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

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

It has been a scholarly commonplace to regard this ‘French impiety' as as a significant moment in the history of European society. Celebrated as the instance when liberty of thought transcended Tradition and Religion, the Enlightenment saw the 'Kingdom of Reason' triumph over the superstition of custom and faith.³ Importantly as this process of religious disenchantment has been described as a radical moment, it has also been classified as an essentially French achievement. It will be the contention of this paper, in reviewing the historiography of ‘the Enlightenment’, that to argue for the significance of anticlerical and irreligious discourses in the eighteenth century should also, by implication, commit historians to an understanding and emphasis upon the English contribution to this radical rupture of ancien regime ideologies.
In recent years the willingness of historians to write about 'the Enlightenment' as a radical moment has not been widely evident. Accounts of 'the Enlightenment' that understood it as a crucial turning point in the history of human society, whether Marxist, liberal or idealist, have been cast aside in favour of work that explores the idiosyncratic, the provincial and the clandestine dimensions of the period. Until recent times the moment was described as the accession of Philosophical rationality. Scientific progress, economic liberalism and modern literary discourses were all thought to have been born in the period. In contrast to these historiographies that placed the processes of thought and cultural change in the larger map of human progress we now have 'Enlightenments' that explore, among other themes, exoticism, sexual underworlds and secret societies. While exploring fragmented, liminal or counter-cultural 'Enlightenments' is a valuable and indeed important enterprise to enable a deconstruction of the grander claims of traditional historiography there may still be the intellectual space to address the significance of some of the broader changes of the period - perhaps the most central being the attack upon religion, which, it will be argued, was prompted by the crisis of Christian culture in England which was one of the legacies of the revolutions in church and state in the 1640s.

II

That France was the font of irreligion in the eighteenth century is a scholarly commonplace. On the contrary England has been construed as being blissfully free of such infidelity. As John Pocock has insisted 'to try to articulate the phrase "the English Enlightenment" is to encounter inhibition; an ox sits upon the tongue'. Although there have been recent attempts to 'shift the ox', or at least to render the notion of an English Enlightenment less of a mouthful, such accounts suggest that the Enlightenment in England was a conservative and clerical movement with no destabilizing propensities. It was a sensibility that throve within rather than without piety: a programme of religious reform rather than revolution. In England after 1660, as a result of the profound social and intellectual inversions of the Revolutionary decades, it is possible to speak with confidence of a society that was riven by competing ideological prescriptions for true religion and government. As the research of many historians has stressed this bipolarity was manifest not just in
the realm of ideas but embedded in the material practices of everyday life at all levels of the social hierarchy. The significance of this cultural polarity has received little attention in recent accounts of eighteenth century life. The eighteenth century British were a polite and respectable people. Colley has written about the social inclusiveness of British national identity in the period rather than the oppositional interests of class: E.P. Thompson has described the period as one of ‘class struggle without class’. Interestingly, much of this recent historiography has assumed that religion played little role as a destabilizing factor in either politics or society. Colley describes a broadly Protestant culture that opposed the Catholic ‘other’, while Thompson writes of a plebeian culture that had all but escaped the ‘hegemony of the Church’. Although Thompson insists that the elite governed in England through a process of ‘cultural hegemony’ the role of established religious authority was only ‘acknowledged in ... perfunctory ways’. To marginalise religion at the same time as placing the concept of cultural hegemony at the centre of an understanding of eighteenth century social relations seems paradoxical.

It is clear that the eighteenth century Church of England loosened its ritual authority over the people. The Toleration Act of 1689 set the legal context for the practical fragmentation of unitary religious worship which had become the experience of post-revolutionary England. But to claim this, or that 'the early eighteenth century witnessed a great recession in Puritanism', is not the same as arguing for a decline in the cultural hegemony of religion. The institutional structure or membership of the Church of England may have become 'erastian' and dominated by the 'cousins of the gentry'. The change from a 'magical' form of authority to different cultural techniques of power did not imply a transcendence of 'religion' merely a mutation of the social and literary form it was represented by. While the legal establishment of the restricted right to worship in non-Anglican variants of Christianity had profound sociological effects in the number of individuals who attended Anglican Churches to suggest that it overthrew the cultural authority of religion (understood as an all encompassing structure of social authority, practice and belief) is dangerously reductive. Recent collections of essays addressing the relationship between religion and society in eighteenth century England indicate the continuing vibrancy of pastoral and theological institutions. The efflorescence of non-established and private forms of Christian worship in the period although divergent in doctrine and dogma, were still forms of religious behaviour even if ecclesiologiae rather than ecclesia. Toleration of Christian belief may perhaps be regarded as an expansion rather than a decline in religion. What toleration did enfranchise was heterogeneity in public debates about the authority of true religion rather than the
rise of secular modernity. Although it is possible to agree with de Certeau's assertions that 'prophetic beginnings [made] room for a socio-political opposition', and that 'religious language turned into social discourse' during the course of the eighteenth century this discursive transformation was enacted under the carapace of religious formality. As historians like Clark and Hole have illustrated, orthodox Anglicanism seems to have been as effective a player in the battle for cultural hegemony in the 1790s as it was in the 1690s: this is not to argue that it was the singular participant.\textsuperscript{14} To argue that religion remained a vibrant and powerful cultural practice is not to insist that English radicalism was mute or peripheral: indeed it was precisely because confessional imperatives remained so embedded in the infrastructure of social power in the period that the anticlerical and irreligious discourses of the commonwealth tradition retained their relevance and power.

This theme has been asserted in the important writings of Margaret Jacob who has suggested that the militant atheism of the High Enlightenment was spawned by a radical English commonwealth tradition.\textsuperscript{15} This argument has distinguished precursors. Contrary to current orthodoxies earlier historians inverted the commonplace narrative of French radicalism and English innocence. Alexis de Tocqueville, while insisting upon the central role that irreligion played in challenging the 'sanctity' of the established political and religious order, importantly suggested that the intellectual origins of that impiety lay in English rather than French discourses. He commented boldly, 'There is no question that the nation wide discred\textsuperscript{it}it of all forms of religious belief which prevailed at the end of the century had a preponderant influence on the course of the French Revolution'.\textsuperscript{16} The Church was 'if not the most oppressive' then certainly the 'chief of all the powers in the land'.\textsuperscript{17} There was, as de Tocqueville put it, a sort of 'give and take' between civil and ecclesiastical authority: 'the secular power insisted upon obedience to the ecclesiastical authorities and the Church saw to it that the King's authority was respected'. With the spread of the 'revolutionary movement' the consecrated alliance between Church and State became fragile given that the 'power' was founded 'not on constraint but belief'.\textsuperscript{18} In describing the ideological origins of this attack upon organised religion de Tocqueville was unequivocal: 'our anti-religious ideas had found exponents in England before our famous French philosophers were born'. Voltaire took his cue from English writers, 'throughout the eighteenth century great skeptics made their voices heard in England, and brilliant writers and profound thinkers sponsored the views we now associate with Voltaire'. de Tocqueville argued that the irreligious spirit of the age (the Enlightenment)
prompted the Revolution of 1789. The modish impiety that wreaked so much havoc on the continent was imported from English shores.

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

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

If Baker locates the ideological origins of 1789 in the invention of restructured languages of opposition to ancien regime discourses of absolute monarchy,
Chartier has adopted a less abstracted model of cultural change. Expanding on Habermas' work on the structural transformation of the public sphere Chartier proposes a wider social context for the process of 'ideological erosion' that focuses upon the idea of the 'public' use of reason. While Baker seems content to explore the changing configurations of political languages, Chartier insists upon the sociological dimensions of these innovations. The new public sphere, embodied in the new forms of intellectual sociability like 'the salons, the cafes, the clubs and periodicals', defined alternative 'modes of representation' that became embodied in 'public opinion'. The 'tribunal of opinion' was ultimately constituted by the 'way of print'. More people read and owned a transformed literary product. Philosophic texts, pornography, satires, libels and salacious narratives circulated with increased frequency in both Paris and the provinces. Pirated and clandestine titles, 'books under the cloak' fashioned French culture from the mid century. Reading Voltaire or d'Holbach alongside the denunciatory libelles unpicked the charismatic authority of orthodox discourses.

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

Recent scholarship then broadly reinforces the arguments of writers like Mornet, and before him de Tocqueville. The corrosion of the religious sensibilities of the ancien régime by high and low life philosophes, gens des lettres and hack journalists fractured the traditional structure of authority. As Chartier summarises, 'if the French of the late eighteenth century fashioned the Revolution, it is in turn because they had been fashioned by books'. With very few exceptions neither
modern French nor English historiography has paid much attention to the role English irreligion may have played in the formation of this Enlightenment culture. Importantly, however, earlier historians, in pursuing the influence of irreligion on the Revolution, located the provenance of this critical discourse in earlier eighteenth century English sources.

III

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

The historiographical suggestion that the roots of Enlightenment discourses of 'ecrase l'infame' are to be found in the soil of English anticlericalism might be expected to provoke some shaking of scholarly heads. This historiographical inertia is ripe for challenging. The stratification of contemporary national historiographies has done a great deal to obscure the cosmopolitanism of early modern culture. To argue in this way, however, is not to jettison the idea of the cultural differences between early modern states as a historical tool of explanation, but to propose a greater cultural permeability than is currently acknowledged. In exploring here just one tributary of the irreligion of the high Enlightenment the intention is to point out some of the continuities, as well as differences, between England and France in the period.
Published first in 1719 and frequently reprinted after 1768 the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* has been long considered as the cynosure of Enlightenment irreligion: a 'complete system of atheism'. As the researches of Wade, Spink and Allen illustrate the work in manuscript also had a massive clandestine circulation throughout the eighteenth century. Recent studies by Silvia Berti and Françoise Charles-Daubert have traced the location of the surviving manuscripts and compiled a bibliography of the variant editions. Reinforcing the impression that the *Traité* represents a peculiarly French phenomenon ('les tendances les plus radicales de la critique antireligieuse de l'époque') of a total of some 300 copies still extant only two English versions seem to have survived. Eventually republished by d'Holbach's printer Marc-Michel Rey in the late 1760s and 1770s the text indicted all organised religion as imposture. Compiled as a *bricolage* of early modern sources the three religious economies, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, were vilified as products of the 'absurd imaginations' of priests and tyrants. Moses, Christ and Mohammed were the three religious impostors, who, masked as divine prophets, had duped the world: as the *Traité* put it, 'Toutes les religions sont l'ouvrage de la politique'. Theological institutions and beliefs - priests, sacraments, heaven, hell, even God - were all false systems of belief, founded upon human ignorance and fear. These false ideologies contrived not only spiritual deviance but civil tyranny.

The *Traité* has been described as a 'preamble' to the systematic irreligion of d'Holbach's *System of Nature or Essay on Prejudices*. It exposed the history of religion as a history of error: imposture was both irrational and unjust. Kings and Priests were condemned as conspirators against human reason and liberty. This polemic, while extreme, was not new. The dissection of the *Traité* has shown its sources to be a collage of much earlier discourses: Hobbes, Spinoza, Vanini, Pomponazzi, Campanella, and Machiavelli all rubbed shoulders with classical standards like Cicero. Although there have been many candidates for authorship ranging from Frederick II to French libertins érudits it now seems most likely that the compiler was a minor Dutch diplomat Jan Vroesen. The intellectual milieu which provoked the *Traité* was Anglo-Dutch rather than French. The 'origins' of the most radical 'oeuvre de combat' of the French Enlightenment seems to have been in an author whose main inspiration was 'la letteratura deistica ingelese'. More recent work has suggested that the pantheistical figure, John Toland may have also had a key role in the development of specific elements of the clandestine text related to the construction of Moses as a political legislator. This research prompts some rethinking of the relationship between English and French thought in the period. The
fact that English writers were capable of 'inventing' such radical discourses between 1649 and 1700, should prompt some reconsideration of the cultural origins of the French Revolution.

IV

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

Although the English Revolution did not effect any profound social or economic transformation there was then one important ideological legacy identified as the problematic of the 'politics of religion'. Between the Restoration in 1660 and the early eighteenth century the central political debate revolved around the axis of religion rather than that of constitutionalism. The political and social power of the established Church came under intense scrutiny. While high Churchmen and Royal apologists persevered in restating the sacrality of Church and State, republican and anticlerical writers like Charles Blount, John Toland and Thomas Gordon designed polemics that undercut the 'halo of sanctity'. This antagonistic discourse, identified as a 'history of priestcraft', can be considered as the first moves in the history and
sociology of religion.  The crisis of authority engendered a series of texts, many of which were translated, paraphrased or plagiarised in later French books, which treated religious belief, ceremony and ritual as a social and historical phenomenon. 'Religion' was conventional rather than transcendent, a product of human psychology and priestly manipulation. For example Hobbes' *Ecclesiastical History from Moses to Luther* (1689 Latin edition, 1722 English translation) provided a simplified historical analysis of the decline of true theology and the rise of priestcraft. Primitive Christianity was originally a sociable religion that promoted natural morality rather than worldly gain. The priests, using a corrupt apparatus of pagan philosophy and scholastic 'jargon', turned religion into empire. False miracles, superstition, ghosts and goblins, the kingdom of fairies and darkness established clerical power over the fearful and ignorant laity. In strikingly similar language to the *Traité*, Hobbes insisted that the clergy had 'deified their dreams'. The sacerdotal order created a domination over the laity, which hand in hand with corrupt monarchs, they forged into civil tyranny.

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

In tandem with reviling the priesthood for corrupting religion and establishing civil tyranny by imposing their false opinions as prejudices in the popular mind the anticlerical writers also exposed the techniques of priestly hegemony. Developing the radical Biblical criticism of the 1650s the work of Toland and Thomas Burnet divested Scripture of its authenticity as the word of God by insisting upon its historicity. Biblical text was 'a heap of copy confusedly taken', the Canon was manipulated by priestly forgers. John Toland scandalously attempted to negate the New Testament by supplanting it with his newly discovered 'Gospel of Barnabas'.
The word of God was wrested and wried by the self-interest of the Church: mistranslations, interpolations, and mystification had obscured the true meaning of Scripture. Reformation of the 'Word' meant revolution in the Church. 

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

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

Evidence that the 'three impostors thesis' had become part of popular currency could be derived from the trial in London of John Baptista Damascene 'an impious and profane and irreligious person' in June 1672. Although acquitted later Damascene was accused of proclaiming that 'Jesus Christ, Moyses and Mahomet were three greate rogues'. Charles Blount's much ignored Life of Apollonius
(1680), a book that was burnt by order of the Bishop of London, used many of the sources contained in the Traité to parody the life of Christ with the example of the pagan magician Apollonius. Importantly the irreligious footnotes to the classical text contained a triologue between a Jew, a Christian and a Moslem debating the relative merits of their religions. Blount made similar allusions to the theory of triple imposture in letters to Rochester which were published in the 1690s. Perhaps the closest parallel to the Traité can be found in John Toland's Nazarenus (1718), another English text widely disseminated and discussed on the Continent and ultimately translated by D'Holbach in 1777. Using a very suspect and highly heterodox gnostic gospel, which he had disinterred in Holland Toland proposed that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were in fact all part of the same 'religious' phenomenon which was concerned to promote moral virtue rather than sacrament and ritual. The subtext of Nazarenus, explored more explicitly in Latin works like Origines Judicae (1709), was that the so called religious prophets (Moses, Christ and Mohammed) were really political legislators who adapted their religious institutions to national and historical circumstances.

The English commonwealthmen like Toland adapted the clerical idea of religion to the needs of the state: they created a civil religion modelled upon classical examples. The indictment of priestcraft was not because it was 'religion' but because it was corrupt religion. Reform of religion was the stepping stone to reform of society. Pre-empting the civic religion of Rousseau and the inauguration of the Cult of Reason and worship of the Supreme Being in 1792-3, the republicans suggested that commonwealth religion was to be 'a minister of God on Earth, to the end that the World may be governed with Righteousness'. Studies like Walter Moyle's discursus on Numa Pompilius applauded the Roman's politic use of religion and credal minimalism. Harrington's Oceana (1656), a popular text in eighteenth century French political theory, promoted a 'public leading' in religion to establish virtue in the nation. The republican model was premised upon a stoic vision of the personal and political battle between reason and the passions. Priestcraft corrupted the soul and the state with ignorance and tyrannous private interest; virtue blessed the souls with reason and the state with public interest. For the republicans the false sacrality of priestcraft was to be transferred to the civic religion. The role of this religion was to teach reason, virtue and public interest to the populace. Priestcraft reformed to civic religion was a central theme of the attack upon the Church of England between 1660 and 1714 enacted by writers like Toland, Gordon and the third Earl of Shaftesbury. It was precisely these writings which were translated for French readers in the 1760s and 1770s.
John Pocock has suggested that early modern England had a political culture in which radical ideas were 'invented but never put into practice'. Because historians have generally been more interested in exploring the 'origins' rather than 'consequences' of 1649 there has been very little attempt at examining the wider ideological significance of the Revolution. A commonplace view might suggest that the radicalism of the 1640s and 1650s died with the restoration of the King and Bishops in 1660. Indeed the idea of the persistence of the traditional order has been painted in bold brush strokes by J.C.D. Clark. Far from being constitutionally distinct from the Continent, for Clark, England with its 'confessional state' remained part of the ancien regime throughout the eighteenth century. Since religious institutions, beliefs and practices remained robust and vibrant, commonwealth traditions were marginalised to the radical fringes.

The logic of this argument rests upon a false opposition between a religious configuration of social power and a secular or civil alternative. The radical legacy of the 1640s and 1650s, mediated by the materialistic and anticlerical re-articulations of men like Toland, Blount and Gordon, was calculated as a contribution of the debate about the legitimate relationship between religious confessionalism and civic order. Indeed recent work on the 'politics of religion' after the Restoration, would argue that the confrontations between radical and traditional interests took place within rather than without the margins of 'religion'. That is that the struggle for 'power' was not a teleological plot whereby politics replaced theology, but a competition for the appropriation of authority within the carapace of the 'religious'. The irreligious discourses born in ecclesiological debate in seventeenth century England, and refined in the crucible of revolutionary exchange in the 1640s and 1650s, were not mere parochial ephemera but remained pertinent to the continuing contestation about the status of 'religion' throughout the eighteenth century. In this sense the radical consequences of 1649 were intimately relevant to the cultural origins of 1789. There is little doubt that after the 1660s, as part of the public debate about the relationship between the Church of England and civil power, that a profoundly radical critique of clerical authority was articulated, which later became an intellectual resource for French anticlericalism. This is not to argue that the radical anticlerical discourse of the English commonwealthsmen 'caused', 'inspired' or 'provoked' the crisis of 1789. Because there were common themes of public debate focused on the nature of religion it was possible for French writers like Voltaire and d'Holbach to appropriate and re-articulate the language and arguments.
of earlier English authors. One point that ought to be stressed is that the English
debate was conducted in the public forum of print. Toland’s *Nazarenus* was a
published text, the *Traité* circulated in France as a clandestine manuscript.  
English commonwealth anticlericalism after 1660 attempted to grapple public power from
the established Church: the objective was to reform public religion. This public
discourse can be contrasted with traditions of French libertinism which performed a
private and elite patrician impiety.

Although the period from 1650 to 1800 has consistently been described as an era of
secularisation it has now become apparent that the relationship between religion
and reason is not as clear as Victorian logic might have it. Discursive
manoeuvrings between Church and State rather than between Monarchies and
representative institutions seem to have determined the nature of conflict in the
period in both England and France. Confronting the problem of the ‘confessional
state’ in England, Freethinker and Priest, competed in the same public forum for the
power to inform ‘public reason’. It is important to note that English freethinking
attacks upon priestcraft did not go unchallenged: impiety was rebutted by vigorous
clerical polemic. Indeed, as Brian Young has recently asserted, ‘enlightenment’ in
England could perhaps be described as being more profoundly clerical than radical.

‘Enlightened ecclesiastics’ like William Law, Daniel Waterland, and William
Warburton, in articulating an anti-dogmatic ‘reasonable’ defence of Christian
orthodoxy, preserved the cultural and intellectual status of religious institutions in
the eighteenth century. Acknowledging the historiographical value of a
churchmanship that successfully plotted a steady course between enlightenment
and counter-enlightenment discourses about the status of reason and religion
should not however, imply a consequent deflation of the ‘radicalism’ of a persisting
tradition of anticlerical and commonwealth ideologies. An alternative reading of the
continuing success of religious apologetics might be to assert the consequentially
persisting relevance of irreligious ideologies. In one sense the debate might be
thought to be determined by different understandings of the relationship between
ideas and cultural change: it is one thing to argue that a set of ideas articulated by a
group of writers became dominant or achieved hegemonic status, it is another to
explore the procedures of competition, contestation and appropriation by which
different affinities or interests defended their positions. An intellectualist approach
might argue that ‘Enlightenment’ conceptions of human nature, reason or
philosophy necessarily vanquished traditional religious and theological values
during the course of the eighteenth century. By rehearsing the arguments of the
current historiography of political culture in eighteenth century France the intention has been to suggest that the politically corrosive dynamic of a set of anticlerical irreligious ideas holds implications for an understanding of the illocutionary meaning of those ideas in an English context. The work of Chartier and Baker suggests that the production, circulation, and reception of anti-monarchical and anti-clerical ideas was intimately connected with the socio-political rupture of 1789. In one sense then it is possible to argue that there was a critical discourse that had a radical reaction in ancien regime society both in England and France. By exploring the intellectual genesis of these ideas and locating them in English commonwealth traditions, it is possible to underscore both the portability and permeability of such radically anti-traditional ideas. There is a twofold implication here. First, that there was a textually continuous relationship between an early radical (English) enlightenment and a later high (French) Enlightenment. Secondly, the point should be made that these ideas were not only portable and adaptable, but also the product of a specific politico-religious moment. Between 1660 and 1730 there was a contestation in intellectual culture between clerical and anticlerical interests: this contestation while not simply ‘religious’ nor ‘secular’, was certainly internecine. While it is possible to assert, pace Clark and Young, that this ‘radical’ moment was compromised, and, even perhaps, marginalised from the central stage of public debate after the 1730s in England, its significance both for providing a resource for later (French) writers and polemicists, but also for establishing a radical agenda for the contours and parameters of eighteenth century European debate about religion should not be ignored.

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


7 See, drawing together much recent work, T. Harris *Politics under the later Stuarts* (London: Longman, 1992).
9 Colley *Britons* 11-54; Thompson *Customs in Common* 49-50, 56, 64.
11 Thompson *Customs in Common* 50; see also Langford *Public Life and Propertied Englishmen* 430.


ibid 151.

ibid 152.


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

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


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


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

31. On Voltaire see N.L. Torrey Voltaire and the English Deists (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930); on d'Holbach see, P.Naville D'Holbach et la philosophie scientific au XVIIe siecle (Paris: Vrin, 1967). D'Holbach seems to have been particularly interested in the writings of John Toland 1670-1722: the Catalogues des Livres de feu M. le Baron d'Holbach (Paris, 1789) shows that he owned an almost complete collection of Toland's writings, many of which he translated anonymously or as composed under his own name. See also J. Vercruysse Bibliographie descriptive des ecrits du Baron d'Holbach (Paris: Press Université de France, 1971) for translations from John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon.
32. See P. Retat (ed) *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (Paris: Centre Interuniveristaire, 1973) 7; there were editions in 1775, 1776, 1777, 1793, 1796.


35. Retat *Traité* 'Tables des Matières'.


37. ibid 539.


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


46. See Rochedieu *Bibliography of French Translations*.


51. See Horns 'Revolution as Discourse' 626.

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

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


For older work on French periodical literature see J. de la Harpe 'Le journal des Savants et L'Angleterre 1702-1789' Modern Philology 20 (1937-41) who comments (289) 'L'importance du rôle de L'Angleterre dans la formation de la pensée française du XVIII siècle est, à cette heure, une fait acquis'.

By exploring the ‘revisionist’ accounts found in contemporary English and French historiography, this paper intends to propose a way of rethinking traditional accounts of the relationship between religion, intellectual change, and ‘revolution’ in Europe between 1649 and 1789. The premise of this discussion will be that English and French society shared many of the same political and cultural problems between the Reformation and the Revolution and that much of this similarity was manifested in conflicts within ‘religious’ life. By reconsidering the cultural relationship between ‘religion’ and th...