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Losing Faith: Radical Religious Thought in the Early English Enlightenment

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Losing Faith: Radical Religious Thought in the Early English Enlightenment

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The gradual marginalization of religion within society is a defining feature of modern Western culture in its development. Whereas during the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church exerted nearly undisputed cultural hegemony over Western Europe, the subsequent rise in influence of rival cultural institutions has gradually created a cultural system in which not only a single church, but organized religion as a whole must compete for cultural influence. Division in Western Christianity during the Reformation allowed for sustained objection to the Catholic Church's claim to absolute truth and rejection to the status of clergy as divine mediators. Events such as the English Reformation and the Concordat of Bologna are examples of developing governments beginning to exert power over the church.[1] During the seventeenth century the foundations of modern science developed, representing a rival authority to Christianity in explaining the processes of the universe. The age of the Enlightenment, from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, brought voluminous attacks against organized religion generally. Radical religious thinkers began to challenge not only the authority of religious institutions, but to challenge the existence of absolute moral standards.[2] By 1789 the newly formed United States of America, founded on Enlightenment ideals, put into law the separation of religion and politics, a critical milestone in the marginalization of religion as Western culture moved into the modern era.

In an attempt to examine in some detail the processes behind this marginalization of religion within Western culture, this essay will focus on one particular historical period

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[1] Frederic J. Baumgartner, "Henry II's Italian Bishops: A Study in the Use and Abuse of the Concordat of Bologna," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 11, no. 2 (Summer, 1980), 49-58: 49-51; Muriel C. McClendon, "'Against God's Word': Government, Religion & Crisis of Authority in Early Reformation Norwich," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1994), 353-369: 357.

[2] Jonathan I. Israel *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity: 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 625-26.

which proved crucial to the development of new patterns of religious thought and discussion in modern culture: the early Enlightenment (prior to 1730), and in particular its manifestation in England.

The Enlightenment, an era in which the foundations of modern science, politics, and culture were developed, is a period of extreme significance in examining this marginalization process of religion within Western society. Although the circulation of these ideas was probably limited in its diffusion among the general populace, the Enlightenment produced many radical religious ideas that were nonetheless influential in changing the nature of intellectual religious discussion.[3] Radical essays and treatises emerged in unprecedented volumes during this period, aided by the development of printing technologies which made printing less expensive, more widespread, and more difficult to control.[4] From early attacks on superstition by figures like the Protestant pastor Balthasar Bekker, to the extreme materialism of La Mettrie in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment era proved a formative period for new, modern religious ideas and discussions to emerge.[5]

An examination of English free-thinking authors during the early Enlightenment, from about 1680 to 1730, will allow for scrutiny of some of the common themes in early modern religious thought as they made the transition from the Reformation era to the Enlightenment. By showing how English authors drew upon intellectual tradition from the Reformation era and earlier Enlightenment thought emerging in the Dutch Republic,

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[3] F.H. Heinemann, "John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment," *The Review of English Studies* 20, no. 78 (Apr., 1944), 125-146: 144-46.

[4] Philip Hamburger, "The Development of the Law of Seditious Libel and the Control of the Press," *Stanford Law Review* 37, no. 3 (Feb., 1985), 661-765: 714-15.

[5] Balthazar Bekker, *The World Bewitch'd; or, An Examination of the Common Opinions Concerning Spirits: Their Nature, Power, Administration, and Operations* (London: Printed for R. Baldwin in Warwick

and developed common Enlightenment religious themes that would influence later authors, this essay hopes to illustrate the processes by which traditional religion lost its influence over intellectual thought, an important step in its marginalization in Western culture. It will be shown that established intellectual traditions were expanded upon by these authors to create increasingly more radical challenges to traditional religion, and that this process exists as part of a gradual shift within Western culture moving toward the eventual marginalization of religion. It is for their value in illustrating this gradual transition in Western religious thought that the authors of the early English Enlightenment shall serve as the focus of this essay.

In between its "Dutch" beginnings in the work of Benedict Spinoza, Bekker, and Pierre Bayle and its climax in the mid-eighteenth century French Enlightenment, several important authors discussing religion emerged in England who were associated with what some refer to as the free-thinking movement. These authors, including Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, John Toland, Anthony Collins, Bernard Mandeville, and Matthew Tindal, built attacks upon superstition and clerical corruption into attacks upon the concept of institutionalized religion itself.[6] They built upon theories of natural religion to argue for morality based upon reason rather than revelation, or in some cases even denied the existence of an absolute standard of morality.[7] They confined God within the laws of natural processes, and rejected the existence of the supernatural.[8]

Lane, 1695), 2; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 705-7.

[6] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 620.

[7] Matthew Tindal, *Christianity Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature, Volume 1* (London: [s.n.], 1731), 11; Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 3 (Jul., 2006) 523-545: 538.

[8] John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious, or, A Treatise Shewing, That there is nothing in the Gospel*

These authors supported the development of a tradition of thought that would serve as the foundation for later modern perceptions of, and perspectives on, religion and its role in society.

Both the English free-thinking movement and the religious discussions of the Enlightenment can be situated within a larger cultural trend emphasizing reason as the ultimate basis of truth. Following more than a century of religious wars and conflicts arising from the Reformation and establishment of Protestant sects across Europe, religious faith had become an object of intense and highly visible controversy both ideologically and politically, and was increasingly being scrutinized using reason and rational methodology.[9] A trend toward rationalizing religion found early expression in the work of figures like Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) and Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648).[10] The attempt to reconcile reason with religion later became a major theme among early Enlightenment intellectuals.

Reason, it was believed, had the power to purge religion of its superstitions and worldly corruption that created religious "enthusiasm" rather than rational reflection and understanding of religion.[11] Some, such as Charles Blount and Matthew Tindal, saw this project as the means to restore religion to a pure state of being, a state in which religion corresponds perfectly to an eternal order of reason. More commonly, the introduction of

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Contrary to Reason, Nor Above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd a Mystery, (London: [s.n.], 1696), 40; Charles Blount, *Miracles, No Violations of the Laws of Nature* (London: Printed for Robert Sollers at the King's Arms and Bible in St. Paul's Churchyard, 1683), 1-5.

[9] Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2.

[10] Elizabeth S. Haldane, "Jacob Bohme and His Relation to Hegel," *The Philosophical Review* 6, no. 2 (Mar., 1897), 146-161: 151; Charles Lyttle, "Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Apostle of Ethical Theism," *Church History* 4, no. 4 (Dec., 1935), 247-267: 253.

[11] S.J. Barnett, *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests: the Origins of Enlightenment Anticlericalism* (New York:

reason and the comparative method were believed to have the power to counter the practices of corrupt clergy seeking to use religion and manipulate superstition in order to reap personal benefit and worldly possessions.[12] In either case, contemporary authors saw the application of reason to religious matters as an endeavor of the utmost importance for ensuring the spiritual health of Europe and finding a place for God and religion within a culture newly devoted to rational inquiry and scientific method.[13] For many authors in the era, reason was to be the savior of religion, ensuring its survival in a new age committed to rational thought by returning it to a supposedly perfect, and perfectly reasonable, original state.

In the process of rationalizing religion, late-seventeenth century authors were in effect undermining much of the foundation of traditional religious thought in Western Europe. The authors of the English free-thinking movement contributed significantly to this trend. They built upon an established critical tradition developed largely in the wake of the Reformation known as "priestcraft" theory, accusing the clergy of abusing their authority to accrue worldly profit and power, and developed it into theories questioning of organized religion generally.[14] In the process, these authors began to question not only the authority of church doctrine, but, as expressed by Anthony Collins,

any "books of bulk… that have gone thro their hands."[15] Theories of natural religion,

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St. Martin's Press, 1999), 96.

[12] Barnett, *Idol Temples*, ix.

[13] Harrison, *Religion*, 5.

[14] Ibid., 72-3.

[15] Anthony Collins, *Priestcraft in Perfection: or, a Detection of the Fraud of Inserting and Continuing this Clause (The Church hath Power to Decree Rites and Ceremonys, and Authority in Controversys of Faith) in the Twentieth Articles of the Church of England* (London: Printed for B. Bragg in Pater-noster-row, 1710): 46.

insisting upon a natural code of morality innately recognized by human reason, drew

upon prior theories grounding the foundations of morality in reason, found among

thinkers during the English Civil War and figures like John Locke.[16] Building upon this

tradition, these authors argued against the necessity of divine revelation, the occurrence

of miracles, and the existence of significant difference between Christianity and other

religions. Borrowing from existing intellectual traditions, the English free-thinkers

produced increasingly more radical challenges to traditional religion.

The theories promulgated by these authors repudiated spiritual authority and

argued against the necessity of organized religion.[17] They split with Lutheran and

Calvinist doctrines of predestination by either insisting on a universal code of morality

innately known to all peoples, rather than only the elect, or they flatly denied the

existence of an absolute code of morality.[18] They subtly questioned the authority of

spiritual texts, denied the existence of miracles, and asserted a shared foundation amongst

all religions which invalidates Christianity's claim to unique moral authority.[19] Such

intellectual developments served to support the emergence of a new paradigm under

which religious discussion was carried out. The rejection of Christianity's claim to sole

absolute truth and assertions of its shared foundations with all rival religions, foundations

based innately in human reason rather than transmitted through divine revelation,

supported critical analysis of Christianity in relation to other religions and prepared

Western Europe for the emergence of comparative religious study.[20] Theories of

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[16] Steven Forde, "Natural Law, Theology, and Morality in Locke," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (Apr., 2001), 396-409: 397; Hill, *The World*, 147.

[17] Hill, *The World*, 45-46.

[18] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 52; Israel, "Enlightenment!", 538.

[19] Collins, *Priestcraft in Perfection,* 46; Blount, *Miracles*, 5-6; Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 212.

[20] Harrison, *Religion*, 1-2.

priestcraft extended into arguments against the legitimacy or necessity of organized

religion and against the dangers inherent within any religious institutions, which would

be echoed by later thinkers such as Denis Diderot, and brought to an early extreme in

tracts such as the *Treatise of the Three Impostors* (1719), which labeled Moses, Jesus,

and Mahomet total impostors and their followers "a people of ignoramuses."[21] Natural

religion theory would support later and more radical materialist theories among figures

like La Mettrie.[22] Building upon earlier theoretical traditions, the freethinkers' critical

analyses of religion brought these theories to the point of legitimizing deism and

pantheism, the rejection of any religion but nature and the laws of reason, and close to the

brink of atheism.

       Evidence of an emergent paradigm shift during the early Enlightenment can be

more clearly illustrated by briefly examining how similar theories were shared between

both the free-thinkers of the early Enlightenment and their opponents, supporters of the

established church. Alongside the free-thinking movement a group emerged which

attempted to use science and reason to support the established Anglican Church. Figures

like Robert Boyle, Henry More, and the Cambridge Platonists had begun during the

Restoration the attempt to reconcile new intellectual developments, such as those of

Descartes and Newton, with the established Anglican religion.[23] The Latitudinarians, as

thinkers in this tradition have come to be known, adopted theories very similar to those of

the freethinkers, including viewing reason rather than faith as being the standard of

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[21] "Treatise of the Three Impostors," in *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Margaret C. Jacob (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 94-114: 94,104-111.

[22] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 708.

[23] John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the age of the Enlightenment: Science, religion and politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40-41; Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 22,

absolute truth and the belief in the governance of the universe by natural processes.[24] Whereas the freethinkers used these theories to cast doubt on the legitimacy of organized religion in general and claims to unique spiritual authority, the Latitudinarians used these theories to support the established church, and a "society governed by reason and divine law as interpreted by the church."[25] The fact that the Latitudinarians employed such similar theories as their opponents, straying further from arguments based upon faith, suggests a larger shift occurring in the religious discussions of Western Europe - a paradigm shift in which both sides increasingly looked to reason rather than faith as the arbiter of truth, and it increasingly seemed necessary that the defense of traditional religion be made on the basis of reason.

This essay will focus on the religious radicals of the early English Enlightenment era, from 1680-1730. Specifically, its focus will be the English 'deist' and free-thinking authors of this period. The English free-thinkers were among the first to engage in an "Enlightenment critique of Church history" and the comparative method of religious study.[26] These authors would influence later Enlightenment critiques of religion in mainland Europe, particularly in France.[27] Historical circumstances allowed "Englishmen… a freedom of religious expression which was matched nowhere in Europe," and together with the development of the natural sciences, this allowed English authors to be among the first to subject religion to comparative study and examination.[28]

Three authors in particular will be closely examined in this essay. The first is

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[24] Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 34.
[25] Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 35.
[26] Barnett, *Idol Temples*, viii.
[27] Barnett, *Idol Temples*, 131.
[28] Harrison, *Religion*, 3.

Charles Blount (1654-1693), "the prime figure of the first generation of radical English deists."[29] Blount was labeled by contemporary Charles Leslie as the leader of the Deist movement in England, and Peter Harrison asserts that with the emergence of Blount's writings "we have the beginnings of the deist canon."[30] Blount is notable not only for his early Deism, but also for producing the first known English translation of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,* which denies miracles.[31] This, coupled with a view of his works, one of which is entitled *Miracles No Violations of the Laws of Nature* and was published the same year that translation was published, is evidence that Blount may have been influenced by Spinoza and his religious thought, and was possibly an instrumental figure in incorporating these Dutch ideas into an English tradition of radical religious thought.[32] Blount wrote many of his works before the Glorious Revolution, and died before the relaxation of censorship laws on the press had truly begun in Britain. In so doing he was an early proponent of radical religious thought which drew on foundations laid in the English Civil War, and would be expanded upon by authors who wrote in later decades. The natural religion theory, which will be discussed in detail presently, is an example of such thought, appearing among thinkers during the English Civil War, and in later works in the eighteenth century, such as Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, a treatise heavily reminiscent of Blount's work.[33] Blount proves a key figure in looking at the development of free-thinking religious thought in the early English Enlightenment, with his works serving to facilitate the continuance of this tradition from

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[29] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 601.

[30] Harrison, *Religion*, 61, 73.

[31] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 604.

[32] Blount, *Miracles*, 2-5.

[33] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 113; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment,* 620.

the Restoration to the Glorious Revolution.

Matthew Tindal (1657-1733) is the second author who will be examined in this study. A Fellow of Oxford University, Jonathon Israel notes that Tindal's primary significance lies in the transmission of existing radical religious ideas through his own work.[34] Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), a significant work in the freethinkers' discussion of natural religion theory, gained considerable attention at its emergence.[35] As has been noted, this work exhibits the influence of Charles Blount's theories of natural religion, and its thesis represents some of the basic tenets of the natural religion theory of the English free-thinking movement. Emerging at the culmination of the free-thinking movement in England and reworking theories put forward at the beginning of the movement by Blount, this work is significant as a model of natural religion theory as understood by the freethinkers.[36]

The third key author this study will examine is John Toland (1670-1722). Toland was born in Ireland, and by 1692 when living in London he was still a member of a Presbyterian congregation.[37] Toland met John Locke through a mutual acquaintance in Holland, and his work is influenced by the epistemological theory Locke espouses in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.[38] Toland's first major work, *Christianity Not Mysterious, or, a Treatise Shewing, That there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason Nor Above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd a Mystery,* appeared in 1696, one year after Parliament had declined to renew the Licensing Act, one

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[34] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 619-20

[35] Ibid., 620.

[36] Harrison, *Religion*, 167.

[37] Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 210-11.

[38] Ibid., 212-15

of the chief means of state censorship of the press.[39] It is in this work that Toland begins to develop his assault upon organized religion, his defense of human reason, and his theories connecting religion with the laws of nature and human reason. It insists that religion cannot exist outside of these, which is Toland's variation of natural religion. Toland is an important author because of his marked notoriety and prominence in religious discussions, and because of the political connotations contained in his writings on religion which exhibit well the connection at the time between dissident religious and political thought. He is significant because of his transition from a Presbyterian to a self-avowed Pantheist which reflects the development of a larger trend of free-thinking religious thought during these years. He is significant because his attempt to reconcile reason with religion through a theory of natural religion, his rejection of the spiritual authority of religious institutions, and his insistence on the consonance of religion with the laws of nature represent major trends in the free-thinking religious thought in the era.[40] In many ways Toland's work exhibits some of the leading trends of free-thinking religious thought during the early English Enlightenment, and for this reason Toland will be the primary focus of the last section of this study.

These three authors, because of their prominence, their influence, and their representation of themes common among religious discussions of the early English Enlightenment, will be considered in the greatest detail during this essay. Toland, Blount, and Tindal promulgated theories that may serve as representative of common themes within Enlightenment religious discussion. There were, however, other important writers involved in the free-thinking movement, yet whose philosophies are not as representative

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[39] Hamburger, "The Development," 716-17.

[40] Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 216-17, 222; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 611.

of common radical religious thought as these authors. Nonetheless, a brief word about them is useful.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), was an author of significance to the free-thinking movement.[41] His *Inquiry Concerning Virtue* alleged an absolute basis for universal morality that lay outside of religion.[42] Shaftesbury, however, breaks with these authors in that his ideas are far less radical, and he himself tended to keep a low profile in the religious controversies of the day.[43] As one of the more conservative authors of this movement, Shaftesbury will not serve as a major focus in this study of radical religious thought in the era.

Anthony Collins (1676-1729), an acquaintance of John Locke, wrote several works of significance to the free-thinking movement, including *Priestcraft in Perfection* and his *Discourse of Free-Thinking*.[44] Collins' philosophy is slightly more extreme than that of most of the freethinkers; he is distinguished by his denial of free will, and his thoughts on the nature of the universe are more closely related to the later extreme materialism of la Mettrie in France than the natural religion theories of his contemporary freethinkers.[45] Collins' rejection of human free will makes his philosophy incompatible with theories of natural religion, which depend upon the free exercise of reason to reveal the universal code of morality represented by natural religion. For this reason, Collins' work falls outside of the mainstream of the English 'deist' thought during this period,

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[41] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 67.

[42] Alfred Owen Aldridge, "Shaftesbury and the Deist Manifesto," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series vol. 41, no. 2 (1951), 297-382: 305.

[43] Aldridge, "Shaftesbury," 304; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 67.

[44] See Collins, *Priestcraft in Perfection,* and *A Discourse of Free-Thinking, Occasion'd by The Rise and Growth of a Sect call'd Free-Thinkers* (London: [s.n.], 1713).

[45] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 614-18; Peter N. Miller, "'Freethinking' and 'Freedom of Thought' in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 3 (Sep., 1993) 599-617: 602.

instead presaging intellectual trends that would emerge more prominently in the later Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century.

Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) is another member of the free-thinking movement whose radical ideas set his philosophy outside of the common themes shared by authors like Toland, Blount, and Tindal. Mandeville, like Collins, follows Spinoza in denying human free will, and differs from the natural religion theorists by rejecting the notion of a universal code of morality inherent within human reason.[46] In his notorious *Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville argued that the operation of society in fact depends upon the existence of private vices ("private vices, public benefits").[47] This moral relativism places Mandeville outside the mainstream of many of the themes common among the English free-thinkers, who for the most part were reluctant to dismiss the existence of absolute moral standards.

Shaftesbury, Collins, and Mandeville are all important authors to the English free-thinking movement of the early Enlightenment, and their work contains many similar themes to those expressed by Blount, Tindal, and Toland, such as an emphasis on reason as the standard of truth and criticisms of priestcraft within religion. Shaftesbury, however, falls outside of the mainstream of English 'deist' thought on the conservative side of the spectrum, marked by his sparse use of priestcraft theory and his firm stance in the metaphysical realm, avoiding the critical history and practical application of theory seen in the work of Blount, Tindal, and Toland. Collins and Mandeville, in contrast, fall on the radical end of the spectrum. Collins' rejection of free will and Mandeville's moral relativism place them in opposition to several common trends in rationalizing religion, as

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[46] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 625.

[47] Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits* (London: Printed for J.

under both of their philosophies the process of establishing a moral code based upon reason becomes a futile endeavor. Shaftesbury, Collins, and Mandeville are thus less suitable than others as an example of common trends within early Enlightenment religious thought.

As a result, this essay will shift its focus away from these authors and instead concentrate upon those who are better representatives of moderate English 'deist' thought. The philosophies of Blount, Tindal, and Toland all fall within this range, and their work will here serve to represent of the common themes of early Enlightenment religious thought. In focusing on these, this essay will identify common themes between them which have ties with prior traditions of religious thought beginning before the late-seventeenth century, and influenced the thought of later religious thinkers during the mid-eighteenth century. These are the themes most representative of intellectual religious thought in a transition process, becoming gradually more radical as existing theories are reworked and reinterpreted. In particular, the supplanting of faith with reason as the standard of absolute truth, claims to the existence of a natural religion and an innate sense of morality (or claims that no absolute standard of morality exist), and attacks upon the institution of organized religion within society are the primary themes which will be examined here. These theories, as developed during the early Enlightenment, made a clear contribution to the larger trend in Western culture in which the traditional role of religion was re-evaluated and religion eventually came to be displaced as the hegemonic cultural institution in Western European culture. The theories of these free-thinkers severely challenged the foundations of traditional religion, contributing to a trend of new religious thought that would eventually develop into modern perceptions and perspectives

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Roberts, near the Oxford Arms in Warwick Lane, 1714), a1, a5.

on religion.

In examining how the theories of these authors are representative of a transition in Western thought, it will first be necessary to examine their foundations in earlier intellectual traditions. The religious free-thinking movement of the early English Enlightenment owed a substantial debt to intellectual developments emerging during the period between the Reformation and the English Restoration period in the 1660's and 1670's. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Reformation had already dealt a significant blow to the role of traditional organized religion in the West.[48] With the Reformation, the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church was for the first time openly rejected by significant portions of the population. In the years following the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the rise of the Protestant Christian sects created a religious pluralism in Europe and an impetus for widespread religious debate.[49] In the seventeenth century, this religious pluralism invited a new interest in comparative religious study.[50] In the comparative process, Christianity became subject to scrutiny in comparison to rival religious ideas.[51] The rise of comparative religious study called into question traditional Christian authority. This amounted to a cultural upheaval which helped to create the conditions under which religious hegemony would dissipate and religion would be marginalized within Western culture. The religious pluralism that followed the Reformation invited the application of reason to religion via engagement in comparative religious study, as rival Christian sects each made claim to ultimate religious authority.

Following the Reformation, Europe entered a century of religious conflicts

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[48] Harrison, *Religion*, 7.
[49] Harrison*, Religion*, 9.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

culminating in the Thirty Years War. Ending in 1648, this conflict is considered the last major religious war in Europe, and resulted in unprecedented devastation and loss of life across Europe.[52] Europe in the late seventeenth century was simultaneously undergoing a cultural paradigm shift. New scientific discoveries changed understandings of nature, providing rational bases for natural processes.[53] Europe attached a growing significance to the use of reason in explaining natural processes. Around the mid-century, Cartesianism gained status as a significant philosophy, based upon logic and deductive reasoning.[54] The work of Francis Bacon attracted interest in the empirical method and the use of inductive reasoning.[55] The emergence of Isaac Newton's *Principia* in 1687 developed further the mechanical worldview of nature and changed the nature of popular metaphysical thought in the era.[56] During this era, "science became essential to educated discourse," and the resulting paradigm shift had immense influence over thoughts and opinions concerning traditional religion and its role in society.[57]

In the wake of seventeenth century scientific discovery, tracts concerned with religion, and its place in a world now described in mathematical and scientific terms, emerged in unprecedented volumes.[58] Religion, which previously had been the dominant arbiter of European world perspective, was increasingly in conflict with a new emphasis on reason and rational methodology. As the century progressed, a continued interest was shown in the reconciliation of reason with religion. It increasingly seemed that, were

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[52] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment,* 23.

[53] Harrison, *Religion*, 6-7.

[54] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment,* 24.

[55] Graham Rees, "Reflections on the Reputation of Francis Bacon's Philosophy," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65, no. 3/4 (2002), 379-394: 380-82.

[56] Margaret C. Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63-65.

[57] Ibid. 73.

religion to survive in this new era and culture, such a reconciliation would be necessary. The approaches to this task, however, were varied and numerous. Newton and Descartes attempted to defend the existence of God through the use of scientific method and logic, while others, such as Spinoza, attempted to include God within a rational set of natural processes that governed the workings of the universe, a theory known as pantheism in which God is present in everything.[59] However, the goal of many of these thinkers was similar: to situate God and religion in a world increasingly explained by the natural sciences and rational processes.

Some of the common themes of Enlightenment religious discussion first emerged prominently in the Dutch Republic. Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677), of course, made his own influential contributions to religious discussion in the middle of the century, espousing a pantheist theory in which God is present in all things, yet subject to the laws of reason and the natural order.[60] There is an ongoing dispute over what the extent of Spinoza's influence in Britain might have been, with some scholars asserting its marked significance and others suggesting it remained marginal.[61] There are, however, other authors in the Dutch Republic whose work, emerging later in the century, also features themes that would become common in Enlightenment religious discussion. Balthasar Bekker was a Dutch preacher and adherent of Cartesianism living in Amsterdam.[62] Although Bekker believed in the separation of the spheres of reason and divinity,

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[58] Barnett, *Idol Temples*, 3.

[59] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment,* 18; 230-1; 519.

[60] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 159.

[61] Rosalie L. Colie, "Spinoza in England, 1665-1730," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 3 (Jun. 19, 1963), 183-219: 183, 210; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 159; Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 234-35.

[62] Andrew Fix, "Angels, Devils, and Evil Spirits in Seventeenth-Century Thought: Balthasar Bekker and the Collegiants," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1989), 527-547: 534.

following Descartes, and believed that revelation should not be subordinated to reason, he made his own contribution to the rationalization of religion by attacking popular superstition.[63] In his *The World Bewitch'd, or, an Examination of the Common Opinions Concerning Spirits,* Bekker examined popular beliefs relating to the Devil and the supernatural and subjects them to an analysis based upon reason.[64]

Pierre Bayle is another important figure. Born in France to a Protestant minister, Bayle eventually moved to Rotterdam, where he spent the rest of his life.[65] While remaining a member of the Protestant church, Bayle both argued for religious toleration and placed the Scripture in opposition to reason, possibly hinting at a radical rejection of religion.[66] Taking the opportunity presented by the appearance of a comet in 1680, Bayle's *Lettres sur la Comète* (later reissued as *Pensées diverses sur la Comète*) emerged in 1682 as an assault upon superstition and idolatry.[67] Becoming later the editor of the journal *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in 1684 and publishing his *Dictionnaire* in 1697, Bayle was an influential contributor to Enlightenment religious thought in England and on the continent.[68]

England itself also contributed to the introduction of what would become common Enlightenment religious themes. During the Civil War in the 1640's and 1650's, England had developed a solid tradition of radical religious thought and an unprecedented pluralism of beliefs. Even in the years leading up to the Civil War, some sectors of English society were, through combination of circumstance, more prepared to accept or

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[63] Ibid., 534-35.

[64] Bekker, *World Bewitch'd*, 4-5.

[65] F. Sheldon, "Pierre Bayle," *The North American Review* 111, no. 229 (Oct., 1870), 377-402: 384-86.

[66] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 334-38.

[67] Richard H. Popkin, *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 405; Sheldon, "Pierre Bayle," 387; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 333.

support radical religious ideologies. Several classes of English society existed on the margins of the traditional social hierarchy.[69] These included an underworld, especially concentrated in London, of "vagabonds and beggars," men not tied to land and possessing few opportunities for employment.[70] This class was largely neglected by the established social order, and they lived on the fringes of society - "mostly living very near if not below the poverty line, little influenced by religious or political ideology but ready-made material for… 'the mob.'"[71] Many dissenting Protestant sects likewise embodied a population outside of the influence of the state church, which especially thrived in towns and whose religious ideas reflect an intense individualism.[72] In addition, there was the rural poor, who were free from allegiance to or protection from a lord and whose subsistence was often insecure, and merchants, who often traveled in their business, possibly serving as carriers of ideas between different populations.[73] These social groups existed outside of the traditional social and religious order in England before the onset of the Civil War, and, as Christopher Hill suggests, may have represented an early audience more receptive to new radical religious and political ideas challenging traditional beliefs.[74]

The collapse of the established church occasioned by the war offered a degree of cultural legitimacy to a wide array of dissident religious thought.[75] The campaigns of the New Model Army allowed for social mixing between classes and regions and allowed

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[68] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 335; 338.
[69] Hill, *The World*, 32-37.
[70] Ibid., 32-33.
[71] Hill, *The World,* 32-33.
[72] Ibid., 34.
[73] Ibid., 35-7.
[74] Ibid., 32.
[75] Ibid., 64, 128.

religious ideas to spread rapidly.[76] Thinkers in the era, such as Gerrard Winstanley,

developed ideas that foreshadowed theories of natural religion, the importance of science

and reason as setting the standard of absolute truth, and the development of an individual

morality.[77] England during the Civil War became a crucible in which both existing and

new radical ideas could mix and develop. The theories of the free-thinking movement

would come to adopt many of the ideas emerging from this period.

Following the English Civil War, significant religious divisions remained within

English society. Voluminous amounts of polemical articles discussing and arguing

religious matters were produced in this period, and the tense religious climate of the war

was perpetuated through this literary polemic.[78] The emergence of the Latitudinarian

movement, which sought to reduce its religious views to several basic convictions

supportable by reason in order to more securely "maintain and increase the church's

domination over the religious life of the nation," is a telling sign of the fragmented

religious landscape of post-Restoration England.[79] In this tense religious climate,

intellectuals increasingly began to look to the rationalization of religion as the means to

resolve religious conflict. Like the Latitudinarians, moderate deist and free-thinking

authors focused heavily on rationalizing religion. However, these authors used the

rationalization process instead to challenge the legitimacy of religious divisions, and of

religious institutions in general. The reconciliation of reason with religion was a major

trend in both early Enlightenment religious discussion generally and among the English

free-thinkers particularly, and played a significant role in challenging traditional

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[76] Ibid., 46-47.

[77] Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 27; Hill, *The World*, 147.

[78] Barnett, *Idol Temples*, 5.

[79] Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 34-35; John Spurr, "'Latitudinarianism' and the Restoration Church," *The*

perceptions of religion within Western culture. Thus, in an examination of the religious thinkers referred to as 'deist' in the early Enlightenment, it is necessary to study these attempts to reconcile reason and religion which was such a predominant goal of their work.

Early authors contributing to this trend in the late seventeenth century believed that, through the introduction of superstitions, rites, and ceremonies, religion had degenerated from its supposed original perfect, natural, and rational state. If religion could be cleansed of these impure elements, it would once again reach a state of perfect rationality.[80] This presumably would end any chance of controversy over religious matters as this perfectly rational religion would be appreciated by all as such.[81] This concept of a natural religion, based not upon spiritual authority nor faith but individual human reason, offered a resolution to confessional conflict in asserting a shared set of fundamental laws upon which all religion must necessarily be based.

Several authors during the early English Enlightenment subscribed to the theory of natural religion. Charles Blount, for instance, claimed in his treatise *Great is Diana of the Ephesians* that "before religion, that is to say, sacrifices, rites, ceremonies, pretended revelations, and the like, were invented amongst the heathens, there was no worship of God but in a rational way."[82] Similarly, Matthew Tindal argues in his work *Christianity Old as the Creation* that the precepts of Christianity were based upon an eternal order of reason.[83] These are not only discernable by human reason, without need of divine

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Historical Journal 31, no. 1 (Mar., 1988), 61-82: 61.

[80] Harrison, *Religion*, 73.

[81] Ibid., 63.

[82] Charles Blount, *Great is Diana of the Ephesians: or, The Original of Idolatry, Together with the Politick Institution of the Gentiles Sacrifices* (London: [s.n.], 1695), 3.

[83] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 52.

revelation or the guidance of the clergy, but "written in the hearts of every one of us from the first creation."[84] For Tindal, men need only exercise their innate human reason to discover the tenets of the eternal and natural religion, which consists only of "those things, which our reason, by considering the nature of God and Man, and the relation we stand in to him & to one another, demonstrates to be our duty."[85] Thus, according to this theory, not only were any divisions within Christianity a result of the corruption of its pure state of being, but all religions in the world are fundamentally compatible, being based upon a shared eternal and unchanging order of reason. Any deviations in the doctrines of various religions must necessarily have no effect on the true, natural religion, which is eternal and unchanging as God is presumed to be. Further, one can depend solely upon their reason to know how to act in accordance with natural religion.[86] Any external divine revelations or religious institutions, including the guidance of the clergy, are rendered unnecessary. If human reason is sufficient to discern this eternal order of reason, any religious tenet adopted by a particular institution that does not correspond to it, and to mankind's innate sense of right and wrong, is at best superfluous, and, at worst, detrimental to the correct understanding of moral obligations.

One can consider that the concept of a natural religion might have been an attractive theory for intellectuals at this time. If there exists a natural religion, based upon an eternal and unchanging order of reason, that precedes any formal religions or sects - if, by this token, all religions are based on the same fundamental truths, which are perfectly rational and everlasting, - then, necessarily, all religious controversies are of no real importance whatsoever. For under this theory, any point upon which religions or sects

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[84] Ibid., 52.

[85] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 11.

diverge must be inconsequential. There can be no controversy over the natural religion -

it represents eternal truths, is founded on "the eternal order of reason."[87] Thus, it is easy

to see the attractiveness of this theory to the freethinkers, who lived in an age rife with

religious controversy, recalling a century of bloodshed over religious differences, witness

to all the division and destruction that these religious differences could cause. If there

existed a true and natural original religion, all of these would be unnecessary, indeed,

foolish. Thus the reconciliation of reason with religion, through the assertion of an

original and natural religion, offered a means to end the religious controversies that split

the ideological landscape of Europe in this period.

The theory of an original religion of nature is well expressed in Matthew Tindal's

work *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion

of Nature*.[88] In this work, Tindal argues for the existence of a natural religion, much like

other authors, based upon a system of eternal reason, entirely consistent with revealed

religion (religious knowledge given through divine revelation), and providing "the

foundation of all religion."[89] The work asserts that "the *Christian* Religion has existed

from the beginning; and that God, both then, and ever since, has continu'd to give all

Mankind sufficient means to know it; and that 'tis their duty to know, believe, profess,

and practice it."[90]

Natural religion must have existed for all time, and mankind must have always

had sufficient means to know it, for "there never was a time, when God intended Men

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid., 1.

[88] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 1.

[89] Ibid., 3, 60, 110.

[90] Ibid., 4.

shou'd have no religion; or… an imperfect religion."[91] The eternal existence and

knowledge of religion among mankind is indeed a prerequisite for human beings to be

held morally accountable for their actions, assuming a just God.[92] This natural religion

must be unchangeable, since conceiving of God as "an arbitrary being" would destroy all

bases of human belief and throw mankind into an inevitable skepticism: there would be

nothing "to hinder [God] from perpetually changing his mind."[93] Further, Tindal asserts

that natural religion is not only the basis of the Christian religion, it is the basis of all

religions.[94] Tindal expands upon the notion of all religions being interconnected through

their grounding in this natural religion. The main speaker in *Christianity as Old as the

Creation* even admits to being "so far from thinking the Maxims of Confucius, and Jesus

Christ to differ; that I think the plain and simple maxims of the former, will help to

illustrate the more obscure ones of the latter."[95]

     For Tindal, natural religion is the sole basis for all religion in the world, and it is a

natural religion based upon eternal and unchanging truths. Deviations from the natural

religion are easily recognized, because God "leaves Men at liberty in all things

indifferent; & 'tis in these only, that our liberty of acting as we please consists."[96] The

necessary obligations to the natural religion are innately comprehended by mankind, and

supported by human reason.[97] Tindal's conception of a natural religion is fairly

representative of the theory of natural religion in the period. This theory is a common

theme seen in the writings of many authors referred to as freethinkers or deists.

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[91] Ibid., 7.

[92] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 9.

[93] Ibid., 53.

[94] Ibid., 60.

[95] Ibid., 314.

[96] Ibid., 107.

One author who also subscribes to natural religion theory is Shaftesbury, who in his *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, asserts the necessity of "a right knowledge of what is right and wrong," and "on such a right use of reason as may give ground to a right application and exercise of the affections," for acting in accordance with the natural religion.[98] According to Shaftesbury, the ability to accurately reflect on one's actions in relation to an innate sense of right and wrong is necessary for virtue to exist: "so that if a creature be generous, kind, constant, compassionate; yet if he cannot reflect on what he dos… he has not the name of being virtuous."[99] This is consistent with the work of the other freethinkers: John Toland similarly argues a valid capacity for reasoning among human beings to be a prerequisite for their status as morally accountable beings, stating that "'tis the Perfection of our *Reason* and *Liberty* that makes us deserve Rewards and Punishments."[100] Matthew Tindal asserts that "if man had not natural abilities to distinguish between good and evil… how cou'd we say he was a moral agent, or even an accountable creature?"[101]

This theory of natural religion carried within it a validation of human reason, claiming as it does an innate ability to reason between right and wrong as a precondition for mankind being morally accountable for their actions. According to Tindal, reason is the means of knowing the true religion, and had God not given mankind reason "he would… have defeated his own intent" in creating a system of divine law, "since a law,

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[97] Ibid., 52, 11.

[98] Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue In Two Discourses, viz., I. Of Virtue, and the belief of a Deity, II. Of the Obligations to Virtue*, (London: Printed for A. Bell in Cornhill, E. Castle in Whitehal, and S. Buckley in Fleetstreet, 1699), 34.

[99] Ibid., 28-9.

[100] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious,* 60.

[101] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 58.

as far as it is unintelligible, ceases to be a law."[102] "Shall we say, that God, who had the forming human understanding, as well as his own laws, did not know how to adjust the one to the other?"[103] Thus for these thinkers, the validity of human reason is necessarily proved, if one is to accept that there exists such a thing as true religion: any true religion would depend upon it. This validation of human reason was a break for traditional religious teaching in Europe, which taught that human reason had been corrupted during the Fall (from grace when banished from the Garden of Eden) and thus was unreliable, especially concerning religious matters.[104] In this respect these thinkers represented a stunning break with traditional religious thought.

There is another role that the reconciliation of reason with religion played in the religious discussion of this era. Reason served to counter superstition, which was a major concern among many of the religious freethinkers. Superstition was antithetical to reason, representing the irrational and extraneous elements of traditional religion. Superstitions were not eternal components of religion, but always subject to change: they are "to the people but like several sports to children, which varying in their several seasons, yield them pretty entertainment for the time, and when grown out of request… are still supplanted by new ones to the same purpose."[105] Above all, superstitions were apt to be used as the tools of "priestcraft," a contemporary term which referred to the manipulation of religion, through preying on superstition and corrupting the tenets of the supposed true religion (respective to the author), by clergy seeking material profit and power.[106]

Here it would be prudent to discuss in some detail the history of the priestcraft

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[102] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 3.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Harrison, *Religion*, 8.
[105] Blount, *Great is Diana*, 2.

theory. It is perhaps an oversimplification to speak of any direct causal relationship that created the emergence and proliferation of discussions and accusations of priestcraft and similar anti-clerical theories during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. There are, however, several aspects of the cultural landscape in early Enlightenment England which allowed these theories to penetrate into the public sphere, rather than fading into obscurity as did most earlier movements challenging the hegemony of the orthodox Christian churches of Europe.

At the end of the Thirty Years War, there remained deep confessional divides and religious tensions in Western Europe, which increasingly began to manifest itself through a proliferation of essays, articles, and treatises concerning religion.[107] The simultaneous occurrence of the Reformation and the advent of printing in Europe created a cultural climate in which confessional conflicts were being debated through the printed word.[108] Themes introduced by adversarial Catholic and Protestant authors were adopted by deist and free-thinking authors in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth century and expanded upon for use in their own critiques of religion.[109] Thus the confessional conflicts arising from the Reformation created a foundation for religious debate that would later allow for the comparative study of religion and more radical deviation from the teachings of traditional religious institutions.

The theory of priestcraft gained its prominence through seventeenth-century polemical religious articles such as these, and was originally the tool of Protestant religious authors battling against Catholics, before being adopted by authors described as

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[106] Harrison, *Religion*, 72-3.
[107] Barnett, *Idol Temples*, 2-3.
[108] Ibid., 3.
[109] Ibid., 3-4.

'deist' or free-thinking. Such authors made much broader accusations of priestcraft than did their Protestant predecessors, exhibiting a tendency to expand the argument of priestcraft to encompass the entire history of the church and not to confine associate it with any particular sect or creed. By claiming the influence of priestcraft and corrupt clergy extended even to the original Christian church and pagan religions, these authors emphasize priestcraft as a consistent feature throughout the history of religion. Priestcraft theory, from its origins in Protestant polemic, became a major theme in the works of the free-thinking movement.

Charles Blount, for instance, built considerably upon priestcraft theory in his work. In *Great is Diana of the Ephesians*, he examines the origins of idolatry. He finds them among the pagan religions, claiming that "the heathens" first "turn'd religion into a trade," and that "the general decay of piety, hath in most religions whatsoever proceeded from the exemplary viciousness of their clergy."[110] For Blount, priestcraft has been a consistent feature of religion since its creation - "no sooner had Men found out that there was a God, but Priests stept up and said, that this God had taught them in what manner he would be worshipped."[111] These priests proceeded to mold and manipulate religion to accrue worldly profit and power.[112] "Their priests," Blount charges, "finding they got more by the sins and ignorance of the common people, than by their virtue… made divers things sins which otherwise were but indifferent."[113] They extolled sacrifice over repentance to atone for sins, to ensure that the priestly class was necessary (as repentance can be accomplished individually without mediation), and to ensure the profits that

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[110] Blount, *Great is Diana*, i, v-vi.
[111] Ibid., 14.
[112] Ibid., i.
[113] Blount, *Great is Diana*, 4.

sacrifices brought to them.[114] Further, these priests "betray'd the people into the Adoration of many Gods, because thereby they acquired… much greater advantages,"[115] by necessitating sacrifices for not only one, but many deities. These priests, according to Blount, did everything in their power to render themselves necessary to the people as divine mediators: "they instituted Lustrations, Expiations, and the like, which none but themselves could execute," they refused to provide the people "with a Record of their God's commands, whereby they might walk themselves without any other assistance," and "to fortifie themselves the better against any… Discovery, they ever decry'd Humane Wisdom, and magnify'd Ignorance."[116]

Blount, however, does not attribute the practices of priestcraft to the self-interested clergy alone. Idolatry, a heathen form of priestcraft which preyed on ignorance and superstition, was, according to Blount, originally a tool of statesmen, "at whose charge it was afterwards Educated by Ecclesiasticks."[117] According to Blount, "the use of this Adoration, was to breed a veneration in the common People, not only for the Prince deceased, but likewise for all his Posterity."[118] Thus superstition was manipulated by these statesmen to ensure worldly power and influence for themselves and their descendants, a practice which in turn was supported by the clergy. Idolatry is therefore an apt example of the methodologies of priestcraft, in which the institution of religion, and the superstitions of the people who adhere to it, are manipulated by powerful people to ensure their own worldly power and profit. This connection between statesmen and the clergy through priestcraft is also found in the work of other authors. It is, for example,

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[114] Ibid., 34-5.
[115] Ibid., 6.
[116] Ibid., 14, 23.
[117] Ibid., 7.

particularly explicit in John Toland's *Destiny of Rome* when he devotes a section of that

work to comparing the Roman Church to "Kingdoms, States, and… Government."[119] For

Blount, priestcraft has existed since the creation of religion, was developed by corrupt

clergy and worldly rulers, and is supported by popular ignorance and superstition.

John Toland also built upon the tradition of priestcraft theory in his writings. In

Toland's seminal work, *Christianity Not Mysterious,* a central theme is exposing the

priestcraft of the Roman church, whose "priestcraft was laid so open at the

Reformation."[120] He accuses early Gentile Christians of introducing ritual and

superstition to the religion that otherwise consisted solely of the tenets contained in the

Gospel, and charges that the clergy have done so "that we might constantly depend upon

them for the Explication," giving them power and influence over the people.[121] Another

central theme is salvaging the Gospel from the supposed extraneous ritual and doctrine

that has been added to the Christian religion by the church, manifesting a distinctly

Protestant emphasis upon individual reliance on the Gospel alone to discover the true

tenets of Christianity.[122]

In a later work, *An Appeal to Honest People Against Wicked Priests*, Toland

continues his argument against a wicked clergy composed of "ill-dispos'd, mercenary,

seditious, and aspiring Persons, who incessantly labour to turn our pure Religion into

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[118] Ibid., 8.

[119] John Toland, *The Destiny of Rome: or, the Probability of the Speedy and Final Destruction of the Pope. Concluded Partly, from natural Reasons, and political Observations; and partly, on Occasion of the famous Prophesy of St. Malachy, Archbishop of Armagh, in the XIIth Century: Which Curious Piece, Containing Emblematical Characters of all the Popes, from his own Time to the utter Extirpation of them, is not only here entirely publish'd; but likewise set in a much clearer Light, than has ever hitherto been done* (London: Printed; and Sold by J. Roberts in Warwick Lane and A. Dodd at the Peacock without Temple-Bar, 1718), 7.

[120] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious,* 176.

[121] Ibid., 159; 26.

[122] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, xiv.

Romish Superstition."[123] He emphasizes that priests engaged in priestcraft used the institution of religion "for ruling instead of instructing, for fleecing instead of feeding their flocks."[124] The superstitions of the people marked them as prey for the corrupt clergy, allowing these wicked priests to manipulate religion to accrue personal wealth and power.[125] In this work, Toland allows that the Protestant religion may fall victim to priestcraft, which is strictly a consequence of "*the Clergy's assuming a right to think for the Laity,*" and therefore represents a threat to any institutionalized religion.[126] His wording in several places in the work is suggestive of an expansion of the application of priestcraft theory beyond the Catholic Church. Yet "the Universal Monarchy of the Pope" remains the named target, proposed as the culmination of the Christian church's long tradition of priestcraft among the clergy.[127]

Toland's accusations of priestcraft against the church continued in a still later work, entitled *The Destiny of Rome: or, the Probability of the Speedy and Final Destruction of the Pope*.[128] As the name suggests, the premise of this work is not only that the Catholic Church is and has long since been infested with the practices of priestcraft and the methods of wicked clergy, but that its desire for power and wealth have reached such a threshold as to precipitate its inevitable destruction.[129] In this work, Toland's argument is that the practices that the Catholic Church has adopted to make it

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[123] John Toland, *An Appeal to Honest People Against Wicked Priests: or, The very Heathen Laity's Declarations for Civil Obedience and Liberty of Conscience, Contrary to the Rebellious and Persecuting Principles of some of the Old Christian Clergy; With an Application to the Corrupt Part of the Priests of this present Time, publish'd on Occasion of Dr. Sacheverell's last Sermon*, (London: Printed for Mrs. Smith in Cornhill, and sold by the booksellers of London and Westminster, 1713), 1-2.

[124] Ibid., 4.

[125] Ibid., 5, 13-14.

[126] Ibid., 38.

[127] Ibid., 8.

[128] Toland, *The Destiny of Rome*.

similar to government - its desire for worldly power, tyranny over its subjects, and opulent riches and court pomp - combined with the blow given to its presumed universal authority by the Reformation, have weakened the authority of Rome and the pope.[130] Thus, the very practices of priestcraft that had enriched and empowered the Catholic church were now becoming the instruments of its downfall. Here, these same charges could be applied to the Anglican Church as well, though Toland is very clear on naming the Catholics as the target. It is perhaps suggestive, though, that the work also calls for religious toleration, claiming that "matters of Belief ought to be ever free and unconstrain'd," and that all the divisions of the clergy should come together to "as studiously court each other's Society, as now they avoid it."[131]

Matthew Tindal similarly identified the scourge of priestcraft as existing throughout the history of religion. He argued that superstition provides the grounds upon which priestcraft is allowed to grow and flourish, emphasizing "how easily Mankind may be abus'd, where 'tis believed, that Religion can require any thing inconsistent with the rights and liberties God has allow'd them by the Law of Nature."[132] "The more superstition the people have, the easier they may be impos'd on by designing Ecclesiasticks."[133] This returns to the importance of reason among thinkers in the early Enlightenment as a means to fortify the people against such abuse and manipulation, and the significance of reconciling reason with religion. Like Blount, Tindal charges that clergy seeking to engage in practices of priestcraft used ceremony and ritual to occlude the true (natural) religion, and that they, "knowing what would render them most

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[129] Ibid., 5-6.
[130] Ibid., 7; 9; 12; 15; 16.
[131] Ibid., 19; 4.
[132] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 105.

acceptable to the people, made the chief part of their Religion to consist in gaudy shews, pompous ceremonies, and such other tricks."[134]

Like Blount, Tindal emphasizes the tendency for corrupt clergy to preach against individual repentance, instead claiming their own necessary role in absolving the sins of the people.[135] Such a practice further increases the clergy's power and influence over the people, by making them the necessary mediators through which one must seek atonement for sins and reconciliation with the tenets of true religion. Like the practice of occluding religious tenets with superstition, this practice, according to Tindal, serves only to ensure the power and influence of the clergy over the people, and is actually inconsistent with the natural religion, "which puts the whole stress on internal penitence & true virtue of the soul."[136] By assuming the authority to expatiate sins, the clergy made themselves indispensable to the people, the better to use their position of power for personal benefit.

Thus for Tindal the essence of the true religion was veiled from the people through ritual and ceremony, which ensured that mediation (through institutionalized religion and the clergy) would be necessary to guide the people in obedience to religion. Priestcraft accounts for superstition in what would otherwise be a perfectly reasonable natural religion: "what then can" this mischief in religion "be imputed to, but that independent power, which those Priests usurp'd?"[137] This, as has been noted, is a theme shared by similar authors. It is also extremely suggestive. If the only reason for mankind to stray from a pure natural religion is priestcraft, and if natural religion is innately known to human beings (as Blount and Tindal explicitly assert), would not priestcraft

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[133] Ibid., 152.
[134] Ibid., 131.
[135] Ibid., 114.
[136] Ibid., 114.

then be inherent in any form of organized religion? Is not every sect, church or creed equally illegitimate? Is not every form of external religion merely a hindrance to mankind?

Featured extensively in the works of Tindal, Blount, and Toland (as well as other authors), the priestcraft theory as it emerged during the free-thinking movement in England belongs to the larger trend in religious discussion of supplanting faith with reason as the standard of truth and reconciling religion with reason. As has been shown, the reconciliation of reason with religion was a common theme among early Enlightenment thinkers seeking to secure a place for religion in a new cultural landscape becoming increasingly dependent upon reason and scientific method for its world perspective. Reason also became a means to attempt to settle contemporary ideological disputes. As it was applied to religion, reason increasingly was given the role of combating superstition, and corrupt practices of priestcraft, which were supported by superstition. In the process of rationalizing religion, however, the authors of the free-thinking movement were moving increasingly farther away from the tenets of traditional religion. The common themes of Enlightenment religious thought which the freethinkers discussed presaged a modern culture in which religion would ultimately become marginal, replaced by natural reason as the primary means of explaining the world and its natural processes.

The English freethinkers are not atheists, nor, by and large, are they agnostics. However, by rejecting traditional religious institutions and emphasizing instead personal religious commitment, by reconciling religion with a world perspective based on reason and rationality rather than faith, and, in some cases, by asserting the common foundation

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[137] Tindal, *Christianity Old*, 95.

of all religion to lie within a universal order of reason, these authors helped to facilitate the effacement of religion's hegemony over European culture and to support the new dominant secular perspective based upon reason rather than faith.

Having discussed in detail some of the common themes in free-thinking religious works during the early English Enlightenment, here it will be illuminating to put a particular focus on one of these authors and their ideas, to show how these common themes of the free-thinking movement were blended together in the individual philosophy of one member. John Toland may serve as the object of such focus. As an early 'deist' author living in England, where some of the earliest Enlightenment critiques of religion originated, John Toland's work provides an excellent example of common 'deist' thought in the early Enlightenment. He supported the reconciliation of reason with religion, the consequent validation of human reason, and the attempt to purge religion of priestcraft and superstition. The remainder of this study will focus upon his work and how it incorporates common themes among the English freethinkers in late 17th and early 18th century Britain.

One of Toland's best known works is *Christianity Not Mysterious*. As its subtitle explains, the work is perhaps Toland's most direct attempt to reconcile reason with religion. In so doing, Toland is removing the support for methodologies of priestcraft, which according to him rely upon superstition and mystery, the opposites of the reason he and contemporary authors wish to include in traditional religion in order to preserve its legitimacy in a modern culture based upon evidence and reason. As he states, his purpose is "to make it appear, that the use of reason is not so dangerous in religion as it is

commonly represented."[138] More particularly, Toland seeks to establish Christianity as a "true religion," necessarily implying that it be "reasonable and intelligible."[139] This sentiment is indicative of the struggle in the early Enlightenment to preserve a place for traditional religion within the modern culture by making Christianity reasonable. For Toland, the effort to prove Christianity as reasonable depends on strict adherence to the scripture and Gospel of Jesus Christ, the only true and reasonable basis on which Christianity can be founded.[140]

In establishing a reasonable basis for Christianity, Toland asserts his first task as defining what reason is. Only after this can it be shown that the Gospel is based on reason and not mystery.[141] Toland's definition of reason is "that faculty of the soul which discovers the certainty of any thing dubious or obscure, by comparing it with something evidently known."[142] More particularly, nothing can become known to our reason but by the experience of the senses or mind, or by humane or divine revelation.[143] The human power to reason is seen by Toland as a gift divinely given, to better shape our perceptions of the natural world.[144] After this assertion of reason as being divinely given, and indeed necessary to understand divine matters being laid out, Toland goes on to show that the doctrines of the Gospel cannot be contrary to reason.

There are several reasons Toland gives that the Gospel must be reasonable. First, he asserts, if the doctrine of the New Testament was contrary to reason, human beings

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[138] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious,* viii.
[139] Ibid., xxvii.
[140] Ibid., xxviii.
[141] Ibid., 7.
[142] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, 12-13.
[143] Ibid., 16.
[144] Ibid., 20.

would not be able to comprehend it, let alone follow its teachings.[145] Mystery and superstition cannot be invoked according to this interpretation. It is a telling sign of the cultural trends of the era that Toland puts so much emphasis on the New Testament according with natural reason. No longer is the dogma of the church taken of proof in itself, the teachings of the true religion must now align with that of natural reason. Not only must the New Testament accord with reason in order to be accepted and followed by humanity, but the will of God, according to Toland, must necessarily accord with reason, or else humanity would be thrown into an incurable scepticism.[146] Toland even goes so far to assert that "when we say… that nothing is impossible with God, or that he can do all things, we mean whatever is possible in itself."[147] In Toland's understanding of the one true religion, not even God can subvert the laws of reason. Reason is the base underlying all divine truth.

Toland gives several reasons for the necessity of Christianity being reasonable. Without reason, Toland asserts, "the highest follies and blasphemies may be deduc'd from the letter of scripture."[148] Thus Toland's emphasis on reason also fits in with his attack against priestcraft. A Christianity devoid of reason allows for the blasphemies of the self-serving priests to prevail and influence the perspective of the masses. Therefore, according to Toland, reason is not only a divine gift. For Toland, it is "a blameable credulity" to "believe the divinity of scripture… without rational proofs."[149] Thus human beings are obliged to utilize their reason if they are to be in accordance with the true religion.

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[145] Ibid., 27.
[146] Ibid., 30.
[147] Ibid., 40.
[148] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, 34.

Toland supports this argument with passages from the Bible. Toland asserts that even "the virgin Mary, tho of that sex that's least proof against flattery and superstition," felt obligated to utilize her reason in order to believe that she would bear a virgin son.[150] Further, Toland cites the many places in Christian teachings where believers are told to beware of false prophets.[151] Toland is here drawing evidence from original Scripture to accord with his belief that true Christianity must accord with the modern belief in reason as the sole logical perspective through which to view the natural world and its processes. Toland's idea of true Christianity here is comparable to the natural religion espoused by Tindal or Blount, except that it does emphasize the authority of Scripture - provided, of course, that the Scripture conforms with reason.

Reason is especially important because it is the only aspect that legitimates divine retribution or reward. As Toland asserts, "'tis the perfection of our reason and liberty that makes us deserve rewards and punishments.[152] Without reason, the tenets of Christianity would be completely without legitimacy. Without reason, human beings could not be expected to keep the commandments of God. Thus reason is not only necessary for humans to understand the divine commandments, reason is necessary for humans to have any legitimate obligation to follow these commandments. In the writings of Toland, church dogma is no longer sufficient in and of itself to warrant obedience to Christianity. The individual believer must make sure the tenets of the true religion accord with his own reason for that religion to have any legitimacy, or the religion in question cannot be a true

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[149] Ibid., 36.
[150] Ibid., 44.
[151] Ibid., 44.
[152] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, 60.

one.[153]

The work of John Toland exemplifies several common aspects of contemporary deist attempts to reconcile reason with religion. He argues for the use of reason to purge religion of superstition, and also of corrupt clergy, who prey upon superstition and seek worldly benefits through manipulation of institutional religion, much like Charles Blount had done several years earlier.[154] He asserts the congruence of revealed divine law with the rational laws of nature, a theme also featured prominently in the writings of Blount, and of Matthew Tindal as well.[155] He argues that the moral accountability of human beings to the divine power depends upon the accordance of the divine law with reason, and upon mankind's cognizance of and ability to comprehend this law through use of their reason, a theme continued by Tindal in his work *Christianity as Old as the Creation.*[156] The themes seen in the writings of John Toland are themes also present in the works of preceding, contemporary, and later mainstream deist authors of the early English Enlightenment.

Toland's work also reflects the debt of the freethinkers to the tradition of priestcraft theory. One of the main ways in which Toland attacks priestcraft in institutional religion is by appealing to the writings of original Scripture rather than church interpretations and clerical dogma. There are several examples of this in *Christianity Not Mysterious*. In the preface itself, Toland asserts that he will only attempt a rational explanation of "the Terms and Doctrines of the Gospel," original Scripture,

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[153] Ibid., xxvii-xxviii.

[154] Blount, *Great is Diana,* 21.

[155] Blount, *Great is Diana*, 12; Tindal, 52.

[156] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, 57-8.

rather than any specific church interpretations or dogmas.[157] Later he continues, "how

many voluminous Systems, infinitely more difficult than the Scripture, must be read with

great attention…", further juxtaposing the theories and interpretations of the clergy

practiced in priestcraft against the simple and straightforward "Sentiments in the

Bible."[158] This theme continues throughout the work, with Toland contrasting the self-

interested priestcraft practices of the clergy with the simple and supportive tenets of Jesus

and the apostles.[159] In fact, later in the work he ties his main theme of attempting to

answer "*whether or no Christianity is mysterious*" with this emphasis on Scripture,

asserting that "it ought to be naturally decided by the *New Testament,* wherein the

Christian Faith is originally contained."[160] Toland makes setting the church and the

Gospel in direct opposition to each other a substantial theme in his writings.[161]

Toland continues this practice in some of his later works as well. In *The Destiny

of Rome*, Toland argues against the "riches and possessions" acquired by the church

through practices of priestcraft by comparing it to the tenets of original Scripture, which

conversely emphasize the merits of poverty and simple living.[162] The clergy are

contrasted with the simplicity and honesty of the apostles.[163] Also in *An Appeal to Honest

People Against Wicked Priests*, the simple tenets of "the Institutions of Christ and his

Apostles" are contrasted with the methods of a clergy employing priestcraft in order to

gain governance over the public that is independent of any nation-state or magistrate.[164]

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[157] Ibid.*,* xiv.
[158] Ibid.*,* xxiv.
[159] Ibid., 54.
[160] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, 90.
[161] Ibid.*,* xxi.
[162] Toland, *The Destiny of Rome*, 12.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Toland, *An Appeal,* 10-11.

This work claims its primary purpose to be ridding Christianity of what Toland refers to as mysteries, and to prove that the authority of original Scripture in no way contradicts reason. In debunking mysteries, Toland is addressing something similar to the superstitions to which other contemporary authors refer.[165] This attempt fits in with Toland and other authors' larger theme of exposing the methods of priestcraft. Toland goes about debunking the asserted mysteries in the gospel by tying them to the ceremonies and dogmas of pre-Gospel Judaic religion.[166] He then proceeds to list all of the purported "mysteries of the Gospel," and asserts that through the introduction of the Gospel and the original Scripture, the "vail" which surrounds these mysteries is removed, and they are made mysteries no longer.[167] Toland makes the effort to list every instance of these purported mysteries in the Gospel, and shows that with the coming of Jesus the Gospel itself is revealed and becomes no longer a mystery.[168] In making such a painstaking effort to debunk these purported mysteries, Toland is building upon his priestcraft argument. It is through mysteries that institutional religion teaches the masses "subjection to heathenish rites" for the benefit of the powers in control over religion.[169] He asserts that the clergy have endeavored "not only to make the plainest, but the most trifling things in the world *mysterious*, that we might constantly depend upon them for the explication," thereby ensuring their position of power over the masses.[170] This essay has already noted how similar arguments were promulgated by Blount writing a decade before Toland, and by Tindal writing after him.

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[165] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment,* 375.
[166] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious,* 95.
[167] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, 96-7.
[168] Ibid., 102.
[169] Ibid., xxi-xxii.
[170] Ibid*.,* 26.

Priestcraft is also a central focus of Toland's *The Destiny of Rome*. Here, the main

argument is that excessive priestcraft will be the "speedy and final" demise of the Roman

church.[171] He attacks the clergy for fostering division rather than collaboration within

their ranks, a practice he sees as a symptom of priestcraft, in that each sect wants to make

claim to absolute truth so as to attain a more complete devotion from their adherents.[172]

The argument is that if the goal really were true knowledge of the divine order, than

collaboration would necessarily be the ideal, rather than division.[173] He goes on to

compare the pomp of the Catholic Church to the splendor of political courts, and its

hierarchy to states and governments, asserting that:

> …nothing is observ'd to be so prevalent in the *Court of Rome*, as the Pride and
>
> Pomp of this World, the Gaudiness and swelling Titles, the Riches and Treasures,
>
> the Luxury and Voluptuousness of the vainest Mortals; that it is over-run with
>
> Avarice, Ambition, Jealousy, Craft, Intriegues, Cabals, Parties, Factions,
>
> Supplanting, Dissimulation, and, in short, with every thing, however corrupt or
>
> nefarious, that is practis'd in other Courts…[174]

These, the benefits and consequences of methods of priestcraft, will be the

destruction of the Catholic Church, which like the "*Kingdoms, States,* and (in a word) all

sorts of *Government*" in the world, is subject to rise, change and demise.[175]

Toland further develops his attack on priestcraft in *An Appeal to the Honest*

People, in which he continues to assault the clergy engaging in priestcraft, who he

accuses of endeavoring "to turn our pure religion into Romish Superstition, and our Legal

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[171] Toland, *The Destiny of Rome,* 2.

[172] Ibid., 3.

[173] Ibid., 4.

[174] Toland, *The Destiny of Rome*, 7-8.

Liberty into French Tyranny."[176] Here it is worth noting that Toland more specifically

accuses priests of engaging in methods of priestcraft as an attempt to rule their adherents,

rather than to support them.[177] This is reminiscent of the theme in *The Destiny of Rome*,

where the splendor of the Roman church was compared to the pomp of a government

court.[178] He further ties the excesses of priestcraft to desire for control and influence over

the public by arguing that priestcraft has "terminated at last in the Universal Monarchy of

the Pope," continuing a theme in this work, *The Destiny of Rome*, and some other of his

later works of portraying the Catholic church as a monarchial institution devoted to

governing rather than supporting the people.[179] The methods of priestcraft, devoted to

confounding and confusing the people so as to make them all the more dependent on the

guidance of the church, support this influence priestcraft clergy can exert over their

adherents, and allow for a hierarchy of power to be maintained within institutional

religion.

  In these works, Toland specifically names the Catholic Church as the target of his

assaults. However, the arguments Toland makes could also be applied to the Anglican

Church at the time, and this, combined with Toland's outspoken support for toleration,

are suggestive. Other authors of the free-thinking movement are not so specific in

pinpointing the Catholics as the targets of priestcraft argument. However, authors like

Blount and Tindal are also less specific in assaulting the practices of institutionalized

religion, preferring instead to challenge its foundations. These might all represent ways in

which these authors moderated the radical nature of their ideas. In none of these works is

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[175] Ibid.,7.
[176] Toland, *An Appeal,* 2.
[177] Ibid., 4.
[178] Toland, *The Destiny of Rome,* 8.

the established (Anglican) church specifically attacked, yet all of them present arguments which challenge its legitimacy and traditional role in society. Whatever the intentions, the priestcraft arguments in Toland's work, combined with his emphasis on reason, present significant challenges to traditional organized religion. In this, Toland's work is consistent with that of fellow free-thinkers and other Enlightenment thinkers in undermining religions traditional claims to authority and absolute truth.

In Toland's work, one can see how the themes of the freethinkers were mutually supportive and used in conjunction with one another. Reason, natural religion theory, and attacks on the church through priestcraft arguments worked together in the philosophies of Toland and his fellow freethinkers to severely challenge the foundations of traditional religion in Western culture.

The themes represented here in the works of Charles Blount, Matthew Tindal, and John Toland exemplify some of the common trends in radical religious thought during the early English Enlightenment. They represent a portion of a larger historical process in Western culture that led to the eventual marginalization of religion within society. Drawing upon earlier intellectual traditions, such as priestcraft theory and assaults upon popular superstition, and influencing the ideas of the 'High' Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century, the development of these themes supported a transition in intellectual perspectives on religion. The challenges brought against religion through the development of these themes increasingly required defenders of traditional religion to support their arguments with reason rather than faith. In so doing, the bases of truth and established fact in intellectual discussions of religion were fundamentally altered, part of a larger paradigm shift occurring across many fields of Western culture during the

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[179] Toland, *An Appeal,* 8.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Unlike earlier periods, the radical religious thought emerging during this era could not be suppressed. The impact of these ideas did not go unnoticed, as evidenced by reaction through the rise of the Latitudinarians, the foundation of the Boyle lectureship,

and written responses by figures like Samuel Clarke and Jonathan Swift.[180] The authors of the English free-thinking movement challenged traditional religious teachings, met popular belief in the supernatural with skepticism, rejected the unique moral authority of Christianity, questioned the legitimacy of institutionalized religion in general terms, and used reason to analyze all aspects of traditional religion. The work and ideas of these authors helped to set a precedent for later authors who would bring even more radical challenges to traditional religion during the mid-eighteenth century. Thus, in supporting a larger paradigm shift in Western culture, which introduced reason as the primary basis of absolute truth, the ideas of these radical religious thinkers had a real impact upon the societies from which they emerged. They did so by causing a shift in perspectives on religion among both supporters and opponents of traditional religion, presaging the loss of religion's cultural hegemony that would become a definitive aspect of modern Western culture.

In examining common themes among the English free-thinkers, and their relation to intellectual developments that preceded and followed them, this essay has attempted to situate these intellectual trends within a larger process within Western culture that led to religion's eventual marginalization. To be sure, this process was gradual, and its diffusion

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[180] Jacob, *The Newtonians*, 32-35; Miller, "Freethinking," 4-5; Paul Russell, "Epigram, Pantheists, and Freethought in Hume's Treatise: A Study in Esoteric Communication,"

amongst mainstream Western society slow. However, the survival of these ideas through generations established a foundation of new religious thought.

In choosing to examine in detail several key authors among the English free-thinkers and their particular works, chosen as representative of common themes within the movement, this essay has attempted to provide a detailed picture of intellectual traditions in transition, of how they evolved in their radicalism and intensity. In so doing it has attempted to highlight the process by which ideas can have a real impact on society, in this case by fundamentally altering perceptions of religion and its role within society.

The common themes of the English free-thinking movement examined in this essay represent one part of a larger process leading to the marginalization of religion within Western culture. They built upon earlier theories and influenced later ones, and represent the gradual evolution of Western intellectual tradition, in this case in relation to religious ideas and perceptions. The work of these authors thus had a real impact on Western culture and society. John Toland, Charles Blount, Matthew Tindal, and the other English free-thinkers are therefore significant figures in the history of Western religious thought. Through examination of their work and its ties to larger intellectual traditions and processes, the role of ideas in altering society is demonstrated, and the process by which this occurs is illuminated.

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