

# Reason, Grace, and Sentiment

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*A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics  
in England, 1660–1780*

VOLUME II  
SHAFTESBURY TO HUME

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# The true religion of nature: the freethinkers and their opponents

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[The first Earl of Shaftesbury] conferring one day with Major WILDMAN about the many sects of Religion in the world, they came to this conclusion at last; that, notwithstanding those infinite divisions caus'd by the interest of the Priests and the ignorance of the People, ALL WISE MEN ARE OF THE SAME RELIGION: wherupon a Lady in the room, who seem'd to mind her needle more than their discourse, demanded with some concern what that Religion was? to whom the Lord SHAFTESBURY strait reply'd, *Madam, wise men never tell.*

Toland, 'Clidophorus', *Tetradymus* (1720), 94–5

there's a Religion of Nature and Reason written in the Hearts of every one of us from the first Creation; by which all Mankind must judge of the Truth of any instituted Religion whatever.

Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), 50

Natural Religion, justly so called, is bound up in Revealed, is supported, cherished, and kept alive by it; and cannot so much as subsist in any Vigor without it. To take away revealed Religion from it, is to strip it of its firmest aids and strongest Securities, leaving it in a very low and languishing State, without Lights sufficient to explain it, or Guards to fence it, or Sanctions to bind it.

Waterland, *Scripture Vindicated*, Part I (1730), 1–2

Certainly whatever evils this nation might have formerly sustained from superstition, no man of common sense will say the evils felt or apprehended at present are from that quarter. Priestcraft is not the reigning distemper at this day.

Berkeley, *Alciphron* (1732)<sup>1</sup>

What is the religion of nature? In what principles is this religion founded? By what laws is it regulated? What are the bounds by which it is terminated? and what duties does it prescribe?

Ogilvie, *Inquiry into the Causes of the Infidelity and Scepticism of the Times* (1783), 179

## 1 Freethinking, deism, and atheism

The movement known as freethinking or deism has been the subject of a good deal of confusion, and there has been little agreement among

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III (1950), 218.

historians about either its meaning or its importance. Because of the constrained circumstances in which the freethinkers worked their methods were oblique, with the result that it is often difficult to know how to read them. Much of their writing was ephemeral and must be disentangled from the contemporary controversies in which they were continually involved, though it is not always possible to separate an argument from its rhetorical context. In recent years several historians have found out a great deal more about what the freethinkers wrote, the circles in which they moved, and the controversies in which they took part, but this invaluable new information has not produced agreement or solved the problem of interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

There are three main emphases in the writings of the freethinkers, though they do not constitute a coherent set of attitudes to which individual freethinkers could subscribe (some of the positions outlined are clearly incompatible with one another). The first is a general anti-Christian stance. Though some freethinkers chose for defensive or other reasons to present themselves at times as Christians and adherents of the Established Church, this is the one position they all share. It consists of hostility on the one hand to Scripture and the scriptural tradition (including the mysteries contained in it and the process whereby the canon was assembled and transmitted), and on the other to the role of the clergy (always termed priests) and their damaging influence on the people. In the freethinkers' characteristic terminology the priests exercise a trade called priestcraft, by means of fraud, cheat and imposture making the people the victims of superstition and prejudice. Sometimes for polemical purposes the true gospel of Christ or primitive Christianity is differentiated from priestly mysteries. This anti-Christian stance is compatible with either a theist stress on natural religion or with atheist materialism.

The second emphasis is epistemological and methodological. It takes the form of a series of attempts to discover through the use of reason whether religious language has any meaning, whether anything intelligible can be said about God, and whether the traditional requirement of belief in things above but not contrary to reason is feasible. Though the terms and arguments used are derived from Christian writers – the latitudinarians and Locke – the tendency of these enquiries is sceptical, atheist, and materialist, and freethinkers who accept the existence and traditional

<sup>2</sup> The classic studies are Stephen, *English Thought* (1876), Chapters 2–4; Robertson, *History of Freethought*, 4th edn (1936), II. Modern works include Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea* (1964); Berman, *Atheism in Britain* (1988), which draws on his earlier articles; Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft* (1992); Hunter and Wootton, eds., *Atheism* (1992); M. Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment* (1981); Lemay, ed., *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment* (1987); Lund, ed., *Margins of Orthodoxy* (1995); Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion* (1976); Sullivan, *Toland and the Deist Controversy* (1982). Relevant works concentrating on continental freethought include Buckley, *Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987); Kors, *Atheism in France*, vol. I (1990); Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (1959).

attributes of God do not engage in them. The implications of these enquiries were not spelt out, though contemporary critics were in no doubt as to where they led. Some modern readers have been more reluctant to interpret them in a destructive sense.

The third emphasis is on natural religion, but the meaning of this much used phrase when divorced from Christianity is problematic. At one end of the spectrum, it is theoretically possible for natural religion to carry the weight of meaning that it has for the latitudinarian, with the important exception that revealed religion is regarded as being redundant. This position is what is now generally understood by 'deism'. However, the reason for this separation of natural from revealed religion may be the desire not so much to establish a universal, non-Christian religion as to provide a natural basis for ethics without supernatural religious sanctions. At the other extreme natural religion may carry the implication of materialism without any religious connotation. In such a situation the phrase is perhaps being used ironically or as a rhetorical device; it is certainly being interpreted in a new way. The phrase would obviously mean different things to different kinds of freethinker, for example one who believed in a benevolent providence, one who regarded the concept of an unknowable first cause as meaningless, or one who regarded God as immanent in nature.

Because of this range of opinion freethinking is a better, more inclusive term than deism, which does not describe the views of some freethinkers. There was considerable disagreement at the time about appropriate labels; often they were applied as terms of opprobrium without any precise meaning attached. Thus the terms Arian, Socinian, and unitarian, which refer to specific versions of Christian theology that were gaining ground in late seventeenth-century England and which in different ways restrict the function or deny the godhead of Jesus and stress the role of reason in interpreting Scripture, were sometimes loosely jumbled with deist, sceptic, infidel, and atheist, as though they were virtually synonymous. So Toland, summing up the attacks of the clergy on his *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), concluded that they made him 'the Head of all the *Arians, Socinians, Deists,* and *Infidels* in the three Kingdoms',<sup>3</sup> and Collins complained of the way these indiscriminate labels were used against the latitudinarians by their opponents: '*If any good Christian happens to reason better than ordinary, they presently charge him with Atheism, Deism, or Socinianism: as if good Sense and Orthodoxy could not subsist together*'.<sup>4</sup>

On the face of it these terms are contradictory: the Socinian, however attenuated his theology in the eyes of the orthodox, regards himself as a Christian and takes the Bible seriously; the deist believes in God; the

<sup>3</sup> *Vindicius Liberius* (1702), 150.

<sup>4</sup> *Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), 84.

atheist does not. But the linking of these terms by the clerical opponents of the freethinkers was more than a smear. The freethinkers borrowed some of their methodology from the Socinians, and their opponents were right to stress this fact. Similarly, there is something to be said for the clergy's repeated assertion that deism is disguised atheism. Toland complained that the word atheist was thrown around so much that it was like calling everyone a son of a whore – 'it ordinarily signifys no more than a Man's being passionatly displeas'd against those who dissent from him'.<sup>5</sup> The modern reader must try to distinguish the reasoned use of the term from the careless and vindictive. If the freethinkers were atheists, there were good grounds for them to disguise the fact, as their opponents well knew. Locke's view of atheists in *A Letter concerning Toleration* (1689) as destroyers of all promises, covenants, and oaths who must not be tolerated in society was very widely shared.<sup>6</sup> Locke argued in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* that it was fear that prevented atheists from declaring themselves:

the Complaints of Atheism, made from the Pulpit, are not without Reason. And though only some profligate Wretches own it too barefacedly now; yet, perhaps, we should hear, more than we do, of it, from others, did not the fear of the Magistrate's Sword, or their Neighbour's Censure, tie up Peoples Tongues; which, were the Apprehensions of Punishment, or Shame taken away, would as openly proclaim their *Atheism*, as their Lives do.<sup>7</sup>

Locke was himself unjustly accused of atheism, and in *A Vindication of The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) tried to establish criteria to prevent the indiscriminate application of the term: 'atheism being a crime, which, for its madness as well as guilt, ought to shut a man out of all sober and civil society, should be very warily charged on any one, by deductions and consequences, which he himself does not own, or, at least, do not manifestly and unavoidably flow from what he asserts'.<sup>8</sup> The problem is that in a society in which atheism is a crime the atheist is most unlikely to let such consequences flow manifestly; he must be circumspect and disguise himself. So all accusations of atheism involve a deductive leap. Richard Bentley succinctly spelt out in his Boyle lectures the assumptions that were made:

<sup>5</sup> *Vindicius Liberius*, 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Works*, 12th edn (1824), V, 47. Locke's Latin text was translated by William Popple. See J. Dunn, 'The Claim to Freedom of Conscience', in Grell *et al.*, eds., *From Persecution to Toleration* (1991), 178ff; Harris, *Mind of Locke* (1994), 185ff; Marshall, *Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (1994), 357–70.

<sup>7</sup> *Essay*, 4th enlarged edn (1700), ed. Nidditch (1975), 88. The *Essay* was first published in 1690.

<sup>8</sup> *Works*, VI, 161–2. Locke was replying to the attacks of John Edwards. See V. Nuovo, Introductions to *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1997) and *John Locke and Christianity* (1997); the second includes extracts from Edwards.

There are some infidels among us that not only disbelieve the *Christian* religion, but oppose the assertions of *Providence*, of the *immortality* of the soul, of an universal *judgment* to come, and of any *incorporeal* essence; and yet, to avoid the odious name of *Atheists*, would shelter and screen themselves under a new one of *Deists*, which is not quite so obnoxious.

Bentley's view is that

the modern disguised *Deists* do only call themselves so for the former reason of Epicurus, to decline the public odium and resentment of the magistrate, and that they cover the most arrant Atheism under the mask and shadow of a Deity; by which they understand no more than some eternal inanimate matter, some universal nature, and soul of the world, void of all sense and cogitation, so far from being endowed with infinite wisdom and goodness.<sup>9</sup>

Bentley's view is worth taking seriously (and its implications will be considered in sections 2 and 3 below), though he is wrong to lump all 'deists' together. Here it is important to note that it is their opponents who apply the term freely; the 'deists' rarely call themselves such. Their favourite name, freethinker, suggests adherence not to a particular religious position or set of ethical tenets but to a frame of mind and a method of enquiry. Collins defines freethinking as '*The Use of the Understanding, in endeavouring to find out the Meaning of any Proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature of the Evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming Force or Weakness of the Evidence.*'<sup>10</sup> It entails the obligation not to accept any argument on any authority except that of reason. Collins argues in the Preface to *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), setting out an important series of principles, that it is a basic human right and also a duty, because without freethinking and its necessary concomitants, free professing, free teaching, and free debate, error may triumph or truth may be supported only by authority and not by its own merits. The ultimate aim of the freethinker is truth:

Men have no reason to apprehend any ill consequence to truth (for which alone they ought to have any concern) from *free debate*; but on the contrary to apprehend ill consequence to truth from *free debate* being disallow'd . . . And while *free debate* is allow'd, truth will never want a professor thereof, nor an advocate to offer some plea in its behalf: and it can never be wholly banish'd, but where human decisions, back'd with power, carry all before them.<sup>11</sup>

Freethinking is a rational process by which truth is discovered; it does not presuppose what that truth is. The freethinkers' opponents, however,

<sup>9</sup> Sermon I, 'The Folly of Atheism, and (what is now called) Deism' (1692), *Works*, ed. Dyce (1838), III, 4, 6–7. On the Boyle lectures see below, p. 17. Stillingfleet makes a similar point in the Preface to *Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697), I–li: 'if they be pressed home, very few among them will sincerely own any more than a Series of Causes, without any intellectual Perfections, which they call *God*.'

<sup>10</sup> *Free-Thinking*, 5. <sup>11</sup> *Grounds and Reasons*, xvii–viii.



objected strongly to their appropriation of the term. A freethinker, according to the orthodox Euphranor in Berkeley's *Alciphron*, ought to mean 'every honest inquirer after truth in any age or country'.<sup>12</sup> But the so-called freethinkers, according to their critics, had no time for those whose freethinking led to conclusions different from theirs, and far from encouraging freedom of thought they inculcated atheist dogma, the worst kind of slavery: 'under the specious show of *Free-thinking*,' objected Bentley, 'a *Set and System of Opinions* are all along inculcated and dogmatically Taught: *Opinions* the most *Slavish*, the most abject and base, that Human Nature is capable of';<sup>13</sup> 'upon a thorough and impartial view', agreed Berkeley, 'it will be found that their endeavours, instead of advancing the cause of liberty and truth, tend only to introduce slavery and error among men.'<sup>14</sup> Bentley suggested that the freethinkers would soon renounce the name if the clergy were to profess that they were themselves the true freethinkers.<sup>15</sup> Berkeley refused to allow them the name and called them instead the minute philosophers, 'they being a sort of sect which diminish all the most valuable things, the thoughts, views, and hopes of men'.<sup>16</sup> Because the freethinkers' methods had consequences which their opponents deplored, these critics denied that they had any serious methods at all: their real motivation was licentiousness and libertinism, not liberty of thought. This identification of freethinking with libertinism was rightly attacked by the third Earl of Shaftesbury as 'a treacherous Language, and Abuse of Words', but he in turn accused his clerical opponents of deliberately fostering superstition and bigotry:

THE artificial Managers of this human Frailty declaim against *Free-Thought*, and *Latitude* of Understanding. To go beyond those Bounds of thinking which they have prescrib'd, is by them declar'd a *Sacrilege*. To them, FREEDOM of Mind, a MASTERY of Sense, and a LIBERTY in Thought and Action, imply Debauch, Corruption, and Depravity . . . 'Tis to them doubtless that we owe the Opprobriousness and Abuse of those naturally honest Appellations of *Free-Livers*, *Free-Thinkers*, *Latitudinarians*, or whatever other Character implies a Largeness of Mind and generous Use of Understanding. Fain wou'd they confound *Licentiousness in Morals*, with *Liberty in Thought and Action*; and make the *Libertine*, who has the least Mastery of himself, resemble his direct *Opposite*.<sup>17</sup>

Each side in the dispute denied that its opponents had intellectual honesty

<sup>12</sup> *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Remarks upon a Late Discourse of Free-Thinking* (3rd edn, 1713), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Berkeley, *Guardian* no. 83, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, VII, 216.

<sup>15</sup> *Remarks*, Part II (1713), 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Alciphron*, *Works*, III, ed. Luce and Jessop, 46. The label is taken from Cicero's *minuti philosophi*, who do not believe in life after death, at the end of *De Senectute*, xxiii, 85.

<sup>17</sup> *Characteristicks* (2nd edn, 1714, 1st published 1711), III, 311, 305, 306. All subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise stated. For publication details see Chapter 2 below. Collins quoted the last sentence (omitting 'who . . . himself') on the title page of *Free-Thinking*.

or good faith. The freethinkers claimed that the clergy were out to gag and blind the people in order to keep themselves in business; the clergy claimed that the freethinkers manipulated rational tools for purely destructive purposes and to justify their own immorality. But though they utterly misrepresented each others' motives, both sides were clearly aware of what the issues at stake were.

Though freethinking in some form can be traced back to the Commonwealth period and earlier, it took recognisable shape in the 1690s in the ideas and activities of a few influential individuals, the most important of whom were John Toland (1670–1722), Anthony Collins (1676–1729), Matthew Tindal (1657–1733), and Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713).<sup>18</sup> The principal disseminator of freethinking views before the Revolution of 1688 was Charles Blount (1654–93). The controversy between later freethinkers and their clerical opponents continued well into the 1740s and 50s, but the crucial years are from the late 1690s to the early 1730s. The freethinkers of this period differed considerably from each other in their social position and way of life. Toland, by birth an Irish Catholic who converted to Presbyterianism and was educated at Scottish and Dutch universities, was a professional writer and political opportunist who was increasingly distrusted by his associates; Collins, educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge, was a country gentleman and JP; Tindal was a lawyer and fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, all his adult life, and had been a Roman Catholic convert in the reign of James II; Shaftesbury was a wealthy and politically influential nobleman. They had, however, certain important points in common. Politically they were extreme Whigs, in varying degrees either sympathetic to or active propagators of the republican tradition of the 1650s, and hostile to the political power of the Established Church. In the 1690s Toland wrote political tracts in collaboration with Shaftesbury and other Whigs, and edited a very important collection of the political writings and memoirs of republicans of the Commonwealth and Restoration period: Harrington, Milton, Holles, Sidney, and Ludlow.<sup>19</sup> In addition to their common political sympathies, the freethinkers in different ways were associated with John Locke (1632–1704).<sup>20</sup> Locke had been political adviser and friend to Shaftesbury's grandfather, the first Earl, and was in charge of the education of the future third Earl; after Locke's death

<sup>18</sup> On Toland see Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. John Toland', in Toland, *Miscellaneous Works*, ed. Des Maizeaux (1747), I; Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft*; Daniel, *Toland* (1984); Heinemann, 'Toland and the Age of Enlightenment', *RES*, XX (1944), 125–46; Sullivan, *Toland*. On Collins see Berman, 'Collins: Aspects of his Thought and Writings', *Hermathena*, XCVII (1975), 49–70; Berman, *History of Atheism*, Chapter 3; O'Higgins, *Collins* (1970). On Shaftesbury see Chapter 2 below, n.4.

<sup>19</sup> See Worden, Introduction to Ludlow, *Voyce from the Watch Tower* (1978).

<sup>20</sup> On Locke and his times see Fox Bourne, *Life of Locke* (1876).

Shaftesbury made explicit his dislike of Locke's philosophy. Collins became an extremely close friend of Locke at the end of his life, as appears from Locke's affectionate letters of 1703–4.<sup>21</sup> Tindal corresponded with Locke, and Toland certainly knew him, though Locke was careful to distance himself once Toland's freethinking views and publications had made him an embarrassment.<sup>22</sup> The ways in which the freethinkers both quarried and undermined Locke's epistemology and his moral and religious beliefs is a complicated matter which will be explored below.

A further common bond was the impact of Holland. With the exception of Tindal, about the details of whose life not much is known, the freethinkers each spent periods of time in Holland in the 1690s and after, as Locke had done in the 1680s, where they came in contact with Locke's friends the Remonstrants Le Clerc and Limborch and the Quaker Benjamin Furly, with the sceptical Calvinist Pierre Bayle, and in general with Huguenot, dissenting, and freethinking groups. Holland, with its tolerance of heterodox ideas and religious sects combined with material prosperity, seemed a haven of liberty and peace unknown in other countries;<sup>23</sup> it could provide both a refuge for freethinkers wishing to avoid the uproar their publications had caused in England (as was the case with Toland and Collins following the receptions respectively of *Christianity not Mysterious* and *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*), and a stimulus for intellectual development (thus Toland originally went to Holland in 1692 to train for the dissenting ministry and came back a freethinker).<sup>24</sup> In turn, Dutch journals, publishers and societies were the main channels through which English freethought reached the rest of Europe.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these significant links the four freethinkers named did not form a cohesive, homogeneous group; indeed, they differed from each other on some essential issues. Shaftesbury was proud of his 'generall Acquaintance . . . with most of our Modern Authors and free-Writers, severall of whome I have a particular influence over'.<sup>26</sup> He knew Collins well, as some letters of 1711 and 1712 testify,<sup>27</sup> and for a time both worked with and gave financial support to Toland. The extent of Shaftesbury's friendship with Toland was concealed by his son, the fourth Earl, who was anxious to present his father as an orthodox Christian. In 1699 Toland published anonymously Shaftesbury's ethical treatise, *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*, probably with Shaftesbury's approval (though this was denied by his

<sup>21</sup> In Locke, *Correspondence*, ed. de Beer, vols. 7 and especially 8.

<sup>22</sup> See Sullivan, *Toland*, 6–8, and n.125 below.

<sup>23</sup> See Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, xxx–xxxii.

<sup>24</sup> Sullivan, *Toland*, 11, O'Higgins, *Collins*, 78, M. Jacob, *Newtonians* (1976), 212–13.

<sup>25</sup> M. Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*, Chapter 5.

<sup>26</sup> To Pierre Des Maizeaux, 5 August 1701, in Voitle, *Shaftesbury* (1984), 90; modernised in Shaftesbury, *Life, Letters*, ed. Rand (1900), 307.

<sup>27</sup> *Life, Letters*, ed. Rand, 479–80.

son).<sup>28</sup> Yet this very interesting conjunction serves to underline the difference between Shaftesbury and the other freethinkers. Shaftesbury's unique importance was as the developer of a moral theory grounded in human nature and of a new moral vocabulary which was to have a wide and lasting influence later in the century, especially in Scotland. In contrast, neither Toland nor Collins wrote ethical works, and Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), which makes some pretension to that status and which owes a debt to Shaftesbury, is a disappointing book which deserved some at least of the scorn of its contemporary critics. Tindal, however, like Shaftesbury, was a deist and showed no interest in the materialist theories of Collins and Toland, nor in the sceptical purposes to which Lockean epistemology might be put.

Against these lay proponents of freethinking the clergy were drawn up. To the freethinkers it seemed that the priests joined ranks to defend their political power and social position – their trade. But the response was by no means from a monolithic body; clergy and ministers of all denominations and persuasions took part in the attack – it was perhaps the only cause that could temporarily unite them. Scottish Calvinists like Thomas Halyburton, dissenters like Isaac Watts, nonjurors like William Law, heterodox Anglicans like Samuel Clarke, orthodox ones like Edmund Gibson, however much they disagreed on matters of doctrine and discipline from the point of view of their respective churches and groupings, were in no doubt that the freethinking movement was not only anti-Christian but also fundamentally anti-religious, and consequently that its tendency was to make any kind of coherent and workable ethics impossible except on the basis of libertinism or Hobbesian coercion. Critical writing against the freethinkers took two main forms: general attempts to demolish the principles of freethinking and strengthen the authority of Christianity, and specific attacks on individual authors and their books. The same attack might embody both forms. Among the general attacks on the freethinkers' principles, the most important are those by Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), George Berkeley (1685–1753), and Joseph Butler (1692–1752). Clarke, though heterodox in his theology (his doubts about the doctrine of the Trinity made it impossible for him to rise in the Church, despite his abilities), was the most influential latitudinarian philosopher in the eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup> He gave the Boyle lectures in 1704 and 1705, the first set entitled *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes*

<sup>28</sup> 'A Sketch of the Life of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury', in *Life, Letters*, ed. Rand, xxiii, xxvi–viii; cf. Voitle, *Shaftesbury*, 134–5, 198–9.

<sup>29</sup> On Clarke see Hoadly, 'An Account of the Life and Writings of Dr. Clarke', in Hoadly, *Works*, III (1773), an adulatory account originally prefixed to Clarke's *Sermons* (1730) and his *Works* (1738); Whiston, *Memoirs of Clarke* (1730), which concentrates on the heterodoxy that Hoadly avoids; Ferguson, *An Eighteenth Century Heretic* (1976).

of God (published 1705), the second *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1706). The first deals in part with atheism, materialism, and necessitarianism, and is concerned with Hobbes, Spinoza, and their followers (among whom Toland is named),<sup>30</sup> the second with deism. Although Clarke posits four theoretical kinds of deist, this is purely a hypothesis set up in order to be knocked down. The challenging part of his argument is that there is no tenable position called deism midway between atheism and Christianity: natural religion supposes revealed religion.<sup>31</sup> This view was shared by Berkeley, the most formidable of the freethinkers' opponents, who could fight them with their own rhetorical weapons. In his lifetime Berkeley was more valued as a defender of the Church (he rose to be Bishop of Cloyne) than as a philosopher.<sup>32</sup> He attacked the freethinkers repeatedly, in particular in a series of essays occasioned by Collins's *Discourse of Free-Thinking* and published in Steele's periodical *The Guardian* (1713). Berkeley, who in one letter signed himself Misatheus (atheist hater), undertook to do all he could 'to render their persons as despicable, and their practices as odious, as they deserve'.<sup>33</sup> These attacks were elaborated in his philosophical dialogue *Alciphron* (1732), in which Alciphron, a follower of Shaftesbury, and Lysicles, an atheist and libertine, are confronted with the arguments of the Christians Euphranor and Crito. Berkeley objected to the slipperiness and changeableness of the 'philosophical knight-errants' and to their misleading emphasis on natural religion, which prevented some of their readers from catching their drift.<sup>34</sup> Collins and Shaftesbury were his particular bugbears, with Tindal lagging behind; Toland does not seem to have struck him as important.<sup>35</sup> In *The Theory of Vision Vindicated* (1733) Berkeley summed up his campaign to expose the freethinkers' methods and intentions:

. . . if I see [atheism] in their writings, if they own it in their conversation, if their ideas imply it, if their ends are not answered but by supposing it, if their leading author [Collins] hath pretended to demonstrate atheism, but thought fit to conceal his demonstration from the public; if this was known in their clubs, and yet that author was nevertheless followed, and represented to the world as a believer of natural religion; if these things are so (and I know them to be so), surely what the

<sup>30</sup> *Being and Attributes* (1705), 46, 109–10.

<sup>31</sup> *Natural Religion* (1706), 42–5. The running head for this work is *The Evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion*, hence it is sometimes cited as *Evidences* in the eighteenth century.

<sup>32</sup> See Berman, *Berkeley* (1994), Luce, *Berkeley* (1949), Walmsley, *Rhetoric of Berkeley's Philosophy* (1990).

<sup>33</sup> Berkeley, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, VII, 176, 224. On the various attempts at identifying Berkeley's contributions to the *Guardian* see Berman, *Berkeley*, 73–7.

<sup>34</sup> Berkeley, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 321.

<sup>35</sup> For Berkeley's attacks on Collins or 'Diagoras', see especially *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, I, 254; III, 52, 163–4, 296; VII, 188–90; on Shaftesbury or 'Cratylus' see *Works*, I, 252–3; III, Dialogue 3, 199ff; VII, 198–200; on Tindal see *Works*, I, 251.

favourers of their schemes would palliate, it is the duty of others to display and refute.<sup>36</sup>

The most long-lived of the main attacks on the principles of freethinking was Butler's *Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736).<sup>37</sup> His Advertisement made clear the occasion of his work:

It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted, by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry; but that it is, now at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it, as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment; and nothing remained, but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals, for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike Clarke and Berkeley, Butler did not descend to attacks on individuals, but parts of his argument were clearly directed at those of Collins and especially Tindal.<sup>39</sup> In his conclusion he made clear that his chosen audience consisted not of scoffers but of those whose infidelity was based on speculative principles and who could be argued with about evidence.<sup>40</sup>

Other encounters with freethinking principles do not have the same philosophical importance. But several are worth consulting and make interesting individual points, for example Thomas Halyburton's *Natural Religion Insufficient . . . or, A Rational Enquiry into the Principles of the Modern Deists* (1714), which from a Calvinist point of view blames latitude in no uncertain terms for the rise of deism; Edmund Gibson's *Pastoral Letters to the People of his Diocese* (1728–31), particularly the second, in which conversely the freethinkers' misapplication of Restoration latitudinarian thought is stressed; and Isaac Watts's *The Strength and Weakness of Human Reason* (1731), which is more gentle in its treatment of freethinkers than many Anglican accounts.<sup>41</sup> Freethinking is a continual preoccupation of the early Boyle lectures delivered between 1692 and 1714, to which Bentley was the first contributor; in his dedicatory letter to the Boyle trustees Bentley quotes from Boyle's will defining the purpose of the sermons as 'for proving the Christian religion against notorious infidels, viz. Atheists, Deists, Pagans, Jews, and Mahometans; not descending to any controversies that are among Christians themselves'.<sup>42</sup> A particularly useful book is the dissenter John Leland's *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers that have appeared in*

<sup>36</sup> *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, I, 254–5. For Berkeley's attitude to Collins see Berman, 'Collins and the Question of Atheism', *PRLA*, LXXV/C (1975), 85–102.

<sup>37</sup> On Butler see Chapter 3 below, n.51. <sup>38</sup> Butler, *Analogy*, *Works*, ed. Bernard, II, xvii–viii.

<sup>39</sup> *Analogy*, Part I, Chapter 6; Part II, Chapters 1, 6, 8. <sup>40</sup> *Analogy*, *Works*, II, 269–70.

<sup>41</sup> For Watts see *RGS*, I.

<sup>42</sup> Bentley, *Works*, ed. Dyce, III, xv–xvi. The lectures up to 1732 were collected as *A Defence of Natural and Revealed Religion*, ed. Letsome and Nicholl, 3 vols. (1739). The series continued throughout the century.

*England in the Last and Present Century*.<sup>43</sup> Leland begins with Lord Herbert of Cherbury in the 1620s, and goes through to the infidels of the 1750s, Bolingbroke and Hume – indeed the bulk of the work is devoted to these immediate threats. Leland is useful for two main reasons: he provides an analysis of the arguments of each freethinker and the writers against him (he is superficial on Toland and Collins, sensible on Tindal, and very acute on Shaftesbury), and he pays some attention to the freethinkers' use of terms (especially natural religion) and their characteristic rhetorical devices. A forceful and entertaining work which deserves to be much better known is Philip Skelton's *Ophiomaches: or Deism Revealed* (1749, revised 1751), a dialogue (probably influenced by Berkeley's *Alciphron*) between Mr Shepherd, an orthodox clergyman, Mr Dechaine, his deist landlord, Mr Templeton, Dechaine's ward, and Mr Cunningham, a deist clergyman who is Templeton's tutor. Skelton thought the defenders of orthodoxy were too gentle with their adversaries; his aim was to bring 'real Deism, and real Christianity, into the field, to confront each other'.<sup>44</sup> At the end of the dialogue Shepherd rescues Templeton from the corrupting effects of his education, in the course of which he has had deist principles imposed on him under the guise of Christianity. Like Halyburton, Skelton thought the latitudinarians bore much of the blame for this state of affairs. His targets were thus not only the freethinkers, in particular Shaftesbury and Tindal, but also divines such as Tillotson and Clarke.

Attacks on individual writers often came in waves, in response to the publication of a particular book: Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), Collins's *Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), *Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) and *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered* (1727), Tindal's *The Rights of the Christian Church Asserted* (1706) and *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730) all provoked many replies. Two that are worth attention because of the important issues they raise are Peter Browne's reply to Toland, *A Letter in Answer to a Book entituled, Christianity not Mysterious* (1697), and William Law's to Tindal, *The Case of Reason, or Natural Religion, Fairly and Fully Stated. In Answer to a Book, entitul'd, Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1731). Browne tried to solve the problem of Toland's sceptical treatment of belief in things of which we have no clear and distinct ideas by using the doctrine of analogy;<sup>45</sup> he developed this argument at length in *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding* (1728), providing in the Introduction an interesting summary of the freethinkers' methods as he saw them. Law's attack on Tindal is based on a questioning of assumptions

<sup>43</sup> *Deistical Writers* was first published in 3 vols. (1754–6), with Vol. II on Hume and Bolingbroke; it was rearranged in 2 vols. in 1757.

<sup>44</sup> *Deism Revealed*, 2nd edn (1751), I, xiii. For the Irish dimension of attacks on freethinking see Chapter 3 below, n.6.

<sup>45</sup> See below, pp. 63–4.

about the definition and role of reason that were very widely held in the early eighteenth century. But the freethinkers were not always the recipients. Gibson's *Pastoral Letters* provoked indignant replies from Tindal, *An Address to the Inhabitants of . . . London and Westminster* (1729, revised 1730) and *A Second Address* (1730). The battle in this case was partly fought over the proper interpretation of intellectual sources.

Assessing the origins of freethinking is a complex matter: there has been much disagreement as to the principal influences on the freethinkers and their relative importance. One useful way of considering the problem is to look at the freethinkers' debt to two main groups, first of those who were generally regarded as subversive, and second of those who were on the whole acceptable to the orthodox. The first group includes Herbert, Hobbes, Bruno, Spinoza, Bayle, and the Socinians; the second includes the latitudinarians, Locke, and the classical moralists, especially Cicero. The claims of some of these must be examined.

Halyburton devoted several chapters of *Natural Religion Insufficient* to Herbert, and called him on the title page 'the great Patron of Deism'; he was followed in this approach by Leland, who gave a fair account of what he knew of Herbert's work in the first two letters of *Principal Deistical Writers*. Leland describes Herbert as 'one of the first that formed Deism into a System, and asserted the sufficiency, universality, and absolute perfection, of natural religion, with a view to discard all extraordinary revelation, as useless and needless'.<sup>46</sup> The main philosophical and religious works of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1582–1648), written in Latin and published in the seventeenth century, are *De Veritate* (1624, with several subsequent editions), *De Religione Laici* (1645), and *De Religione Gentilium* (1663).<sup>47</sup> There was an English translation of the last as *The Antient Religion of the Gentiles* (1705), the others remaining untranslated until the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> In addition an English work, *A Dialogue between a Tutor and his Pupil*, which popularises part of the arguments of the Latin works, circulated in manuscript in the seventeenth century but was not published until 1768.<sup>49</sup> Herbert's ideas were borrowed and passages from his works incorporated by Charles Blount (who had access to the manuscript *Dialogue*) in his own *Religio Laici* (1683) and *The Oracles of Reason* (1693). The attitudes Herbert most obviously shares with the later freethinkers are bitter and often satirical hostility to priests, superstition, and mysteries, and the championing of philosophy against organised religion.

<sup>46</sup> *Principal Deistical Writers*, 4th edn (1764), I, 3.

<sup>47</sup> On Herbert see Bedford, *Defence of Truth* (1979) and especially Griffin, 'Studies in Herbert' (1993).

<sup>48</sup> *De Veritate*, trans. Carré (1937); *De Religione Laici*, Hutcheson (1944). Griffin, p. 213, argues for the title *Religio Laici*; however, as Hutcheson's translation is cited his title is used.

<sup>49</sup> See Griffin, 'A Dialogue between a Tutor and his Pupil', *EMS*, VII (1998), 162–201.



His most important contribution to religious thought is his theory of the five fundamental articles of religion, which are also designated common notions or catholic truths: there is a supreme God; he ought to be worshipped; virtue is the most important part of worship and religious practice; men should repent of their sins; there are rewards and punishments after death.<sup>50</sup> The epistemology of common notions underlying Herbert's natural religion as well as that of the latitude-men was attacked by Locke in Book I, Chapter 3 of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>51</sup> Indeed Herbert's natural religion is much more like that of the latitude-men than that of the freethinkers (Shaftesbury and Tindal are somewhat closer to Herbert in this respect than Toland and Collins), but the reverse is true of his attitude to revealed religion. In some ways the term 'deist' fits Herbert in the early seventeenth century much better than it does the 'deists' in the early eighteenth, who did not acknowledge a specific debt to him (though this is not in itself decisive) and who should not be regarded as his heirs. However it is worth comparing his work to theirs, for the differences as well as the similarities, in order to clarify the meaning of the problematic phrase natural religion.<sup>52</sup>

A more recent approach has been to look for sources for freethinking in some of the versions of materialism of the Interregnum period. The freethinkers' opponents were always keen to associate them with Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who was frequently linked with Spinoza and Bayle as among their favourite authors.<sup>53</sup> Hobbes's selfish ethics, his authoritarian political system and his repudiation of religious toleration and freedom of thought all seem to make him a thoroughly inappropriate ancestor of the freethinkers, and indeed Shaftesbury's ethics are in part an answer to Hobbes.<sup>54</sup> The freethinkers hardly ever name him with approval, though Blount's friendship with and admiration for Hobbes are plain in *The Oracles of Reason*, and Collins includes him – 'notwithstanding his several false Opinions, and his *High-Church Politicks*' – in his list of freethinkers of the past, of which more will be said below.<sup>55</sup> Leland devotes Letter III of his *Principal Deistical Writers* to Hobbes, and observes that not many modern deists want to be thought to espouse his system, but that several have borrowed some of their principles from him, notably the materiality and mortality of the soul, and the denial of man's free agency.<sup>56</sup> He probably has Toland and especially Collins in mind: Collins argued

<sup>50</sup> *De Veritate* (1937), 291–302; see also *De Religione Laici* (1944), 129; *Religion of the Gentiles* (1705), 300, 354, 367; *Dialogue* (1768), 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Essay*, ed. Nidditch, 77. On common notions see *RGS*, I, 59–63.

<sup>52</sup> Cf Sullivan, *Toland*, 220–32.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. Berkeley, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, I, 254; Law, *Case of Reason*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> See Chapter 2 below, pp. 88–9.

<sup>55</sup> Blount, *Oracles of Reason*, in *Miscellaneous Works* (1695), 97ff; Collins, *Free-Thinking*, 170.

<sup>56</sup> *Principal Deistical Writers*, I, 35.

that the soul is material and that man is a necessary agent in a series of exchanges with Clarke (1707–8) and in *A Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty* (1717). Hobbes is significant as an antecedent not only for his materialism but also for his treatment of priests and Scripture, and his development of an evasive, equivocating rhetoric, something at which the freethinkers were adepts.<sup>57</sup> It seems fair to say that the freethinkers drew on aspects of Hobbes's treatment of religion and natural philosophy while discounting the uncongenial aspects of his moral and political thought. Another materialist of the Interregnum and Restoration period and friend of Hobbes, Henry Stubbe (1632–76), has been identified as the principal link between the freethinking of the earlier period and the 1690s. Stubbe's *An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism*, written in the 1670s, circulated in manuscript for some years after; it was drawn on by Blount in *The Oracles of Reason*, and may have influenced Toland's account in *Nazarenus* (1718) of primitive Christianity and its corruption.<sup>58</sup>

Alongside the English tradition of materialist thought was a continental tradition of pantheism, which was capable of being interpreted in a materialist way and which profoundly influenced Toland. The principal exponents of pantheism – the belief that God and nature are the same and that the universe is eternal and infinite – were the Dutch Jew Benedict de Spinoza (1632–77) and the Italian Giordano Bruno (1548–1600). Both were outcasts – Spinoza was excommunicated by the Synagogue at Amsterdam, and Bruno was burnt after condemnation by the Inquisition at Rome. Spinoza was regarded by the orthodox in the second half of the seventeenth century with the same horror as Hobbes: his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670; translated into English, 1689) was soon noted as a potential threat by Stillingfleet in *A Letter to a Deist* (1677), and systematic refutations of his major work, the *Ethica* (1677), were made by, among others, the dissenter John Howe in *The Living Temple*, II (1702) and Clarke in *The Being and Attributes of God* (1705).<sup>59</sup> Toland knew Spinoza's *Ethics*, and gave serious consideration to Spinoza in *Letters to Serena* (1704), IV and V; although he disagreed with some of Spinoza's arguments, it was from a materialist point of view, and he praised Spinoza for his qualities as a

<sup>57</sup> See e.g. *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter 12, Part IV, Chapters 45, 47. On the question of Hobbes's religious views see P. Springborg, 'Hobbes on Religion', in Sorell, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes* (1996). On his practice of rhetoric see Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric* (1996), Chapter 10.

<sup>58</sup> See J. Jacob, *Stubbe* (1983), Chapters 4 and 8.

<sup>59</sup> Stillingfleet, *Letter to a Deist* (1677), A4<sup>r</sup>; Howe, *Living Temple*, Part II, Chapter 1, in *Works* (1724), I; Clarke, *Being and Attributes*, 50, 130, 141. For Howe see RGS, I. See Colie, 'Spinoza and the Early English Deists', *JHI*, XX (1959), 23–46; 'Spinoza in England, 1665–1730', *PAPS*, CVII (1963), 183–219; M. Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*, 48–53; G. Reedy, 'Spinoza, Stillingfleet, Prophecy, and "Enlightenment"', in Lemay, ed., *Deism*.

man.<sup>60</sup> In the case of Bruno, who may have exercised some influence on Spinoza, Toland rediscovered an author who was no longer known in England at the end of the seventeenth century: he acquired and circulated texts and manuscripts in England and on the continent, arranged for the publication of a translation of Bruno's *Spaccio della Bestia Trionfante* (1584) (*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*) in 1713, and made an abridgement of *De l'Infinito Universo et Mondi* (1584) as 'An Account of Jordano Bruno's Book of the Infinite Universe and Innumerable Worlds'.<sup>61</sup> Considerable attention has been given by modern scholars to Toland's debt to Bruno; it is evident in *Letters to Serena* IV and V and particularly in the introductory 'Dissertation upon the Infinite and Eternal Universe' in *Pantheisticon* (1720, translated 1751), though Bruno himself is not named.<sup>62</sup>

The influence of Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) was of a very different kind: it was on method, on freethinking itself, rather than on the content of the freethinkers' beliefs. Shaftesbury, a correspondent and close friend of Bayle, testified after Bayle's death in a letter of 21 January 1707 to the nature of that influence:

But if to be confirm'd in any good Principle be by Debate & Argument after thorow scrutiny to re-admit what was first implanted by prevention; I may then say, in truth, that whatever is most vallewable to me of this kind has been owing in great measure to this our Friend whom the World call'd *Scepticall*. Whatever Opinion of mine stood not the Test of his piercing Reason, I learnt by degrees either to discard as frivulouse, or not to rely on, with that Boldness as before: but That which bore the Tryall I priz'd as purest Gold.<sup>63</sup>

Bayle, a French Huguenot who took refuge in Holland, was regarded by most of his contemporaries as an atheist and philosophical sceptic, though the recent tendency has been to see him (perhaps wrongly) as a fideist and orthodox Calvinist.<sup>64</sup> He delighted in intellectual contradictions, such as the impossibility of a rational explication of the problem of evil and of reconciling reason and faith, and in challenging received authorities and setting them against each other. He defended the toleration of atheists (an extraordinary position to make public in the late seventeenth century), and in *Pensées Diverses sur la Comète* (1680), translated as *Miscellaneous Reflections, Occasion'd by the Comet* (1708), made the notorious suggestion that a virtuous atheist was a possibility (Toland refers to this view in his praise of Spinoza,

<sup>60</sup> *Letters to Serena*, 133; cf 'Mangoneutes', *Tetradymus* (1720), 185.

<sup>61</sup> The 'Account' was published in Des Maizeaux's posthumous collection of Toland's *Miscellaneous Works*, I, 316–49. On Bruno see Singer, *Bruno* (1950).

<sup>62</sup> See Heinemann, *RES*, XX (1944), 140; M. Jacob, *Newtonians*, 226–35, 245–7, *Radical Enlightenment*, 35–9.

<sup>63</sup> Voile, *Shaftesbury*, 221; also in *Life, Letters*, ed. Rand, 374.

<sup>64</sup> On Bayle's English reception see Courtines, *Bayle's Relations with England* (1938). D. Wootton, 'Pierre Bayle, Libertine?', in M. A. Stewart, ed., *Studies in Seventeenth-Century European Philosophy* (1997), argues against revisionist readings.

and Berkeley includes the freethinker Thrasenor, who believed that ‘a republic of atheists might live very happily together’, in his list of minute philosophers in *Alciphron*.<sup>65</sup> Bayle’s major work, his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (4 volumes, 1697; 2nd edn 1702), was widely read in England; Des Maizeaux, the friend of Toland and Collins, did much to make Bayle’s work known in England and published a translation of the *Dictionary* in five volumes (1734–38), with a *Life of Bayle* in Volume I.<sup>66</sup> Bayle’s sceptical methods are reflected (though on a smaller scale) in Collins’s work and interests. Collins had an enormous private library of both orthodox and freethinking works, with many items by Bayle,<sup>67</sup> on which he could draw for sceptical purposes: setting authorities against each other and hence destroying the reader’s confidence in them is the basic technique of the *Discourse of Free-Thinking*.

A more specific influence on the freethinkers’ methodology was that of the Socinians. The term Socinianism (which derives from the name of the sixteenth-century Italian reformer Faustus Socinus, who spread his doctrines in Poland) was giving way by the end of the seventeenth century to unitarianism, reflecting both the continental and the independent English traditions. The works of the continental Socinians, collected in 1656 as *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum quos Unitarios Vocant*, seem to have been fairly widely known in England. The philanthropist Thomas Firmin (converted during the 1650s by John Biddle) was responsible for commissioning and publishing a collection of tracts in the 1680s and 90s expounding unitarian doctrine, the first, by Stephen Nye, entitled *A Brief History of the Unitarians, called also Socinians* (1687). The central tenets are that God is one, that Jesus is man not God, that nothing in faith can be beyond reason, and that there are no mysteries in Scripture because the gospel has made mysteries plain. However, despite their heterodoxy, the unitarians of the 1690s remained within the Established Church.<sup>68</sup> The Socinian treatment of reason and mysteries was adopted by Toland in *Christianity not Mysterious*, but not for the purpose of supporting Socinian beliefs. Critics were angry at the way in which the Socinians provided a stepping stone to freethinking: Stillingfleet did not think it was the design of the Socinians to advance deism, but

<sup>65</sup> Bayle, *Miscellaneous Reflections* (1708), II, Sections 161, 172, 174, 176, 178; Toland, *Letters to Serena*, 134; Berkeley, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 51. Sullivan, *Toland*, 47, points out that the second of the *Letters to Serena* incorporates large sections of Bayle’s article ‘Anaxagoras’. Warburton’s definition of the threefold cord of moral principles in the *Divine Legation*, discussed in Chapter 3 below, p. 199, is provided as an answer to *Miscellaneous Reflections*.

<sup>66</sup> A longer lived version was Birch’s *General Dictionary* (1734–41).

<sup>67</sup> See O’Higgins, *Collins*, Chapter 2.

<sup>68</sup> See H. J. McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (1951), Chapter 16; Reedy, ‘Socinians, John Toland, and the Anglican Rationalists’, *HTR*, LXX (1977), 285–304; Sullivan, *Toland*, Chapter 3; Wilbur, *History of Unitarianism* (1952), Chapter 12.

‘such men who are *Enemies to all revealed Religion, could not find out better Tools for their purpose than they are*’.<sup>69</sup>

In the case of authors who were regarded as subversive, it is often difficult to establish the extent of their influence because of the freethinkers’ reluctance to identify them as forebears. In the case of the latitudinarians the problem is exactly the opposite. With the exception of Toland, the freethinkers repeatedly associated themselves with certain seventeenth-century Anglican divines, especially Chillingworth, Taylor, More, Whichcote, Tillotson (probably the most quoted), and Burnet. The highest praise is lavished on Tillotson, ‘than whom none better understood Human Nature’,<sup>70</sup> and ‘whom all *English Free-Thinkers* own as their Head’.<sup>71</sup> The succession of archbishops since 1689 is presented as little short of perfect: Tindal says of Tillotson, Tenison, and Wake, ‘I may challenge all Church-History to show three such Bishops, as to the Honour of the *Revolution*, have, since that blessed Time, succeeded one another at *Lambeth*’.<sup>72</sup> The terms freethinker and freethinking are often applied to favourite clerics. Shaftesbury calls Taylor and Tillotson ‘*Free-thinking Divines*’;<sup>73</sup> Collins calls Chillingworth ‘that true Christian and Protestant (and by consequence *great Free-Thinker*)’ and the early Church Father Minutius Felix ‘a true modern Latitudinarian Free-Thinking Christian’.<sup>74</sup> Collins’s account of great freethinkers includes many classical authors but few moderns, with Tillotson as the final author discussed, directly after Hobbes (though Collins adds a further list of modern freethinkers which includes Erasmus, Grotius, Chillingworth, Herbert, Wilkins, Whichcote, Cudworth, More, and Locke).<sup>75</sup> Not surprisingly, the clergy were outraged at this treatment: Hoadly, for example, objected to Collins including Tillotson in the same list as Epicurus and Hobbes, ‘against both whom [Tillotson] hath expressed himself with so particular a Severity in some parts of his Works’.<sup>76</sup>

There are three possible views of the freethinkers’ expressed admiration for the latitudinarians. One is that freethinking genuinely developed from latitudinarianism, and was a logical extension of certain lines of thought pursued within strict limits by the latitudinarians themselves. Halyburton, no friend to latitude, wrote bitterly that ‘the strongest Arguments urged by *Deists*, have been drawn from unwary Concessions, made them by their Adversaries’; ‘it would have been long before the *Deists* could have trimm’d

<sup>69</sup> Stillingfleet, *Vindication of the Trinity*, xlvi; cf Browne, *Procedure*, 40, on deists, freethinkers, and atheists as the natural offspring of Socinianism.

<sup>70</sup> Tindal, *Christianity*, 64. <sup>71</sup> Collins, *Free-Thinking*, 171.

<sup>72</sup> *Christianity*, 288; cf the praise of Wake in Collins’s *Letter to Dr. Rogers* (1727), 113–14.

<sup>73</sup> *Characteristics*, III, 297.

<sup>74</sup> *Free-Thinking*, 34, 163. <sup>75</sup> *Free-Thinking*, 123–76, 177.

<sup>76</sup> Hoadly, *Queries* (1713), 22.

up *natural Religion* so handsomely, and made it appear so *like a sufficient Religion*, as some have done, who mean'd no such Thing'.<sup>77</sup> Skelton's Shepherd develops his argument: 'Lord *Shaftesbury* hath actually built Deism on this system, adopted by the Divines; and *Tindal* argues from little else, but quotations taken from their writings.'<sup>78</sup> In effect, the latitudinarians got what they deserved.<sup>79</sup> The early eighteenth-century latitudinarians, Bentley, Clarke, and Hoadly, for example, naturally did not agree. The second view is that the freethinkers, whose admiration for the latitudinarians may well have been genuine, used them as a cover and to lend an aura of respectability to their own subversive ideas. This involved misrepresenting the religion of the Restoration divines, as Gibson rightly pointed out.<sup>80</sup> The third view is that the freethinkers were activated by malice or at least by a desire to make fun of the latitudinarians by associating them with freethinking views to which they were certainly not sympathetic. This view is implicit in Jonathan Swift's funny but unfair parody of Collins, *Mr. C – ns's Discourse of Free-Thinking, Put into plain English, by Way of Abstract, for the Use of the Poor* (1713).<sup>81</sup> There may be truth in all these views. The first can be most readily applied to Tindal, the second to Toland and Collins; Shaftesbury is more slippery. It is not easy to decide what the freethinkers were up to; the ironic tone of freethinking writing (which will be considered in detail in the next section) makes definite judgement impossible. The problem can be illustrated by a dramatic example. In the last chapter of *Miscellaneous Reflections*, forming the conclusion to the whole of *Characteristics*, Shaftesbury presents a dialogue between a freethinking gentleman of rank and a group of clerical bigots on the subject of freethinking and professing. At one point the gentleman declaims a long speech on the unreliability of the text of Scripture and the impossibility of interpreting it. He is attacked as 'a *Preacher* of pernicious doctrines', only to reveal that he is quoting from Jeremy Taylor's *Liberty of Prophesying*.<sup>82</sup> The '*Lay-Gentleman*' then openly draws on Tillotson, and tells his clerical opponents that he has 'asserted nothing on this Head of *Religion, Faith, or the Sacred Mysterys*, which has not been justify'd and confirm'd by the most celebrated *Church-Men* and respected *Divines*'.<sup>83</sup> Is Shaftesbury here differentiating between the latitudinarians whom he admires and the high churchmen whom he detests, or is he setting a trap

<sup>77</sup> *Natural Religion Insufficient*, 17–18.

<sup>78</sup> *Deism Revealed*, II, 213; cf 292.

<sup>79</sup> This view is argued by Sullivan, *Toland*, Chapter 8. R. L. Emerson, 'Latitudinarianism and the English Deists', in Lemay, ed., *Deism*, objects to studies that suggest there were close links between the two.

<sup>80</sup> *Second Pastoral Letter* (1730), 64–6.

<sup>81</sup> Swift, *Works*, ed. Davis, IV.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor is quoted for much the same purpose in Collins's *Free-Thinking*, 58–61. Aldridge, 'Shaftesbury and the Deist Manifesto', *TAPS*, NS XLI (1951), 364, objects that Shaftesbury misrepresents Taylor.

<sup>83</sup> *Miscellany V, Characteristics*, III, 317–44.

and using what he calls the 'freethinking divines' as a cover for quite another kind of freethinking? Shaftesbury's method makes a direct answer impossible.

There is no doubt about the importance of Locke for the freethinkers, though they reacted to him differently and applied his arguments and his terminology in ways that he neither expected nor approved. Collins and Toland admired him and in effect betrayed him. Locke regarded Collins as his companion in the search for truth;<sup>84</sup> Collins did not publish anything till after Locke's death, so Locke presumably did not know the extent of the disagreement between them. Toland praised Locke in his lifetime as 'the greatest Philosopher after CICERO in the Universe', and later described the *Essay* as 'the most useful Book towards attaining universal Knowledg, that is extant in any language',<sup>85</sup> but Locke had become aware early on of Toland's dangerous application of the book's arguments. Paradoxically Locke was both an anticipator and an opponent of freethinking. Several recurring arguments in the *Essay* (first published in 1690) contributed directly to aspects of freethinking: that individuals should not rely on authorities, but search for truth themselves; that custom can corrupt men's thought; that ideas of God and morality are not innate, and that there is no universal consent about the existence of God; that words must correspond with clear and distinct or determinate ideas. Toland seized on the last of these in *Christianity not Mysterior*, which he began in 1694 and published in 1696. Locke read part of the work in manuscript, and it appears to have contributed to his change of direction in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).<sup>86</sup> Nothing distinguishes Locke from the freethinkers more than his devotion to the Bible, manifest in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and the posthumously published commentaries on St Paul (1705–7). As Daniel Waterland observed in his attack on Tindal, 'Mr Locke . . . was no Priest, nor a Bigot to Priests: But He understood the high worth and excellency of our Bible.'<sup>87</sup> Locke was dismayed at the growing view that natural religion was sufficient without revelation, and he wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity* to counter it, modifying his own earlier view of the accessibility of natural religion in the process.<sup>88</sup> Because Locke deliberately ignored or played down certain Christian doctrines, some irate contemporaries charged him with Socinianism, deism, and atheism. However, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* in its treatment of natural religion is a more conservative work than earlier latitudinarian accounts, and this conservatism is directly attributable to the spread of freethinking. Locke

<sup>84</sup> To Collins, 29 October 1703, *Correspondence*, ed. de Beer, VIII, 97.

<sup>85</sup> *Life of Milton* (1699), 147; *Letters to Serena*, 226.

<sup>86</sup> See Biddle, 'Locke on Christianity' (1972), Chapter 1, and 'Locke's Critique of Innate Principles and Toland's Deism', *JHI*, XXXVII (1976).

<sup>87</sup> *Scripture Vindicated*, Part II (1731), 128. <sup>88</sup> See below, pp. 67–9.