

Reason, Grace, and Sentiment

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

VOLUME II
SHAFTESBURY TO HUME

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The true religion of nature: the freethinkers and their opponents

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Berkeley, *Alciphron* (1732)¹

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

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

1 Freethinking, deism, and atheism

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

¹ *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III (1950), 218.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³ *Vindicius Liberius* (1702), 150.

⁴ *Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), 84.

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

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

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

⁵ *Vindicius Liberi*, 42.

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

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

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

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

Bentley's view is that

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ *Free-Thinking*, 5.

¹¹ *Grounds and Reasons*, xvii–viii.

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

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

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

¹² *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 34.

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

¹⁴ Berkeley, *Guardian* no. 83, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, VII, 216.

¹⁵ *Remarks*, Part II (1713), 19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shaftesbury made explicit his dislike of Locke's philosophy. Collins became an extremely close friend of Locke at the end of his life, as appears from Locke's affectionate letters of 1703–4.²¹ Tindal corresponded with Locke, and Toland certainly knew him, though Locke was careful to distance himself once Toland's freethinking views and publications had made him an embarrassment.²² The ways in which the freethinkers both quarried and undermined Locke's epistemology and his moral and religious beliefs is a complicated matter which will be explored below.

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

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

²¹ In Locke, *Correspondence*, ed. de Beer, vols. 7 and especially 8.

²² See Sullivan, *Toland*, 6–8, and n.125 below.

²³ See Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, xxx–xxxii.

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

²⁵ M. Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*, Chapter 5.

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

²⁷ *Life, Letters*, ed. Rand, 479–80.

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁰ *Being and Attributes* (1705), 46, 109–10.

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

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

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

³⁴ Berkeley, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 321.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴¹ For Watts see *RGS*, I.

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁵ See below, pp. 63–4.

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

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

Halyburton devoted several chapters of *Natural Religion Insufficient* to Herbert, and called him on the title page 'the great Patron of Deism'; he was followed in this approach by Leland, who gave a fair account of what he knew of Herbert's work in the first two letters of *Principal Deistical Writers*. Leland describes Herbert as 'one of the first that formed Deism into a System, and asserted the sufficiency, universality, and absolute perfection, of natural religion, with a view to discard all extraordinary revelation, as useless and needless'.⁴⁶ The main philosophical and religious works of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1582–1648), written in Latin and published in the seventeenth century, are *De Veritate* (1624, with several subsequent editions), *De Religione Laici* (1645), and *De Religione Gentilium* (1663).⁴⁷ There was an English translation of the last as *The Antient Religion of the Gentiles* (1705), the others remaining untranslated until the twentieth century.⁴⁸ In addition an English work, *A Dialogue between a Tutor and his Pupil*, which popularises part of the arguments of the Latin works, circulated in manuscript in the seventeenth century but was not published until 1768.⁴⁹ Herbert's ideas were borrowed and passages from his works incorporated by Charles Blount (who had access to the manuscript *Dialogue*) in his own *Religio Laici* (1683) and *The Oracles of Reason* (1693). The attitudes Herbert most obviously shares with the later freethinkers are bitter and often satirical hostility to priests, superstition, and mysteries, and the championing of philosophy against organised religion.

⁴⁶ *Principal Deistical Writers*, 4th edn (1764), I, 3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵² Cf Sullivan, *Toland*, 220–32.

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

⁵⁴ See Chapter 2 below, pp. 88–9.

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

⁵⁶ *Principal Deistical Writers*, I, 35.

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

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

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

⁵⁸ See J. Jacob, *Stubbe* (1983), Chapters 4 and 8.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶³ Voitle, *Shaftesbury*, 221; also in *Life, Letters*, ed. Rand, 374.

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

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

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

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

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

⁶⁷ See O’Higgins, *Collins*, Chapter 2.

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

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

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

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

⁶⁹ Stillingfleet, *Vindication of the Trinity*, xlviiii; cf Browne, *Procedure*, 40, on deists, freethinkers, and atheists as the natural offspring of Socinianism.

⁷⁰ Tindal, *Christianity*, 64. ⁷¹ Collins, *Free-Thinking*, 171.

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

⁷³ *Characteristics*, III, 297.

⁷⁴ *Free-Thinking*, 34, 163. ⁷⁵ *Free-Thinking*, 123–76, 177.

⁷⁶ Hoadly, *Queries* (1713), 22.

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

⁷⁷ *Natural Religion Insufficient*, 17–18. ⁷⁸ *Deism Revealed*, II, 213; cf 292.

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

⁸⁰ *Second Pastoral Letter* (1730), 64–6. ⁸¹ Swift, *Works*, ed. Davis, IV.

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

⁸³ *Miscellany V, Characteristicks*, III, 317–44.

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

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

⁸⁴ To Collins, 29 October 1703, *Correspondence*, ed. de Beer, VIII, 97.

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

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

⁸⁷ *Scripture Vindicated*, Part II (1731), 128.

⁸⁸ See below, pp. 67–9.

made his aims clear in the Preface to *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity* (1697), explaining why he had restricted the role of natural religion and stressed only the fundamentals of Christianity; he hoped it would be of use

especially to those, who thought either that there was no need of revelation at all, or that the revelation of our Saviour required the belief of such articles for salvation, which the settled notions, and their way of reasoning in some, and want of understanding in others, made impossible to them. Upon these two topics the objections seemed to turn, which were with most assurance made by deists, against christianity; but against christianity misunderstood.⁸⁹

But it was the *Essay* that interested the freethinkers. Locke spent three years engaged in a controversy with Stillingfleet over the meaning of potentially anti-Christian passages in it, a controversy which arose from Stillingfleet's attack in Chapter 10 of his *Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697) on Toland's use of arguments and terms from the *Essay in Christianity not Mysteries*. Stillingfleet blamed Locke for giving weapons to the freethinkers, even though they were used in ways Locke had not intended. But Stillingfleet underestimated Toland when he said that 'none are so bold in attacking the *Mysteries of the Christian Faith*; as the Smatterers in *Ideas*, and new Terms of Philosophy, without any true Understanding of them'.⁹⁰ Toland knew what he was doing with Locke's language of ideas, just as he knew what he was doing with the Socinian treatment of mysteries: in each case he drew out the potentially irreligious tendency of certain kinds of argument which were intended to support religion.

However, although Lockean epistemology could be used in support of sceptical freethinking (by someone discarding the absolute acceptance of revelation that was essential to Locke's philosophy as a whole), there is no evidence that Locke's writings lent support to deism strictly interpreted, i.e. natural religion without revelation. After the early accusations against the *Essay* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* had subsided, Locke was defended and relied on by the orthodox as a supporter of Christianity, and often cited against the freethinkers.⁹¹ For example Halyburton and Watts cite *The Reasonableness of Christianity* in support of the view that 'Nature's Light affords not a sufficient Rule of Duty';⁹² Gibson draws on Locke's attack on innate ideas and examples of horrid heathen practices in Book I, Chapter 3 of the *Essay* for the same purpose.⁹³ Tindal notes the irony of Gibson quoting Locke against deism though Locke had been railed at by Stillingfleet as 'a Promoter of Heretical Depravity'.⁹⁴ But though Tindal

⁸⁹ *Works*, VI, 188. ⁹⁰ *Vindication*, 273.

⁹¹ See Yolton, *Locke and the Way of Ideas* (1956), Chapter 5.

⁹² Halyburton, *Natural Religion Insufficient*, Chapter 7; see also Watts, *Strength and Weakness of Human Reason*, *Works*, ed. Parsons (1800), III, 18, quoted in *RGS*, I, 188.

⁹³ *Second Pastoral Letter*, 5–6, 35. ⁹⁴ *Second Address* (1730), 50.

quotes Locke back at Gibson in the *Addresses* and draws on him occasionally in *Christianity as Old as the Creation* his position is largely antithetical to Locke's. Locke might be manipulated in the cause of sceptical freethinking or he might be properly enlisted on the side of Christian faith, but he could not be made to support innate universal belief in God or the irreproachable dignity of heathen philosophers. The Christian or the Socinian or the sceptic could draw comfort from Locke's arguments, but not the deist.⁹⁵

Probably the most important dispute between the freethinkers and their opponents over the appropriation or misappropriation of sources related not to the latitudinarians or Locke but to the classical moralists. Both sides were anxious to establish their interpretation of the significance of classical philosophy and to draw on it to sustain their own views. The clerical opposition pursued two lines of argument, which are not necessarily consistent: that classical philosophy was an insufficient guide to mankind, and that what was best about it was a faint anticipation of revealed religion. Halyburton and Gibson, for example, put the first case and Berkeley the second.⁹⁶ The problem is explored in detail by Clarke in *Natural Religion*, Proposition 6, 'That all the Teaching and Instruction of the best Heathen Philosophers, was for many Reasons utterly insufficient to reform Mankind.'⁹⁷ The tone of these arguments is inevitably much more cautious when they are directed against eighteenth-century freethinkers rather than (as was the case with the latitude-men) against seventeenth-century Calvinists. The freethinkers, conversely, both argued the sufficiency of classical philosophy and found in the relationship between philosophy and religion in the pagan world a model for their own precarious status in contemporary society. It might seem likely that the two sides would have confronted each other with favourite rival philosophers, but on the whole this did not happen. There are exceptions. The freethinkers were fond of quoting Plutarch's *On Superstition*,⁹⁸ and their debt to Seneca and Varro, though not often acknowledged, is evident: Collins praises Seneca for his 'noble *Notion* of the *Worship of the Gods*', i.e. through acting well, and Varro's threefold theology (mythical, physical and civil) is particularly useful to Toland.⁹⁹ Shaftesbury's devotion to the Stoics Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, which was to have a profound influence later in the century, was partly concealed.¹⁰⁰ The clergy were anxious to associate the freethinkers with the Greek atomist Epicurus as a disrepu-

⁹⁵ For the Lockean tradition in the later eighteenth century see Chapter 5 below.

⁹⁶ Halyburton, *Natural Religion Insufficient*, Chapters 4 and 6; Gibson, *Second Pastoral Letter*, Chapter 2; Berkeley, *Alciphron*, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 242–3.

⁹⁷ *Natural Religion*, 207–40. ⁹⁸ See below, p. 53.

⁹⁹ Collins, *Free-Thinking*, 147; Toland, 'Clidophorus', *Tetradymus*, 91–3.

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter 2 below, pp. 94–5.

table atheist, and Bentley makes much of the connexion in his second Boyle sermon, ‘Matter and Motion cannot think’, but the freethinkers, whether from lack of interest or caution, rarely mention either Epicurus or his Roman interpreter Lucretius. Collins’s praise of Epicurus as the most virtuous of the philosophers, eminent for friendship, a virtue said to be unknown to the New Testament, seems exceptionally rash.¹⁰¹ Collins caused further annoyance by pointing out that ‘There is but one compleat Ancient *System of Atheism* (*viz.* EPICURUS’s *System* written by LUCRETIUS)’, and that the clergy, by their recommendation of the translation by Thomas Creech (himself a clergyman), were in effect propagating it.¹⁰²

The battle was fought over the interpretation of one philosopher, Cicero, with both sides claiming him as their own.¹⁰³ In 1712 Toland circulated a plan to publish a new edition of Cicero’s works, *Cicero Illustratus*.¹⁰⁴ Toland’s object was in part to show how Cicero should be read from a freethinking point of view, as a sceptic and opponent of superstition, who should not be identified with the advocates of religious views in his dialogues.¹⁰⁵ This scheme, which annoyed Hoadly,¹⁰⁶ came to nothing, but it indicates how seriously Cicero was taken as a model. In *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* Collins objects to the way Cicero’s works are cited against the freethinkers from pulpit and press, and provides a rule, borrowed from Toland’s *Cicero Illustratus*, for the correct interpretation of the dialogues: Cicero should never be identified with any character in his dialogues except the Academic sceptic or when he speaks in his own name; he should certainly not be identified with Stoic supporters of superstition.

So that CICERO is as unfairly dealt with, whenever he is cited against *Free-Thinking*, as the Priests themselves would be, did any one cite as their Sentiments what they make *Deists*, *Scepticks*, and *Socinians* say, in the *Dialogues* they compose against those Sects . . . And if CICERO’s Readers will follow this Rule of common Sense in understanding him, they will find him as great a *Free-Thinker* as he was a *Philosopher*, an *Orator*, a *Man of Virtue*, and a *Patriot*.

Far from giving ammunition to the clergy, Collins’s Cicero is effectively an atheist, whose writings do not ‘tend to the Service of any Priestly Purpose whatsoever’.¹⁰⁷

The reaction was predictable: Bentley voiced his ‘scorn and indignation’ at Collins telling priests how to read Cicero, and argued that Collins had misunderstood (whether deliberately or not) the nature of Cicero’s sciep-

¹⁰¹ *Free-Thinking*, 129–31. For Hume’s association of himself with Epicurus see Chapter 4 below, pp. 249–50.

¹⁰² *Free-Thinking*, 90–1.

¹⁰³ See Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft*, 183–6, 192–4; Gawlick, ‘Cicero and the Enlightenment’, *SVEC*, XXV (1963), 657–82.

¹⁰⁴ Included in Toland, *Miscellaneous Works*, I, lxxvii, 231–96.

¹⁰⁵ *Miscellaneous Works*, I, 262.

¹⁰⁶ *Queries*, 16. ¹⁰⁷ *Free-Thinking*, 135–40.

tical philosophy and his essentially religious beliefs; Cicero, claims Bentley, 'declares for the Being and Providence of God, for the Immortality of the Soul, for every Point that approaches to Christianity'.¹⁰⁸ Hoadly similarly objects to the kind of respect the freethinkers bestow on Cicero, and the way that they 'have taken upon them to teach us all, how to understand him, by a *Key* which seems peculiar to themselves'.¹⁰⁹ Swift's parody deserves to be quoted at length:

And because the Priests have the Impudence to quote *Cicero* in their Pulpits and Pamphlets, against *Free-thinking*; I am resolved to disarm them of his Authority. You must know, his Philosophical Works are generally in Dialogues, where People are brought in disputing against one another: Now the priests when they see an Argument to prove a God, offered perhaps by a *Stoick*, are such Knaves or Blockheads, to quote it as if it were *Cicero's* own; whereas *Cicero* was so noble a *Free-thinker*, that he believed nothing at all of the Matter, nor ever shews the least Inclination to favour Superstition, or the Belief of God, and the Immortality of the Soul; unless what he throws out sometimes to save himself from Danger, in his Speeches to the *Roman Mob*; whose Religion was, however, much more Innocent and less Absurd, than that of *Popery* at least: And I could say more, – but you understand me.¹¹⁰

This debate continued through the century. Conyers Middleton, a Cambridge cleric of sceptical sympathies, seems to have incorporated without acknowledgement Collins's rule for interpreting Cicero's dialogues in his *Life of Cicero* (1741): when Cicero gives his own judgement deliberately, in his own person or in that of an Academic, he is delivering his own opinions. When he does not appear in person, he takes care to indicate which character speaks his own sentiments. 'This key will let us into his real thoughts.' However, Middleton's Cicero was not a sceptic: he believed in one God, providence, the immortality of the soul, and a future state, and regarded contemporary Roman religion, though essentially an engine of state or political system, as a wise institution.¹¹¹ Conversely, the anti-sceptical writer, James Beattie, argued in his *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770) that Cicero, a Stoic dogmatist, was an Academic in name rather than reality; he chose this name 'in order to have a pretence for reasoning on either side of every question, and consequently an ampler field for a display of his rhetorical talents'.¹¹²

The battle over what Cicero meant was thus closely connected with the question of form, of how to read the Ciceronian dialogue, and it was as part of this battle that the freethinkers and their opponents wielded the

¹⁰⁸ *Remarks*, Part II, 45, 70–82.

¹⁰⁹ *Queries*, 15.

¹¹⁰ *Mr. C – ns's Discourse, Works*, ed. Davis, IV, 44.

¹¹¹ *Life of Cicero*, II, 546–52.

¹¹² *Essay on Truth* (1770), 243. In later editions (6th edn, 1778, 210n) Beattie noted with approval Bentley's defence of Cicero in his *Remarks* on Collins. For Beattie as a critic of Hume see Chapter 4 below.

dialogue form against each other. Tindal wrote *Christianity as Old as the Creation* ‘Dialogue-wise’ because of its use by the ancients, claiming that Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* and *De Divinatione* (also singled out by Collins), ‘both levell’d against the Superstition of his Country-men; are living Monuments of the Expediency, and Usefulness of this Way of Writing’.¹¹³ Tindal’s form itself (though he does not do anything very interesting with it) is thus part of his quarrel with Clarke in Chapter 14 over the correct interpretation of Cicero.¹¹⁴ Berkeley in *Alciphron* deliberately employs Ciceronian dialogue in support of Christianity, as does Watts in *The Strength and Weakness of Human Reason*, but Watts interestingly also uses the form to demolish Cicero: his deist Logisto idolises him, but his orthodox clergyman Pithander is dismissive: ‘His writings and his behaviour are full of self, and discover one of the proudest and vainest mortals that ever trod upon the earth.’¹¹⁵ Skelton’s Shepherd agrees: ‘Cicero, with all his fine talk about religion and virtue, had very little of either.’¹¹⁶ The final shot in this battle was Hume’s rewriting of *De Natura Deorum* in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.¹¹⁷

The influence of Cicero was thus of a different kind from the other sources, whether orthodox or subversive, on whom the freethinkers drew. The nature of that influence can most clearly be seen in the case of Toland. As the philosopher who concealed his views under the cloak of religious observance and kept them for the few, Cicero provided Toland not merely with arguments, style, and method (drawn on freely in *Letters to Serena*) but a model (as explained in ‘Clidophorus’) of how to conduct himself. In *Pantheisticon* Toland made of the works of classical poets and philosophers, especially Cicero – ‘to whom our Society [of pantheists] is indebted for so many, and such excellent Things’ – a rival liturgy and a substitute natural religion which was essentially a secular moral code.¹¹⁸ It was because classical philosophy provided the freethinkers with a role, a stance, a means of expression, a pre-existing alternative to the Christian tradition that they tried to free it from Christian control and their opponents were so anxious that they should not succeed in appropriating it.

2 Irony, equivocation, and esotericism

As writers the freethinkers tended to disguise both their views and their identities. Their books were published often without the name of the author, sometimes without that of the bookseller or printer, and on rare occasions with a false place of publication. Toland, who was far more of a

¹¹³ *Christianity*, iv.

¹¹⁴ See below, pp. 57, 80–1.

¹¹⁵ Watts, *Works*, ed. Parsons, III, 95.

¹¹⁶ *Deism Revealed* (1751), I, 82.

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 4 below.

¹¹⁸ *Pantheisticon* (1751), 102.

self-publicist and much less cautious than Collins, Tindal, and Shaftesbury, unlike them put his name to several of his publications; however, his *Pantheisticon* (perhaps slightly mocking these conventions of discretion) was published anonymously in 1720 at Cosmopolis with a preface by Janus Junius Eoganesius (i.e. John from Inisowen). In the *Addresses* attacking Gibson Tindal defended *Christianity as Old as the Creation* as though he were not its author, signing himself simply 'Anti-Pastor'; Collins shared this habit of rushing to his own defence as a third party in his disputes with the clergy. Shaftesbury's *Miscellaneous Reflections*, published as the third volume of *Characteristicks*, are written from the point of view of a sympathetic editor commenting on the first two volumes.¹¹⁹ The freethinkers were skilful and self-conscious manipulators of their roles and their audiences; their opponents regarded them as disingenuous, lacking in candour, and stooping to insinuate what they did not dare to publish openly.

These rhetorical practices and the habits of mind that accompanied them can be attributed partly to the freethinkers' position under the law and partly to deliberate choice. The freethinkers were bound to be careful about what they published. With the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 there no longer existed a system of licensing, i.e. censorship before publication, but this did not mean that unrestricted publication of unorthodox religious views was possible. Blasphemy – ranging from swearing to denying the existence of God – was a punishable offence at common law: it was regarded as subversive of government as well as religion, and a blasphemer could be proceeded against by justices of the peace as well as in ecclesiastical courts. Further, in 1698 the Blasphemy Act (which was aimed especially at unitarians) made it a punishable offence to deny that any person of the Trinity was God or to maintain that there were more Gods than one, or to deny the truth of the Christian religion or the divine authority of the Old and New Testaments. The punishment under this act was disablement from public office for the first offence, and three years' imprisonment for the second, though there seem to have been no convictions. The usual punishment for blasphemy as a common law offence was fining or imprisonment. (The death penalty for blasphemy was briefly brought in during the Commonwealth period but not applied, and the old Act for burning heretics was finally repealed after the Restoration.)¹²⁰

The legal status of blasphemy, combined with the fact that the law was not often enforced, was thoroughly unsatisfactory to both sides. The freethinkers were constrained to adopt certain rhetorical tactics because of the threat they were under, while some of the clergy were outraged that

¹¹⁹ See Chapter 2, section 2.

¹²⁰ The information in this paragraph is derived from Nokes, *History of the Crime of Blasphemy* (1928).

what they saw as heresy, however disguised, was able to circulate. The Lower House of Convocation, high church in its sympathies, was especially anxious to proceed against heretics, though it had no legal right to do so; it regarded as such not only freethinkers like Toland and Arians like William Whiston but latitudinarians like Burnet. Indeed in 1717 its zeal against the latitudinarian Hoadly resulted in its prorogation by George I, and Convocation was to be powerless until the mid-nineteenth century.¹²¹ The freethinkers sometimes laughed at the inquisitorial aspirations of the clergy: Collins commented on the freethinking of the Old Testament prophets that if any modern Englishmen were to talk like that they would find themselves listed ‘in the *Representation of the Lower House of Convocation*, as proofs of the *Profaneness, Blasphemy, and Atheism* of the Nation’.¹²² Shaftesbury ridiculed the clergy for not having the courage simply to face the freethinkers in print: ‘Having enter’d the Lists, and agreed to the fair Laws of Combat by Wit and Argument, they have no sooner prov’d their Weapon, than you hear ’em crying aloud for help, and delivering over to the *Secular Arm*.’¹²³ Their powerlessness now made them absurd:

For tho, in reality, there cou’d be nothing less a laughing matter, than the provok’d Rage, Ill-will, and Fury of certain zealous Gentlemen, were they arm’d as lately they have been known; yet as the Magistrate has since taken care to pare their Talons, there is nothing very terrible in their Encounter. On the contrary, there is something comical in the case. It brings to one’s mind the Fancy of those Grotesque Figures, and Dragon-Faces, which are seen often in the Frontispiece, and on the Corner-Stones of old Buildings. They seem’d plac’d there, as the *Defenders* and *Supporters* of the Edifice; but with all their Grimace, are as harmless to People without, as they are useless to the Building within.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, blasphemy was a crime and the clergy were not always harmless. Toland’s *Christianity not Mysteriorious* was presented by the Grand Jury of Middlesex in 1697 (along with Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity*) for anti-Trinitarianism; the book was condemned to be burnt in Dublin, and Toland had to leave Ireland after a few months’ visit and return to England to avoid arrest. Peter Browne (at that time a Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin) was eager for Toland to be punished:

I wou’d deliver him into the hands of the Magistrate, not mov’d by any heat of Passion, but by such a *Zeal* as becomes every Christian to have for his *Religion* . . . The World is at this time so dispos’d for the reception of all Discourses that seem to set up *Reason* and *Evidence* in opposition to the *Reveal’d and Mysteriorious Doctrines of Christianity*; that nothing less than the *Interposition of Authority*, can stop this current of *Infidelity* and *Prophaness* [sic] which threatens to overwhelm these Nations.¹²⁵

¹²¹ On Convocation and heresy see Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker*, 58ff. ¹²² *Free-Thinking*, 157.

¹²³ *Sensus Communis* (1709), *Characteristicks*, I, 66. ¹²⁴ *Characteristicks*, I, 149–50.

¹²⁵ *Letter in Answer to Christianity not Mysteriorious* (1697), 144, 171. The story is told in Des Maizeaux’s ‘Memoirs of Toland’, Toland, *Miscellaneous Works*, I, xvi–xxiv (see also Locke’s correspondence

In 1701 his books were examined by Convocation, and although nothing came of this Toland was sufficiently alarmed to make conciliatory (and presumably false) statements about his religious beliefs in letters to Convocation which he published in *Vindicius Liberius* (1702). His alarm may also have been aroused by the execution of a young Scot, Thomas Aikenhead, for blasphemy in Edinburgh in 1697, though the Scottish laws against blasphemy were more severe than the English ones.¹²⁶

Toland's passion for self-advertisement may have exacerbated his difficulties. Collins, who always published anonymously, escaped prosecution, although several of his opponents would have liked to see him punished. Whiston, who had himself been deprived of his chair at Cambridge and hounded by Convocation for his Arianism, attempted unsuccessfully to have Collins removed from the Commission of the Peace.¹²⁷ Bentley claimed that Collins's outrageous licence in *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* would cause the government to abridge existing legal freedoms,¹²⁸ while Richard Steele concluded a ferocious paper in the *Guardian* by pronouncing that 'if ever Man deserved to be denied the common Benefits of Air and Water, it is the Author of a *Discourse of Free-Thinking*'.¹²⁹ John Rogers, Chaplain to the Prince of Wales, responded to Collins's plea 'That universal liberty be established in respect to opinions and practices not prejudicial to the peace and welfare of society' and 'that nothing but the *law of nature*, . . . and what can be built thereon, should be enforced by the civil sanctions of the magistrate' by condemning his latitude as '*subversive of all Order and Polity*' and urging that he should be prevented from disturbing the public peace: '*surely holding his Hand, and restraining him from such turbulent Attempts, is not persecuting him, but protecting those to whom Protection is due*'.¹³⁰

There were occasional successful prosecutions, the best known case being that of Thomas Woolston, who was convicted of blasphemy, fined, and imprisoned in 1729 for his *Discourses on the Miracles* (1727–9).¹³¹ Tindal, whose *Rights of the Christian Church* (1706) had been attacked by Convocation and burnt by order of the House of Commons, criticised the Blasphemy Act in his first *Address* and added a long passage to the second edition taking note of Woolston's conviction. Tindal's attitude to the legal status of blasphemy is summed up by his question, 'I shall only ask,

of 1697 with his Irish friend William Molyneux, *Correspondence*, ed. de Beer, VI, 82–3, 105–6, 132–3, 143–4, 163–4, 192), and in 'An Apology for Mr Toland' added by the author to the 1702 edition of *Christianity not Mysterious*.

¹²⁶ See the very full account by Hunter, 'Aikenhead the Atheist', in Hunter and Wootton, eds., *Atheism*; Locke, *Correspondence*, ed. de Beer, VI, 17–19.

¹²⁷ Berman, 'Collins and the Question of Atheism', *PRLA*, LXXV/C (1975), 90.

¹²⁸ *Remarks*, 28. ¹²⁹ *The Guardian*, ed. Stephens (1982), no. 3, 49.

¹³⁰ Collins, *Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered* (1727), 432–3; Rogers, *Necessity of Divine Revelation* (1727), Preface, lxi, lxxv.

¹³¹ See Lund, 'Woolston and the Crime of Wit', in Lund, ed., *Margins of Orthodoxy*.

whether Mens using Force in Matters of meer Religion, is not displacing the Image of God, and setting up that of the Beast.' However, he spoilt the effect of his argument by his reference to the cruelty of 'one *Edmund, Bishop of London*' in Mary's days (i.e. Bonner, the persecutor of the Marian martyrs); the malicious implication is that Gibson, also Edmund, Bishop of London, would burn the freethinkers if he had the chance.¹³² Gibson was certainly keen to see the freethinkers prosecuted, and was disappointed that the civil authorities did not respond to his prompting. But there is no contemporary evidence for the often repeated story that he got hold of the manuscript of the second part of *Christianity as Old as the Creation* after Tindal's death and destroyed it.¹³³

Even if prosecution was infrequent, it was not the only kind of pressure that was brought to bear on the freethinkers. In 'The Origin and Force of Prejudices', Toland presents a kind of spectrum of possible responses to the man who frees himself from prejudice, ranging from execution to social ostracism, depending on political circumstances:

If he's not put to Death, sent into Banishment, depriv'd of his Employment, fin'd, or excommunicated, according as his Church has more or less Power; yet the least he may expect, is to be abhorr'd and shun'd by the other Members of the Society (a thing in all People's power) which every Man has not Fortitude enough to bear for the greatest Truths.¹³⁴

The freethinkers were clear that even the last of these responses was damaging not only to the individual concerned but to society as a whole. Such restrictions not only prevented the individual from expressing his views openly, they inhibited the development of thought and ensured that custom and prejudice were not perceived as such. 'Is it not ridiculous' asked Collins, 'that men of the greatest integrity and capacity [his list includes Chillingworth, Wilkins, Whichcote, Tillotson, and Locke] should be under any discouragement from making inquiries after truth, and under any difficulties for publishing writings in consequence of their inquiries; and that none can safely speak in matters of speculation, but the blind followers of the blind, or the interested followers of the interested?'¹³⁵ The right to free expression did not simply benefit the freethinker. In *A Letter to the Reverend Dr. Rogers* (1727), Collins's defence of his claim for 'universal liberty' in *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy*, he repeated the arguments from the preface to *Grounds and Reasons* for the tangible social as well as intellectual benefits of toleration: 'I was always of Opinion, that *Toleration* or *Liberty of Conscience* in matters of mere Religion, was the way of

¹³² *Address* (1729), 10, 21, 28; 2nd edn (1730), 15.

¹³³ See Sykes, *Gibson* (1926), 259–62, on Gibson's attitude to prosecution. For the origins of the story about Tindal, see Berman and Lalor, 'The Suppression of *Christianity as Old as the Creation* Vol. II', *NQ*, CCXXIX, NS 31 (1984), 3–6.

¹³⁴ *Letters to Serena*, Letter I, 13–14. ¹³⁵ *Grounds and Reasons*, xi.

Knowledge and *Truth*, the way of good Neighbourhood, and Peace, and Order and the way of Wealth and strength in Society.¹³⁶

At the same time as they urged the case for free expression, the freethinkers strongly resented the insistence of some of their opponents that they should speak out openly in the face of existing attitudes to blasphemy. Rogers mocked Collins with the suggestion that he might vindicate his position through martyrdom: '*If he expects to convince us that he is in earnest, and believes himself, he should not decline giving us this Proof of his Sincerity; what will not abide this Trial, we shall suspect to have but a poor Foundation.*'¹³⁷ Collins sensibly defended his circumspection: 'it is a Degree of Virtue to speak what a Man thinks, tho' he may do it in such a Way, as to avoid Destruction of Life and Fortune'. He refused to give his opinion of Rogers's proofs of the gospel miracles: 'you have no Reason to expect an Examination of those *Proofs*, till you think it allowable for Men to examine them. While you think, that Men ought to be *restrain'd* from speaking, you will surely be so humane as to excuse them from speaking: and they themselves will be apt to submit to that threatned *Restraint*, and to excuse themselves'.¹³⁸

Toland made a similar point in 'Clidophorus', probably the most important account of the problem of expression and interpretation in freethinking works.¹³⁹ He objected with reason to 'invitations to Heretics, Deists, and Atheists, to speak above-board'. Those good men who made such invitations would be sorry if they succeeded, 'when they found they had drawn them [the heretics etc.] into a snare, out of which they could not extricate them'; those 'whose invitations tend to decoy and trepan . . . must be left to the conscience of their own base designs', and, interestingly, those deluded by them 'ought to suffer unpity'd for their folly'. Toland implies that no sensible freethinker would be fool enough to fall for such an invitation. The only solution to the current situation in which truth cannot be told freely is unqualified toleration: '*Let all men freely speak what they think, without being ever branded or punish'd but for wicked practises, and leaving their speculative opinions to be confuted or approv'd by whoever pleases; then you are sure to hear the whole truth, and till then but very scantily, or obscurely, if at all.*'¹⁴⁰

Since the right to free expression of speculative opinions did not exist, the freethinkers saw no reason why they should expose themselves deliberately to the risk of punishment or ostracism by stating their views

¹³⁶ *Letter to Rogers*, 5; cf *Grounds and Reasons*, xxxvi.

¹³⁷ *Necessity of Divine Revelation*, xlvi.

¹³⁸ *Letter to Rogers*, 17, 102. The copy in Dr Williams's Library (shelf mark 18.35.1) contains the indignant contemporary comment, 'This is a capital Sophism!'

¹³⁹ Berman stresses the importance of this work in 'Collins and the Question of Atheism', *PRIA*, LXXV/C (1975), 90. See also his 'Disclaimers as Offence Mechanisms in Charles Blount and John Toland', in Hunter and Wootton, eds., *Atheism*, and 'Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying', in Lemay, ed. *Deism*.

¹⁴⁰ 'Clidophorus', *Tetradymus*, 95–6.

plainly and openly. Instead they employed two tactics, irony and equivocation, which sometimes shade into each other but which can be differentiated in general terms. However, it is not always easy to determine in a particular case what the purpose of a certain tactic is, or how the text is to be interpreted. Irony and equivocation, for example, may be used not so much to *conceal* views as to reveal them in a certain way. The purpose may be to entrap the reader while leaving the writer an escape route. Writer and reader may be drawn into an alliance (willing or unwilling on the latter's part) in which they both know very well what the writer is up to. Further, these tactics may be part of a carefully worked out theory of exoteric and esoteric doctrines which assumes two audiences who are either addressed separately in different works in a language appropriate to them, or expected to respond to the same work in two different ways. The freethinkers' treatment of irony, equivocation, and esotericism thus requires careful consideration.

Their characteristic irony – also referred to by the related terms of wit, raillery, banter, drollery, good humour, and ridicule – naturally infuriated their opponents. These reactions can serve as a useful pointer to the modern reader who may miss the tone of some freethinking works: thus Hoadly treats the occasional practice of referring to Christianity with exaggerated respect – for example in phrases like ‘our most Holy Faith’ – as banter,¹⁴¹ a view which should be borne in mind by readers of Shaftesbury. At the simplest level the clergy regarded tactics of this kind as intellectual laziness, as refusal by the freethinkers to argue the issues seriously with their opponents because they knew that they would lose. Berkeley's *Crito* objects to Alciphron that when a freethinker is with his disciples he recommends reasoning, but if he is pressed with reason by his opponents then he laughs at logic and assumes the airs of a gentleman and *railleur*. ‘This double face of the minute philosopher is of no small use to propagate and maintain his notions.’ Berkeley has no sympathy with the freethinkers' view that they are inhibited by the law from arguing freely.¹⁴² Similar objections to the freethinkers' apparent refusal to argue are made by Stillingfleet: ‘let them debate these things calmly and seriously, and let the stronger Reason prevail’;¹⁴³ by Clarke: ‘Such men as these are not to be argued with, till they can be perswaded to use *Arguments* instead of *Drollery*’;¹⁴⁴ and by Leland. Leland sometimes puts forward the standard view that the freethinkers cannot take on the arguments of their opponents: their use of the weapons of misrepresentation, ridicule, low jest, and buffoonery ‘seems to be a presumption in favour of Christianity, that its adversaries are themselves sensible that little can be done against it, in a way of plain

¹⁴¹ *Queries*, 29. ¹⁴² *Alciphron, Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 158, 37–8.

¹⁴³ *Letter to a Deist* (1677), A3^v. ¹⁴⁴ *Natural Religion*, 31.

reason and argument.’ However, elsewhere Leland is perceptive about the purpose and effect of the freethinkers’ tactics, which he detests, complaining that ‘no writers ever acted a part more unfair and disingenuous’ and that their treatment of Scripture has been ‘inconsistent with all the rules of candour and decency’. He makes the interesting observation that their tactics are not forced on them but are chosen for their destructive effect:

if [the adversaries of Christianity] have frequently thought fit to cover their attempts with a pretended regard for Christianity, we may safely affirm, that it has not been so much out of fear of punishment, as that under that disguise they might the better answer the end they had in view, and give religion a more deadly wound as pretended friends, than they could do as avowed adversaries.¹⁴⁵

Leland acutely draws attention to the contradiction between the freethinkers’ claim that irony is forced on them by circumstances, and their deliberate choice of it because of its effectiveness as a weapon.

The principal accounts of the function of irony and ridicule are provided by Shaftesbury in two of the treatises in *Characteristicks, A Letter concerning Enthusiasm* (1708) and *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709), and by Collins in *A Discourse concerning Ridicule and Irony in Writing* (1729). These accounts lend some support to Leland’s view, though it would be wrong to minimise the risks the freethinkers faced. Shaftesbury and Collins (who develops Shaftesbury’s arguments) undoubtedly have it both ways: they stress the need for self-protection, yet at the same time their main concern is with demolishing their opponents’ views as effectively as possible.¹⁴⁶ Both Shaftesbury and Collins blame the practice of irony on the threat of persecution. Shaftesbury argues that irony and equivocation are closely connected, and would not be needed in a free society:

IF Men are forbid to speak their minds seriously on certain Subjects, they will do it ironically. If they are forbid to speak at all upon such Subjects, or if they find it really dangerous to do so; they will then redouble their Disguise, involve themselves in Mysteriousness, and talk so as hardly to be understood, or at least not plainly interpreted, by those who are disposed to do ’em a mischief. And thus *Railery* is brought more in fashion, and runs into an Extreme. ’Tis the persecuting Spirit has rais’d the *bantering* one.¹⁴⁷

Collins shares this view. The starting point for his *Discourse concerning Ridicule* was ‘A Letter from the Rev. Dr. Marshall jun. to the Rev. Dr. Rogers’, included by Rogers in *A Vindication of the Civil Establishment of*

¹⁴⁵ *Principal Deistical Writers*, II, 356, 399, I, 113.

¹⁴⁶ The editors of Collins’s *Discourse concerning Ridicule* (1970), p. xi, comment in their Introduction that he employed irony ‘sometimes out of fear and sometimes out of malice’.

¹⁴⁷ *Sensus Communis, Characteristicks*, I, 71–2.

Religion (1728). Marshall disagreed with Rogers's insistence that the magistrate should restrain freethinkers, but drew the line at tolerating irony and ridicule: 'Sober arguing I never fear: *Mockery* and *bitter railing*, if I could help it, I would never *bear*, either for the Truth, or against it.'¹⁴⁸ In reply, Collins claimed that he would gladly give up irony for liberty:

The great Concern is and ought to be, that the *Liberty of examining into the Truth of Things should be kept up*, that Men may have some Sense and Knowledge, and not be the *Dupes of Cheats and Imposters*, or of those who would keep them in the dark, and let them receive nothing but thro' their Hands. If that be secur'd to us by Authority, I, for my part, am very ready to sacrifice the Privilege of *Irony*, tho so much in fashion among all Men; being persuaded, that a great part of the *Irony* complain'd of, has its rise from the *want of Liberty to examine into the Truth of Things*; and that if that *Liberty* was prevalent, it would, without a Law, prevent all that *Irony* which Men are driven into for want of Liberty to speak plainly, and to protect themselves from the Attacks of those who would take the Advantage to ruin them for direct Assertions.¹⁴⁹

However, the manner in which Shaftesbury and Collins defend the use of ridicule (which at times appears to be synonymous with irony) does not really fit their claim of self-protection. For Shaftesbury ridicule is a good in itself, not simply a resort of the persecuted, because it is the means to detect imposture. The 'Test of Ridicule', by which the truly serious can be distinguished from posturing gravity, would seem to be an essential weapon for the discovery of truth, whatever the political or social climate: 'Now what Rule or Measure is there in the World, except in the considering of the real Temper of Things, to find which are truly serious, and which ridiculous? And how can this be done, unless by applying *the Ridicule*, to see whether it will bear?'¹⁵⁰ 'Truth, 'tis suppos'd, may bear *all* Lights: and *one* of those principal Lights or natural Mediums, by which Things are to be view'd, in order to a thorow Recognition, is *Ridicule* it-self, or that Manner of Proof by which we discern whatever is liable to just Raillery in any Subject.' 'For nothing is ridiculous except what is deform'd; Nor is anything proof against *Raillery*, except what is handsom and just.'¹⁵¹ Berkeley is properly scathing about the validity of ridicule as a test of truth.¹⁵² Collins does take it up as a means of combating gravity and imposture, but he gives much more attention to ridicule both as a natural human response to absurdity and as a literary device. For Collins, ridicule is instinctive and unavoidable: 'Books of Satire, Wit, Humour, Ridicule,

¹⁴⁸ Rogers, *Vindication of the Civil Establishment*, 307.

¹⁴⁹ *Discourse concerning Ridicule*, 23–4. Collins goes on to quote the passage from Shaftesbury above.

¹⁵⁰ *A Letter concerning Enthusiasm, Characteristicks*, I, 11, 12. See Aldridge, 'Shaftesbury and the Test of Truth', *PMLA*, LX (1945), 129–56.

¹⁵¹ *Sensus Communis, Characteristicks*, I, 61, 128. Part of Shaftesbury's argument is borrowed and his last sentence quoted by Tindal, *Address*, 2nd edn (1730), 33.

¹⁵² *Alciphron, Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop, III, 137, 284.

Drollery, and Irony, are the most read and applauded of all Books, in all Ages, Languages, and Countries'; 'the Opinions and Practices of Men in all Matters, and especially in Matters of Religion, are generally so absurd and ridiculous that it is impossible for them not to be the Subjects of Ridicule.' The greater part of Collins's text is devoted to illustrating the argument that banter, drollery, and ridicule are more widely used by the established clergy in matters of religion than by anyone else, particularly against catholics and dissenters, so that it is in itself 'a most prodigious Banter' that the clergy should call for the punishment of ridicule in religion only when it is applied against themselves. Collins suggests that the clergy recognise only too well the effectiveness of ridicule: thus Swift, 'one of the greatest *Droles* that ever appear'd upon the Stage of the World', was far too valuable for his drollery on Whigs, dissenters, and the war with France for Convocation to wish him punished for *A Tale of a Tub*, and the unfortunate dissenters are subject to so much ridicule by the clergy from the pulpit, especially in the country, 'that they are unable to withstand its Force, but daily come over in Numbers to the Church to avoid being laugh'd at'.¹⁵³

Collins is on firm ground in pointing out both the universality of ridicule and its habitual use by the clergy against their opponents. Unfortunately he does not seem to notice that his example of the success of the clergy in laughing dissenters into conformity weakens the argument for the importance of ridicule as a test of truth: presumably shame makes people vulnerable to being laughed out of a minority opinion, whatever its intrinsic value. A stronger objection is that there is no real comparison between the ways in which ridicule is employed by the clergy on the one hand and the freethinkers on the other. There is no element of concealment among the former as to the purpose for which ridicule is being applied, whereas the use of the 'test of ridicule' by the latter leaves undefined precisely the nature of the truth that will bear ridicule and the imposture that will succumb to it. If this were not so, it would make nonsense of the freethinkers' claim that irony and ridicule are defensive as much as offensive weapons. Their chosen method seems paradoxical. If irony is to be protective, then it must be ambiguous; but if ridicule is to differentiate truth from imposture, then its object must be understood.

At times the freethinkers' intentions are clear enough. For example,

¹⁵³ *Discourse concerning Ridicule*, 19, 29, 39, 41. Swift's anonymous *Tale of a Tub* (1704), his satire of abuses in religion and learning, was interpreted by some as a freethinking work: William Wotton described it as 'one of the Prophanest Banterers upon the Religion of *Jesus Christ*, as such, that ever yet appeared'. Wotton, *Observations upon the Tale of a Tub* (1705), in Swift, *Tale of a Tub*, ed. Guthkelch and Nichol Smith, 2nd edn (1958), 324. Clarke, *Natural Religion* (1705), 29, gave *Tale of a Tub* as an example of deist writing which pretended to expose the abuses of religion but really aimed at all virtue. After the publication of Swift's 'Apology' in the 1710 edition of *Tale of a Tub*, Clarke withdrew the reference in subsequent editions of *Natural Religion*; see fourth edition (1716), 23. I owe the last point to Roger Lund.

when Shaftesbury draws an elaborate parallel between religion and heraldry it can be assumed that he is saying among other things, in a manner both oblique and offensive, that the tenets of Christianity are as fictitious as heraldic beasts like mermaids and griffins, and that the clergy are as anachronistic in contemporary society as the Clarencieux and Garter heralds.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, when Collins in *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* describes the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel as in effect a society for the propagation of freethinking, and when he argues that its members would see it as their duty to offer a reciprocal welcome to missionary priests sent by the King of Siam, it seems clear that he is accusing the Society of bigotry and asserting that Christianity has no greater claim to truth than any other religion. When he goes on to suggest that high church divines like Sacheverell, Atterbury and Swift should be sent out to establish the Church of England throughout the world, it is implied that they are the cause of nothing but trouble at home and this would be a good way of getting rid of them.¹⁵⁵ The function of ridicule throughout *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* seems to be to subvert the status of the clergy, the Church, and Christian doctrine. So it was understood by the book's clerical readers, especially Swift, who turned ridicule back on Collins in *Mr. C-ns's Discourse* by making explicit and unambiguous (and ridiculously simpleminded) what Collins implied indirectly.

Did the freethinkers always intend to be understood in this manner? Was the object of their use of irony and ridicule to leave the responsibility for drawing the correct conclusions to the reader, as these examples suggest, or did they intend to confuse the reader as to how far they meant to go? Were at least some of their readers meant to be deceived by their tactics, while another, self-defined group of sympathetic readers saw exactly what they meant? Although it is not possible to provide a consistent answer to these questions, since the freethinkers were not consistent either in their claims about what they were doing or in their practice, nevertheless their choice of methods can be explained in a simplified form. Irony and ridicule enabled them to insinuate or imply certain views; equivocation enabled them to deny these views when hostile readers challenged them; the theory of exoteric and esoteric doctrines enabled them to conceal these views from the hostile reader while revealing them to the sympathetic, and at the same time provided them with a general defence for their rhetorical and intellectual position.

One common method of insinuation and evasion was for the freethinker to encourage the reader to make the leap from the ostensible to the real subject under discussion and then, when the reader challenged him, to deny that this leap should have been made. A favourite way for the

¹⁵⁴ *Soliloquy, Characteristicks*, I, 362–3.

¹⁵⁵ *Discourse of Free-Thinking*, 41–3.

freethinkers to undermine Christianity by implication was to attack paganism and superstition, in particular the rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices of the heathen priests.¹⁵⁶ Herbert had employed it freely in *The Religion of the Gentiles* and *A Dialogue*. It depended on readers making the right inference, while having only themselves to blame if they disliked the result. A story told by Toland about Sir Robert Howard illustrates this point perfectly: ‘Being told that he was charg’d in a Book with whipping the Protestant Clergy on the back of the Heathen and Popish Priests, he presently ask’d what they had to do there?’¹⁵⁷ Toland himself employed the method to great effect in *Letters to Serena* (1704), particularly in the first three letters, ‘The Origin and Force of Prejudices’, ‘The History of the Soul’s Immortality among the Heathens’, and ‘The Origin of Idolatry, and Reasons of Heathenism’. He claims with an exaggeratedly straight face in the Preface that the letters are ‘*only innocent Researches into the venerable Ruins of Antiquity, or short Essays in Philosophy, not calculated to offend any, but to please all*’, insisting that he is not commenting on the moderns under the disguise of the ancients except where he explicitly makes the comparison, and throwing the blame for such comparisons on the reader: ‘*such Inferences are much easier drawn by the People concern’d, who must needs perceive the best of any, what has the greatest Resemblance with their own Doctrins or Practices*’.¹⁵⁸ But the fact that such inferences were *meant* to be drawn by the reader of freethinking books is spelt out clearly by Swift in his attack on Collins. The following criticism was ostensibly directed by Collins at the Roman priest-hood:

THE Grave and Wise CATO the *Censor* will for ever live in that noble *Free-Thinking* Saying recorded by CICERO, which shows that he understood the whole Mystery of the *Roman Religion as by Law establish’d*. I wonder, said he, how one of our Priests can forbear laughing when he sees another.¹⁵⁹

This was ‘Put into plain English’ by Swift as follows:

The Grave and Wise *Cato* the *Censor* will for ever live in that noble *Free-thinking* Saying; I wonder, said he, how one of your Priests can forbear laughing when he sees another. (For Contempt of Priests is another grand Characteristick of a Free-thinker). This shews that *Cato* understood the whole Mystery of the *Roman Religion, as by Law Established*. I beg you Sir, not to overlook these last Words, *Religion as by Law Established*. I translate *Haruspex* [i.e. a soothsayer, a diviner from entrails] into the general Word, *Priest*: Thus I apply the Sentence to our *Priests* in *England*, and when Dr. *Smalridge* sees Dr. *Atterbury*, I wonder how either of them can

¹⁵⁶ This tactic is described as ‘the grand subterfuge’ by Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 21.

¹⁵⁷ Toland, *Life of Milton* (1699), 139. ¹⁵⁸ *Letters to Serena* [c5^v, c6].

¹⁵⁹ *Free-Thinking*, 135. The quotation is from *De Divinatione*, II, xxiv; its popularity among freethinkers is noted by Gawlick, ‘Cicero and the Enlightenment’, *SVEC*, XXV (1963), 663–4.

forbear laughing at the Cheat they put upon the People, by making them believe their *Religion as by Law Established*.¹⁶⁰

The freethinkers evaded the accusation that such inferences were intended by insisting that their criticisms were restricted to heathenism. For example, whenever the pupil in Herbert's *Dialogue* asks his tutor about the implications for Christianity of the tutor's remarks about the practices of heathen priests, the tutor refuses to discuss them and tells the pupil to put his questions to a divine, even though the account of human sacrifice obviously has a direct bearing on the doctrine of the atonement.¹⁶¹ Toland equivocates in a similar way in 'The History of the Soul's Immortality among the Heathens'. He gives a critical account of the invention of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and of its adoption by heathen legislators because of the usefulness of belief in future rewards and punishments. He describes the heathen philosophers' reasons for believing in immortality sympathetically, but the clear implication is that the doctrine is not true and has survived because of its psychological and political usefulness. However, Toland somewhat ostentatiously protects himself: at the beginning of the letter he claims that his addressee Serena (the Queen of Prussia) herself has no doubts about immortality because of revelation, and before he embarks on a consideration of those heathens who did not accept the doctrine he piously states, in an argument familiar in much clerical writing, that 'in my opinion the Moderns have not the same right to examine this matter as the Antients, but ought humbly to acquiesce in the Authority of our Savior JESUS CHRIST, who brought Life and Immortality to Light [II Timothy 1: 10]'.¹⁶²

A more direct method was for the freethinkers to declare their allegiance to orthodox Christianity and to disavow statements suggesting the opposite. So Collins informed Rogers that he early judged the Christian religion to be true and joined the Church of England.¹⁶³ The most blatant example of this tactic is *Vindicius Liberius*, in which Toland to some extent dissociated himself from the arguments in *Christianity not Mysterious* which had brought him so much trouble and professed his belief in God, the immortality of the soul, future rewards and punishments (i.e. natural religion), the divinity of the Christian religion as delivered in Scripture (revealed religion) and his conformity to the doctrine and worship of the Church of England. Toland carried on this fiction in the Preface to *Letters to Serena*, where he cited his self-defence in *Vindicius Liberius* and defined himself as a low churchman. But *Letters to Serena* undoubtedly both was intended to be read and was read as an extremely subversive work, and in 'Mangoneutes' (1720), his answer

¹⁶⁰ *Mr. C-n's Discourse*, in *Works*, ed. Davis, IV, 43–4. ¹⁶¹ *Dialogue* (1768), 103, 219, 240–1.

¹⁶² *Letters to Serena*, II, 19, 54–6; compare Collins's ironic account of immortality, *Free-Thinking*, 152–3.

¹⁶³ *Letter to Rogers*, 4.

to attacks on *Nazarenus* (1718), Toland found himself obliged to prevaricate over the *Letters* as he had done earlier over *Christianity not Mysterious*. He denied that his account of the elves and bugbears of prejudice in Letter I had any application to the doctrines of Christianity, which he insisted that he had never treated in any of his books.¹⁶⁴

Were such professions of faith on the part of the freethinkers intended to deceive, or were they simply blatant acts of self-defence which fooled no one but kept the freethinkers within the law? Skelton illustrates the supposed effect of such deception on the innocent through Templeton's account to Shepherd of his education by Cunningham:

You know all the Libertine writers pretend to be of our religion, and profess only an intention to recommend a truer idea of it, than that which is vulgarly entertained. This enabled my Tutor to teach me Christianity out of *Hobbes*, *Shaftesbury*, *Collins*, *Toland*, and *Tindal*; insomuch that, I assure you, I was a Libertine, almost a Deist, before I had any notion I had ceased to be a Christian.¹⁶⁵

However, it seems unlikely that Toland's readers would have been persuaded to believe that he was a Christian by his claims, particularly since he was frank about his reasons for making them. In spite of his protestations of support for Christianity in the Preface to *Letters to Serena*, for example, Toland implied in Letter I, 'The Origin and Force of Prejudices', that they were based on hypocritical self-interest: 'if by some lucky chance we shou'd happen to be undeceiv'd, yet the prevailing Power of Interest will make us hypocritically (or, if you please, prudently) to pretend the contrary, for fear of losing our Fortunes, Quiet, Reputation, or Lives.' His reference to 'the Reform'd Religion which we [Toland and Serena] profess' is manifestly ironic: whatever Toland's religion was (not an easy thing to determine) it was certainly not the reformed religion in its usual acceptation, Protestant Christianity.¹⁶⁶ In the Preface to *Tetradymus* Toland blamed such prudential evasions squarely on the aggression of the clergy: 'men are become suspicious of each other, reserv'd in opening their minds about most things, ambiguous in their expressions, supple in their conduct . . . To what sneaking equivocations, to what wretched shifts and subterfuges, are men of excellent endowments forc'd to have recourse thro human frailty, merely to escape disgrace or starving?' In 'Clidophorus' he explained again the resort to equivocation: the manner in which the churches treat their opponents 'must of necessity produce shiftings, ambiguities, equivocations, and hypocrisy in all its shapes; which will not merely be call'd, but actually esteem'd *necessary cautions*'.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ *Vindicius Liberius*, 105–6; *Letters to Serena* [c8^v]; 'Mangoneutes', *Tetradymus*, 188–90.

¹⁶⁵ *Deism Revealed* (1751), II, 218. ¹⁶⁶ *Letters to Serena*, 9, 8.

¹⁶⁷ *Tetradymus*, vii, 67–8.

Toland's openness about his hypocrisy reduces his claims to orthodoxy to a legal device. In the case of Shaftesbury, however, always more circumspect than Toland, there is evidence that his equivocations were intended to deceive, and that contemporary readers were confused about the question of his orthodoxy. Leland, though in some ways an admirer of Shaftesbury and reluctant to include him among the writers against revealed religion, was in no doubt that it was Shaftesbury's object to cast contempt and ridicule on Christianity, despite his 'pretended veneration' for Scripture. However, this view does not seem to have been shared by Leland's readers: because of the objections made by readers of the first edition of *Principal Deistical Writers* to Shaftesbury's inclusion among the deists, Leland felt obliged to add a further letter on Shaftesbury to later editions, and he insisted that he saw no reason to retract his account.¹⁶⁸ Shaftesbury's equivocal comments on his own religious position are to be found principally in Miscellany II and to a lesser extent in Miscellany V. His distaste for Christianity is apparent in his ironic use of phrases such as the 'Holy *Mysteries* of our Religion' (which Hoadly warned against), and, like Toland, Shaftesbury protects himself against the imputation of scepticism or atheism by insisting that he does not discuss Christian doctrines. He portrays himself as a Christian sceptic who accepts the established religion neither through divine communication nor his own positive opinion but through resigning his judgement to his superiors.¹⁶⁹ Like Toland, Shaftesbury submits from prudence and self-interest, but whereas with Toland this is a question of paying lip-service to Christianity, with Shaftesbury the process seems to be more complicated.

He tells the story of a group of travelling gentlemen who, with great good humour, make a pact to find an uncomfortable journey on poor roads with entertainment at bad inns pleasant and amusing. This becomes a parable of the way in which men willingly impose upon their own understandings when it is convenient and useful for them to do so. 'Now it is certainly no small *Interest* or *Concern* with Men, to believe what is by Authority establish'd; since in the Case of Disbelief there can be no Choice left but either to live a *Hypocrite*, or be esteem'd *profane*.' The multitude of religious faiths in the world would not have been successful if men had not co-operated in the imposture. Coercion is not necessary; when the magistrate countenances a particular belief, men will be disposed to believe it:

If the BELIEF be in any measure consonant to *Truth* and *Reason*, it will find as much favour in the eyes of Mankind, as *Truth* and *Reason* need desire. Whatever Difficultys there may be in any particular *Speculations* or *Mysteries* belonging to it; the better sort of Men will endeavour to pass 'em over. They will *believe* . . . to the

¹⁶⁸ *Principal Deistical Writers*, I, 48–9, 57, 65–6.

¹⁶⁹ Miscellany II, *Characteristicks*, III, 70–2.

full stretch of their REASON, and add spurs to their FAITH, in order to be the more *sociable*, and conform the better with what their *Interest*, in conjunction with their *Good-Humour*, inclines them to receive as credible, and observe as their *religious Duty* and *devotional Task*.

HERE it is that GOOD HUMOUR will naturally take place, and the *Hospitable Disposition* of our travelling Friends above-recited will easily transfer it-self into *Religion*, and operate in the same manner with respect to the *establish'd Faith* (however miraculous or incomprehensible) under a tolerating, mild, and gentle Government.¹⁷⁰

Unlike Toland, who sees fear of persecution or ostracism as the main motive for equivocation, Shaftesbury argues that toleration is a better means to get men to fall in with the established religion than coercion. The tone is strikingly different. But nothing here implies that Shaftesbury thought Christianity to be true. Leland was surely right to point out that like Hobbes (from whom he differed in most other things) Shaftesbury made the magistrate the judge of religious truth.¹⁷¹ In his most mockingly laboured assertion of orthodoxy Shaftesbury abandoned the right to judge for himself the religion that he claimed to espouse:

THE only Subject on which we are perfectly secure, and without fear of any just Censure or Reproach, is that of FAITH, and *Orthodox BELIEF*. For in the first place, it will appear, that thro a profound Respect, and religious Veneration, we have forborn so much as to name any of the sacred and solemn *Mysteries* of *Revelation*. And, in the next place, as we can with confidence declare, that we have never in any Writing, publick or private, attempted such high Researches, nor have ever in Practice acquitted our-selves otherwise than as just *Conformists* to the lawful Church; so we may, in a proper Sense, be said faithfully and dutifully to embrace those holy *Mysteries*, even in their minutest Particulars, and without the least Exception on account of their amazing Depth. And tho we are sensible that it wou'd be no small hardship to deprive *others* of a liberty of examining and searching, with due Modesty and Submission, into the nature of those Subjects; yet as for *our-selves*, who have not the least scruple whatsoever, we pray not any such Grace or Favour in our behalf: being fully assur'd of our own steady *Orthodoxy*, *Resignation*, and intire *Submission* to the truly *Christian* and *Catholick* Doctrines of our Holy Church, as by *Law* establish'd.¹⁷²

It is difficult to believe that orthodox readers found this arch pretence of compliance reassuring.

Leland not only saw through these protestations, he also claimed that Shaftesbury meant them to be seen through. He admitted that it was not easy to discern Shaftesbury's true sentiments, but he thought that Shaftesbury had provided a clue for the purpose. Leland draws attention to a passage from *Sensus Communis* in which Shaftesbury distinguishes the

¹⁷⁰ Miscellany II, *Characteristicks*, III, 99–105.

¹⁷¹ *Principal Deistical Writers*, I, 56.

¹⁷² Miscellany V, *Characteristicks*, III, 315–16.

manner in which the man of wit should treat different audiences: it is right for him to conceal certain truths from unsuitable hearers by ‘*defensive Raillery*’, but it is absurd for him to confuse his own allies as to his real meaning:

It may be necessary, as well now as heretofore, for wise Men to speak in *Parables*, and with a double Meaning, that the Enemy may be amus’d [i.e. deceived], and they only *who have Ears to hear, may hear*. But ’tis certainly a mean, impotent, and dull sort of Wit, which amuses all alike, and leaves the most sensible Man, and even a Friend, equally in doubt, and at a loss to understand what one’s real mind is, upon any Subject.¹⁷³

Leland infers from this that Shaftesbury must have thought that his true attitude to Christianity could be perceived through his ridicule.¹⁷⁴

Shaftesbury here provides a brief sketch of the theory of exoteric and esoteric doctrines, a theory that Toland discusses at length in ‘Clidophorus’. Leland’s response draws attention to the problem of what may be called the rhetorical conventions of esotericism. The problem can best be illustrated by reference to Toland’s significantly inconsistent stance on the matter. On the one hand Toland adopts the pose of the lover and propagator of truth, who dispels error and brings enlightenment through the force of his eloquence. This is the pose of his mouthpiece Adeisidaemon (the unsuperstitious man) in his poem *Clito* (1700), or the key, which is subtitled ‘A Poem on the Force of Eloquence’:

THUS arm’d, thus strong, thus fitted to persuade,
I’ll Truth protect, and Error straight invade,
Dispel those Clouds that darken human sight,
And bless the World with everlasting Light.¹⁷⁵

Toland presents himself as the populariser and revealer of truth to the vulgar, in contrast to the clergy who conceal what should be plain and simple from the vulgar by disguising it in terms intelligible only to themselves. He explains this stance in the prefaces to *Christianity not Mysterious*, *Letters to Serena*, and *Nazarenus*. Thus in *Christianity not Mysterious* he claims to write ‘*with all the Sincerity and Simplicity imaginable*’; unlike those who have invented terms in order ‘*to make plain things obscure*’, he has ‘*endeavour’d to speak very intelligibly*’, and has ‘*made explanatory Repetitions of difficult Words, by synonymous Terms of more general and known use.*’ This is ‘*of considerable Advantage to the Vulgar*’, who are as able as the learned to be ‘*Judges of the true Sense of Things, tho they understand nothing of the Tongues from whence they are translated for their Use*’. In writing in this way he is imitating the style of the gospel, which is ‘*most easy, most natural, and in the*

¹⁷³ *Characteristicks*, I, 62, 63. Shaftesbury here echoes a repeated saying of Jesus, ‘He that hath ears to hear, let him hear’, e.g. Matthew 11: 15.

¹⁷⁴ *Principal Deistical Writers*, I, 63. ¹⁷⁵ *Clito*, 7–8.

common Dialect of those to whom it was immediately consign'd'.¹⁷⁶ In the Preface to *Letters to Serena* Toland explains how he accommodates his argument to the needs of a well-read woman with no knowledge of the ancient languages: like Cicero, who '*artfully wrought into his own Text and Words, so many Passages of the Greek Writers*', so that his text could be read by a Roman lady with no knowledge of Greek, he has left quotations from the original languages in the margin and introduced his translations into his discourse to Serena so that '*they run in the same continu'd Thread and Stile with the rest*'.¹⁷⁷ In the Preface to *Nazareus* Toland continues this account of his method. His text is '*plain and perspicuous enough, even to the meanest capacity*'; he has interwoven his translations in his discourse '*in a continu'd thread*'; he believes not only '*that the simplest Stile (not incompatible with the politest) is in teaching the best; but that every man, who clearly conceives any subject, may as clearly express it.*' This method will, he expects, bring on him the opprobrium of the clergy: '*If the Stile of the man they love not, be chaste and unaffected, stript of the enthusiastic cant of the Fathers, the barbarous jargon of the Schools, and the motly dialect of later Systems, then his Principles are vehemently suspected; and by how much more they are intelligible, judg'd to be by so much the more dangerous.*'¹⁷⁸

In accordance with this method, Toland frequently appeals to the ordinary rational man who cannot fail to be persuaded by the plainness and simplicity of his argument: thus in *Christianity not Mysterious* he addresses 'every considerate and well-dispos'd Person' and 'all equitable persons'.¹⁷⁹ This imagined reader is similar to the one invoked by Tindal in *Christianity as Old as the Creation*; Tindal repeatedly assumes that 'whoever in the least reflects' must assent to the obviousness of his propositions. This rhetorical assumption of open, plain argument on the part of the writer and rational acceptance on the part of the ordinary intelligent reader differs markedly from the tactics of irony and equivocation described above. And despite his fondness for this pose, Toland recognised only too well that it did not accord with the facts. So he adopted a parallel though contradictory pose in which he portrayed himself as constrained by the vindictiveness of the orthodox and the precariousness of his position to adopt a twofold philosophy and address his true sentiments secretly and esoterically to a likeminded audience of the wise and few, while publicly and exoterically accommodating himself to the majority views of the ignorant and vulgar. There are glimpses of this pose in *Letters to Serena* and *Nazareus*, in which Toland boasts of his isolation and independence in his freedom from superstition.¹⁸⁰ He argues that wise men expect to be attacked for their views; if their work gains general approval, they fear that they cannot have written the truth, whereas popular disapproval of a view

¹⁷⁶ *Christianity not Mysterious*, x–xi, xviii–xx, 50.

¹⁷⁷ *Letters to Serena*, b^v.

¹⁷⁸ *Nazareus*, xi–xii, xix.

¹⁷⁹ *Christianity not Mysterious*, 46, 111.

¹⁸⁰ *Letters to Serena*, 16; *Nazareus*, xvii.

almost becomes a test of its validity. ‘Experience shows that great numbers of Adversarys are no Argument against the Truth of any thing whatsoever. The plainest things in the World have bin mighty Secrets for whole Ages’.¹⁸¹ The deliberate duplicity involved in the twofold method, mentioned in passing in *Letters to Serena*,¹⁸² is expounded in ‘Clidophorus’ and *Pantheisticon*. The subtitle of ‘Clidophorus’ summarises the distinction between the external and internal doctrines of the ancients: ‘The one open and public, accommodated to popular prejudices and the RELIGIONS establish’d by Law; the other private and secret, wherin, to the few capable and discrete, was taught the real TRUTH stript of all disguises.’ Toland claims to have published ‘Clidophorus’ – which means ‘the keybearer’ – in order ‘that they of our modern times may, in the history of former ages, behold their own pictures drawn to the life; and learn the causes as well as the cure of their distemper’. His object is, first, to show how the twofold method was employed by the ancients, second, to explain its relevance to the moderns, and third, to provide the reader with a key for the interpretation of those moderns who still employ it. Thus, paradoxically, at the same time as he expounds the theory of exoteric and esoteric knowledge, he breaks it down by providing the reader with the means for distinguishing the two. With reference to the obscurity of Heraclitus he comments: ‘The readers wanted a key, that might open ’em a passage into his secret meaning: and such a key, that I may hint it *en passant*, is to be, for the most part, borrow’d by the skilful from the writers themselves.’ After quoting Cicero’s account of the twofold method of the Peripatetic philosophers in *De Finibus*, V, v, he adds: ‘Hence he rightly concludes, that the same Philosophers *do not always seem to say the same thing*, tho they continu’d of the same opinion; which is as true as Truth it self, of many writers in our own time.’ These hints are enlarged in section 13, the last part of ‘Clidophorus’. Given the repressive climate and the reasonable reluctance of men to make unpopular truths public, Toland suggests that there is

one observation left us, wherby to make a probable judgement of the sincerity of others in declaring their opinions. Tis this. *When a man maintains what’s commonly believ’d, or professes what’s publicly injoin’d, it is not always a sure rule that he speaks what he thinks: but when he seriously maintains the contrary of what’s by law establish’d, and openly declares for what most others oppose, then there’s a strong presumption that he utters his mind.*

But he adds that even this simple test may not work unless there is freedom of expression. Toland concludes ‘Clidophorus’ with an account of the fifth-century Platonist philosopher Synesius, who reluctantly became a bishop though he was scarcely a Christian. Synesius provides ‘an example of liberty and reserve, of external and internal doctrines, an ample profession of speaking what he thinks, and an absolute uncertainty whether he does

¹⁸¹ *Letters to Serena*, c6^v, 171.

¹⁸² *Letters to Serena*, 56.

so or not'. Synesius thus seems to stand for the difficulties faced not only by freethinkers but also by heterodox members of the clergy; from the account of Synesius and the argument of the whole essay the reader is to conclude '*how hard it is to come at TRUTH your self, and how dangerous a thing to publish it to others.*'¹⁸³

'Clidophorus' illustrates the inconsistencies in Toland's various rhetorical poses and the difficulties caused by the resort to exoteric and esoteric doctrines. It is in a sense a work of popularisation, in that, true to the method outlined in *Christianity not Mysterious*, *Letters to Serena*, and *Nazarenus*, it presents the results of scholarly research into classical philosophy clearly, briefly, and intelligibly, with all quotations in translation. It seeks to make public the practice of exoteric and esoteric writing, which is itself based on the assumption that the truth can be told only to the philosophic few while the vulgar many must be content with the traditional lies. *Pantheisticon* appears deliberately to break with Toland's popular, public stance: it asserts the superiority of the secret views of the philosophic few to those of the ignorant multitude, and it is written in Latin. (It was published in a limited, private edition in 1720, the same year as *Tetradymus*, the volume containing 'Clidophorus'; an anonymous English translation appeared in 1751.) Yet it is a work which addresses two audiences, the private audience already in possession of esoteric knowledge, and a wider (though not a popular) audience to whom both the duplicitous practices of the philosophers and to some extent the content of their esoteric knowledge are revealed. Toland insists that because of the power of the superstitious 'it necessarily must happen, *That one Thing should be in the Heart, and in a private Meeting; and another Thing Abroad, and in public Assemblies.*'¹⁸⁴ Yet he deliberately exposes his own cover. There is a further paradox. Toland's revelation of the twofold method has the effect of casting doubt precisely on those passages in other works where he claims to speak freely and openly for the benefit of the vulgar. Despite his willingness to reveal the methods of concealment that were forced on him by circumstances and his encouragement of the reader to penetrate the devices that the freethinkers employed to protect themselves, Toland is careful not to state his views unambiguously. His works are only as clear and intelligible as the alert reader who takes advantage of the clues and warnings offered can make them.