'May the last king be strangled in the bowels of the last priest': irreligion and the English Enlightenment, 1649-1789

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Writing on *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies in the Metropolis* (1800) W.H. Reid excoriated the diffusion of continental irreligion amongst the 'lower orders' in London. Popular songs and reading clubs pilloried Bishops and Kings. 'May the last King be strangled in the bowels of the last priest' was a common toast in the public houses and hairdressers of Shoreditch, Whitechapel and Spitalfields. Meetings in club rooms, timed to coincide with Church services, promoted discussion where 'every religious obligation, in civilised society, was resisted as priestcraft'. Through associations like the London Corresponding Society 'doctrines of infidelity' became 'extensively circulated among the lower orders'. This process of popularisation was heinous: books alone were corrosive of order, but when the 'principle of infidelity [was] transferred from <u>Books</u> to <u>men</u>; from <u>dead</u> characters to <u>living</u> men' then the status quo was threatened. Much of Reid's diagnosis of the pathological quality of English irreligion was deduced from the importation of French ideas of dechristianization after 1789. Alongside classics of English unbelief, like Paine's *Age of Reason*, the lower orders had become corrupted by a litany of Continental writings like Mirabaud's *System of Nature* or d'Holbach's *Le Bon sens* 'a paragon of French atheism'.[1] A central theme of Reid's text, echoed in many other contemporary works, is that of English culture tainted by a radical French impiety.[2]

It has been a scholarly commonplace to regard this 'French impiety' as as a significant moment in the history of European society. Celebrated as the instance when liberty of thought transcended Tradition and Religion, the Enlightenment saw the 'Kingdom of Reason' triumph over the superstition of custom and faith.[3] Importantly as this process of religious disenchantment has been described as a radical moment, it has also been classified as an essentially French achievement. It will be the contention of this paper, in reviewing the historiography of 'the Enlightenment', that to argue for the significance of anticlerical and irreligious discourses in the eighteenth century should also, by implication, commit historians to an understanding and emphasis upon the English contribution to this radical rupture of *ancien regime* ideologies.

In recent years the willingness of historians to write about 'the Enlightenment' as a radical moment has not been widely evident. Accounts of 'the Enlightenment' that understood it as a crucial turning point in the history of human society, whether Marxist, liberal or idealist, have been cast aside in favour of work that explores the idiosyncratic, the provincial and the clandestine dimensions of the period. Until recent times the moment was described as the accession of Philosophical rationality. Scientific progress, economic liberalism and modern literary discourses were all thought to have been born in the period. In contrast to these historiographies that placed the processes of thought and cultural change in the larger map of human progress we now have 'Enlightenments' that explore, among other themes, exoticism, sexual underworlds and secret societies.[4] While exploring fragmented, liminal or counter-cultural 'Enlightenments' is a valuable and indeed important enterprise to enable a deconstruction of the grander claims of traditional historiography there may still be the intellectual space to address the significance of some of the broader changes of the period - perhaps the most central being the attack upon religion, which, it will be argued, was prompted by the crisis of Christian culture in England which was one of the legacies of the revolutions in church and state in the 1640s.

II

That France was the font of irreligion in the eighteenth century is a scholarly commonplace. On the contrary England has been construed as being blissfully free of such infidelity. As John Pocock has insisted 'to try to articulate the phrase "the English Enlightenment" is to encounter inhibition; an ox sits upon the tongue'.[5] Although there have been recent attempts to 'shift the ox', or at least to render the notion of an English Enlightenment less of a mouthful, such accounts suggest that the Enlightenment in England was a conservative and clerical movement with no destabilizing propensities. It was a sensibility that throve within rather than without piety: a programme of religious reform rather than revolution.[6] In England after 1660, as a result of the profound social and intellectual inversions of the Revolutionary decades, it is possible to speak with confidence of a society that was riven by competing ideological prescriptions for true religion and government. As the research of many historians has stressed this bipolarity was manifest not just in

the realm of ideas but embedded in the material practices of everyday life at all levels of the social hierarchy.[7] The significance of this cultural polarity has received little attention in recent accounts of eighteenth century life. The eighteenth century British were a polite and respectable people. Colley has written about the social inclusiveness of British national identity in the period rather than the oppositional interests of class: E.P. Thompson has described the period as one of 'class struggle without class'.[8] Interestingly, much of this recent historiography has assumed that religion played little role as a destabilizing factor in either politics or society. Colley describes a broadly Protestant culture that opposed the Catholic 'other', while Thompson writes of a plebeian culture that had all but escaped the 'hegemony of the Church'.[9] Although Thompson insists that the elite governed in England through a process of 'cultural hegemony' the role of established religious authority was only 'acknowledged in ... perfunctory ways'. To marginalise religion at the same time as placing the concept of cultural hegemony at the centre of an understanding of eighteenth century social relations seems paradoxical.[10]

It is clear that the eighteenth century Church of England loosened its ritual authority over the people. The Toleration Act of 1689 set the legal context for the practical fragmentation of unitary religious worship which had become the experience of post-revolutionary England. But to claim this, or that 'the early eighteenth century witnessed a great recession in Puritanism', is not the same as arguing for a decline in the cultural hegemony of religion. The institutional structure or membership of the Church of England may have become 'erastian' and dominated by the 'cousins of the gentry'. The change from a 'magical' form of authority to different cultural techniques of power did not imply a transcendence of 'religion' merely a mutation of the social and literary form it was represented by. While the legal establishment of the restricted right to worship in non-Anglican variants of Christianity had profound sociological effects in the number of individuals who attended Anglican Churches to suggest that it overthrew the cultural authority of religion (understood as an all encompassing structure of social authority, practice and belief) is dangerously reductive.[11] Recent collections of essays addressing the relationship between religion and society in eighteenth century England indicate the continuing vibrancy of pastoral and theological institutions.[12] The efflorescence of non-established and private forms of Christian worship in the period although divergent in doctrine and dogma, were still forms of religious behaviour even if *ecclesiolae* rather than *ecclesia*. Toleration of Christian belief may perhaps be regarded as an expansion rather than a decline in religion.[13] What toleration did enfranchise was heterogeneity in public debates about the authority of true religion rather than the

rise of secular modernity. Although it is possible to agree with de Certeau's assertions that 'prophetic beginnings [made] room for a socio-political opposition', and that 'religious language turned into social discourse' during the course of the eighteenth century this discursive transformation was enacted under the carapace of religious formality. As historians like Clark and Hole have illustrated, orthodox Anglicanism seems to have been as effective a player in the battle for cultural hegemony in the 1790s as it was in the 1690s: this is not to argue that it was the singular participant.[14] To argue that religion remained a vibrant and powerful cultural practice is not to insist that English radicalism was mute or peripheral: indeed it was precisely because confessional imperatives remained so embedded in the infrastructure of social power in the period that the anticlerical and irreligious discourses of the commonwealth tradition retained their relevance and power.

This theme has been asserted in the important writings of Margaret Jacob who has has suggested that the militant atheism of the High Enlightenment was spawned by a radical English commonwealth tradition.[15] This argument has distinguished precursors. Contrary to current orthodoxies earlier historians inverted the commonplace narrative of French radicalism and English innocence. Alexis de Tocqueville, while insisting upon the central role that irreligion played in challenging the 'sanctity' of the established political and religious order, importantly suggested that the intellectual origins of that impiety lay in English rather than French discourses. He commented boldly, 'There is no question that the nation wide discredit of all forms of religious belief which prevailed at the end of the century had a preponderant influence on the course of the French Revolution'.[16] The Church was 'if not the most oppressive' then certainly the 'chief of all the powers in the land'.[17] There was, as de Tocqueville put it, a sort of 'give and take' between civil and ecclesiastical authority: 'the secular power insisted upon obedience to the ecclesiastical authorities and the Church saw to it that the King's authority was respected'. With the spread of the 'revolutionary movement' the consecrated alliance between Church and State became fragile given that the 'power' was founded 'not on constraint but belief'.[18] In describing the ideological origins of this attack upon organised religion de Tocqueville was unequivocal: 'our anti-religious ideas had found exponents in England before our famous French philosophers were born'. Voltaire took his cue from English writers, 'throughout the eighteenth century great skeptics made their voices heard in England, and brilliant writers and profound thinkers sponsored the views we now associate with Voltaire'. de Tocqueville argued that the irreligious spirit of the age (the Enlightenment)

prompted the Revolution of 1789. The modish impiety that wreaked so much havoc on the continent was imported from English shores.

There is then a common assumption that the Enlightenment attack upon religion was in some manner important towards determining the shape of 'revolution' in France. Exploring the precise connection between the diffusion of radical ideas and the coming of the Revolution has occupied (mainly French) historians since the early decades of this century. Daniel Mornet's classic studies between 1910 and 1938, based upon his researches into the diffusion of ideas through an examination of book ownership, argued that 'incredulity and indifference' derived from the arguments of many writings created a revolution in 'men's mind's' that set the context for 1789. If one intention was to play down the role of the 'great texts' in creating the impious culture of eighteenth century France Mornet's corollary was to emphasise the role a widely diffused public opinion had in creating the ideological circumstances for the breakdown of the *ancien regime*.[19] Mornet's early attempt at answering the question of what the French read in the eighteenth century spawned a massive body of quantitative research into book ownership, publishing houses, and the circulation of clandestine literature but very few attempts at addressing the relationship between reading and revolution. Two recent works by Baker and Chartier have attempted to re-pose the question of the 'ideological origins' of the Revolution.[20]

Both Baker and Chartier set out to go beyond Mornet and explore the cultural implications of changes in reading and writing. In effect to explore how new ideas or languages contributed to ruptures in the traditional forms of social authority. There are however important distinctions between Baker and Chartier. For Baker the Revolution was constituted in the realm of linguistic practice. The Enlightenment evolved a collection of critical discourses that tore French culture away from its absolutist foundations. Stressing the 'linguisticality' of political life, Baker's account of the ideological origins of 1789 is premised upon a confrontation between competing absolutist and anti-monarchical discourses. The traditional ideology of the ancien regime was undercut by *mauvais discours*: the men of letters, the *societes de pensees* transformed the traditional 'symbolic representation' of absolutism into the 'socio-political action' of revolution in 1789: opinion was brought to power.[21]

If Baker locates the ideological origins of 1789 in the invention of restructured languages of opposition to ancien regime discourses of absolute monarchy,

Chartier has adopted a less abstracted model of cultural change. Expanding on Habermas' work on the structural transformation of the public sphere Chartier proposes a wider social context for the process of 'ideological erosion' that focuses upon the idea of the 'public' use of reason. While Baker seems content to explore the changing configurations of political languages, Chartier insists upon the sociological dimensions of these innovations. The new public sphere, embodied in the new forms of intellectual sociability like 'the salons, the cafes, the clubs and periodicals', defined alternative 'modes of representation' that became embodied in 'public opinion'. The 'tribunal of opinion' was ultimately constituted by the 'way of print'. More people read and owned a transformed literary product. Philosophic texts, pornography, satires, libels and salacious narratives circulated with increased frequency in both Paris and the provinces. Pirated and clandestine titles, 'books under the cloak' fashioned French culture from the mid century. Reading Voltaire or d'Holbach alongside the denuciatory *libelles* unpicked the charismatic authority of orthodox discourses.[22]

Although Chartier expresses some caution in 'linking philosophical books and revolutionary thought', that is in connecting reading to belief, it his contention that the period saw a transformation of reading practices. The new relationship between reader and book was the crux of the matter. This innovation was not just a matter of the content of philosophic texts, but, as Chartier writes, 'rather a new mode of reading that, even when the texts it took on were in total conformity with religious and political order, developed a critical attitude freed from the ties of dependence and obedience that underlay earlier representations'.[23] This 'disengagement from tradition' was manifest not just in linguistic practice (qua Baker) but in cultural and social practice. The process of dechristianization and secularisation was part of the early modern transition from a theocratic organisation of society to the political.[24] The decline of the social role of the parish and priest, the desacralisation of the monarchy, and the diffusion of practical and theoretical incredulity, all provided the components of a 'new political culture' that ultimately destroyed the established order in 1789.[25]

Recent scholarship then broadly reinforces the arguments of writers like Mornet, and before him de Tocqueville. The corrosion of the religious sensibilities of the *ancien regime* by high and low life *philosophes*, *gens des lettres* and hack journalists fractured the traditional structure of authority. As Chartier summarises, 'if the French of the late eighteenth century fashioned the Revolution, it is in turn because they had been fashioned by books'.[26] With very few exceptions neither

modern French nor English historiography has paid much attention to the role English irreligion may have played in the formation of this Enlightenment culture.[27] Importantly, however, earlier historians, in pursuing the influence of irreligion on the Revolution, located the provenance of this critical discourse in earlier eighteenth century English sources.

III

Reading the series of literary studies written between 1900 and the 1930s it is commonplace to encounter arguments that insisted upon the 'great intellectual liaison' between France and England in the first half of the eighteenth century.[28] Examinations of the networks of correspondence and literary journals that constituted the public forum of the *respublica litteratorum* stress the primacy of the English contribution. Central in the diffusion of radical ideas to the Continent were Dutch journals, like the *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres* and the *Bibliotheque Universelle*, which acted as conduits conveying 'substantial information on the English deistic movement ... to French readers'. As one commentator put it 'the English movement was thought to be the source of the French movement which followed'.[29] Taking the examples of Voltaire and d'Holbach, the two most popular writers of 'forbidden books' according to Darnton, as cases of English influence is instructive.[30] The early historiography treats these writers as publicists rather than innovators: Voltaire was the means by which 'the whole movement of English ideas was channelled into France'. D'Holbach's widely diffused materialist tracts contained translations of substantial portions of earlier eighteenth century English writings.[31]

The historiographical suggestion that the roots of Enlightenment discourses of 'ecrase l'infame' are to be found in the soil of English anticlericalism might be expected to provoke some shaking of scholarly heads. This historiographical inertia is ripe for challenging. The stratification of contemporary national historiographies has done a great deal to obscure the cosmopolitanism of early modern culture. To argue in this way, however, is not to jettison the idea of the cultural differences between early modern states as a historical tool of explanation, but to propose a greater cultural permeability than is currently acknowledged. In exploring here just one tributary of the irreligion of the high Enlightenment the intention is to point out some of the continuities, as well as differences, between England and France in the period.

Published first in 1719 and frequently reprinted after 1768 the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* has been long considered as the cynosure of Enlightenment irreligion: a 'complete system of atheism'.[32] As the researches of Wade, Spink and Allen illustrate the work in manuscript also had a massive clandestine circulation throughout the eighteenth century.[33] Recent studies by Silvia Berti and Françoise Charles-Daubert have traced the location of the surviving manuscripts and compiled a bibliography of the variant editions. Reinforcing the impression that the *Traité* represents a peculiarly French phenomenon ('les tendances les plus radicales de la critique antireligieuse de l'epoque') of a total of some 300 copies still extant only two English versions seem to have survived.[34] Eventually republished by d'Holbach's printer Marc-Michel Rey in the late 1760s and 1770s the text indicted all organised religion as imposture. Compiled as a *bricolage* of early modern sources the three religious economies, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, were vilified as products of the 'absurd imaginations' of priests and tyrants. Moses, Christ and Mohammed were the three religious impostors, who, masked as divine prophets, had duped the world: as the *Traité* put it, 'Toutes les religions sont l'ouvrage de la politique'.[35] Theological institutions and beliefs - priests, sacraments, heaven, hell, even God - were all false systems of belief, founded upon human ignorance and fear. These false ideologies contrived not only spiritual deviance but civil tyranny.

The *Traité* has been described as a 'preamble' to the systematic irreligion of d'Holbach's *System of Nature or Essay on Prejudices*. It exposed the history of religion as a history of error: imposture was both irrational and unjust. Kings and Priests were condemned as conspirators against human reason and liberty. This polemic, while extreme, was not new. The dissection of the *Traité* has shown its sources to be a collage of much earlier discourses: Hobbes, Spinoza, Vanini, Pomponazzi, Campanella, and Machiavelli all rubbed shoulders with classical standards like Cicero. Although there have been many candidates for authorship ranging from Frederick II to French *libertins érudits* it now seems most likely that the compiler was a minor Dutch diplomat Jan Vroesen.[36] The intellectual milieu which provoked the *Traité* was Anglo-Dutch rather than French. The 'origins' of the most radical 'oeuvre de combat' of the French Enlightenment seems to have been in an author whose main inspiration was 'la letteratura deistica ingelese'.[37] More recent work has suggested that the pantheistical figure, John Toland may have also had a key role in the development of specific elements of the clandestine text related to the construction of Moses as a political legislator. This research prompts some rethinking of the relationship between English and French thought in the period. The

fact that English writers were capable of 'inventing' such radical discourses between 1649 and 1700, should prompt some reconsideration of the cultural origins of the French Revolution.

IV

After 1649 English culture experienced (to use Baker's vocabulary) a rupture in the symbolic representation of monarchy and religion that eroded the coherence of traditional authority. While writers on the French Revolution have described this conceptual fracture with absolutism as the 'origin' of the socio-political action of 1789, in the English context it is more typical to write of the 'revolution' in 1649 as an accidental aberration. Recent research would however insist that the revolution had profoundly irreligious consequences. Indeed by exploring debates about the politics of religion between the execution of Charles I and the accession of the Hanoverian monarchy it is possible to identify a series of republican and anticlerical discourses that provided the conceptual cloth for Vroesen's *bricolage* in the *Traité.* Whatever the social, political, or religious causes of the outbreak of revolution in 1642 might be, there surely can be little controversy in insisting that the world was turned upside down in 1649. Although it cannot be said that there was any systematic and co-ordinated ideological programme that toppled both Church and State, the result of practical disorder and heterodox practice meant that the traditional economy of spiritual authority was disrupted. The Bible became a bagatelle, priests became popish rogues, and Princes mere dogs. Combined with the social disintegration of the established clerical and monarchical order were intellectual assaults on *ancien regime* ideology. While the writings of Hobbes, Spinoza and La Peyrère attacked the sanctity of the Bible as politically prescriptive, theorists like Harrington promoted a civic republicanism that undercut the patriarchal ideology of later Stuart society.

Although the English Revolution did not effect any profound social or economic transformation there was then one important ideological legacy identified as the problematic of the 'politics of religion'. Between the Restoration in 1660 and the early eighteenth century the central political debate revolved around the axis of religion rather than that of constitutionalism. The political and social power of the established Church came under intense scrutiny. While high Churchmen and Royal apologists persevered in restating the sacrality of Church and State, republican and anticlerical writers like Charles Blount, John Toland and Thomas Gordon designed polemics that undercut the 'halo of sanctity'. This antagonistic discourse, identified as a 'history of priestcraft', can be considered as the first moves in the history and

sociology of religion.[38] The crisis of authority engendered a series of texts, many of which were translated, paraphrased or plagiarised in later French books, which treated religious belief, ceremony and ritual as a social and historical phenomenon. 'Religion' was conventional rather than transcendental, a product of human psychology and priestly manipulation. For example Hobbes' *Ecclesiastical History from Moses to Luther* (1689 Latin edition, 1722 English translation) provided a simplified historical analysis of the decline of true theology and the rise of priestcraft. Primitive Christianity was originally a sociable religion that promoted natural morality rather than worldly gain. The priests, using a corrupt apparatus of pagan philosophy and scholastic 'jargon', turned religion into empire. False miracles, superstition, ghosts and goblins, the kingdom of fairies and darkness established clerical power over the fearful and ignorant laity. In strikingly similar language to the *Traité*, Hobbes insisted that the clergy had 'deified their dreams'. The sacerdotal order created a domination over the laity, which hand in hand with corrupt monarchs, they forged into civil tyranny.

Other important texts, Robert Howard's *History of Religion* (1694), John Trenchard's *Natural History of Superstition* (1709) and Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696) all reinforced the anticlerical polemic: mystery, cunning and priestcraft had corrupted natural religion. Although many of these attacks upon religion and the Church were polemical *livres de circonstance* they drew from a large body of scholarly research that investigated not only the history of Christianity, but the history of heathenism, Judaism and Islam. Drawing from the critical writings of Herbert of Cherbury and John Spenser populist pamphlets like Charles Blount's *Anima Mundi* (1680) and Toland's *Letters to Serena* (1704) exposed Christian beliefs like the soul and the afterlife as opinion and idolatry: the history of theology became the history of error. The underlying theme was the distinction between the virtuous injunctions of the law of nature and the conventional aspirations of positive institutions. Almost inevitably natural religion became corrupted by the priests.

In tandem with reviling the priesthood for corrupting religion and establishing civil tyranny by imposing their false opinions as prejudices in the popular mind the anticlerical writers also exposed the techniques of priestly hegemony. Developing the radical Biblical criticism of the 1650s the work of Toland and Thomas Burnet divested Scripture of its authenticity as the word of God by insisting upon its historicity. Biblical text was 'a heap of copy confusedly taken', the Canon was manipulated by priestly forgers. John Toland scandalously attempted to negate the New Testament by supplanting it with his newly discovered 'Gospel of Barnabas'.[39]

The word of God was wrested and wried by the self-interest of the Church: mistranslations, interpolations, and mystification had obscured the true meaning of Scripture. Reformation of the 'Word' meant revolution in the Church.[40]

The anticlerical writers of the 1680s, '90s and 1700s developed a conception of religion as a sociological quality rather than as a divine truth. This formulation was not merely a scholarly point but a political discourse aimed at countering the social power of the Church. Some of the texts, like Charles Blount's edition of the *Life of Apollonius* (1680), another book that was translated for a French audience twice in the 1770s, were elegant, learned and even erudite deconstructions of Christian myth.[41] Others, like Trenchard's and Gordon's journals *Cato's Letters* and the *Independent Whig*, were aimed at a popular audience.[42] The central point of this English disquisition, just as with the *Traité*, was that irreligion was part of a political agenda. Priestcraft corrupted both theology and society. As Trenchard pithily commented, Christianity was 'a deadly engine in the hands of a tyrant to rivet his subjects in chains'. The first step on the road to reform was to desacralize the Church. The battle was not to overthrow religion but to purify it.

At this point a critic might comment that for all the anticlerical intentions the freethinking English works were tame compared with the outrageous elements in the *Traité* or d'Holbach's writings. On the contrary, in England the 'three impostors' thesis was mooted in print and in public from the 1650s. Richard Popkin's work on the Oldenburg circle shows that there was a current anxiety about the existence of a treatise that presented Moses, Christ and Mohammed as political legislators. Oldenburg was desperate for Adam Boreel to compose a rebuttal. As early as 1643 Thomas Browne had written against the author of 'the miscreant piece of the Three Impostors'. Henry Stubbe was familiar enough with the arguments to write a manuscript life of Mohammed which presented him as a much more successful politician that either Christ or Moses.[43] The bibliographer Richard Smith wrote an account of the 'rumour' of the treatise some time in the 1660s giving a detailed prospectus of both the types of argument such a work might propose as well as a useful list of sources for further reading.

Evidence that the 'three impostors thesis' had become part of popular currency could be derived from the trial in London of John Baptista Damascene 'an impious and profane and irreligious person' in June 1672. Although acquitted later Damascene was accused of proclaiming that 'Jesus Christ, Moyses and Mahomet were three great rogues'.[44] Charles Blount's much ignored *Life of Apollonius*

(1680), a book that was burnt by order of the Bishop of London, used many of the sources contained in the *Traité* to parody the life of Christ with the example of the pagan magician Apollonius. Importantly the irreligious footnotes to the classical text contained a trialogue between a Jew, a Christian and a Moslem debating the relative merits of their religions. Blount made similar allusions to the theory of triple imposture in letters to Rochester which were published in the 1690s. Perhaps the closest parallel to the *Traité* can be found in John Toland's *Nazarenus* (1718), another English text widely disseminated and discussed on the Continent and ultimately translated by D'Holbach in 1777. Using a very suspect and highly heterodox gnostic gospel, which he had disinterred in Holland Toland proposed that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were in fact all part of the same 'religious' phenomenon which was concerned to promote moral virtue rather than sacrament and ritual. The subtext of *Nazarenus*, explored more explicitly in Latin works like *Origines Judicae* (1709), was that the so called religious prophets (Moses, Christ and Mohammed) were really political legislators who adapted their religious institutions to national and historical circumstances.

The English commonwealthmen like Toland adapted the clerical idea of religion to the needs of the state: they created a civil religion modelled upon classical examples. The indictment of priestcraft was not because it was 'religion' but because it was corrupt religion. Reform of religion was the stepping stone to reform of society. Pre-empting the civic religion of Rousseau and the inauguration of the Cult of Reason and worship of the Supreme Being in 1792-3, the republicans suggested that commonwealth religion was to be 'a minister of God on Earth, to the end that the World may be governed with Righteousness'.[45] Studies like Walter Moyle's discursus on Numa Pompilius applauded the Roman's politic use of religion and credal minimalism. Harrington's *Oceana* (1656), a popular text in eighteenth century French political theory, promoted a 'public leading' in religion to establish virtue in the nation. The republican model was premised upon a stoic vision of the personal and political battle between reason and the passions. Priestcraft corrupted the soul and the state with ignorance and tyrannous private interest; virtue blessed the souls with reason and the state with public interest. For the republicans the false sacrality of priestcraft was to be transferred to the civic religion. The role of this religion was to teach reason, virtue and public interest to the populace. Priestcraft reformed to civic religion was a central theme of the attack upon the Church of England between 1660 and 1714 enacted by writers like Toland, Gordon and the third Earl of Shaftesbury. It was precisely these writings which were translated for French readers in the 1760s and 1770s.[46]

V

John Pocock has suggested that early modern England had a political culture in which radical ideas were 'invented but never put into practice'.[47] Because historians have generally been more interested in exploring the 'origins' rather than 'consequences' of 1649 there has been very little attempt at examining the wider ideological significance of the Revolution.[48] A commonplace view might suggest that the radicalism of the 1640s and 1650s died with the restoration of the King and Bishops in 1660. Indeed the idea of the persistence of the traditional order has been painted in bold brush stokes by J.C.D. Clark. Far from being constitutionally distinct from the Continent, for Clark, England with its 'confessional state' remained part of the *ancien regime* throughout the eighteenth century. Since religious institutions, beliefs and practices remained robust and vibrant, commonwealth traditions were marginalised to the radical fringes .[49]

The logic of this argument rests upon a false opposition between a religious configuration of social power and a secular or civil alternative. The radical legacy of the 1640s and 1650s, mediated by the materialistic and anticlerical re-articulations of men like Toland, Blount and Gordon, was calculated as a contribution of the debate about the legitimate relationship between religious confessionalism and civic order. Indeed recent work on the 'politics of religion' after the Restoration, would argue that the confrontations between radical and traditional interests took place within rather than without the margins of 'religion'.[50] That is that the struggle for 'power' was not a teleological plot whereby politics replaced theology, but a competition for the appropriation of authority within the carapace of the 'religious'.[51] The irreligious discourses born in ecclesiological debate in seventeenth century England, and refined in the crucible of revolutionary exchange in the 1640s and 1650s, were not mere parochial ephemera but remained pertinant to the continuing contestation about the status of 'religion' throughout the eighteenth century. In this sense the radical consequences of 1649 were intimately relevant to the cultural origins of 1789.[52] There is little doubt that after the 1660s, as part of the public debate about the relationship between the Church of England and civil power, that a profoundly radical critique of clerical authority was articulated, which later became an intellectual resource for French anticlericalism. This is not to argue that the radical anticlerical discourse of the English commonwealthsmen 'caused', 'inspired' or 'provoked' the crisis of 1789. Because there were common themes of public debate focused on the nature of religion it was possible for French writers like Voltaire and d'Holbach to appropriate and re-articulate the language and arguments

of earlier English authors. One point that ought to be stressed is that the English debate was conducted in the public forum of print. Toland's *Nazarenus* was a published text, the *Traité* circulated in France as a clandestine manuscript.[53] English commonwealth anticlericalism after 1660 attempted to grapple public power from the established Church: the objective was to reform public religion. This public discourse can be contrasted with traditions of French libertinism which performed a private and elite patrician impiety.[54]

Although the period from 1650 to 1800 has consistently been described as an era of secularisation it has now become apparent that the relationship between religion and reason is not as clear as Victorian logic might have it.[55] Discursive manoeuvrings between Church and State rather than between Monarchies and representative institutions seem to have determined the nature of conflict in the period in both England and France. Confronting the problem of the 'confessional state' in England, Freethinker and Priest, competed in the same public forum for the power to inform 'public reason'.[56] It is important to note that English freethinking attacks upon priestcraft did not go unchallenged: impiety was rebutted by vigorous clerical polemic. Indeed, as Brian Young has recently asserted, 'enlightenment' in England could perhaps be described as being more profoundly clerical than radical. 'Enlightened ecclesiastics' like William Law, Daniel Waterland, and William Warburton, in articulating an anti-dogmatic 'reasonable' defence of Christian orthodoxy, preserved the cultural and intellectual status of religious institutions in the eighteenth century.[57] Acknowledging the historiographical value of a churchmanship that successfully plotted a steady course between enlightenment and counter-enlightenment discourses about the status of reason and religion should not however, imply a consequent deflation of the 'radicalism' of a persisting tradition of anticlerical and commonwealth ideologies. An alternative reading of the continuing success of religious apologetics might be to assert the consequentially persisting relevance of irreligious ideologies. In one sense the debate might be thought to be determined by different understandings of the relationship between ideas and cultural change: it is one thing to argue that a set of ideas articulated by a group of writers became dominant or achieved hegemonic status, it is another to explore the procedures of competition, contestation and appropriation by which different affinities or interests defended their positions. An intellectualist approach might argue that 'Enlightenment' conceptions of human nature, reason or philosophy necessarily vanquished traditional religious and theological values during the course of the eighteenth century. By rehearsing the arguments of the

current historiography of political culture in eighteenth century France the intention has been to suggest that the politically corrosive dynamic of a set of anticlerical irreligious ideas holds implications for an understanding of the illocutionary meaning of those ideas in an English context. The work of Chartier and Baker suggests that the production, circulation, and reception of anti-monarchical and anti-clerical ideas was intimately connected with the socio-political rupture of 1789. In one sense then it is possible to argue that there was a critical discourse that had a radical reaction in *ancien regime* society both in England and France. By exploring the intellectual genesis of these ideas and locating them in English commonwealth traditions, it is possible to underscore both the portability and permeability of such radically anti-traditional ideas. There is a twofold implication here. First, that there was a textually continous relationship between an early radical (English) enlightenment and a later high (French) Enlightenment. Secondly, the point should be made that these ideas were not only portable and adaptible, but also the product of a specific politico-religious moment. Between 1660 and 1730 there was a contestation in intellectual culture between clerical and anticlerical interests: this contestation while not simply 'religious' nor 'secular', was certainly internicine. While it is possible to assert, *pace* Clark and Young, that this 'radical' moment was compromised, and, even perhaps, marginalised from the central stage of public debate after the 1730s in England, its significance both for providing a resource for later (French) writers and polemicists, but also for establishing a radical agenda for the contours and parameters of eighteenth century European debate about religion should not be ignored.

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[1] 1. W.H. Reid *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies in the Metropolis* (1800) iii-v, 3-8, 10-13, 16 (please note I cite here Reid's ascription of authorship). Both Mirabeau and d'Holbach are represented on R. Darnton's listing of best-selling 'forbidden' books, see 'The forbidden books of pre-Revolutionary France' in C. Lucas (ed), *Rewriting the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) see Tables 1 and 2 for a listing of most popular titles.

[2] For discussion of English radical political culture see, I. McCalman *Radical Underworld. Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993); J. Mee *Dangerous Enthusiasm . William Blake and the culture of radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). A work that explores the continuities of English traditions is, E.P. Thompson *Witness Against the Beast. William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[3] For a useful survey see M.S. Anderson *Historians and Eighteenth Century Europe 1715-1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 64-119.

[4] See for example: G.S. Rousseau, R. Porter (eds) *Exoticism in the Enlightenment* (Manchester University Press, 1990) and idem *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Manchester University Press, 1987): also P. Hulme, L. Jordanova *The Enlightenment and its Shadows* (London: Routledge, 1990) and M.C. Jacob *Living the Enlightenment: Fremasonry and Politics in Eighteenth Century Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

[5]. See J.G.A. Pocock 'Post-Puritan England and the Problem of the Enlightenment' in P. Zagorin (ed) *Culture and Politics: from Puritanism to the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 91, 106; see also idem 'Clergy and Commerce: the conservative Enlightenment in England' in *L'Eta dei Lumi: Studi Storici sul Settecento Europe in onore di Franco Venturi* (Naples 1985). For an excellent overview which shares many of th arguments of this piece, see M.A. Goldie 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism' in N.Phillipson, Q.Skinner (eds) *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[6]. See R. Porter, M. Teich *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); J. Gascoigne *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment* (Cambridge Uiversity Press, 1989).

[7] See, drawing together much recent work, T. Harris *Politics under the later Stuarts* (London: Longman, 1992).

[8] See P. Langford *A Polite and Respectable People. England 1727-1783* (Oxford University Press, 1989), idem *Public Life and Propertied Englishmen 1689-1798* (Oxford University Press, 1991); L.Colley *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); E.P. Thompson *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1993).

[9] Colley *Britons* 11-54; Thompson *Customs in Common* 49-50, 56, 64.

[10] Thompson *Customs in Common* 86-7. For an examination of the material infrastructure of the eighteenth century state see J. Brewer *The Sinews of Power: War Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (London: Unwin and Hyman, 1989).

[11] Thompson *Customs in Common* 50; see also Langford *Public Life and Propertied Englishmen* 430.

[12] See, J. Walsh, C. Heydon, S. Taylor (eds) *The Church of England c.1689-1833. From Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); K. Haakonssen (ed) *Enlightenment and Religion. Rational Dissent in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also W. M. Jacob *Lay People and Religion in the early eighteenth century* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

13 See M. de Certeau 'La formalité des practiques. Du systeme religieux a l'ethique des lumieres (XVIIe-XVIIIe)' translated into English in *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 166.

14 See R.Hole *Pulpits, politics and public order in England 1762-1832* (Cambridge University Press, 1989)

15 M.C. Jacob *The Radical Enlightenment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981) passim; Franco Venturi made similar suggestions in his *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1971) 47-69. For a survey of the historiography see, J.E. Force 'The Origins of Modern Atheism' *Journal of History of Ideas* 50 (1989).

16. A. de Tocqueville *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1988) 155.

17. ibid 151.

18. ibid 152.

19. D. Mornet 'Les enseignements du bibliotheques privees (1750-1780)' *Revue d'histoire litteraire de la France* 17 (1910) and *Les origines intellectualles de la Revolution Francaise* 1715-1789 (Paris: Armand Collin, 1938). For a useful discussion of Mornet's work see R. Darnton *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982) 167-8, 176-82.

20. K.M. Baker *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) and R. Chartier *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

21. See Baker *Inventing the French Revolution* 12-31; and idem 'Enlightenment and Revolution in France: old problems, renewed approaches' *Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981), and idem 'On the problem of the ideological origins of the French Revolution' in D. La Capra, S.L. Kaplan (eds.) *Modern European Intellectual History. Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). For some very cogent criticisms of Baker's arguments see J.Horns 'The revolution as discourse' *History of European Ideas* 13 (1991) 628-30.

22. See R.Darnton *The Literary Underground*, and idem 'The forbidden books of pre-Revolutionary France' in C. Lucas (ed), *Rewriting the French Revolution*, Tables 1 and 2.

23. Chartier *Cultural Origins* chapter 4 'Do books make revolutions' especially at 81-91. For an useful discussion of Chartier's work see D. Goodman 'Public sphere and private life: towards a synthesis of current historiographical approaches to the Old Regime' *History and Theory* 31 (1992). See J. Habermas *The Structural*

Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge Ma: MIT Press, 1989).

[24]. See de Certeau 'The Formality of Practices' *passim*.

[25]. Chartier *Cultural Origins* 136.

[26]. Chartier *Cultural Origins* 68.

[27]. The exceptions are the works of F. Venturi and M. Jacob. See also A.C. Kors, P.J. Korshin *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France and Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

[28]. See for example J. Texte *Jean Jacques Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitanisme litteraire* (Paris, 1895); A.C. Hunter *J-B Suard: un introducteur de la litterature anglaise en France* (Paris, 1925); H.J. Reesink *L'Angleterre et la Litterature Anglaise dans les trois plus anciens periodiques Francais de Holland de 1684 a 1709* (Paris: Libraire Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1931); G. Bonno *La Culture et la civilisation britannique devant l'opinion francaise de la paix d'Utrecht aux Lettres Philosopiques (1713-1734)* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948). See also C.A. Rochedieu *Bibliography of French Translations of English Works 1700-1800* (Chicago University Press, 1948). For a more recent assessment of the relations between English and French freethought see C.B. O'Keefe *Contemporary Reactions to the Enlightenment* (Geneva: Bibliothèque de Litterature Compare, 1973); J. Grieder *Anglomania in France 1740-1789. Fact Fiction and Political Discourse* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1985).

[29]. See for a useful survey of the older literature I.O. Wade *The Structure and Form of the French Enlightenment* 2 volumes (Princeton University Press, 1977) volume 1 120-171 (citation at 136).

[30]. See Darnton 'Forbidden Books' Table 2: both Voltaire and d'Holbach topped the bestsellers list of illegal books.

[31]. On Voltaire see N.L. Torrey *Voltaire and the English Deists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930); on d'Holbach see, P.Naville D'*Holbach et la philosophie scientific au XVIIIe siecle* (Paris: Vrin, 1967). D'Holbach seems to have been particularly interested in the writings of John Toland 1670-1722: the Catalogues des Livres de feu M. le Baron d'Holbach (Paris, 1789) shows that he owned an almost complete collection of Toland's writings, many of which he translated anonymously or as composed under his own name. See also J. Vercruysse *Bibliographie descriptive des ecrits du Baron d'Holbach* (Paris: Press Université de France, 1971) for translations from John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon.

[32]. See P. Retat (ed) *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (Paris: Centre Interuniveristaire, 1973) 7; there were editions in 1775, 1776, 1777, 1793, 1796.

[33]. See I.O.Wade *The Clandestine Organisation and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (Princeton University Press, 1938); J. Spink *French Freethought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (London: Althone Press, 1960); D.C. Allen *Doubt's Boundless Sea* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1964).

[34]. Retat *Traité* 'Introduction' 12. For full details of the extant mansucript tradition see M. Benitez *La Face Cachée des Lumiéres* (Paris: Universitas, 1996) 51-2. The standard work on the diffusion and reception of the work is, S. Berti, F. Charles-Daubert, R.H. Popkin (eds) *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free thought in early-eighteenth-century Europe. Studies on the Traité des trois imposteurs* (Dortrecht: Klewer, 1996). An English translation of the 1777 version of the *Traité* is available edited by A. Anderson, *The Treatise of the Three Impostors and the Problem of the Enlightenment* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997). F. Charles-Daubert *Le Traité des trois Imposteurs et L'Esprit de Spinoza 1678?-1768* (Paris: Universitas, 1998) provides transcriptions of the major manuscript traditions and variations.

[35]. Retat *Traité* 'Tables des Matieres'.

[36]. See S. Berti 'Jan Vroesen, autore del Traite des Tois Imposteurs?' *Rivista Storica Italiana* CIII (1991).

[37]. ibid 539.

[38] For a general account see, J.A.I. Champion *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken. The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); see also, M.A. Goldie 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism' in N.Phillipson, Q.Skinner (eds) *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), and idem 'Ideology' in J.Farr, T.Ball and T.Hanson (eds) *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also P.N. Miller ' "Freethinking" and "Freedom of Thought" in eighteenth century Britain' *Historical Journal* 36 (1993).

[39]. For an extended discussion see, J.A.I Champion (ed) *John Toland Nazarenus* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998)

[40] For a general account of English attitudes towards the status of Revelation and the Biblical text see, C. Hill *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1993). For a broader overview see, R.A. Muller *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 2 Holy Scripture: the Cognitive Foundations of Theology* (Baker Books, 1993).

[41]. See Rochedieu *Bibliography of French Translations*: translations were published at Berlin in 1774 and Amsterdam in 1779.

[42] The best account of these contributions is M. P. McMahon *The Radical Whigs, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Libertarian Loyalists to the New House of Hanover* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990).

[43] See J.A.I Champion 'Legislators, Impostors, and the politic origins of religion: English theories of 'imposture' from Stubbe to Toland' in Berti, Charles-Daubert, Popkin (eds) *Heterodoxy,* 333-356.

[44]. See J.A.I. Champion, R.H. Popkin 'Bibliography and Irreligion: Richard Smith's 'Observations on the Report of a Blasphemous Treatise' *The Seventeenth Century* 10 (1995) 77-99.

[45]. See M. Vovelle 'The adventure of Reason or From Reason to the Supreme Being' in C. Lucas *Rewriting the French Revolution;* idem *The Revolt against Religion* (Kings Lynn: Polity, 1992). See Champion *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, Chapter 7.

[46]. See Rochedieu *Bibliography of French Translations.*

[47]. J.G.A. Pocock 'Introduction' *Edmund Burke. Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indiana: Hackett, 1987) xi.

[48] See C.Hill *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980) and idem, 'Freethinking and Libertinism: the legacy of the English Revolution' in R.Lund (ed) *The Margins of Orthodoxy. Heterodox writing and cultural response 1660-1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) 54-70.

[49]. See J.C.D. Clark *English Society 1688-1832* (Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also idem 'England's Ancien Regime as a confessional state' *Albion* 21 (1989), and more recently for a massive revision of the eighteenth century see *The Language of Liberty: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World 1660-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[50]. See T.Harris, P. Seaward, M.A. Goldie *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) which brings together much of the recent work.

[51]. See Horns 'Revolution as Discourse' 626.

[52]. For some suggestive remarks see J.G.A. Pocock 'Edmund Burke and the redefinition of enthusiasm, the context as counter-revolution' in F. Furet, M. Ouzouf (eds), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture 1789-1848* (Oxford: Permagon, 1989) 23.

[53]. The material for a major study of the cultural significance of book ownership and the European wide diffusion of ideas is substantial. Following in the traditions of Mornet and Chartier the starting point for such a project would be the a comparison of the c3,000 surviving Sales Catalogues of private book collections with the literary journals. For a listing see A.N.L. Munby, L. Coral B*ritish Book Sale Catalogues 1676-1800* (London: Mansell, 1977) and R.S. Crane, F.B. Kaye *A Census of British Newspapers and Periodicals 1620-1800* (University of North Carolina, 1927).

[54] For a discussion of this point see, M. Benitez 'Lumières et élitisme dans les manuscrits clandestins' in *La Face Cachée des Lumières. Recherches sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l'âge classique* (Paris: Universitas, 1996) 199-211.

[55] See C.J. Sommerville *The Secularisation of Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[56] For a useful cross-cultural comparision of the popular press seee S.Botein, J.Censer, H.Ritvo 'The periodical press in eighteenth century English and French society: a cross cultural approach' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (1981). See also J.H. Popkin 'Periodical publication and the nature of knowledge in eighteenth century Europe' in D.H. Kelly, R.H. Popkin (eds) *The Shapes of Knowledge from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Dortrecht: Klewer, 1991). For older work on French periodical literature see J. de la Harpe 'Le journal des Savants et L'Angleterre 1702-1789' *Modern Philology* 20 (1937-41) who comments (289) 'L'importance du rôle de L'Angleterre dans la formation de la pensée française du XVIII siècle est, à cette heure, une fait acquis'.

[57] See B. W. Young *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century England. Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998).