as a means of promoting loyalty, unity and even giving identity to the amorphous nature of Anglicanism was a traditional tactic of the Church, traditionally utilizing concepts of popery and the ‘Dissenter threat’. It would be very surprising indeed, therefore, if deist writers were not similarly used, for their tenets were clearly anti-Anglican and their arguments certainly inflammatory at times. Such tactics had political value both in times of perceived crisis and in periods of political calm, for in periods of calm the existence (or effective creation) of threat could be utilized as a means of restating the Tory *raison d’être*. The Sacheverell case is perhaps the most well known example of this phenomenon. In 1709 the Tory and High Church Henry Sacheverell preached at St Paul’s, emphasizing the dramatic perils facing the Church as a result of the Whig government’s policy of relative (that is to say still quite restricted) religious toleration of Dissenters. Not surprisingly, the Commons condemned the sermon as seditious whilst the Tories gave him strong support. The nature of his politico-religious chauvinism, however, widely reported in the press, excited a considerable degree of public support for Anglicanism. Despite strong opposition, Sacheverell was impeached for high crimes and misdemeanour. But this was in fact a climb-down and, if anything, a victory for the Church-in-danger tactic, for his sentence was a mere suspension from preaching for three years and Sacheverell rapidly became a popular hero.

Three years later Sacheverell preached to packed gatherings, his sermons had wide circulation and he was presented by Queen Anne to the living of St Andrew’s Holborn. It is also widely recognized that the fall of the Whigs in 1710 was in large part the result of the
impeachment of Sacheverell. This was a political-religious lesson never forgotten, in which the power of public opinion to alter political fortunes was never underestimated – we need only recall the successful opposition to the Quaker Tithe Bill in 1737, the riots which forced the withdrawal of Pelham’s ‘Jew Bill’ in 1853, the Gordon Riots against Catholics in 1780, and the Church and King Riots against Dissenters in 1791. So, despite that fact that some lessening of the disabilities under which Dissenters suffered did come about in subsequent decades, Walpole and other political leaders steadfastly refused to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts (the former not repealed until 1829 and the latter until 1828). The Church-in-danger cry, then, had the power to create reputations and bogeys, for we know that the Dissenters certainly never represented the broad threat ascribed to them by Sacheverell, his High Church supporters and sympathetic media organs. The press and interested parties had created a dissenting bogey capable of great political import, and would go on to create others to serve similar ends; indeed, one was already partly created, that of the immoral, irreligious, Church-hating deist. The Church-in-danger cry was not, however, exclusive to Tories, but was to be found in the hands of Whig High Church prelates such as Bishop Gibson, to whom we shall return.

The Sacheverell case, although traditionally given little space in Enlightenment studies, is crucial to our understanding of the conditions under which the Enlightenment developed. It is thus also crucial to our understanding of the conditions under which the creation of Enlightenment shibboleths such as deism were forged and bequeathed to modern historians. As Holmes has commented, in most respects Sacheverell did not undertake any new High Church politico-religious tactic. Inside the ‘predictable grooves of the extreme High Churchman’, he utilized the ‘traditional reliance on political means’. Indeed, it ‘is striking how each wave in the “Church in Danger” campaigns of the post-Revolution period began to rise towards its crest at a period when the Whigs were either firmly in control of the government or were threatening to seize control’. The great majority of High Churchmen and even some less conservative Anglican clergy ‘still yearned for the closest possible return to the pre-1687 position, when the Church and State still worked in harmony within a regime in which uniformity and unquestioning obedience to authority were the watchwords’. This
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made the division between High and Low Church or Tory and Whig stark indeed, and the result was the ‘prostitution of the pulpit, particularly in Queen Anne’s reign, to blatantly party ends’. Many made the Church-in-danger cry ‘a regular feature of their sermons. They strove to convince their congregations that the Church not only was in direst peril from the Dissenters, from the new intellectual forces unleashed against it, and above all from the enemy within the gate – from those black sheep, the Low Church bishops and the Whig or moderate politicians.’ Indeed, ‘Tories were encouraged by the clergy to proclaim their Church’s danger from the housetops’. In the constituencies this crude party slogan, ‘so easy to spread … and so hard to eradicate’, was even more effective, for ‘[i]n return for this backing, the bulk of the 9,000-odd parish clergy threw their whole weight behind the Tory cause in Election after Election from 1698 onwards…. by the very nature of their office they were the most effective canvassers any party could possess. But, above all, they were prepared to use their pulpits shamelessly for electoral ends.’67

In terms of the development of the Enlightenment and the realization of its ‘programme’ of liberation from clerical tutelage, what was at stake in the Sacheverell affair? It hardly needs stating that a return to pre-1687 conditions would have been a blow of momentous proportions for progressive aspirations. It is true that Sacheverell and his vast following ultimately failed to bring about any such return, but it is also true that Sacheverell’s astute use of public opinion brought about the most serious challenge the English Enlightenment encountered, one which had lasting consequences. Sacheverell was an ambitious man, even arrogantly so, and one way to make fame and fortune – which he certainly did – was to make one’s name a household word. From this point of view, his astute use of the media was a landmark in the development of public opinion and print culture.

The foundation of High Church thought was the assumption that the Crown and Church were interdependent and, crucially, that that interdependence was vital to both and also constituted a central element of the English ‘constitution’. As Holmes has put it, all around him ‘Sacheverell saw men intent on threatening, if not destroying, the sacred links between the civil and ecclesiastical power: and few of his congregations were left in doubt of the potentially awful consequences of such intentions. Once those links were
broken the road to republicanism, and even to regicide, would be open.' Thus, as was the norm amongst such thinkers, Sacheverell made no distinction between one form of dissent and another, and was vehemently opposed to the notion of toleration which could only lead to atheism. Whigs and others, ‘in the blindness of their spiritual pride [had] ... seemed to assume that the freedom of worship the State had granted to persons of real scruples should empower Deists, Socinians and Atheists to revile, ridicule and blaspheme our most holy faith and Church at their pleasure’.68 In the hands of such men, the most moderate of Dissenters and insignificant numbers of deists could become grotesquely transformed into movements and national threats, and had been proclaimed so by High Church pulpit-thumpers since the 1690s, and by Sacheverell since at least 1702. His 1709 sermon, however, marked a radical development in the production of the deist myth, and deism too became firmly associated in the public mind with a threat to Englishness. His 1709 sermon, *The Perils of False Brethren*, in good part on account of his impeachment, was to sell close to 100,000 copies. Given that many copies were read aloud and others had multiple readers, this is a very significant figure. Indeed, it has been said that as a ‘short-term best-seller’ the sermon had no equal in that century: a sermon was now going to be read ‘by at least a quarter of a million men and women, in other words by a number equal to the whole electorate of England and Wales’.69 What is missing from many accounts of his trial and its impact is, however, the power of the media. Too much attention is usually paid to the print figures of the *Perils of False Brethren* and too little to the large numbers of leaflets, pamphlets and copious newspaper coverage of the affair, in which at times England seemed to be at the mercy of the enemies of the Church.

The Sacheverell affair was a personal and media extravaganza the like of which had never been seen, for, while the events of the late seventeenth century had been tumultuous, the Sacheverell phenomenon was not founded on any comparable event, but merely upon one rather predictable sermon. The age of media and public opinion had certainly arrived in the late seventeenth century, but with the Sacheverell affair, the public sphere had matured into something recognizable today. The case reflects the latent tension in early-eighteenth-century society, which was ripe for exploitation. Paradoxically, it was a situation in which the least enlightened
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played a direct role in the production of the bogey of supposedly the most enlightened, the deists. Sacheverell became the hero of all England, whether urban or rural. He became the white solitary knight steadfastly pitting himself against innumerable foes, and the contemporary descriptions of his rapturous, even tumultuous reception wherever he went are remarkable even without recounting the serious anti-Whig pro-Sacheverell riots in London. On one occasion, in one northern location, 1,700 loaves were distributed to the poor all marked 'Sacheverell', and the rural and urban districts alike boisterously celebrated what was, in effect, Sacheverell’s victory in the trial. It is no exaggeration to say – and is accepted so by most historians – that Sacheverell made the Tory campaign for an election possible and also ensured the defeat of the Whigs: “[t]he anti-Whig reaction was nowhere more marked than in those counties and boroughs through which the Doctor had passed’.70 Such momentous reactions and concomitant political defeat meant the Sacheverell affair produced political lessons difficult to forget. The foremost of these was the vulnerability of the Whigs to the Church-in-danger cry and the possibility of raising it without real evidence of any increase in danger.

To believe the Church-in-danger cry of Sacheverell and his supporters, one would think eighteenth-century England was racked by division and intolerance. Yet most modern historians have recognized that in this period England was above all a society marked by religious diversity, yet relative harmony, a society in which there was also ‘a significant unity of purpose between Church and Enlightenment’.71 According to Porter, after 1688, ‘the very statute book incorporated much of the enlightened wish list: freedom of the person under habeas corpus, the rule of law, Parliament, religious toleration, and so forth’.72 This was, of course, substantially the same description given of Enlightenment England by Voltaire in his *Lettres philosophiques ou Lettres Anglaises* (1734), and he was rather too admiring. So, were the High Church Tories and their varied supporters mistaken in their interpretation of reality? On the other hand, should historians be in the business of declaring the opinions of historical actors invalid? Certainly some believed their own assertions. We may say, therefore, that the historical record contains a series of opinions from which we may choose our reality, and that our interpretation of essential elements of any period should be definitively contingent on our recognition of that fact. In
practice, then, we have little choice but to accept that, at times, the politico-religious configuration of the period could result in quite high degrees of ‘noise’ without evidence of any commensurate battle. Let us examine a case in point, that of the outbreak of anticlericalism in Parliament in the 1730s, supposedly unparalleled since ‘Henry VIII’s Reformation Parliament’ and having deism as one of its contributory causes.73

The Cambridge Modern History of 1909, hardly a bastion of anticlericalism, describes the politico-religious context of the period in these terms: ‘Political considerations dominated ecclesiastical patronage and behaviour; and, while the Church became more and more political, the State became less and less religious’. It was a ‘Church occupied chiefly with patronage and controversy…. Episcopal politicians … learnt the mundane lessons of corruption and venality from the place-hunters of Parliament.’74 But responsibility for this state of affairs cannot be laid at the feet of any coterie or set of individuals, rather it was in good part the result of the structure of the state–Church relationship. The House of Lords still wielded considerable power and bishops formed an important constituency within it, and, as a consequence, at times their votes could be decisive. In 1733, for instance, the episcopal bench saved Walpole from defeat. As Cragg has commented, the ‘appointment of bishops was one of the few ways in which the balance of power could be affected, and it became a matter of prime concern to select men of proven party loyalty. In making appointments, political considerations outweighed all others. A court chaplain of the period remarked that when a bishop “rose by the weight of his character”, it was “against all the rules of gravity and experience”’.75 In his own diocese, bishops were very important figures and were expected to promote their party’s cause. This status, and the influence and potential earnings from the post, meant that bishoprics were the target for younger sons of the nobility, and lesser but still lucrative prebends and benefices were targeted by the gentry. Given that the gentry and nobility dominated the politics of the period, the unavoidable result was that the higher clergy were often related by ties of family and interest to those sitting in Parliament and their influential party supporters.

Although political parties existed, we should not make the mistake of thinking them to be essentially similar to modern disciplined political parties. They were much looser entities than today’s parties.
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and the discipline sought by ministers was too often impossible or hard to come by. The main method of ‘encouraging’ party obedience was of course patronage, which could come in a variety of forms and be more or less overt or covert depending on circumstance. Patronage was – in Europe as a whole – still an accepted means of influence. That is to say patronage did not equal corruption in the political corridors of early modern Britain, although some forms of patronage might be seen as less legitimate than others. This is an essential understanding, for without it we will have difficulty comprehending the scale and thus the importance of patronage in the public and political life of eighteenth-century Britain. This circumstance provided a key element of the interface between religion and politics. But even patronage could not secure all a minister might desire, especially if the targets were already rich and powerful as was usually the case in the House of Lords, whose members were also guaranteed a seat by right of birth. In this circumstance their fellows, the bishops or ‘spiritual lords’, could at least be chosen with care for their political reliability, becoming the placemen of ministers.

This blatant mixing of venality, class distinction, politics and religion did not enhance the already jaundiced image of the Church in the eyes of the public. Indeed, in Christian terms, the highly questionable and divisive arrangement was often confirmed by the class-based pew arrangement in Anglican churches themselves. So, while in general terms still loyal to King and the Church, sections of the public could still harbour great resentment at the Church–state arrangement. As Cragg has put it, ‘[t]here is little doubt that the clergy were unpopular. Neither before nor since has the clerical order been exposed to such general attack.’ Nevertheless, as Walsh and Taylor have noted, ‘[t]here was, however, a powerful strain of popular Anglicanism within English society. Any fashionable stereotype of the Church as an agency of social control neglected or despised by its plebeian constituents needs to be treated warily and set alongside the powerful loyalties which it attracted: loyalties attested to by the great “Church and King” riots from Sacheverell to Priestley, and still more by the innumerable little pro-Church mobbings of Methodist itinerant preachers.’ The key point for this discussion should, however, be the significance of Walsh and Taylor’s next sentence: ‘The existence of that loyalty, however, is easier to define than its meaning. Popular Anglicanism was not pri-
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marily theological. Had or could popular Anglicanism ever be purely or primarily theological? National identity, loyalty and current affairs had, inevitably, always played a most important role in the life of what was the official Church of state and government. If that Church had ever found itself wholly bereft of popular, positive sentiment, that is to say a context either of pure indifference or pure theology in which a sense of Anglican national identity was lacking, then a loud Church-in-danger cry might be justified, whether the supposed danger was identified as popery, Dissent or deism. So, in the broad public and popular realm, the exact theological nature and actual size of any threat to the Church could be less important than its perceived significance in terms of standards of morality, general cultural outlook and national identity. But an important point about public media, known then as now, is that taste, desire, fears, hopes and ignorance can be manipulated. Small news can quickly become big news more or less regardless of the degree of correspondence between the story and reality. As we now know, once taste or habits of media consumption are created, they can serve as a prompt for more media sensationalism and in turn create readerships, influence and income.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the public’s growing hunger for news was fed with a now familiar diet of scandal, political reality and ‘current concern’ items by the growing numbers of confident political journalists in numerous weekly or monthly newsheets. As Roy Porter has put it, the eighteenth century saw ‘the rise and triumph of lay and secular public opinion, the fourth estate’. So worrying was this burgeoning public world that it was felt a government counter was needed. So it was that the Daily Courant, the Free Briton and the London Journal, effectively ministerial mouthpieces, were distributed free by the Post Office and issued free to coffee houses, and their editors were paid considerable sums from state funds. The growing capacity of the press to mount a public critique of the status quo was thus clearly a worry for some, but this is not the same as saying that the Church was besieged by its antichristian enemies. Indeed, most historians accept that indifference and unbelief were, as Porter has recently put it, ‘far from the norm’. It is true that some anticlericalism could be loosely termed deistic and antichristian, ‘but much of it was not’.

The problem for Whig governments was that the Whig party traditionally represented critics of the Anglican Church and its
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privileged relationship to the state, yet Walpole and some other leading Whigs realized the ultimate folly of neglecting the Church and allowing it to fall into hands hostile to their political interests. Walpole thus wanted to demonstrate that the Church was at least safe in Whig hands, even if not revered. To his constant chagrin, however, he found that when Church affairs were debated in Parliament, some of his supporters understood it as their right to criticize the Church and continued to take the opportunity to inveigh against Anglican clergy. In those attacks, Whigs were reflecting their own view, but also creating a public impression easily utilized by their orthodox Tory opponents as supposed evidence of their implicit alliance or at least connection with more radical enemies of the Church. This impression is, as we have seen, how some modern historians have interpreted the situation, having taken what seemed to them the noise of the battle as evidence of the real thing.

Part of the underlying problem in this misinterpretation of the historical record has been that the High Church has been considered to have been in great decline in these years, and consequently without significant influence on events or opinions. In addition, on account of the traditional Enlightenment studies focus on radicalism, the very idea of a conservative ecclesiastical lobby having any significant input into the enlightened scene or at least its historical record has been dismissed out of hand. For many years it had been held that the mid and late Georgian Church was dominated by an all-pervasive Latitudinarianism. This view was challenged by J. C. D. Clark in his *English Society 1688–1832* (1985), arguing that ‘Tories and Jacobites before 1760, far from being a tiny fringe of fanatics, were a large sector of society. They possessed a powerful and credible ideology.’83 More recently, Walsh and Taylor have noted that ‘[i]f the fortunes of High Churchmanship ebbed and flowed, it seems always to have commanded the allegiance of size-able sections of the clergy’. Indeed, ‘the theological (i.e. not ceremonial) tradition of High Anglicanism seems [to have been] strengthening rather than diminishing in the later decades’ of the century.84 The issue of a weak or demoralized or strong or confident eighteenth-century conservative Church goes to the very heart of Enlightenment studies. A strong and/or confident High Church could feel able to exaggerate the deist or ‘rational’ threat (High Church polemicists had always maintained that Latitudinarianism was a cloak for heresy) with the design of calling its ranks and some
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of the wavering Latitudinarians to order, and forging increased
unity against dissenting campaigns for greater toleration without
running any significant risk.

So although anticlericalism did undoubtedly exist, the public
and press could still be rallied to the support of popular
Anglicanism. Of course deists, those (in the popular portrayal)
without Christian morals or allegiance to Church and King, were
exactly that, perceived threats to Englishness loosely embodied in
Anglicanism. From one historical vantage point, then, it could ap-
ppear to all intents and purposes as if the Church was besieged on all
sides by its enemies, and many clergy were quite happy to subscribe
to that version of reality. The paradox is that the public appearance
of radical Enlightenment strength was in part predicated upon a
Church establishment – or elements of it – that was confident
enough to allow that fiction in order to serve its own ends.

There is yet another dimension or shade to our canvas, for as
Walsh and Taylor have also noted, although ‘historians are confi-
dent that “High” Anglicanism existed as a potent force throughout
the eighteenth century, they are not always so confident in defining
what it was. What makes the taxonomy of church groups particu-
larly difficult is the way in which political definitions became peri-
odically entangled with religious ones … for many Englishmen in
the early eighteenth century High Churchmanship suggested the
Tory party at prayer.’ Such labels were used for political stereotyp-
ing but ‘the political use of partisan terminology did not necessarily
coincide with the religious usage…. One might be a “High Church-
man” in a political sense and not in a doctrinal sense,’85 or indeed
vice versa. One such example was Bishop Gibson, a court Whig yet
High Churchman. As Cragg long ago put it, if Walpole was some-
times embarrassed by the anticlerical outbursts of his followers, ‘his
position was easy compared with that of Bishop Gibson of London,
his great ally in the management of Church affairs. Gibson was
both a staunch High Churchman and a convinced Whig. His diffi-
culties stemmed from the intermediate position in which his party
still found itself.’ The Whigs certainly believed in toleration, ‘[b]ut
the Whig churchmen themselves regarded the Church as part of the
constitutional settlement, as a body of immense political impor-
tance whose support must be won for the Hanoverian regime’.86
This was the basis of the Church–Whig alliance against Dissenter
campaigns for greater toleration and Church reform (against tithe
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Naturally, Gibson deplored much of the anticlerical thought of many Whigs and was therefore viewed as a staunch defender of the Church even against other Whigs. This is an extremely important point, for much of the sparse evidence for the ‘reality’ of the deist movement is anecdotal, and one such significant source is the life of Bishop Gibson as related by Sykes. As we have seen, Walsh and Taylor, for instance, have said that in the 1730s ‘deism seemed to have become dangerously fashionable in the haut monde and contributed to an outbreak of anti-clericalism in parliament unparalleled, in the opinion of Norman Sykes, since Henry VIII’s Reformation Parliament…. The Church leaders of the period sounded shrill notes of alarm.’ The evidence adduced for that ‘dangerously fashionable’ deist movement inciting attacks upon the Church remains, however, at the level of Sykes’s anecdote. Walsh and Taylor, it appears, have underestimated the intense interconnections between Church, state, Parliament, press and public opinion and the capacity of those connections to colour the historical record. What may have misled them and others is that Sykes’s account of the life of Bishop Gibson is above all a eulogy to a High Churchman who was – as Sykes’s account demonstrates – almost fanatical in his zeal against any threat to the Church, urging (unsuccessfully) the imprisonment of deists and unremittingly hostile to both Dissenters and Latitudinarians. Naturally, therefore, Sykes’s account highlights at some length the evils of the deist and sceptical threat and focuses on Gibson’s heroic role in fighting them.

As Sykes himself recounts it, ‘the clergy were the objects of a series of sharp and damaging attacks during the latter half of the Parliament of 1727–33, which recalled the Reformation Parliament of Henry VIII in its zeal to attack the stronghold of clerical privilege and abuse’. The ‘Church was being attacked on all sides and was steadily losing ground. The Deists were penetrating into the very citadel of revelation … and the general temper of scepticism and immorality was detaching many of those who had adhered to it outwardly in former times.’ According to Sykes, the main champion in the struggle against the tide of hostility was of course Bishop Gibson, cutting a heroic figure in that ‘stirring scene’. That ‘stirring scene’ was of course also a political one, with party-political struggle at its core. Walpole was happy for the Whigs to be seen as defenders of the Church against even a largely imaginary deist
threat, but exasperated with Gibson’s implacable hostility to Latitu-
dinarians and Dissenters, which in electoral terms was more of a
liability. This is also the politico-religious position of Sykes in his
biography of Gibson, and Sykes exaggerates the scale of the attack
on the Church and its importance, making it appear as if deism was
a sizeable threat. We know that anticlerical outbursts by Whigs and
their supporters were a commonplace, even if churchmen were apt
to exaggerate the scale and content of them with allusions to infidel-
ity and deism. Thomas Secker (1693–1768), subsequently Arch-
bishop of Canterbury, for instance, wrote that ‘Christianity is now
railed at and ridiculed with very little reserve, and its teachings
without any at all. Against us our adversaries appear to have set
themselves to be as bitter as they can, not only beyond all truth, but
beyond all probability, exaggerating without mercy.’

In 1736, disillusioned with the Whigs’ attitude to the Church,
Gibson broke with Walpole and, for his own High Church reasons,
himself encouraged ‘a persistent vein of anticlericalism in Parlia-
ment’. By then, however, Gibson had already played a most im-
portant part in what Sykes has termed the victory of the dialectic of
orthodox divines over deism, ‘the most important event of Church
history since the Reformation’. It is true, however, that as a propa-
gandist for the Church, Gibson was almost without equal and he
contributed to a large degree to the construction of the myth of a
defist movement. It has been said that “the success of his efforts was
largely due to the fact that he had addressed himself to the common
man…. “At the debate between the Deists and the Christian apolo-
gists the public was umpire” ... Because Gibson appealed to the
people, therefore his writings became popular.” There is no doubt
that Gibson, presiding over the most populous and politically sig-
nificant diocese in Britain, did manage to reach large numbers of the
public with his anti-deist scaremongering, which was designed to
frighten Anglican waverers into line and away from Latitudinarian-
ism. His anti-infidelity arguments were transmitted in various writ-
ings and numerous sermons, but above all in his pastoral letters,
and the printing figures are an extraordinary testament to the scale
of the myth of deistic radicalism in the Enlightenment. No fewer
than 30,000 copies of his first Pastoral Letter (1728) were printed
by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. The second edi-
tion ran to 27,000 copies and the third edition to 17,000. A further
collected edition also ran to 3,000 copies, and some translated into
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French for refugees. Many other Anglican and some non-Anglican writers propagated the same theme in numbers of books, tracts and pamphlets. Given that many or most were sold in London and a multiple readership for many copies must be assumed, these figures bear ample evidence not to the reality of deism or any ‘radical’ Enlightenment, but to the ability of the bogeyman of deism and associated suppositious threats to the Church to reach a popular level.

Dissent and Enlightenment

Any period, past or present, can be assessed in terms of continuity or change, or both, although such choices are not necessarily always conscious. It is only natural for us to look for or highlight new elements that seem to characterize or delineate one historical period from another. But, as Munck in his comparative social history of the Enlightenment has recently reminded us, selecting such elements constitutes little more than a snapshot, a few frames in a long film of untold numbers of frames. Such selective treatment, therefore, can be extremely misleading, serving to minimize, even trivialize vastly greater and more dominant elements of continuity. As has already been argued in the previous chapter, relying on snapshots or what may be called the headlines of history can lead us to believe that the exceptions were the rule, and so to characterize a period in one manner rather than another. Munck too reminds us that – as was certainly the case with the leading English deists such as John Toland – the notoriety of a work or its author is not necessarily an indicator of influence, but more usually an indicator of the limits of acceptability of such ideas and thus their very restricted appeal. So, the old measure of counting the replies to works that challenged hitherto accepted notions is just as likely to measure the lack of acceptability of a work as its ‘influence’.

Yet we, myself included, persist in believing there was an intellectual phenomenon in eighteenth-century Europe we term the Enlightenment. Indeed, once we broaden our gaze from the coterie of intellectuals traditionally deemed to personify the Enlightenment, we can see it was a relatively broad intellectual phenomenon cutting across religion and political affiliation rather than being determined by such allegiances. Nowhere was this more apparent than in England and Scotland. The Scottish Enlightenment has for some been
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seen as an exception to the general European trend, in so far as much of its intellectual thrust emanated from clerical and established milieux. But there is ample evidence to suggest that the Scottish Enlightenment was far less exceptional that has been considered, and that the English Enlightenment hardly constituted a narrow affair restricted to the traditional canonical figures including Newton, Locke, Hume and just a few deists.

There is now almost a consensus that there was no automatic enmity between Enlightenment and religion in eighteenth-century England. It should hardly need recounting that Locke, the empiricist and great campaigner for toleration, and Newton, the unraveller of the laws of gravity, were devout Christians and that science and religion most often happily coexisted. Religion and science were, in fact, seen as complementary to each other, as evident in the work of Boyle and his Christian Virtuoso: Shewing that by being Addicted to Experimental Philosophy a Man is rather Assisted than Indisposed to Be a Good Christian (1690). Further, it may even be said that there is more evidence of attitudes to science being influenced by religion than there is evidence for religion being influenced by science. As Fara has noted, natural philosophers were centrally involved in gradual but fundamental changes central to the culture of the Enlightenment. Isaac Newton and his many admirers and adherents legitimated their scientific activities by tying the production of knowledge to the public good. They also asserted that the world had been created by a benevolent God for human benefit, thus the exploration and exploitation of nature was translated into holy commandment. The ‘natural philosophers converted their private experiments into a public science by demonstrating their successful domination and manipulation of nature. As they marketed their products, they participated in building a materialist society dependent on their expertise. They used various tactics to enlist public support and capture appreciative audiences, packaging their skills, instruments and knowledge into sellable commodities competing for polite income.’ Some of the greatest scientific thinkers of the century were, like Newton, Dissenters. Indeed, Roy Porter has recently described Dissenters, along with sceptics and those resentful of the traditional authority of Church and state, as ‘fomenters of the Enlightenment’, and underlined the fact that Newtonianism tended to bolster Latitudinarianism as evidence of a constant, divine intervention in maintaining the universe.
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Before the end of the 1770s, Dissenters and dissident Anglicans ranked amongst the foremost writers on political, religious, philosophical and scientific issues. Dissenters themselves were generally predisposed to look positively upon the acquisition of knowledge and many of the general tenets of the Enlightenment. Writing of the late eighteenth century, for instance, Fitzpatrick has noted that

Dissenting Protestantism, heterodoxy, and enlightenment, were closely interrelated ... Rational Dissenters ... believed that the Reformation was far from complete ... Rational Dissenting religion thus constituted an endless search for truth and understanding. It was distrustful of dogma and received opinion, and it encouraged its adherents to seek enlightenment by free enquiry. This concern for the unfettered pursuit of truth, and willingness to pursue truth into the wilderness of heterodoxy was most marked amongst the English Presbyterians.98

Dissenters knew very well that Newton had been heterodox in his ideas and thus felt that the whole Newtonian tradition was – in terms of intellectual endowment – proof of divine favour to such seekers of true religion. For Dissenters, reason and revelation were considered to be complementary in the scientific field; both scientific and theological truths could be understood through the application of reason with revelation providing extra assistance. Another aspect of the congruence of Dissenter thought with the broad progress-orientated aims of the Enlightenment was the belief that reason and revelation had been proved to be consonant with the very latest scientific ideas. In his Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations (1749), for instance, the dissenting Anglican David Hartley had deduced that the mind was mechanistic, as much subject to the laws of cause and effect as any other part of nature. In addition, he was sure that a benevolent God had at heart the ultimate and unlimited happiness of the human race; thus human actions innately tended towards virtue and happiness. Starting from Hartley’s theory of the association of ideas, the dissenting scientist Priestley took the further step of considering the human will to be subject to the same ‘mechanical’ laws of the mind: the mind desires an object because it provides pleasure, and the highest pleasure of man was to act in conformity with the divine will. Priestley assumed that an innate providence was leading humanity slowly but inevitably to happiness along the path of progress,99
writing that ‘it is in the order of providence, that man, and the world, should arrive at their most improved state by slow degrees’.100

The fact that the dissenting community was seen to contain distinguished scientists such as Richard Price and Joseph Priestley was merely more confirmation of the long-standing Dissenter conviction about the place of true religion in the field of enlightenment. Dissenters were not competing for the honour of their sects, but rather stressed the role of free discussion as the route to scientific and intellectual truth. Such convictions, in Fitzpatrick’s words, amounted to that ‘sense of growing enlightenment, of the possibility of moral regeneration, which is detectable in the European Enlightenment’. Late-eighteenth-century Dissenters were thus naturally also leaders in the call for religious toleration, one of the hallmarks of the Enlightenment.101 Perhaps the major influence here was Joseph Priestley. In his *Essay on the First Principles of Government*, Priestley argued that Locke had been too confined in his notions of toleration. Priestley was in favour of universal toleration, including Catholics, primarily because in a free society truth would always triumph over error.102 As we shall see in the next chapter, in France, as in England, the main impetus for broad campaigns to extend toleration in the eighteenth century came from committed Christians rather than from deists or other enemies of Christianity.

Notes

1 The Clarendon Code was composed of four Acts designed to cripple the power of the Nonconformists: the Corporation Act 1661, the Act of Conformity 1662, the Conventicle Act 1664, and the Five Mile Act 1665.

2 In his ‘England’s Troubles: Exhuming the Popish Plot’, in T. Harris, P. Seaward and M. Goldie (eds), *Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), Jonathan Scott argues that much of the seventeenth century can be understood as a continuity of crises – 1637–42, 1678–83, 1687–89 – that were fundamentally about religion. This is, however, to go too far, for there were fundamental interconnections between politics, economics and religion in that century and remained so in the next.


5 T. Halyburton, *Natural Religion insufficient; and Reveal’d necessary to man’s happiness* (Edinburgh, 1714), p. 25.

6 R. Porter, *Enlightenment Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (Lon-
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don, Penguin, 2000, p. 112.
13 On Howard’s Unitarianism see, for example, where he writes of the ‘Being and Unity of God’ (History of Religion, p. 315).
14 Champion (Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken, pp. 16–1) has argued that Dennis is a deist or freethinker.
15 J. Dennis, Priestcraft distinguished from Christianity (London, 1715), preface, p. 3; text, pp. 1–2, 8–9, 31–2, 39. The analysis contained in this work is much the same as in his The Danger of Priestcraft to Religion and Government, with some Politick Reasons for Toleration (London, 1702).
16 Champion (Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken, pp. 160–1) has claimed Trenchard as a deist or freethinker.
17 Porter claims John Trenchard is a deist (Enlightenment Britain, pp. 31–2), as does Munck (The Enlightenment, pp. 31–2), and also Clark (English Society, p. 438).
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30 On Goldie see his ‘Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism’.

31 On eighteenth-century Unitarianism and politics see the useful discussion in D. Nicholls, God and Government in an Age of Reason (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), ch. 3.


35 For an appreciation of Toland written within living memory of his life, see the biography of him prefaced to Toland’s posthumous A Critical History of the Celtic Religion and Learning (London, 1740), esp. pp. 6–7.

36 J. Toland, An Apology for Mr Toland (1697), quoted in Evans, Pantheisticon, p. 24.


38 For more discussion of the difficulties of terming Toland a republican see, for example, R. Sullivan, John Toland and the Deist Controversy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 149.

39 On Toland’s concern for the Protestant succession see also the biography of Toland prefaced to his Critical History of the Celtic Religion.

40 John Toland, Vindicius liberius: or M. Toland’s Defence of Himself, against the Lower House of Convocation (London, 1702), pp. 26–7, 162. On Toland’s
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41 P. Harrison, ‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Avon: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 87, and Evans, *Pantheisticon*, pp. 14–15, also describe Christianity not Mysterious as a work aimed at reform of the Protestant Church. Evans (p. 15) notes that Toland, on account of his religious concerns, cannot be written off as a ‘sceptic or simple deist’; so too does Sullivan in his John Toland and the Deist Controversy.

42 J. Toland, Christianity not Mysterious (London, 1696), preface, pp. 9, 21; text pp. 168–76. On Toland’s belief that Christianity demonstrated the immortality of the soul and for more on the condemnation of superstition and idolatry see Toland’s *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704).

43 See, for instance, Henry Ainsworth’s *An Arrow against Idolatry. Taken out of the Quiver of the Lord of Hosts* (1611).

44 Convocation of Canterbury, A Representation of the present state of Religion, with regard to the ... growth of infidelity, Heresy, and Profaneness (London, 1711), p. 5.

45 Toland, Christianity not Mysterious, pp. 159–63, 168–71.


47 Herrick, The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists, pp. 6, 10, 12, 205, 211.


51 Ibid., p. 67; see also D. Berman, A History of Atheism in Britain (New York: Croom Helm, 1988).


53 In his Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists, Herrick cites following deists: Joseph Addison, Annet, Peter Blount, Thomas Chubb, Collins, Shaftesbury, Henry Dodwell (the younger, d. 1748), Morgan, Tindal, Toland, William Woolaston and Thomas Woolston.


56 Ibid., p. 162.

57 Sullivan, John Toland and the Deist Controversy, pp. 7–9.

58 Ibid., pp. 9–10.

59 Ibid., p. 109.

60 Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason, p. 165.

61 Porter, Enlightenment Britain, p. 98.

62 Mossner, Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason, pp. 79, 152, 177, 238.

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64 Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason, p. 129.
65 Mossner, Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason, p. 27.
67 G. Holmes, The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 32, 43–5, 47. For more on the place of the state within the thought of High Churchmen see, for instance, Grell, Israel and Tyacke (eds), From Persecution to Toleration.
68 Holmes, The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell, pp. 51, 55.
69 Ibid., p. 75.
70 Ibid., pp. 240–1, 254.
75 Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason, p. 120.
76 Ibid., p. 127.
77 Walsh and Taylor, ‘The Church and Anglicanism’, p. 27.
78 In his Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, Haydon has shown how the Church-in-danger cry was directed at popery and Dissent by the elite and the clergy in order to foster greater allegiance to the Church and a sense of Anglican national identity.
79 Porter, Enlightenment Britain, p. 23.
81 Porter, Enlightenment Britain, p. 97.
83 Clark, English Society, p. 279.
85 Ibid., p. 34.
86 Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason, p. 120.
89 Sykes, Edmund Gibson, pp. 149, 247, 289–90.
90 Quoted in Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason, p. 127.
91 Ward, Christianity under the Ancien Régime, p. 240.
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94 Ibid., p. 134.
95 For discussion on various aspects of Dissent and Enlightenment see, for example, Haakonsen, Enlightenment and Religion; and M. Fitzpatrick, ‘Heretical Religion and Radical Political Ideas in Late Eighteenth-Century England’, in E. Hellmuth (ed.), The Transformation of Political Culture. England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century (Oxford: German Historical Institute, 1990).
97 Porter, Enlightenment Britain, pp. 47, 135–6.
99 On Priestley’s theory of progress see his The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated (London, 1777).
100 J. Priestley, A General History of the Christian Church from the Fall of the Western Empire to the Present Time (4 vols, Northumberland, USA, 1802–3), vol. 2, p. 25.
102 Fitzpatrick, ‘Heretical Religion and Radical Political Ideas’, pp. 343, 357.