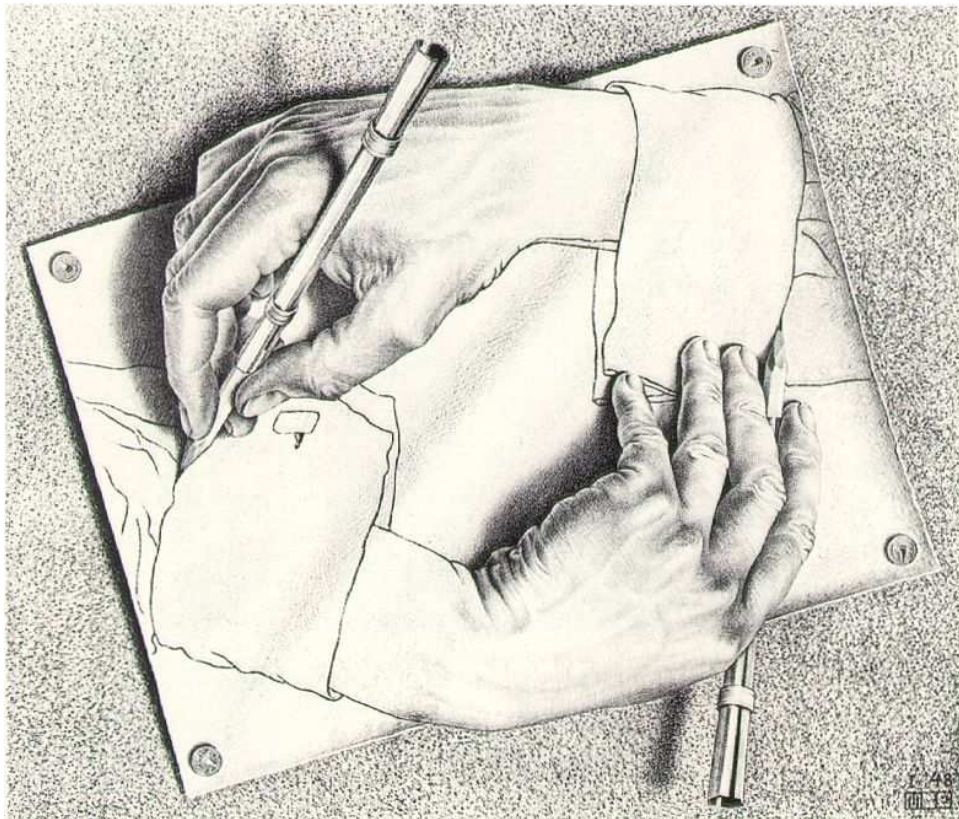


THE TRUE TOLAND?

INQUIRY INTO THE RELIGIOUS WRITINGS
OF AN IRRELIGIOUS MIND



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0. INTRODUCTION

HOW (NOT) TO READ TOLAND

As for religion... it is more easy to guess what he was not, than to tell what he was. 'Tis certain, he was neither Jew nor Mahometan: But whether he was a Christian, a Deist, a Pantheist, an Hobbist, or a Spinozist, is the Question.

- A. Boyer, 1722.¹

Who was John Toland?

An Irish philosopher, born on the island of Inishowen in 1670, educated in Scotland and Holland, yet active in England for most of his writing career, up to his death in 1722. A published polemicist taking up his pen against repressive political and religious systems; a warrior against 'priestcraft', and a coffee shop controversialist. A critic of kings, and a correspondent of queens. Foe of many, friend of few.

Such things we know – or think we know. Yet the question of who Toland – the 'true' Toland – really was, does not become much clearer for our knowledge of such facts. As the above observation by A. Boyer indicates, even Toland's contemporaries were somewhat bemused by the matter. Most agreed that Toland was a controversial figure, but many disagreed as to why exactly he was so. Toland's critical deconstructions of orthodox discourses appear to have led him to explore the outer regions of Christianity, the grey area of doubt that separates the struggling Christian from the sceptic, the radical, the freethinker. Yet the question remains whether Toland criticised religious doctrines and practices from within Christianity, whether he took the leap beyond its borders, or whether he wavered forever in between.

It does not help that Toland himself appears to have contributed to this air of mystery surrounding him and his works, which are riddled with (apparent) contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities, evasions, unfulfilled promises and references to inexistent works. When he did not publish under his own name, or anonymously, he hid behind a broad range of curious pseudonyms, such as 'Adeisidaemon', 'Hierophilus', 'Pantheus', or 'Philogathus'.² In early works he praises clarity in writing and scorns obscurity; in later works he repeatedly points out the necessity for unorthodox writers to conceal their true ideas beneath layers of ambiguity. In the epitaph he wrote for himself at the end of his life, Toland says that though dead, 'he's frequently to rise himself again,/ Yet never to be the same Toland more'; and he hints to the reader: 'If you would know more of him/ Search his Writings.'³

Considering the diversity of the ways in which Toland chose to represent himself, the contrariness of some of his expressions, and the obscurity of some of his opinions, it is no wonder that modern historians differ about his intentions. Toland has been read as a radical

¹ Quoted in Justin Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 69.

² For a more extensive (though not exhaustive) list, see Stephen H. Daniel, *John Toland: His Methods, Manners and Mind*, p. 69, n. 28.

³ Quoted in Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 14. For the Latin version, see Pierre Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. John Toland', p. lxxxviii-ix.

deist, pantheist, and (crypto-)atheist – though much confusion haunts the use of these terms – but also as a combative Protestant reformer, and as a Christian who has been misrepresented as a radical in a successful anti-campaign hosted by his enemies.⁴ Consequently, a historian has recently noted that there seem to be ‘almost as many Tolands as there are books about Toland.’⁵

Such incongruity in expert opinions may strike one as baffling, but it should be noted that similar cases of disputed author’s profiles can be found in debates among historians – especially where supposedly ‘radical’ philosophers are concerned. (Spinoza and Bayle are prominent examples, and others can be found). In cases such as these, there is bound to be something in the texts – or contexts – that harbours this confusion among the audience of readers. The question of the author’s identity thus becomes tied up with the question of how the author should be read. This does not make the matter any less complicated – but it makes the answer, should we find one, more complete.

CONFUSIONS AND SUSPICIONS

As for Toland, why do his texts give rise to such scholarly confusion? Part of the answer must lie in his way of dealing with controversial topics. In a nutshell (and in anticipation of a more detailed exploration later on), Toland’s oeuvre revolves around the critique of kingcraft, priestcraft, and the foundations and doctrines of the Christian religion in general. These themes are interconnected in various ways – perhaps primarily by the red thread of civil liberty and religious toleration, which Toland himself claimed as his foremost motivations in writing. To establish this liberty and toleration, the authority of kings and especially of priests needed to be pruned. To prune this authority, the ‘pillars’ that upheld it needed to be shaken – pillars that extended into the heart of Christian tradition.⁶ To shake one pillar, was to shake all of them, and in the end it was not only the authority of kings and priests, but also of the Church, the Bible, and faith itself, that appeared to have crumbled to the ground.

The ambiguity does not lie in the critique of kingcraft or priestcraft. Controversial though these topics were, they were out in the open, and there was little confusion about Toland’s intentions. That Toland meant to mount an attack on the usurped power of kings and priests is scarcely disputed by historians (though there are different views on the character and range of this attack). The question is how far Toland was willing to go, after the wickedness of such traditional power structures had been laid bare. It seems clear that Toland wanted to go further than his raid on the priestly domain – but how much further? Was Toland’s more general critique of religious doctrines and traditions primarily meant to be instrumental in bringing down these pillars of priestcraft? Or did the attack on priests feature as part of a greater scheme to bring down Christianity entire?

A first glance at Toland’s oeuvre provides no answer to such questions – it suggests, in fact, that there may not be a straightforward answer. The works that are represented by Toland as an attempt to bring Christianity back to its purest roots stand in stark contrast with those in which he appears to be flirting with ‘pantheist’ metaphysics. Perhaps more significantly, the passages that appear to be motivated by an implicit anti-Christian drive are

⁴ For the latter interpretation, see S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and religion*.

⁵ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 10.

⁶ See Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*.

contradicted by instances of explicit pro-Christian sentiments. Does a historian have the right to simply brush one of these aside, and to prioritise either the radical implications of Toland's critique or his professions of profound religious sincerity? I think not. The problem of Toland, then, is first and foremost a problem of interpretation – of hermeneutics – of readership.

Much of the confusion surrounding the Toland debates stems from disagreements about the supposed dissimulative character of Toland's writings. In his later works, Toland on more than one occasion expresses an awareness of philosophers, both ancient and modern, having to veil an unconventional message behind an apparently conventional façade. Combined with the already noted side-by-side appearance of subversive elements and Christian professions in Toland's works, this has spurred the suspicion amongst commentators then and now that Toland may well have been dissembling. Furthermore, Toland himself appears to have corroborated such suspicions by stating, in the 1720 'Clidophorus':

When a man maintains what's commonly believ'd, or professes what's publicly enjoin'd, it is not always a sure rule that he speaks what he thinks: but when he seriously maintains the contrary of what's by law establish'd, and openly declares for what most others oppose, then there's a strong presumption that he utters his mind.⁷

This passage has been read by scholars as supplying a key not only for the distinction between dissimulative and non-dissimulative texts, but also for the reading of Toland himself. Whether such an interpretation, and the use of this passage as an interpretative key, is warranted, need not and cannot be decided yet. More will come to light concerning Toland's ideas and suggestions about dissimulation in the process of reading his works. But the suspicion of dissimulation having risen, an initial strategy is necessary for the detection and interpretation of possible dissimulative movements in such texts. Whether Toland did or did not dissemble cannot be decided prior to reading him – but to accomplish as complete a reading as possible, it is important to know how to see dissimulation when it hides-reveals itself, and how to handle it once it has been seen.

The better to engage in the intricacies of Tolandian thought, I will therefore first enter into some considerations of methodology: how to read Toland, and how not to read him.

HERMENEUTICS OF DISSIMULATION

In broad strokes, a dissimulative text characteristically contains several layers of meaning, which are intended to evoke different readings and different reader responses. Such a text is generally conceived to be adapted to a set of at least two different audiences. The typical (or stereotypical) dissimulative text will aim at conveying its primary message to the tolerant or open-minded part of the public, whilst simultaneously trying to shelter this message from the intolerant or oppressive part, by means of a number of textual strategies, such as ambiguities, evasions, contradictions, and secondary messages. David Berman identifies three purposes in this 'art of theological lying': convincing the authoritative reader of the

⁷ Toland, 'Clidophorus', in: *Tetradymus*, p. 96.

innocence of the text, sharing the hidden subversive message with fellow radicals or insiders, and endeavouring to persuade open-minded outsiders of its truth.⁸

If it is the case that such texts are deliberately composed to give rise to a variety of readings, this poses a hermeneutical challenge for any reader: the 'radical' and the conservative; the audience of the time, and the historian today. If the author has employed writing strategies to avoid being compromised by a univocal message, the question rises how the remaining text, the substratum of these tactical evasive and deceptive manoeuvres, should be read. On the one hand, to approach a dissimulative work like any other text is to run the risk of missing part – and quite possibly the most essential part – of the message. A reader searching for univocal meaning in a multi-layered text is likely to be deceived by possible textual devices hiding the more controversial message from unwanted eyes. On the other hand, approaching a text as dissimulative from the start is just as treacherous a method. A reader trying to decode the text and thereby uncover an encrypted message might be unintentionally forceful – for there may not be a hidden message, there may not be a code. One cannot know if a text is dissimulative prior to reading it – and perhaps not even then.

These dangers of a 'one-eyed' reading – with either a too naïve or a too suspicious eye – are *principal dangers* when dealing with (possibly) dissimulative texts.⁹ They do not allow for definite demonstration, since a hermeneutics of dissimulation of any integrity is destined to revolve around an open question. As dissimulative texts are set up precisely to avoid being recognised for what they are, and thus to evade categorisation, a hermeneutics tailored to such dissimulation must respond by remaining, to some extent, indefinite, indeterminate, uncertain, and un(dis)closed. Certainly, suspicions may be expressed and candidates identified (Bayle, Toland, Vanini), but the classification as 'dissimulation' or 'dissimulator' should be very sparingly used – if it merits use at all, for actual dissimulation always retains an air of some uncertainty. A text that is suspected of dissimulation therefore needs tentative – but not too tentative readers; neither too arrogant, nor too shy; neither too suspicious, nor too naïve.

In my opinion the best (though never infallible) way of reading where dissimulation may be involved, is a 'two-eyed', a *bifocal* approach. It consists of a double attitude towards the text. Where there is a suspicion of dissimulation – spurred by contextual data, remarks of the author or his contemporaries, or opinion of historians today – the reader should look out for possible pockets of meaning buried within, between, or beneath the layers of the text. At the same time, the reader should be prepared to cast aside his suspicions, which may after all be no more than the figments of his or others' imagination. At all costs, the reader should beware of forcing a text where it does not mean to go, yet be ready to follow where it does.

It is my intention to try to clear up some of the confusions in the increasingly muddled debate surrounding the supposed 'Tolands'. I aspire to read his texts, and whilst reading to try to coax Toland into showing us his true – or truer – face – or faces. The main question I mean to ask, and to have answered, pertains to Toland's attitude towards religion in general, and towards the Christian religion in particular. Having carefully investigated his writings, I will here present those of Toland's works that I believe to be most relevant for discovering his (ir)religious beliefs. My discussion of these works will proceed partly in chronological

⁸ See Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, p. 292; David Berman, 'Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying', p. 72-3.

⁹ For a broader discussion see Mara van der Lugt, *Met twee ogen* (Bachelor's Thesis 2008).

and partly in thematic order, the better to trace both the development and coherence of Toland's thought. It will be linked to hermeneutical issues springing from the texts, to relevant historical and contextual considerations, and to the arguments and interpretations of other Toland scholars.

There is a disturbing tendency in some historians to take a reductive approach in reading Toland, in that they claim a certain aspect of his works as an interpretative 'key' for reading the others. To decide beforehand to let one of the parts of Toland's oeuvre determine the interpretation of the whole, is to decide on a certain interpretation from the start, and thereby to close the hermeneutical circle before it has been opened. I mean therefore to take a dual approach: to consider each text both as it is in itself, and as it is in context with others. Only after the individual parts of Toland's oeuvre have been taken into consideration, will I stand back and see if it is possible to determine the character of the whole. Perhaps, having acquired such a bird's-eye view of the whole, the parts will appear to make more sense. Perhaps, in such a way, the true Toland can be drawn out at last.

1. THE EARLIEST WORKS (1694-1695)

Born and raised in a Catholic climate – or, in his own words, ‘being educated, from my Cradle, in the grossest Superstition and Idolatry’¹ – Toland left Ireland for Scotland in his late teens to complete his education.² He attended a college in Glasgow and graduated as a Master of Arts at the University of Edinburgh. By the time he reached England, in 1690, he had converted to Dissenter Protestantism – or, again in his own words, he was ‘deliver’d from the insupportable Yoke of the most Pompous and Tyrannical *Policy* that ever enslav’d Mankind under the name or shew of *Religion*.’³ In London, Toland reportedly became the protégé of Daniel Williams, a Presbyterian with Arminianist leanings. Through Williams, Toland came into touch with Jean Le Clerc, and the combination of these contacts gave occasion to Toland’s first publication: a note to the second edition of Williams’ *Gospel-Truth stated and vindicated* in a letter to Le Clerc.⁴

In the fall of 1692, Toland moved to Holland to study at Leiden University, with renowned scholars such as Friedrich Spanheim. Here, according to Pierre des Maizeaux, ‘he was generously supported and maintain’d by some eminent Dissenters in England’.⁵ It was reportedly Williams ‘who with some others of the brotherhood made a Collection of a good round summ to maintain him for two years in Holland’⁶, though in fact Toland only stayed for barely a year, returning to England in the summer of 1693. This sojourn in the Lower Countries, however brief, appears to have been of considerable importance to Toland. It was during this period abroad that he was often in touch with not only Le Clerc and Spanheim (the latter being an acquaintance to which he would proudly refer in several of his writings⁷), but also Philip van Limborch and Benjamin Furly, who in turn established contact between Toland and John Locke. It was also during his stay in Holland that Toland first read the works of Spinoza.⁸

Back in England, Toland soon decided to exchange London for Oxford, where he attended some university courses, but mostly pursued his own research in the library. Here he produced, in 1694, a short work entitled ‘The Fabulous Death of Atilius Regulus: Or a Dissertation proving the reciev’d History of the tragical Death of Marcus Atilius Regulus the Roman Consul, to be a Fable.’ As the title gives away, the work questions the marvellous circumstances surrounding the consul’s death, and offers an explanation of how the gossip

¹ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, ‘The Preface’, p. viii. (I will quote from the 1702 edition).

² The most important source of information about Toland’s life remains the biography by his acquaintance Des Maizeaux, who edited the posthumous collection of Toland’s unpublished works, and included ‘Some Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. John Toland’. For more recent biographies see Tristan Dagron’s introduction to *Le Christianisme sans mystères*; Pierre Lurbe’s introduction to *Raisons de naturaliser les Juifs*; and R.E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*.

³ Toland, *An Apology for Mr. Toland*, p. 16.

⁴ See Dagron, ‘Introduction’, p. 14; Lurbe, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

⁵ Des Maizeaux, ‘Some Memoirs’, p. ix.

⁶ Anonymous letter concerning Toland’s life, quoted in F.H. Heinemann, ‘John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment’, p. 127-8; and ‘confirmed, corrected, supplemented, and even identified’ in Heinemann, ‘John Toland: France, Holland and Dr. Williams’, p. 346.

⁷ For instance, in *Nazarenus*, p. 116. See Dagron, ‘Introduction’, p. 14, n. 5.

⁸ Lurbe, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

of ‘the women and vulgar’ transformed the true events into a fictitious account.⁹ Yet the dissertation also appears to be directed against the proliferation of prejudice in general, for on several occasions it is hinted that there are many examples of such fabulous tales, which are commonly believed:

But in matters of this nature which are establish’d by popular tradition, wherein religion or the honour of a nation are concern’d, and the belief whereof can have no ill consequences, ‘tis not always safe, nor perhaps will it be thought so necessary to insist too nicely upon truth. Modern as well as ancient Histories furnish us with numerous examples to this purpose.¹⁰

And later on:

There are many other histories as little question’d as ever this was, which, we are very certain, have not a quarter so much ground nor probability to recommend ‘em for truth. And yet many in the world place all their learning and something more in the bare belief of such childish and old-wives fables.¹¹

Furthermore, a sneer at the prejudiced Catholics, ‘our implicit-faith-men’, at the end of the piece shows that Toland’s criticism is directed at a wider phenomenon than the example of Atilius Regulus alone.¹² In the words of Des Maizeaux, here Toland ‘began to shew his inclination for Paradoxes, and the pleasure he took in opposing traditional and commonly receiv’d Opinions’.¹³

THE FIRST CONTROVERSY

Indeed, public rumours and concerns about this apparent appetite for provocation began to be heard as early as 1694 – for it was no secret that Toland was preparing to publish ‘a piece with intent to shew, that there is no such thing as a *Mystery* in our Religion, but that everything in it is subjectible to our understandings.’¹⁴ In an anonymous letter left for him in one of his habitual coffeehouses, Toland was told that the ‘Character you bear in Oxford is this; that you are a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion.’¹⁵ The letter-writer exhorts Toland to mend his ways and use his skills for noble causes, and not for ‘unworthy ends’ such as ‘[p]opular esteem, the applauses of a Coffee-house, or of a Club of prophane Wits’.¹⁶ Toland is implored to consider and embrace anew the Christian religion and the Gospel, for the sake of his own soul.¹⁷

Toland responds – with what appears to be a full-blown profession of the Christian faith. He begins by presenting the anonymous correspondent with several rhetorical questions, linking morality to the necessity of religious belief. If Toland were indeed ‘an Atheist or Deist’, why would he be studying at all, why would he speak of virtue?

⁹ Toland, ‘The Fabulous Death’, in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹³ Des Maizeaux, ‘Some Memoirs’, p. xii.

¹⁴ Second anonymous letter to Toland (May 30, 1694), in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 312.

¹⁵ First anonymous letter to Toland (May 4, 1684), in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 295.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

Nay, tho' I granted a Deity, yet if nothing of me subsisted after death, what laws could bind, what incentives could move me to common honesty? Annihilation would be a sanctuary for all my sins, and put an end to my crimes with my self.¹⁸

He continues:

Now if I am persuaded our Souls are immortal and responsible for their actions, to be eternally happy or miserable in a future state, I must be necessarily of some Religion: and I presume you will readily acknowledge it to be the Christian, when I assure you, that...¹⁹

Here follows a three-pointed Christian confession, in which Toland attests his belief in: 1) 'the existence of an infinitely good, wise and powerful Being' or God; 2) Christ as 'God manifest in the flesh, or true God and Man'; 3) the activity of 'the divine Spirit, who worketh in us, and with us, who directs and perfects us.' Toland concludes: 'This is the sum of my assurance of eternal life, in hopes whereof I am now writing this unfeign'd Confession of my Faith.'²⁰

Having thus expounded his beliefs, Toland briefly makes a case for religious toleration, as 'tis not just any should say what he thinks not'; yet also calls himself 'a faithful and a zealous' advocate of religion.²¹ He finally remarks upon the slanderous allegations that had been made against him by some 'Jacobites' in the coffeehouse: first, that Toland was 'an accomplish'd Conjurer'; later, that he was a heretic.²² As Toland cynically reports:

Well, if Magic won't do, Heresy must. I am a dangerous Anti-Trinitarian, for having often publicly declared that I could as soon digest a wooden, or breaden Deity, as adore a created spirit or a dignified man. This Socinianism and Arianism are, one would think, very orthodox.²³

In a second letter, the correspondent quite apologetically responds by saying he never took Toland for an atheist or deist: 'by the character of *little Religion*, I meant no more than this: that you were one who dealt somewhat too freely with it'.²⁴ Having read Toland's reply, he is now convinced Toland has 'no real kindness' for atheism; that he is 'neither prophanely nor sceptically given'; that he is altogether 'an Orthodox believer' and 'a very good Christian'.²⁵ However, he still tries to dissuade Toland from pursuing this rumoured project on Christianity having no mysteries, or at least to persuade him to think it over one more time.

It appears, then, that Toland's earliest written statement about religion shows him to be, at least at the time, a devout Christian. It should be noted, however, that a reader scanning for dissimulation might not find the text completely unequivocal. For instance, Toland's initial remarks upon atheism and the belief in immortality are not presented as assertions, but as rhetorical questions, leaving the answer itself to the discretion of the reader. More significantly (or not), Toland's profession itself is set between quotation marks, and preceded by a double conditional: *if* Toland believes in the immortality of the soul, *then* he has to be of

¹⁸ 'Mr. Toland's Answer' (undated), in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 302.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 303-4. The second point also avows belief in Christ's resurrection.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 305-6.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 306-7.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

²⁴ Second anonymous letter to Toland (May 30, 1694), in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 308-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309-10.

some religion; and *if* he believes the three points of the confession, *then* this religion has to be the Christian one.

On the other hand, such conjectures are highly speculative, and clearly unwarranted at this point. Though Toland's profession contains a rather minimalistic version of Christianity, in which mention of the Holy Scripture is conspicuously absent, it is still a very direct statement in favour of some of the primary Christian dogma's – and Toland himself calls it the 'unfeign'd Confession of my Faith.' So far, we have no reason to doubt his words, and we should consider Robert Rees Evans' exhortation to read *Christianity not Mysterious* in conjunction with this text.²⁶ For at the time of writing this letter, Toland was already working on what was to be his first major publication. The two texts are thus closely connected, by time, by personality.

However, there may be a third text intersecting the connection between these works. In between the letter to the unknown correspondent, in 1694, and the publication of *Christianity*, in 1696, an anonymous text appeared that, according to John Valdimir Price, was even 'more sceptical about revealed religion' than *Christianity*.²⁷ The author, quite possibly, was none other than John Toland.

TWO ESSAYS

In 1695, the year in which Toland left Oxford to return to London, a short work was published, entitled *Two Essays Sent in a Letter from Oxford to a Nobleman in London*, naming as its author 'L.P. Master of Arts.' It opens with an 'Apology' for the controversial import of the essays, above all its treatment of Holy Scripture. The author points to philosophers such as Galileo, Campanella and Descartes, who 'are not esteem'd the worse Christians, because they contradict the Scriptures in Physical or Mathematical Problems'. One must remember that Scripture addressed laymen, not scholars, and was therefore adapted to the laymen's vulgar ideas and ways of speech; its design being not to establish a natural system, but 'the true *Theocracy*, and good *Morals*.'²⁸ The author expresses his bewilderment at the public outcry that had raged against Hobbes, merely 'because he describ'd God Almighty as Corporeal, though *Moses* and the *Scriptures* had done so before him.' These days, L.P. continues, every religious sect is quick to denounce all others as atheists or heretics, for no other reason than their own 'Caprice, or Interests'. However, the author himself claims to be 'well affected to the *Church of England*, and not in the least tinctur'd with *Atheism*'.²⁹ Not that he thinks much of this charge, as it is commonly put forth:

I have Travell'd many Countries, yet could never meet with any *Atheists*, which are few, if any; all the noise and clamour is against Castles in the Air; a sort of War, like that of *Don Quixotte*, with the Windmills.³⁰

The first essay purports to be directed against the notion that maritime fossils are remnants of fish lost in the Flood at the time of Noah. But the salient part of its argument is

²⁶ Robert Rees Evans, *Pantheisticon: The Career of John Toland*, p. 17-8.

²⁷ John Valdimir Price, 'Introduction', in: *Christianity Not Mysterious* (ed. Price), p. vi.

²⁸ *Two Essays sent in a Letter from Oxford*, p. i-ii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. iii-iv.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. iv-v.

designed to question whether the idea of a universal deluge, as recounted in the Bible, is reasonable at all. God after all had no need of such a deluge, and

...though we may grant that the first *Chaos* and the universal *Flood* might be miraculously brought about; yet there is no colour for thinking that the Hand of *God* would confound it's own *Laws* (where there was no manner of necessity) in forming and reforming the *Machine* we call the *Universe*...³¹

Although L.P. says he will 'give all the rope and scope imaginable to the *Mosaic History*', he notes that many difficulties surround it: not only in the notion that all species were preserved solely through Noah's ark, but also in the idea that all creatures originated from the same place (paradise) – and, most of all, in the supposition that all people have sprung from Adam and Eve.³² The initial bio-geological intent of the essay is, by the end, transformed into a format of religious criticism.

The second essay aims at critically exposing the use of fables and allegorical speech by the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, and the way in which this practice was passed on to not only the Hebrews, but to the early Christians – and even to Christ himself:

The Sacred Authors themselves complied with this Humour of *Parables* and *Fictions*, the Holy Scripture being altogether Mysterious, Allegorical and Enigmatical; and our *Saviour* himself gave his Precepts under this veil.³³

From the ancient 'fountains', L.P. continues, 'the Christian *Monks* drunk in the art of Lying', thus giving rise to an accumulation of misunderstandings in Christian dogma.³⁴ For example, before Antonie Van Dale, it was generally believed that the devil spoke through the ancient oracles until the coming of Christ. And again it is stressed how Scripture itself was affected by the ancient use of fables:

The *Sacred Writers* complying with the pulse of the *Jews*, made use of *Fictions* and *Parables* to express their Inspirations; therefore our *Holy Scripture*, in the Judgment of our best Criticks, *Grotius*, *Father Simon*, *Le Clerc*, &c. is altogether Mysterious, Allegorical, and Enigmatical.³⁵

L.P. includes some examples of Old Testament books which are intended to be figuratively understood. As to the myths of demonology, he notes it has been sufficiently dealt with by Hobbes and Bekker: L.P. will merely describe how the destruction of such fables came about.

INTERMEZZO: WHO IS L.P.?

It is seldom a straightforward task to identify Toland as the author of a text. Next to the works he published under his own name, Toland was an enthusiastic user of pseudonyms, and sometimes preferred to remain anonymous. As Stephen Daniel remarks:

A recurring problem for Toland scholars is that of distinguishing his authentic works from the spurious ones attributed to him. Because many of his major works were

³¹ Ibid., p. 4.

³² Ibid., p. 24-6.

³³ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 31-2.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

published anonymously, researchers have had to depend on techniques of indirect identification...³⁶

The question of attribution does not pose a problem for Toland's most important works, where his authorship is uncontested by recent scholarship. In the case of the *Two Essays*, however, there has been (and still is) some debate as to whether Toland can be identified as the illusive 'L.P.' Giancarlo Carabelli was the first to make a cautious case for Toland's authorship in 1975, which has been contested by Chiara Giuntini in 1978, supported by Sullivan in 1982, contested again by Margaret Jacob in 1983, and supported again by Daniel in 1984. After Daniel, scholars such as Justin Champion and David Berman have accepted Toland's authorship as unproblematic, though a 1997 article by Rhoda Rappaport has firmly criticised the way in which 'what began as conjecture has evolved into a strong probability and even into an established fact – all this without any notable addition to Carabelli's evidence.'³⁷

What then is the case for Toland's authorship? As Carabelli reports, rumours to this effect originated in Oxford in 1695.³⁸ In a letter to one of his correspondents Edward Lhwyd, second Keeper of the Ashmoleum Museum, says the following about the *Two Essays*:

I must confesse I like'd it very well; but it seem'd to me that onely some good naturalist had supply'd an other writer with materials. They have a notion in this town that one TOLAND an Irishman who has livd here this last 12-month, and is eminent for railing in coffee houses against all communities in religion, and monarchy, is the author; but for the reason above mention'd (besides some others) I presume he had noe hand at all in't.³⁹

The reason why Lhwyd himself did not believe the rumours that Toland had written the *Essays*, appears to have been that he believed the author to have been aided by 'some good naturalist' – and, in the reading of Rappaport, 'this did not fit Lhwyd's notion of Toland's temperament.'⁴⁰ But if Lhwyd thought Toland was not the author, rumour had it that he was.

Still, rumours are rumours. Carabelli has pointed to a more substantial piece of circumstantial evidence in a different letter, this time from Anthony à Wood to John Aubrey, dated 15 August 1695. According to Wood, Toland had 'two letters published, but never tells me of them.'⁴¹ As we know of no other letters published by Toland in that year, Wood's statement might well indicate the *Two Essays*. However, he gives no information as to the content of the 'letters', and Rappaport has a point when she judges this evidence 'suggestive but inconclusive.'⁴² And there is little other external or contextual information to substantiate the claim of Toland's authorship.⁴³ What of internal evidence?

According to Giuntini, the content of the *Two Essays* 'matches neither the concepts and interests of Toland during the Oxford period, nor the 'pantheistic' theses and evaluations of the relationship between ancient and modern culture, which characterise the works of the

³⁶ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 14.

³⁷ Rhoda Rappaport, *Questions of Evidence*, p. 339.

³⁸ Giancarlo Carabelli, *Tolandiana*, p. 20-21.

³⁹ Edward Lhwyd, in: R.T. Gunther, *Early Science in Oxford*, Vol. XIV, p. 278.

⁴⁰ Rappaport, *Questions of Evidence*, p. 340.

⁴¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 343.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Carabelli does deliver an argument to the effect that L.P. were not the initials of the true author, but as Rappaport retorts: 'to ignore the initials L. P. merely opens the door to a variety of candidates and adds nothing to incline us towards John Toland in particular.' (*Questions of Evidence*, p. 342.)

later Toland.⁴⁴ Jacob agrees, as to her 'its flat style does not seem to match the confidence and pugnacity found in *Christianity not Mysterious*'.⁴⁵ Sullivan, however, sees enough continuity of style and content to link Toland to the *Essays*, and suggests two concrete examples of such correspondence. First of all, he points out the Latin epigraph on the title-page of the *Two Essays*, taken from Lucretius: '*Edita Doctrinâ Sapientum Templâ Serena*', which roughly translates as 'the serene spaces brought forth by the learning of the wise.'⁴⁶ In Sullivan's view, this could be a covert reference to Toland's *Letters to Serena*, published in 1704.⁴⁷ Second, the appearance of Virgil's phrase '*Jovis Omnia plena*' ('all things are full of God') at the very end of the *Essays*, suggests a covert pantheistic motif.⁴⁸

Neither Jacob nor Rappaport are convinced. Rappaport argues that the 'Serena'-connection loses its force when one remembers that the *Letters* were intended for Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia, whom Toland was not to meet until 1701. If she was 'Serena', why would Toland refer to her as early as 1695, if at all? Furthermore, to read the Virgilian phrase as a pantheistic motto is to mistake the *Essays*' leaning towards Cambridge Platonism for a covert pantheism.⁴⁹ Neither associations are warranted, says Rappaport – and Jacob also laments Sullivan's 'failure to develop a case where one would prove very interesting'.⁵⁰

The reason why I have considered these arguments at length is twofold: I believe the critics are correct in stating that so far no strong case has been made to support Toland's authorship – and I believe that such a case *can* be made. Though Daniel thinks the *Two Essays* 'of moderate importance for Toland's early statements', I disagree.⁵¹ If Toland can more firmly be identified as the author, the *Essays* may well be the missing link in the understanding of his early works, and throw some light upon the intentions and strategies of *Christianity not Mysterious*. Evans suggested that *Christianity* should be read in conjunction with Toland's 1694 Christian profession. Perhaps, if Toland does prove to be the author, the *Essays* should be read in conjunction with both.

A CASE FOR TOLAND

Giuntini's observation that the *Essays* do not correspond with Toland's interests of the time, or with his later works, seems to me profoundly unwarranted. As to his interests and conceptions around 1695, we have little straightforward information, and the information we do have is riddled with conflicting accounts. This is part of the reason why there is such confusion about the interpretation of *Christianity*, and why the content of the *Essays* might be relevant to the case. As to Toland's later works, I believe the correspondence in the *Essays* to be quite striking. From the initial way the author presents himself as a devout Christian seeking to reform religion and battle atheism, to the polemical and sometimes openly

⁴⁴ 'Ci sembra tuttavia che il contenuto dell'opera non trovi corrispondenza nelle concezioni e negli interessi di Toland all'epoca di Oxford, e neppure nelle tesi 'panteistiche' e nella valutazione dei rapporti fra cultura antica e moderna che caratterizzano le opera dell'ultimo Toland.' – Chiara Giuntini, *Panteismo e Ideologia Repubblicana*, p. 40, n. 50.

⁴⁵ Margaret C. Jacob, review of Sullivan's *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*, p. 390.

⁴⁶ *Two Essays*, title-page.

⁴⁷ Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 114.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115; see *Two Essays*, p. 47.

⁴⁹ Rappaport, *Questions of Evidence*, p. 345-6.

⁵⁰ Jacob, review of Sullivan, p. 390.

⁵¹ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 15.

provocative tone in the face of religious authority and tradition, the *Essays* show signs of firm resemblance to Toland's other public writings.

There is, first of all, a continuity of topics. The attack on prejudice and superstition runs like a red thread through Toland's oeuvre, and features prominently in the *Essays*. Thus the first essay opens with an invective against '*Hypotheses, and monstrous Traditions, invented and instill'd in Cells, in Nurseries, or in Schools, the fountains of Mythology.*'⁵² Already in *Christianity not Mysterious*, Toland remarks how people are usually attached to notions they learned in their childhood ('How fond are we all apt to be of what we learn'd in our Youth'⁵³). Later on, in the first *Letter to Serena*, Toland will elaborate on the origin of prejudices, and among their sources identify 'Nurses, ignorant Women of the meanest Vulgar', and 'School, where all the Youth come equally infected from home' and learn nothing but other superstitions and 'stupendous Miracles'.⁵⁴ A similar passage occurs in his posthumous tract about druids and the Celtic religion:

SUPERSTITION ... is industriously instill'd into men from their cradles by their nurses, by their parents, by the very servants, by all that converse with them, by their tutors and school-masters, by the poets, orators, and historians which they read, but more particularly by the Priests, who in most parts of the world are hir'd to keep the people in error...⁵⁵

Another correspondence can be found in the *Essays'* exposition of the use of fables and allegories by the ancients, and the continuation of this practice by not only the Hebrews, but the Christians. The infiltration of mystery and obscurity into religion is of course the main theme of *Christianity*, and the transmittance of allegorical speech from the heathens to the Christians plays a major role in many of his later works. In the third *Letter to Serena*, Toland proposes to lay bare the 'Origin of Idolatry' by explaining 'the Fables of the Heathens', which corrupted even the doctrines of Christ.⁵⁶ The same theme occurs in the 1718 *Nazarenus*, according to which the gentiles introduced the 'peculiar expressions and mysteries of Heathenism' and the 'abstruse doctrines and distinctions of their Philosophers' into Christianity.⁵⁷ The heathen use of fables and allegories is scrutinised again in 'Clidophorus', published in 1720.⁵⁸

Even the quasi-geologist discussion of fossils is repeated in *Pantheisticon*, and here too it is coupled to a critique of the concept of a universal deluge.⁵⁹ But perhaps the strongest thematic correspondence between the *Essays* and the accepted Tolandian canon, pertains to a political interpretation of the role of Moses, which has its source in Machiavelli's *Discourses*. Machiavelli saw Moses as a legislator, and presented him in conjunction with eminent Greek and Roman statesmen and law-givers, such as Lycurgus, Numa and Solon. As Justin Champion points out, this view is honoured by Toland in his 1700 edition of James

⁵² *Two Essays*, p. 2.

⁵³ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. x.

⁵⁴ Toland, *Letters to Serena*, p. 4-5.

⁵⁵ Toland, 'A Specimen of the Critical History of the Celtic Religion and Learning', in: *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 140. In the 'Preface' to *Letters to Serena*, Toland explicitly states the influence of Cicero on these ideas. See below, Ch. 3, n. 23.

⁵⁶ Toland, *Letters to Serena*, p. 69-70, 129.

⁵⁷ Toland, *Nazarenus*, p. 187.

⁵⁸ Toland, 'Clidophorus', in: *Tetradymus*, p. 85-7.

⁵⁹ Toland, *Pantheisticon*, p. 45-54.

Harrington's *Oceana*, of which the title-page shows five portraits: of Moses, Solon, Confucius, Lycurgus, and Numa.⁶⁰ In later works Toland remains insistent upon the Machiavellian ideas of Moses' political role: for instance in the 1709 *Origines Judaicae*, where Moses is likewise compared to ancient legislators such as Lycurgus; and again in *Nazarenus*, where Toland proposes to 'allow MOSES a rank in the politics farr superior to SALEUCAS, CHARONDAS, SOLON, LYCURGUS, ROMULUS, NUMA, or any other Legislator.'⁶¹ *Pantheisticon* and 'Hodegus' respectively speak of 'that wise Law-giver Moses'⁶² and 'this incomparable Legislator.'⁶³

More controversial yet is the passage in the *Essays* that likens Moses to Hobbes, as both had 'describ'd God Almighty as Corporeal.' This theme is mirrored, again, in *Origines Judaicae*, where Moses is 'unequivocally' characterised as 'a pantheist, or as we in these modern times, would style him, a Spinozist' – though Toland attributes this view to the ancient writer Strabo.⁶⁴ The general content of the *Essays*, then, does appear to show considerable correspondence to Toland's other works. Furthermore, the *Essays* contain certain typical Tolandian twists: such as the author's devious appropriation of theological thinkers such as Grotius, Simon and Le Clerc. Though these writers certainly had some controversial ideas about religion and the Bible, the author of the *Essays* puts words into their mouth when he claims they considered Scripture to be 'altogether Mysterious, Allegorical, and Enigmatical.' As will be shown, such a 'technique' is used by Toland on more than one occasion. Also, a respectful citation of Cicero and the already quoted reference to Don Quixote recall similar moments in his other works.⁶⁵

Reviewing all this internal coherence in connection to the circumstantial evidence collected by Carabelli, I believe the case for Toland's authorship to be a strong one. I feel no hesitations, then, in treating *Two Essays* as one of Toland's earliest publications, relevant for his religious and philosophical attitudes at the time of writing *Christianity not Mysterious*, and indicative of a thematic continuity with his later works. Bearing this in mind, it is time to turn the page to the year of 1696, which saw the publication of *Christianity*, and the rise of a controversy that would bring Toland fame, infamy, and enmity.

⁶⁰ Toland (ed.), *The Oceana of James Harrington* (1700), title-page. See Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 106.

⁶¹ Toland, *Nazarenus*, Appendix I, p. 8.

⁶² Toland, *Pantheisticon*, p. 47.

⁶³ Toland, 'Hodegus', in: *Tetradymus*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ English manuscript translation of *Origines Judaicae*, as quoted in Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 175.

⁶⁵ Toland's oeuvre shows a consistent reverence for Cicero. Don Quixote is referred to in the posthumous 'Primitive Constitution of the Christian Church', in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 155; and perhaps in the preface to *Letters to Serena*, where Toland speaks of 'those peevish Knights Errant, who are always in search of new Adventures, and make every one they encounter a Giant or a Dwarf.' (unpaginated).

2. CHRISTIANITY NOT MYSTERIOUS (1696)

In a way, the message propounded by *Christianity not Mysterious* is a straightforward one. The book is summarised most concisely by its own title, its aim being to show that Christianity is not mysterious. Yet as to the precise nature of Toland's intentions in writing this book, there has been much discussion. By his contemporaries, Toland has alternately been called a deist, an atheist, a Socinian, and (according to some of his recent editors) 'a Jesuit in disguise',¹ following the publication of *Christianity*. By some modern scholars, *Christianity* has likewise been deemed a deist work, one author going so far as to style it the 'signal-gun of the deistic controversy.'² Others, however, have contested the supposed heterodox or radical quality of the work, some preferring to categorise it as presbyterian and socinian rather than deist.³ Christianity may not be mysterious, according to the book – but *Christianity not Mysterious* certainly is.

Two questions are central in the discussion of the work: first, what exactly did Toland say? – second, did he mean it? These questions are interrelated, of course. Our interpretation of the meaning of Toland's words depends on our appraisal of his sincerity; and this, in turn, is influenced by our estimation of the layers of his message. Neither the question of content nor that of sincerity can be understood on its own – nor can either of them be answered before we are acquainted with the broader scope of Toland's oeuvre. Here, however, the task is to examine *Christianity* as it stands on its own, and next to Toland's other early works. Any tentative answers to the questions posed will thus remain provisional until a wider view is open to us – and possibly even then.

A RECONSTRUCTION

A reconstruction of *Christianity not Mysterious* must centre on three concepts: mystery, reason, and Holy Scripture. Toland's main question pertains to what should be made of the Christian *mysteries*. Some have referred the question of mysteries to an authoritative voice: that of the Church Fathers, of learned theologians, of a 'General Council' or the Pope.⁴ However, says Toland, all these voices have proved themselves to be fallible; and especially in the last case, he warns against 'those chimerical supreme Headships, and Monsters of Infallibility.'⁵ Others are of the opinion that one should strictly stick to *Scripture*, and in principle, Toland agrees – but now the question rises what it means to stick to Scripture. The assessment of mysteries is thus tied up with the various theories behind scriptural hermeneutics; these, again, are connected to the role of *reason* in interpreting Scripture.

Some believe that one should adhere to the literal sense of Scripture, even when it appears to be unreasonable; consequently, some mysteries may be contrary to reason. Others assign to reason the role of 'the Instrument, but not the Rule of our Belief'; therefore

¹ See Philip McGuinness, Alan Harrison, and Richard Kearney, 'Preface' to *John Toland's Christianity Not Mysterious*, p. vii-viii.

² Leslie Stephen, quoted in Evans, *Pantheisticon*, p. 19.

³ S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion*, p. 53.

⁴ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 2-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

mysteries cannot be *contrary* to reason, but they may well be *above* it.⁶ Toland disagrees with either, for in the interpretation of Scripture, as in all other things, 'Reason is the only Foundation of all Certitude' – which leads him to state the central thesis of the book: 'that *there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to Reason, nor above it; and that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd a Mystery.*'⁷

In order to prove this, Toland engages the reader in two complementary lines of argumentation: a theoretical-philosophical and a historical-exegetical approach. The first is based on a theory of knowledge that is not only strongly reminiscent of that of John Locke, but also laden with Lockean terminology. Thus, knowledge is conceived to be '*the Perception of the Agreement or Disagreement of our Ideas*'.⁸ When the mind perceives such (dis)agreement directly, the method of knowledge is '*Self-evidence or Intuition*'; when indirectly, by means of intermediate ideas, it is '*Reason or Demonstration*'. From this Toland, in the wake of Locke, draws two important conclusions: first, that where there are no ideas, there can be no knowledge; second, that where the requisite intermediate ideas are lacking, our reasoning cannot lead us to knowledge, but only to probability.

CONTRARINESS

Armed with this philosophical machinery, Toland sets out to disprove, first of all, the 'contrariness'-thesis, which claims that some doctrines of the Gospel are contrary to reason. This thesis, according to Toland, is refuted by the structure of knowledge itself. Contradiction is 'a Synonym for *Impossibility*', which is the same as '*pure nothing*': therefore, to express a contradiction (such as a squared circle) is 'to say *nothing*; for these Ideas destroy one another, and cannot subsist together in the same Subject.'⁹ Where ideas fail, knowledge fails; therefore, to suppose that God has revealed contradictions is to open the door to scepticism. One cannot believe what one cannot understand. As Tristan Dagron has aptly put it, for Toland faith is an act of the understanding, and not of the will.¹⁰ One cannot simply choose to override reason and believe the inconceivable.

The only way the mind can attain new ideas is by means of *experience*, be it 'external, which furnishes us with the Ideas of sensible Objects; or internal, which helps us to the Ideas of the Operations of our own Minds.'¹¹ However, the mind can come to certain information by means of 'Authority' or testimony, whether human or divine, under the conditions of intelligibility and possibility: '*Whoever reveals any thing, that is, whoever tells us something we did not know before, his Words must be intelligible, and the Matter possible.*'¹² Neither God nor man could have any reason to communicate either a vacuous word such as 'Blictri',¹³

⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12. Compare John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, IV.I.2, p. 525, where knowledge is '*the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas.*'

⁹ Toland, *Christianity not Mysteries*, p. 40.

¹⁰ '...la foi elle-même est par conséquent un acte de l'entendement (et non de la volonté)' – Dagron, 'Introduction', in: Toland, *Le Christianisme sans mystères*, p. 50.

¹¹ Toland, *Christianity not Mysteries*, p. 16.

¹² Ibid., p. 42.

¹³ Ibid., p. 128.

which would encounter an absence of ideas, or a contradiction, which would engender their self-destruction.

Furthermore, Toland strictly distinguishes between the 'Means of Information' (i.e. internal or external experience, and human or divine authority) on the one hand, and the 'Grounds of Persuasion' on the other. Before we give our assent to information that reaches us by way of authority, we must be certain that we are not mistaking 'Old Wives Fables' for sound human testimony, or 'Human Impostures' for divine revelation.¹⁴ An infallible rule is needed for such discernment, which Toland calls '*Evidence*', or '*the exact Conformity of our Ideas or Thoughts with their Objects, or the Things we think upon.*'¹⁵ The reliability of human testimony depends on the trustworthiness of the witness; that of divine revelation is demonstrated by certain external signs: by miracles.

When we are truly dealing with God's revelation, this is none other than the 'Manifestation of Truth by Truth it self'¹⁶; it 'is not only clear to my Reason, (without which his Revelation could make me no wiser) but likewise *it is always true*' – for while men can deceive, God cannot.¹⁷ When it is certain that we are listening to the voice of God, we know we shall find no lies, no absurdities, and no contradictions. Therefore, the Gospel, if authentic, cannot be contrary to reason.

ABOVENESS

Having deflated the thesis of 'contrariness', Toland turns to that of 'aboveness', which holds that, even if the doctrines of the Gospel are not contrary to reason, they may still be above it. Refuting this thesis is central to proving Christianity not mysterious, for '*to be above Reason* is the same thing with MYSTERY; and, in effect, they are convertible Terms in *Divinity*.'¹⁸ Here the method of theoretical-philosophical argumentation is overshadowed by that of historical-exegetical demonstration. Toland distinguishes two ways in which the term 'mystery' or 'above reason' is commonly used:

First, It denotes a thing intelligible of it self, but so cover'd by figurative Words, Types and Ceremonies, that *Reason* cannot penetrate the Vail, nor see what is under it till it be remov'd. Secondly, It is made to signify a thing of its own Nature inconceivable, and not to be judg'd of by our ordinary Faculties and Ideas, tho it be never so clearly revealed.¹⁹

A mystery can thus signify something intelligible but veiled, or not veiled but inherently unintelligible. Through a cascade of biblical references, Toland proceeds to argue that wherever the Gospel speaks of mystery, it should be understood in this first sense – never in the second. In general, revelations in the New Testament are called mysteries 'not from any present Inconceivableness or Obscurity', but because they were undiscovered prior to Christ's coming.²⁰ However, the veil that made the 'mystery' was removed in the Gospel, and therefore '*such Doctrines cannot now properly deserve the Name of Mysteries.*'²¹ Other instances of 'mystery' in the Gospel likewise signify things that were veiled, partially or

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 18-19.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 89.

²¹ Ibid., p. 94.

totally, from certain people: for instance, from the Gentiles and some of the Jews – or, in the case of Christ’s use of ‘Parables or Enigmatical Expressions’, from the part of his audience that was not ready to hear the truth.²² Furthermore, Toland offers a historical demonstration of the way Christianity became ‘mysterious’: from the introduction of pagan practices by the Gentiles to the fraudulent distortion by the self-interested clergy.

To this biblical and historical evidence Toland adds a more theoretical argument, namely, ‘That nothing can be said to be a Mystery, because we have not an adequate Idea of it, or a distinct View of all its Properties at once; for then every thing would be a Mystery.’²³ There is nothing of which man has strictly perfect knowledge, our human faculties being adapted to that which is useful and necessary for ‘our present Condition’.²⁴ As Des Maizeaux would later remark, here the central argument of *Christianity* comes down to ‘a dispute about words’.²⁵ If one insists that the term ‘mystery’ should be used for all things of which we have no adequate ideas, Toland is ‘willing to admit as many as they please in *Religion*’; but then the term must likewise apply to ‘every Spire of Grass, Sitting and Standing, Fish or Flesh’.²⁶ In such an approach the word ‘mystery’ would effectively lose its sense. Consequently, as Dagron put it, it would be more appropriate to style certain aspects of religion ‘enigmatic’ than ‘mysterious’.²⁷

From all of this, Toland believes it safe to conclude ‘that there is no MYSTERY in CHRISTIANITY, or the most perfect Religion; and that by Consequence nothing contradictory or inconceivable, however made an Article of Faith, can be contain’d in the Gospel, if it be really the Word of God’.²⁸

ZOOMING IN: THE ‘RADICAL’ TWIST

All in all, in *Christianity* the structure of religious belief is subjected to a set of rigorous conditions. As God does not speak to us directly, we would ‘acquiesce in the Words or Writings of those to whom we believe he has spoken’. For our faith to be warranted, we depend entirely upon a process of ‘Ratiocination’: we must investigate the authenticity of the writings, the trustworthiness of the witness in question, and the intelligibility and possibility of the content.²⁹ Furthermore, we need miracles to supply us with an external sign of truth, and these again cannot be contrary to reason, but ‘must be some thing in it self intelligible and possible, tho the manner of doing it be extraordinary’; for ‘all those *Miracles* are fictitious, wherein there occur any Contradictions’.³⁰

This is what Toland says – plainly and explicitly – and already from this it is clear that he does not belong to the ranks of conventional or orthodox theologians. The question is how much further he was prepared to go, whether openly or quietly, and whether his arguments open up to interpretations that would implicate him in the radical fringe.

²² Ibid., p. 104.

²³ Ibid., p. 74.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

²⁵ Des Maizeaux, ‘Some Memoirs’, p. xiv.

²⁶ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 79-80.

²⁷ Dagron, ‘Introduction’, p. 196, n. 1.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 170.

²⁹ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 127.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 145-6.

Before I move to a discussion of such overt-covert suggestions of Toland's more radical side, perhaps a brief remark on the term 'radical' is in order. I am aware that, especially in the wake of Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*, the term has enjoyed an enthusiastic but somewhat careless popularity on the one hand, and attracted criticism on the other. Israel, as is known, contrasts a 'Radical' movement of Enlightenment, which is orientated exclusively on reason, with its 'moderate' counterpart, which is prepared to compromise between reason and 'faith and tradition'.³¹ Leaving aside the possible deeper problems with such a strict radical-moderate distinction, it should be noted that it suffers from its own simplicity: when contrasted with the 'moderates', the question rises whether any 'radicals' are left.³²

At the same time, the word has conveniently, but often less than appropriately, been used to encompass a wide range of theological and philosophical opinions, to designate their relative controversiality. The downside of this looser definition of radicalism, is that its original conceptual virtues have become rather worn, with the effect that it may introduce more confusion than clarity into a debate. However, despite the danger of vagueness, I believe the concept of radicalism loses its credibility if it does not retain some element of historical relativity – that is, if it is not weighed up and contrasted against the 'orthodoxy' of the time (which, of course, is just as fluid a term). I will therefore, loosely but consistently, apply the term 'radical' to any opinion that was relatively controversial in its historical context, in that it attacked the foundations fundamental to an 'orthodox' core, and was *possibly* (not necessarily) linked to a wider movement spreading similar opinions.

THE PROVOCATIVE TWIST

Part of the reason why Toland was considered controversial by readers then and now can be found in his style and (self-)presentation. He opens his 'Preface' on a heroic note: in his day and age 'we shall find none more backward to speak their Minds in publick than such as have Right on their side'³³: people dare not speak openly, if at all, of religious matters, for fear of being 'pursu'd with the Hue and Cry of Heresy'.³⁴ Nonetheless, Toland has 'ventur'd to publish this Discourse', in order to correct both 'the narrow bigotted Tenets' of those who pretend to defend religion, and 'the most impious Maxims' of those who have offended it.³⁵ Toland thus presents his book as a bold enterprise to speak where others have been silent, and himself as a combatant in the face of religious superstition: his method will be 'the Use

³¹ Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, p. 11.

³² This may, incidentally, constitute the core of Israel's hermeneutical problem. When Israel positions the climax of the Radical Enlightenment in the late 17th to early 18th century, well before the rise of outspoken atheists such as Baron d'Holbach, he must necessarily assume his 'radicals' to have been radical *deep down*, as virtually none of them were *superficially* so. On the surface, so to speak, practically all of Israel's radicals allowed for some compromise between reason and faith. To maintain the strict radical-moderate distinction and yet be able to posit a widespread movement of 17th century radicals, Israel requires a hermeneutics that allows him to systematically uncover patterns of dissimulation and covert radicalism. That such a method of interpretation carries inherent dangers has been insufficiently noted by historians. It will appear from the case of Toland in the proceeding chapters.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. iii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

of Reason'; his object, the distortions in the doctrines of the Gospel; his intended public, the 'Vulgar' as well as the learned.³⁶

More daring, and typically Tolandian, are the numerous polemical passages, where the general argument is spiced up by irony and wit, or by enflamed manoeuvres against his opposition – most of all, the clergy. Such examples of rhetorical *crescendo*, in which Toland bares his teeth, are often indicated by exclamation points. To become more acquainted with Toland's voice, and to recognise this fiery aspect of his temper, I will note a few passages in *Christianity* where Toland changes the tempo:

But wonderful! That the sacred Name of *Religion* which sounds nothing but Sanctity, Peace, and Integrity, should be so universally abus'd to patronize Ambition, Impiety, and Contention!³⁷

Hey-day! are not these eternal Rounds very exquisite Inventions to giddy and entangle the Unthinking and the Weak? ³⁸

O! blessed and commodious System, that dischargest at one stroak those troublesome Remarks about History, Language, figurative and literal Senses, Scope of the Writer, Circumstances, and other Helps of Interpretation!³⁹

Toland did not stand alone in the use of irony. However, his openly provocative intonation and rather heated derision of his main enemy, the clergy, do serve to set him apart from most of his contemporaries. The voice of the messenger is spiked with radicalism. But what of the message?

THE LOCKEAN TWIST

Though *Christianity* bears traces of several other influences, such as that of Le Clerc⁴⁰ and Spinoza,⁴¹ it leans most heavily on the philosophy of Locke. Already by some of his contemporaries Toland was considered to have radicalised (or 'misused'⁴²) Locke's theory, and modern historians such as Dagron have generally accepted this opinion, though differing on the intricacies of Toland's '*Lockisme radicalisé*'.⁴³ In a recent thesis, however,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. vii, xviii.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. v (against the lack of religious tolerance).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33 (against a circular argument intended to prove both the divinity of Scripture and the authority of the Church).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34 (against a hermeneutics that allows for contradictions in Scripture).

⁴⁰ For instance, in Toland's apparent approach to hermeneutics. Strictly speaking, Toland does not propose a hermeneutical method, as the authenticity of Scripture remains an open question in *Christianity*. Also see Dagron, 'Introduction', p. 54-85, for a discussion of Toland's proximity/ distance to certain Armenian theologians, such as Le Clerc.

⁴¹ Most significantly, Toland approaches Spinoza in his appraisal of miracles as 'produc'd according to the Laws of Nature, tho above its ordinary Operations' (*Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 150). Toland stops short of asserting, with Spinoza, that miracles must be understood as 'natural occurrences' (Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 84); however, Toland's 'Hodegus' contains an interpretation of miracles that is effectively a continuation of Spinoza's argument in the infamous chapter 6 of his *Theological-Political Treatise*.

⁴² William Molyneux mentions such an opinion in one of his letters to Locke, dated 16 March 1697. See E.S. de Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, Vol. 6, p. 40.

⁴³ Dagron, 'Introduction', p. 85.

Dennis de Gruijter has argued against this all-too-common interpretation, suggesting instead that ‘Toland did not modify Locke’s philosophy nor extend it to its heterodox conclusion, but accepted it as complete philosophy that could be used as a critical tool against religious imposture.’⁴⁴ I believe enough time and ink has been spent elsewhere on the matter for me not to discuss it extensively here; furthermore, I do not believe Locke’s influence essential for determining Toland’s place among the ‘moderate’ or the ‘radical’ fold. However, the better to position Toland in the philosophical context of his time, I will examine the salient parts of the Locke-Toland-relationship and deliver my own conjectures on the nature of this ‘dangerous liaison’.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE ESSAY

As has been noted, Toland borrows freely from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and builds his critique of mysteries on a Lockean epistemology. And the correspondence between the two John’s does not end here. Both agree that revelation can convey no new simple ideas to the understanding; that certain outward signs (i.e. miracles) are needed to prove the divinity of revelation; that reason is required to provide and assess this proof; that the certainty of a revealed proposition does not extend beyond the evidence that the proposition truly is revealed; and that there can be, in principle, no contradiction between reason and faith.

Having said this, there are also differences. Though Locke calls faith ‘an Assent founded on the highest Reason’,⁴⁵ it is still part of the realm of probability and not of that of knowledge. Within the domain of probability, faith may reach the highest level of certainty, yet it will still fall short of the certainty of knowledge through reason or intuition. This strict epistemological distinction between the domains of knowledge and probability, and the ranking of faith among the latter kind, is lacking in Toland. Though Toland has been (mis)quoted as simply stating that ‘Faith is knowledge’,⁴⁶ he is more subtle, and less clear, about the matter. If ‘*Knowledg* be taken for a present and immediate View of things’, then faith is not knowledge; but ‘if by *Knowledg* be meant understanding what is believ’d, then I stand by it that *Faith is Knowledg*’, says Toland.⁴⁷ Here he is not necessarily diverging from Locke; he does appear to diverge, however, in the role he assigns to probability and the suspension of judgment.

In the *Essay*, Locke values probability rather highly, as it is the foundation not only of faith, but also of many other propositions we need for daily life.⁴⁸ When we perceive a high level of probability in a proposition, it commands our assent as reason would, though not with the same clarity. As a result, we cannot suspend our judgment by reserving our assent to a highly probable proposition, any more than we can refuse knowledge when it presents itself:

But though we cannot hinder our Knowledge, where the Agreement is once perceived; nor our Assent, where the Probability manifestly appears upon due Consideration of all the Measures of it: Yet *we can hinder both Knowledge and Assent, by stopping our Enquiry,*

⁴⁴ Dennis de Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 11-12.

⁴⁵ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.XVI.14, p. 668.

⁴⁶ For example by Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 79.

⁴⁷ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 139.

⁴⁸ Locke, *An Essay*, IV.XIV.1-2, p. 652.

and not employing our Faculties in the search of any Truth. (...) Thus, in some cases, we can prevent or suspend our Assent...⁴⁹

Elsewhere, Locke asserts that the 'one unerring mark' of the love of truth is 'the not entertaining any Proposition with greater assurance than the Proofs it is built upon will warrant'.⁵⁰ Dagrón has identified this position, which merely stresses the importance of investigating one's opinions and dispelling prejudice, with Toland's stronger view on the value of suspension.⁵¹ If my interpretation is correct, this is a misapprehension. Though Locke cautions the reader not to place too great a confidence in propositions of little probability, he holds a negative view on actual suspension, even warning against the 'danger' facing those 'who, even where the real Probabilities appear, and are plainly laid before them, do not admit of the conviction, nor yield unto manifest Reasons, but do either (...) suspend their Assent, or give it to the less probable Opinion.'⁵² In other words: sceptical suspension is not warranted when one has probability, even if this does not amount to knowledge. On the whole, then, Locke's outlook on probability is positive; on suspension, negative.

For Toland, it is quite the other way around. His positive evaluation of suspension is apparent from his claim in *Christianity* that 'God the wise Creator of all, (...) who has enabl'd us to perceive things, and form Judgments of them, has also endu'd us with the Power of *suspending our Judgments about whatever is uncertain, and of never assenting but to clear Perceptions.*' Although it is 'out of our Power to dissent from an evident Proposition', we are free to hold back our assent from 'what is indifferent, or dubious and obscure'.⁵³ The force of this sceptical manoeuvre is deepened by Toland's subsequent remark that 'Perspicuity and Obscurity are relative Terms, and what is either to me may be the quite contrary to another'.⁵⁴ Having just stated that one must suspend that which is obscure, Toland here blurs the distinction between obscurity on the one hand and perspicuity or self-evidence on the other, which makes the question of when to suspend a relative, even subjective matter. Furthermore, in the revised second edition, Toland adds at an earlier point that 'where I have only *Probability*, there I suspend my Judgment, or, if it be worth the Pains, I search after Certainty'.⁵⁵

This is significant. Though Toland does not speak often of probability in *Christianity*, all the more mention is made of doubt, uncertainty, and obscurity. The comment in the second edition shows that Toland was effectively sceptical about probability, and the other passages concerning suspension suggest that he more or less equated probability with obscurity. Whereas Locke drew a clear-cut border between the autonomous realms of knowledge and probability, Toland sketched a more fluid line between knowledge on the one hand and, on the other, everything else. The clarity of evidence being a relative matter, the distinction between knowledge and probability or obscurity becomes a gradual one. For faith to have any epistemological merit, therefore, it must either be the object of knowledge, or subject to suspension.

⁴⁹ Ibid., IV.XX.16, p. 717.

⁵⁰ Ibid., IV.XIX.1, p. 697.

⁵¹ See Dagrón, 'Introduction', p. 47, and p. 148, n. 3.

⁵² Locke, *An Essay*, IV.XX.7, p. 711.

⁵³ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 23-4.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

The sceptical moment in *Christianity*, insufficiently noted by historians, is indicative of Toland's divergence from Locke's theological ideas. It may even be the starting point for Toland's rolling into radicalism, depending on how he chooses to resolve the issue of faith. Before I return to this, however, I will briefly discuss that other part of the Locke-Toland-liaison: the question of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

CHRISTIANITY AND REASONABLENESS

It is not clear whether this other work of Locke, more theological and less famous than the *Essay*, serves to complicate or elucidate the relationship between Locke and Toland's *Christianity*. The two works seem to cross each other. Though *Reasonableness* left the printers in August 1695 – a few months before *Christianity*, which was published sometime between December 1695 and June 1696⁵⁶ – Locke appears to have been sent an early manuscript version of Toland's book by his correspondent John Freke, in March 1695.⁵⁷ This has led some historians to believe that Locke raced Toland to the press in order to deliver, with *Reasonableness*, 'une réponse par anticipation' of *Christianity*.⁵⁸

The similarity of the titles, the closeness of the dates of publications, and the fact that the two authors were interested in broadly the same topics and specifically in each other's works, do suggest that one (or both) must have reacted to the other. However, I agree with De Gruijter that the interpretation of *Reasonableness* as a 'magisterial rebuttal' of *Christianity* is far-fetched and lacking evidence.⁵⁹ The two books are, I believe, both too different and too similar in content and intent to warrant such a conclusion. They are too different, because they do not seem to deal with the same problems: whereas *Reasonableness* is primarily a Scripture-based discussion of which doctrine(s) are essential to the Christian faith, *Christianity* is concerned with the epistemological foundations of faith itself, and is therefore closer to Locke's *Essay*. They are too similar, because where their topics do converge, they are roughly in agreement.⁶⁰

If *Reasonableness* were indeed a precautionary refutation of Toland's thorny arguments, one would think that at least *Christianity*'s central thesis, that there are no mysteries in the Gospel, would be discussed, disputed and discarded. However, as De Gruijter has noted, *Reasonableness* 'nowhere even hints at Toland, nor identifies or engages with any of his arguments.'⁶¹ To this I would like to add that when Locke does discuss mysteries, in *A second*

⁵⁶ See Champion, *Republican Learning*, p. 70.

⁵⁷ Freke mentions Toland to Locke in a letter dated 29 March 1695. On 2 April Locke writes to Freke, thanking him 'for the packet you sent me and the character in it of the gentleman I enquired after', and refers to a 'Mr. T.' On 9 April Locke again mentions 'Mr Ts Papers' to Freke, and adds that 'I hoped you would have said something to me of your opinion both of his Tract ... and of the man'. (De Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, Vol. 5, p. 318-327.) Though De Gruijter has questioned the identification of Toland as 'Mr. T.', the overall context of Locke's correspondence makes it hard to doubt.

⁵⁸ See Dagron, 'Introduction', p. 92, n. 1., as well as Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 43.

⁵⁹ De Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 16, n. 50.

⁶⁰ In *Reasonableness*, as in *Christianity*, assent must be preceded by understanding, and revealed truths must be 'agreeable to reason': they must be confirmed both by reason and miracles, though only revelation can 'discover' them (Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, p. 140, 145-7.) Beneath the surface still lies the deeper incongruity having to do with the role assigned to knowledge and probability, yet this has its roots in the *Essay* and is not explored by Locke.

⁶¹ De Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 18.

Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity, published March 1697, he appears to be closer to Toland's side of the debate. Here Locke expressly rejects the ideas of his opponent John Edwards to the effect that 'Christianity is called mysterious', and that some fundamental Christian doctrines contain mysteries, which must be believed:

If his articles, some of which contain mysteries, are necessary to be believed to make a man a christian, because they are in the bible; then, according to this rule, it is necessary for many men to believe what is not intelligible to them; (...) i.e. it is necessary for many men to do, what is impossible for them to do, before they can be christians.⁶²

Locke stresses that the doctrines fundamental to Christianity (those which every Christian must believe) cannot be mysterious or unintelligible: 'a proposition to be believed (...) must first necessarily be understood.'⁶³ He and Toland thus appear to have a common enemy in those who claim that there are mysteries in Christianity that must be believed. Although Locke does not go so far as to say, with Toland, that there are no mysterious doctrines in the Gospel, at no point in either *Reasonableness* or its *Vindications* does he distance himself from this more 'radical' view.

From their thematic and structural differences, as well as the lack of articulated disagreement in their essential questions, I believe it is safe to conclude that *Reasonableness* and *Christianity* were neither reactions to nor refutations of each other. I would conjecture that both works grew in a more or less parallel fashion out of common soil, their roots springing from Locke's *Essay* and contemporary philosophical debates about faith, Scripture and reason, which had been brewing not only in formal scholarly circles, but in the popular setting of London and Oxford's coffee houses. Though it is often assumed that *Reasonableness* was the first attempt of Locke to distance himself from Toland and his philosophy, I believe it is in the course of the controversy with Stillingfleet that Locke insisted upon severing the link.

In November 1696, Locke's *Essay* was fiercely attacked by Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, who invoked the example of *Christianity* as proof that the *Essay*'s epistemological principles give rise to unacceptable theological implications: via Toland, Locke was linked to the Unitarians.⁶⁴ In January 1697 Locke responded by publishing a letter to the Bishop, in which he denies he can be linked to either Toland or the Unitarians. Though Toland may agree with Locke 'in the original of our ideas and the materials of our knowledge', Locke does not agree 'with him, or any body else, in laying all foundation of certainty in matters of faith, in clear and distinct ideas'. Therefore, says Locke, 'the thread that ties me to the author of Christianity not mysterious, is so fine and delicate, that without laying my eyes close to it, and poring a good while, I can hardly perceive how it hangs together'.⁶⁵

In the following months, while the Bishop was penning a response, concerns about the association with Toland began to seep through to Locke's personal correspondence. In March Locke was reminded by his correspondent William Molyneux that there were some who believed 'that the bishop does not so directly object against your notions as erroneous, but as misused by others, and particularly by the author of *Christianity not Mysterious*'.⁶⁶ In April,

⁶² Locke, *A second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, p. 237-8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁶⁴ See Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*.

⁶⁵ Locke, *A Letter to the Bishop of Worcester*, p. 107.

⁶⁶ Letter from Molyneux to Locke, 16 March 1697. Cited in Dagron, 'Introduction', p. 30-1.

Locke expressed his worries about Toland's 'vanity',⁶⁷ and in May Molyneux noted Toland's 'unseasonable way of discoursing, propagating and maintaining' his opinions in '[c]offee-houses and public tables,' which 'are not proper places for serious discourses relating to the most important truths.' Furthermore, said Molyneux, 'Mr. T also takes here a great liberty on all occasions to vouch your patronage and friendship, which makes many that rail at him, rail also at you.'⁶⁸ It is at this point that one detects a definite change in Locke's tone and attitude toward Toland, when he replies to Molyneux that Toland 'is a man to whom I never writ in my life, and, I think, I shall not now begin'. Toland not having shown certain 'qualities to bring me to a friendship', Locke firmly states that 'whatsoever you shall or shall not do for him, I shall no way interest myself in.'⁶⁹ Locke thus washes his hands of Toland's character and behaviour, as he had already with regard to his philosophy. In Dagron's words, 'Locke prend ses distances vis-à-vis d'un Toland, qui ne mérite pas, à ses yeux, le titre d'ami.'⁷⁰

It appears, then, that Locke was not so much adverse to *Christianity* itself, as to its function as a motor of controversy, and Toland as its rather reckless engineer.

THE TOLANDIAN TWIST

However, even if Locke and Toland's positions do not appear to be so far apart on a first reading of their texts, they do on a second. When De Gruijter argues that Toland 'agreed with Locke on all fronts where Christianity is concerned and used the same arguments that Locke did in his own writings', I must disagree.⁷¹ There may be a point at which the supposedly subtle crack between Locke and Toland widens into a gulf. Here I believe it warranted to go beyond a surface reconstruction of *Christianity* and employ a deeper hermeneutics that, even if it does not presuppose a tactics of dissimulation, will have eye for its more elusive yet further-reaching implications.

The breaking point appears to be indicated in the very conclusion of *Christianity*, when Toland states that there can be no mysteries in Christianity and nothing '*contradictory* or *inconceivable*' in the Gospel, '...if it be really the Word of God'.⁷² The inclusion of the latter clause is significant, for the force of Toland's argument hinges upon the question whether the Gospel and the Christian doctrines are really of divine origin. If they are, then Christianity is true and it can contain no mysteries. If they are not, then Christianity can contain mysteries, but it cannot be true. According to Daniel's reconstruction, Toland 'thus forces the Christian apologist into the predicament of having to say either that Christian revelation is not reasonable or that it is not true.'⁷³ For Toland, whoever insists on the truth of Christianity, forfeits the possibility of mysteries; whoever insists on mysteries, forfeits Christian truth.

'...if it be really the Word of God' – but is it really? Here, as in other places, Toland's argument, already audacious, appears to indicate his 'darker' side. Throughout the book,

⁶⁷ Locke to Molyneux, 6 April 1697. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁸ Molyneux to Locke, 27 May 1697. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 33-4.

⁶⁹ Locke to Molyneux, 15 June 1697. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 34-5.

⁷⁰ Dagron, 'Introduction', p. 35.

⁷¹ De Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 11.

⁷² Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 170.

⁷³ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 42.

Toland specifies a set of strict conditions, which must be satisfied by any Christian text or doctrine for it to be recognised as authentic, divine and true – but he is silent as to how these conditions can be satisfied. Like Locke, Toland appears to be taking the divinity of Scripture for granted, but unlike Locke, he demands proof of its divinity – and then fails to supply it. What is most striking is that Toland is perfectly aware of this hiatus in his argument, and offers an explicit justification.

I have not yet noted that *Christianity* is represented as the first part of a trilogy. In the book itself, ‘the Divinity of the New Testament is taken for granted’; in the sequel, Toland will ‘attempt a particular and rational Explanation of the reputed *Mysterics* of the Gospel’; in the final part, he will ‘demonstrate the Verity of Divine Revelation against *Atheists*, and all Enemies of reveal’d Religion.’⁷⁴ In other words, he will ‘prove first, that the true Religion must necessarily be reasonable and intelligible’; second, ‘that these requisite Conditions are found in Christianity’; third, that the Christian religion ‘was divinely revealed from Heaven.’⁷⁵ Thus Toland can afford to subject religion to the strictest of conditions, and the Christian reader can rest assured: whatever problems are raised in *Christianity*, will be resolved in the subsequent volumes.

THE PHANTOM VOLUMES

The problem is that Toland never published any sequels to *Christianity*, and never apologised or gave any reasons for breaking his promise. The only times he refers to the other volumes are in the defences that followed the revised second edition of *Christianity*, which Toland had published later in 1696 under his own name (the first edition having been anonymous). When Toland began to find himself ‘warmly attack’d from the *Pulpit*’⁷⁶ in Ireland as well as England, and, no less ‘warmly’, from a number of published tracts, he published *An Apology for Mr. Toland* and *A Defence of Mr. Toland* in 1697. In the *Apology* Toland answers the objection that ‘he makes a doubt whether the *Scriptures* be of Divine Authority’ by pointing to the phantom volumes.⁷⁷ In response to another objection he remarks that he ‘had no natural occasion to declare his Sentiments relating to CHRIST’s Person, that and the other particular Doctrines of the Gospel being the Subject of the second and third Books he promises, and by which alone his Conformity or Dissent with the *Common Christianity* is to be discern’d.’⁷⁸

In the *Defence*, a highly curious text, in which he poses as an anonymous letter writer and lavishes himself with praise as well as admonitions,⁷⁹ Toland uses the same line of defence. Again, he points to the expected second and third volume to *Christianity* and remarks that

the World has no reason to cry out against you yet upon this account; for you are not yet come to the proof of your New Divinity in that part of your discourse which is already printed: you have only prepared the way and Skirmisht a little with some flying

⁷⁴ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. xxiv.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxv-vi

⁷⁶ Toland, *An Apology for Mr. Toland*, p. 3-4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁹ It should be noted that there is to this day no hard proof that Toland was the author of the *Defence*: however, I believe it to correspond in style and artifice to other works of Toland and, as we have no other likely candidate, I would tentatively accept him as the author. My argument here is not dependent on Toland’s authorship of the *Defence*.

suggestions in order to lead on the main arguments with more force in the second part, which are to be backt and maintained by a strong reserve in the third.⁸⁰

Consequently, says Toland to Toland, ‘tis a prejudging the cause to condemn you before the other parts you have promised are put out: whereupon I will suspend my judgment of your work till I have it altogether’, for ‘I don’t think I have just ground to find fault with your work till I see it concluded ill’.⁸¹

What to make of Toland’s insistent referring to these promised books, which never would see the light of day? According to Daniel, ‘Toland never intended to write those parts himself, as an individual’, but meant for ‘a community of investigators’ to finish the task he had started in *Christianity*.⁸² This to me seems rather far-fetched. Taking into account the fact that the phantom volumes function primarily as an inbuilt defence mechanism, as an autoimmune system deflecting hostile reactions from the inside out, I would interpret them as a classroom example of strategic writing. As Dagron notes:

Formellement, le *Christianisme*, par ses promesses non tenues, est inattaquable: defense qui, naturellement, ouvre la porte au process d’intention. (...) Pour chacun de ces points pourtant cruciaux, Toland renvoie donc au silence du *Christianisme*.⁸³

THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTIANITY

The central thesis of *Christianity* thus appears to consist of philosophical quicksand: it feigns a foundation, which, on closer inspection, it does not have; and all that is built upon it may be intended to sink and not to stand. It must be noted, however, that Toland’s argument is interspersed with pious remarks, biblical references, and explicit confirmations of his sincere Christian faith. For instance, in a Hobbesian quote, Toland asserts he is ‘neither of *Paul*, nor of *Cephas*, nor of *Apollos*, but of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, who is *the Author and Finisher of my Faith*’.⁸⁴ Though refusing to be identified with any particular sect or party, Toland appears more than willing to profess his Christianity: ‘The only religious Title therefore that I shall ever own, for my part, is that most glorious one of being a *Christian*’.⁸⁵ Years later, in the 1702 *Vindicius Liborius*, Toland would

solemnly profess to the World, and make my Appeal to Heaven, that in writing CHRISTIANITY NOT MYSTERIOUS, I neither doubted my self of the Wisdom, Goodness, or Power of GOD; nor in the least intended to bring others into any Scruples about his Attributes or Existence: and, whatever Errors or Mistakes there may be in that Treatise, yet I challenge all my Accusers to discover any Thing in the same directly or

⁸⁰ Toland (?), *A Defence of Mr. Toland in a Letter to Himself*, p. 5-6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6-7. In these passages Toland appears quite cocky, for instance when he lyrically expresses his high expectations of himself elucidating all of revelation (‘Oh what a glorious Scene will here be’); for although his alter ego does not believe this is possible, he is aware that ‘I am not to measure another Man’s genius by my own’ (*ibid.*).

⁸² Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 71.

⁸³ Dagron, ‘Introduction’, p. 29-30.

⁸⁴ Toland, *Christianity not Mysteries*, p. xxvi. A similar passage can be found in *Nazarenus*, p. 183 (see below, Ch. 5, n. 52).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii-viii. In Toland’s revised second edition, the ‘Preface’ is expanded by an additional section in which Toland claims to be opposed to ‘corrupt Clergy-men’ alone, not to the ‘sincerest Teachers’ of religion (*ibid.*, p. xxx).

indirectly, exprest or imply'd, as tending to *Atheism*, which I execrate and abhor from the Bottom of my Soul...⁸⁶

The question is, of course, whether such professions of sincerity are themselves sincere, or whether they are other instances of his textual defensive measures. I believe this cannot and should not be answered yet: as the pattern of Christian professions paired with unorthodox implications runs like a red thread through Toland's oeuvre, the question of sincerity should be postponed until we are acquainted with the whole. For now, it is enough to take note of both sides of *Christianity*, and keep in mind the strategies employed and the deeper impact intended, as we read on.

For it is, in fact, within the wider context of Toland's other works that the radical twist of *Christianity* truly comes to light. As has been noted, Toland repeatedly pointed to the phantom sequels of *Christianity* to prove the divinity of Scripture, on which the Christian religion is founded. He never published these. What he *did* publish, however, were works such as *Amyntor* and *Nazarenius*: works that did not provide a firmer basis for Christianity to stand upon, but that would render the status of the Gospel and, consequently, of Christianity itself even more doubtful.

⁸⁶ Toland, *Vindicius Liberius*, p. 42-3.

3. THREE LETTERS TO SERENA (1704)

A massive public outcry followed in the wake of *Christianity not Mysterious*, starting with a number of theological responses and refutations, and culminating in the book being officially condemned by the Grand Jury of Middlesex, in May 1697.¹ Toland would later remark that the condemnation mainly served to make the book more famous, or, in the words of Des Maizeaux, to make it 'sell the better'.² Even so, by then the hostile climate in England had already driven Toland back to Ireland, only to find that he was even less welcome on native soil. In September *Christianity* was condemned by the Irish Parliament and ordered to be 'publicly burnt by the hands of the Common Hangman'.³ Furthermore, Toland was to be arrested and prosecuted, but this, as he later noted, 'he took care to prevent'⁴: he returned to England, where at least his enemies wielded pens, not swords, and he was never convicted before the courts.⁵

In 1699, Toland travelled to Holland, a journey which Sullivan styles 'an act of prudence': yet here, as in England, he would find his earlier relations with intellectual allies and acquaintances had cooled down considerably.⁶ Le Clerc and Limborch took Locke's lead in distancing themselves from Toland, a man now tainted with the dangerous allegation of Socinianism and haunted by the well-remembered shadow of Thomas Aikenhead.⁷ In England, this meant that Toland was alienated from several of his former patrons, yet he retained some, such as the third earl of Shaftesbury, and gained others, such as Robert Harley, head of the Country Party in the House of Commons.⁸ Though Harley showed too many Tory tendencies to Shaftesbury's taste, Toland believed the Whig in his new-found patron outweighed the Tory; his other protectors, such as the duke of Newcastle and Sir Robert Clayton, were Whig entire.⁹

Perhaps it was in an attempt to solidify these newly conquered and prominent connections, that the following years would see Toland's rise as a political writer as well as the biographer and editor of several authors in the republican canon – such as John Milton, James Harrington, Denzil Holles, and Edmund Ludlow – and his development, in the words of Daniel, 'into one of the foremost Whig writers'.¹⁰ If it was, then this attempt was successful. Through his connections to Harley, Toland was invited to accompany Lord Macclesfield to the court of Hanover in 1701, as part of the official delegation that would

¹ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 70-1. *Christianity* was condemned together with two anonymous works: *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (by Locke), and *A Lady's Religion* (author unknown, but the preface, signed 'Adeisidaemon', usually attributed to Toland).

² Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs', p. xvi; Toland, *An Apology*, p. 5-6.

³ Quoted in Toland, *An Apology*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Dagron, 'Introduction', p. 27-8; Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 72-3, 77. In 1701, a late attempt by the Lower House of Convocation to condemn *Christianity* and some other books was frustrated by the Upper House. See *ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶ Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 11.

⁷ Aikenhead, a Scottish medical student with anti-Trinitarian ideas, was executed in January 1697: the last person to be hanged for blasphemy in Britain. See Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 10-11.

⁸ Lurbe, 'Introduction', p. 9; Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 12.

⁹ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 9; Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 12-13.

¹⁰ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 9.

bring the Act of Settlement to the Electress Sophia, to confirm her eventual succession to the English throne. Furthermore, Toland was personally allowed to present his own *Anglia Libera* to the Electress, in which he had fervently supported this fundamental part of the Whiggish agenda: the Hanoverian succession.¹¹

Apparently Toland and Sophia, who was strongly interested in matters of philosophy and metaphysics, got along nicely, for in the following years they would pursue their theoretical debates either in person, on one of Toland's subsequent trips to the continent, or in their personal correspondence. Through Sophia, he would also engage in contacts with Leibniz and with Sophia's daughter Sophia Charlotte, Queen of Prussia, who like her mother was a lady very much philosophically-inclined, and even more eager to correspond about religion and metaphysics.¹²

The years 1697-1704, spanning the period between *Christianity* and Toland's next major work, *Letters to Serena*, thus comprise Toland's reorientation towards politics and his reaffirmation of the Whiggish cause. The majority of the texts rising from these years, however interesting, need not be discussed here: they belong primarily to a political context, not a religious one. The main exception is Toland's 1699 *Amyntor*, which poses as 'A Defence' of his earlier *Life of John Milton*, yet is more offensive than defensive in character. Though *Amyntor* chronologically belongs to the *interlibrum* period between *Christianity* and *Serena*, it is thematically linked to Toland's *Nazarenus*, published in 1718, and I would prefer to discuss it in combination with the later work. For reasons of clarity, and to avoid getting lost amid the cascade of Toland's post-1697 publications, I will therefore follow Pierre Lurbe in adopting 'un traitement plus thématique que chronologique pour évoquer la suite de la carrière de Toland'¹³ – starting with *Serena*.

LETTERS TO SERENA – PART ONE

In *Vindicius Liberius*, his 1702 defence of both *Christianity not Mysterious* and *Amyntor*, Toland claims he had refused to put out a new edition of *Christianity* after the publication of the second, in 1696. 'When I perceiv'd what a Stir was made about it,' says Toland, 'and what real or pretended Offence it had given, all I cou'd do was not to publish any more of 'em'.¹⁴ This, according to Champion, 'was deceitful nonsense', as a third edition was published in the same year, with the inclusion of Toland's *Apology*.¹⁵ Furthermore, when Toland mentions that, following *Amyntor*, he has 'firmly resolv'd never hereafter to intermeddle in any *religious Controversies*, but to keep my self (as now I am) very easy and contented', we have reason to take this with a pinch of salt.¹⁶ A mere two years later, in 1704, his *Letters to Serena* would cast doubt upon this self-professed willingness 'to live quietly my self, and to let others enjoy their Opinions undisturb'd'.¹⁷

Purportedly intended for Sophia Charlotte, alias 'Serena', and resulting from the philosophical conversations and correspondence between her and Toland, the *Letters* deliver

¹¹ Ibid., p. 9-10; Heinemann, *Toland and Leibniz*, p. 439.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lurbe, 'Introduction', p. 9.

¹⁴ Toland, *Vindicius Liberius*, p. 80.

¹⁵ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 70.

¹⁶ Toland, *Vindicius Liberius*, p. 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

a new outlook on a number of subjects. Some of these, such as the critique of prejudice and superstition in religion, seem to continue lines of thought that already appeared in his earlier works, particularly *Christianity* and the *Two Essays*. Others, such as the discussion of natural philosophy in the perspective of both ancients and moderns, appear to indicate a new philosophical orientation on Toland's part. Unlike his earlier publications (but like the 1720 *Tetradymus*), the *Letters to Serena* thus comprise a rather miscellaneous collection of topics. Consequently, historians disagree not only on how 'radical' and original the *Letters* are, but on which to prioritise: the psychological-historical-anthropological arguments of the first three, or the scientific-metaphysical discussions of the fourth and fifth?

I will try to offer an overview of the *Letters* as they stand on their own, before commenting on their respective significance, originality, and overall coherence. However, for the same preference of thematic treatment as mentioned above, I will here confine myself to an inquiry into the first three letters, which are connected and interconnected in such a way as to form a complementary whole. The last two letters, which pertain to the philosophy of Spinoza and are *not* addressed to 'Serena', I will reserve for my discussion of *Pantheisticon*, to which they show significant thematic resemblance.

1. THE ORIGIN AND FORCE OF PREJUDICES

The first letter traces the origin of prejudices in society and in the individual mind. As Toland explains in the preface, it was inspired by a passage from Cicero, according to which 'all sorts of Traps are laid to seduce our Understandings' by either our parents 'or Nurse, or Schoolmaster, or Poet, or Playhouse', or by our sense of pleasure, which leads us to accept the wrong things as good.¹⁸ As requested by Serena, Toland will give his opinion on this passage, 'showing the successive Growth and Increase of Prejudices thro every step of our Lives, and proving that all the Men in the World are join'd in the same Conspiracy to deprave the Reason of every individual Person.'¹⁹ From the onset, he notes that the reader must not infer 'that I am against either Learning, or Religion, or Government, from what I have censur'd in Schools, Universities, Churches, or Statesmen': it is only at the 'peculiar Abuses' of these institutions that his arguments are aimed.²⁰

'We no sooner see the Light,' says Toland in the first Letter, 'but the grand Cheat begins to delude us from every Quarter': every birth is surrounded by the superstitious practices and ceremonies of midwives and priests. Though the child is not aware of it yet, already he is beginning to be 'infected' by the 'mistakes' of others; later in life, he will forget how he came by these erroneous notions and be 'tempted to believe that they proceed from Nature it self.'²¹ After birth, we are 'deliver'd to Nurses, ignorant Women of the meanest Vulgar, who infuse into us their Errors with their Milk' and menace us into good behaviour by frightening tales.²² This instruction in superstition is continued at home by 'idle and ignorant Servants'; at school by other children, who 'communicate their mutual Mistakes and vicious Habits' to

¹⁸ As quoted and translated by Toland in *Letters to Serena*, 'Preface', par. 10 (unpaginated). See above, Ch. 1, p. 14, for corresponding remarks in the *Two Essays*.

¹⁹ Toland, 'Preface' to *Letters to Serena*, par. 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Letters to Serena*, p. 2-3. These passages are, of course, strongly indebted to Locke's analysis of the origin of the illusory notion of 'innate' ideas. See Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I.III.22-3.

²² *Letters to Serena*, p. 4.

one another, and by our pleasure in reading 'Poets, Orators, and Mythologists'. We thus begin 'to imagin we believe what we only dread or desire, to think when we are but puzzl'd that we are convinc'd, and to swallow what we cannot comprehend.'²³

Adult life does little, if anything, to mend this. On the contrary, we are made 'little wiser, tho much more vain and conceited in the Universitys, especially abroad, where the Professors (right or wrong) must accommodate all things to the Laws and the Religion of the Country'. The universities do not correct us, but reinforce us in our mistakes, and are thus become 'the most fertile Nursery of Prejudices'.²⁴ To make matters worse, most communities have special persons (i.e. priests) 'not to undeceive, but to retain the rest of the People in their Mistakes.' Though every sect denies this of itself and affirms it of the others, 'it is impossible they shou'd be all or above one of 'em in the right, which is a Demonstration that the rest, being the bulk of Mankind, are retain'd in their Mistakes by their Priests.'²⁵ The polemical passage ends on a bold note:

And nevertheless the very Doubts about the Joys of Heaven and the Torments of Hell, are enough to procure Authority for their infinite Contradictions: so strong are the Impressions of Hope and Fear, which yet are ever founded in Ignorance!²⁶

Hence, the most persistent prejudices are 'those of the Society wherein we live and had our Education', and this 'holds equally true of their civil Customs and religious Rites, of their Notions and Practices.' People who are ready to die for 'Religion or Truth' are in fact willing to become 'Martyrs to a Habit', for their beliefs are usually rooted in 'Custom', not truth.²⁷ The stagnation of knowledge is further aided by the fact that most sects do not allow for freedom of examination. 'You may reason your self,' says Toland, 'into what Religion you please; but, pray, what Religion will permit you to reason your self out of it?'²⁸ Perhaps bearing in mind his own experiences during the reception of *Christianity not Mysterious*, Toland describes the treatment awaiting anyone who dares to question religious doctrines:

If he's not put to Death, sent into Banishment, depriv'd of his Employments, fin'd, or excommunicated, according as his Church has more or less Power; yet the least he may expect, is to be abhorr'd and shun'd by the other Members of the Society ... which every Man has not Fortitude enough to bear for the sake of the greatest Truths...²⁹

Adding to this all 'our own Fears and Vanity' and general ignorance, it is not hard to see how errors rule the world. Many authors are judged not by their writings, but by their factions; their readers 'being ready to approve or condemn, to read over his Book or to throw it away, according to the Faction or Party he espouses.'³⁰ Yet Toland does not see 'by what means a Man can quit the Alcoran if he must never read the Bible; or if a Mahometan ought to read the Bible, I see no reason a Christian shou'd fear to read the Alcoran; which is as true of all the Books in the World.' The origin of prejudices thus lies in 'our predominant

²³ Ibid., p. 5-6. As argued in Chapter 1, these Ciceronian ponderings are foreshadowed by a similar passage in the *Two Essays*, and repeated in Toland's posthumous tract about the druids. See above, Ch. 1, n. 55.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 6-7.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 8-9.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 12-3.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 13-4.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 14-5.

Passions, the Contagion of the consenting Multitude, or the Authority of our most mighty Master, the irresistible Tyrant Custom, which equally rules over Princes, Priests, and People.³¹

2. THE HISTORY OF THE SOUL'S IMMORTALITY AMONG THE HEATHENS

If the first letter was inspired by Cicero, the second rose from Serena's failing to be convinced by the arguments in Plato's *Phaedo*, concerning the immortality of the soul. According to the preface, Toland told her that 'Divine Authority was the surest Anchor of our Hope, and the best if not the only Demonstration of the Soul's Immortality' – for the heathens however, the doctrine was surrounded by great doubt. At Serena's request, Toland will explain how it came to be known by the heathens, and in what form; he will show it to have originated neither with the heathen philosophers nor with the Jews, but 'to have bin first taken up by the Mob, popular Traditions often becoming the Doctrines of Philosophers, who strive to support by good Reasons what the others begun with none or very bad ones.'³²

Again, at the beginning of the letter itself, Toland remarks that 'Christianity affords the best, the clearest Demonstration' for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul: 'even the Revelation of God himself.'³³ To some it may therefore seem strange to hear Toland speak of the doctrine 'as of an Opinion, which, like some others in Philosophy, had a Beginning at a certain time', but that is how it was for the heathens.³⁴ Toland consequently traces the history of the doctrine through Plato to Pherecydes and then to Anaxagoras, who was the first to add the principle of mind to that of matter.³⁵

He proceeds to attribute the roots of the doctrine, through Anaxagoras, to the Egyptians, from whom both the Greeks and the Jews received their metaphysical ideas.³⁶ According to Toland, the Egyptians were 'the first among the Heathens, who particularly asserted the Immortality of the Soul, with all that depends on it, as Heaven, Hell', and a number of superstitions.³⁷ As to where the Egyptians got the idea, Toland figures it must have originated with their funeral rites: the notion of immortal souls sprang naturally from the observation that mummified bodies lasted after death.³⁸ The doctrine was thus 'introduc'd from the Egyptians among the Grecians, spread by the latter in their Colonys in Asia and Europe, and deliver'd to the Romans, who from the Greeks had their Religion and Laws.'³⁹

It is no wonder, says Toland, that 'this Doctrin was gladly and universally receiv'd (tho not built among the Heathens on its true Reasons) since it flatter'd Men with the Hopes of what they wish above all things whatsoever, namely, to continue their Existence beyond the Grave'. The thought of dying is, after all, something that most people cannot bear.⁴⁰ The doctrine became so popular that it was passed on, throughout the ages, from parents to their children, so that eventually 'the Learned themselves believ'd it before they had a reason for

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³² 'Preface' to *Letters to Serena*, par. 11.

³³ *Letters to Serena*, p. 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22-3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29-40.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

it.⁴¹ Hence it was after the doctrine was firmly rooted in society, education and the public consciousness that philosophers began to devise arguments for its justification. Belief in the doctrine was further reinforced by the heathen legislators, who observed that although some people were naturally virtuous, others needed to be 'made so by the hopes of Reward and Honor, or by the Fear of Punishment and Disgrace'.⁴²

In times that followed moderns as well as ancients wrote 'many subtil and ingenious Conjectures' on the immortality of the soul, 'but more that were ridiculous, extravagant, and impossible.'⁴³ Throughout the ages there were also those who opposed the doctrine, and in every sect there were some who denied it in secret, 'tho they might accommodate their ordinary Language to the Belief of the People'.⁴⁴ 'But', says Toland at the end of the letter, 'however Men left to themselves may mistake, 'tis impossible that God shou'd lie; and what he has reveal'd, tho not in every thing falling under our Comprehension, must yet be true and absolutely certain.' It is because of divine revelation, therefore, that Christian believers may be convinced of the immortality of the soul, even if they are ignorant of its nature.⁴⁵

3. THE ORIGINS OF IDOLATRY, AND REASONS OF HEATHENISM

In the third letter, the longest of the five, Toland proposes to excavate the origins of idolatry among the heathens, though in fact his inquiry pertains to all kinds of religious superstition, and already in the preface he announces that he will draw 'a Parallel of their Practices with the Corruptions of Christianity'.⁴⁶ Here also he mentions his veneration of the Dutch preacher Anthonie van Dale, with whom Toland had corresponded in 1699,⁴⁷ and who had likewise written a book on 'the *Origin and Progress of Idolatry*' (*Dissertationes de origine ac progressu Idolatriae et Superstitionum*, Amsterdam 1696). According to Toland, however, this book ought to have been entitled 'A compleat Collection of the most antient Heathen, Jewish, and Christian Superstitions', as it has much to say on this subject, but little on the historical origins of idolatry, or its progress throughout the ages.⁴⁸ On these points Toland intends to supplement this highly controversial philosopher, who in 1683 had provoked the so-called 'War of the Oracles',⁴⁹ and whom Toland lavishes with praise:

...tho Mr. VANDALE be by Profession a Mennonite, or (as we term them) an Anabaptist, yet he's one of the most passionate Lovers of Truth, as well as of his Friends, that I ever knew; of a large Soul notwithstanding his narrow Fortune, and of nobler Thoughts than to be a Bigot to any thing against plain Reason or Authority.⁵⁰

In the letter itself Toland means to show 'by what means the Reason of men became so deprav'd' as to engage in all sorts of polytheistic and idolatrous beliefs and practices.⁵¹ Originally, the most ancient heathens had neither use nor need for any such idols or rituals,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 53-4.

⁴² Ibid., p. 55.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 66-7.

⁴⁶ 'Preface' to *Letters to Serena*, par. 12.

⁴⁷ Toland, *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 331-4.

⁴⁸ 'Preface' to *Letters to Serena*, par. 13.

⁴⁹ See for instance Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 359-374.

⁵⁰ 'Preface' to *Letters to Serena*, par. 13.

⁵¹ *Letters to Serena*, p. 69-70.

‘the plain Easiness of their Religion being most agreeable to the Simplicity of the Divine Nature, as indifference of Place or Time were the best Expressions of infinite Power and Omnipresence.’⁵² Gradually, however, men began ‘to be led into precarious or arbitrary Practices’, and to have ‘the same Conceptions of God himself, which they had before of their earthly Princes’: as ‘mutable, jealous, revengeful, and arbitrary’, and as someone whose favour can and must be won.⁵³ As in the second letter, Toland argues that ‘all Superstition originally related to the Worship of the Dead, being principally deriv’d from Funeral Rites’. For several reasons such practices, themselves innocent, grew to be firmly anchored in the social and cultural structures of heathen communities; and ‘hence are deriv’d the peculiar Religions as particular Familys.’⁵⁴

Toland proceeds to dissect several ancient superstitions, such as the belief in astrology, the concept of ‘Ghosts and Specters’, the illusion that heaven lies above and hell below (‘whereas in the Universe, properly speaking, there is in reality neither Above nor Below’), and the absurd gods of polytheistic religions.⁵⁵ However, Toland observes that ‘according to the degrees of Improvement any Nation made in Politeness, Literature, or Government, the less they were addicted to this impious Humor of God-making.’⁵⁶ Though princes and priests alike have tried, and often succeeded, to misuse religious superstitions to further their own interests, ‘the wiser Men grew, the less they believ’d of these things’; and ‘Religion and Reason are hated Obstacles to Superstition and Error’.⁵⁷

Those who did assert ‘the Unity of the Deity, and expos’d Superstition’ should not be ranked among the heathens, whom Toland defines as essentially polytheistic.⁵⁸ The enlightened few who dared to oppose the heathen idolatry, were ‘call’d and reputed Atheists, and treated as such by the Multitude at the Instigation of the Priests’; they were

...fin’d and imprison’d, some were sent into Exile, others judicially sentenc’d to Death, many torn in pieces by the Rabble, and all of them constantly branded with Impiety for disbelieving the Mysterys, or exposing the Holy Cheats of their Times.⁵⁹

One cannot say, therefore, that all non-Christians living in idolatrous societies were themselves idolaters: an author such as Cicero, for instance, who has vehemently attacked the superstitions of his age, cannot possibly be reckoned a heathen.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Christianity cannot claim to be free of superstitions itself: for ‘we may remark that almost every Point of those superstitious and idolatrous Religions are (...) reviv’d by many Christians’. According to Toland, Christianity with superstitions is not Christianity at all; it

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 71-2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73-4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75-92. For instance, Toland mentions that for the Romans ‘Fear and Hope, Paleness and Trembling’ and even the ‘destructive Fever had an Altar’; the Egyptians worshipped ‘the Bird Ibis, Hawks, Cats, Dogs, Crocodiles, Sea-horses, Goats, Bulls, Cows, Onions, Garlick, and what not?’ (p. 90-2). Here we see Toland paraphrasing (and perhaps trying to outdo) Hobbes, who listed ‘Men, Women, a Bird, a Crocodile, a Calf, a Dogge, a Snake, an Onion, a Leeke, Deified.’ (*Leviathan*, p. 173).

⁵⁶ *Letters to Serena*, p. 98.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115-6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

should rather be called 'Antichristianism'.⁶¹ In a passage bringing to mind the feat and focus of *Christianity not Mysterious*, Toland asks the reader to consider

...how in very many and considerable Regions the plain Institution of JESUS CHRIST cou'd degenerate into the most absurd Doctrins, unintelligible Jargon, ridiculous Practices, and inexplicable Mysterys: and how almost in every corner of the world Religion and Truth cou'd be chang'd into Superstition and Priestcraft.⁶²

On the whole, Toland believes to have proven what he set out to prove, namely, 'that in all times Superstition is the same, however the Names of it may vary'.⁶³

'UNREMARKABLE AND UNORIGINAL'

According to De Gruijter, the first three *Letters to Serena* are 'rather unremarkable and unoriginal in themselves', Toland having 'simply plundered' their subject material from contemporary sources, such as Van Dale, Bernard Fontenelle, and Herbert Cherbury.⁶⁴ Furthermore, says De Gruijter, 'his other source, John Locke, provides the framework that incorporates the studies of these men into the Christian discourse identical to *Christianity not Mysterious*.' Consequently, Toland's 'disdain of pagan religion and morality' was *not* directed 'at Christianity itself'.⁶⁵

Though De Gruijter's premises are mostly accurate, I believe his conclusion to be false. True, these three letters are *in themselves* not very original, they do draw on modern sources and they do belong, at least in part, to the same framework as *Christianity* – but these observations do not warrant the conclusion that they are 'unremarkable', 'unoriginal', and non-radical. De Gruijter fails to note three aspects of these letters: first, that they are interconnected in ways such as to form a combative whole; second, that they contain several strange or ambiguous comments and passages, which may allow for a more 'radical' interpretation; third, that they are connected in several ways to Toland's other work. I will here survey these connections and ambiguities.

AMBIGUITIES

The *Letters to Serena* may not be teeming with dissimulation and ambiguities, but they do allow the reader ample room for doubt when it comes to hermeneutical decision-making. Most commentators have done their best to disambiguate the text and tip the scales in favour of either a radical or a Christian interpretation. For instance, on the one hand, David Berman has no scruples in calling the letters 'pantheistic',⁶⁶ and even Justin Champion styles Toland's controversialist opinions as 'unequivocally clear'.⁶⁷ De Gruijter, on the other hand, sees

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ To the list of Toland's sources may be added, amongst others, Charles Blount, Edward Herbert, John Trenchard (see Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken*, p. 22); and, probably, Balthasar Bekker.

⁶⁵ De Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 32.

⁶⁶ Note that Berman speaks of the five letters as one coherent whole and is therefore doubly reductive. See Berman, 'The Irish Freethinker', in: McGuinness, Harrison, and Kearney (eds.), *John Toland's Christianity Not Mysterious*, p. 226.

⁶⁷ Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken*, p. 148.

Toland's various references to divine authority as a sign that he was less of a 'heterodox' and more of a Christian.⁶⁸ Together, these converse attempts at disambiguation merely serve to pinpoint the multiple ambiguities of the text. For two things appear to be at stake in *Serena*. While the line separating Christianity from the other religions is wearing suspiciously thin, at the same time the three letters do contain one or more remarks by which the true Christian faith can, at least superficially, be saved. Or do they?

The reader will recall how in the first letter Toland points out that most (if not all) religious sects are deeply infected by priestly prejudice, but that 'every Sect will deny this of its peculiar Doctrines', while at the same time each will 'affirm it with undeniable Arguments of one another'.⁶⁹ What I have not yet noted is that, in the same passage, Toland parenthetically remarks that he and Serena know this infiltration of prejudice 'to be false of the Reform'd Religion which we profess'.⁷⁰ Yet this remark, which appears to set true Christianity aside from those tainted by falsehood, is itself rather suspicious. Toland's statement that intentional religious deception is not true of the reformed religion is effectively annulled by, first of all, the previous statement that every sect believes this of itself; second, the consequent statement that they cannot all be right; and third, the lack of a criterion for discerning the truth.

At no point does Toland provide the reader with a way of distinguishing the true and unprejudiced religion from the prejudiced ones. His remark to Serena suggests that they take the truth of their religion for granted, yet according to the very same sentence such overconfident convictions are symptomatic of the prejudicial attitude. On its own, then, the first letter delivers many reasons, both explicitly and implicitly, for believing that prejudices abound in *every* religion; it offers *no* reasons, *neither explicitly nor implicitly*, for thinking that Christianity should be acquitted from this universal charge.

It is not so for the second letter. Here there are no less than four passages in which Christianity is, or appears to be, saved. The first is contained within the preface, where 'Divine Authority' is designated 'the surest Anchor of our Hope, and the best if not the only Demonstration of the Soul's Immortality'.⁷¹ According to Daniel, however, Toland's remarks 'about what men hope for may well be interpreted as always having a surreptitiously negative implication'.⁷² He points out two other passages in *Serena*: one in the first letter, where 'the Impressions of Hope and Fear (...) are ever founded in Ignorance'⁷³; the other in the third letter, where the 'fluctuating of mens Minds between Hope and Fear, is one of the chief Causes of Superstition'.⁷⁴ And indeed, in the second letter itself the fear of death and corresponding hope for immortality are identified as the main psychological drive behind

⁶⁸ De Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 31-3.

⁶⁹ *Letters to Serena*, p. 8-9. See above, p. 33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* The entire passage runs as follows: 'Tho every Sect will deny this of its peculiar Doctrines (and that we know it, SERENA, to be false of the Reform'd Religion which we profess) yet the rest affirm it with undeniable Arguments of one another; for it is impossible they shou'd be all or above one of 'em in the right, which is a Demonstration that the rest, being the bulk of Mankind, are retain'd in their Mistakes by their Priests.'

⁷¹ Preface to *Letters to Serena*, par. 11.

⁷² Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 97.

⁷³ *Letters to Serena*, p. 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

humans accepting all sorts of ridiculous notions about an afterlife. It is thus possible that the association of divine authority with human hope does not speak in authority's favour.

However, there are three more passages in which Christianity appears to receive the benefit of the doubt. At the very beginning of the second letter, Toland writes that Christianity, by means of divine revelation, 'affords the best, the clearest Demonstration' of the immortality of the soul.⁷⁵ Later on, he sees it fit to note that 'in my opinion the Moderns have not the same right to examine this matter as the Antients, but ought humbly to acquiesce in the Authority of our Savior JESUS CHRIST, who brought Life and Immortality to Light.'⁷⁶ Finally, toward the end of the letter, he states that 'however Men left to themselves may mistake, 'tis impossible that God shou'd lie; and what he has reveal'd (...) must yet be true and absolutely certain.'⁷⁷ The latter fragment brings to mind a similar passage in *Christianity not Mysterious*, according to which God cannot deceive, and his Word therefore must necessarily be true.⁷⁸

Furthermore, like *Christianity*, each of the four passages noted above (including the one on the 'Anchor of our Hope') point to divine authority or revelation as the sole warrant of Christian truth. On its own, this may not seem very remarkable or ambiguous, but it may well be within the wider context of Toland's other – both earlier and later – work. I will pass over this for now, and return to the matter shortly, when I 'zoom out' to view this bigger picture.

ANAXAGORAS AND PLINY THE ELDER

Other ambiguities in the second letter concern Toland's appraisal of certain ancient philosophers, notably Anaxagoras and Pliny the Elder. I have already mentioned the instance where Toland pinpoints the former as the first to have joined mind to matter.⁷⁹ Consequently, Toland describes how Anaxagoras, because of the novelty of his invention, was derided by most fellow philosophers, who not only argued against him, but poked fun at other absurdities in his philosophy. Having noted this, Toland proceeds to deliver a pages-long summary of such attacks.⁸⁰ The reason why I consider this significant is that the list of counter-arguments and examples of mockery and vilification directed at Anaxagoras seems conspicuously long: too long to be trivial. Toland's purpose might either be to portray Anaxagoras as a heroic figure, misunderstood by his contemporaries; *or* to stress the inherent strangeness of his doctrines, and, as a consequence, of the immortality of the soul.

Even more dubious is Toland's use of Pliny. Having surveyed several examples of philosophical and poetic dissimulation, Toland remarks that 'the Reasons of those who deny'd the Immortality of the Soul, whether Poets or Philosophers, are almost all comprehended' in a certain chapter from Pliny the Elder, which he proceeds to quote at length.⁸¹ The three-page passage is, indeed, extremely naturalistic and profoundly unchristian, listing the many reasons why the concept of an immortal soul, as well as the

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷⁸ *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 43.

⁷⁹ *Letters to Serena*, p. 22-3. See above, p. 34.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24-8.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63-6. As Champion points out (*The pillars of priestcraft shaken*, p. 149), precisely this passage from Pliny appeared also in Charles Blount's *The oracles of reason*, though in a different translation.

very desire for immortality, should be called ridiculous.⁸² At the end of this elaborate quotation Toland states that he does not endorse Pliny's views, which merely exemplify 'the Reasonings of Men who talk all the while of they know not what', their erroneous notions of the soul leading them to draw such conclusions about its existence and immortality.⁸³ Immediately after this statement follows the observation that God cannot lie and revelation provides Christians with the certainty of an immortal soul.

This smells fishy. Like the Anaxagoras passage, the excerpt from Pliny is elaborate to the point of suspiciousness – more so, in fact, when one takes into account the unchristian character of its statements. However, if Toland quoted Pliny because he was tacitly in agreement with him, the subsequent remarks in which he denounces Pliny in favour of Christianity would have to be instances of full-blown dissimulation. I am not ready, at this point, to draw so strong a conclusion. I merely note that this passage suggests that Toland was not as disapproving of Pliny as he claimed to be, and therefore, possibly, not quite so convinced of the immortality of the soul. (This would also tip the Anaxagoras passage in the direction of the more radical interpretation). If corresponding evidence from Toland's other works will confirm these suspicions – as I believe it will – we have, in *Serena*, a textual example of a moment where Toland was less than honest with his reader, or with himself.

CHRISTIANS AND HEATHENS

The pro-Christian statements that feature in the first and second letter appear to be lacking in the third. Here, Christianity is mentioned most prominently when Toland laments its degeneration into mystery, idolatry and superstition. He does offer, near the end of the letter, a redefinition of Christianity as a moral institution: not as 'a politick Faction or a bare Sound; but as an Institution design'd to rectify our Morals, to give us just Ideas of the Divinity, and consequently to extirpate all superstitious Opinions and Practices.'⁸⁴ This conception of Christianity as dealing with morality rather than truth brings to mind Spinoza: Toland, however, appears to identify a second function of religion in general and of Christianity in particular. For instance, elsewhere in the third letter he notes that 'the Religion of the Gentiles (as contrary or superadded to the Light of Reason) is such as cou'd not influence Virtue or Morality very much in this Life, nor afford any certain Hopes or Security against the Terror of Death.'⁸⁵

To the *moral* function of religion, then, should be added the *psychological* function, which also played such a significant part in the second letter: the role of religion as a mental and emotional safeguard against the prospect of death. In both respects, Toland considered Christianity superior to the heathen religions, which were fraught with superstition. But what of heathen *reason*?

In the passage where Toland discusses the religious persecutions in heathen societies, he mentions that there were, in fact, fewer such persecutions among the heathens than among the Christians. According to Toland, this was due to the fact that the heathen priests were subjected to the state, whereas 'the Christian Priests (except in a very few Protestant Countrys) overtop the Government, and are every where absolute Masters of the

⁸² Ibid., p. 65-6.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 66.

⁸⁴ *Letters to Serena*, p. 128.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

Understanding of the Laity.⁸⁶ One should therefore not conclude from this that 'Heathenism was a better Foundation for Virtue than Christianity', though one might say that 'the Law of Nature was often better fulfill'd by Heathens than Christians'. After all, the 'sound Notions or moral Practices' of such non-Christian societies can only be ascribed to 'the Light of Reason, whereof Heathenism was a notorious Corruption.'⁸⁷

Where does this leave Christianity? As a moral institution it may have been superior to heathen religion, but it was, apparently, less effective in inducing people to virtuous behaviour than the 'Light of Reason' among the heathens. The moral function of Christianity is thus equalled and even superseded by secular reason. As for the psychological function, it had already been suggested in both the second and third letter that the fear of death and hope for immortality are of doubtful merit when it comes to choosing one's beliefs. Were hope and fear not 'founded in Ignorance'; were they not among 'the chief Causes of Superstition'?⁸⁸ Furthermore, the example of Pliny had shown that those among the heathens who were neither superstitious nor, for that matter, religious, had no need for a doctrine of immortality.⁸⁹ On the contrary: in Toland's quotation Pliny calls death (that is, death *without* immortality) 'the principal Good of Nature', whereas the credulous belief in a future life merely 'doubles the Pains of a dying Man'.⁹⁰

This perspective, which I would style the 'philosophical view of death', will resurface on several occasions in Toland's oeuvre, to such an extent that it suggests itself to be representative of his personal views. Yet again, this matter will have to rest until further discussion later on. For now, I believe one may safely conclude that, taking into account the two functions of religion identified by Toland, Christianity wins of heathen religion on both counts. It cannot, however, be said to win of the light of reason among the heathens. If it is a competition for superiority, Christianity and pagan (or any kind of) reason come to a draw where the *moral* function of religion is concerned. As for the *psychological* function, Christianity may be seen to triumph – but it is, at the same time, confronted with the futility of the prize.

CONNECTIONS

To any reader of the letters, it should therefore be clear that radical conclusions *can* be drawn – the question is if they *must*. The ambiguities recounted above show that the letters cannot be designated as essentially Christian merely on the basis of their Christian statements. On closer reading, these statements appear to have a fog-like quality: they disintegrate when one tries to grasp them firmly. The question now is whether it can also be said that, beneath this haze of ambiguities, radical implications take concrete shape: in other words, whether the letters are not only negatively unorthodox, but positively heterodox. To

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 116.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 116-7.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 9, p. 78.

⁸⁹ In *Adeisidaemon* Toland will claim that Pliny is 'not credulous, to such an extent that he cannot even be called religious', as is shown by his attack on the immortality of the soul. (*Adeisidaemon*, p. 24: '[Plinius] adeo non credulus certè, ut nullatenus religiosus dici possit; cum, libro septimo *Historiae naturalis*, animarum immortalitatem ex consulto impugnaverit.')

⁹⁰ As quoted by Toland in *Letters to Serena*, p. 66.

unearth the roots of *Serena's* radicalism, I will zoom out to survey this text within the wider context and contours of Toland's other works.

Before I do so, it should be noted that the three letters are themselves interconnected in a subtle yet significant way. The first letter lays bare the psychological, social and cultural roots of human prejudices. The second letter, which identifies the funeral rites of the ancient Egyptians as the historical source of the doctrine of the soul's immortality, claims that this doctrine was anchored in the collective consciousness by the very mechanism described in the first letter. Finally, the third letter expands the message of the previous one by arguing that the Egyptian funeral rites were likewise the historical and cultural source of all religious superstition and idolatry, and of the particular religions themselves. One might argue, by extension, that the immortality of the soul is just another superstition. And what of Christianity itself?

In the first letter, religion is explicitly associated with prejudice; in the third, with superstition and idolatry. The second, moreover, contains a sceptical motif concerning a specific theological doctrine (as said, that of the immortality of the soul), which is common and essential to polytheistic and monotheistic religions alike. The doctrine, says Toland, was not based on human reason, but on a psychological need. As the Egyptian practice of mummification preceded the belief in immortality, so an egotistical motive (i.e. the fear of death) preceded the rational arguments for believing it. Even the philosophers did not give their assent to the doctrine because of the reasons in its favour: rather they tried to devise such reasons in order to found a doctrine in which they already believed.

In toto, therefore, the letters offer a psychological, historical and almost sociological analysis of the mechanism by which religion could evolve, both as a specific thought-structure in the human mind, and as an institution in human culture. Together, they form an offensive piece of machinery pointing in the direction of religion in general, from which Christianity is barely set apart.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

When we zoom out further and expand our view to comprise Toland's entire oeuvre, the first three *Letters to Serena* show themselves to be a crossroads of topics that hark back to his earlier works and point forward to his later ones. It has already been argued that several of Toland's steps in *Serena* – his analysis of the origin of prejudices and his criticism of the fabulous traditions of the heathens – can be retraced to one of his earliest publications, namely, the *Two Essays*.⁹¹ Likewise, the letters can be said to continue at least part of the project started in *Christianity not Mysterious*. Though *Serena* is not as expressly presented as an effort to clear the ground of religion for the sake of religion, both works do bring to light the corruption of Christianity through remnants of pagan superstition. If the earlier book criticised the proliferation of *mysterics* in Christianity, the first letter to *Serena* does the same for *prejudices*; the third, for *superstitions*.

At the same time, there are several ways in which the three letters significantly foreshadow Toland's later work. His apparently new-found fascination of ancient philosophers such as Cicero, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras and Pliny, which has already admitted of some ambiguity in the case of the last two, will rise to the fore more prominently in *Adeisidaemon*, 'Clidophorus', and *Pantheisticon*. Connected to this ancient orientation is the

⁹¹ See above, Ch. 1, p. 14. The latter theme will reappear, as noted, in *Nazarene* and 'Clidophorus'.

question of Toland's views on death, whether philosophical or religious, which will resurface in these and other works. Finally, and most importantly, his repeated mention of philosophical dissimulation in the letters, including the concept of an internal doctrine next to an external one, will play a large and dubious part in both 'Clidophorus' and *Pantheisticon*, in which context I will discuss it further on.

But it is, I believe, *Serena's* connection to *Christianity not Mysterious* that is decisive in contesting the claim by De Gruijter (and others) that the first three letters are neither original, radical nor remarkable. Though De Gruijter does acknowledge a strong thematic continuity between these letters and *Christianity*, for him this is a reason for supposing both to belong to an identical 'Christian discourse'.⁹² This of course presupposes that *Christianity* is itself an essentially Christian text. At the end of the previous chapter I have tried to show that the gist of the book is more complicated: Toland argued, in effect, that the doctrines of Christianity are fundamentally dependent upon the divinity (i.e. the authenticity) of Scripture. At the same time, he failed to satisfy this strictest of conditions, upon which he himself insisted. Does this poignant line of thought in *Christianity* not cast an entirely different light upon Toland's argumentation in *Serena* – and, most importantly, on his avowal of divine revelation?

Let me rephrase. In *Christianity*, the certainty of Christian truth became conditional upon the authenticity of divine revelation. At no point in *Serena* does Toland distance himself from this claim. The first three letters, which in several ways can be seen as a continuation of his earlier work, may therefore be bound by the same condition as was *Christianity*: that God's revelation must be authenticated for Christian truth to be confirmed. Like *Christianity*, then, the letters hinge on the divinity of revelation. If it is divine, then there is no reason to believe that Christianity is infiltrated by prejudice and superstition. However, if its divinity cannot be proven, then Christianity must automatically be ranked among the other religions, which are shown to be prejudiced and superstitious; like them, it must be subjected to rational scrutiny. In *Serena*, as in *Christianity not Mysterious*, the certainty of Christian truth is the only buffer Christianity has against the heat of Toland's attacks on the corruption of other religions. If this buffer falls, then the Christian religion may well be sucked down in the same maelstrom of criticism that threatens to swallow the others.

Of course, all is not yet lost for Christianity. In both *Serena* and *Christianity*, the divinity of revelation is not opposed, but presupposed; not disproven, but unproven. If the works were to be followed by a series of attempts to firmly found the authority of revelation, De Gruijter's contentions might after all be warranted. Yet De Gruijter's analysis ends with *Serena*; and Toland proceeded to do precisely the contrary of what a proponent of the Christian interpretation would expect. I have already lifted part of this veil at the end of chapter two, and I will lift it entirely in the coming chapters. For now, let me say again that in the remainder of his writing career Toland would bring forth publications that did not make the authority of Scripture more certain, but less so.

Not only are the letters a continuation of the critical forces amassed in *Christianity*, but they are likewise an anticipation or implication of those of *Nazarenus*, *Pantheisticon*, and *Tetradymus*. I will argue in the following chapter that this later orientation on scriptural criticism was also anticipated by Toland's *Amyntor*, published as early as 1699. This suggests that *Serena* was not isolated from Toland's more biblical, or anti-biblical, fascinations, but embedded in the argumentative structure of the surrounding works.

⁹² De Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 32.

Hence, there are three reasons why the first part of *Serena* can be called both radical and remarkable. First, one must take into account the active role played by ambiguities in shaping the message of each of the letters. Second, the three letters are interconnected in such a way as to have more impact together than each would on its own. Third, it is in connection to the broader scope of Toland's project that the most controversial aspects of the letters are amplified and confirmed. In this triangular light, furthermore, the letters show their originality. It resides not so much in the arguments themselves, as it is true that Toland borrowed freely from other notorious names, but in the corrosive ambiguities and bundled strategic force of the letters and Toland's other works. Are we then justified in calling the first three letters of *Serena* 'rather unremarkable and unoriginal in themselves'? *In themselves* – perhaps. But remarkable and original they are.

LETTERS TO HANOVER?

Before the chapter on this part of *Serena* can be closed, there is one more aspect of the letters that must be discussed. It has to do with one of Toland's royal correspondents, who is often supposed to be concealed within the title of this work, beneath the mysterious name of 'Serena'. When Toland published the letters in 1704, he did not identify Serena, though he attested to the fact that 'she's a very real Person' and extensively praised her admirable character traits.⁹³ It was not until the publication of *Adeisidaemon* in 1709 that Toland revealed Serena to be 'the incomparable Queen of Prussia', i.e. Sophia Charlotte.⁹⁴ Though no external evidence can be found to corroborate Toland's testimony, it has gone unquestioned throughout the ages, and has been universally accepted by historians.

Two decades ago, however, Rienk Vermij published an article in which reasons were given that suggest the contrary – an article of which most Toland scholars, judging from their failure to respond to its arguments, are strangely unaware. Here Vermij points out that an 'as yet unnoticed Dutch translation of John Toland's first "Letter to Serena" was published anonymously at Amsterdam in 1710, as an introduction to a book containing some translations of French deistic literature.'⁹⁵ Whereas (as Vermij claims) the other texts and selected fragments in this edition have been rather accurately translated, the Dutch version of Toland's letter shows several surprising textual deviances from the 1704 English publication. Each of the texts contains passages lacking in the other, yet the Dutch version is on the whole 'sharper with respect to religion'.⁹⁶ The Dutch version omits Toland's moderating statement that the general deceptive function of priests 'cannot concern the Orthodox Clergy'⁹⁷; it features several controversial and provocative remarks that do not appear in the English text; and in a few instances the Dutch elaborates where the English is concise.⁹⁸

Furthermore, the Dutch text is dated 20 October 1702, whereas the English version gives no date other than that of its publication; yet Toland's biographers agree that he started work

⁹³ 'Preface' to *Letters to Serena*, par. 9.

⁹⁴ Toland identifies Serena in reference to the third letter: 'In Epistola de Origine Idolatriae, quam, sub tecto SERENAE nomine, ad incomparabilem Prussiae Reginam inscripsi ...' See *Adeisidaemon*, p. 28.

⁹⁵ 'Summary' in Rienk Vermij, 'Toland's eerste brief aan Serena', p. 22.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Letters to Serena*, p. 8.

⁹⁸ Vermij, 'Toland's eerste brief', p. 16-19.

on *Serena* around the time of his second visit to Hanover, in 1702.⁹⁹ Most importantly, in the Dutch edition the letter is addressed *not* to Serena or any such intellectual lady, but to an English 'Mylord', dubbed 'N.N.'¹⁰⁰ In both versions, the opening lines suggesting a personal relationship between Toland and the addressee are identical but for the substitution, in the Dutch text, of 'Mylord' for 'Madam'.¹⁰¹ As Vermij tentatively concludes, the comparison between both letters suggests the 1710 Dutch version to be a reliable translation of an earlier, original text from 1702, whereas the 1704 English version appears to be a modification of the original, so as to be suitable for publication and distribution among an English audience.

Although Toland did, in all probability, have Sophia Charlotte in mind upon the *publication* of the three letters, we now have fewer reasons to suppose that she inspired their *composition*, or that she ever was their actual recipient. As Vermij notes, when in 1721 the German scholar Mosheim asked around about the letters, he found that no one in Berlin had heard of them; and it was only after the death of Sophia Charlotte in 1705 that Toland identified her as Serena.¹⁰² Toland's addressing the letters to a mysterious and eminent lady, later revealed to be of royal birth, rather than to an anonymous 'Mylord' might therefore be an act of self-advertisement. And perhaps Toland did look back to the Lucretian epitaph ('*Edita Doctrinâ Sapientum Templâ Serena*') on the title-page of the *Two Essays* when coming up with an appropriately evocative name for his new fictitious addressee.¹⁰³

Such observations may be confined to the realm of probability, not knowledge, but they do serve to further distance the *Letters to Serena* from the political context in which they are sometimes (dis)placed. De Gruijter for instance believes nearly every argument in *Serena* to be 'formulated with the cause of the Hanoverian Succession firmly in mind.'¹⁰⁴ According to him, the letters boil down to Toland's application of 'a political perspective that supported the interests of Hanover' to an elaborated version of Lockean ideas. The *Letters to Serena*, therefore, 'could just as well have been named *Letters to Hanover*.'¹⁰⁵

However, as the letters were probably not originally addressed to Serena, and never posted to either Berlin or Hanover, this political framework is pushed further into the background. I believe the letters should be read not in the context of Toland's political works of roughly the same time, but in that of his religious – or irreligious – writings. The letters, written neither to Serena nor to Hanover, would more aptly be represented in connection to *Christianity not Mysterious* and those works that deepen and refine Toland's critical message. If anything, the letters could be renamed 'Christianity not Superstitious.'

⁹⁹ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 11; Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁰ Vermij, 'Tolands eerste brief', p. 13.

¹⁰¹ The English version: 'You greatly complain, MADAM, that you are still a Captive to several Prejudices; and I wonder more how you came to get rid of so many.' (*Letters to Serena*, p. 1). The Dutch version: 'Gy klaagt dikwils tegen my, Mylord, dat gy altyd met veele vooroordeelen zyt bezet; en my aangaande, ik ben veel eer verwondert hoe gy van zoo grooten getal der zelve hebt ontslagen.' (Quoted in Vermij, 'Tolands eerste brief', p. 20).

¹⁰² Vermij, 'Tolands eerste brief', p. 13.

¹⁰³ See above, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ De Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

4. CANONS AND CATALOGUES (1699-1722)

One of the books that sprang from Toland's political orientation in the years following the publication of *Christianity*, was his 1698 *Life of John Milton*, which prefaced a new edition of Milton's works. In this biography 'Toland did not shrink from applauding and commending Milton's explicitly republican texts,' as Justin Champion notes; but 'he also paid very close attention to the ecclesiastical writings.'¹ Throughout the work, Toland reiterated Milton's criticism of kingly and priestly tyranny, and included elaborate quotations from Milton's most polemical works to emphasise these themes.

The picture painted of Milton thus consisted of viewpoints with which Toland himself was broadly in agreement. However, from the onset Toland denies that his biography was biased either in Milton's favour or against it: 'I am neither writing a satyr, nor a panegyric upon MILTON, but publishing the true history of his actions, works, and opinions.' Toland is aware that historians are often 'suspected rather to make their hero what they would have him to be, than such as he really was', putting 'those words in his mouth which they might not speak themselves without incurring som danger'. He therefore promises to produce Milton's 'own words, as I find 'em in his works; that those who approve his reasons, may ow all the obligation to himself, and that I may escape the blame of such as may dislike what he says.'² In Champion's view, this historical method served as a strategic device: 'Toland (in general agreeing with Milton's ideas) justified the re-articulation of Milton's republican sentiments by the injunctions of the *ars historica*.'³

Among the points on the Miltonic agenda reproduced by Toland was the controversial discussion of the *Eikon Basilike*. The latter work, which portrayed King Charles I as a 'Royal Martyr', a 'neotype of the crucified Christ',⁴ was published in the days after the king's beheading by parliament in 1649, and popularly attributed to the king himself. Later in 1649, Milton published *Eikonoklastes*, in which he both deconstructed the almost hagiographical attempts of the *Eikon Basilike* to eulogise Charles and called into question the king's purported authorship.⁵ Toland, in his turn, would approvingly restate Milton's critique, especially his denial of royal authorship: by 'the composition, stile, and timing of this book', it showed itself to be 'rather the production of som idle clergyman, than the work of a distrest prince', and to 'smell rankly of a system of the pulpit.'⁶ He then presented new evidence to support the alternative theory that Bishop John Gauden was the true author of *Eikon Basilike*.⁷

Though Toland's *Milton* was attacked from several corners for both its anti-royalist and anti-clerical statements, the most interesting controversy rose from the context of the *Eikon*

¹ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 102.

² Toland, *The Life of John Milton*, p. 2-3.

³ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 101.

⁴ Jim Daems & Holly Faith Nelson, 'Introduction', in: *Eikon basilike*, p. 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22-34.

⁶ *The Life of John Milton*, p. 70-1.

⁷ Gauden had in 1661 claimed authorship; however, some modern scholars believe that, as 'there is substantial historical and stylistic evidence to support both the authorship of Charles I and John Gauden, we are best served to read the King's Book as a heteroglossic collaborative royalist effort.' (Daems & Nelson, 'Introduction', p. 21).

Basilike discussion. In a rather long and disconcerting passage, Toland remarks that, having observed the many deceptions surrounding the book's authorship,

I cease to wonder any longer how so many supposititious pieces under the name of CHRIST, his apostles, and other great persons, should be publish'd and approv'd in those primitive times, when it was of so much importance to have 'em believ'd; when the cheats were too many on all sides for them to reproach one another, which yet they often did when commerce was not near so general as now, and the whole earth intirely overspread with the darkness of superstition. I doubt rather the spuriousness of several more such books is yet undiscover'd, thro the remoteness of those ages, the death of the persons concern'd, and the decay of other monuments which might give us true information...⁸

On January 30th 1699, the day on which Charles' execution was traditionally commemorated by the Church of England, the Reverend Ofspring Blackall drew attention to this passage in his sermon to the House of Commons. Not only, said Blackall, did Toland 'have the Boldness, without Proof, and against Proof, to deny the Authority' of *Eikon Basilike*; but he

is such an Infidel as to doubt, and is Shameless and impudent enought, even in Print, and in a Christian Countrey, publickly to affront our Holy Religion, by declaring his Doubt, *That several Pieces under the Name of Christ and his Apostles*, he must mean those now received by the whole Christian Church, for I know of no other, *are suppositious*...⁹

Blackall thus considered Toland to have 'openly struck' at the officially received doctrines and scriptures of Christianity, including those of the New Testament, and consequently at 'the Foundation of all Revealed Religion'. He stressed the danger of Toland's enterprise: 'if this Foundation be peck'd at and undermined, and so weakened, that one Part of the Building falls to the Ground, I doubt it will be impossible, by any Art, to uphold the other.'¹⁰

It is this criticism, perhaps foreseen by Toland, that would spur him into producing, in the form of a counter-attack, one of his most enigmatic works.

AMYNTOR (1699)

In *Amyntor: or, a Defence of Milton's Life*, which was published twice in the same year,¹¹ Toland begins by expressing his surprise at the charges laid against him and insisting again on his use of the historical method: the *Life of Milton* is an impartial biography and therefore Toland cannot be blamed for the reader disliking what he finds there.¹² Turning to the allegations made by Blackall, he quotes the entire passage from *Milton* that gave rise to the offense. According to Toland, 'it is plain, that, I say, a great many spurious Books were early father'd on CHRIST, his Apostles, and other great Names, part whereof are still acknowledg'd to be genuine, and the rest to be forg'd'.¹³ Though the New Testament had never been mentioned, still Blackall had brusquely concluded that Toland 'must mean those

⁸ *The Life of John Milton*, p. 77-8. The passage is quoted in its entirety by Toland in *Amyntor*, p. 14-15.

⁹ Ofspring Blackall, *A Sermon Preach'd before the Honourable House of Commons at St. Margarets Westminster*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ I.e. in April and May of 1699. See Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 193.

¹² Toland, *Amyntor*, p. 3-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

now received by the whole Christian Church, for I know of no other'.¹⁴ Toland interpreted the latter remark as a confession of ignorance on Blackall's part, and took the opportunity to poke fun at his adversary:

A cogent Argument truly! and clearly proves his Logic to be just of a Piece with his Reading. I admire what this Gentleman has bin doing so long at the University, that he should be such a great Stranger to these things.¹⁵

If Blackall had known more of the Church Fathers, as he ought to have, he would have been familiar with works attributed to the apostles outside the New Testament. But even without 'the help of the Fathers', Blackall should have realised that Toland 'did not mean the Books of the New Testament, when I mention'd Supposititious Pieces under the Name of CHRIST, since there is none ascrib'd to him in the whole Bible'.¹⁶ However, 'to convince all the World that I did not intend by those Pieces the Books of the New Testament', Toland will 'here insert a large Catalogue of Books anciently ascrib'd to JESUS CHRIST, his Apostles, their Acquaintance, Companions, and Contemporaries'.¹⁷ He promises to distinguish between the books that were accepted and rejected by the Fathers, and to 'name those Pieces of whose Spuriousness I doubted, tho' their Authority is still receiv'd'.¹⁸

Toland keeps his promise: he includes a catalogue of twenty-one pages, in which he lists spurious books attributed to Jesus, Mary, the Apostles and Disciples, but also those ascribed to Old Testament names such as Eve and Abraham; the purported Gospels of the Hebrews and Egyptians; and '*Pieces alledg'd in favour of Christianity, which were forg'd under the Name of Heathens*'.¹⁹ Having completed his list, Toland is able to say that by the 'spurious Pieces' mentioned in *Milton*, he had not meant books from the New Testament, but 'a good parcel of those Books in the Catalogue' – though not all. The spurious books, he believes, were either forged by 'som more zealous than discreet Christians'; by 'designing Men to support their privat Opinions'; or by 'Heathens and Jews to impose on the Credulity of many wel-dispos'd Persons, who greedily swallow'd any Book for Divine Revelation that contain'd a great many Miracles, mixt with a few good Morals'.²⁰

THE CHURCH FATHERS

According to Toland, some of the catalogued books were generally accepted by the Church of England as well as that of Rome, following the example of the Fathers, and still 'read with extraordinary Veneration', though 'in my privat Opinion I could not think 'em genuin'.²¹ This already shows that Toland, who called one of these books 'the sillyest Book in the World',²² was not convinced of the reliability of the Church Fathers in determining authenticity – and he continues to discredit their authority. Toland does not believe all the books in the catalogue to be spurious, but he expresses his doubts about the selection of the canon:

¹⁴ Blackall, *A Sermon*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Amyntor*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1607.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Such as 'the Works of [Hermes] *Trismegistus*' (*ibid.*, p. 40.) The entire catalogue runs from p. 20-41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43-4.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

I am so far from rejecting all those Books of the New Testament which we now receive, that I am rather solicitous lest, as in the dark Ages of Popery, those we commonly call Apochryphal Books, were added to the Bible, so at the same time, and in as ignorant Ages before, several others might be taken away, for not suiting all the Opinions of the strongest Party.²³

For instance, no one knows how many ‘true and spurious Gospels or Histories of CHRIST were extant in St. LUKE’s time’, and Toland criticises the Church Father Irenaeus for delivering precarious arguments to the effect ‘that there cannot be more, nor fewer than Four Gospels’.²⁴ Though the selection of the biblical canon was based primarily upon the testimony of the Fathers, they themselves were often in disagreement: in fact, ‘there is not one single Book in the New Testament which was not refus’d by som of the Ancients as unjustly father’d upon the Apostles, and really forg’d by their Adversaries’, but no one considers this ‘a good Reason to disapprove them’.²⁵ Toland mentions several examples of texts that ‘were a long time plainly doubted by the Ancients, particularly by those whom we ‘esteem the soundest part; and yet they are receiv’d, (not without convincing Arguments) by the Moderns.’ In practice, therefore, the votes of the Fathers are not always counted. Conversely, if ‘the Approbation of the Fathers be a proper Recommendation of any Books’, then there are several other works which should be included in the canon upon their authority.²⁶

Neither does Toland consider the Council of Laodicea (363-4 A.D.) as authoritative. The Council, says Toland, ‘could not among so great a variety of Books as were then abroad in the World, certainly determin which were the true Monuments of the Apostles,’ unless they had ‘a particular Revelation from Heaven’ to guide them in this choice: but ‘of any extraordinary Revelation made to this Council we hear not a Word’. If on the other hand they decided ‘by crediting the Testimony of their Ancestors’, Toland claims that ‘for the Books I defend, I have the same Testimony which is usually alledg’d in the behalf of others.’²⁷ Toland will let this go for now, but assures Blackall that ‘if he must needs have me to be a Heretic I am not unteachable’ – as long as the Reverend gives good reasons for his cause. Instead of ‘censuring and calumniating’, says Toland,

let such as are better enlighten’d endeavor to extricate the Erroneous out of these or the like Difficulties, that they may be able to distinguish truly, and that in such an extraordinary number of books, all pretending equally to a Divine Origin, they may have som infallible Marks of discerning the proper Rule, lest they unhappily mistake the false one for the true.²⁸

HEATHENS AND HERETICS

That such an authentication of the canon is crucially important can be seen from ‘the Ancient as well as our Modern Unbelievers.’²⁹ Here Toland notes how Celsus, that arch-critic of Christianity, ‘exclaims against the too great Liberty which the Christians (as if they were

²³ Ibid., p. 49.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 50-1.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 57-8. It is unclear to me which are exactly the books Toland ‘defends’.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 59-60.

drunk, says he) took of changing the first writing of the Gospel three, or four, or more times, that so they might deny whatever was urg'd against 'em as retracted before.' Furthermore, Toland mentions 'a very considerable Sect of the Christians themselves, I mean the *Manichaeans*, who shewed other Scriptures, and deny'd the Genuinness of the whole New Testament.'³⁰ He then includes two elaborate quotes from the Manichean Faustus of Mileve, who criticised the Christian arrogance in thinking 'that of all Books in the World, the Testament of the Son only could not be corrupted', and contested the authenticity of the gospels.³¹

In the dawn of Christianity, there were always sects among the Christians who doubted a certain part of the New Testament, if not the whole. Toland therefore admonishes Blackall 'to spend his time in preventing the Mischievous Inferences which Heretics may draw from hence, or to remove the Scruples of doubting but sincere Christians', rather than attacking Toland, whose only fault, if it is one, is that he believes 'more Scripture than his Adversaries.'³² Toland expresses his hope that some clergyman will write in more detail about the history of the canon; if not, he will do so himself:

and if I ever write it, I promise it shall be the fairest History, and the only one of that kind that ever appear'd; For I shall lay all the Matters of Fact together in their natural Order, without making the least Remark of my own, or giving it a Color in favor of any Sect or Opinion, leaving all the Word [World] to judge for themselves, and to build what they please with those Materials I shall furnish 'em.³³

Having helpfully, or patronisingly, pointed Blackall in the direction of not only the Fathers, but of a number of contemporary patristic scholars,³⁴ Toland (in Champion's words) 'reinforced his pretensions to pious erudition by completing his arguments with another act of citation'.³⁵ He includes a long quotation from the renowned Henry Dodwell, which spans nine pages and describes how the early church did not enforce the distinction between the canonical and apocryphal books of the New Testament.³⁶ According to Toland, anyone who wishes to write about the biblical canon has to find a way to solve the problems contained within this passage: for instance,

how the immediate Successors and Disciples of the Apostles could so grossly confound the genuine Writings of their Masters, with such as were falsly attributed to them; or since they were in the dark about these Matters so early, how came such as follow'd 'em by a better Light; why all those Books which are cited by CLEMENS and the rest should not be counted equally Authentic; and what stress should be laid on the Testimony of those Fathers, who not only contradict one another, but are often inconsistent with themselves in their Relations of the very same Facts...³⁷

³⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

³¹ Ibid., p. 61-4.

³² Ibid., p. 65.

³³ Ibid., p. 67-8.

³⁴ Toland mentions 'RIVET, Father SIMON, DU PIN, IITGIUS [ITTIGIUS], Dr. CAVE, ERNESTUS GRABIUS', but adds that *Amyntor* contains 'a much larger Catalogue than was publish'd by any of these.' (Ibid., p. 66).

³⁵ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 203.

³⁶ *Amyntor*, p. 69-78.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 79-80.

Here Toland rests his case. He believes he has defended himself adequately against this part of Blackall's accusations: in the remainder of *Amyntor* he will supply more evidence to support his and Milton's claim that *Eikon Basilike* was not authored by Charles. Yet, as he says at the very end of the catalogue section, he is aware that some people will not be satisfied: 'for they are sagacious enough to discover the hidden Poyson of every Word, and will be sure to give loud warning of the Danger, to shew where the Snake lies in the Grass, and to tell what's in the Belly of the *Trojan* Horse.'³⁸

OTHER CATALOGUES (1699-1722)

Thus a single passage in *Milton* grew into a twenty-page catalogue in *Amyntor*: or, as Champion remarks, 'Toland expanded his brief remarks about supposititious Christian works into a detailed catalogue of materials listing references to over seventy titles.'³⁹ If the catalogue had done what it pretended to do, which was to distance Toland from the controversial stance imputed on him by Blackall, we might not give this another thought. But even more clearly than *Christianity* and *Serena*, *Amyntor* carries a number of controversial implications within its folds, and therefore is interesting precisely for what it does not say. Toland may explicitly state that his doubts concerning the authenticity of certain texts do *not* apply to the books of the New Testament, but he consequently gives the reader every reason to think these should also be suspected.

From the onset, Toland's uncertainty about the canonical selection of the New Testament is shown by his concerns that inauthentic books may have been added to the canon, or authentic ones removed.⁴⁰ His attack on Irenaeus implies that Toland does not believe that the number of Gospels can only be four: in principle, there might be more, there might be less.⁴¹ His dismissal of the authority of the Church Fathers, who disagreed so often that every book from the New Testament was refused by one of them at some point in history, leaves the canon without a basis for its authenticity.⁴² If the Council of Laodicea had had some 'extraordinary revelation', this would have justified their selection – but of such revelation 'we hear not a word'.⁴³ Though the 'better enlighten'd' are advised to bring forth any 'infallible marks' they might have for distinguishing the true books from the false, Toland provides no certain rule, and does not specify what would be such an infallible mark.⁴⁴

Furthermore, when Toland draws attention to 'the Ancient as well as our Modern Unbelievers,' and mentions 'the Mischievous Inferences which Heretics may draw' from the chaotic history of the canonical selection process, he effectively highlights the way in which these considerations can give rise to radical conclusions.⁴⁵ In *Serena*, Toland will refer to non-Christian sources; in *Amyntor*, he incorporates positively *anti-Christian* ones, by way of Celsus the heathen, and Faustus the heretic. In a way, then, *Amyntor* functions as a signpost pointing towards the road to unbelief, instead of blocking it.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

³⁹ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 193.

⁴⁰ *Amyntor*, p. 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50-1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 57-8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59-60, 65.

SCHOLARLY RESPONSES

As Champion points out, Toland's display of erudition in *Amyntor*, as later in *Nazarenus*, had an important strategic function. Especially his system of bibliographical reference and citation, which spread out into the writings of the revered Church Fathers and the dubious apocryphal texts themselves, consisted in 'both an epistemological and rhetorical transaction: it was both a claim to knowledge and an assertion of status within the community of scholars.'⁴⁶ One could not deflect such a well-equipped infiltration into the scholarly ranks merely by publicly dismissing Toland's seditious intentions: one had to disarm Toland, dismantle his weaponry, and prove to the public that his gun was never loaded. Toland was thus taken seriously, the better to be refuted.

In 1700, one year after *Amyntor* was published, scholars such as John Richardson and Stephen Nye engaged in the laborious effort of scrutinising each of Toland's references and retracing them to the original texts. Blackall himself had, already in 1699, accepted *Amyntor* as a retraction of the questionable remarks in *Milton*: though he claimed to have been justified in doubting Toland's intentions, he believed that Toland 'now agrees with me, that the Books of the New Testament are Genuine, which was all *I* ever meant to contend for.'⁴⁷ Richardson, however, considered *Amyntor* to be a confirmation of Blackall's interpretation, though it poses as a rebuttal: first Toland 'pretends to clear himself from the Aspersions of Mr. *Blackall*, and prove that he never insinuated that any of the Books of the New Testament might justly be question'd,' then he 'proceeds (if I understand English) to assert the same with open Face'. This was, according to Richardson, 'just as if a Man should Vindicate himself from having ever Rob'd on the High-way, and as soon as he had finish'd his discourse, should fall upon and Spoil the next Traveller he meets.'⁴⁸

Both Richardson and Nye pointed out Toland's faulty scholarship, his misappropriation and distortion of patristic learning, both primary and secondary, and his devious use of heretical sources. Toland's army of references branched out into texts and contexts that, if fully and faithfully quoted, would not have supported the conclusions he drew from them. For instance, Toland would argue that certain Church Fathers considered a canonical book to be spurious, or that they accepted a spurious book as authentic, and then authorise his argument by referring to specific passages in their writings: these passages, however, would contain no such claims. Furthermore, as both Richardson and Nye disapprovingly noted, Toland had extracted the anti-Christian remarks by Celsus and Faustus from the Christian rebuttals by Origen and Augustine, without quoting the corresponding counter-arguments. More often than not, Toland appeared to have pasted a new meaning to his sources, or to have used them selectively and crookedly for his own purposes.⁴⁹

To this Nye, who (it can only be intentionally) misrepresented Toland as having invoked 'the Devil and his Angels',⁵⁰ added that *Amyntor* was often ambiguous, not so say self-

⁴⁶ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 208.

⁴⁷ Blackall, *Reasons for not Replying to a Book Lately Published Entitled Amyntor*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ John Richardson, *The Canon of the New Testament vindicated*, p. 2.

⁴⁹ For Champion's discussion of Toland's strategic use of references and citations in *Amyntor* as criticised by a.o. Richardson and Nye, see *Republican learning*, p. 203-7; and 'Introduction' to *Nazarenus*, p. 33-9.

⁵⁰ Toland's epigraph to *Amyntor* consists of a passage from Virgil, in which the gods are asked to aid the writer in revealing 'things hidden within the deep earth and darkness' ('*Pandere res alta terra & caligine mersas*' – see *Amyntor*, title page). Nye's translation has Toland asking the 'Gods and Ghosts of

contradictory. Toland, according to Nye, 'is of a different (and contrary) mind, in divers parts of his Book', sometimes appearing to argue for the admittance of certain apocrypha into the canon, and at other times denouncing these as forgeries.⁵¹ Later on, Nye offers a convincing reconstruction of the crux of Toland's argument: 1) the most highly respected of the Church Fathers considered several apocryphal books to be authentic. 2) 'The true Canon can be ascertained, only by Revelation, or the Testimony of the Fathers: Revelation there was none; and the Testimony of the Fathers is as home and full' for these apocrypha as it is for the books of the canon. 3) As we know that the Fathers were mistaken in their acceptance of some apocryphal texts, 'neither is their Testimony valuable concerning the Books of the New Testament, or present Scripture Canon.'⁵² Nye proceeds to deliver a confident step-by-step rebuttal of each of Toland's arguments. At the end of his and Richardson's refutation *Amyntor's* dangers, which consisted in the explosive combination of subversive content and scholarly form, were believed to have been dismantled.

THE CATALOGUE REVISITED

But were they really?

Contrary to what we might expect from Toland's mastery of 'the art of scholarly subversion',⁵³ Toland hardly responded to the new and challenging attacks waged on him by these and other critics. On the contrary: he appeared to consider the catalogue a work in progress, for he would continue to add new information and revise the subsequent versions until the end of his career, even producing a French translation. In 1710, Toland sent a scribal copy entitled 'Amyntor Canonicus ou Eclaircissement sur le Canon du Nouveau Testament' to another of his royal correspondents, Prince Eugene of Savoy.⁵⁴ In the same year, Jacob Arminius wrote to Toland from Amsterdam 'sur le sujet de votre Canon du Nouveau Testament, que vous m'a dit de avoir entre les mains pour quelque grand Seigneur, et que vous m'a promis de le copier, qu'and ce sera achevé.'⁵⁵ From Toland's own list of 'Manuscripts of mine abroad', in which he kept track of the circulation of his manuscripts outside of England, we know that Sir Thomas Hewett, architect and Whig acquaintance of Toland's best friend Robert Molesworth, had borrowed and returned a 'History of ye Canon' sometime between 1718 and 1720.⁵⁶

Whereas these intermediate versions have not survived, the final version has: it was included by Des Maizeaux in the 1726 posthumous collection of some of Toland's unpublished works.⁵⁷ Although the title (*A Catalogue of Books*, etc.) is identical to that of the

Hell' for protection, so that he 'safely may relate/ The blacker Secrets of our Church, and State.'
(Stephen Nye, *An historical account and defence of the canon*, p. 6).

⁵¹ Nye, *An historical account*, p. 6-7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 58-9.

⁵³ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 192.

⁵⁴ This version does not survive, but the Vienna archives list it as part of a collection named *Dissertations Diverses de Monsieur Tolandus*, which also contained a French translation of the *Letters to Serena*, an early version of 'Hodegus', a work entitled 'Christianisme judaïque et mahometan', to which I will return in the next chapter, and 'Deux Problemes historiques, theologiques et politiques.' See Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 257; Jordi Morillas Esteban, *Religión, ciencia y política en la filosofía de John Toland*, Chapter 1, p. 17 (online version).

⁵⁵ Quoted in Champion's edition of Toland, *Nazareus*, p. 314.

⁵⁶ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 46, 194.

⁵⁷ Toland, *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 350-403.

Amyntor catalogue, the later version is addressed 'to a Person of Quality in Holland'. In a new introduction, Toland summarises the controversy started by Blackall yet originating from Toland's remarks in the *Life of Milton*. The current catalogue is the same as that of *Amyntor*, yet it is 'very much enlarg'd, and more compleat than any hitherto publish'd.'⁵⁸ Champion has helpfully counted these additions: 'The first version (1699) contained seventeen general entries and discussed seventy-seven titles, while the final version (1726) had twenty general entries discussing over one hundred and ten titles.' As these numbers indicate, 'the vast majority of new material consisted of sub-entries added to already existing headings.'⁵⁹

Interestingly, in the face of all these new revisions and additions to the original *Amyntor* catalogue, Toland makes no effort to either defend himself against his critics, or to correct the mistakes and deceptions they brought to light. Whilst he makes note of his four 'principal Antagonists' (Blackall, Samuel Clarke, Nye and Richardson), he does not deem it necessary to respond to them: he merely suggests that several of his 'Answerers confound themselves by their mutual contradictions', and that 'the last Answerer seems to acknowledge in some sort, as if the rest had not succeeded in their efforts, since if they had, it must needs have been superfluous for him to write after them.'⁶⁰ Such a nonchalant dismissal of his opponents is rather out of character for Toland, who had published no less than three defences of *Christianity not Mysterious*, as well as *Amyntor* in defence of *Milton*; and would later publish 'Mangoneutes' in defence of *Nazarenus*.

These, however, were published works; the posthumous catalogue was not. Although its general presentation and introductory letter suggest it to have been a polished final version, the earlier versions may well have been presented in the same manner, bearing their own introductions, possibly addressed to Prince Eugene himself. The post-*Amyntor* catalogues were probably never meant to be published, but solely to be circulated in scribal form, primarily abroad (Holland, Vienna). According to Champion, Toland's lack of concern with 'the damage to his reputation as a learned man' inflicted by the furious reception of *Amyntor* suggests that 'such a reception may have been precisely the point of the catalogue.'⁶¹ Toland's purposes for distributing the later catalogues were perhaps not so much to spur polemics by means of a prominent though hostile public reception, but to disperse his ideas.

If *Amyntor* was little concerned with the rigorous conditions of respectable scholarship, the posthumous catalogue bordered upon plagiarism, Toland borrowing freely and shamelessly from such intricately tailored works as those by Johann Grabe and Johann Albertus Fabricius.⁶² More deviously, Toland balances the criticism against *Amyntor* by claiming that the book 'met with a favourable reception among the learned abroad, and particularly with the no less learned than laborious Professor FABRICIUS of Hamburg'.⁶³ This is astoundingly untrue. In the exact passage of the *Bibliothecae Graecae* to which Toland

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁵⁹ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 194.

⁶⁰ *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 356-7.

⁶¹ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 207.

⁶² See *ibid.*, p. 195-6.

⁶³ *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 355.

refers, the famous Johann Albertus Fabricius praises not *Amyntor*, but Richardson and Nye in their refutation of *Amyntor*.⁶⁴

Taking into consideration this growing tendency towards barely concealed acts of plagiarism, misappropriation and intellectual distortion, it is perhaps less surprising that Toland did neither defend nor correct himself in response to his critics: authenticity was simply not among his main concerns. And it is in this light of Toland's strategic, deceptive yet creative use of sources that we should see a connected work, *Nazarenus*. Here, Toland's catalogical efforts to blur the line between spurious and authentic books of Scripture would crystallise into a deliberate attempt to authenticate the spurious: into what Champion calls the promotion of a *forgery*.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ '...Richardsonus & Stephanus Nye in historica recensione & Apologia Canonis N.T. adversus Amyntorem Jo. Tolandi (qui tamen ipse Tolandus quoque disertis verbis negat se ullum N.T. librum vocare in dubium)'. Johann Albertus Fabricius, *Bibliothecae Graecae*, Vol. IV, p. 178.

⁶⁵ Champion, 'Introduction', to *Nazarenus*, p. 60.

5. CHRISTIANS, MAHOMETANS AND JEWS (1708-1720)

'Between 1707 and 1710,' says Robert Sullivan, 'Toland spent more time abroad than at home.'¹ He appeared again at the courts of Hanover and Berlin, and went on to Prague and Vienna. Des Maizeaux recounts that in Prague Toland visited the Irish Franciscans, on a genealogical mission to confirm his ancestry from 'an honourable, noble, and most ancient Family, recorded in the History of Ireland for several hundred years'² (namely, the Uí Thuathalláin³). When his political patron Harley lost his office in 1708, Toland decided to stay on in Holland until Harley's return to power in 1710.⁴ It was in Holland that he performed research for *Nazarenus* (in the public library of Leiden),⁵ and uncovered the apocryphal texts that would form the backbone of this work. Perhaps, then, this change of environment encouraged Toland in pursuing his controversial interests in canons and catalogues; possibly an interest from higher places did the same. In 1708 he had met Baron von Hohendorf, the advisor and, when it came to assembling radical books, 'partner in crime' to Prince Eugene of Savoy. Through him, he would come into contact with the Prince himself, and in Vienna he visited the Habsburg court.⁶ In the years that followed Toland would maintain a correspondence with both Eugene and Hohendorf, and at Hohendorf's request supply them with controversial texts and books, whether by Toland or others, to add to their heterodox libraries.⁷

The first of these mailings included a French scribal text boldly entitled 'Christianisme Judaique et Mahometan', which was in fact an early version of the first letter of *Nazarenus*, with rudiments of the second. Toland had drafted the material during his sojourn in Holland and sent two manuscript copies to Eugene and Hohendorf in 1710 as a part of his collection of *Dissertations diverses*.⁸ Even earlier than this, during the controversy that followed the publication of *Christianity not Mysterious*, Toland pondered the Christian-Muslim connection that would play a major part in the first letter of *Nazarenus*. According to Champion, Toland's private papers show that he was 'irritated' by the remarks of *Christianity's* critics that he was 'as famous an impostor as Mahomet' (said Peter Browne) or a 'Mahometan Christian' (said Robert South).⁹ Furthermore, on the reverse of an undated manuscript with Toland's comments on these allegations, he outlined a kind of book proposal or (in Champion's words) 'a mocked-up title page', under the heading of '*libri quaerendi*'. It runs as follows:

¹ Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 27.

² Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs', in: *A Collection*, p. v-vi.

³ See Richard Kearney, 'John Toland: an Irish Philosopher?' in: *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 208.

⁴ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 11.

⁵ Toland, *Nazarenus*, p. 116.

⁶ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 11; Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 33; Sullivan, *John Toland*, p. 29-30.

⁷ Thus Toland had dedicated his 1709 tract on Giordano Bruno to Hohendorf (*A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 304), and his 1712 *Cicero Illustratus* to both Eugene and Hohendorf, (*ibid.*, p. 231).

⁸ Champion, 'Introduction' to *Nazarenus*, p. 58-9; *Republican learning*, p. 237. See above, Ch. 4, n. 54.

⁹ Both quoted in Champion, 'Introduction' to *Nazarenus*, p. 56.

Mahometan Christianity:

or

An Account of ye ancient gospel of Barnabas,
and the modern gospel of the Turks, with some
reflections on the contexts between Peter and Paul
about the observation of the law of Moses by Christian
Believers.¹⁰

Nazarenus, though published as late as 1718, was thus not a work of the later Toland. We can see the title of the project evolve from 'Mahometan Christianity', via 'Christianisme Judaique et Mahometan', to *Nazarenus: or, Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity* – titles which in themselves show that Toland never lost the taste for stirring controversy after the uproar of *Christianity not Mysterious*. If this earlier book had already incited hostile reactions through its 'Heretical' and supposedly paradoxical title,¹¹ Toland's current feat of juxtaposing Christianity to Judaism and Islam was asking for trouble. More importantly, it appears that the general considerations of *Nazarenus* can be traced, with some probability, to the *Christianity* controversy; and its specific argument, with much certainty, to the year 1709. This was the year in which Toland, as he tells us, made two important discoveries. One was the *Codex Armachanus*, an apocryphal text or 'Irish Manuscript of the Four Gospels',¹² which he came upon in the Hague whilst cataloguing manuscripts for Harley's librarian Humphrey Wanley.¹³ The other was the Gospel of Barnabas.

In *Amyntor*, Toland had mentioned that an apocryphal book of that title and several others 'are quite lost; and were they extant, would probably appear to be as foolish and fabulous as the rest.'¹⁴ In the posthumous catalogue, however, Barnabas is appointed a section of his own, in which his Gospel, Epistle, and Passion are briefly surveyed. Concerning the first, Toland notes the following:

This Gospel of BARNABAS is still Extant, but interpolated by the Mahometans. There's but one copy of it in Christendom, accidentally discover'd by me at Amsterdam in the year 1709, and now in the Library of his most serene Highness Prince EUGENE of Savoy. But a full account of it is to be had in a volume I have written on this very subject, entitul'd, NAZARENUS, or *Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity*...¹⁵

The Gospel of Barnabas had come to Toland's attention through Johann Friedrich Cramer, counsellor to the king of Prussia. As Toland notes in *Nazarenus*, Cramer had the text 'out of the library of a person of great name and authority' in Amsterdam; in the French manuscript he specified that this person was 'un magistrat'.¹⁶ In 1713, Cramer would send the text on to

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 58.

¹¹ Toland, *An Apology*, p. 28; Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs', in: *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. Xiii.

¹² Toland, *Nazarenus*, p. 194, 120-1.

¹³ Champion notes that the *Codex*, 'along with many other valuable texts, was stolen from the French library by the renegade cleric Jean Aymon in 1707' and that Toland, through his connection to Wanley, was involved 'in the retention of the manuscript in England.' ('Introduction' to *Nazarenus*, p. 72); see also *Republican learning*, p. 171, for Toland's connection to Aymon.

¹⁴ *Amyntor*, p. 40.

¹⁵ *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 381.

¹⁶ *Nazarenus*, p. 143; Toland, 'Christianisme Judaique et Mahometan', in: *Nazarenus*, p. 261.

Eugene, whom Toland had already informed about its existence; it still resides in Vienna today.¹⁷

NAZARENUS (1718)

Though *Nazarenus* consists of two letters, one based on the Gospel of Barnabas, the other on the *Codex Armachanus*, I will here focus on the first. The second letter features a positive account of ancient Irish Christianity, which functions both as an ideal prototype of Christianity pure and uncorrupted, and as a pretext for launching a new attack against priestcraft and popery. Though the letter thus delivers an interesting argumentative twist, Toland's dislike of priestcraft is not in question here: in this, he never was ambiguous. It is to his dubious attitudes to canons and apocrypha, and to his strategic use of sources that I want to draw attention. For this, we must turn to the first letter of *Nazarenus*, and to the strange part that is played by the Gospel of Barnabas.

The first letter of *Nazarenus* can be thematically divided into three parts: one dealing with 'Mahometan Christianity', another with 'Jewish and Gentile Christianity', and one with the subtextual question of scriptural authentication that also drove the catalogues. The Gospel of Barnabas is only functional in the first and last of these topics; the second takes up the largest part of the letter, but although it has some connection to the other themes, it hangs rather curiously in between. I will here survey the letter according to this order of topics.

MAHOMETAN CHRISTIANITY

In the preface Toland tells his addressee (an unidentified 'D. S.') that by accounting for 'the Mahometan sentiments with relation to JESUS and the Gospel' he has represented the Mahometans 'as a sort of Christians, and not the worst sort neither, tho farr from being the best.'¹⁸ In the beginning of the letter itself (which, like the second letter, is addressed to 'Megaletor' – in all probability Eugene of Savoy),¹⁹ Toland rephrases:

tho the very title of *Mahometan Christianity* may be apt to startle you (for *Jewish or Gentile Christianity* shou'd not sound quite so strange) yet I flatter my self, that, by perusing the following *Dissertation*, you'll be fully convinc'd there is a sense, wherin the Mahometans may not improperly be reckon'd and call'd a sort or sect of Christians, as Christianity was at first esteem'd a branch of Judaism...²⁰

This association between Christianity and 'Mahometanism'²¹ is Toland's first subject, and he intends to prove it by showing 'some of the fundamental doctrines of Mahometanism to have their rise (...) from the earliest monuments of the Christian religion.'²² The Gospel of Barnabas provides the missing link to the Christian-Mahometan connection.

¹⁷ See Luigi Cirillo, Michel Frémaux (eds.), *Evangile de Barnabé*, p. v, 13, 323. (Champion wrongly identifies the 'Mr. CRAMER' mentioned by Toland as Johan Jacob Cramer in a footnote to *Nazarenus*, p. 143, n. 9).

¹⁸ *Nazarenus*, p. 116.

¹⁹ See below, p. 67, for a brief discussion of this pseudonym.

²⁰ *Nazarenus*, p. 135.

²¹ To preserve continuity with the original text, I have used Toland's terminology for Islamic concepts (Mahometan, Mahometanism and Alcoran, instead of the modern terms Muslim, Islam and Koran).

²² *Ibid.*

The Mahometans, according to Toland, believe that there are many books divinely revealed, yet only four of them are obligatory: 'the *Pentateuch* of MOSES, the *Psalms* of DAVID, the *Gospel* of JESUS, and the *Alcoran* of MAHOMET.'²³ The Mahometans thus do not doubt the doctrines of Christ, since they 'openly profess to believe the Gospel', and 'the Alcoran itself does so often refer to the *Pentateuch*, the *Psalms*, and the *Gospel*, the inspiration and authority whereof it always allows.' What they doubt is the authenticity of the *Christian Gospel*, which 'they deprecatorily brand with falsification': the Mahometans 'charge our copies with so much corruption and alteration, that our *Gospel* is not only no longer certain or genuine; but, according to them, the farthest of all books in the world, from being divine.'²⁴ However, when Toland studied other Islamic writings he discovered 'multitudes of citations' out of the Christian Gospel, which cannot be found in the Alcoran itself. These passages agreed sometimes 'with those in our *Gospels*, often with those we count apocryphal, and oftner with neither.' From this he concludes that, since the Mahometans 'counted the *Gospel* a divine book, and had more knowledge of it than their *Alcoran* furnish'd, they must needs have a *Gospel* of their own'.²⁵

This '*Gospel of the Mahometans*', says Toland, 'very probably is in great part the same book with that of BARNABAS'.²⁶ That there used to be such a Gospel of Barnabas, he concludes from the testimony of several Church Fathers, such as Gelasius.²⁷ The question is if the text discovered by Toland, an Italian translation that was 'most certainly the performance of a Mahometan Scribe', is this Gospel. Toland describes paper and print, and notes the stylistic correspondence to canonical Scripture: citing the first sentence, he remarks that '[w]hatever may become of the truth, this is the Scripture-stile to a hair'.²⁸ He proceeds to point out the Mahometan elements in the text: Mahomet is named and foretold as 'the design'd accomplisher of God's economy towards man.' Furthermore, in agreement with 'the ancient Ebionite or Nazaren System' as well as 'the scheme of our modern Unitarians', Jesus is presented as a prophet and 'a mere man'. But most importantly, the Christian account of Jesus' crucifixion is denied, which is 'perfectly conformable to the tradition of the Mahometans who maintain that another was crucify'd in his stead'.²⁹

This denial of Christ's death and resurrection was, according to Toland, not 'an original invention of the Mahometans', as several early Christian sects (the Basilidians, the Cerinthians, and the Carpocratians) believed the same. Consequently, 'the *Gospel of BARNABAS*, for all this account, may be as old as the time of the apostles, bating several interpolations'.³⁰ Also, Toland notes that one of the Baroccian manuscripts in Oxford mentions a fragment of the Gospel of Barnabas, which he claims to have found 'almost in terms' in his version.³¹ This 'naturally induces' Toland to think that the text he discovered

²³ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 140-2.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 136-8.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 144.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 145.

³¹ Ibid., p. 138, 147. The Baroccian manuscripts (MSS. Barocci) are a wide-ranging collection of Greek manuscripts, which have resided at the Bodleian Library in Oxford since the 17th century.

'may be the *Gospel* antiently attributed to BARNABAS, however since (as I said) interpolated.'³²

From this Toland draws three conclusions. First of all, 'we now probably know, whence the Mahometans quote most passages of this kind, they have concerning CHRIST': most of them sprang neither from forgeries nor from apocryphal works, but were 'cull'd out of their own *Gospel* of BARNABAS.' Second, we have discovered that 'the Mahometans not only believe, as is well known, many things recorded of JESUS in our *Gospels*; but that they have likewise a peculiar *Gospel* of their own, tho probably in a few hands among the learned, from which perhaps some passages in ours may be farther illustrated'. Third, 'we have at length found out the *Gospel* father'd of old upon BARNABAS, tho not in its original purity.'³³

Later on, Toland attaches political consequences to the Christian-Mahometan connection. If the faith of the Mahometans is a 'peculiar Christianity', they 'may be as well allow'd Moschs in these part of Europe, if they desire it, as any other Sectaries'³⁴ – or, as Toland states in the beginning of the letter, 'they might with as much reason and safety be tolerated at London and Amsterdam, as the Christians of every kind are so at Constantinople and thro-out all Turkey.'³⁵ The *Gospel* of Barnabas thus has a political function as well as a theological one: it serves to erode the borders between Christianity and Mahometanism and to set up religious tolerance in traditionally exclusivist Christian society.

JEWISH CHRISTIANITY

The theme of tolerance, an undercurrent in his discussion of Mahometanism, rises more prominently when Toland turns the page to Judaism. In this sense, the first two topics of the letter are plainly connected, but Toland bridges them in a peculiar way. Citing the final passage of the *Gospel* of Barnabas, he points out the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul, and compares it to Paul's 'contest with Peter, about his manner of preaching the *Gospel* to the Gentiles.'³⁶ This he illustrates by quoting an apocryphal text, yet he does so (as Champion notes) 'without any indication that he is using an apocryphal source'.³⁷ From this 'most remarkable and incontestably ancient piece, with others at least as ancient', Toland is convinced he can show

that this notion of PAUL's having wholly metamorphos'd and perverted the true Christianity (as some of the Heretics have exprest it) and his being blam'd for so doing by the other Apostles, especially by JAMES and PETER, is neither an original invention of the Mahometans, nor any sign of the novelty of their *Gospel*: but rather a strong presumption of its antiquity, at least as to some parts of it; since this was the constant language and profession of the most ancient Sects...³⁸

Taking leave from this premise, Toland launches into a discussion of the supposed disagreement between Paul and the other apostles, which centres on the question whether

³² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 147-8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135. Already in the first letter to *Serena* Toland argued for a mutual intellectual toleration, in that Mahometans and Christians should not fear to read each other's holy books (*Letters to Serena*, p. 15.)

³⁶ *Nazarenus*, p. 149. See above, Ch. 3, p. 33.

³⁷ Champion, footnote to *Nazarenus*, p. 149, n. 13.

³⁸ *Nazarenus*, p. 150.

the Jews were meant to give up the Mosaic Law on becoming Christians. Toland points out that the Ebionites or Nazarenes, who 'were the first converts among the Jews to Christianity; that is to say, the first Christians, and consequently the only Christians for some time', were 'mortal enemies to Paul', primarily because they believed Paul to have preached the abandonment of the Mosaic Law to the Jews as well as the Gentiles.³⁹ Although this interpretation of Pauline teaching is predominant in Christian theology, Toland believes it to be a misconception: when one scrutinises Scripture, it becomes clear 'that PAUL contended onely for the liberty of the Gentiles from Circumcision and the rest of the Law, but not by any means of the Jewish Christians'.⁴⁰

Toland argues that if the Jewish law were abolished by the Christian covenant, this would lead to a number of serious contradictions within Scripture: it would mean that the apostles disagreed amongst each other, and that God contradicted his own word by undoing laws that were meant to be eternal. One cannot twist the meaning of Scripture and make 'the words *eternal, everlasting, for ever, perpetual, and thro out all generations*, to mean onely a *great while*'. All such contradictions are solved, says Toland, by distinguishing Jewish Christianity from Gentile Christianity: 'no other scheme can reconcile Christianity, and the promises of everlasting duration made in favour of the Jewish Law'.⁴¹ When one remembers that the apostles spoke sometimes to the Gentiles, and sometimes to the Jews, it becomes evident that 'the Jewish Christians were ever bound to observe the Law of MOSES,' from which the Gentile Christians were excused.⁴²

The reason for this is the particular constitution of the Jewish nation, of which the Law formed an essential part: 'This Law they look'd upon to be no less national and political than religious and sacred: that is to say, expressive of the history of their peculiar nation, essential to the being of their Theocracy or Republic'.⁴³ The Gentile Christian did not belong to the Jewish republic and was therefore justified by his faith alone, 'without being oblig'd to exercise the ceremonies of the Law, being things no way regarding him, either as to national origin or civil government'. The Jewish Christian was bound 'to the outward observance of his country Law by eternal covenant', though he must add to this an 'inward Regeneration and the Faith of the *Gospel*'. Toland calls this dual policy for Jewish and Gentile Christians 'the ORIGINAL PLAN OF CHRISTIANITY', for the 'Religion that was true yesterday is not false today; neither can it ever be false, if it was once true.'⁴⁴ Not only can Jews keep their laws and yet be good Christians, but to ask them to give up their Judaism is to ask them to renounce their Christianity.⁴⁵

As in his discussion of Mahometan Christianity, Toland connects his observations of Jewish and Gentile Christianity to a political theme of tolerance and brotherhood. It is the neglect of this fundamental distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and the ancient custom of 'pressing *Uniformity*' upon the Jews that has caused the 'execrable treatment of them' in Christian lands.⁴⁶ 'The greatest endearment shou'd ever reign among

³⁹ Ibid., p. 151-3.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 158.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 161.

⁴² Ibid., p. 177-9.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 160.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 178.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 168, 173.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

brethren', says Toland, yet it has become so difficult for Christians and Jews to live together that 'the latter are in a sort of slavery to the former'.⁴⁷ Both the Gospel and 'the Law of Nature' teach us toleration, 'so that they who persecute others in their reputations, rights, properties, or persons, for merely speculative opinions, or for things in their own nature indifferent, are so farr equally deusted both of Humanity and Christianity.'⁴⁸ The original plan for Christianity was for the Jews to keep true to the Mosaic Law, and for Jews and Gentiles to be 'one in CHRIST, however otherwise differing in their circumstances', for it is this 'Union without Uniformity' that is the true message of the Gospel.⁴⁹

The Nazarenes, who converted to Christianity yet kept true to the Jewish laws, were 'the first Christians, and consequently the only Christians for some time.'⁵⁰ For Toland, they represent 'the original uncorrupted easy, intelligible Institution' of Christianity, without 'the fabulous systems, lucrative inventions, burthensom superstitions, and unintelligible jargon early substituted to it'.⁵¹ Though Toland has 'declar'd long since that I love not to call names in Religion' and (paraphrasing Hobbes) 'that I am neither of PAUL, nor of CEPHAS, nor of APOLLOS', he would not mind the name of Nazaren.⁵² For this was how the first followers of Christ called themselves; and the Nazarens 'understood the design of Christianity as I do; namely that the Jewish nation shou'd always continue to observe their own Law under the Christian dispensation'.⁵³ Thus Toland has explained the title of the book. 'Nazarenus' is he.

THE CANON REVISITED

Although the juxtaposition of Jewish, Gentile and Mahometan Christianity is (as the subtitle indicates) Toland's main purpose in *Nazarenus*, his concern for canonical authentication, which was central to the catalogues, is palpable throughout the text. That he considers the authenticity of the canon to be, as yet, unproven, is apparent from his exhortation to the divines of England 'to prove the authenticness, divinity, and perfection of the *Canon of Scripture*, the best means to silence all gainsayers.'⁵⁴ Again, Toland stresses the inevitable corruption of scriptural works ('no Gospel is exemt' from 'interpolations' in the original text⁵⁵) and, most of all, the fallibility of the process of selection. If the catalogues undermined the authority of the Church Fathers, *Nazarenus* as good as laughs at them. Not only were the Fathers sometimes 'shamefully inconsistent, both with one another and each with himself'⁵⁶, a 'damning crew' who sent 'not onely private persons, but even whole societies, churches, and nations, a packing to the Devil'⁵⁷, but they are not to be taken

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 163.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 161.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 182.

⁵² Ibid., p. 183. The same phrase à la Hobbes occurs in the Preface of *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. xxvi (see above, Ch. 2, p. 28). See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 711: 'And so we are reduced to the Independency of the Primitive Christians to follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh best'. Toland's 'anti-sectarianism' also appears in his depiction of Milton as someone who 'was not a profest member of any particular sect among Christians' (*Life of John Milton*, p. 140).

⁵³ *Nazarenus*, p. 184.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

seriously. Epiphanius is called 'bungling and confus'd'⁵⁸, Jerome a 'hotheaded raving monk' who frightened Augustine into excluding the Jews from the Church.⁵⁹

The selection of the canon in the earliest days of Christianity was a process ruled by 'Imposture and Credulity', says Toland; 'the last being as ready to receive, as the first was to forge books, under the names of the Apostles, their companions, and immediate successors.' The matter only got worse when books were entrusted into the hands of the monks, and 'in process of time it became almost absolutely impossible to distinguish history from fable, or truth from error, as to the beginnings and original monuments of Christianity.' As in *Amyntor*, Toland poses (and does not answer) the question how we can properly distinguish between canon and apocrypha, 'observing that such Apocryphal books were often put upon the same foot with the Canonical books by the *Fathers*; and the first cited as *divine Scriptures* no less than the last, or sometimes when such as we reckon divine were disallow'd by them'.⁶⁰

Unique to *Nazarenus*, however, is the introduction of the Mahometans and Nazarenes into the catalogical debate, to whom Toland appears to assign an authority equivalent to that of the Church Fathers. When Toland mentions, as he does on several occasions, the Mahometans' opinion that the Christian gospel has been altered and corrupted to the extent of erasing its divinity, he does not reject their testimony. On the contrary: he notes that the Mahometans are 'more careful in preserving the integrity of their sacred books, than the Christians have generally been'⁶¹; and he calls Mahometan hermeneutics and textual criticism 'more consistent' and 'no less subtil or more slightly grounded' than those of Jews and Christians.⁶² Likewise, Toland calls to the stand not only the Nazarenes or Ebionites, who (like the Cerinthians and Marcionites) rejected the canonical *Acts of the Apostles*, but other sects who 'accus'd our *Scriptures* of error and imperfection, of contradiction and insufficiency'.⁶³ And if the Mahometans had a gospel of their own, so did the Nazarenes; one that, had it not been destroyed, 'would have finish'd or prevented abundance of Controversies, otherwise not easy to be determin'd'.⁶⁴

If the authority of Scripture depends on the reliability of canonical selection, this in turn is made dependent on the authority of the canonical selectors – and Toland undermines one by undermining the others. Having discredited the testimony of the Church Fathers, Toland has in effect removed the prime witnesses from the stand and supplanted them by his own. In all probability, however, this does not mean that the surrogate testimonies from obscure sects and sources are themselves to be taken seriously: the Mahometans especially are introduced precisely because they are, for a Christian public, too controversial to be believed. It must be remembered that each of the voices in *Nazarenus* serve Toland's purposes, not their own. As Champion has succinctly put it, 'by appropriating the historical and scriptural sources to the establishment of a highly unorthodox model of the church, and then insisting that all such

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 174-5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 184-5.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 140.

⁶² Ibid., p. 140, 142.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 157, 190.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 188.

reconstructions were mythopoetic, Toland aimed not just to disable particular legitimations of religious authority, but the very infrastructure of such legitimations.⁶⁵

MANGONEUTES (1720)

The first letter of *Nazarenus* thus contained enough controversial statements, both implicit and explicit, to be called radical by any definition. Like the catalogues, *Nazarenus* incorporated ancient and modern, orthodox and heterodox, canonical and apocryphal sources, and rerouted them towards its own corrosive purposes. Like *Amyntor*, it evoked a number of well-researched scholarly responses, many of which 'attempted to impugn Toland's scholarship, pointing out his mis-citations, mis-translations, and manipulations or misunderstandings of texts', as Champion notes; for 'the question of scholarly credibility was not simply a matter of accuracy, but also of cultural authority.'⁶⁶

By far the most dubious of the contents of *Nazarenus* was the role played by the Gospel of Barnabas, a text that was universally rejected as spurious by contemporary critics. Presenting the case for its authenticity allowed Toland to use it for a dual purpose: first, the Gospel of Barnabas helped to connect the dots between Christianity and Mahometanism and thereby strengthened the arguments for religious toleration; second, it further complicated the credibility of the Church Fathers and of canonical selection. This second and most subversive of Toland's efforts was pinpointed sharply by one of his critics, Thomas Mangey, later in 1718. Mangey could hardly believe Toland 'to be either so weak or wicked as to assert in earnest this *Mahometan* Gospel' and to 'fancy the World so credulous, as to come readily into a new Gospel that was but a Translation into *Lingua Franca* not 300 Years old, without any other internal or external Evidence of its being genuine but his own bare Word'. Mangey does not doubt what Toland's true reasons are for using the Gospel of Barnabas:

I can easily account for his Folly by his Malice, and suppose that this his sham Discovery gave him an opportunity of emptying his common place Book, and lent him a Title to his long projected Design of unsettling the Canon of Scripture, overturning the Foundations of Christianity, and of pursuing that fashionable and threadbare Subject of abusing the Clergy.⁶⁷

Toland, says Mangey, had 'offer'd so weak Proofs for his Gospel of *Barnabas*, that one would suspect, that he meant not so much to prove this true, as to make it probable, that all the rest were false or uncertain.'⁶⁸ The Gospel of Barnabas served as a mere pretence for Toland to dismantle the canon and expose his ideas on Christians, Mahometans and Jews. As Mangey stingingly remarks:

It is an uncommon Fate that this Book hath gone through, that it should for so many Ages escape the Knowledge of Foes and Friends, Orthodox and Hereticks, without approbation on the one side, or dislike on the other, and at last fall into Mr. *Toland's* lucky Hand; and I cannot but congratulate this Gentleman's Happiness that having declar'd for two sorts of Christianity, *Jewish* and *Mahometan*, he hath met with a new Gospel that equally supports both.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Champion, Introduction' to *Nazarenus*, p. 79.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶⁷ Thomas Mangey, *Remarks upon Nazarenus*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20-1.

Having thus had his false pretences in authenticating the Gospel of Barnabas forcefully and, I believe, convincingly exposed, two years later Toland denied having attempted any such authentication. In 'Mangoneutes', published as a part of *Tetradymus* (1720), he argued that Mangey had misrepresented *Nazarenus* to such an extent that one would think Toland 'had asserted the truth' of the Gospel of Barnabas, 'which I have been so farr from doing, that I mist no opportunity of detecting the forgery.' Toland had never represented his discovery as a 'true or canonical *Gospel* ... nor so much as even the work of BARNABAS, whom I no where affirm to have written a *Gospel*'. He points out that he had discussed the book in the context of apocryphal works, and that he had not said 'that a *Gospel* was written by BARNABAS', but only 'that one was *anciently attributed*' or '*father'd of old upon* BARNABAS'. Toland had concluded the Gospel of Barnabas to have been 'originally a Christian forgery', and used in later ages by the Mahometans. When he had mentioned that the Gospel of Barnabas still existed, he had not meant a Gospel written by Barnabas himself, 'but the *Gospel* that was *antiently attributed* to him, *father'd upon* him, and *forg'd under his name*'. Such terms he claims to have used quite unequivocally. 'What can there be more decisive, or what cou'd be less ambiguously exprest?'⁷⁰

The latter is of course a rhetorical question, but it becomes more interesting when we read it as if it were not. For there are, in fact, many phrases and passages in *Nazarenus* that could be more decisive and less ambiguously expressed. As Mangey experienced, any first reading of *Nazarenus* naturally leads one to the conclusion that the Gospel of Barnabas is being authenticated: it suggests and implies to the point of making the reader think that the case for authenticity is explicitly made. It is only after hearing Toland's remarks in *Mangoneutes* that one rereads *Nazarenus* and notices that the text is strewn with ambiguities, which allowed Toland to rise in its defence. It is true that Toland, although he speaks of the 'Gospel of Barnabas' throughout *Nazarenus*, does not explicitly argue for the authenticity of the Gospel as written *by* Barnabas, or that it should be given canonical status. On the other hand, Toland's insistence in 'Mangoneutes' that he 'mist no opportunity of detecting the forgery' is plainly false. And he does claim, in *Nazarenus*, that the text discovered by him was the very Gospel that has been attributed to Barnabas since the earliest days of Christianity, and by the Church Fathers themselves.

This in itself is enough for Toland's purposes. He does not need the Gospel of Barnabas to be an authentic scriptural text, which should belong to the canon: on the contrary, if his aim is to immobilise scholarly efforts to authenticate the canon, a serious claim of authenticity would undermine this project. As Mangey noted, Toland is not so much trying to validate the Gospel of Barnabas, as he is to invalidate other scriptural texts. He is not so much concerned with authenticating this specific text, as he is with gnawing at the authenticity distinction between canon and apocrypha. In *Nazarenus*, the Gospel of Barnabas is associated with the Church Fathers and thereby with the canon; the Church Fathers, on the other hand, are associated with error and deceit. Toland is not afraid to repeat this point all the more fiercely in 'Mangoneutes', where he insolently asserts that 'there's nothing on which the Fathers laid their hands that they did not deprave and corrupt, but above all things the sacred *Scriptures*, which no men in the world were less fit to explain'.⁷¹

Dissolving the opinion of the Church Fathers as a cohesive authority meant breaking the chain of tradition that linked the canon to the original word of God; and in *Nazarenus*, canon

⁷⁰ Toland, 'Mangoneutes', in: *Tetradymus*, p. 147-9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208-9.

and apocrypha approached each other to the point of touching. In the end, for Toland, the Gospel of Barnabas is just another apocryphal text. But then again, perhaps all of Scripture is.

THE REPUBLIC OF THE JEWS

The concern for toleration of and brotherly association with the Jews, which featured so prominently in *Nazarenus*, was not new to Toland. Four years before, he had published a bold work entitled *Reasons For Naturalizing The Jews In Great Britain and Ireland* (1714). Here Toland argued that, following Oliver Cromwell's readmission of the Jews in England in 1656, it was time for them to be naturalised and treated as full citizens. Not only would it not be detrimental for the natives if the Jews were to be granted full access to society and the economic system, but it would be positively advantageous for all parties involved. Though the Jews are traditionally forced to be active in the financial sector, they are just as well-equipped for any other trade.⁷² They would not 'eat the bread out of the mouths of others': true, 'there will thus be more taylors and shoemakers; but there will be also more suits and shoes made than before.' The driving force of economics, the 'one Rule of MORE, and BETTER, and CHEAPER, will ever carry the market against all expedients and devices', and as 'the encrease of people encreases import and export, garrisons and armies', the English and Irish should be eager to admit the Jews within their midst.⁷³ Excepting certain positions in the Church and State, there is no office from which the Jews ought to be excluded.⁷⁴

Having gone through ages of bloody persecution at the hands of Christians and their 'DAMNING THEOLOGY',⁷⁵ the Jews are an example of how 'dangerous and destructive a monster is SUPERSTITION, when rid by the *Mob*, and driven by the *Priests*'.⁷⁶ Apparently Toland had paid special attention to their situation in the destinations of his European journeys, for he bears witness to the Jewish ghetto in Prague and the exclusion of Jews from the city borders in Cologne.⁷⁷ Where Jews are accepted and included in society, it prospers the more, as is shown by 'those whole streets of magnificent buildings, that the *Jews* have erected at *Amsterdam* and the *Hague*'.⁷⁸ There is 'no common or peculiar inclination' that sets the Jews apart from other people: on the contrary, they 'visibly partake of the Nature of those nations among which they live, and where they were bred'; for example, the '*Germans* differ from the *Polish Jews*, as much as *Poles* do from *Germans*'.⁷⁹ As in any other nation or religion, there are among the Jews 'sordid wretches, sharpers, extortioners, villains of all sorts and degrees': but we must not 'impute the faults of a few to the whole number'.⁸⁰ In fact, Toland's purpose is 'to prove, that the *Jews* are so farr from being an Excrescence or Sponge (as some wou'd have it) and a useless member in the Commonwealth, or being ill subjects, and a

⁷² Toland, *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews*, p. 14-5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 39-41.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23-4, 52.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

dangerous people on any account, that they are as obedient, peaceable, useful, and advantageous as any; and even more so than many others'.⁸¹

As historians since have noted, 'Toland's unequivocal argument for the political normalisation of the political status of Jews was unprecedented both in its secularism and in its specificity'⁸²; and 'there is hardly an argument that appeared afterwards in Jewish apologia in the 18th and 19th centuries which was not mentioned by Toland.'⁸³ One element in Toland's pro- or philo-judaism,⁸⁴ however, was less likely to be repeated. Toland's concern for the Jews stems from a long-standing interest in the specific constitution of their commonwealth as founded by Moses; an interest that is perhaps subtextually present in *Reasons*, but expressly articulated in *Nazarenus*.

RESPUBLICA MOSAICA

To the latter are attached a set of Appendices, in one of which Toland observes the preservation of the Jews throughout the ages as 'a distinct people with all their ancient rites', and wonders whether this can be explained 'by the intrinsic constitution of the Government or Religion of the Jews'.⁸⁵ If so, then the Jewish republic as founded by Moses had the potential to be '*a Government immortal*'. According to Toland, 'the MOSAIC plan was never wholly executed' and the Mosaic republic never wholly 'establish'd in Judea', but if it had, it would have lasted eternally: it 'shou'd have last'd as long as mankind'.⁸⁶ For this reason Toland admires the Mosaic republic 'infinitely, above all the forms of Government, that ever yet existed', and he claims to have been working on a book entitled 'RESPUBLICA MOSAICA, or THE COMMONWEALTH OF MOSES', which is almost done: 'my materials are in such a readiness; that one half year, free from all other business, wou'd be sufficient for me to form and finish the whole work.'⁸⁷

Toland traces the idea of '*the Immortality of a Commonwealth*' back to Cicero, though he mentions that it also occupied the mind of his own political inspirator James Harrington, 'who indeed dreamt some such thing about the *Republic of Venice*'.⁸⁸ The connection to Harrington is interesting, as it may also serve to explain Toland's enigmatic use of the pseudonym 'Megaletor' throughout *Nazarenus*, to address (in all likelihood) Eugene of Savoy. Though in 'Christianisme Judaïque et Mahometan' Toland speaks to 'Megalonymus', a name borrowed from Lucian, 'Megaletor' refers to *The Common-Wealth of Oceana*, one of Harrington's works edited by Toland in 1700. In *Oceana*, Harrington uses the pseudonym of

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 10-11.

⁸² Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, p. 227.

⁸³ S. Ettinger, 'The beginnings of the change in the attitude of European society towards the Jews', p. 218.

⁸⁴ Toland's interest in Jewish intellectual culture can be sensed from his references to Jewish sources in several of his works; and perhaps it culminates in his inclusion of a *Hebrew* epigraph on the title page of *Tetradymus* (see below, Ch. 6, p. 71).

⁸⁵ 'Toland, Two Problems, Historical, political, and theological concerning the Jewish Nation and Religion', in: *Nazarenus*, Appendix I, p. 236-7. The *Dissertations diverses* from 1708-10 likewise contained 'Deux Problemes historiques, theologiques et politiques.' See above, Ch. 4, n. 54.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 236.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 235.

⁸⁸ 'Two Problems, Historical, political, and theological concerning the Jewish Nation and Religion', in: *Nazarenus*, Appendix I, p. 238. The *Dissertations diverses* from 1708-10 likewise contained 'Deux Problemes historiques, theologiques et politiques.' See above, Ch. 4, n. 54.

'Olphaeus Megaletor' to designate Oliver Cromwell, who is ranked among historical legislators such as Lycurgus, Numa, and (controversially) Moses.⁸⁹ Coming from the mouth of a republican like Toland, the comparison to 'Megaletor' can only be meant as a compliment to Eugene.

Like Toland after him, Harrington was interested in the ancient Jewish commonwealth and its foundations in Mosaic law⁹⁰; furthermore, both were inspired by the writings of the Venetian rabbi Simone Luzzatto. In his *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei* (1683), Luzzatto had argued for the toleration of Jews by insisting on their central role in the Venetian economic system. Such arguments had strongly influenced Toland in writing his *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews*, and had contributed to Harrington's valuation of the Jews, which was perhaps connected to his admiration for the Republic of Venice (as noted by Toland).⁹¹ Hence we witness, in the Appendix to *Nazarenus*, a close connection between Toland's political and 'Jewish' work, a connection that is strengthened by the Harringtonian link and rises to the fore in the announced project of a *Respublica Mosaica*.

Toland mentioned his intention of publishing such a work on several occasions between 1708 and 1720. It is first brought up in an early version of 'Hodegus', which was part of the 1708-10 *Dissertations diverses* sent to Eugene and Hohendorf: 'Vous savez que j'ai déjà promis au public LA REPUBLIQUE DE MOYSE,' which Toland ambitiously believes will be 'un ouvrage que je pretendois faire vivre apres moi, sans craindre de passer pour fan faron'.⁹² In *Origines Judaicae*, published together with *Adeisidaemon* in 1709, Toland again refers to this elusive work, which he claims to have been thinking about for a long time.⁹³ Although no such book survives in either Toland's private or public works, Champion believes the *Respublica Mosaica* to have constituted an actual project, of which fragments (such as 'Hodegus' and *Origines Judaicae*) were disseminated even if the book itself never saw light.⁹⁴

Taking into account the fact that, as Champion himself notes, designing 'controversial book proposals was one of Toland's intellectual pastimes',⁹⁵ and many 'of Toland's announcements denoted intellectual hubris, rather than any serious intention',⁹⁶ the question is how seriously to take Toland's words. For instance, if in *Nazarenus* Toland had announced that the book was as good as finished, two years later in 'Hodegus' (1720) he still referred to

⁸⁹ James Harrington, *The Oceana: and other works* (1747), p. 56. See Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *The life of John Milton*, p. 344. I have remarked upon the recurrence in Harrington and Toland of the Machiavellian list of legislators in Ch. 1, p. 15.

⁹⁰ See Maria Edgeworth, Susan Manly (ed.), *Harrington*, p. 38.

⁹¹ Champion, 'Toland and the *Traité des trois impoteurs*', p. 23; Donatella Calabi, 'The "City of the Jews"', p. 46. For Toland and Luzzatto, see also the introduction by Paolo Bernardini and Laura Orsi in their (Italian) edition of Toland's *Reasons*.

⁹² Toland, 'Projet d'une dissertation sur la colomne de feu et de nuée des Israelites: dans une lettre à Megalonymus', in: Champion, 'Toland and the *Traité des trois impoteurs*', p. 28.

⁹³ Toland, *Origines Judaicae*, p. 82: 'Pluribus hoc testimoniis, omni exceptione majoribus, confirmare possem, nisi commodius fieri crediderim in opere, quod aliquamdiu meditatus sum DE REPUBLICA MOSAICA, quam omnibus aliis longè fuisse perfectiorem (etsi nullibi unquam integrè stabilitam aut erectam) pro viribus demonstravero.' Another reference to *Respublica Mosaica* occurs on p. 86.

⁹⁴ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 174.

⁹⁵ Champion, 'Introduction' to *Nazarenus*, p. 59.

⁹⁶ Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 48.

it rather vaguely as a future project, without giving any hints about its stage of completion.⁹⁷ However, Toland's consistent stream of references to the *Respublica Mosaica* stands in stark contrast to his erratic name-dropping of other never-published works.⁹⁸ Furthermore, we can observe the careful development and elaboration of the texts relating to (and mentioning) the *Respublica Mosaica* over at least a decade (1708-10 to 1718-20): from 'Christianisme Judaïque et Mahometan' to *Nazarenus*, from 'Projet d'une dissertation' to 'Hodegus'. The continuity of interests throughout these works in Mosaic law, history and religion, as well as in the constitution of the 'Mosaic republic', suggests that Toland's claims about a broader project, though possibly exaggerated, are largely valid.

HODEGUS (1720) AND ORIGINES JUDAICAE (1709)

In 'Hodegus, or the Pillar of Cloud and Fire', Toland attempts to deconstruct, in the manner of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the biblical account of a supposedly miraculous event: the pillar of cloud and fire that God manifested before Moses and the people of Israel to guide them through the desert.⁹⁹ According to Toland, the use of 'ambulatory Beacons' was common among the Jews as well as other 'oriental nations', and the Israelites were guided by such an artificial pillar, 'directing their march with the *Cloud* of its *Smoke* by day, and with the *Light* of its *Fire* by night.'¹⁰⁰ By clarifying this Toland hopes to do justice to Moses ('whom I cannot too often repeat how much I venerate') in his role as a military leader and lawgiver, and 'to clear up a matter of fact in a most antient book, on the credibility of which our holy Religion is founded'.¹⁰¹ The Pentateuch, according to Toland, was in fact an 'abridgement of the *MOSAIC History*', in which many circumstances are omitted; the proof of this claim is deferred to the *Respublica Mosaica*.¹⁰²

At around the same time of the *first* conception of 'Hodegus' (in the earlier 'Projet d'une dissertation'), Toland produced a dual project in Latin, *Adeisidaemon* and *Origines Judaicae*, both published in The Hague in 1709, though dated 7 November 1708.¹⁰³ The second of these took up the very topics of Jewish history and the political and military role of Moses that were central to Toland's interests in the *Respublica Mosaica*. Here again, the development of the Jewish state and religion appears to be analysed from a republican mindset, though it is

⁹⁷ See Toland, 'Hodegus', in: *Tetradymus*, p. 6 ('I have already promis'd THE COMMONWEALTH OF MOSES'), and for instance p. 20 and 25. Note that Toland misses no opportunity, in each of the works wherein the *Respublica Mosaica* is announced, for mentioning that he considers this form of government 'the most excellent and perfect' ('la plus excellente et parfaite').

⁹⁸ For instance, in *Christianity not Mysterious*: the enigmatic second and third volumes, and 'Systems of Divinity exploded' (Preface, p. xxiv); or in *Pantheisticon*: the 'Esoterics' (p. 24).

⁹⁹ See Exodus 13:21 (King James version): 'And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night'.

¹⁰⁰ Toland, 'Hodegus', p. 6-7.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰³ Published by Thomas Johnson, the Scottish bookseller who was active in Holland as a publisher and distributor of controversial texts and who, according to Champion, links Toland to the circle of literati involved in the publication (and perhaps the composition) of the infamous *Traité des trois imposteurs*. Toland was in touch with Johnson in his Holland years (the years in which he researched the *Respublica Mosaica*), and as Champion points out, 'used his bookshop as a postal address in 1708 when writing to Leibnitz.' (Champion, 'Toland and the *Traité des trois imposteurs*', p. 3).

simultaneously connected to a set of suggestive observations on pantheism and ancient philosophy.¹⁰⁴

On the whole, then, Toland's 'Mosaic' works demonstrate an important intersection between his ideas on Jews and Judaism and his republican politics. The connection between politics and religion, which appears to lie dormant in many of Toland's religious works, becomes concrete in *Nazarenus* and the project of a *Respublica Mosaica*. The fruit of this connection materialises in the theme of Jewish emancipation in *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews*, and in Toland's considerations of religious toleration for Jews and Muslims in *Nazarenus*. Furthermore, the wider context of Toland's interest in the history of the Jewish republic helps to understand why the continuity of the Mosaic Law, in *Nazarenus*, is such an important point for Toland: it is tied up with the republican idea of an eternal commonwealth, as envisioned by Cicero and Harrington.

Most importantly, in *Nazarenus* as well as the catalogues, the autonomous architecture of traditional religion is deconstructed by means of explosive textual devices such as the 'Gospel of Barnabas'. Consequently, in the Mosaic works religion appears to be reassigned a political role, and reevaluated for its effectiveness in fulfilling it. The outcome of this assessment is, on the whole, positive for Judaism (thus explaining, in part, Toland's long-standing pro-Jewish sentiments), it appears to be negative for Christianity. This in itself does not imply the total dismissal of Christianity; nor does it mean that Toland preferred the Jewish *faith* above the Christian one. Beneath the surface of these and other of Toland's later works, I believe we can detect a tacit distinction between public and private religion. Public religion, as it features in the Mosaic works, is to be evaluated in terms of the preferable institutional *form*, and thus has less to do with religion than with politics. Private religion, on the other hand, is to be valued solely for its truth-component, its purely intellectual *content*, and thus has more to do with philosophy than with religion.

Having sorted through the ruins of Toland's unbelief, it is now time to investigate this second type of religion and to ask the question what, if anything, Toland still believed.

¹⁰⁴ See below, Ch. 6, p. 83.

6. PANTHEISM AND SECRECY (1720)

After periods of prolific political publicising, now and then stirring up religious controversy as we have seen in *Amyntor*, *Letters to Serena*, and *Nazarenius*, by the early 1720s Toland was all but destitute. After his break with Harley in 1714,¹ and the frustration of his anticlericalism by Sir Robert Walpole's renewal of the Whiggish liaison with the Church of England in 1720, Toland's political connections had ruptured; furthermore, his speculations in the South Sea Company ruined him (and many others) financially when the Company collapsed in 1720.² In his final years, Toland was dependent on the support of his long-time friend Robert Molesworth, whose devotion to Toland is mirrored in the last letters he sent him, before Toland's death in March 1722.³

Whilst he was out of touch with the political powers that had financed many of his publications and intellectual journeys to the continent, Toland did not cease to read or write. As Stephen Daniel notes, towards the end of his life 'Toland grew more interested in secretive matters' and 'began to develop in thematic form an undercurrent found in much of his work and in that of other authors he read, namely, the distinction between esoteric and exoteric doctrines.'⁴ This new train of thought, designed to justify and examine the dual practice of public dissimulation and private transparency, harks back to the *Letters to Serena*, but also has its rudiments in some of Toland's earlier work – especially as it is fundamentally connected to his interests in ancient pagan authors. It is, however, not until 1720 that these considerations would assume concrete and articulate form, in the publication of two curious texts: 'Clidophorus' as part of *Tetradymus*, and *Pantheisticon*. Together, these would anchor Toland's reputation, in the centuries to come, as an enigmatic author, a pantheist in disguise.

CLIDOPHORUS (1720)

'Clidophorus', literally meaning 'Keybearer', is essentially about a problem of communication. The mysterious character of the work is suggestively foreshadowed by the biblical epigraph – in *Hebrew* – on the title page of *Tetradymus*: 'I will utter dark sayings of old'.⁵ The essay itself opens with the following words: 'To know the TRUTH is one thing, to tell it to others is another thing: and as all men profess to admire the first, so few men practise the last as they ought.'⁶ In times and places where freedom of speech is curtailed to such an extent that no room is left 'for the propagating of TRUTH, except at the expense of a

¹ Both Toland and Harley appear to have had their reasons for this break: according to Daniel, 'Toland was to lose favor with Harley after Harley was almost killed in an assassination attempt in March 1711' and it was rumored that Toland had corresponded with the assassin (Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 12); according to Champion, Toland 'had sacrificed his friendship to Harley when the latter seemed to compromise his commitments to Protestant liberties' (Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 150).

² Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 13; Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 4.

³ See Toland, *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 484-495.

⁴ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 12-13.

⁵ Psalm 78:2 (King James Version). The Hebrew is as follows: אֲבִיעֵהּ חִיחִי מִן־קֹדֶם. I thank Joanna Weinberg for translating the epigraph and detecting its source.

⁶ Toland, 'Clidophorus', in: *Tetradymus*, p. 63.

man's life, or at least of his honor and employments', philosophers have no other choice but to dissimulate.⁷ Thus Toland writes that the ancient philosophers were

constrain'd by this holy tyranny to make use of 'a two-fold doctrine; the one *Popular*, accommodated to the PREJUDICES of the vulgar, and to the receiv'd CUSTOMS or RELIGIONS: the other *Philosophical*, conformable to the nature of things, and consequently to TRUTH; which, with doors fast shut and under all other precautions, they communicated onely to friends of known probity, prudence, and capacity.' These they generally call'd the *Exoteric* and *Esoteric*, or the *External* and *Internal* Doctrines.⁸

The exoteric doctrine was thus designed to conform to the notions of the crowd and the expectations of the censors; the esoteric, on the other hand, was hidden from the many and reserved for the few. According to Toland, the use of this distinction was regaining popularity in modern times, and he intends to show that it was 'the common practice of all the antient Philosophers.'⁹ He traces it, first, to Parmenides, whose words meant something different '*Exoterically*' and '*Esoterically*'¹⁰; and to Pythagoras, who expressed himself 'in a plain, perspicuous, and copious speech' to the inner circle of mathematicians, but 'in a perplex, obscure, and enigmatical manner' to the common hearers.¹¹ Aristotle and Plato are similarly represented, the latter's books being 'full of the *Exoteric* and *Esoteric* distinction, which is the true key to his works', so that one must take care to note when Plato is speaking '*Exoterically* and *Vulgarly*, or *Esoterically* and as a *Philosopher*.'¹² The same duplicity of speech causes Heraclitus' obscurity, and here we may catch a glimpse of Toland's intention to provide a hermeneutical method for the reading of such texts:

The readers wanted a key, that might open 'em a passage into his secret meaning: and such a key, that I may hint it *en passant*, is to be, for the most part, borrow'd by the skilful from the writers themselves.¹³

Having noted that the double doctrine was also remarked upon by Cicero, Toland argues that it is even functional in the Jewish and Christian religions. Moses, 'the most illustrious Lawgiver of the Jews', was often heard 'to accommodate his words, when speaking of GOD himself, to the capacity and preconceiv'd opinions of the vulgar', which eventually caused the fables and 'palpable darkness' in the rabbinic teachings, Kabbalah, and Talmud.¹⁴ Even Jesus spoke esoterically at times, as he 'taught for the most part in parables', and admonished the disciples not to cast pearls before swine.¹⁵ Toland provides other examples of ancient esotericism, and claims that many others can be given, since the practice was universal: 'this *distinction of Exoterical and Esoterical doctrines*, was, as it were, the *Catholic establishment* of all nations; which shows that *Universality* is no infallible mark of TRUTH'.¹⁶

⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

⁸ Ibid., p. 65-6. Strangely, Toland gives no reference (as he usually does) for the quote in this passage; I have not been able to identify his source – if there was one.

⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 72-3.

¹² Ibid., p. 75-6.

¹³ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 78: 'What can be more *Esoteric* in some places, than the *Talmud*?'

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

This universality, furthermore, pertained to time as well as space, for the use of the distinction was not unique to the ancients. Already in the preface to *Tetradymus*, Toland announced that ‘Clidophorus’ would hold up a mirror to the current age: ‘that they of our modern times may, in the history of former ages, behold their own pictures drawn to the life.’¹⁷ If the ancients had their tongues tied by priests and magistrates, Christian sects are embroiled in a vicious circle of mutual persecution: ‘they heartily plague each other with fines and incapacities, with exile, imprisonment,’ and even death; ‘till Persecution ends at length in the *Inquisition*, as the utmost perfection of this hellish *Oeconomy of faith*.’ For this reason, ‘there is no discovering, at least no declaring of TRUTH in most places, but at the hazard of a man’s reputation, imployment, or life’, and such circumstances ‘cannot fail to beget the woful effects of insincerity, dissimulation, gross ignorance, and licentious barbarity.’¹⁸

TOLAND’S LAW

The intolerant practices of ‘ambitious Priests, supported by their property the Mob’, thus produce a set of ‘*necessary cautions*’ among the philosophically minded: they are forced to use ‘shiftings, ambiguities, equivocations, and hypocrisy in all its shapes’ to convey their thoughts.¹⁹ As an example of such dissimulation, Toland points to the 17th century natural philosopher Claude Bérigard of Pisa, who had expressed some controversial ideas on religion in his *Circulus Pisanus*, yet had included a ‘bouncing compliment to *Mother Church*’ as a precaution. ‘I doubt not, for my part,’ says Toland, ‘but he made use of the *Exoteric and Esoteric distinction*, to save his bacon, as we say’.²⁰ Later on, Toland stresses again how the distinction is ‘as much now in use as ever’, though it is ‘not so openly and professedly approv’d’ among the moderns as among the ancients.²¹ The problem with this continued covert practice is, of course, that it is ‘difficult to know when any man declares his real sentiments of things.’ Politically, the solution lies in religious toleration and freedom of speech:

*Let all men freely speak what they think, without being ever branded or punish’d but for wicked practises, and leaving their speculative opinions to be confuted or approv’d by whoever pleases: then you are sure to hear the whole truth, and till then but very scantily, or obscurely, if at all.*²²

Until this freedom is secured, people will continue to profess doctrines without believing them, human weakness being such that they would ‘preferr their repose, fame, or preferments, before speaking of Truth’. For the time being, however, some clarity of interpretation can be afforded through the following hermeneutical rule:

When a man maintains what’s commonly believ’d, or professes what’s publicly injoin’d, it is not always a sure rule that he speaks what he thinks: but when he seriously maintains the contrary of

¹⁷ ‘Preface’ to *Tetradymus*, p. vii.

¹⁸ ‘Clidophorus’, p. 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68-9. For Bérigard (also known as Beauregard or Berigardus), see Francesco Bottin, ‘Claude Guillermet Bérigard (c. 1590-1663), p. 147.

²¹ ‘Clidophorus’, p. 94.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 95-6.

*what's by law establish'd, and openly declares for what most others oppose, then there's a strong presumption that he utters his mind.*²³

This rule, which I have elsewhere called 'Toland's law' and which is surprisingly reminiscent of Straussian hermeneutics, is not infallible, yet it is all that we may hope for until 'full and impartial Liberty obtains'.²⁴ After mentioning one more example of esotericism, in the case of the 4th century bishop Synesius of Cyrene, Toland closes 'Clidophorus' by concluding, in words that mirror the opening lines, 'how hard it is to come at TRUTH your self, and how dangerous a thing to publish it to others.'²⁵

CLIDOPHORUS FORESHADOWED

Looking back at Toland's previous works, it appears that his awareness of phenomena such as dissimulation, veiled speech and double doctrines dates from an early stage, though he evaluated these in a wholly different way. The idea that ancient philosophers hid their inner teachings behind obscure ways of speaking goes back to *Christianity not Mysterious*, where Toland mentions how the world is

overstock'd with the *Acroatick* Discourses of *Aristotle*, with the *Esoterick* Doctrines of *Pythagoras*, and the *Mysterious* Jargon of the other Sects of Philosophers; for they all made high Pretences to some rare and wonderful Secrets not communicable to every one of the Learned, and never to any of the Vulgar.²⁶

The examples of Aristotle and Pythagoras are repeated in 'Clidophorus', but there the esoteric practices of the ancients are represented as a way of protecting their very rational philosophical religion, which was hidden from the vulgar out of sheer necessity: in *Christianity* they are considered to be a way of covering up that which was 'contradictory, incoherent, dubious, or incomprehensible' in their teachings, which were kept secret because the ancients feared they would not be taken seriously if made explicit.²⁷ That dissimulation has become a habit among the moderns as well, is apparent from Toland's remark that it 'is now the most ordinary Practice in the World for such as would not be understood by every one, to agree upon a way of speaking peculiar to themselves.'²⁸

In the 1697 *Defence*, Toland the letter-writer tries to refute the charge of dissimulation imputed on Toland the author of *Christianity*:

'tis very difficult for me to conceive how any Man, that owns the least tittle of *Natural Religion*, can publicly and solemnly profess to the World that he is firmly perswaded of the Truth of the *Christian Religion*, and the *Scriptures*, when at the same time he does not really and sincerely believe any thing of them; and therefore since you have made such a profession as this, I think my self obliged to believe you so far...²⁹

The letter-writer notes that, according to some people, it is 'an usual Artifice' for deists and libertines 'to write booty, and to cover themselves with the profession of Religion, in order to undermine it more securely, and give their impiety an easier vent'. Those who claim this

²³ Ibid., p. 96.

²⁴ Ibid. For my comments on 'Toland's law' see Mara van der Lugt, *Met twee ogen*, p. 5, 12.

²⁵ 'Clidophorus', p. 100.

²⁶ Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 96.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 104.

²⁹ Toland (?), *A Defence of Mr. Toland in a Letter to Himself*, p. 16-17.

believe to have evidence in the example of Charles Blount, 'who in *the Oracles of Reason* plainly owns himself a *Deist*', but in *Philostratus*, a Christian.³⁰

As to the hermeneutical key presented in 'Clidophorus', in two of his earlier works Toland appears to be expressing a contrary view. At the end of the second part of *Amyntor* (1699), he criticises the overly suspicious hermeneutics of readers who 'never fail of finding in the Writings of their Adversary, not what is there, but what they have a mind should be so', because they are determined 'to discover the hidden Poyson of every Word'.³¹ Likewise, in *Vindicius Liberius* (1702), Toland warns against those critics who are eager to accuse their opponents 'of impious or seditious Designs, who suspect the plainest Apologies they can make, and discover a hidden Poison in their words even when they are of their own prescribing.' Here he proposes a hermeneutical guideline that is the opposite of 'Toland's law' in 'Clidophorus'. When pondering a person's words, even if their views are different from our own, we are

oblig'd to make the most candid Construction of their Designs, and if their words admit of a double Sense, (which is hard to be always avoided in any Language) we ought to allow the fairest Interpretation of their Meaning.³²

The issue of dissimulation resurfaces in the *Letters to Serena* (1704). In the first letter it is said that out in the world anyone who disagrees with the universal errors of prejudice is 'gaz'd on as a Monster', and if we do happen to be 'undeceiv'd' in some matter, we dissimulate: 'the prevailing Power of Interest will make us hypocritically (or, if you please, prudently) to pretend the contrary, for fear of losing our Fortunes, Quiet, Reputation, or Lives.' The problem with such dissimulation is that it confirms others in their prejudices, as we only know each other by our 'outward Actions', which thus seem to be uncontroversial.³³ And so nothing ever changes. Furthermore, in the second letter, Toland mentions the distinction between an esoteric and exoteric philosophy for the first time in his oeuvre. Here, however, he does not use these terms: instead he says that most philosophers

had two sorts of Doctrins, the one internal and the other external, or the one private and the other publick; the latter to be indifferently communicated to all the World, and the former only very cautiously to their best Friends, or to some few others capable of receiving it, and that wou'd not make any ill use of the same.³⁴

As an instance of such dissimulation, Toland points to Pythagoras, who according to him did not believe his own doctrine of transmigration; likewise, many of the ancient poets secretly rejected their own descriptions of the afterlife.³⁵ In the third letter, it is again noted that those among the ancients who had 'better Notions' about God and the universe rarely dared to speak out against popular conviction: for this reason 'we find the Sentiments of some of 'em mighty fluctuating and obscure, principally occasion'd by the Persecution that was sure to attend the truth, or any attempt towards a general Reformation'.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

³¹ Toland, *Amyntor*, p. 80-1.

³² Toland, *Vindicius Liberius*, p. 6-7.

³³ Toland, *Letters to Serena*, p. 9-10.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 56-7.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 57-9.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

Whilst Toland's attitudes towards dissimulation seem to shift from disapproval to admiration, it is clear that he was aware of the phenomenon throughout his career, and interested in the problems that it posed. Although his treatment of the topic was often subtly extended to apply to moderns as well as ancients, it was primarily connected to his considerations of ancient philosophers. It is interesting, then, that both threads of dissimulation and ancient philosophy come together, not only in 'Clidophorus', but in the same year's *Pantheisticon*.

PANTHEISTICON (1720)

One of the few works Toland wrote in Latin, its preface pseudonymously signed 'Janus Junius Eoganesius'³⁷, *Pantheisticon* is perhaps the obscurest of Toland's publications. As Des Maizeaux remarks, Toland 'seems to have been sensible, that he had too much indulg'd his loose imagination; for he got it printed secretly, at his own charge, and but a few copies, which he distributed with a view of receiving some presents for them.'³⁸ Breaking his long-standing habits of provoking public controversy by publishing for a wide audience of readers, and of circulating his scribal texts across Europe, Toland appears to have distributed *Pantheisticon* carefully and selectively. This is mirrored by the relative silence that followed its publication: as Champion points out, 'the usual response to Toland's work was a steady stream of printed counter-polemic', whereas the 'rejoinder to *Pantheisticon* was muted', and quick rebuttal 'simply did not occur'.³⁹ As the project of a 'formula, sive liturgica philosophica' is hinted at in the 1712 correspondence between Toland and Hohendorf, the final publication probably resulted from another of Toland's long term research activities.⁴⁰ However, though elements of *Pantheisticon* can be linked to Toland's other works, certain aspects of its content, style and structure set it apart from the rest of his oeuvre.

Continuity with 'Clidophorus' is shown primarily by the similar treatment of the dissimulation theme. Mentions of secrecy and esotericism occur throughout the trilogically structured *Pantheisticon*, but most of all in its third section, entitled 'A short Dissertation upon a Two-fold Philosophy of the Pantheists'.⁴¹ Here it is said that the pantheists, who are assigned the leading role in *Pantheisticon*, are known for

embracing two Doctrines, the one *External* or popular, adjusted in some Measure to the Prejudices of the People, or to Doctrines publicly authorised for true; the other *Internal* or philosophical, altogether conformable to the Nature of Things, and therefore to Truth itself: And moreover for proposing this secret Philosophy, naked and entire, unmasked, and without any tedious Circumstance of Words, in the Recesses of a private Chamber, to Men only of consummate Probity and Prudence.⁴²

³⁷ Toland claimed and explained the pseudonym in a 1720 letter to Barnham Goode (see Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 243). For Alan Harrison's interpretation see below, Ch. 7, n. 4.

³⁸ Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs', p. lxxviii.

³⁹ Champion, "'Published but not printed': John Toland and the circulation of manuscripts c.1700-1722', p. 10. (I have used the online version and corresponding pagination – see bibliography).

⁴⁰ See Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 242.

⁴¹ I will quote from the first English translation, published in 1751.

⁴² Toland, *Pantheisticon*, p. 96.

According to Toland no one can doubt that the pantheists acted wisely in assuming such a secretive and superior attitude toward the prejudiced vulgar,⁴³ and in adopting the use of the following rule of thumb: '*That one Thing should be in the Heart, and in a private Meeting; and another Thing Abroad, and in public Assemblies.*' This practical maxim, says Toland, 'has often been greatly in Vogue, and practised not by the Antients alone': it is, in fact, 'more in Use among the Moderns, although they profess it is less allowed.'⁴⁴

Later on, the maxim is developed into a threefold guideline for the pantheists. First, the pantheists will not 'run counter to the received *Theology*, that in philosophical Matters swerves from Truth', but 'neither shall he be altogether Silent, when a proper Occasion presents itself'. Second, there are some matters that 'the *Pantheist* can with Safety disclose,' and these he will not keep to himself, but 'voluntarily communicate' to others, though never 'without a due Caution'. Third, as to 'the more sacred Dogms, regarding either the Nature of *God*, or of the *Soul*', these the pantheist shall meditate upon 'in the Silence of his Heart', and none but kindred spirits will be allowed to partake in his '*Esoterics*'. Though some outsiders may dislike such secrecy, the pantheists 'shall not be more open, 'till they are at full Liberty to think as they please, and speak as they think.'⁴⁵

PANTHEISM EXPLORED

The distinction between '*External*, or popular and depraved' and '*Internal*, or pure and genuine' philosophy is also brought up in the first section of *Pantheisticon*, as is the pantheists' opinion that 'in *indifferent Matters*, nothing is more prudent than the old Saying, *We must talk with the People, and think with Philosophers.*'⁴⁶ However, if the third section examines the secretive structure of pantheist societies, the first hones in on the content of their secrets. Entitled 'A Discourse upon the Antient and Modern Societies of the Learned', it draws a line from 'those Societies that were frequently instituted among the *Greeks* and *Romans*, either for the Pleasure or Instruction of the Mind'⁴⁷ to the '*Socratic Societies*' that have risen in modern times. The latter consist mostly of philosophers with a desire to 'freely and impartially, in the Silence of all Prejudices, and with the greatest Sedateness of Mind, discuss and bring to a Scrutiny all things, as well sacred (as the saying is) as prophane.'⁴⁸ They are usually styled '*Pantheists*' because of their specific 'Opinion concerning GOD and the UNIVERSE', and their views concerning 'the Cause and Origin of Things' are best expressed by the dictum from '*Linus*, the most antient, most authentic, and revered Oracle of mysterious Science', that '*All Things are from the Whole, and the Whole is from all Things.*'⁴⁹

The universe, for the pantheists, is infinitely extended yet '*one, in the Continuation of the Whole, and Contiguity of the Parts*', and '*eternal in Existence and Duration*'. As a whole, it is

⁴³ Note the witty and rather patronising passage in which the pantheists are said to 'behave towards frantic, foolish, and stubborn Men, as fond Nurses do towards their babbling Minions, who imbibe from them the pleasing Infatuation of imagining themselves Kings and Queens, that they are the only Papa and Mama's Pets, and that there are none so pretty and so fine as they.' (Ibid., p. 98).

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 107-8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 14-15.

immoveable, since beyond the universe '*there's no Place or Space*',⁵⁰ and there exists 'no Space void, nor a last Barrier'⁵¹; its parts, however, are not only moveable, but in a state of constant flux.⁵² For this reason,

nothing of the Whole perishes, but Destruction and Production succeed each other by turns, and all by a perpetual Change of Forms, and a certain most beautiful Variety and Vicissitude of Things, operate necessarily towards the Participation, Good, and Preservation of the Whole, and make, as it were, an everlasting Circulation.⁵³

All things originate from seeds that are 'begun from an eternal Time' and 'composed out of the first Bodies, or most simple Principles' of the world⁵⁴; thus 'every Thing in the Earth is organic, and there is no equivocal Generation, or without its own Seed, of any Thing in Nature'.⁵⁵ The species of things arise from the 'Motion and Intellect that constitute the Force and Harmony of the infinite Whole,' from which we may conclude that 'the best Reason, and most perfect Order, regulate all Things in the *Universe*'.⁵⁶ This 'Force and Energy of the Whole, the Creator and Ruler of All, and always tending to the best End, is GOD, whom you may call the *Mind*, if you please, and *Soul* of the *Universe*'; and it is because they do not consider the creative force (i.e. God) to be 'separated from the *Universe* itself, but by a Distinction of Reason alone', that 'the *Socratic Brethren* ... are called PANTHEISTS'.⁵⁷

ELEMENTS OF PANTHEISM (1696 – 1722)

The pantheist doctrines explored – though not necessarily professed – by Toland comprise an interesting mix of ancient and modern influences. As Toland himself remarks, the pantheist metaphysics excludes chance as a factor in the origin of the world, for which reason they are 'diametrically opposite to the *Epicureans*, *Chaologists*, and *Oneiropolists*'.⁵⁸ Other ancient sources, however, do make their presence felt: occasionally explicitly, as in the case of Cicero, Cato, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Hippocrates, Socrates and Plato; but most often implicitly, as in the case of Lucretius and (again) of Anaxagoras and Heraclitus throughout the work.⁵⁹ In such an abundance of side characters, it is tempting for scholars to try to identify a leading part: for instance, Jeffrey Wigelsworth has recently argued informatively, but perhaps too stringently, that the influence of Anaxagoras outweighs that of other sources.⁶⁰ It does appear that *Pantheisticon*, in its presentation of the

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵² Ibid., p. 15, 21.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 17-18. In his exposition of pantheism, Toland also incorporates views on thought as 'a peculiar Motion of the Brain' and ether as the supreme element 'environing' and 'permeating all Things' (p. 22), a discussion of Pythagorean or Copernican astronomy (p. 34 and onwards), and a refutation of the biblical account of a universal deluge (p. 46, 52).

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁹ In 'John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment', p. 141, F.H. Heinemann detects not only Lucretius, but Ammianus Marcellinus as a source in *Pantheisticon*.

⁶⁰ See Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, 'A pre-Socratic source for John Toland's *Pantheisticon*'.

universe as an organic whole that unfolds itself through the recombination of seeds and is guided by an implicit cosmic mind, owes a share to Anaxagoras.⁶¹ But I believe the priority given to Anaxagoras in Wigelsworth's article downplays not only the eclectic character of the research on which *Pantheisticon* is built, but the prominent role of Heraclitus throughout the work, especially in the repeated suggestions of Heraclitean flux ('all Things ... are in Motion'⁶²).

Furthermore, though Wigelsworth and others have warned against overestimating the influence of the heretic Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548 - 1600) on *Pantheisticon*, they should likewise be cautioned against underestimating it. The rather miscellaneous mixture of philosophical influences and sources in the work is such that the pantheistic doctrine expounded there could be traced to a number of ancient and modern names. Bruno is one such candidate, and by no means the least likely. As Heinemann remarks, *Pantheisticon's* view that the universe

is infinite both in extension and virtue, but one in the continuation of the whole and the contingency of the parts, eternal in existence and duration, intelligible by an eminent reason, filled with perfect order, unfinished, obedient to the law of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, God indwelling it as the Soul of the world; all that is pure Bruno.⁶³

The Brunean traces in *Pantheisticon* conform well to what is known of Toland's interests in Bruno, which stem from the first years of his writing career. As early as 1698, says Champion, 'Toland purchased a number of Bruno's works from the library of Francis Bernard', such as the *Spaccio della Bestia Trionfante*.⁶⁴ Heinemann pushes the date of the discovery of Bruno back further to 1696, pointing to a letter (written in 1710) in which Toland mentions that Bruno's *Spaccio* 'étoit entièrement inconnu aux curieux avant l'année 1696, que je le trouvai et le fis voir à different personnes, quoique sans en laisser jamais prendre copie.'⁶⁵

The years 1709-1710 also find Toland in correspondence with Leibniz, who brought up the subject of Bruno and remarked that, although he himself had not read the *Spaccio*, he had reason to believe Toland had, since 'M. DE LA CROSE m'a dit, que vous luy avez montré ce Livre.'⁶⁶ Toland responded the next year by sending Leibniz 'first, a most circumstantial account of the Book it self, and secondly, a specimen of it, containing three articles out of forty eight', both of which he had already sent 'to another excellent person'⁶⁷ – possibly

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶² Toland, *Pantheisticon*, p. 21. A form of Heraclitean flux is also alluded to in 'Clidophorus' (p. 83) and in *Letters to Serena* (p. 57), though it is sometimes connected to the esoteric philosophy of the Pythagoreans.

⁶³ Heinemann, 'John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment', p. 141. Here Heinemann is partly paraphrasing Toland's summary of the pantheist doctrine in *Pantheisticon*, p. 15. Note that Toland, though not mentioning Bruno, refers explicitly to the doctrine of 'the *Co-incidentia of Extremes*' on p. 36.

⁶⁴ Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken*, p. 150.

⁶⁵ Heinemann, 'John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment', p. 140. Champion notes that Toland tried to pass off Bruno's *Spaccio* as the infamous *Traité des trois imposteurs* (*Republican learning*, p. 172).

⁶⁶ Leibniz to Toland (30 April 1709), in: Toland, *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 387. Leibniz is referring to Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze (1661-1739), with whom Toland was probably in touch. Leibniz' opinion of Bruno, expressed in the same letter, was that 'cet auteur ne manquoit pas de penetration', but 'malheureusement il est allé au delà des justes bornes de la raison.' (Ibid.).

⁶⁷ Toland to Leibniz (undated, but written in the second half of February 1710), in: Toland, *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 396.

Hohendorf, since it is known that he received several tracts on Bruno in the same years.⁶⁸ Toland's own list of 'Manuscripts of mine abroad', which dates from after 1718, shows that he circulated several translations of Bruno's other works, as well as a 'Life of Jordanus Bruno', in England and Holland.⁶⁹ Furthermore, though Toland remarked in 1710 that he never let others duplicate his copy of the *Spaccio*, he did publish a limited edition of the English translation by William Morehead in 1713.⁷⁰ It is, then, by no means far-fetched to see a continuation of this Brunean fascination in the miscellaneous views of *Pantheisticon*: Toland's interest in Bruno spans not only years, but decades.

THE ANCIENT STRAIN

At the same time, so does his interest in ancient philosophers. Names such as Anaxagoras, Pythagoras and Pliny appear on several occasions in Toland's oeuvre, perhaps most prominently in the *Letters to Serena*. The influence of Cicero, most of all, can be traced throughout his writing career, in his political writings but also in the works pertaining to religion: from the *Two Essays* and *Christianity not Mysterious*, via the *Letters to Serena*, to *Nazarenus*, *Tetradymus*, and ultimately *Pantheisticon*. 'Of all the ancient authors, Cicero was Toland's favourite,' says Stephen Daniel⁷¹; and Champion notes that 'Toland's use of Cicero extends beyond the acknowledgement of intellectual influence, to a fervent evangelism to spread his mentor's philosophy', and 'extracts directly quoted from pivotal passages in many of his works.'⁷² Mirroring his distributive activities around Bruno, Toland expressed his intentions of publishing a new edition of Cicero's work, and in 1712 wrote and printed a Latin tract entitled 'Cicero Illustratus', which he dedicated to both Eugene and Hohendorf and sent on to Vienna.⁷³

In general, Toland's continued veneration for several ancient authors is demonstrated not only by his repeated praising and referring to them, but by his enthusiastic use of Latin epitaphs drawn from Roman sources,⁷⁴ and by his curious taste for attaching Greek titles to

⁶⁸ The posthumous *Collection* contains a compact Latin tract by Toland on Bruno, 'De Genere, Loco, et Tempore Mortis Jordani Brunii Nolani', dedicated to Baron von Hohendorf and signed Amsterdam 1709 (Vol. I, p. 304-315); also a translation of a summary by Bruno of one of his own works (*ibid.*, p. 316-349). See Heinemann, 'John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment', p. 140.

⁶⁹ The 'Life of Jordanus Bruno' was sent to the Dutch scientist Nicolaas Hartsoecker, a 'Translation of Bruno's *Asse*, 2 Dialogues' to Thomas Hewett, and 'Bruno Sermon' to Lord Matthew Aylmer. The list is reproduced in Heinemann, 'Prolegomena to a Toland Bibliography', p. 184, but more accurately in Champion, 'Published but not printed', p. 24. See also Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 31, 47; and *The pillars of priestcraft shaken*, p. 150.

⁷⁰ The translation had been made for Anthony Collins, who lent it to Toland, who in his turn 'had a few copies printed and sold them at a very high price' (Heinemann, 'John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment', p. 140).

⁷¹ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 130.

⁷² Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken*, p. 192.

⁷³ See Champion, *Republican learning*, p. 50; and Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs', p. lxxvii, where it is noted that Toland had 'only printed a few Copies at his own charge, to distribute among his friends and Subscribers'. 'Cicero Illustratus' is included in *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 231-296.

⁷⁴ For instance, Lucretius is used for the *Two Essays* and for the fifth letter to *Serena*, Virgil for *Amyntor*, Juvenal for *Vindicius Liberi*, Cicero for the entire *Letters to Serena*, and Pliny and Lucan for *Nazarenus*.

his (English) books.⁷⁵ The question is, of course, whether the 'ancient' strain in Toland's thought can be connected to his apparently later interest in pantheism. In a way, I believe it can. It has already been shown that *Pantheisticon* itself links 'modern' pantheism, as seen by Toland, to a discussion of bits and pieces of ancient philosophies. Furthermore, it must be noted that in 'Clidophorus', wherever Toland detects the use of the esoteric/ exoteric - distinction, especially by the ancients, the esoteric doctrine pertains to a form of pantheism.

For instance, Plato is represented as having spoken exoterically or 'positively about a beginning of the world, or a *Creation* in our language', whilst esoterically he 'maintain'd the UNIVERSE to be JOVE.'⁷⁶ Similarly, the Pythagoreans may have spoken exoterically of 'the *Transanimation*, or *Transmigration of Souls*, for holding of which they are so famous', but esoterically they understood by this the 'incessant flux or motion of all things, and the perpetual change of forms in matter'.⁷⁷ Even the Egyptians, 'who were the wisest of mortals' are thought to have been closet pantheists, for although the vulgar believed Isis to be a goddess, according to Toland she esoterically signified 'the *Nature of all things*, according to the Philosophers, *who held the UNIVERSE to be the principal GOD*, or the supreme being'.⁷⁸

Certain aspects of the pantheist appropriation of ancient philosophers as described (though, I repeat again, *not necessarily* professed) in both 'Clidophorus' and *Pantheisticon* will redirect the attentive reader to the *Letters to Serena*. For instance, the above reinterpretation of Pythagoras as a secret Heraclitean pantheist can also be found in the second letter, where it is said that 'PYTHAGORAS himself did not believe the Transmigration which has made him so famous to Posterity; for in the internal or secret Doctrin he meant no more than the eternal Revolution of Forms in Matter'.⁷⁹ Furthermore, many elements of the doctrines that appear in *Pantheisticon* are also expounded in the fourth and fifth letters to *Serena*, where Toland respectively criticises Spinoza's system and launches some counter-metaphysics. Because of this thematic link, and because spinozism is often associated (even, at times, by Toland himself) with pantheism, I will briefly discuss these letters here.

EARLY TRACES OF PANTHEISM

In the fourth letter, not addressed to Serena but 'To a Gentleman in Holland, showing SPINOSA'S System of Philosophy to be without any Principle or Foundation', Toland writes that Spinoza 'has had several lucky Thoughts, and appears to have bin a Man of admirable natural Endowments', though his erudition is sometimes overestimated.⁸⁰ As to his philosophy, Toland is 'persuaded the whole System of SPINOSA is not only false, but also precarious and without any sort of Foundation', even if the *Ethics* do contain some

⁷⁵ For instance, *Amyntor*, *Clito*, and the three of the four essays in *Tetradymus* ('Hodegus', 'Clidophorus', 'Mangoneutes').

⁷⁶ Toland, 'Clidophorus', in: *Tetradymus*, p. 75.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83-4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70-1. (The italics are quotes from Plutarch.) This view on the Egyptians appears to indicate a higher estimation of their religion in 'Clidophorus' than in the *Letters to Serena*, but a passage in the third letter suggests that Toland was not unsympathetic towards their and other ancient religions *prior* to the infiltration of superstition and idolatries, 'the plain Easiness of their Religion being most agreeable to the Simplicity of the Divine Nature' (*Letters to Serena*, p. 71).

⁷⁹ *Letters to Serena*, p. 57.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

'incidental Truths'.⁸¹ He intends 'to show that his whole System is altogether groundless, which at one stroke destroys whatever is built upon it',⁸² and centres his attack on the role of motion in Spinoza's philosophy.

Essentially, Toland considers the metaphysical doctrine to founder because 'SPINOSA has no where in his System attempted to define Motion or Rest, which is unpardonable in a Philosopher'.⁸³ Though Spinoza believed 'that Matter was naturally inactive', his system is built 'on all the common Notions about local Motion, without ever showing any Cause of it'. As Spinoza 'acknowledges no Being separate or different from the Substance of the Universe, no Being to give it Motion', the question is what originates motion, if it can be neither inherent in the universe nor derived from an external source.⁸⁴ According to Toland, Spinoza deliberately used 'Delays, Shifts, and Excuses' to avoid having to answer these problems, as he 'cou'd not bear to part with his System, nor to lose the hopes of heading a new Sect.'⁸⁵

Toland's own view is that '*Motion is essential to Matter*' and should be included in its definition, though he would prefer to distinguish '*Action*', or the '*Motion of the Whole*', from '*Motion*', or 'all local Motions'.⁸⁶ He elaborates these ideas in the fifth letter, aptly entitled '*Motion essential to Matter*', where he argues that '*Matter is necessarily active as well as extended*', or that '*Matter can no more be conceiv'd without Motion than without Extension, and that the one is as inseparable from it as the other*'.⁸⁷ Here also we find *Pantheisticon*'s pantheism foreshadowed. Heraclitus, whose doctrines had been alluded to in the second letter in connection to Pythagoras, rises again in passages such as the following: 'All the Parts of the Universe are in this constant Motion of destroying and begetting, of begetting and destroying'. All particles are 'alive in a perpetual Flux like a River', and none 'are ty'd to any one Figure or Form'.⁸⁸ Life and death are interwoven through this 'incessant riverlike Flowing and Transpiration of Matter' between humans, animals, plants, and all other bodies, which 'have bin all resolv'd into one another by numberless and ceaseless Revolutions, so that nothing is more certain than that every material Thing is all Things, and that all Things are but one.'⁸⁹ This, in the framework of *Pantheisticon*, is pantheism proper.

Hence, though Toland did distance himself from Spinoza, it would appear that he had been flirting with varieties of pantheism from an early stage. Other indications of such a courtship can be seen, perhaps, in Toland's use of the pseudonym 'Pantheist' and 'Pantheus' upon two occasions prior to the exposition of pantheism in *Pantheisticon*. The first appears in Toland's anonymous publication *Socinianism truly Stated* (1705), which contains a translated essay by Le Clerc, and prefixed to this an introductory tract by Toland, entitled 'Indifference in Disputes: Recommended by a PANTHEIST to an Orthodox Friend'.⁹⁰ Here Toland argues for a certain impartiality and 'Indifference of Temper', though not 'Indifference of Opinion',

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 135.

⁸² Ibid., p. 139.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 144.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 147-8.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 159.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 164, 168.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 188-9.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 192.

⁹⁰ See Heinemann's description of *Socinianism truly Stated* in 'Prolegomena', p. 182: 'A small pamphlet of 15 pp., only pp. 1-10 being T.'s, the statement of Socinianism, pp. 11-15, is a translation of Le Clerc's essay on Fabritius in the fifth vol. of his *Bibliothèque Universelle* under the title "Digression."'

in religious and philosophical disputes, and he makes an interesting remark to the effect that, although many people are predisposed towards a certain party when they enter into a discussion,

those cou'd be found in the World (particularly the PANTHEISTS) who not only were, but also appear'd intirely unconcern'd in all Disputes, of which number I profess my self to be one. Their *System of Philosophy* I did in confidence communicate to you...⁹¹

The second time Toland used the pseudonym was in the 1708-10 letters and treatises to Eugene and Hohendorf in Vienna, which, as he writes in the preface to *Nazarenus*, he 'sent by the post under the feign'd name of PANTHEUS',⁹² though he also signed his name to them. Furthermore, pantheist doctrines are suggestively – and apparently sympathetically – pushed to the forefront of *Origines Judaicae* (1709), for instance when Toland comments positively upon Strabo's claim that 'Moses was a Pantheist, or, to speak with the moderns, a Spinozist', as he had taught that God and Nature were one and the same.⁹³ Here also a 'golden passage' by Pacuvius (drawn from Cicero), which relates the pantheist doctrine of unity and continuity of life, as expounded in *Serena* and *Pantheisticon*, is quoted without disapproval.⁹⁴ It is not difficult to see, in the light of such continued pantheist innuendo, why Toland has been considered, by several commentators, to have been a 'private pantheist' from early on.⁹⁵

PROBLEMS WITH PANTHEISM

However, is an interest in pantheism enough to make one a pantheist? There are reasons to doubt such an inference. First of all, it must be noted that neither of the (semi-) pseudonymous adventures mentioned above amounted to a full profession of pantheism. In the already quoted passage from *Socinianism truly Stated*, it is not clear whether the writer professes himself to be a pantheist or merely one of those who are 'unconcern'd in all Disputes'. In both this case and that of the Viennese mailings, the title of pantheist may serve not so much as a theological confession than as an act of playful provocation, which so often was Toland's game. Furthermore, the connection between *Pantheisticon* and the last two of the *Letters to Serena* is less straightforward than is often assumed. Though pantheist allusions are all but ubiquitous in the fifth letter, Toland does strongly criticise a specific variety of pantheism, which he attributes to the Cambridge mathematician Joseph Raphson (1648-1715).

In his *De spatio reali seu ente infinito* (1697) Raphson had conceived of an infinitely extended universe, which by definition could only be divine; and had contrasted such one-substance or *pantheistic* philosophies (for instance, that of Spinoza) with atheistic or

⁹¹ Toland, *Socinianism truly Stated*, p. 7.

⁹² Toland, 'Preface' to *Nazarenus*, p. 132.

⁹³ Toland, *Origines Judaicae*, p. 68: 'Mosem enimvero fuisse Pantheistam, sive, ut cum recentioribus loquar, Spinosistam, incunctanter affirmat in isto loco Strabo: eum namque exhibet docentem, nullum dari Numen a materia & compage mundi hujus distinctum, ipsamque Naturam, sive rerum Universitatem, unicum esse & supremum Deum'.

⁹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*: 'Quicquid est Hoc, omnia animat, format, alit, auget, creat;/ Sepelit, recipitque in sese omnia, omni nique idem est Pater:/ Indidemque eadem, quae oriuntur, de integro atque eodem occidunt.'

⁹⁵ Evans, *Pantheisticon*, p. 102.

panhylistic ones, which conceptualised the universe in terms of matter alone.⁹⁶ According to Toland, the problem with the view of Raphson and others lies in ‘the Notion of an infinite, extended, and yet incorporeal Space’, as distinguished from ‘particular Bodys’, which are also extended, but finite and corporeal.⁹⁷ On this conception of extension as infinite and matter as finite, philosophers such as Raphson based ‘an inadequate Conception of God’ and effectively ‘made Nature or the Universe to be the only God’.⁹⁸ Toland claims to be ‘satisfy’d that most of those Gentlemen did firmly believe the Existence of a Deity’, so that ‘the Goodness of their Intention ought to secure ‘em with all men of Candor from the Charge and Consequences of Atheism’. Even so, he notes that their equation of God and absolute or substantial Space does lead into atheism, because this notion of Space makes no sense.⁹⁹ It is unreasonable to ‘infer that the Whole must have Understanding, because some Portions of it are intelligent’, since we might reason ‘that by the same Argument, the Whole must be a Courtier, a Musician, a Dancing-master, or a Philosopher, because many of the Parts are such.’¹⁰⁰

Toland’s criticism of Raphsonian pantheism is significant for several reasons. First, the views ascribed to Raphson appear to correspond with Toland’s general conception of pantheism, as described in his later works. The identity of God with the universe is presented as the core of pantheism in both *Origines Judaicae* and *Pantheisticon*; and although Raphson’s notion of an intelligent whole is criticised in the *Letters to Serena*, the conception of God as the mind or soul of the universe is examined uncritically in *Pantheisticon*. Second, whilst Toland is often supposed to have invented the term ‘pantheist’, it was in fact Raphson who had coined the Latin equivalent ‘pantheus’, as well as ‘pantheismus’, in 1697, and Toland can only have borrowed it from him.¹⁰¹ Considering Toland’s avid use of these terms in other writings (though it is absent from his discussion of Raphson), it is highly probable that he was indebted to Raphson not only for his terminology, but for his very conception of pantheism.

Third, if Raphson informs Toland’s ideas concerning pantheism, so does Spinoza. Raphson’s views are not clearly distinguished from those of Spinoza in the *Letters*, and it has already been noted that Toland, in *Origines Judaicae*, appears to be equating Spinozism with pantheism in general. Furthermore, in a universally ignored passage in the posthumous catalogue (and absent from *Amyntor*), Toland mentions a Gnostic Gospel of Eve, in which she receives a pantheist message from God; and Toland wittily remarks that ‘EVE, as we may see, was a great Spinosist.’¹⁰² The boundaries between Raphsonism, Spinozism and other versions of pantheism are, in Toland’s oeuvre, vaguely drawn, and though Toland’s criticism

⁹⁶ See Ivor Leclerc, *The Nature of Physical Existence*, p. 208-10; Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought*, p. 78.

⁹⁷ *Letters to Serena*, p. 212-4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219-20.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Toland quotes an unidentified atheist poem to this effect: God may be ‘Almighty Space’, but ‘Space w’are sure is nothing’, ergo God is nothing (p. 220).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 221. The argument is attributed to Cicero.

¹⁰¹ Joseph Raphson, ‘De spatio reali seu ente infinito’, p. 2 (‘Pantheorum nomen’) and p. 8. (‘Pantheismus’). Toland was still the first to use the term ‘pantheist’ in the English language, in *Socinianism truly Stated*. See Stephen Daniel, ‘Toland’s Semantic Pantheism’, in: McGuinness, Harrison & Kearney (eds.), *John Toland’s Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 306.

¹⁰² Toland, ‘A Catalogue of Books’, in: *A Collection*, Vol. I, p. 382: ‘God, in that Gospel, said to her in a voice like Thunder, *I am thou, and thou art I; wherever thou art, there am I, being diffus’d among all things: and, whence soever you will, you gather me; but in gathering me, you gather yourself.*’

of Raphson and Spinoza sounds sincere, so does his early dalliance with pantheist views. As the *Letters to Serena* both propose and oppose several doctrines that would be reiterated in *Pantheisticon*, it becomes unclear whether to consider the *Letters* a preparation or a contradiction of Toland's later work.

A MEETING OF THE PANTHEISTS

But what of *Pantheisticon* itself? The question of Toland's earlier views being muddled, are we not at least warranted in reading *Pantheisticon*, with David Berman, as an open profession of pantheism?¹⁰³ Is it not clear that Toland, whatever he was in the beginning, was a pantheist in the end? Perhaps not. For although Toland's tone is formal and unremarkable in the first and third part of *Pantheisticon*, how serious he is becomes questionable when one takes into account the second and main part of the book, which I have not yet discussed. This section, entitled '*The Form of Celebrating the Socratic- Society*', describes the formal structure according to which the meetings of the modern pantheists are organised. In a kind of dialogical role-play between the president and the brethren of the pantheist society, the essentials of their doctrines are repeated, the ancients venerated and the vulgar scorned. The general tone can be neatly demonstrated by the following fragment, in which the respondents answer to the president's reading of a passage from Cato:

RESP.: Let *Socrates* and *Plato* be praised, And *Marcus Cato*, and *Marcus Cicero*,

PRES.: Let us discuss every Thing seriously, And fill up the Chasms of Discourse with diverting Stories.

RESP.: Wittily, modestly, facetiously.

PRES.: Let us search out, diligently, the Causes of Things, that we might live pleasantly, and die peaceably.¹⁰⁴

How seriously are we to take a text that qua content pretends to expose a profound metaphysical doctrine, yet qua form is strongly anomalous when compared to Toland's other philosophical works? I am inclined to agree with Stephen Daniel's suggestion that Toland's 'pantheist liturgy parodied the liturgies of institutional religions', even if his purpose was 'not solely parodic'.¹⁰⁵ It is hard for a modern reader to keep from smiling when confronted with the many witticisms, bombastic expressions and apparently satirical allusions throughout the transcript of the pantheist meeting: it would have been no different for a heterodox reader from Toland's time. Likewise, questions should be raised concerning Toland's remark upon the pantheists' whereabouts, in the first part of *Pantheisticon*:

Many of them are to be met with in *Paris*, in *Venice* also, in all the Cities of *Holland*, especially at *Amsterdam*, and some (which is suprising) in the very Court of *Rome*, but particularly, and before all other Places, they abound in *London*, and have placed there the See, and, as it were, the Citadel of their Sect.¹⁰⁶

Perhaps it would be wise to take Toland's references to modern esotericism in 'Clidophorus' and pantheist societies in *Pantheisticon* with a pinch of salt. We do know, from

¹⁰³ David Berman, 'The Irish Freethinker', in: McGuinness, Harrison & Kearney (eds.), *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 227.

¹⁰⁴ Toland, *Pantheisticon*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁵ Daniel, *John Toland*, p. 220.

¹⁰⁶ *Pantheisticon*, p. 58.

these and other works, that Toland was intrigued by themes of pantheism and secrecy, but he may also have been tempted to represent himself as more occult, esotericist and authoritative than he was. In the end, perhaps, the charge that he secretly desired to be the leader of a sect, which was imputed to him by Peter Browne in the earliest years of his career and which he himself imputed to Spinoza, was not so far from the truth.¹⁰⁷

In his final works, it is Toland himself who opens the hermeneutical question of how to untangle the knots and paradoxes of his earlier writings: it is Toland who confronts us with the problem of how Toland must be read. Taking this into account, it is unsurprising that several historians have fully embraced the reductive approach that can be drawn from 'Clidophorus'. David Berman, ever quick to detect 'the Art of Theological Lying' in the writings of the 'major deists' such as Toland, Collins and Blount, contends that their so-called deism is in fact the dissimulated outcome of a 'deep, covert atheism'.¹⁰⁸ The key of 'Clidophorus' firmly in hand, Berman claims to unlock the ambiguous passages in works such as the *Letters to Serena* and concludes that, whereas *Christianity not Mysterious* 'may be described as deistic, the *Letters* are pantheistic'.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, 'Clidophorus' is identified by Robert Rees Evans as 'a latterday key to Toland's entire previous literary production', and Toland is accordingly said to have become a private pantheist after 1704.¹¹⁰ In the end, the question is still one of interpretation. Are we warranted in reducing the entirety of Toland's oeuvre to the slippery pages of 'Clidophorus' and *Pantheisticon*?

I would answer: *no*. To give priority to the suggestive hermeneutical instructions in 'Clidophorus' as an all-round interpretative key would amount to a forceful intervention in the readings of Toland's other work. It would mean that the broad range of creative ambiguities and textual techniques in Toland's writings could be reduced unequivocally to instances of full-blown dissimulation. Toland's supposed later identity as a covert pantheist would, so to speak, be cut from the pages of *Pantheisticon* with the scissors borrowed from 'Clidophorus', and pasted onto the covers of books such as *Christianity not Mysterious* and *Letters to Serena*. I believe we should be careful in using any such 'key' to unlock Toland's oeuvre – even if it is Toland himself who poses as the 'Keybearer'. It should be remembered that Toland is in fact an *untrustworthy* writer. Reading Toland, we have seen him try to fool, trick and deceive his readers: throughout his works, he has given us every reason not to trust him. Why then should we place our faith completely in the cryptic, suggestive but inconclusive passages of 'Clidophorus' and *Pantheisticon*?

This is not to say that Toland was not a pantheist, or that he was; the above considerations are merely intended to point out that the question of his supposed pantheism, whether open or concealed, is more complicated than is sometimes assumed. Toland is as elusive in his pantheist as in his Christian views: here, as well as anywhere else, he is hard to pin down.

¹⁰⁷ Toland comments on Browne's charge that he wanted to be 'the Head of a Sect' in *An Apology*, p. 10-11, and claims that Spinoza had hopes 'of heading a new Sect' in *Letters to Serena*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁸ Berman, 'Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying', p. 77.

¹⁰⁹ Berman, 'The Irish Freethinker', p. 226.

¹¹⁰ Evans, *Pantheisticon*, p. 167, p. 99.

7. CONCLUSION: THE TRUE TOLAND

Who, then, was John Toland?

Although we have traced his thought-processes throughout the most important of his religious – or irreligious – works, we are still left with this question. If Toland was not just a critical Christian, if he was not a pantheist in disguise, who or what *was* he? It may seem that, for all our investigations, the matter has merely gained in vagueness, not clarity, and perhaps it has – but we have also learned certain things. Through our new-found acquaintance with Toland's life and writings, we have perhaps acquired a sensitivity for the voice of the messenger (for his 'methods, manners and mind' as Stephen Daniel would say) and are now better equipped to understand the message. It is possible, at this point, to look back at the previous chapters and take a bird's-eye view of Toland's oeuvre, as we have discovered it.

We have seen, in *Christianity not Mysteriorous*, the parallel appearance of Christian professions and critical subtexts, allusions and implications, whilst the general argument, which claims to save the Christian religion, bounces back upon colliding with the missing volumes II and III. Toland may have articulated, in this early enterprise, the required conditions for Christianity to be saved, but he fails to fulfil them: revelation is never proven, and therefore Christianity still lacks foundation. Next, we have noted that the *Letters to Serena* are effectively bound by the same condition, and that here also revelation remains unproven. More importantly, the religious scepticism first ignited in *Christianity* is further fuelled by *Serena*, which reduces the structure of Christian and other religions to their historical and psychological roots. At the same time, *Serena's* critique of idolatry and superstition, ostentatiously directed at heathenism and Catholicism, seeps through to the foundations of Christianity entire.

Turning our eyes to Toland's catalogical efforts, it can perhaps be said that both *Christianity* and *Serena* were built upon the groundwork of *Amyntor*, *Nazarenus* and the posthumous catalogue – projects that were initiated early on in Toland's career. If in the former works the Christian religion was made dependent on the foundations of divine revelation, in the latter works these foundations were not only lacking, but positively torn apart. Following the corrosive nature of these works, little doubt can remain that from early on, Toland denied divine revelation a role in the architecture of faith, even if he had presupposed this role in *Christianity not Mysteriorous*. In *Nazarenus* and the works pertaining to the *Respublica Mosaica*, religion is revaluated as a political institution, and Christianity is not assigned the highest score. Finally, although Toland could be seen to have one foot outside revealed Christianity from early on, it is not until works such as 'Clidophorus' and *Pantheisticon* that Toland openly formulates his arguments from outside a Christian framework.

TOLAND'S STYLE

Whilst several important aspects of Toland's character as a writer can be learned from the content of his work, another side of him comes to light when we turn to some considerations of his style. We have sensed, from *Christianity not Mysteriorous* to *Pantheisticon*, that Toland liked to spice his writings with emotion: with passion, anger, irony or wit. Listening to Toland, one hears a lively and variable voice, whose tone and temper may change from one

page to the other, now railing against the priests, then deriding his critics or lamenting the intolerance of the Church. We have detected a more playful or devious side of him in the continued references, throughout his oeuvre, to non-existent works, and the unfulfilled promises to publish certain other books, which would never see the light of day. Other techniques include his acts of creative plagiarism and manipulative citation in the catalogues, as well as the (quasi-) promotion of the 'Gospel of Barnabas' in *Nazarenus*. Less conspicuous, but just as unorthodox, were some of his methods of defence. For instance, we have witnessed how, in *A Defence of Mr. Toland* (1697), Toland splits himself into two and poses as an anonymous letter-writer, partly defending and partly criticising the author of *Christianity not Mysterious* (i.e. himself).¹ A similar feat occurs in *A Short Essay Upon Lying* (1720), where Toland, again anonymously, pretends to defend one of his own critics and ironically calls 'Mr. Toland' an 'abandoned Free-thinker', a 'Heretick', and an 'Enemy to the church' as well as to God.²

All in all, Pierre Des Maizeaux was perhaps right when he spoke of Toland's 'inclination for Paradoxes'.³ Surveying Toland's stylistic and literary manoeuvres, it becomes clear that Toland liked his ambiguities: he enjoyed toying with mysteries, identities and guises. This is perhaps most apparent, first, from his eager use of a variety of pseudonyms, such as 'Adeisidaemon' and 'Janus Junius Eoganesius',⁴ even on occasions when anonymity would have been a sufficient veil; second, from the obscure Hebrew epigraph to *Tetradymus*: 'I will utter dark sayings of old'⁵; and third, from the enigmatic epitaph that Toland wrote a few days before his death, which ends with the words: 'If you would know more of him Search his Writings.'⁶

Such playful hints and allusions to a secret, deeper part of Toland's identity, as well as his other stylistic devices, have been taken completely seriously by some of his critics, when they may in fact be instances of Toland pulling our leg. One can often imagine Toland, in his Miltonesque tirades, his Borgesian system of fake references, and his esoteric clues, to be writing *tongue-in-cheek*. This mischievous side of Toland's personality should not be omitted from our considerations of his writing, as it may warn us, at times, not to take Toland too seriously. Jean-Luc Nancy once said of his friend Jacques Derrida that he 'will always have laughed, with a laughter at once violent and light'.⁷ Perhaps a similar thing can be said of Toland: perhaps Toland, like Derrida, is often laughing.

READING TOLAND

It appears, then, that Toland's *post mortem* exhortation to 'Search his Writings' is of little help for modern historians, as there are as many Tolands as there are ways of reading him. In the previous chapter I have criticised the more reductive or, one might say, *clidophoric* way

¹ See above, Ch. 2, p. 27. Note that Toland's authorship of this work can be contested.

² Toland, *A Short Essay Upon Lying*, p. 14, p. 16. Here again, authorship is unconfirmed.

³ Des Maizeaux, 'Some Memoirs', in: Toland, *A Collection*, p. xii.

⁴ This pseudonym for *Pantheisticon* was interpreted by Alan Harrison as referring to the two-faced god Janus, the republican founding father Junius Brutus, and Toland's birth place Inishowen (Inis Eoghain). See Alan Harrison, 'John Toland's Celtic Background', in: McGuinness, Harrison & Kearney (eds.), *John Toland's Christianity not Mysterious*, p. 245.

⁵ See above, Ch. 6, p. 71.

⁶ F.H. Heinemann, 'John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment', p. 131.

⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, p. 96-8.

of reading Toland, as propagated by authors such as David Berman, who reads Toland as actively and consciously dissimulating, even lying, in several of his more controversial works. The problem with this dissimulation thesis is not only that the reader is likely to fall prey to Toland's wit in taking him too seriously, but that it is unwarranted to select and authorise certain passages of the later Toland as an exclusive hermeneutic tool for assessing his earlier work, such as the *Letters to Serena*.

An essential point in this context was made by Justin Champion, who warned against prioritising the private Toland over the public Toland.⁸ Looking back at Toland's philosophical practices, an image rises of a man who was, first and foremost, a *public* writer, who tailored his work for a number of specific audiences, and shaped his thoughts in public or semi-public environments: in coffee-houses, libraries, and on paper within a community of well-read correspondents. There were of course differences in what and how Toland chose to communicate to the diverse recipients of his scribal and published works, but on the whole there does not appear to be much that Toland kept to himself. Toland's personality was one that naturally sought an audience for his philosophical productions: he was not one for private thought.

If the dissimulation thesis attempts to heal the Christian-pantheist rift in Toland's oeuvre by splitting it into a public and private component, others have taken the opposite position by separating the early Toland from the late. Based on the many differences and inner contradictions within the wider span of Toland's writings, this approach believes it to be warranted to leave his later *non-* or *anti-Christian* statements and suggestions out of account in reading the numerous explicit Christian professions of his earlier works. For instance, Dennis de Gruijter effectively separates the supposedly Christian framework of *Christianity not Mysterious* and the *Letters to Serena* from later works such as 'Clidophorus' and *Pantheisticon*. While he believes the 'Christian opinions' in the former books to be 'identical',⁹ thus allowing *Serena* to be read in the light of *Christianity*, De Gruijter notes that 'Clidophorus' was 'published sixteen years after *Serena* and can not be used to explain Toland's frame of mind in 1704'.¹⁰

Similarly, S.J. Barnett chooses elements from *Christianity*, *Vindicius Liberius*, and *Serena* to elevate Toland's Christian character above his so-called 'deism', and hence concludes that Toland was firmly Protestant, up to 1705 at least.¹¹ Furthermore, Barnett uses the case of Toland (as well as that of Pierre Bayle) to formulate critical claims about the wider phenomenon of deism in his age. Whereas Berman identified eighteenth-century deism with dissimulated atheism, Barnett is sceptical about the existence of underground atheist movements who used subtle 'textual devices' to spread their thought, and instead argues that deism was to some extent a public illusion, 'a bogeyman created in political debate and print culture', and that Toland was 'publicly transformed from a Unitarian into a deist'.¹²

Notwithstanding Barnett's important criticism of the recent trend amongst historians to exaggerate the predominance of deism in 18th century philosophy, his hermeneutical approach poses problems of its own. If Berman can be criticised for prioritising a set of selected passages in his interpretation, so can Barnett and De Gruijter, though here these

⁸ Justin Champion, 'Introduction' to *Nazarenus*, p. 60-1.

⁹ Dennis de Gruijter, *Letters to Hanover*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹¹ S. J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and religion*, p. 98-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31, 68, 105.

passages consist not of esoteric pantheist, but of explicit Christian remarks. The main battleground for this debate is of course the *Letters to Serena*, which can be positioned as a border between the early and late as well as between the (supposedly) Christian and pantheist Toland. Conversely yet comparably to the dissimulation approach, in the literalist reading *Serena* is again reduced: this time not to the labyrinthine pantheist expressions of his later, but to the bombastic Christian professions of his earlier works.

More importantly, in overemphasising the differences between Toland's late and early writings, this second way of reading glosses over the *continuities* within his work. On the one hand, it is certainly true that Toland's views changed over time. For instance, we can witness the gradual diminution of his orthodox professions, the alteration of his attitudes to dissimulation, clarity and obscurity in writing, and the overall reorientation of his interests from theological epistemology towards a political and pantheist evaluation of religion. On the other hand, in taking a bird's-eye view of Toland's oeuvre we can trace his counter-Christian tendencies from his later publications to deep within his earliest works. Toland's criticism of Christianity and traditional religion in general is, if not always explicitly visible, then certainly subtextually palpable throughout his writings.

This is perhaps clearest in Toland's catalogical efforts to deconstruct the power-structures of biblical authority, canonical selection, and divine revelation, in a textual line stretching from the late 1690's to the mid-1720's: from *Amyntor*, via *Nazarenius*, to the posthumous catalogue. These long-term productions are in themselves significant, yet they become more so when considered next to the parallel 'Christian' line of works, as read by Barnett and De Gruijter: from the 1696 *Christianity not Mysterious* to the 1704 *Letters to Serena*. The two lines in question can be connected by, first of all, their temporal vicinity and parallel development, and second, the thematic correspondence in the essential role assigned to divine revelation: a role that is supposed to be vital in the Christian works, yet becomes fatal in the catalogues. In the form of *Amyntor* most of all, published as early as 1699, we are confronted with the treacherous grounds, the philosophical quicksand, upon which *Christianity* and *Serena* stand, and maybe fall. The internal ambiguities and implications with which these early works are strewn may not be enough, in themselves, to tip the scale in favour of a more radical interpretation of the early Toland – but when added to the wider context and connections with his other writings, perhaps they are.

It is then possible that Toland himself would not wish to be judged by the exact meaning of his statements, but by their illocutionary force: by the way in which they make an impression on the mind of the reader and effectuate change in the fabric of society. The most important lesson that can be learned from the above considerations is, perhaps, that Toland's subversive nature should be measured not by the articulation, but by the effectiveness of his words.

TOLAND ON DEATH

Furthermore, it is not necessary to resort to the dissimulation interpretation to see in Toland a writer more radical than Barnett and De Gruijter would have him be. Notwithstanding the playful dimension of his work, there are many points at which the tone and message appear to be profoundly serious, and sincere. One often hears, in his political as well as his religious works, his voice enflamed with righteous anger against kingcraft, priestcraft, religious intolerance and persecution. Likewise, the critique of superstition and authoritarian structures in religion is a grave matter for Toland, even if it is often infused

with irony and scorn. And although there are reasons to take *Pantheisticon* less than seriously, Toland's long-standing interests in pantheism and ancient philosophy do, on the whole, bear the marks of sincerity.

I believe to have shown, in the first and last chapter, that these 'pantheist' interests prove themselves traceable throughout many of Toland's writings, up to the *Two Essays* (1695). Even if one leaves the later Toland out of account, there are enough traces to be found in early works of his fascination with ancients such as Cicero and Pliny the Elder, or with a pantheist such as Bruno. That Toland was not merely flirting with these ways of thinking, but possibly committed to them, is suggested by his philosophical view on *death*.

This view appears clearly in a passage from the second part of *Pantheisticon*, which comprises a meeting of the pantheists:

RESP.: But he who fears not Death, because necessary, prepares a Safe-guard for a happy Life.

PRES.: As our Birth brought us the Beginning of all Things, so shall our Death the End.

RESP.: As nothing of these belonged to us before our Birth, so nothing shall after Death.¹³

In *Pantheisticon*, such words are not surprising, yet the passage gains significance when considered next to earlier appearances of the philosophical view. For instance, in the posthumous 'Project of a Journal', Toland endorses Cicero's notion that philosophy removes 'the terror of death',¹⁴ and in his poetic excursion *Clito* (1705) he writes that

...Death is only to begin to be
Som other thing, which endless change shall see;
(Then why should men to dy have so great fear?
Tho nought's Immortal, all Eternal are)¹⁵

Another source for these ideas can be found in Toland's bold citation of Pliny in the second letter to *Serena*, according to which death in itself is not lamentable: it is the belief in an afterlife that amplifies harm and grief.¹⁶ This notion is mirrored in the observation that all sorts of religious superstitions are born from an irrational fear of dying, and echoes on in the fifth letter, where 'Death is in effect the very same thing with our Birth; for as to die is only to cease to be what we formerly were, so to be born is to begin to be something which we were not before.'¹⁷ Even earlier than this, in a letter dated 4 December 1698, Toland tries to console his acquaintance Robert Clayton 'on the early death of your most hopeful Nephew' by means of a suggestively unchristian argument:

A passage to immortality, and a perpetual union with the supreme Being cannot be reckon'd for his disadvantage; and were there no sensation after death, he could not be reputed more miserable than before he was born...¹⁸

¹³ Toland, *Pantheisticon*, p. 88.

¹⁴ Toland, 'A Project of a Journal', in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 213.

¹⁵ Toland, *Clito*, p. 9.

¹⁶ Toland, *Letters to Serena*, p. 66; see above, Ch. 3, p. 39.

¹⁷ Toland, *Letters to Serena*, p. 191.

¹⁸ Toland, 'A Consolatory Letter', in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 323.

Finally, it should perhaps be noted that in his final letters to Robert Molesworth, written in the weeks before his death, Toland utters no hope for Christian redemption or for another life: he merely notes, in an apparently nonchalant way, that he knows his end is near:

I take it for granted, that these are symptoms of approaching Gravel, and therefore I comfort my self with the thoughts, that when this Gravel comes, I shall together with it be discharg'd from my pains.¹⁹

The reason why I believe Toland's views on death to be doubly significant is, first, that they serve to emphasise yet again the continuity of his non-Christian ideas and interests, and second, that they are quite possibly indicative of his personal notions on death and life after death, notions that he may have taken to the grave. However, whatever may be concluded on the matter of Toland's most personal views, here we are confronted yet again with the more radical side of his character in life and writing, which did not commence after *Serena*, but well before it.

CONCLUSION

Having zoomed in and out on the contours, features and poses of John Toland, perhaps it is now possible to draw a picture of his belief and disbelief: what he was, and what he was not.

He was not an orthodox Christian, not at the beginning of his career and certainly not at the end. Neither can he unequivocally be styled a Reformed Protestant, who was only peripherally critical of religious authority, nor an Anglican or Dissenter. From the earliest of his writing days, Toland has shown himself to be profoundly critical of any kind of revealed religion, Christianity not excepted. It is true that, in his early publications, he still stood with one foot in a Christian framework, so to speak; however, the wider context of Toland's writings suggests that this early one-footedness merely served the purpose of criticising Christianity from the inside out.

The connections between works such as *Christianity* and *Serena* on the one hand, and *Amyntor* and *Nazarenus* on the other, reveal an image of Toland fumbling and gnawing at the foundations of religion, so that Christianity would implode, and priestcraft with it. Although Toland soothingly writes, in *Clito*, that 'RELIGION's safe, with PRIESTCRAFT is the War',²⁰ this is hard to believe. Perhaps this line of defence could be used, though little convincingly, to justify the pages of *Christianity* and *Serena*, yet it disintegrates when considered side by side with Toland's catalogical projects, culminating in *Nazarenus*. In these works, if anywhere, revealed religion is divested of its ornaments, stripped to its foundations, and attacked in its very core. Hence, priestcraft may have been the foremost enemy in Toland's early days, and religious scepticism merely a weapon in his hand, yet it is clear that at some point in his career war was declared on religion itself.

However, even if in later works such as *Tetradymus* and *Pantheisticon* the final step outside Christianity was eventually made, this is not to say that Toland ended up simply atheist or pantheist. While he can be seen to have flirted with a range of pantheist beliefs, there are several important reasons not to take 'Clidophorus' and *Pantheisticon* too seriously.

¹⁹ Toland to Molesworth, (Feb. 1722), in: *A Collection*, Vol. II, p. 491.

²⁰ Toland, *Clito*, p. 16.

Therefore, while Toland was not sufficiently Christian in the beginning, he was not necessarily pantheist in the end.

So much for what Toland was *not* – but what *was* he?

Toland was, I believe, a playful religious deconstructionist, less interested in composing a new religious format than in clearing up the rubble of the old. He was *Adeisidaemon*, ‘the Unsuperstitious Man’, determined to combat religious prejudices and superstitions, which is perhaps why he mentioned that the first letter to *Serena*, on the origin of prejudices, ‘pourroit servir de clef à tous mes autres ouvrages.’²¹ He was also a republican political author, fiercely bent on battling king- and priestcraft and breaking through restrictive structures of religious and ecclesiastical authority. He disrespected the traditional, intolerant, oppressive aspects of religion, as well as its exclusive claims to truth, yet strangely respected it as a political or moral institution: though politically, he ranked Judaism above Christianity, and morally, he assigned superiority to the ancient heathens. He was an *aficionado* of ancient philosophers and modern pantheists, and closest to them in his outlook on the universe, on life and death. He was an adherent of a philosophical religion, if any.

Toland was, furthermore, an original and imaginative writer, whose methods varied and did not comprise dissimulative manoeuvres so much as *strategies*. By playing with tone, style, structure and a diversity of highly original and devious techniques (such as plagiarism, misquotation, false references and unfulfilled promises), Toland tailored his oeuvre for a number of wide or narrow audiences, some less tolerant and open-minded than others. This is not to say that he structurally toned down his message or concealed himself in writing: bear in mind that Toland was essentially a *provocateur*, one that liked publicity, whether positive or negative. For all his audacity, however, Toland was not oblivious of the fact that there were limits to what a philosopher might say and write without losing his bearing in society and, most of all, in political circles. Perhaps he was also aware that to gain and retain an audience, it does not suffice merely to state a controversial message, lest it scare off the reader whose mind is still structured by tradition, or – even worse – lest it bore him. Toland used his pseudonyms, quips, ploys, and guises to ensure a minimum level of self-protection in his writings, but also to entice his readers with his provocative edge, to impress his peers with his diversity, and to irritate scholars and clerics with his elusiveness.

Hence, the term ‘dissimulation’ does not cover the strategic devices handled by a Toland. Historians such as Berman and De Gruijter, commenting from different sides of the debate, have a too black-and-white idea of what Toland is achieving in his writings: they believe it is a matter of either sincerity *or* dissimulation, clarity *or* obscurity, truth *or* lies. Yet it is precisely because Toland, with his *clair-obscur* techniques of twists and ambiguities, was able to steer in between these categories, in between the truth and the lie, that he fostered such a broad range of scholarly responses, which in turn spurred the sale of his books, as he so liked to point out. Toland was too subtle, and too sincere, to have simply encrypted his true intentions by means of theological lies: at the same time, he was too elusive to have always spoken his mind. At best we can say that Toland was a *strategic* writer, who used any number of tactics to deliver his message, not to hide it. He may have toyed with themes of secrecy, but again, these are not to be taken too seriously: more than anything, Toland wanted to be read.

²¹ Toland to an unidentified correspondent, Amsterdam 28 December 1709, in: F.H. Heinemann, ‘John Toland and the Age of Enlightenment’, p. 129.

To some extent, then, the question of the *true* Toland is destined to remain ambiguous, due to the slippery side of his personality in print. Perhaps clear-cut categories, as we have seen, are insufficient for an author such as Toland. However, if anything can be gleaned from the religious writings of an irreligious mind, it is that Toland did not remain bound by a Christian framework, that he did cut himself loose from traditional religion altogether; and even if he was not definitely committed to an alternative stance such as pantheism, he did develop into an increasingly audacious, subversive, and heterodox writer, and thus did more than linger in between. I believe the term 'radical' would be in order.

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