

# ROMANTIC ATHEISM

*Poetry and freethought, 1780–1830*

MARTIN PRIESTMAN



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## *Introduction*

The core idea of this book is simple: to explore the links between the development of explicit atheism in the period 1780–1830 and the simultaneous emergence of much important new poetry. There is no single currently available book which aims to bring home to a reasonably wide readership at once the vigour, flexibility, coherence and popular appeal of anti-religious arguments from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth, and the engagement in or response to them of a significant range of the poets of the time. The emergence of declared atheism into common discourse has been traced by such historians of ideas as J. M. Robertson, Iain McCalman and David Berman, the last of whose *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (1988) dates ‘the birth of avowed atheism’ from 1782.<sup>1</sup> Such histories of thought, however, have had no particular brief to look at poetry as a special kind of discourse and have hence overlooked it except when it transparently overlaps with philosophy or polemic.

In literary studies, conversely, even some of these moments of transparent overlap have tended to be overlooked: either the issue has been avoided in various ways, or treated as obvious, or only related to one or two writers at a time. As a topic, the full-bodied presence of atheism in Romantic literature has been seen either as barely conceivable or as somehow crudely beside the point, in a context where ‘Romantic poetry’ itself still constitutes a kind of religion. To give a very rough thumbnail sketch of an old but widely prevalent picture, the eighteenth century was an ‘age of prose and reason’, from which we were saved in the nick of time by the ‘renaissance of wonder’ which constituted Romanticism. It was, of course, a single *ism*, so that whatever its more loquacious theorizers (especially Wordsworth or Coleridge) had to say about it was true all round. This generally had to do with rediscovering the truths of

religion through Nature or the Imagination, or else a particular fusion of the two, to understand which was to be admitted to the inner mysteries of 'Romanticism'. Whether this reborn sense of enchantment simply supplemented older forms of religion or replaced them with new ones was not always clear, but it was often presented as an issue which would not even have occurred to the poets themselves, rapt as they were in contemplating the wonders of nature and the imaginative forays of their own minds.

Though their more explicitly unorthodox views on religion have long been available, a nineteenth-century tradition of actively suppressing these has remained powerful in shaping generalized images of these writers. Some of these suppressions were by the writers themselves, as in Wordsworth's withholding of many significant early works from publication, as well as his endless self-revisions, both of individual texts and his overall opus. Some suppressions were by early publishers and editors, as with the family pressures which prevented Mary Shelley from publishing her husband's works in any completeness until 1839. The tradition of editorial suppression also continued in subtler forms: thus her placing of the atheistic *Queen Mab* as the first of Shelley's mature works in 1839 was not followed in Thomas Hutchinson's 1907 standard Oxford edition, where it is to be found discreetly repositioned with his 'Juvenilia' at the back.<sup>2</sup> In this century, the greater problem in assessing such unorthodox views has been the kind of indifference sanctioned by entry to the canon: thus Wordsworth's and Coleridge's 'pantheism' has become a mildly idiosyncratic variant of Christianity, and Blake's furious blasphemies just a quaintly religious-minded way of putting things. There is also perhaps the circular feeling that since this is what famous writers say, this must be what people thought then, especially when these are the main or only 'people' we read from their period. For readers looking for a more accurate positioning of these writers' ideas in their context, there are many critical studies of the type which whisks one off into the higher reaches of philosophical disquisition, assuming a complete knowledge of the history of thought as a *sine qua non* for understanding the given poet. What makes many excellent studies of Romantic literature 'suppressive' on the religious front is the lack of a sense of shock, that these people said these things at this time. It is partly to restore that sense of shock that this book foregrounds the issue of 'atheism' as central to the age; though to restore the sense of

context, it positions it in relation to as many as possible of the softer variants of unorthodoxy which are also essential to fill out the picture.

Whether total or partial, the various kinds of editorial and critical suppression discussed above played well to a readership attuned to seek and find in 'Romanticism' a wide-eyed innocence on religious matters. This might also be said about politics: indeed it is sometimes hard to know whether religious or political unorthodoxy explains any particular piece of textual suppression since they were often hopelessly entwined in twin-barrelled assaults on 'tyranny' and 'superstition'. Much comparatively recent criticism has worked hard to restore the period's politics to our picture of its literature, and I shall often lean gratefully on such studies in what follows. But, except in a few cases, the religious debates which so intimately accompanied this politics have either been sidelined as unpolitical, or somewhat too readily assumed to be simply dictated by political concerns, or else considered in the work of only one or two writers at a time.

Three books from successive decades which *have* focussed attention on such religious issues across a range of writers, without disregarding the political context, are M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830* (1981) and Robert M. Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation* (1997). In its title alone (borrowed from Thomas Carlyle), *Natural Supernaturalism* implies a great deal of what I believe needs to be said on the subject: that many 'Romantic' writers use religious, 'supernatural' terminology to describe objects, experiences and ideas which they know to be purely 'natural', thus turning the language of religion against itself by directing the feelings of reverence and attachment it has traditionally demanded towards the 'world' it has traditionally downgraded. At a stroke, Abrams makes impossible the simplistic move of estimating a particular poet's degree of 'religion' from a quick count of their biblical quotations: depending on the context, such quotations may easily be polemically placed to make us reapply learned religious responses to other matters entirely.

The great first example which launches his argument is Wordsworth's 'Prospectus to *The Recluse*', whose description of a mental flight past 'Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir / Of shouting

angels' really conveys that 'the heights and depths of the mind of man are to replace heaven and hell'.<sup>3</sup> In support of his position, Abrams adduces a great many learned sources from Plotinus and Böhme to Schelling and Kant, tending to demonstrate that a single Neoplatonic philosophy provides 'a "key" to the understanding of Romanticism' (p. 169). Though on some level the materialist 'nature' of contemporary science is accepted as a basis for the shift from orthodoxy, all the interest is on what one chapter calls 'The Redemptive Imagination'; and a series of other religious-sounding chapter titles focusses our attention more on the perfect fit made by the new Romantic construct with the terms of the old one it 'replaces'. For Abrams, ultimately, Romanticism becomes the religion it has ousted.

Where Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* is decisively important is in the wedges she drives between different writers of the period, as indicated in her title whose 'and' opposes three groupings to each other rather than conflating them in a single 'ism'. In the most dramatic of the consequent rearrangements, Coleridge is torn away from his usual soul mate Wordsworth and even from being defined primarily as a poet, to be juxtaposed with other rootless 'men of letters' including the group of German intellectuals, such as Friedrich Schlegel, who first constructed out of their disillusion with politics and uncertainty as to their audience the whole idea of 'Romanticism' as something involving 'an emotional, mystical, irrational religiosity'.<sup>4</sup> In his similar role as a Christian apologist, Coleridge persuaded a later generation that such views were central to his period's literature, but sharply differentiated himself from the Enlightenment ideal of 'Art for the People' through which another chapter links his old comrade-in-arms Wordsworth with William Blake. This latter pairing adds to its initial surprisingness by being further related to the neoclassicism of revolutionary and 'infidel' France, thus dealing a further blow to the conventional opposition between Enlightenment soullessness and the visionary Romanticism of which Blake and Wordsworth/Coleridge are usually seen as representing different but complementary strands.

While Butler juggles with many more themes than the religious one, religion is a decisive reference point in her picture of the period as one of active struggle between opposed points of view. In particular, she foregrounds the existence of atheism as a possible position, and the special importance of theories of mythology in

articulating an 'infidelity' which need not be shorn of exciting imaginative content. If some proponents of these ideas, such as Richard Payne Knight and Erasmus Darwin, play starring roles in the present book, it is because of the interest initially roused by coming across them in hers; indeed, more often than I have room to acknowledge in detail, this book has found itself chasing hares started by one or other of her crisp asides.

Though Butler's book gives a new focus for the idea of atheism as a live issue across the whole range of 'Romantic' writing, it does so somewhat in passing as far as the poetry is concerned. Robert M. Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature 1789-1824* does focus almost entirely on the religious issues raised by the major canonical poets of the period, though its title might suggest a fundamentally different starting point from the present study of 'Romantic atheism'. This impression is partly confirmed, in that Ryan does attempt to demonstrate that five of the 'big six' poets, Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelley, were religious reformers at heart, with Coleridge taken as read and Shelley, the most notoriously atheistic, saved till a triumphant last. In proving his case, moreover, Ryan is not always free from the tendency which I earlier suggested Abrams makes untenable, to brandish biblical allusions as evidence of actual or incipient religious commitment.

However, there is more in his book that I agree than disagree with, given that the word *Reformation* can be approached from either side, as he acknowledges in a quotation from Edmund Burke to the effect that 'A man is certainly the most perfect Protestant who protests against the whole Christian religion'.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, I believe all these poets were at times 'Protestants', though not consistently so (and perhaps, in Coleridge's case, with the attack directed at two mutually exclusive 'halves' of Christianity in turn). Ryan gives much useful evidence of their far-reaching critiques of established religion, and sets these in much the same political contexts as I shall. On Keats in particular, where the problem is to establish any clear line on the religious topics which Keats often deliberately avoids discussing in such terms, I have little if any disagreement with Ryan. Where he demonstrates a poet's move back towards orthodoxy, this is often in the context of later works, such as Wordsworth's *The Excursion* and Blake's *Jerusalem*, which I happily cede to him, since my book does not attempt to follow either poet past his more 'infidel' phase. Our difference is more a matter of emphasis: where he

presents a narrative of each poet's life in turn, with infidelism as the first act and a healthier religious attitude as the last, I take it that whatever their later settlements of their affairs, it is significant enough that most of these poets *had* an infidel phase, in which most of their best work happened to be written.

To turn now to what this book does attempt to do, I shall use the rest of this introduction to look at some crucial words, by whose meanings and occasional ambiguities it is partly shaped. The double-sidedness of the words *Reformation* and *Protestant* can also be found lurking in the word *religion* itself: while writing the above, I have been aware how often I have used the word *religious* when I meant *irreligious* or *atheistic*. There is a large category problem in discussing atheism, which is that it is assumed to 'belong' to the broader field of religion: in libraries, books on the subject will appear on the Religion shelves, if anywhere. This is not just because a negative inevitably invokes its positive; it is because atheism depends on religion to mean anything at all: if the latter simply went away, so would the former. Hence the ease with which the vociferously atheist Shelley can be described as a religious poet; hence, too, the paradox that the most thorough atheist of all might never mention the fact, since for him or her both halves of the dualism have already vanished. From within the shadow of such paradoxes, however, it is still possible to assert that many people from the 1780s to the 1820s attacked religion because they really did want to attack religion, and believed there was something better.

One word often used to indicate that something better is *humanism*. It is a word I do not use in this book because it carries too many overlapping meanings, from classical scholarship to general benevolent humaneness, which either tend to construct their own argument or else need persistent policing. But a belief in the power of, and necessity for, humans to construct their own meanings out of the known facts of nature rather than the unknowable postulates of religion is common to many of the writers I shall be discussing and, at some level, crucial to their work.

I can best start to indicate the range of issues and debates this book will cover by expanding on the key terms of its title. The first of these terms, *Romantic*, denotes only a literary period, not the kind of extractable essence I have criticized above. The often-used 'Romantic period' is ungainly when used adjectivally, and the half-resigned inverted commas I have placed round the term up to now



can be tiring to sustain. However, both in the title and in my subsequent uses of the term, I use it to mean only the period later thus labelled, not any shared intention by its writers to write in a certain way.

The next word of the title, *atheism*, technically denotes the belief that there is no God. My first chapter demonstrates that this became an expressible belief in Britain during the early Romantic period, but I shall not be arguing that all the poets I discuss are atheists, even when they challenge orthodox religion, as virtually all of them do. I shall, however, argue that they were acutely aware of positive, unapologetic atheism as a phenomenon of the time, and that most had unorthodox moments or periods which they knew could easily be accused of atheism, and that some did indeed participate in aspects of atheist discourse. Until I have explored the nuances of their very different positions further in the relevant chapters, however, it is best to stress that the title indicates 'atheism' as a topic, an issue, a concern in the period called *Romantic*, rather than indicating 'Romantic atheism' as a belief system to which I somehow need to prove all 'Romantics' subscribed.

My next word, *poetry*, is clear enough, but it may raise the question, *why* poetry, or why *just* poetry? I focus on it because, unlike such multivocal forms as prose fiction and drama, poetry has an acknowledged responsibility to be affirmative from a single subject position, rather than as filtered through novels or plays where the author's responsibility for any given utterance may be in doubt – admittedly, often usefully so where controversial ideas are concerned. Of course the same might theoretically be said of poetry, but it is nonetheless easier to tell when poets are taking risks or refusing to do so, given the rush of directly engaging enthusiasm on which so much poetry of the period depends. Tracking the atheist possibility through poetry also gives a useful opportunity to restore to a wider discursive context such mystified 'poetic' terms as *Nature* and *Imagination*, the first of which has a special resonance in atheist book titles from the Roman poet Lucretius to the French *philosophe* Baron d'Holbach as denoting the materialist alternative to God, and the second of which can be interpreted as the right to invent God or an acceptable substitute even if, in line with Voltaire's dictum, he does not exist.

Given that the 'atheism' of the main title denotes a dramatic topic towards which the period's writers orientate themselves in different

ways, my subtitle uses the deliberately broader *freethought*, a term in use from the earlier eighteenth century and allowing for a more shifting range of positions, sharing a general refusal to submit the reason to religious authority but ranging from committed atheism to the 'natural religion' of *deism*, and even to such 'heretical' types of Christianity as the *Unitarianism* and *antinomianism* espoused at times by Coleridge and Blake respectively. In using this looser term, I am not equating all freethinkers with 'atheists', but drawing attention to the interplay between that newly possible label and a more articulated range of terms which might also include *infidel*, *sceptic*, *philosopher*, *materialist*, *enemy of superstition and priestcraft*, *Dissenter* and *theist*. While words near the top of the scale do virtually connote 'atheist', those further down could be used to connote strength or absence of religious commitment, depending on the speaker, though in hostile hands almost all are shadowed by the possibility that they may conceal or lead towards atheism.

Having now related 'freethought' to a range of further terms, I shall briefly define them here, referring readers also to the glossary at the end of this book. *Deism* is the belief that the universe must have had a broadly benevolent creator about whom, however, we can know little more. Since we deduce his existence from the evidence of nature, a virtual synonym for 'deism' is 'natural religion'. As thus defined since the late seventeenth century, the word could be variously used as perfectly compatible with Christianity or (as with Thomas Paine) as violently opposed to it. *Unitarianism* was the branch of 'Dissenting' (i.e. non-Anglican) Christianity nearest to deism, maintaining that Christ was purely human although sent by God to convince us of his message through miracles, including the resurrection. In rejecting the Trinity, Unitarians were theoretically outside the law, the only Christian group whose doctrines were thus actually proscribed except the Roman Catholics. As the leading group of *Rational Dissenters* in our period, however, Unitarians were immensely influential in provoking the debates through which atheism articulated itself, and in leading radical middle-class opposition to the government.

A less 'rational' strain in non-Anglican Dissent was *antinomianism* (i.e. 'against the moral law'), a blanket term for a set of beliefs involving the supersession of the authority of both the Old and New Testaments by the immediate inspiration of some or all believers. Ranging from Quakerism to the Swedenborgianism with which

Blake was involved, such beliefs had roots in the upswelling of independent religious groups in the seventeenth century, and were often seen as forms of ‘Enthusiasm’ appealing particularly to the radical working classes. There were, however, overlaps with the more middle-class ‘Rational Dissent’, particularly in the *millenarianism* which greeted the French Revolution as a fulfilment of prophecies of the overthrow of Babylon. In the chapter on Blake, I shall also touch on the following: *Behmenism*, the engagement with the writings of the sixteenth-century German mystic Jakob Böhme; *alchemy*, presumed to be based on Egyptian theories of matter as impregnated with various spiritual forces; *Neoplatonism*, the idea derived from Plotinus and other followers of Plato that matter is simply a trap for the spiritual; and *Gnosticism*, the heretically Christian version of such ideas which sees the creator of matter as lower than the ultimate God, and often as distinctly evil.

Of my further list of possible synonyms for ‘freethinker’, *infidel* is one of the most significant. Meaning simply ‘non-believer (in what the speaker believes in)’, it virtually connotes ‘atheist’ while being a slightly easier label to accept for oneself: hence William Godwin embraces the term while worrying about the ‘cold’ connotations of ‘atheist’. Unfortunately, the abstract noun *infidelity* has now come predominantly to mean sexual cheating: otherwise, as the period’s commonest term for atheism, it should perhaps have featured in my title. To continue with my list: *scepticism* is close to what we might now call agnosticism, but with a harder edge to it. A sceptic will only believe what can be proved: in particular, the philosopher David Hume used this approach to discredit the deist belief in a creator while refusing to back any alternative hypothesis, except ironically. The word *philosopher*, meaning ‘lover of wisdom’, could be neutral, as when applied to scientists (‘natural philosophers’), but could also connote *philosophe*, the group of French thinkers including Voltaire, Denis Diderot and Baron d’Holbach generally credited with an undermining of religious authority throughout the eighteenth century which eventually precipitated the French Revolution. Several of these, such as d’Holbach, were committed *materialists*, who believed with the Greek philosopher Epicurus and Roman poet Lucretius that the universe consisted purely of matter, animated by its own energies and needing no external divine input.

Of the last few words on the list, *priestcraft* and *superstition* were often yoked together as things the speaker expects every reasonable

person to be opposed to, and usually ostensibly denote Roman Catholicism. ‘Superstition’ is clearly any form of irrational belief; ‘priestcraft’ implies a whole theory of religion being used as a pretext to seize ideological and real power. The beauty of these two extremely prevalent words was that it was impossible to tell exactly where the attack stopped: at Catholicism alone, or at any form of imposed ‘state religion’, including the Church of England, or even at Christianity itself? The last word, *theist*, is usefully open-ended: theoretically meaning simply ‘believer in God’, it could in practice range from the most orthodox upholder of revelation to the most minimal deist. One final word I should explain my use of before concluding is *orthodox*, not in the above list but virtually unavoidable as the opposite term to most of those discussed in this book. Meaning simply ‘adhering to the established doctrines’, it is an inherently spongy term, dependent on how broadly or narrowly one reads those established doctrines. Clearly belief in God and the Thirty-Nine Articles were both ‘orthodox’ at the time, but the former does not necessarily imply the latter: it depends on the context of the debate.

A great many of these words feature in the following chapter, ‘The atheism debate’, which demonstrates, I hope, the crucial importance of ‘atheism’ itself – both the word and the thing it denotes – in the period from 1780 to 1800. As an occasional daringly-adopted badge, or more often as a veiled or open accusation, it vies for importance in the collective mind with the French Revolution itself, with whose fortunes it was to become indissolubly linked. In the chapters that follow, my focus on particular canonical poets is only ever half the point: just as important is an attempt to crowd the canvas with other writers or with the viewpoints which give them context. If in some ways this book’s preoccupation with religious debates may seem to narrow unduly the focus of what it discusses, in other ways I hope it widens it beyond the still-prevalent critical obsession with too small a range of ‘great writers’. These issues touched everybody; religious and/or infidel discourses provided the channels much else ran in, from theories of political change to theories of mythological poetry to theories of gender to theories of science. These four areas are taken up in a more polemical context again in chapter 6, which considers where the atheism debate had got to between 1800 and 1830, if *debate* continues to be the word for a situation dominated by legal repression and various forms of retaliation. The final chapter

has in a sense the easiest life, with an examination of the overwhelmingly infidel Shelley generation, leaving the conclusion to pose if not explain the conundrum of the rapid disappearance of such infidel literary groupings thereafter.

## CHAPTER I

### *The atheism debate, 1780–1800*

Be it therefore for the future remembered, that in London in the kingdom of England, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-one, a man has publicly declared himself an atheist.

This declaration was made by someone calling himself William Hammon, introducing a pamphlet called *Answer to Dr Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* (1782).<sup>1</sup> An unpacking of some of its context will help to set out the terms on which an 'atheism debate' was initiated in Britain in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. First, its authorship: the otherwise unidentified 'Hammon' claims to be merely the editor of the main body of the pamphlet, whose anonymous author was subsequently identified as Matthew Turner, a 'physician at Liverpool: among his friends a professed Atheist'.<sup>2</sup> The situation of a respectable figure known personally as an atheist but unable to put their name to such views in print is one we shall encounter again repeatedly. The murkiness surrounding 'Hammon' – whether a pseudonym for Turner or the real (or indeed false) name of someone else publishing his views as a partial cover for their own – is also of a piece with the often crooked routes through which atheist ideas gradually came to be aired at this time.

Next, its addressee: as the title suggests, the pamphlet inserts itself into an on-going debate initiated by Dr Joseph Priestley, in the first part of a series of published 'letters' to a supposedly atheistic correspondent who may or not be a specific individual, but who offers him a pretext for attacking the views of two writers to be discussed shortly: David Hume and Baron d'Holbach.<sup>3</sup> One of the stars of this chapter and indeed this book, Priestley was a protean figure who at this time played an equally leading role in three apparently disparate spheres of activity: the physical sciences (he discovered oxygen); radical, anti-establishment politics; and religious

‘Rational Dissent’. As a Unitarian minister, he briefly helped to turn that form of anti-trinitarian Christianity into one of the most powerful intellectual forces in the country, whose intimate, sparring partner relationship with out-and-out atheism will form one of this book’s major leitmotifs. While for most of the present chapter Priestley will figure as the hectically versatile defender of Christianity against attack from many directions, it is important to remember that, as he himself pointed out in his reply to Hammon (*Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, 1782), a declared Unitarian like himself was legally a heretic and as such arguably ‘in more danger than a declared *unbeliever*’.<sup>4</sup>

Priestley is referring to the series of laws and legal precedents based on William and Mary’s Toleration Act of 1689, supposedly the cornerstone of English religious freedom but specifically debarring non-believers in the Trinity as well as Roman Catholics from the protection of the law. The Blasphemy Act of 1698 outlawed further specific doctrines, though the enforcement of Trinitarianism was removed for those (such as the Jews) who had never been Christians: hence perhaps Priestley’s remark. Legislation was supplemented by specific judges’ decisions, and William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–9) had recently confirmed that ‘Christianity is part of the laws of England’ and proscribed ‘blasphemy against the Almighty, by denying his being or providence; or by contumelious reproach of our Saviour Christ’. Though the eighteenth century is often described as an irreligious ‘age of reason’, the publication of freethinking views without a decent veneer of orthodoxy was still very dangerous, and produced a long list of ‘martyrs’ legally punished or socially persecuted for it, from the deist and proto-Unitarian John Toland to Peter Annet, imprisoned and pilloried in 1763 at the age of seventy for denying the divine inspiration of the Pentateuch.<sup>5</sup>

It is against this legal background that Hammon/Turner and Priestley play an intricate but revealing game of buck-passing. In his prefatory address, Hammon declares he was neither a philosopher nor an unbeliever till he read Priestley’s *Letters* and asked for an anonymous ‘friend’’s (i.e. Turner’s) comments on them: if the letters alone would not ‘quite have made me an Atheist!’, the fusion between them and the friend’s response *has* achieved that effect (*Answer to Priestley*, p. ix). Hammon goes on to query Priestley’s claim to be ready to extend the arguments of his *Letters* if the first part is

well-received. How will Priestley *know* how it has been received by unbelievers themselves? Will their views be legally publishable, and will he respond to them? In a postscript, Hammon states that he first sent the *Answer* personally to Priestley, requesting a reply as well as his protection for a work which he himself has solicited, since ‘your opponent has to dread, beside ecclesiastical censure, the scourges, chains and pillories of the courts of law’ (p. 60). His concluding remark, ‘To this letter Dr Priestley sent no answer’, in fact received a very prompt answer in Priestley’s *Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in Answer to Mr Wm Hammon* (1782). This begins with a circumstantial description of Priestley’s several attempts to reach Hammon at his stated address, at which no one of that name seemed to live; a public response (which quotes generously from Hammon/Turner’s hitherto obscure *Answer*) is thus the only option. Such complex interfacing between the private and public functions of ‘letters’ are endemic in the early stages of the atheism debate.

In content, the *Answer* usefully encapsulates a number of the main positions of late eighteenth-century atheism. As Priestley’s offered label ‘Philosophical Unbeliever’ implies, these positions include a general orientation towards the physical sciences (‘natural philosophy’) but also a more specific one to the French *philosophe* tradition. Claiming that ‘Modern philosophers are nearly all atheists’, Hammon cites particularly Hume, Helvétius, Diderot and d’Alembert (p. xxiv). The last two were chiefly responsible for the great *Encyclopédie* (1751–72), which was generally held to have smuggled atheist tendencies into popular discourse under the cloak of general knowledge – something also achieved in a more satirically focussed way by Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764). Of the other two, Hume was a notorious sceptic and Helvétius was the author of *De l’esprit* (1758), a materialist account of the mind which bypassed the idea of the soul, though in naming him Hammon probably means Baron d’Holbach, another member of the *philosophe* circle whose *Système de la nature* (1770) was published pseudonymously and known in Britain as being either by Helvétius or ‘Mirabaud’.

In the main body of the pamphlet, Turner quotes *Système* repeatedly, echoing its arguments that matter might have existed forever and has no need of God to direct it since it is endowed with its own ‘energy of nature’, whereby it constantly forms new combinations. Drawing on the discussions of prehistoric remains by such scientists as Buffon and Cuvier, he argues that the present range of living



species, supposedly created once and for all by God, depends on the present environment: ‘bones of animals have been dug up which appertain to no species now existing, and which must have perished from an alteration in the system of things taking place too considerable for it [*sic*] to endure’ (p. 41). With another change, the ‘energy of nature’ might produce them again – as envisaged in the ‘Epicurean system’. This system, postulating a universe made entirely of ‘atoms and void’, and most widely accessible to classically educated readers through the Roman poet Lucretius, was acknowledged even by the seventeenth-century Christian apologist Cudworth as giving ‘a weight to atheism not to be overturned’. Unlike the Christian, the atheist has a sense of ‘his relative importance’ in the great chain of Nature, and ‘If the world has so good a mother, a father may well be spared’, especially one so apparently ‘haughty, jealous and vindictive’ as the Christian God (p. 47). And if this God exists, why does he not make himself known, why ‘require a Jesus, a Mahomet or a Priestley to reveal it’? Or as the author of *Système de la nature* asks, ‘How does he permit a mortal like me to dare attack his rights, his titles, or his very existence?’ (p. 49). As a good scientist, Priestley really agrees with Turner and d’Holbach that everything in nature is determined and that ‘Necessity is therefore the first God’; but at a certain point he exchanges emotion for empiricism and simply worships what he wants to believe in, making God in his own image like all religious devotees: ‘They are all idolators and anthropomorphites to a man; there is none but an atheist that is not the one or the other’ (p. 21).

All these ideas – of Epicurean atoms, unexplained bones, necessity, the energy of nature, misguided self-projection, the redundancy of revelation, and the preference for a natural mother over a cruel father – will recur constantly throughout this book, sometimes in some unexpected mouths. A great many of them were first brought systematically together in what Priestley called ‘the Bible of Atheism’, d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature*.

A thoroughgoing materialist, d’Holbach appeals both to Epicurean atomism and to Newton’s theory of *vis inertiae* (the force needed to resist other forces even in resting bodies) to argue that motion and energy are aspects of matter itself, and therefore have no need of injection into an otherwise ‘dead’ universe by an external deity.<sup>6</sup> Man is himself merely an arrangement of matter, who may either have existed forever, like the earth, or have developed to

adapt to a changing environment if, for instance, the earth itself began as a comet, or has undergone cataclysmic changes in which earlier species have been destroyed – as man may in turn have to give way to new species if the environment changes again. That life can develop spontaneously is demonstrated by the growth of microscopic animals in sealed jars of flour paste, and ‘the production of a man, independent of the ordinary means, would not be more marvellous than that of an insect with flour and water’ (*System of Nature*, I, 6 and 2, pp. 52–4, 15–16). Given the materiality of all nature, psychological and moral forces can be described in similar terms to physical ones: ‘those modes of action which natural philosophers designate by the terms *attraction, repulsion, sympathy, antipathy, affinities, relations*; that moralists describe under the names of *love, hatred, friendship, aversion*’; ‘Natural philosophers call [the tendency to self-conservation] SELF-GRAVITATION. Newton calls it INERT FORCE. Moralists denominate it, in man, SELF-LOVE’ (I, 4, pp. 29–32).

Another influential part of d’Holbach’s argument relates to the early development of religion. Man embodied powerful natural forces as separate beings, beginning with fire: ‘Thus he . . . fancied he saw, the igneous matter pervade every thing, . . . he gave it his own form, called it Jupiter, and ended by worshipping this image of his own creation’ (I, 6, p. 50). Similarly, Saturn represented time, Juno wind, and Minerva wisdom; Osiris, Mithras, Adonis and Apollo all represented the sun, while Isis, Astarte, Venus and Cybele all represented nature ‘rendered sorrowful by his periodical absence’. The founders of this mythology, however, understood that it was only ‘the daughter of natural philosophy embellished by poetry; only destined to describe nature and its parts’. The Orphic Hymn to Pan demonstrates that ‘It was the great whole they deified; it was its various parts which they made their inferior gods.’ Such knowledge was, however, confined to the élite ‘mystery’ cults: ‘Indeed, the first institutors of nations, and their immediate successors in authority, only spoke to the people, by fables, allegories, enigmas, of which they reserved the right of giving an explanation: this, in fact, constituted the mysteries of the various worship paid to the pagan divinities’ (II, 2, pp. 269–72). d’Holbach argues that the habit of allegorizing natural processes is also evident in some biblical myths, and that Moses’ account of the birth of Eve from Adam’s rib reflects a belief he had picked up in Egypt that humans were

originally hermaphrodite, like aphids. He explains how ‘Moses, who was educated among these Egyptians’ wrote in Genesis that “‘in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them’”: ‘It is not therefore presuming too much, to suppose, as the Egyptians were a nation very fond of expressing their opinions by hieroglyphics, that that part which describes Eve as taken out of Adam’s rib, was an hieroglyphic emblem’ (II, 2, p. 268).<sup>7</sup>

Despite the odd disrespectful aside, however, d’Holbach shows little interest in attacking biblical Judaeo-Christianity in detail, presenting Mosaic monotheism as an attempt to reform older systems and ‘the first doctors of Christianity [as] Platonists, who combined the reformed Judaism, with the philosophy taught in Academia’. For him, it is sufficient to lump them with other types of ‘theism’, whose adherents, ‘undeceived upon a great number of the grosser errors, . . . hold the notion of unknown agents . . . full of infinite perfections; whom they distinguish from nature, but whom they clothe after their own fashion; to whom they ascribe their own limited views’, and hence can have ‘no fixed point, no standard, no common measure more than other systems’ (II, 7, pp. 389–90). For d’Holbach, ‘theism’ includes what is usually called ‘deism’, differing from ‘superstition’ in that in theism ‘the tints are certainly blended with more mellowness, the colouring of a more pleasing hue, the whole more harmonious, but the distances equally indistinct’. At best, such enlightened theism is only a short stop on the route to atheism which, ironically, is travelled faster under more oppressive regimes: ‘Theism is a system at which the human mind cannot make a long sojourn . . . Many incredulous beings, many theists, are to be met with in those countries where freedom of opinion reigns; . . . atheists, as they are termed, will be found in those countries where superstition, backed by the sovereign authority, most enforces the ponderosity of its yoke’ (II, 13, pp. 482, 479). While the same argument was used to reverse effect by many British apologists for Protestant toleration as against papist tyranny, Turner’s *An Answer to Dr Priestley* picks up precisely on d’Holbach’s coolly dialectical argument that religious suppression has put the French *philosophes* ahead of the game.

Of the slew of French texts with a bearing on the atheism debate in Britain, the *Système* and one other (Volney’s *Ruines*) are all I shall have room to include here. Both had a considerable ‘underground’ reputation as high-watermarks of infidelism, but both were also

inscribed into what may be called the 'official' debate through the tireless publications of Priestley. And interestingly, his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* speaks of the *Système* with some respect as at least more 'frank and open' than Priestley's main object of attack, David Hume (Letter XI, *Works*, IV, p. 389).

Hume, famously, refused to be pinned down as a deist, let alone an atheist: once, on introduction to a group of leading *philosophes* in France, he claimed not to believe in the existence of atheists, even when told by d'Holbach himself that there were fifteen in the room.<sup>8</sup> Though Britain's most formidable sceptical philosopher, his refusal to push that scepticism into avowed disbelief made him a difficult, often frustrating target for defenders of religion, while many of his arguments nonetheless went straight into the kitty of atheist polemic. His essay 'Of Miracles' (1741) carefully scraped away at the grounds for our accepting reports of miracles we have not witnessed, or of our preferring biblical reports over equally circumstantial pagan ones. The controversial eleventh chapter of *An Enquiry into Human Understanding* (1748) puts the case for thoroughgoing materialism into the mouth of an Epicurean philosopher, and rejects the standard arguments for outlawing that position on grounds of morality. *A Natural History of Religion* (1757) presents both polytheism and monotheism from a largely psychological or anthropological perspective, as natural cyclical correctives to each other's considerable drawbacks. Written about the same time, but intentionally published long posthumously, in 1779, *Dialogues on Natural Religion* launches a devastatingly sceptical assault on deist arguments that any deity, let alone a benign one, can be deduced from the evidence available to us from the natural universe. All these texts, however, cover Hume's retreat with variations of the argument that scepticism cuts all ways, and therefore ultimately impels us towards accepting revelation as the only possible guide to the truth.

In *Letters*, Priestley acknowledges the skill with which Hume allows good arguments to the opponents of the *Dialogues'* sceptical spokesman Philo, who then retracts his views at the end, but 'when, at the last, evidently to save appearances, he relinquishes the argument, on which he had expatiated with so much triumph, it is without alleging any sufficient reason; so that his arguments are left, as no doubt the writer intended, to have their full effect on the mind of the reader . . . [T]hough the debate seemingly closes on the side of the theist, the victory is clearly on the side of the atheist'.<sup>9</sup>

Priestley's apparent preference for d'Holbach's forthright atheism is of a piece with his refusal to carry on playing the polite game of hide-and-seek claimed as the proper forum for such debates by Hume and his friend Edward Gibbon. It was in his express wish to open up the rules of debate to include all 'sincere' views as theoretically legitimate that Priestley prompted Hammon/Turner's *Answer*.

Priestley's alacrity in prolonging such debates, or stirring them up unilaterally, is evident in his challenges to Gibbon, his brief correspondence with whom (also in 1782) is an interesting reverse echo of his skirmish with Hammon. Having attacked Gibbon in *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), he sent him a copy with the clear intention of extracting a public reply or at least permission to publish Gibbon's private one, which Gibbon declined in a tone making very clear the impertinence of such an ill-bred and *ad hominem* approach.

The main objects of Priestley's attack were the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) which, after paying due deference to divine causes, account for the early spread of Christianity in terms of an unappealing psychology of fanaticism and intolerance. Gibbon contrasts these qualities with the tolerance of the long-established polytheism and suggests that they eventually undermined the stability of the empire; furthermore, the failure of non-Christians to confirm the miraculous events of the New Testament is noted in tones of somewhat exaggerated mock astonishment.<sup>10</sup> From their publication in 1776 as the climax to the first volume of *Decline and Fall*, the two chapters were the focus of controversy. Their most respectable opponent – certainly the most respected by Gibbon himself – was Richard Watson, Cambridge Professor of Divinity and later to become Bishop of Llandaff, whose *An Apology for Christianity, in a Series of Letters, addressed to Edward Gibbon, Esq.* was a model of courteous and scholarly rebuke. While praising Gibbon for his 'great work' and probably pious intentions, Watson suggests that other minds might be led to believe that Christianity spread by human means alone, and goes on to argue that the cohesion, morality and courage of the first Christians was in itself a mark of divine guidance, as was their message, which attracted converts solely thanks to its self-evident truth.<sup>11</sup> Watson goes on to cite examples of the intolerance of Roman polytheism, and of reasons why such a miracle as the

universal darkness at the moment of crucifixion might have been overlooked by Italians used to the clouds of Etna and Vesuvius. In a final letter, addressed over Gibbon's shoulder to strayers into deism or even atheism, he insists that the only basis for morality is the Christian system of rewards and penalties after death, whose truth is firmly underpinned by miracles, and dismisses the ideas that some biblical prophecies may have been falsified later, that new geological evidence dates the earth well before the supposed creation, and that science and philosophy are fundamentally opposed to religious belief.

In *A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1779), Gibbon praises the 'liberal and philosophic' Watson for his declared wish not to prolong the debate and his refusal 'to descend to employ the disingenuous arts of vulgar controversy'.<sup>12</sup> Since Watson accepts that *some* secondary causes probably assisted the spread of Christianity, their disagreement is only one of degree. Gibbon only takes issue with one of Watson's arguments: that the Roman authorities' hostility to the Christians' refusal to give even token recognition to the pagan gods showed their imperviousness to rational arguments for religious toleration. Gibbon argues that since neither Roman polytheists nor sceptical philosophers would refuse such recognition to any gods, as a matter 'not of *opinion*, but of *custom*', they simply could not understand the Christians' stubbornness.<sup>13</sup>

The Christian impoliteness to which Gibbon hopes Watson will understand his implied objections is, arguably, of a piece with what he clearly finds offensive in Priestley's various approaches to him. 'Considerations addressed to Unbelievers, and especially to Mr Gibbon' opens the general conclusion to Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782). While repeating many of Watson's arguments about the miraculous persuasiveness of the early Christians, Priestley does so in a far more hectoring tone, accusing Gibbon of sharing Voltaire's anti-Semitism and of writing 'sarcasms . . . founded on ignorance' with a 'sneer of triumph'. While modestly disclaiming the role of 'champion of Christianity, against all the world', Priestley owns he will 'have no objection to discuss this subject with Mr Gibbon, as an historian and philosopher', and repeatedly speaks as if this challenge had already been accepted, 'admonishing' him as to what points he should reply to and, worst of all, enlisting him as a potential ally in his own Unitarianism by

stressing the various trinitarian and other superstitions from which both of them are equally free.<sup>14</sup>

In reply to Priestley's gift of a copy of his book, Gibbon wrote back declining the offered challenge and querying 'to whom the invidious name of *Unbeliever* more justly belongs: to the historian who, without interposing his own sentiments, has delivered a simple narrative of authentic facts, or to the disputant, who . . . condemns the religion of every Christian nation as a fable'. Further, 'since you assume the right to determine the objects of my past and future studies', Gibbon passes on the 'almost unanimous . . . wish of the philosophic world' that Priestley return to his scientific studies and abandon religious controversy, taking warning from the Swiss Unitarian Servetus, burned by the Calvinists for heresy but now only remembered for his work on the circulation of the blood.<sup>15</sup> In reply, Priestley insists that for all his protests Gibbon's real aim 'has been to discredit Christianity in fact, while, in words you represent yourself as a friend to it; a conduct which I scruple not to call highly unworthy and mean, an insult on the common sense of the Christian world'. As a means of hiding from the law (from which Priestley himself is in greater danger) such double-talk is valueless, and by now too hackneyed to seem 'ingenious and witty'.<sup>16</sup> Since Gibbon had claimed to write the *Vindication* to defend his 'honour', surely Priestley has now insulted him enough to make him enter the lists again? As for Servetus, Priestley respects his martyrdom more than he would the greatest scientific discovery; and his own scientific researches are proceeding apace, in no way interrupted by his theological involvements. To Gibbon's curt reply that the letter's 'style and temper' make him decline all further correspondence, Priestley riposted with a request to publish the correspondence so far, and met Gibbon's brusque refusal by stating that he would in any case circulate it among friends, and that Gibbon would be wise to say nothing more since any further protest would only increase the volume of the correspondence to be thus circulated. Gibbon seems to have followed this advice, and Priestley subsequently published the correspondence in *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, going on to attack Gibbon again in *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part II* (1787).

As we have seen, d'Holbach's *Système* touches lightly on the idea that some of the fundamental images and events of biblical narrative

derive from Egyptian or other mythologies which are really attempts to describe natural processes metaphorically. Similar ideas were discussed in less committedly 'atheistic' but in some ways more shocking terms by Richard Payne Knight's *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1785), privately published for the learned Society of Dilettanti, along with a shorter essay by Sir William Hamilton. To be discussed more fully in the next chapter, Knight's essay threatened to ruin his career as an MP and was hastily withdrawn from even the limited circulation it had enjoyed. Seen as a disgraceful mixture of obscenity and impiety, it was a jaunty but largely serious attempt to trace the phallic worship still to be found in parts of Italy (the subject of Hamilton's contribution) back through many religions from Greek paganism to Hinduism, and then forward again into certain aspects of Christianity itself. In its mythographic approach to the links between Christianity and other religions, *The Worship of Priapus* is not new, but for Britain at least it made very clear the possible dangers of this rising field of research. The more acceptably orthodox face of such comparative mythography had been seen in Jacob Bryant's *Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1775), and in the oriental researches of Sir William Jones, a major source for Knight but also for many subsequent 'proofs' of the primacy of Christianity over other religions.

I shall be turning shortly to the massive impact of the French Revolution on the atheism debate once we enter the 1790s, but for now I would like to anticipate that moment slightly by following the mythographic issues just noted through into that decade, first by considering a key text of 'revolutionary atheism': Constantin de Volney's *Les Ruines, ou, revolutions des empires* (1791; English translation 1792). The book opens with the narrator musing on the ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra in Lebanon, and then being whisked up out of his body into space by a spirit or 'Genius' who shows him the ruins of many other seats of empire, and explains that with them passed many belief systems which once seemed as universally valid as Christianity does now. In the dream vision which takes up the rest of the book, the Genius conjures up a tribunal in which all the world's religions have to justify themselves before the legislators of 'a free people' recently liberated from superstition – clearly France.<sup>17</sup> In chapter 22, after the contradictions and failings of all have been exposed in turn, the revolutionary legislators outline the true history of all religions: most, apparently, sprang from early Egyptian



A View of the  
**ASTROLOGICAL HEAVENS of the ANCIENTS**  
*to explain the Mysteries of the*  
**Jewish & Christian**  
**RELIGIONS**

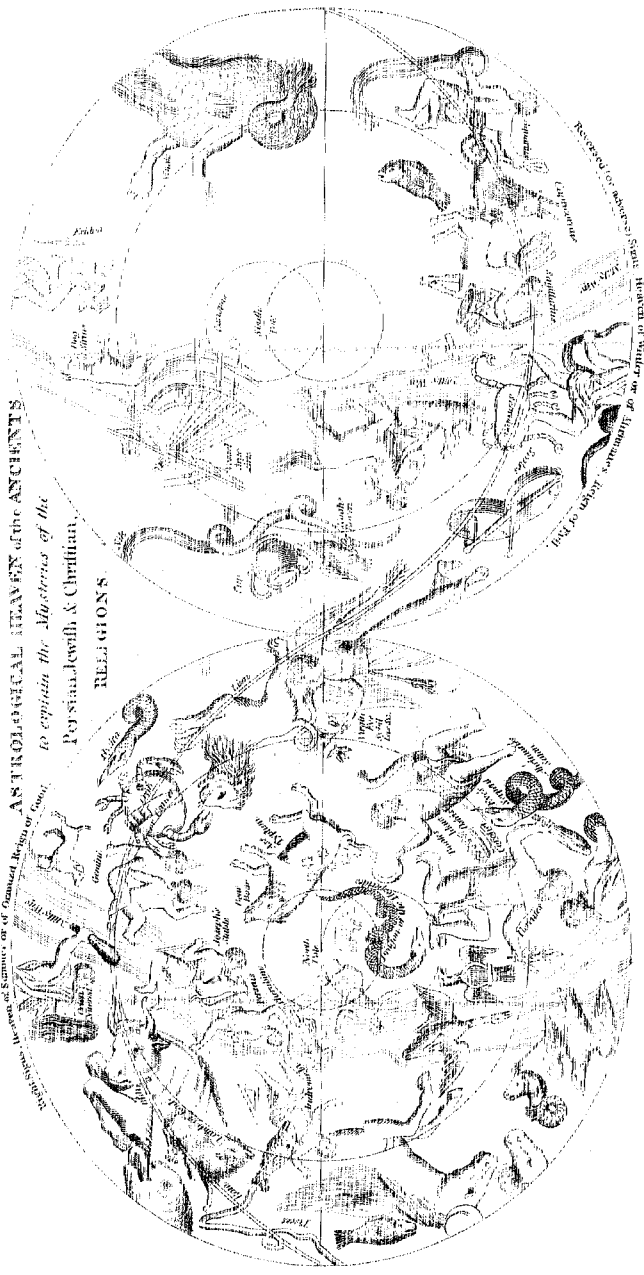


Plate 1. Astrological chart from Volney's *Ruins* (1791), showing figures from various religions including Christianity as personifications of astronomical configurations. Describing one depiction of the twelve signs of the zodiac, Volney says 'that of the Virgin represents a young woman with an infant by her side: the whole scene, indeed, of the birth of Jesus is to be found in the adjacent part of the heavens. The stable is the constellation of the charioteer and the goat, formerly Capricorn; a constellation called praesepe Jovis Heniochi, stable of Iou, and the word Iou is found in the name Iouseph (Joseph)' (London: Thomas Tegg, 1826, pp. 323-4, 196).

attempts to predict the seasons, weather and fluctuations of the Nile according to astronomical configurations which later became personified as gods, whose natures changed as their cults spread round the world. Numerous ingenious comparisons of divine names and attributes (along lines prefigured by d'Holbach, Bryant and Jones, as well as Knight) include with deliberate lack of special treatment figures from the Christian narrative usually accepted as historical, even by the most sceptical. Thus Joseph and Mary become variants of the constellations Capricorn and Virgo, and the name of Jesus Christ is seen as derived from or related to 'Yes-us' (a variant of Bacchus) and Krishna.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the tribunal, the legislators rule that all religions have been vehicles for the personal aggrandisement of priests and rulers, and that henceforth only the Laws of Nature should be followed.

In Part I of his long anti-radical poem *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794), T. J. Mathias attacks both Knight and Volney. A note on Knight's *Priapus* states that 'all the ordure and filth, all the antique pictures, and all the representations of the generative organs, in their most odious and degrading protrusion, have been raked together and *copulated* . . . with a new species of blasphemy'. As for Volney, 'by a jargon of language, and antiquity, and mythology, and philosophy, he labours to confound and blend *them all* in uncertain tradition and *astronomical* allusions'. In making Jesus a version of the sun-god, Volney 'requires of his reader *only* the surrender of his common sense . . . [yet] demands the admission of *all his* allegories and mystical meanings (. . . in the true French stile)'.<sup>19</sup>

A fuller response to Volney was made (inevitably) by Priestley, first briefly in Letter IV of *Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France, on the Subject of Religion* (1793), then in *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity* (1794), then at greater length in a third edition expanded to include 'Animadversions on the Writings of several Modern Unbelievers, and especially The Ruins of M. Volney' (1797), whom a revised preface invites to reply. When he did so, in a tone expressing a Gibbonian wariness about joining a public debate on Priestley's terms, Priestley gleefully rejoined with *Letters to M. Volney, occasioned by a Work of his entitled Ruins, and by his Letter to the Author* (also 1797). After expressions of respect and regret over Volney's personalizing of their debate, Priestley argues that 'the splendour of your imagination, and the fascinating charms of your diction' are particularly dangerous in their attractiveness to young readers, too ill-informed

to resist the false arguments of one ‘of your celebrity and shining talents’ (*Works*, xvii, p. 117). Citing much evidence for Christ’s historical existence, he goes on to challenge Volney for evidence on eleven specific points, including his assertion that the God of Moses was Egyptian, his linking of Christ with Bacchus and Krishna, and his claim that the world is at least 17,000 years old, ‘which entirely overturns the *Mosaic* account of the origin of the human race’. This account, confirmed by no less an authority than Newton, can hardly be overturned by passing references to one Dupuis, whom Priestley has never heard of. Ending with a reminder of his own honorary French citizenship, Priestley concludes by wishing Volney ‘*health and fraternity*’ (pp. 126–8).

By 1799, Priestley had remedied his ignorance of Charles Dupuis’s *Origine de tous les cultes, ou religion universelle* (1795), which he challenged in *Remarks on M. Dupuis’s Origin of all Religions* (1799) in terms similar to his attacks on Volney. Despite the latter’s acknowledgements to the former, Priestley suggests that the views of Dupuis’s more ponderous but later-published work are too ‘strange’ to derive from anyone but Volney himself. Along with further challenges for astronomical and mythographic evidence for these views, Priestley also attacks the residual apparent deism of Dupuis’s assertion that ‘There is nothing but *the universe itself* that can correspond to the immense idea which the name of *God* presents to us’ (*Works*, xvii, p. 322). Volney too is prone to such pantheist pronouncements, and in identifying as atheistic any view which identifies the creation with the creator, Priestley assists in the slow stopping-up of deist escape holes which is a main feature of this period.

The brief *Remarks on Dupuis* were published as a pendant to Priestley’s more ambitious *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations* (1799). Drawing largely on Sir William Jones’s Asian studies (particularly *Institutes of Hindu Law, or the Ordinances of Menu* and *Dissertations and Miscellaneous Pieces relating to the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia*), Priestley demonstrates impressive if newly acquired mastery of the rapidly expanding field of Orientalist knowledge which, if not carefully patrolled, might lead to all kinds of marginalization of Christianity by comparison to other cultures and belief systems. This danger is here represented by yet another Frenchman, Langles, who sees ‘the religion of the Hindoos’ as a source for ‘those of the Egyptians and Jews who have done nothing but ape

the latter, of the Chinese, of the Greeks, of the Romans, and even of the Christians'. The five Hindu Vedas are the prototype of 'the five books of Moses, who . . . only copied Egyptian works, originally from India'. Furthermore, Langles accepts a non-Mosaic chronology whereby 'many thousand years before' the Egyptians or Jews 'formed themselves into societies, or ever thought of forming a religion, the civilized Indians adored the Supreme Being, eternal, almighty and all-wise, divided into three persons' (*Works*, XVII, pp. 139–42, 324).

On the chronological question, Priestley again invokes the authority of Newton as well as detailing Jones's determined efforts to reduce the enormous time span of Hindu mythical history to proper Mosaic proportions. While normally cited as a reliable bulwark against Langles's impious suggestions, Jones is also not completely to be trusted: sound on the absurdities of Hinduism, and its clear status as a corruption of the Persian branch of the proto-Christian ur-religion destroyed at Babel, he waxes dangerously sentimental over the Hindus' 'spirit of sublime devotion, of benevolence to mankind, and of amiable tenderness to all sentient creatures'. To counter such religiously levelling tendencies, Priestley compares a long list of absurd superstitions with the rational worship enjoined by Moses and Christ, which for Priestley of course does not include the division of God 'into three persons' cited by Langles and others (including Jones at times) as proof of the fundamental identity of the two systems. For Priestley, the evils of Hinduism range from irrational vegetarianism and teetotalism to widow suicide and the obscenities of phallic lingam worship (pp. 141, 149, 172). While emphasizing Hinduism's distance from Judaeo-Christianity, however, Priestley does pay credence to such confirmatory aspects as its possession of a deluge myth (on which Jones too laid much stress), and on any links with Western paganism which can be used to illustrate what a powerful world system of superstition the Jews and Christians were up against.

In tracing the mythographic dimension of the atheism debate up to 1799, I have had temporarily to bypass the most important phase of the whole debate: the intensely politicized furore surrounding the French Revolution. As early as 1790, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was using the charge of deep-laid atheist conspiracy to blacken both the revolution itself and the Enlightenment atmosphere leading up to it:

The literary cabal [i.e. the Encyclopaedists] had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal which hitherto had been discovered only in the propagators of some system of piety. They were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree; and from thence, by an easy progress, with the spirit of persecution according to their means.<sup>20</sup>

Come the revolution,

We cannot be ignorant of the spirit of atheistical fanaticism, that is inspired by a multitude of writings, dispersed with incredible assiduity and expense, and by sermons delivered in all the streets and places of public resort in Paris. These writings and sermons have filled the populace with a black and savage atrocity of mind, which supersedes in them the common feelings of nature, as well as all sentiments of morality and religion.<sup>21</sup>

These quotations can perhaps stand for now for what was to become an increasingly standard British association of ideas, especially in the deliberately anti-radical works of Hannah More, T. J. Mathias and the *Anti-Jacobin* group.

Within this context, Priestley's radical politics were more to the fore than his campaign for revealed religion. Elected an honorary French citizen by the National Assembly, his pro-French sympathies occasioned the famous 'Church and King' Birmingham riot of 1791, in which, possibly at government instigation, a crowd destroyed his meeting-house, library and laboratory – an event which led directly to his later emigration to Pennsylvania in 1794. The official deposition of Christianity in such ceremonies as the installation of the worship of Reason in Notre-Dame Cathedral in 1793 divided his loyalties, but his conviction that the new France was engaged in a slow struggle from Catholic oppression to Protestant enlightenment soon received a boost from Robespierre's execution of the more extreme atheizers such as Hébert, and his installation of the deistic cult of the Supreme Being instead. It was in this context that Priestley published *A Continuation of the Letters addressed to the Philosophers and Politicians of France* (1794), in which he informs his 'Fellow Citizens' of his satisfaction at Robespierre's and the Assembly's reintroduction of '*morals and religion*': this bodes better than in Priestley's visit to France in 1774, when 'every person of eminence to whom I had access, and . . . every man of letters almost without exception, was a professed Atheist, and an unbeliever in a future state on any principle whatever'.<sup>22</sup> Now the existence of God, a

future state and the immortality of the soul are all accepted, and he trusts Christianity itself will follow in time. Priestley then proceeds to mount the kind of assault on natural religion which in the hands of Hume or Shelley might be taken as a plea for atheism: nature gives us no assurances of God's goodness, the existence of a human soul as distinct from those of animals, an after-life or, hence, any reason for good moral conduct (*Works*, XXI, pp. 113–17). Robespierre's idol Rousseau, who denied the evidence of miracles (in the 'Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar', in *Emile*, Book v), offered no way out of these problems, nor can the Assembly simply *decree* the doctrine of a future state on Robespierre's grounds of its 'use' (pp. 119–24). Pagans such as Cicero and the English seventeenth-century deists alike attempted to deduce the immortality of the soul from first principles, but then abandoned the idea. In fact, however, the French have only given up on Christianity because of its Catholic 'corruptions': if they examine the Bible itself they will find plenteous evidence of verified miracles, which all confirm the truth of an after-life and the rest of the teaching of Christ, who was himself a champion for the 'liberty and equality of man' (pp. 125–6).

In the same year as Priestley's letters to the French politicians, another work appeared which credited 'the determination of mind which gave birth' to it to the French Revolution, and acknowledged 'the *Système de la Nature*, the works of Rousseau, and those of Helvétius' as its most immediate influences.<sup>23</sup> William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) does not spend much time on religion, but its relegation of specific religious ideas to the heading of 'Opinion Considered as a Subject of Political Institution' (what a Marxist might call 'ideology') is deliberately icy. Continuing from a chapter on 'The Political Superintendence of Opinion', the chapter 'Of Religious Establishments' (VI, 2) argues that 'the system of religious conformity is a system of blind submission' whose priests are 'fettered in the outset by having a code of propositions put into their hands, in a conformity to which all their enquiries must terminate', so that the people are 'bid to look for instruction and morality to a denomination of men, formal, embarrassed and hypocritical, in whom the main spring of intellect is unbent and incapable of action' (*Writings*, III, pp. 324–6).

Hard-hitting though this is, Godwin's own roots as an ex-Dissenting preacher appear in his willingness to stop at this point: 'if I think it right to have a spiritual instructor to guide me in my

researches and at stated intervals to remind me of my duty, I ought to be at liberty to . . . supply myself in this respect'; 'If [public worship] be from God, it is profanation to imagine that it stands in need of the alliance of the state' (*Writings*, III, p. 327). Perhaps only the cool detachment of those 'ifs' signals Godwin's personal atheism, though this could easily be read into some of *Political Justice's* most contentious claims about the non-utility of such emotional reflexes as gratitude, obedience to parents and commitment to marriage partners when these are socially imposed rather than individually and rationally motivated.<sup>24</sup>

Godwin's fullest explanations of his 'conversion from Christianity' were unpublished in his lifetime and will be considered in a later chapter. As far as the debate of the 1790s is concerned, his atheism was widely known to critics and friends (and those who were both, such as Coleridge), but conveyed in his published work chiefly by the sort of studied silence about religion – except under the heading of political coercion of opinion – whose significance will be reconsidered when we come to Wordsworth. His 'circle' of friends and debating partners constitutes, however, such a significant section of the intelligentsia of the time that an important phase of the debate can be explored by considering some of their interactions, whether or not conveyed in explicit published polemic on religious matters.

The 1794 trial for treason of Godwin's atheist friends Thomas Holcroft and John Thelwall, among others, was one of the key political events of the 1790s, setting the government's seal on its determination to root out 'Jacobin' republicanism, but also establishing – with their eventual jury acquittal – that there was widespread sympathy for their views. Some of the credit for their acquittal belongs to Godwin's pamphlet 'Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, October 2, 1794', whose chilling ending 'and the Lord have mercy on your souls!' brings out the barbarism of the sentence of execution that awaits them if convicted.<sup>25</sup> While the charge did not involve atheism, the fact that the leading defendants *were* known atheists helped to forge further the link in conservative minds between infidelity and political republicanism, which increasingly became the mental association both radicals and infidels had to contend with even when it was not justified.

It often was justified among the circle surrounding Joseph Johnson, who was responsible for publishing an extraordinary

number of the left-leaning books of the 1780s and 1790s, and whose house was the centre for an immense cross-fertilization of ideas among his authors. These included Mary Wollstonecraft, who first met her future husband Godwin here. Famously, it was his *Memoirs* (1798) of her after her death that ruined her reputation for more than a generation by revealing too much about her love life; a situation not helped by his proud affirmation that as she was dying, ‘during her whole illness, not one word of a religious cast fell from her lips’.<sup>26</sup>

She was not, however, an atheist: the religious views expressed in her works are broadly those of the ‘rational’ end of Rational Dissent, as promulgated at the Newington Green Academy where she had met Richard Price, the main British butt of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In her rapid riposte to Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), she proclaims ‘I reverence the rights of men. – Sacred rights!’, but adds ‘The fear of God makes me reverence myself’.<sup>27</sup> In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her portrait of the ideal woman who has used her abilities to the full concludes ‘The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death, and rising from the grave, may say – Behold, thou gavest me a talent – and here are five talents’ (*Political Writings*, p. 119). By the time of *A View of the French Revolution* (1794), however, the idea of religion has become much more a matter of disputed symbolisms:

We must get entirely clear of all the notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin: the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora’s box, and the other fables, too tedious to enumerate, on which priests have erected their tremendous structures of imposition, to persuade us, that we are naturally inclined to evil. (*Political Writings*, p. 294)

On the other hand, religious terms can be used positively when describing the realization of human potential: ‘Respect thyself – whether it be termed fear of God – religion; love of justice – morality; or, self-love – the desire of happiness.’ More apocalyptically, ‘Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face’ and hence ‘The image of God implanted in our nature is now more rapidly expanding’ (p. 296). In all these various references there is a constant equation of God with reason and the fulfilment of potential; in the last, the idea of an imminent realization of ‘the image of God implanted in our nature’ comes close to the antinomian and millenarian ‘enthusiasm’ to which we shall return in relation to Blake.



Mary Hays, the friend and admirer of both Wollstonecraft and Godwin, was a Unitarian whose first major publication in 1791 argued for the efficacy of prayer against the more hardline rationalism of the leading Unitarian radical Gilbert Wakefield. By the time of her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), however, she presented in the character of Mr Francis an approving portrait of Godwin's opposition to all accepted forms of religion as a clog to progress:

That immutability, which constitutes the perfection of what we (from poverty of language) term the *divine mind*, would inevitably be the bane of creatures liable to error; it is of the constancy, rather than the fickleness, of human beings, that we have reason to complain . . . Bigotry, whether religious, political, moral, or commercial, is the canker-worm at the root of the tree of knowledge and virtue . . . These are the truths, which will slowly, but ultimately, prevail; in the splendour of which, the whole fabric of superstition will gradually fade and melt away.<sup>28</sup>

These ideas, along with numerous references to Helvétius and such daring speculations as whether the soul is 'a composition of the elements, the result of organized matter, or a subtle and ethereal fire' (p. 25), aid the heroine Emma as she battles through a wasteland of sexual disappointment based on Hays's own long-standing passion for William Frend, the radical scholar whose expulsion from Cambridge in 1793 for attacking the Trinity converted Coleridge to Unitarianism.

Along with the avowed feminists Wollstonecraft and Hays, many other woman writers were prominent 1790s radicals, and I shall consider some of the work of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and others later in this book. All identified 'superstition' as one of the chief barriers to the advance of human equality, but it was not until the 1820s that it became possible for women to put themselves on record as atheists: partly because such views would have been hard to publish until the emergence of a fiercely radical press unintimidated by legal or social pressures, and perhaps partly because in the 1790s Rational Dissenting circles had proved immensely enabling to women's explorations of radical and emancipatory ideas.<sup>29</sup>

When Wollstonecraft and Godwin met in 1791, the latter was lured to the dinner at Joseph Johnson's by the chance of meeting by far the most celebrated and notorious radical of the time, Thomas Paine.<sup>30</sup> The two parts of Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–2) outsold any other political work ever up to that time, partly thanks to the direct,

demotic style in which they handled ideas previously the province of more elite discourses. Charged with 'wicked and seditious writings', Paine fled to France in 1792 where, after being briefly feted, he was imprisoned and very nearly beheaded as an enemy alien.<sup>31</sup> Just before his arrest he had completed *The Age of Reason*, Part I (1794), which he avowedly wrote to stem the tide of French atheism: 'lest, in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true'.<sup>32</sup> Repeatedly stressing that Christ was a 'virtuous reformer and revolutionist' and a deistic belief in a benevolent creator and a probable after-life, the book nonetheless managed to give quite unprecedented offence in Britain. Redefining 'infidelity' as being untrue to oneself in false protestations of belief, Paine bluntly declares from the start that 'All national institutions of Churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit' (*Complete Writings*, I, pp. 469, 464). Repeating Hume's demand for evidence of miracles beyond hearsay, he moves on to deconstruct the Christian 'fable' in the light of other mythologies and the conventions of legendary narrative: 'the Christian Church sprung out of the tail of the old mythology . . . by making the reputed founder to be celestially begotten. The trinity of gods that then followed was no other than a reduction of the former plurality'; 'The Christian mythologists, after having confined Satan in a pit, were obliged to let him out again, to bring on the sequel of the fable'. Even by these standards, he argues, the fable is incompetent, giving no clear reason why Christ and not Satan should be sacrificed, or in what sense the 'proxyism of the crucifixion' saves us from death, especially since 'if their accounts of longevity be true, men die faster since the crucifixion than before' (pp. 467, 470, 480, 479).

Furthermore, the Bible has no special status as a text: 'When the Church mythologists established their system, they collected all the writings they could find and managed them as they pleased . . . they decided by *vote* which of the books out of the collection they had made should be the WORD OF GOD, and which should not.' There is no evidence that that educated Egyptian Moses wrote or believed in the crude creation myth, and as for the rest of the Old Testament, 'the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness with which

more than half the Bible is filled . . . is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalise mankind'. The so-called prophets were no more than 'Jewish poets and itinerant preachers, who mixed poetry, anecdote, and devotion together', to musical accompaniment. As for the New Testament, it is founded on unproveable and often contradictory anecdotes written after the event by men who were not there; and 'As to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me a species of Atheism – a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God. It is a compound made up chiefly of Manism and but little Deism' (pp. 472–5, 486–7).

Elsewhere in Part I, Paine presents parts of Job and the Psalms positively, as supporting his own deistic belief in God as a first cause deducible from the wonders of creation, and also speaks respectfully of his own Quaker upbringing. It was, however, his tone of unrelenting mockery of Christianity as a wholly alien system, 'out there' in the vicious and nonsensical world of power politics rather than 'in here', already installed in our lives and affections, that provoked such powerful reactions, from the book's immediate suppression and repeated prosecutions of its publishers, to a flood of published ripostes. Not surprisingly, these included Priestley's *Continuation of Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France, on the Subject of Religion; and of the Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in Answer to Mr Paine's Age of Reason* (1794). Speaking as an admirer of Paine's political achievements, Priestley praises *The Age of Reason* for 'vigour of mind and strength of expression', but regrets that this time Paine lacks 'knowledge of his subject'.<sup>33</sup> Repeating some of the Humean arguments of *Philosophers and Politicians* against natural religion, Priestley agrees with Paine in condemning 'mental lying' about one's real beliefs, but argues that *philosophes* from Voltaire and Rousseau to Hume and Gibbon made their careers out of such lies, and that only Christianity supplies sufficient moral conviction for true martyrdom for one's beliefs (a point coming oddly from the self-exiled if undoubtedly harrassed Priestley to the forcibly exiled and recently imprisoned Paine) (pp. 132–3). He goes on to argue that the biblical miracles are as well attested as most other facts, that Paine is self-contradictory to admire Christ's character while overlooking his teachings, and that if all churches were established 'for power and profit' the persecuted early Christians were singularly unsuccessful. At least Paine, unlike Volney, accepts Christ's historical existence, but is wrong to suggest he was little known during his life, or known

only as a political agitator: if anything, it was his pacific approach to the Roman oppressors that made the Jewish leaders fear his great influence (pp. 140–2). Priestley then argues that Christianity did not usher in a decline of scientific learning: this had been at a standstill for some time, and after the barbarian invasions it was Christians who kept it alive. Despite the many corruptions which crept in after Constantine's adoption of the Church (one of Priestley's own favourite themes in other contexts), its early teaching was opposed to priests enriching themselves and its selection of the biblical canon was founded on good textual evidence (pp. 152, 156).

Regretting Paine's 'scurrility' about the doctrines of atonement and the Trinity, Priestley assures him that these are Catholic corruptions which should not be confused with true Christianity. Paine is right to attack 'mystery' when it means keeping the people in ignorance, but the Bible only uses it to denote something which will be explained, or is ultimately incomprehensible (pp. 156–8). His statement that 'the fable of Jupiter and the giants was told hundreds of years before that of Satan' is false since the books of the Pentateuch are 'at least a thousand years older than any others', though in fact Paine's version of the Satan story owes more to Milton than the Bible, where most references (including Christ's temptation in the desert) are clearly allegorical.<sup>34</sup> Paine's denigration of prophets as mere entertainers is belied by the fulfilment of numerous prophecies, and others – such as those in the Book of Revelation – are only now being fulfilled by the corruption of the Church into a 'persecuting power', soon to be overthrown with all the temporal powers in a great calamity, after which Christ will return to earth for the Millennium. In conclusion, Paine should consider the Bible's sublimities as well as its distressing but accurate record of earlier times, and recognize that his instinctive belief in an after-life can only be justified in Christian terms (pp. 166, 168).

Also in 1795, Paine published *The Age of Reason*, Part II, with a preface describing his haste to complete Part I without even a Bible to hand before being arrested, his lucky escape from execution through sickness, and his reinstatement by the Assembly on Robespierre's fall. Now that he can write at leisure and with access to books, he will prove in fuller textual detail the assertions for which his many (unnamed) critics have assailed him while unable to disprove them. In indicating that Part I was written without a Bible, Paine illustrates perhaps unconsciously the close familiarity with it

inherited from his Dissenting background; and in fact Part II is a far less brilliant performance, despite or even because of the point-by-point textual references he is now able to provide. Since many of its arguments duplicate those of Part I, their impact on the controversy is best traced in the context of the most influential refutation of them, Richard Watson's *An Apology for the Bible, in a Series of Letters addressed to Thomas Paine, Author of a Book Entitled 'The Age of Reason, Part the Second, Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology'* (1796).

Much of the *Apology* consists of detailed refutations of Paine's arguments against the factual accuracy, the assumed authorship and the morality of the Bible. In a passage which particularly appalled Blake, Watson responds to Paine's assault on the morality of Joshua's massacre of the innocent 'crying or smiling infants' of the Canaanites by insisting that the latter were themselves 'sacrificers of their own crying or smiling infants; devourers of human flesh; addicted to unnatural lust; immersed in the filthiness of all manner of vice', and hence deserved extermination to deter such practices in future (*Two Apologies*, p. 171).

As interesting as the content, however, is the contrast in tone to the politeness of Watson's earlier address to Gibbon. The very title differs from that for the *Apology for Christianity* in granting Paine no such honorific as 'Esq.', and in the arm's-length designation of 'a Book Entitled "The Age of Reason"'. Where Watson 'knows' Gibbon and his book as any gentleman would, his lack of prior acquaintance with Paine is blazoned throughout *An Apology for the Bible* from this title to later somewhat improbable claims to know nothing of Paine's class background, his political views, or even of *The Age of Reason*, Part I. The point is rubbed in from the start:

Sir,

I have lately met with a book of yours, entitled – "The Age of Reason, part the second, being an investigation of true and fabulous theology;" – and I think it not inconsistent with my station, and the duty I owe to society, to trouble you and the world with some observations on so extraordinary a performance. (*Two Apologies*, p. 163)

A brusque nod to Paine's sincerity, energy and acuteness is followed with the wish that – given Paine's confession in his preface that only fear for his life rushed him into publishing Part I so soon – 'I hope there is no want of charity in saying, that it would have been fortunate for the Christian world, had your life been terminated before you had fulfilled your intention' (p. 164). This remark – which

prompted Blake's furious annotation 'Presumptuous Murderer' – elaborately enacts Watson's claim to be only acting and speaking for the general good, while nobly swallowing strong deeper feelings of personal revulsion.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever motives of personal conscience he may claim, Paine's book has 'unsettled the faith of thousands'. The French Revolution, far from being a healthy reaction to Catholic stifling of debate, was simply a mark of the benighted French not 'believing even that religion' (p. 165). As Locke has proved, conscience can only relate to private actions, not to more general principles of right and wrong: the danger of extending it to the public sphere is illustrated not only by 'an inquisitor who burns Jews and heretics', but also by 'a Robespierre, who massacres innocent and harmless women' or 'a robber, who thinks that all things ought to be in common' (p. 167). To counter Paine, Watson will retaliate by writing 'the following letters in a popular manner; hoping that thereby they may stand a chance of being perused by that class of readers, for whom your work seems to be particularly calculated' (p. 169).

While clear as to his intended readership, Watson claims sublime ignorance of Paine's own class or even his politics: 'Some accounts of you have been published in England; but conceiving them to have proceeded from a design to injure your character, I never read them. I know nothing of your parentage, your education, or condition in life . . . I know not whether you have as great a dislike of kings as of priests' (p. 202). With superb *faux-naïvety*, he argues that 'if' Paine has been elevated by birth 'above the necessity of . . . sustaining life by the labour of hand and head', he should still not begrudge tithes to priests who do work for a living. Watson's carefully managed 'ignorance' of Paine's artisan background is here used extraordinarily to ally him with such radical-chic Whig aristocrats as the Duke of Bedford excoriated in Burke's 'Letter to a Noble Lord' (1796). At other points, however, he shows more familiarity with his antagonist's career, arguing that kings and priests 'never, I believe, did you any harm; but you have done them all the harm you could' (p. 195).

Paine's American and French involvements are further lovingly dwelt on in a fantasy supposedly designed to refute his sneers at the disparities in Gospel accounts of the crucifixion: 'had you been guillotined by Robespierre, with this title, written in French, English, and German, and affixed to the guillotine – Thomas Paine, of America, author of the Rights of Man', and had this wording been

reported slightly differently in four different accounts, no one would have queried their essential truth (pp. 308–9). While presented as if purely illustrative, this invocation of a scene which very nearly occurred cleverly satirizes the final fate of Paineite radicalism in France, sacrificed like Christ by the very power on whose behalf it claims to speak.

Increasingly, towards the end, Watson rounds on Paine's abusive language: not only his suggestion that Mary Magdalene was 'on the stroll' when she claimed to meet the resurrected Christ, but more generally:

your abuse of holy men and holy things will be remembered, when your arguments against them are refuted or forgotten. Moses you term an arrogant coxcomb, a chief assassin; Aaron, Joshua, Samuel, David, monsters and impostors; the Jewish kings a parcel of rascals; Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets, liars; and Paul a fool, for having written one of the sublimest compositions, and on the most important subject that ever occupied the mind of man – the lesson in our burial service. (p. 357)

'Men of low condition', that is Paine's natural audience, will not thank him for undermining this service's sublime promise that after death the 'misery peculiar to' their station 'will not be in vain'. As for Watson himself,

Sincerely as I am attached to the liberties of mankind, I cannot but profess myself an utter enemy to that spurious philosophy, that democratic insanity, which would equalize all property, and level all distinctions in civil society. Personal distinctions, arising from superior probity, learning, eloquence, skill, courage, and from every other excellency of talents, are the very blood and bones of the body politic. (p. 378)

In attacking the people's simple beliefs, Paine threatens to spread the weed of infidelity, whose 'root is principally fixed amongst the great and opulent',

through all the classes of the community. There is a class of men, for whom I have the greatest respect, and whom I am anxious to preserve from the contamination of your irreligion – the merchants, manufacturers, and tradesmen of the kingdom. I consider the influence of the example of this class as essential to the welfare of the community. I know that they are in general given to reading, and desirous of information on all subjects. (pp. 392–3)

If Watson hoped to stem the rising tide of infidelity by this attack, he may have helped to increase it: *Watson Refuted* (1796), by the otherwise unknown Samuel Francis, MD, is arguably only the

second published British declaration of atheism after Hammon and Turner's *Answer to Dr Priestley*. Defending Paine's critique of revealed religion on many points of detail, Francis also happily accepts Watson's attacks on the illogicality of Paine's acceptance of natural religion: 'The deistical notions of your adversary do not agree with his reasonable tenets . . . my principles extend so much further than his, that I suspect I come under the class which you [i.e. Watson] are pleased to call madmen.'<sup>36</sup> David Berman's claim not to have found 'any passage in which Bishop Watson calls atheists madmen' overlooks Watson's dramatic assertion that if Paine deems the Creation 'a story, I am not dealing with a deistical philosopher, but with an atheistic madman'. Pinpointing what Berman has usefully described as 'the repression of atheism' through the denial of its very possibility, Francis declares 'The world has too long been imposed upon by ridiculous attempts to vilify atheists and show their non-existence. That name has been a cant word, like Jacobin in France, and the Whig and Tory in England.'<sup>37</sup>

In 1797, *An Investigation of the Essence of the Deity*, by the cautiously pseudonymous 'Scepticus Britannicus', took the antideist arguments of Francis a stage further. Like d'Holbach, 'Scepticus' disputes all attempts to separate a creator from the material universe itself, which he maintains has existed forever, whatever transformations individual forms of matter may have undergone. As for atheism, 'An atheist is a man, who destroyeth chimeras prejudicial to the human species.'<sup>38</sup>

With their unabashed foregrounding of the word *atheist* and their direct assaults on the vestiges of a deistic common ground between believers and non-believers, Francis and 'Scepticus' set the tone for a different, less well-behaved phase of the atheism debate than that of Hammon and Turner's *Answer to Dr Priestley* fifteen or so years before. The non-élite 'underground' of opinion from which they seem to emerge is the subject of William Hamilton Reid's *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies*, whose account of the popular diffusion of atheist ideas enables us to draw a convenient if provisional line under this chapter's account of atheism up to 1800. Published in 1800 by the 'bookseller to her Majesty', Hatchard's of Piccadilly – alongside Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, approving accounts of the forcible pacification of Ireland 'during the French Invasion' of 1798, and numerous sermons on such subjects as 'Dearness occasioned by Scarcity, not Monopoly' – it speaks with the voice of



reaction triumphant. At the same time, as Iain McCalman has demonstrated, it indicates real inside knowledge of the scene it describes, and is by no means unintelligent in its explanations both for the rise and temporary fall of the various agitational groupings it describes collectively as ‘infidel societies’.<sup>39</sup>

One of Reid’s most dramatic and interesting moves is to suggest that, far from representing opposite ends of an ideological spectrum, ‘infidelity’ and extreme religious ‘enthusiasm’ often became intertwined as a result of the French Revolution:

It being a general tradition among Protestants, that the seat of the Roman Catholic religion was to be annihilated, it unfortunately occurred, that, as the French were successful, after the period of the revolution, in despoiling that church, notwithstanding their general espousal of infidelity, their admirers still supposed them to be the *instruments* of fulfilling their favourite prediction . . . From hence, under the idea of the instrumentality of the French revolution, in the fulfilment of prophecies, religion itself became accessory to deism and atheism! (*Infidel Societies*, p. 2)

Conversely, ‘It was natural for infidels, who had a revolution in view, to connive at those enthusiasts who believed in vulgar predictions relative to the destruction of Popery; it was natural also for the former to embrace such converts.’ Though such alliances often proved temporary thanks to the infidels’ ‘general habit of ridiculing every thing before held sacred’, their existence gives ample grounds for suspecting dissenting groups as different as the Unitarians, Methodists and Swedenborgians of providing support if not cover for the spread of atheism among the lower classes.

During a circumstantial discussion of this spread through political associations such as the London Corresponding Society and other groups whose shifting addresses in both the East and West Ends are closely tracked, Paine’s *Age of Reason* is given pride of place as the ‘New Holy Bible’ of the infidels (p. 5). It was, however, accompanied or preceded by such other works as ‘the heavy artillery of Voltaire, Godwin, &c.’, Meslier’s *Le Bon Sens*, the works of Peter Annet (until stopped by prosecution) (pp. 7–8), and above all, ‘Mirabaud’s [i.e. d’Holbach’s] System of Nature, and Volney’s Ruins of Empires: the latter, in point of style, is looked upon as the Hervey of the Deists; the former, as the Newton of the Atheists: and, as the System of Nature was translated by a person confined in Newgate as a patriot, and published in weekly numbers, its sale was pushed’ (p. 6). The suggested contrast in this passage between deists and atheists is more

rhetorical than real, since Reid normally couples the two terms, and later explains: 'Nor let the reader be surprised, that I have classed Atheists and Deists indiscriminately: for the common practice of Infidels, to cover themselves with the name of *Deists*, is a mere pretext, calculated to escape the more odious appellation of *Atheists*' (p. 79).

While the rise of infidelism is explained in terms of political manipulation and the lower classes' temporary sense of empowerment in attacking things they were brought up to respect, Reid devotes just as much time to explaining its apparent decline in the later 1790s, which he ascribes to its inability to inspire or motivate in its own terms when not attacking Christianity. Thus he describes at length an attempt to open a 'Temple of Reason' in a salesroom in Whitecross Street in 1796; this had some organizational resemblances to a Dissenting meeting-house but

as the acts of prayer and praise were expressly excluded, the defects of solemnity or impression upon the attendants may easily be conjectured . . . and, while the doctrines of the new philosophy, as far as they related to morality, were much too general to suit any particular purpose, the feelings of the impartial hearer, who justly expected the *new* religion would supersede the *old*, were invariably those of surprize and disappointment. (*Infidel Societies*, p. 25)

While 'the most rational members' wished to confine lecturers to discussing morality without reference to Christianity, the majority overruled them, 'well persuaded, that, deprived of the most copious themes of argument, or rather declamation, they would entirely lose the command over the passions of their auditors, and, of course, become more insipid and uninteresting than any of the professions they were determined to condemn' (p. 25). Nonetheless, 'laxity of attendance' soon caused the Temple to be closed, though Reid tries to have his cake and eat it by arguing that it proved a dangerous breeding-ground for the spread of similar attempts throughout the country. While systematic government suppression is clearly one reason for the failure of such 'temples', Reid points triumphantly to the failure of a similar venture in France: 'in the summer of 1799, the Theophilanthropic Temple, at Paris, would share the fate of its humble imitator in Nichols's sale-room in Whitecross-Street, notwithstanding the support of Thomas Paine and other eminent characters', since even there 'the many-twinkling meteor of Infi-

delity, after blazing its hour, has paled' before the greater truths of Christianity (p. 27).

In expanding these points, Reid argues that the infidel texts included 'no work upon the relative duties, no work inculcating moral or religious obligations to virtue', with the exception of Volney's *Law of Nature*, a copy of which however was not to be found in 'a hundred houses furnished with Paine's Age of Reason' (p. 31). (Reid's qualified approval for a work normally published as an end-piece to *Ruins* is strange, and one of many hints that he has himself been more deeply engaged in the lines of thought he is attacking than he openly admits.)

In his account of 'infidel' tendencies in various dissenting groups, Reid offers interesting support for the idea that the Swedenborgianism and Unitarianism with which Blake and Coleridge – the two most 'pious' figures of the great Romantic canon – were involved at formative stages in their poetic careers could easily be seen by contemporaries as themselves atheistic. Thus,

the opinions of Baron Swedenborg, approaching nearer than others to modern Infidelity, may be supposed to have administered in proportion to the objections of Deists and Atheists. What must these think of a sect, who, under the appellation of Christians, explain away the doctrine of the atonement, the resurrection, and the day of judgement? Let them be told, that, from the canon of the New Testament, this new sect have excluded all the Epistles, which they class as *private letters*! That with them the day of judgment is more a *figure* than a *fact*: that it commenced about 1758, in the printing and publication of the judgment of Emmanuel Swedenborg, to condemn, collectively, all the doctrines of the *Old*, or Trinitarian, church. (*Infidel Societies*, pp. 89–90)

This sums up very succinctly many of the 'antinomian' ideas I shall be discussing in relation to Blake. Reid goes on to link the Swedenborgian belief in the 'divine humanity' of Christ to the Muggletonian sect to which E. P. Thompson has tried to relate many of Blake's unorthodox ideas: 'that the whole godhead is circumscribed in the person of Jesus Christ, still retaining the human form in heaven; the *belief of which*, and not *repentance*, both Muggletonians and Swedenborgians enforce upon their followers, as the *first* and most essential condition of gospel acceptance' (p. 90).

If such views were dangerously 'enthusiastic', the Unitarianism or Socinianism with which Coleridge and many other key writers of the period were involved represents an opposite danger:

But, after all, where Infidelity has failed of complete success, many upon whom it has operated have been, at least, brought under Socinianism, the *Frozen Zone* of Religion, even if it can deserve the name; for, before Dr Priestley had attained to his past celebrity as a *divine*, this opinion undoubtedly had its effects in deadening the human heart. But, when his improvements upon it were dignified with the name of *philosophy*, the warm tide of intellectual life immediately ceased to flow. The character of a *materialist* was fixed, and all the benignant forces of genuine Christianity, which might have been expected in this quarter, were hermetically sealed.

It was this great chemist who reduced all the ideas of the grand enemy of the human race to a mere '*personification of human passions*'; from whence, and similar refinements in what was called the '*corruptions of Christianity*', a discussion of questions, in the debating societies, on a Sunday evening, previous to 1781, subversive of all the fundamentals of our religion, operated as a sufficient justification of the Sunday Reformation-Bill, passed in that year, which, by prohibiting the taking of money at the doors, put a temporary stop to the increase of Infidelity in the lower orders. (p. 90)

Despite its tortured syntax, the last sentence above indicates the ways in which the Priestleyan Unitarians paved the way for the infidel societies – and for much gagging legislation against them – by holding open debates on controversial religious issues, funded by a small entry-charge, on the Sunday evenings supposed to be reserved for religious services. The language Reid uses against the 'materialist' Priestley in particular is interesting for its metaphorical resonances: the imagery of 'hermetically sealing' vital forces in the interests of a 'reducing' process which may be excellent chemistry but freezes the spirit is very like that used by the ex-Unitarian Coleridge of his recent beliefs at just this time, and will be useful to bear in mind when considering that great tour of 'Frozen Zones', 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'.

Other activities which prepared the ground for organized infidelity included the 1775/6 'Deistical lectures' of the Revd David Williams, whose common 'appellation of the *Priest of Nature*' – borne out in such claims as that 'In moral as well as natural scenes, my delight has ever been in climbing rocks and tempting dangers' – throws an interestingly deistical light forward on to that other Priest of Nature, Wordsworth.<sup>40</sup> Various foreign groups cited by Reid also suggest links between the deist/dissenting fringe and some ideas of Wordsworth and other poets such as Shelley. An 'imitation' of one of the Psalms by a group of French 'Illuminati' posits a dangerously anarchistic version of the simple life as ideal, with the proviso that

the father constitutes the absolute patriarchal authority within a family unbound by any other laws:

Then the father of the family, king of his household, had no other sceptre but his pastoral staff.

Without sword or balance, he administered justice at the foot of an Oak, or before the door of his Cottage . . .

Blood never stained his [i.e. man's] lips, neither was he preserved by the destruction of useful and peaceable animals.

Then was the marriage-union, formed in the face of Heaven, without a witness, and without a priest. (*Infidel Societies*, pp. 101–2)

This attempt 'to render the present state of society, odious, by a fictitious display of the indolent pleasures of the patriarchal life' may strike a modern reader as relatively uncontroversial except for the male chauvinism implicit in the patriarchal ideal; but it helps to underline the degree of nonconformity invoked, not only by Shelley's espousal of vegetarianism and free love, but by the whole *Lyrical Ballads* ethos of outdoor living, care for animals and concern at the morale-sapping of such rural patriarchs as Michael, the Female Vagrant's father, and the weeping owner of 'The Last of the Flock'.

With Reid, we encounter a whole melange of the ideas and cultural practices which I have tried to keep separate for most of this chapter. In particular, distinctions between republicanism, reform agitation, Unitarian Dissent, millenarian enthusiasm, deism and atheism seem to break down, in ways which doubtless partly reveal the prejudices Reid is appealing to, but also reflect a kind of reality, as groups leaning towards one or the other combine and interconnect in what Iain McCalman terms the 'radical underworld'.<sup>41</sup> Defined in opposition to and to some extent created by the oppressive government legislation of the 1790s, this infidel underworld was a long way from the polite debates on the nature of the deity of which Priestley was for so long the ringleader. Nonetheless, as Reid's account of Priestley's Sunday debating societies indicates, it was the Unitarians' commitment to the whole notion of open-ended debate, in a non-trinitarian context that was in any case technically illegal, that offered this underground infidelism many of its most useful forms of procedure.