Chapter Thirty-three

The Beginnings of Religious Skepticism in Western Christendom, to ca. 1720

Religious skepticism came to public attention in western Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century. It was nurtured not only by philosophers and men of science but also by devout biblical scholars and by a few religious eccentrics. Of these there were plenty. The end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 did not mean the end of religious enthusiasms: those would continue to flare for a very long time. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, a few people were turning against Christianity in particular and the scriptural religions in general. By the 1680s deists in England had begun to advertise their "rational understanding" of God. On the continent skeptics were by then beginning to publish their doubts about Christianity in anonymous and clandestine pamphlets, the importance of which has only recently been recognized by historians.

While Catholics and Protestants were fighting each other in the Thirty Years War, a few Christians were beginning to challenge doctrines fundamental for both sides. Judaism and Islam were no less susceptible to doubt, but the focus was on Christianity as Christian scholars began not only to disbelieve what they had been taught but also to publish the grounds of their disbelief. The Bible was central to this crisis of belief. First of all, some doctrines that had been important to Protestants as well as Catholics seemed to lack a biblical foundation. The most important of these was the doctrine of the trinity, or the doctrine that Jesus was one of the "persons" of God and so had existed from all eternity. Secondly, in the seventeenth century the Bible itself came under scrutiny, and proved to be far more problematic than Protestants had supposed. With Spinoza, religious skepticism came to full bloom.

Textual criticism of the Bible

Because the Bible was of extraordinary importance for Protestants, they exerted themselves to make certain that their biblical texts - the Hebrew and

Greek originals - were exactly right. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a Golden Age of Hebrew and Greek studies: many students learned to read the sacred languages, and all Protestant and many Catholic universities boasted of professors who had a thorough knowledge of the sacred texts. Much research was done in order to make the texts of the Old and New Testaments - every phrase, every word - as close as possible to what had been composed by the divinely inspired authors.

In 1624 Louis Cappel, a Huguenot and a professor of Hebrew at the Calvinist university at Saumur (near Tours, in western France), published his conclusion that when Jerome made his Vulgate translation in the late fourth century the Hebrew texts that he translated did not yet indicate vowels. Cappel, who also read Arabic, believed that the pointing of the Hebrew vowels was done by Masoretes in early Islamic times. His book, *Arcanum punctationis revelatum* ("Secret of pointing revealed"), aroused much opposition, the devout claiming that Moses himself had pointed all the vowels, which were inspired by God along with the consonants. Many professional Hebraists, however, found Cappel's evidence and arguments persuasive, and by 1700 it was widely acknowledged by both Christian and Jewish scholars that the pointing of Hebrew vowels had been added to the sacred texts by Masoretic scholars between the seventh and the tenth centuries.

Nor were the Hebrew consonants entirely secure. In his *Critica Sacra* in 1650 Cappel showed that words, phrases, and even entire verses of the Hebrew Bible appeared differently in different manuscripts. The *textus receptus* ("received" or standard text) of the Hebrew Bible was the *Mikraot gedolot* that had been edited by Jacob ben Hayyim and published by Daniel Bomberg in 1517. This "Bible of the Rabbis" was supposed by everyone to be precisely what Moses and the Prophets had written, and it served as the basis for the English translation of the Old Testament in the Bible authorized by King James I. Cappel undermined confidence in the *Mikraot gedolot*. Comparing the *textus receptus* with the Samaritan Hebrew text, the Septuagint, and many medieval Hebrew manuscripts of the Tanakh, Cappel found hundreds of places in the Old Testament where the Hebrew reading was uncertain.

Scholars of the Greek text of the New Testament were as meticulous as their Old Testament counterparts. For the New Testament the *textus receptus* was the edition that Erasmus had produced, based on Byzantine manuscripts dating from the tenth to the thirteenth century. Shortly after the Authorized Version of the Bible was published a much older manuscript of the Greek Bible arrived in London. Codex Alexandrinus, or Codex A, was at least five hundred years older than any manuscript known to Erasmus. It was a gift to King James (although by 1627, when it reached London, James had died and Charles I was king) from Cyril Lucaris, Patriarch of Constantinople. Lucaris sent it to London because he was pleased that King James had authorized the publication of a fine English translation of the Bible. Earlier in his career Lucaris had been Patriarch of Alexandria, where he had acquired the old manuscript. Seventeenth-century scholars quickly recognized the manuscript's antiquity (it is now agreed that it was written in the late fourth or early fifth century), and were disappointed to find that in some places it differed from the *textus receptus* that they had inherited from Erasmus. Codex Alexandrinus even raised questions about the canon, presenting the first two epistles of Clement as part of the New Testament. By the middle of the seventeenth century textual criticism was thus casting doubt on the soundness of the received texts of both the Old and the New Testament.

The beginnings of English Arianism

In the wake of the Reformation study of the Bible raised serious questions about the traditional Christian doctrine of the trinity. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin maintained the traditional doctrine, but the Socinians concluded that the New Testament provided no basis for it. The Anabaptists also, searching the New Testament meticulously, found in it no more support for the trinity than for infant baptism. In fact, trinitarianism hardly appears in the New Testament. Only two passages - the "Great Commission" at Matthew 28:19, and the "witnesses" passage at I John 5:7 - present a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and even those two passages are dubious. In the King James version of the "Great Commission," when Jesus is about to ascend into Heaven he instructs his apostles to go and teach all nations, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy

Ghost." Early in the fourth century, in the New Testament familiar to Eusebius the text of the "Great Commission" seems to have been quite different. As Eusebius consistently and often quoted the passage, Jesus tells the apostles to baptize the nations "in my name."[1] Also troubling for English scholars in the seventeenth century was that the very early Codex Alexandrinus - which had just arrived in London - did not include verse 5:7 in its text of I John. The implication was that when Codex Alexandrinus was copied, I John 5:7 was not yet part of the received text. The English Arians, emphasizing the lack of Biblical evidence, insisted that the trinity was not worshiped in the early Church. Trinitarianism, they claimed, was an invention of the Council of Nicaea in 325, and so yet another Catholic error.

In England those who doubted the trinity were labeled not "Socinians" but "Arians." The term was pejorative, and reflected the distaste that mainstream Protestants had for the doubters. The trinity was firmly imbedded in Anglicanism and its Thirty-Nine Articles, and was also fundamental for Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Initially, authorities in England took drastic measures to prevent the spread of Socinian and Anabaptist views. Several dozen Anabaptists were burned at the stake in the reign of Henry VIII, and this persecution continued in the reigns of Edward, Mary and Elizabeth. In 1575 a group of Anabaptists from the Netherlands came to England to advocate their "true" form of Christianity, but they were arrested, tried, and burned to death. They were, it was alleged, "Arian Baptists."

In 1612, Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman were burned at the stake, the last persons in England to be thus executed for their blasphemies. Legate, along with his brothers, was one of the early "Seekers," and became prominent as a preacher who proclaimed the errors of the Church of England. One of the principal errors he identified was trinitarianism, and as a result he was branded an Arian heretic and was burned at the stake at Smithfield, an execution approved by King James I and witnessed by Roger Williams, who was then only eight years old and whose family lived close to the place of burning. Edward Wightman taught, in a loud and spectacular manner, that Jesus was a perfect and sinless man but in no way God. Wightman also denounced the Nicene and Athanasian creeds.

Pertinent to the Arian controversy is an anti-trinitarian tract, *De doctrina Christiana*, written in the early 1650s. The author of *De doctrina Christiana* announces at the outset that the tractate is based entirely on passages from the Bible, and not on patristic writers or on church councils. The *De doctrina Christiana* was found in manuscript form in 1823 among a collection of unpublished papers written by John Milton. It is this work, and not *Paradise Lost*, that has persuaded most scholars that Milton's Christianity was essentially Arian.

Although in Milton's time they were no longer burned at the stake, Arian Christians in England continued to be harassed. John Biddle (1615-1662) was an Arian and perhaps a Socinian, and in 1647 published a work against trinitarianism, *Twelve Arguments drawn out of Scripture, wherein the commonly received opinion touching the deity of the Holy Spirit is clearly and fully refuted.* Biddle was four times imprisoned. In 1648 the English parliament made denial of the trinity a capital crime. The 1662 revision of the Book of Common Prayer utilized the Athanasian Creed to express the doctrine of the trinity, and anyone seeking an academic or civil position in England was required to profess that creed. This continued to be the law even after the parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689.

Adam and Eve, Millennialism, and the beginning of "higher" biblical criticism

In 1655 biblical criticism reached what is called its "higher" level,[2] although its pioneer was not a professional biblical scholar. In that year Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676) published his *Prae-Adamitae*, arguing that God had created the human race thousands of years before he created Adam and Eve. La Peyrère began writing his book about "Pre-Adamites" in the 1630s but was unable to publish it in his native France. Moving to the more liberal Netherlands, La Peyrère made the acquaintance of Queen Christina, who had recently abdicated the throne of Sweden. As an adolescent Christina had been tutored by Descartes, and under his influence had secretly become a Catholic. In 1654 she abdicated and left Sweden for Amsterdam. There she met La Peyrère, read his manuscript, and paid for its publication. The printing was done in Basle and Amsterdam. *Prae-Adamitae* was an

immediate sensation. It quickly went through five editions in Latin. An English translation was published in 1656 and a Dutch translation in 1661.

Only in the last twenty years has Isaac La Peyrère's contribution to the Enlightenment been appreciated. What little notice he earlier received was as the perpetrator of a bizarre Messianic-Millennialism. The late Richard Popkin called attention to La Peyrère as a pioneer in subjecting the Bible to historical criticism.[3] That honor had previously been given to Baruch Spinoza and Richard Simon, but Popkin showed that both Spinoza and Simon read La Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae* and were much influenced by it. So also, apparently, was Thomas Hobbes.

La Peyrère was born in Bordeaux. Perhaps of Jewish Marrano ancestry, he was raised as a Huguenot. Very little is known about his early years, but by the 1630s he had already developed his odd religious views and had written a long manuscript in support of them. Cardinal Richelieu learned of the manuscript, condemned it, and forbade its publication. In 1640 La Peyrère became secretary to Louis, prince of Condé, whose powers in France were second only to those of King Louis XIII. The prince is said to have often discussed metaphysics and theology with La Peyrère.[4]

La Peyrère lived at a time when Millennialism was rife. The Book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, spoke of a thousand-year period in which Satan would be bound and cast into the pit, no longer a menace to humankind, and Christ would reign over the entire earth. Although the Book of Revelation had not been of much importance in Catholic Europe, it became a favorite of Protestants, many of whom associated Rome and the papacy with the dragon or the "great serpent" which is Satan (Revelation 20:2).

In western Europe many Christians believed that a mass conversion of Judaeans to Christianity would immediately precede Jesus' appearance and his thousand-year reign. For English Protestants this belief was linked with an effort, favored by Cromwell, to revoke the centuries-old ban on Judaeans living in England. Jewish propagandists contributed to the enthusiasm, although painting a somewhat different apocalyptic picture. In describing

the apocalyptic atmosphere in which Isaac La Peyrère came to his strange beliefs, Popkin noted that "Menasseh ben Israel, in 1650, published his Messianic work, *The Hope of Israel*, which showed that the fulfillment of Jewish Messianic expectations was at hand, and needed only the return of the Jews to England to set the stage for the coming of the Messiah."[5]

Caught up in this heady Millennialism, La Peyrère believed that his great mission was to prepare for "the recall of the Jews" to God's grace. As he saw it, however, the stage for this climactic event would be set not in England but in France: although Louis, Prince de Condé, would not himself be the second Messiah, he would play a very important role in the transition to the Millennial state. La Peyrère supposed that the Jews had indeed been God's Chosen People, but had fallen out of favor because they rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Christians had therefore taken the Jews' place in God's grace, but now - in the middle of the seventeenth century - God was about to send a second Messiah and thus to recall the Jews to himself. In the long-awaited Millennium, so La Peyrère supposed, Jews, Christians and Mohammedans would be united in one universal religion and one theocratic state. In 1643 La Peyrère published his *Du Rappel des Juifs*, but did so anonymously.

Although *Du Rappel des Juifs* was the essence of La Peyrère's project, the book omitted much of the supporting argument. To make his Millennialism persuasive La Peyrère had hoped to show that the Bible presented only the history of the Jews, and not the history of the entire human race. That argument, however, seemed blasphemous to Cardinal Richelieu and other French authorities and was therefore deleted from *Du Rappel des Juifs*. In 1655 its publication in the Dutch Republic as *Prae-Adamitae* caused a great stir. Adam and Eve, as La Peyrère saw them, were the progenitors only of the Jews: prior to God's creation of Adam and Eve, he had created a "pre-Adamite" race, from which most of the world's Gentiles were descended. The pre-Adamite race was ancestral not only to European Gentiles but also to the millions of heathen in the Americas, in sub-Saharan Africa, and in most of Asia. La Peyrère claimed that the traditions of the Mexicans, Eskimos, and Chinese stretched back several thousand years before Adam and Eve, and he noted that the ancient Egyptians and

Babylonians likewise had very long chronologies, which were supported by their astronomical observations. Obviously, concluded La Peyrère, Adam and Eve were relative late-comers to the human race. The Great Flood, which according to Genesis had wiped all but eight people from the face of the earth, was not a world-wide flood but a local catastrophe.

Because his own reconstruction of the remote past differed starkly from that given by the Bible, La Peyrère found it necessary to show that the first five books of the Bible were not entirely reliable. Moses must have kept a diary, La Peyrère conceded, but could not have written the Pentateuch as it now stands: how could Moses have described his own death (Deuteronomy 34)? In addition, La Peyrère showed that the so-called Five Books of Moses omitted much and contained contradictions and errors. Undoubtedly the original texts would have been perfectly accurate, but what has come down to us must be a third- or fourth-hand account, and a far cry from what Moses, inspired by God, had originally written: they are, La Peyrère concluded, "a heap of Copie confusedly taken." No single writer was responsible for the varying accounts: "These things were diversely written, being taken out of several authors."[6]

Almost immediately after its publication *Prae-Adamitae* was denounced by Jewish, Catholic and Protestant clerics and scholars. The bishop of Namur, where La Peyrère was then living, ordered all Catholic churches in the city to publicly condemn the book. In February of 1656 La Peyrère was arrested and jailed. "Finally, it was gently suggested to him that if he repented, apologized to the Pope and became a Catholic, he would be forgiven. By June of 1656, a worn out La Peyrère accepted this solution."[7] In his apology, which was carefully contrived, he blamed his Huguenot upbringing for whatever errors he had made.

In his religious zeal Isaac La Peyrère had pioneered a critical examination of the Tanakh, the Christian Old Testament. He was not an academic and apparently could read neither Hebrew nor Greek.[8] Readers such as Spinoza and Richard Simon were not attracted to the Millennialism of *Du Rappel des Juifs*, but in *Prae-Adamitae* they found much persuasive criticism of what had traditionally been "the five books of Moses."

The Quakers, and Samuel Fisher

While Millennialism was leading La Peyrère toward biblical criticism, another religious movement was carrying Samuel Fisher in the same direction.[9] This happened in England, which in the middle of the seventeenth century was seething with religious movements of all sorts. The rebellion against Charles I, and then his execution, loosed upon English society a host of Christian sects and sectarian conflict. With Catholicism routed and the Anglican church in disarray, Presbyterians, Puritans and other Calvinists came to the fore. Although briefly in the ascendant, the Calvinists were hardly an established church, having to contend with Ranters, Quakers, Arians, Socinians and other and more obscure Christian groups. It is arguable that England was, even more than the Netherlands, the place most susceptible to religious innovation in the middle and late seventeenth century. In England as in the Netherlands, the new religious ideas were tied to - and energized by - republicanism.

Samuel Fisher was a "Quaker," a convert to the Society of Friends that George Fox had recently formed. The Friends took issue both with the Church of England and with its Puritan opposition. They set no store by the sacraments and the clerical hierarchy of the Church of England, but neither could they accept the Puritan reliance on scripture as the sole medium through which God communicates with mortals. Although scripture is paramount, the Quakers believed, God also sends his Holy Spirit to believers, in order to illuminate them with an inner light. This kind of revelation happens especially when Friends are gathered together in a meeting: the revelation is thus a corporate experience and strengthens all participants. Unlike some twentieth-century Pentecostals, the seventeenth-century Quakers were inspired to declare their revelations in English and did not "speak in tongues."

Fox and the Quakers accepted Jesus as God's son and humankind's Savior, and they very much appreciated the work of the Holy Spirit, but the *doctrine* of the Trinity they regarded as a construct. This infuriated both Puritans and Anglicans. The Quakers also preached plainness, the equality

of all men, and pacifism. Because of their pacifism and their refusal to pay the usual respects to royalty and nobility, the Quakers were looked upon as anti-social and dangerous. Many spent time in prison. William Penn (1644-1718) was imprisoned from time to time, but because of family wealth he was able not only to persevere but even - in 1682 - to purchase a large tract of land in America as a refuge for Quakers. Persecution of the Friends continued until passage of the Toleration Act of 1689, which was part of England's "Glorious Revolution."

Samuel Fisher (1605-1665), who had studied Hebrew and Greek at Oxford University and was in fact highly respected as a Hebraist, for a time was a priest in the Church of England. Disappointed that the Anglicans retained much of their Catholic past, he joined the Baptists. The Baptists pleased him no more than had the Anglicans, and in 1654 he joined Fox's Society of Friends. As a Quaker, he put to use his knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, as well as his considerable acquaintance with the history of early Christianity, in order to show the Baptists and Puritans that as divine revelation the Bible was far less reliable than they supposed. In 1660 Fisher published his *Rusticus ad Academicos, the Rustick's Alarm to the Rabbies, or the Country Correcting the University, and Clergy*. The book was written in English and it was massive (939 pages). Fisher's anti-scripturalism was aimed at the Puritans. At the outset of the Puritan revolution the Westminster Confession had declared that the biblical texts, in Hebrew and Greek, "being immediately inspired by God and by his singular care kept pure in all Ages are therefore Authentical."[10] Calvinist certainty about the Bible was expressed in books such as John Owen's *The Reason of Faith, or An Answer unto that Enquiry, Wherefore we believe the Scripture to be the Word of God*.

Hoping to persuade the Puritans that they should not base their faith entirely on the Bible, Fisher argued that "existing texts of Scripture were altered, corrupted, variable."[11] The ancient canonizing of both the Old and the New Testament, declared Fisher, had been arbitrary: books had been left out of the canon because they were in conflict with the canonizers' beliefs, and questionable texts had been included. Still other books and epistles that had once been regarded as Scripture were eventually and irretrievably lost.

In answer to the Calvinists' certainty Fisher derided "the Uncertainty of your *tattered transcripts.*"[12]

Not surprisingly, Fisher's personal fortunes were much worse than La Peyrère's. He was early arrested and imprisoned for preaching his Quaker beliefs, and spent years in the appalling Newgate, Gatehouse and Wood Street prisons of London. His *Rusticus ad Academicos* was published while he was a prisoner. Fisher died in 1665, having contracted the plague while confined in the White Lion prison in Southwark.

Pyrrhonist skepticism, Descartes, and the beginnings of modern philosophy

A philosophical contribution to modernity, as Richard Popkin showed, was the revival of ancient skepticism.[13] In 1562 a Latin translation of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* was published by Henri Estienne, a Parisian printer and Hellenist (Estienne did the translation himself). That marked the return of ancient skepticism in its Pyrrhonist (as opposed to its Academic) form.[14] Pyrrhon of Elis, in the third century BC, believed that we can know nothing with certainty (we can not even know that we know nothing). What we claim to "know" is only what our senses tell us, and they are all fallible. The translation of Sextus Empriricus' book on Pyrrhonism, to say nothing of the Greek original, was hardly a popular book, but it inspired its few readers - most of them in France - to draw important negative conclusions. Montaigne was much influenced by Pyrrhonism, although he presented his skepticism in a way that caused no offense.

Philosophical skepticism was brought to bear upon Christianity by Pierre Charron (1541-1603), a Catholic priest and a long-time friend of Montaigne. In 1601 Charron published a book on knowledge - *Traicté de la sagesse* - that can be described as the first important French contribution to philosophy. In university circles *La sagesse* stirred up a considerable controversy.[15] Eight years earlier, Charron had published his *Les trois véritez*, declaring that although we have no demonstrative evidence we do have probable evidence for three truths: that God exists, that the Christian religion is correct, and that the true church is Catholic rather than Protestant. In his *Traicté de la sagesse* Charron carried his skepticism much further.

Here he proposed that all religious beliefs, even those of the Catholic church, are grounded entirely on divine revelation. Thomas Aquinas' attempt to prove religious doctrines by rational argument, according to Charron, was unsuccessful: to defend Christianity intellectually is no more possible than to defend Judaism or Islam intellectually.[16] Although prior to this work Charron had been highly regarded as a Catholic champion against Protestantism and Judaism, after *La sagesse* the Catholic hierarchy (although not King Henri IV) denounced him as an atheist, which he was not.

Along the same lines, in 1624 Edward Herbert, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), published *De veritate*, which has been described as the first articulation of deism. In *De veritate* Herbert corrected Charron's *Les trois véritez*. Herbert stripped down religious "knowledge" to five truths: that there is a deity, that the deity should be worshiped, that worship consists of piety and virtue, that people should feel remorse for their wrongdoing, and that in an afterlife people will be punished or rewarded. This leaves out most of Christianity, as well as Judaism and Islam. Lord Herbert mostly (although not entirely) discounted revelation. Late in life he wrote *De religione gentilium*, an attempt at comparative religion. Neither the *De veritate* nor the *De religione gentilium* had much immediate influence, as the English descended into civil war between Anglicans and Puritans, supporters and opponents of Charles I. In 1680 Charles Blount made use of Cherbury's writings in promoting his own skepticism. By that time English deism - based on "natural theology" and denying divine revelation - was under way.

In the face of Pyrrhonism, both Francis Bacon and René Descartes sought to ground knowledge on a firm basis, but neither man applied his method to religion. Ostensibly an Anglican, Francis Bacon did not challenge religion in general or Christianity in particular. This was perhaps a counsel of discretion, because he had a distinguished civil career as well as a scholarly career (under James I Bacon became Lord Chancellor). Whether sincerely or not, Bacon divided understanding into philosophical and revealed, thus neatly separating knowledge from faith. Benjamin Farrington argued that Bacon's Christianity, although eccentric, was genuine and central to his work. His Christianity, that is, was moral or ethical rather

than doctrinal, and was indebted to both the Old and the New Testament. Bacon was deeply concerned with alleviating poverty and human misery, an ideal that he found in the Bible and did not find in classical Greek and Latin works.

In 1637 René Descartes - resident for most of his adult life in the Dutch Republic - published his *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*. As Bacon had done, Descartes rejected Aristotelianism and syllogistic reasoning as the philosopher's point of departure. In reaction to the complete skeptics, however, Descartes insisted that some things can be known, beginning with the existence of one's own mind (*cogito ergo sum*) and proceeding through rigorous mathematics to abstract conclusions.[17] Although thorough in applying his method in the philosophical realm, Descartes was discreet about challenging divine revelation and Christian doctrine. Mindful of what Galileo was suffering for his impertinence in Italy, Descartes simply avoided bringing his philosophy to bear on Christianity. He remained at least nominally Catholic throughout his life, although Catholicism in Utrecht, Amsterdam and other Dutch cities was mostly private rather than public. Descartes died in Stockholm in 1650 and his body was transported back to France for burial. On its way, parts of it were removed by Catholics who supposed that Descartes would be sainted and that they would then have a precious relic.

Hobbes (1588-1679)

Nor did Thomas Hobbes directly challenge Christianity: his criticism was limited to obviously Catholic doctrines, sparing both Anglican and Puritan sensibilities. Hobbes' *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* was published in 1651, while Hobbes was in Paris. Because of his royalist sympathies (he was the tutor to King Charles' son, who would himself live to rule England as Charles II) he had fled England when the "Roundheads" gained control. In *Leviathan* Hobbes proposed that kingship - even royal absolutism - was a necessary evil, a great bulwark against men's natural disposition to harm each other while promoting their own interests.

Leviathan contributed to deism but in the 1650s Hobbes did not yet dare publicly to espouse deism. Eighteenth-century deists based themselves on natural theology: the general agreement, they supposed, of humankind. They affirmed the existence of God, but denied all divine revelation. Such openness was not yet prudent in the revolutionary zeal of Cromwell's Commonwealth. Even in the 1680s Charles Blount published anonymously his *Great is Diana of the Ephesians* and other writings.

Hobbes' attitude toward the Bible was circumspect. After proposing that among the Gentiles religion arose because of fear, or ignorance of causes, he offered something entirely different for the religion of ancient Israel: "where God himself by supernatural revelation planted religion, there he also made to himself a peculiar kingdom, and gave laws...."[18] Hobbes seems to have credited all the Biblical miracles, except those worked by Pharaoh's magicians, in which he suggested that perhaps some deception took place. Otherwise, he supposed, "a miracle is a work of God done (besides His operation by the way of nature, ordained in the Creation) for the making manifest to His elect the mission of an extraordinary minister for their salvation."[19]

Yet, by the standards of his time, Hobbes was hardly a religious conservative. In Chapter 33 of *Leviathan* he pointed out the several passages proving that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch, that Samuel did not write the books attributed to him, and that much of the Psalter was written by authors other than David. Most radical was Hobbes' overall conclusion: "But considering the inscriptions or titles of their books, it is manifest enough that the whole Scripture of the Old Testament was set forth, in the form we have it, after the return of the Jews from their Captivity in Babylon." The man responsible for setting forth the Old Testament, he suggested, was Ezra, in the fifth century BC.[20] Hobbes was evidently the first to propose this "subversive" (but incorrect) thesis that Ezra compiled the Hebrew Bible.[21]

Spinoza (1632-1677)

In July of 1656, at about the same time that Samuel Fisher traveled to Amsterdam to convert the city's Judaeans to Quakerism, and a year after Isaac La Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae* was published in the same city, Baruch Spinoza was expelled from the Jewish synagogue in Amsterdam.[22] He was twenty-three. In the warehouse that served as the synagogue's meeting-place the *beth din* charged the young Spinoza with "abominable heresies" and "monstrous deeds." As a boy Spinoza had been an exceptional student, and as an adolescent had been groomed to become the synagogue's next rabbi. His views about God, however, had become so distant from those of the synagogue that the council pronounced *cherem* (ban, or excommunication) upon him, ordering all within the nation of Israel to cut off contact with him: "Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up."

After his expulsion from Amsterdam's little Jewish community Spinoza changed his given name, "Baruch," to "Benedictus," its Latin equivalent. He often supported himself as a lens-grinder, and associated regularly with the Collegiants, eccentric Dutch Protestants.[23] The Collegiants had no formal creed, and were encouraged to explore all things and so find their way to the truth. They had emerged in 1619 in reaction to the rigid doctrinalism of other Christian sects. The group's main center was at Rijnsburg, near Leiden, but cells had also sprung up in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities. Spinoza may have had Collegiant acquaintances before he was expelled from the Amsterdam synagogue, but his involvement with the group became much closer after 1656. From 1660 until 1663 he lived in Rijnsburg, boarding with the town surgeon.

Spinoza's lifelong passion was philosophy. In 1663 he published *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*, confirming and extending Descartes' epistemology.[24] That was a technical work, and although it brought Spinoza to the attention of European philosophers it scarcely was noticed by the general public. Very different was his second work. As a renegade from Judaism and dismayed by Christian dogmatism Spinoza greatly appreciated the tolerant policies of the Dutch Republic. He recognized how fragile such tolerance was, and feared that reactionary forces would try to compel religious conformity. In defense of intellectual and religious liberty, he

wrote the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, which was a trenchant criticism of revealed religion. He had the book printed and published anonymously in 1670, although his wide circle of friends knew very well who had written it. During his lifetime he published nothing more. After his death in 1677, possibly caused by years of grinding lenses, his friends arranged for the publication of his other writings, chief of which was his *Ethics*.

In the full title of the *Tractatus* Spinoza made his libertarian agenda very clear: "TRACTATUS THEOLOGICO-POLITICUS containing a number of dissertations, wherein it is shown that freedom to philosophise can not only be granted without injury to Piety and the Peace of the Commonwealth, but that the Peace of the Commonwealth and Piety are endangered by the suppression of this freedom."[25] In his introductory paragraphs Spinoza elaborated on this theme:

> Now, seeing that we have the rare happiness of living in a republic, where judgment is free and unshackled, where each may worship God as his conscience dictates, and where freedom is esteemed before all things dear and precious, I have believed that I should be undertaking no ungrateful or unprofitable task, in demonstrating that not only can such freedom be granted without prejudice to the public peace, but also, that without such freedom piety cannot flourish nor the public peace be secure. Such is the chief conclusion I seek to establish in this treatise.[26]

The treatise takes aim at superstition, and advocates a life of reason. Spinoza assumed that the great majority of humankind has no interest in - or time for - philosophy and science, and so makes do with religion. He wrote for the few who wish to know. In his radicalism he decisively broke with the religious past, and opened the way for the Enlightenment.[27]

The belief that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, Spinoza argued at some length, was baseless. The Pentateuch, he claimed, was written long after Moses' death: the first twelve books of the Bible - from Genesis through II Kings - were written by a single author, most likely Ezra. That Ezra had composed the Pentateuch and the books of "the Former

Prophets" had earlier been suggested by Hobbes, but Spinoza advanced the theory more forcefully.

Having learned the lessons of the Scientific Revolution, Spinoza was confident that miracles do not happen. Yet he assumed that the events narrated in the Bible did happen: the ten plagues on Egypt, the opening of the Red Sea, Elijah's bringing a young boy back to life, Jesus' healing of a blind man, and many more. But for each of these, he supposed, there must have been a natural cause. These were not supernatural Acts of God, but were presented as Acts of God by the biblical authors, who hoped thereby to encourage the Israelites to worship him:

> Thus it is plain that all the events narrated in Scripture came to pass naturally, and are referred directly to God because Scripture, as we have shown, does not aim at explaining things by their natural causes, but only at narrating what appeals to the popular imagination, and doing so in the manner best calculated to excite wonder, and consequently to impress the minds of the masses with devotion.[28]

The scriptures were revered by the general population, Spinoza wrote, precisely because they presented ordinary events as miraculous:

> If the Bible were to describe the destruction of an empire in the style of political historians, the masses would remain unstirred, whereas the contrary is the case when it adopts the method of poetic description, and refers all things immediately to God.[29]

In general, Spinoza's anonymous book was a broadside against the veracity of the Bible. As D. P. Walker summarized it, the *Tractatus* "presented the Bible as consisting almost wholly of lies useful to the vulgar; the few useful truths it contains are superfluous for intellectuals in whom the natural light of reason shines clearly."[30] Matthew Stewart's summary is more specific:

> The bulk of the *Tractatus* is devoted to an analysis of the Bible. Spinoza sets out to demonstrate, among other things, that the Bible is

> full of obscurities and contradicts itself with abandon, that the Pentateuch manifestly did not come from the pen of God, Moses, or any other single author, but rather was the work of several human writers over a long span of time; that the Jews were not God's 'chosen people,' except in the sense that they thrived in a specific place and time long ago; that the miracles reported in the Bible are always imaginary and often ill informed.... In short, Spinoza presents a thoroughly secular and historicist reading of the scriptures.[31]

Along with the Bible went the scriptural God himself, a topic skirted in the *Tractatus* and addressed at length in the posthumous *Ethics*. Spinoza was not an atheist, but until well into the nineteenth century he was regarded as an atheist. This is not surprising since his God was an impersonal Ground of Being, which had little or nothing in common with the personal and anthropopathic God worshiped in the scriptural religions. As summarized by Stewart, "in Spinoza's view, to put it simply, God and Nature are not and never will be in conflict for the simple reason that God *is* Nature."[32]

The impact of Spinoza was enormous. The Scientific Revolution was well under way by the time that Spinoza wrote his *Tractatus*, and modern philosophy had begun with Descartes. These advances, however, were being accommodated - although with some difficulty - by western Christendom: in the third quarter of the seventeenth century the scriptures still supplied the framework within which philosophers and men of science worked and thought. What Jonathan Israel calls "the radical Enlightenment" began with Spinoza's dismissal of scriptures.[33] Undoubtedly the subordination of western Christianity to science and philosophy would have happened without Spinoza, but it was greatly accelerated by what Spinoza wrote.

According to Pierre-François Moreau, who has assessed both the immediate and the long-term influence of Spinoza's writings, "the publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise* had the effect of a lightning bolt. The first public attack came from Leibniz's teacher, Thomasius, and soon a whole series of clergy and university people - German, Dutch, and even French Huguenots who had taken refuge in the United Provinces -

denounced the work."[34] Gottfried Leibniz, young and ambitious, paid a visit to Spinoza at The Hague (Den Haag) in November of 1676, and for the rest of his life Leibniz tried to overturn Spinoza's impersonal God and to reestablish the credentials of the personal God of the Bible.[35]

Although the *Tractatus* was a lightning bolt, it was not quite a bolt out of the blue.[36] It had precedents, although none had been so frank and so radical. Spinoza profited from the pioneering efforts of Isaac La Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae* and Samuel Fisher's *Rusticus ad Academicos*. Fisher may have become personally acquainted with Spinoza soon after 1654. Margaret Fell, the Grande Dame of Quakerism, had written two pamphlets which she hoped would persuade the Jews to convert to Quakerism. She wrote the pamphlets in English and asked Fisher to translate them into Hebrew, so that the Jews of the Netherlands could read them. Fisher was at the same time part of the Quakers' mission sent to Amsterdam to convert the Jews of the city. Richard Popkin suggested that in Amsterdam Fisher met Spinoza - who at the time was still a young man, recently expelled from the synagogue - and asked his assistance in translating the pamphlets. In any case, after comparing Fisher's and Spinoza's biblical criticism, Popkin concluded that "the same forceful points arose in two quite different contexts."[37]

While Fisher's critique of scriptures had been provoked by Puritans, Spinoza's was occasioned by his disputes with Jewish scholars and rabbis.[38] Despite Spinoza's intentions, however, Judaism was for a long time hardly affected by his writings: his expulsion from the Amsterdam synagogue had effectively isolated him from Judaism, which did not have to reckon with him until the *haskalah*, a hundred years later. Spinoza wrote in Latin rather than in Hebrew (within a year after his death his works had been translated into both Dutch and French), and the immediate victim of his attack on biblical authority was western Christendom.

Locke (1632-1704)

John Locke, born in the same year as Spinoza, was one of the most important English philosophers. Historians of philosophy regard very highly Locke's *Essay concerning human Understanding*, in which he redefined the self as continuity of consciousness. More pertinent to our

theme is Locke's championing of religious and political liberty. He was in fact one of the authors of classical liberalism. The term 'liberalism' was not coined until the early nineteenth century,[39] but in retrospect we may say that classical liberalism was hatched in seventeenth-century England, after a salutary incubation in the Netherlands. The watchword of classical liberalism was the freedom or liberty - in Latin, *libertas* - of the citizen over against royal authority. It included such things as freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the rights of citizens to make their voices heard in a parliamentary assembly.

Classical liberalism coalesced in opposition to the belief that kings had a "divine right" - a *ius divinum* - to absolute rule. This supposed divine right was supported by reference to a number of Biblical passages. Especially important was Paul's admonition to the *Christiani* and the brethren in Rome that they were to respect the political authorities. In the King James Bible, widely used in seventeenth-century England, the admonition read as follows:

> Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.[40]

In the 1640s, as King Charles I began to clash with the English parliament, Sir Robert Filmer composed his *Patriarcha; or the Natural Power of Kings*, assembling various scriptural verses and stories - beginning with Adam, ruling in Eden - to show that a king ruled by divine right (*iure divino*). In 1648 the revolution against King Charles overtook Filmer, and he wisely chose not to publish the book under Cromwell (Filmer died in 1653). After the Restoration, Filmer's heirs published *Patriarcha*, which quickly became a significant support for Charles II and royal absolutism.

The liberal response was composed by John Locke. Locke was born in the village of Wrington, not far from Bristol. As an exceptional student he was admitted to Oxford University, where he was drawn to natural philosophy and to medicine. In his late thirties he became the personal

physician to Anthony Cooper. Cooper was an early member of the political faction, derisively called "Whigs" by their royalist opponents, who stood for a reduction of the king's powers. Cooper was not, however, a radical republican, and was instrumental in restoring the monarchy in 1660. Soon thereafter he was made the Earl of Shaftesbury and was elevated to the office of Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain. Having few duties as Shaftesbury's physician, Locke had the luxury of reading and writing on philosophical subjects. As his patron's political importance rose, Locke focused his attention on government and his opinions were much influenced by Shaftesbury. When Charles II dissolved the parliament in 1681, Shaftesbury broke with the king and became a rallying figure for those opposed to royal absolutism. As such, he was forced into exile. Late in 1682 Shaftesbury fled to the Netherlands, and died there early in 1683. Locke had been writing anonymous pamphlets critical of Charles, and fearing for his life he too fled to the Netherlands, in July of 1683. Charles attempted to have Locke extradited, but he hid under various assumed names. Early in 1689 Locke returned to England in the entourage of William and Mary.

In 1689 Locke anonymously published *Two Treatises of Government*, on which he had been working for several years. The first treatise was a refutation of Filmer's *Patriarcha*. Like Filmer, Locke frequently referred to Biblical passages, although a different set, in order to persuade his readers that kingship was not divinely ordained. In the second of his two treatises, "An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government," Locke laid out the basis and purpose of government. A French translation was published in 1691 and in the eighteenth century had considerable influence among the *philosophes* of France. Locke argued that in their "state of nature" men were entirely free but in continuing danger. In order to rid themselves of the danger, they subjected themselves to a government which would somewhat infringe upon their liberties but would keep them and their property safe. This "social contract" theory, combined with the First Treatise, supported a liberal or constitutional monarchy, in which the king's authority was substantially limited.

Locke on the separation of church and state

The chronic difficulties that England had experienced between the Church of England and a variety of "non-conformists" or "dissenters" apparently prompted Locke to write another important piece. This was *Epistola de tolerantia*, which Locke wrote in Latin and published in the Netherlands early in 1689. It was almost immediately translated into English and published as *A Letter concerning Toleration*. The relatively tolerant attitude of the Dutch on religious matters seemed to Locke a good lesson for other republics and kingdoms. In England the Act of Uniformity, passed by the parliament in 1662, had been intended to suppress Quakers, Presbyterians, Puritans, and many other Christian sects, in favor of the established Church of England. Reducing the hostilities between the English government and these sectarian Protestants was much on Locke's mind when he wrote his *Letter*. He did not, of course, advocate toleration of Catholicism. As supporters of James II, English Catholics were opposed to William and Mary, and beyond that were suspected of being not only loyal to the pope (who in the seventeenth century still had political as well as religious powers) but also in league with Louis XIV of France. Nor did Locke believe that atheists and Socinians deserved to be tolerated: denying the very existence of Hell, they surely lacked any foundation for moral behavior and opened the doors for people to indulge in all sorts of vice and crime.

Nevertheless, in its late seventeenth-century context Locke's *Letter* presented a daring proposal for the separation of church and state. It argued that religion is not the state's business, and that the state best serves its own interests by avoiding religious coercion. Locke asked how true Christians can burn to death a person whose convictions are different from their own, and he hoped for "mutual toleration of Christians in their different professions of religion."

> I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men's souls, and, on the other side, a

> care of the commonwealth. The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests.

These civil interests, Locke specifies, are life, liberty, health, leisure, and property. Having defined the raison d'etre of the state, Locke moved on to the church:

> Let us now consider what a church is. A church, then, I take to be a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord in order to the public worshipping of God in such manner as they judge acceptable to Him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls.

That the non-conformist sects have been seditious is only because they have been oppressed by the government. They have sought to take it over in order to make it possible for them to exercise their manner of religion peacefully.

Locke's thesis did not propose the entire disestablishment of religion, but it was in sharp contrast to the *cuius regio eius religio* principle that had dominated European thought since the Peace of Westphalia. In the eighteenth century freedom of religion became an important topic first in Britain and then in the English colonies in North America. In western Europe it burst violently into prominence during the French Revolution.

Although Locke may have intended his tolerance to apply only to the Christian sects prominent in England, and although he declared himself suspicious of Socinians, "Papists," Lutherans, and atheists, his argument cast the net widely enough to cover people of all religions and even of no religion:

> If a Roman Catholic believe that to be really the body of Christ which another man calls bread, he does no injury thereby to his neighbour. If a Jew do not believe the New Testament to be the Word of God, he does not thereby alter anything in men's civil rights. If a heathen doubt of both Testaments, he is not therefore to be punished as a

> pernicious citizen. The power of the magistrate and the estates of the people may be equally secure whether any man believes these things or no. I readily grant that these opinions are false and absurd. But the business of laws is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth and of every particular man's goods and person.

Locke's liberal ideas about the limited powers and duties of the state contributed significantly to Thomas Jefferson's insistence that under no circumstances should the state establish a religion.

The progress of Biblical criticism: Richard Simon

As philosophers broke with old assumptions and explored new possibilities, biblical scholars continued to delve into the scriptures. A year after Spinoza's death, and while Locke was still a relatively unknown personal physician to the Earl of Shaftesbury, a scandal in Paris was ignited by historical criticism of the Old Testament.[41] The source of the scandal was a book with precisely that title, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, written by Richard Simon (1638-1712). Simon was a Catholic priest in the French Oratory (the *Congregatio Oratorii Iesu et Mariae*) in Paris, and he was also renowned for his mastery of Hebrew. His manuscript had been approved for publication by the heads of the Sorbonne and the French Oratory, and an edition of thirteen hundred copies was printed at Paris. But on Maundy Thursday, in April of 1678, the edition was confiscated at the insistence of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, a powerful cleric and a personal advisor to King Louis XIV. In a subsequent letter Bossuet explained that he advised the king to ban Simon's book because it was "un amas d'impiétés et un rempart du libertinage" (a mass of impieties and a fortress of freethinking).[42] Simon managed to salvage a few copies of the book, but in July all the rest of the edition was shredded to pulp. Frustrated in France, Simon took his project to the Dutch Republic and in 1685 the book was reprinted at Rotterdam, and was published.

Simon's book caused a stir, as Bossuet knew it would, and was soon translated into Latin and English. Among other things, the book

demonstrated that neither Moses nor any other single author could have authored the Pentateuch. La Peyrère had said the same, as had Hobbes, Fisher and Spinoza, but Simon backed up the thesis with much more scholarly erudition. As an expert Hebraist, Simon showed too how tenuous was the modern understanding of ancient Hebrew. Especially obscure were many passages in Job, Proverbs, Psalms and the Prophets. Translation of the historical books - Samuel, Kings, Chronicles - was more certain, but much in the Pentateuch was unclear. Simon noted that Jewish scholars of his own day were no more confident than he was about the meaning of these Hebrew passages, but that both Jewish and Christian scholars pretended that all was well. Citing Gregory of Nyssa in support, Simon ridiculed the idea - still widespread at the time - that God spoke Hebrew and taught it to Adam and Eve.

The *clandestina*

It was not only the giants of philosophy and scholarship who brought on the Enlightenment. Also instrumental were anonymous authors who circulated letters and hand-written essays in underground networks. These writings, collectively known as *clandestina,* began appearing in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. They were especially numerous in Germany and France, where state and church censorship was rigid.[43] In the clandestine communications, somewhat similar to the *samizdat* writings that circulated privately in the U.S.S.R. before *glasnost*, Europeans who no longer believed that the Bible was the Word of God expressed opinions and conclusions which, if published, would have incurred at least public censure and perhaps punishment or even execution. As rationalists, skeptics and freethinkers began to air their opinions, kingdoms and republics began to enact anti-blasphemy laws. In Scotland, where the Presbyterian Kirk was still dominant, persons found guilty of blasphemy - denying the trinity, denying the divinity of Jesus, scoffing at the Bible - were usually sentenced to wear sackcloth or to prison. Corporal punishment was also common and on January 9 of 1697 a university student of theology named Thomas Aikenhead, at the age of twenty, was hanged for blasphemy in Edinburgh.[44] That same year the English parliament passed its Blasphemy Act, making blasphemy a crime. In the early eighteenth century most of the English

colonies in North America had anti-blasphemy laws, and as of 2009 anti-blasphemy laws were still on the books in most Muslim countries and in six states of the U.S.A. (Massachusetts, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Wyoming).

The *clandestina* often took the form of a personal letter from one pseudonymous person to another. Unlike personal letters, however, the *clandestina* were copied from the first recipient to the next, and so circulated throughout the network. Most were written in Latin, but some were in French or German. One of the later and most elaborate of the *clandestina* was the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, perhaps composed ca. 1720 by Nicolas Fréret.[45] The *Lettre* posed as an essay written by a first-century Greek who had traveled widely and read much. It contrasts superstition with *raison*, monotheism with polytheism, and explains that the Jews have been much more obedient to their god since Ezra composed scriptures for them, reassuring them with stories of their god's miraculous blessings and frightening them with stories of how he punished those who disobeyed him.[46]

"The Three Imposters"

A published variant of the *clandestina* was the *Traité des trois imposteurs.* Since medieval times Judaeans had been convinced that the founders of the other two scriptural religions, Jesus and Muhammad, were charlatans or imposters. A thoroughly irreverent canard accepted that Judaean claim and added Moses as the original imposter. Denunciations of so blasphemous a statement appear in thirteenth-century texts. In the early eighteenth century a book was produced which claimed to be a translation of the medieval text in which the blasphemy had been first elaborated. The little book, *Traité des trois imposteurs: Moïse, Jésus, Mahomet*, was printed in 1719, and posed as the French translation of a Latin original, *De tribus impostoribus*. The supposed translator hid behind the pseudonym, Alcofribas Nasier. This is an anagram of the name François Rabelais, and Rabelais had used it as an easily decipherable pseudonym for various obscene works that he published in the sixteenth century.

In his introduction to the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, "Nasier" claims to have acquired the Latin manuscript from a German soldier in Frankfurt,

and reports that the German soldier had found the manuscript in the library of the Elector of Bavaria. After the Battle of Höchstädt (September of 1703), so went the story, the soldier had visited the library of the elector, and there found the precious manuscript. It had been dedicated, so Nasier claimed, to Otto the Illustrious, Duke of Bavaria (1206-53). Nasier said he thought it right to publish this long-lost medieval text, and so arranged for its printing. In fact, the text seems to have been composed not long before the printed edition of 1719, and at the earliest in the closing decades of the seventeenth century. The author was evidently familiar with Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus.* Once this was recognized, later editions of the book were titled, *Traité des trois imposteurs, ou l'Esprit de M. Spinosa*.

However it came into being, the booklet ridiculed Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. They were successful as imposters, so the *Traité* explained, because of the colossal ignorance and gullibility of the people among whom they lived. The only laws of God are those written in the human heart. All other supposed laws of gods are fictions, useful for keeping priests in power. Among the ancient Hebrews, who were the most ignorant and credulous of all ancient people, Moses was able to pass himself off as a leader chosen by God. He convinced them that he conversed with God, in a burning bush or on a mountain top. Moses led the Hebrews into the trackless desert, where despite God's guidance he lost his way, and had to depend on his brother-in-law Hobab to find the way out (Num 10:29-32). As for Jesus, he persuaded the least intelligent of the Jews that his mother was a virgin and that his father was the Holy Spirit. By faking miracles he gained a following. His teachings were respectable, but not quite so good as those of the Greek philosophers. After his death his disciples, all ignorant men, were run out of Judaea. Luckily for Christianity, the young man Paul was struck by lightning and, imagining it to be a miracle, was converted to the faith. Paul was a bit more astute than the ignorant fishermen, or at least knew how to read and write, and by promises of Heaven and threats of Hell he was able to attract many Gentiles into his superstition. Mahomet was the third of the imposters, an illiterate man. He convinced his ignorant countrymen that he was regularly in touch with God and his angels, and imposed on them a third divine law. He was more fortunate than Moses, since Mahomet did not die with his project half finished. He was also more fortunate than Jesus, being

wealthy while Jesus was poor. Mahomet managed to pass himself off as a prophet by asking a companion to hide himself in the Ditch of Oracles, and there to shout, as Mahomet and a train of followers passed by, "I am God, and I proclaim that I have called Mahomet to be my prophet, and to correct the errors of the Jews and Christians." Mahomet's followers accepted the shout as the Voice of God, and Mahomet, satisfied at their reaction, then commanded them to throw stones on that part of the ditch whence the Voice had come, and so to erect a monument like that which Jacob erected (Gen 28:18-19) to mark the spot where God had spoken to him alongside the ladder. So perished the miserable Arab who had made Mahomet's elevation to Prophethood possible.

The above is a summary of how the *Traité* presents "the three imposters." The book concludes with the author's own theology: God is nothing more than the cause and the effects of everything in the material world. God is the sum of all natural energies. To describe God as angry, vengeful, loving, merciful, and so forth is to personalize God, or to create a god similar to humans. That God hears prayers, punishes evildoers and rewards the virtuous, although a notion helpful for the state, is utter nonsense.

Christian deism in England

While the *clandestina* were circulating underground in France and Germany, a few writers in England published printed works that superficially were defenses of traditional Christianity but at a deeper level were sharp departures from it. In place of traditional Christianity they advocated what may be called "Christian deism," stripping from Christianity its sacraments, mysteries and divine revelation, and leaving it as a moral system founded on reason and on a belief in an impersonal and unrevealed God.[47] Deism was much more radical than "Arianism," because the so-called Arians still accepted most of the central tenets of traditional Christianity. The English deists in the late seventeenth century did not, although they supposed that they were further reforming Christianity, and bringing it into agreement with what had been learned in what is now called the "Scientific Revolution." In the English language the word "deism" is first attested in the early

seventeenth century. By the end of the century it was well enough known that in 1696 William Stephens, displeased with the movement, published a pamphlet entitled *An Account of the Growth of Deism in England*.

As we have seen (toward the end of Chapter 29), from the 1640s through the 1680s England was riven by religious conflicts among Catholics, Protestants, and Christians who fit in neither category. Alongside the Church of England, especially prominent were Presbyterians, "independent" Puritans, and Baptists, all three groups having Calvinist roots, while Quakers, Seekers, Ranters, Arians and Socinians further enlivened the scene. This was a fanatical phase of English history, in which Puritan parents gave to their children such hortatory names as Arise, Experience, Faint-not, Praise-God, and Purify. Alongside the larger sectarian groups was an array of self-declared prophets, each of them prophesying to however many listeners he could gather and hold. Richard Coppin, Abiezer Coppe, Lodowicke Muggleton and still more obscure prophets believed that they were themselves receiving divine revelations, and several of them had their prophesies printed and published. Like "deism," one of its antonyms was also coined in the seventeenth century: the word "enthusiasm" denoted, according to Samuel Johnson's dictionary, "a vain belief in private revelation."

It was partially in reaction to this religious exuberance that deism began, a vaguely Christian movement that claimed to be founded on reason, and that eschewed both "enthusiasm" and the more traditional belief in divine revelation. The deists were not atheists: neither they nor anyone else in the seventeenth century denied the existence of God. The vastness and glory of the universe proclaimed the existence of God, so the deists thought, but nothing can be known about God's will, other than his presumed wish that people behave morally. The universe, they believed, ran according to natural laws, and God neither intervened in it nor was accessible through prayer. Although presaged by Lord Herbert of Cherbury in the 1620s, deism did not become noticeable until the middle decades of the seventeenth century.[48] It was often combined with republican or anti-monarchical sentiments.

Several deists in the late seventeenth century wrote what are often regarded as anti-Christian books, but which can also be seen as efforts to re-ground Christianity on a rational basis. In 1679, when he was a very young gentleman, Charles Blount (1654-93) published under his own name a book that discussed the mortality or immortality of the soul.[49] This was *Anima mundi, or an historical narration concerning man's soul after this life: according to unenlightned nature*. By "unenlight[e]ned" Blount meant "pre-Christian." In his introduction Blount claims that the glory and splendor of Christianity can be seen more clearly by looking at ancient paganism, "the deformity of the one serving but as a foyl to the beauty of the other." Ostensibly Blount condemns the pagan philosophers and writers - notably Epicurus and Lucretius - who denied the immortality of the soul, but his presentation suggests that the Epicurean arguments were better than those of Plato and other philosophers who preached that the soul is immortal.

In 1680 Blount published anonymously *Great is Diana of the Ephesians, or, The Original of Idolatry, together with the Politick Institutions of the Gentiles Sacrifices*. In the introduction the author declares that his booklet is meant to explain the origins of heathen sacrifices and not those of the Israelites, which had been specified by Moses at God's instruction. Very obviously, however, the booklet aimed to explain the origin of all sacrifices, including those in Israel. Blount had read widely in Greek and Roman literature. He argued that before ceremonies, miracles and revelations were invented, philosophers had taught the Gentiles to worship God in an entirely rational way. Then along came the priests, supported by kings:

> They forbad some meats as unclean, which yet were wholsome; commanding others to be used, which yet were offer'd and sacrificed, that so they might have their parts; allotting some days to labour and others to idleness; of all which, and many more conspicuous in pomp and ceremony, they constituted themselves as Patrons and Procurers. (p.6)

As Blount saw it, priests and kings - collaborating in their common interests - fattened off the ignorant subject populations.

Another notorious book was published in 1696: John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious.*[50] Toland (1670-1722) had been raised as a Catholic (he was said to have been the son of a Catholic priest) but in adolescence converted to the Church of England, of which he soon tired. All Christian churches - whether Anglican, Catholic, or Protestant - had always celebrated the "great mystery" of the man Jesus as the Incarnate God (a favorite Christmas hymn was *O magnum mysterium*, in settings by Byrd, Palestrina, and other composers). Having become a deist if not a freethinker, Toland apparently wrote his little book in response to a sermon, "Christianity Mysterious, and the Wisdome of God in Making it So," delivered at Westminster Abbey on April 29 of 1694, by Dr. Robert South, canon of Christ Church at Oxford. That sermon, like more than a hundred others delivered by South, was published and had come to Toland's attention. Toland published his first edition of *Christianity not Mysterious* anonymously, but to the second edition - which also was printed in 1696 - he attached his name. The Church of Ireland (an Anglican communion) found the book blasphemous, and Toland had therefore to flee his native Dublin.

In his book Toland declared himself a Christian, and an opponent of atheists and unbelievers. The book was vaguely deist, commending Jesus' teachings but nowhere identifying Jesus as God or even as the Son of God, and not acknowledging the Holy Spirit. More pointedly, the book was anti-clerical: Toland attacked the clergy for making their livelihood by pretending to dispense God's blessings. Christianity, he declared, was originally very transparent and clear, with no mysteries and obscurities. He announced at the outset that he would question everything except "Scripture or Reason, which, I'm sure, agree very well together" (Preface, p. xv).

Fideism and "superskepticism"

We may doubt that Toland was sincere in making that statement, but it expressed very well the hope of Christian deists: through vigorous pruning Christianity could be made compatible with rationality. An opposite view was that reason and religion do not, and cannot, agree at all. Reason, that is, does not support any religious creed, and a person must therefore ultimately choose between reason and faith, or between reason and divine revelation.

In this dichotomy, "fideism" preferred faith to reason (the root of the term is *fides*, the Latin word for "faith"). The fideist frankly acknowledged that he or she could not rationally defend believing this or that dogma, but accepted the dogma because it was revealed either by the pope or by holy scriptures.

Fideism found a surprising ally in Pyrrhonist skepticism. The philosophical skeptic insisted that reason itself is hopelessly flawed: what we claim to know, either empirically or logically, we do not really know, and we must therefore concede that neither science nor philosophy can provide us with truth. Pyrrhonist skepticism, along with a muted form of fideism, culminated in Pierre Bayle (1647-1706).[51] Bayle was brought up as a Huguenot in France, but as Louis XIV began to banish Protestantism and make France a purely Catholic kingdom Bayle fled to the Netherlands. He found employment as a teacher in a Huguenot college in Rotterdam.

Gifted with a prodigious memory, Bayle was immensely learned and over the years became Rotterdam's leading intellectual. He also became a philosophical skeptic and as such began work on his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, a vast collection of articles on persons - usually writers, philosophers, and men of science - from antiquity to his own time. Bayle himself wrote all the articles, each of them evincing his critical acumen and his complete skepticism. In Bayle's eyes no philosophy and no theory (with the possible exception of Pyrrhonism), was satisfactory. The writings of Descartes, Spinoza (the longest entry in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* was on Spinoza),[52] Locke, Leibniz, and Newton were all superficially attractive, but in the end were discovered to be rife with errors and contradictions. Nor did Bayle spare the patristic writers. Origen's handling of the problem of evil was shown to be deceptively convincing, but ultimately a failure. Augustine's persecution of the Donatists, according to Bayle, was utterly misguided.

Bayle was at least superficially a fideist.[53] Yet it is not clear how sincere his Christian beliefs were. Thomas Aquinas' project - to show that Christianity and philosophy were completely compatible - was almost the opposite of Bayle's. Bayle wrote articles on persons important in the Old Testament and in early Christian times, but none on Jesus, Paul, or any New

Testament figure other than John the Baptist. Richard Popkin also notes that Bayle, unlike Charron, Pascal, Kierkegaard and other fideists, wrote nothing promoting his religious views: "The total absence of mystical or fervent religious expression in Bayle's writings makes one wonder what he *really* intended."[54] Some readers of the *Dictionnaire* have thought that by so completely separating reason from faith Bayle intended to leave the reader with no confidence in either reason or faith. The problem of evil especially haunted Bayle, and he found no way to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of God. Leibniz undertook his *Théodicée* largely to answer Bayle's pessimism.

The *Dictionnaire* was published at Rotterdam and began appearing in 1696. The Huguenots were dismayed by it and it was denounced by their Consistory of the French Reformed Church in Rotterdam. In France the *Dictionnaire* was completely banned, but "both of these events no doubt helped to make the work notorious and more popular."[55] It virtually opened the Enlightenment and for the next hundred years was one of the most frequently consulted works in all of Europe.[56]

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1. The phrase at Matthew 28:19, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (AV), is probably not original to Matthew, although it appears in all manuscripts. The phrase itself is quite early - the formula is about the same in the *Didache* - but may not have been attached to the Gospel of Matthew until the third or early fourth century. In his various works Eusebius cites this Matthew passage sixteen times, usually to show that Jesus sent his apostles to convert all the Gentiles, and Eusebius always cites it as "baptizing them in my name."

2. While the "lower" criticism attempts to establish the original text, the so-called higher criticism attempts to establish the date, author, and purpose of a given text. The term, higher criticism, was first used by Johann Eichhorn, as a description of the goals pursued and methods used in his *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (1787).

3. On La Peyrère see Richard Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 1987). Popkin's more general study was a history of skepticism from

1500 to 1700. First published in 1960 as *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, the book's third and expanded edition was titled *The History of Scepticism: from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Chapters 2-4 of this book make much of the Pyrrhonist influence on skepticism from the 16th to the 18th century. In addition to his interest in the rise of modern philosophy Popkin (1923-2005) was also fascinated by conspiracies, and in the aftermath of John Kennedy's assassination published *The Second Oswald*, contending that an Oswald look-alike fired the shots that killed Kennedy.

4. Popkin 1987, p. 6.

5. Popkin 1987, p. 61. Menasseh, of Jewish Portuguese ancestry and resident mostly in the Netherlands, was renowned as a Hebraist and also had studied Kabbalah. Among his many writings was his *Esperança de Israel*, a tract rather than a book. Written originally in Spanish, it was quickly translated into Latin, Portuguese, English, Dutch, and Hebrew.

6. Popkin 1987, p. 49, quoting from the English translation of 1656. Popkin observes that medieval Jewish scholars had noted that if Moses wrote the Pentateuch he must have described his own death, but they got round that awkward fact. Broadly, they explained that God had revealed to Moses the future as well as the past. Of the last chapter in Deuteronomy one rabbinic scholar explained "that Moses wrote it, as God dictated it to him, with tears pouring out of his eyes, as he learned of his own approaching demise, and that he would not live to set foot upon the Promised Land."

7. Popkin 1987, p. 14.

8. Chapter Four in Popkin 1987 is "Biblical Criticism and Interpretation in La Peyrère." At p. 42 Popkin says, on Simon's authority, that La Peyrère could read neither Greek nor Hebrew.

9. On Samuel Fisher see Richard Popkin, "Spinoza and Samuel Fisher," *Philosophia* 15 (1985), pp. 219-236.

10. Popkin 1985, p. 224.

11. Popkin 1985, p. 221.

12. Popkin 1985, p. 228.

13. Popkin, "The Sceptical Crisis and the Rise of Modern Philosophy," *Review of Metaphysics* 7 (1953), pp. 132-151 and 307-322, argued that Pyrrhonism - which had only rarely and briefly been mentioned in previous scholarship - was crucial for the rise of modern philosophy.

14. Giovanni Lorenzi had produced a Latin translation of Sextus Empiricus' *Adversus Mathematicos* late in the 15th century, but Lorenzi's book attracted little attention.

15. On Charron see Popkin, "Charron and Descartes: The Fruits of Systematic Doubt," *Journal of Philosophy* 51 (1954), pp. 831-37.

16. Charron's second book was "a massive onslaught against Scholasticism" (Popkin 1954, p. 831). More specifically, according to Popkin, "the conclusion of *La sagesse* is that Pyrrhonian scepticism is the sole outcome of man's quest for knowledge *by human means.*"

17. On Descartes' response to skepticism see Popkin, "The High Road to Pyrrhonism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), pp. 18-32. In the early 17th century Pyrrhonist skeptics were denying alchemy, astrology, Calvinism, Platonism, Scholasticism and everything else dogmatic. P. 18: "Descartes, raised in this context, outdoubted his contemporaries in order to find a truth so certain that all of the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics could not shake it. Then, he went on to erect a new type of dogmatic philosophy that was to affect all subsequent efforts to make our intellectual universe coherent and consistent" (Popkin 1965, p. 18).

18. *Leviathan*, Chapter 12 ("Of Religion"). At Chapter 32, "Of a Christian Commonwealth," Hobbes dealt in more detail with what he called "supernatural revelation." For such revelation to be credible, he stated, two things are required: the prophet must perform miracles, and he must prophesy in accordance with the already established religion. "Seeing therefore miracles now cease, we have no sign left whereby to acknowledge the pretended revelations or inspirations of any private man; nor obligation to give ear to any doctrine, farther than it is conformable to the Holy Scriptures, which since the time of our Saviour supply the place and sufficiently recompense the want of all other prophecy." Chapter 38 in *Leviathan* is titled, "Of the Signification in Scripture of Eternal Life, Hell, Salvation, the World to Come, and Redemption." Here Hobbes shows the difficulties in the traditional notion of Hell, and especially in its location, and concludes that the language that Scripture uses must be understood metaphorically. All of Chapters 33-41 deal with Christianity and the Bible in a reverent way.

19. *Leviathan* Chapter 37. The Chapter is titled, "Of Miracles and their Uses."

20. *Leviathan* Chap. 33: "And if the books of Apocrypha (which are recommended to us by the Church, though not for canonical, yet for profitable books for our instruction) may in this point be credited, the Scripture was set forth in the form we have it in by Esdras, as may appear by that which he himself saith, in the second book, chapter 14, verses 21, 22, etc., where, speaking to God, he saith thus, 'Thy law is burnt; therefore no man knoweth the things which thou hast done, or the works that are to begin. But if I have found grace before thee, send down the holy spirit into me, and I shall write all that hath been done in the world, since the beginning, which were written in thy law, that men may find thy path, and that they which will live in the latter days, may live.' And verse 45: 'And it came to pass, when the forty days were fulfilled, that the Highest spake, saying, The first that thou hast written, publish openly, that the worthy and unworthy may read it; but keep the seventy last, that thou mayst deliver them only to such as be wise among the people.' And thus much concerning the time of the writing of the books of the Old Testament."

21. On this see Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), Chapter Twelve, pp. 383-431, "Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: the History of a Subversive Idea." Malcolm shows how Hobbes - along with La Peyrère and Spinoza - was denounced for having broached the idea that Ezra wrote the Old Testament.

22. For an account of the trial, and a translation of the *cherem* (ban of excommunication) against Spinoza see Stewart 2006, pp. 32-34.

23. On Spinoza's association with the Collegiants, and their influence on his historical criticism of the Bible, see Frampton 2006.

24. The work, written in Latin, was titled *Renati des Cartes principiorum philosophiae.*

25. Translated from the Latin by R. H. M. Elwes in 1883.

26. *Tractatus* preface, p. 6 (Elwes translation).

27. This point is being made most emphatically by Jonathan Israel. See Israel's, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and his *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). A third volume is in preparation. In these massive books Israel stresses the influence of Spinoza, and of the intellectual ferment in the Netherlands, and he concentrates on the overthrow of religion rather than on the beginnings of modern philosophy, economics, science, and other secular disciplines. Israel divides the Enlightenment into two kinds: one was a moderate and mainstream Enlightenment, which tried to combine traditional faith-based beliefs and values with Cartesian philosophy, and the other kind (which Spinoza introduced) was a Radical Enlightenment that parted ways from the scriptural religions.

28. *Tractatus* chapter 6, p. 73 (Elwes).

29. *Tractatus* chapter 6, p. 86 (Elwes).

30. Walker 1964, p. 7.

31. Stewart 2006, p. 100.

32. Stewart 2006, p. 158; for a fuller discussion of Spinoza's concept of God see Stewart 2006, pp. 157-163.

33. For the distinction see, for example, Israel 2006, p. 11: "From the outset then, in the late seventeenth century, there were always two enlightenments. Neither the historian nor the philosopher is likely to get very far with discussing 'modernity' unless he or she starts by differentiating Radical Enlightenment from conservative - or as it is called in this study - moderate mainstream Enlightenment. For the difference between reason alone and reason combined with faith and tradition was a ubiquitous and absolute difference." The dichotomy has some value, but should not be pressed too far: if the Enlightenment is to be divided into kinds, one could argue for dividing it into three, four or a great many kinds.

34. Moreau 1996, p. 409.

35. For Leibniz's debt to Spinoza, and his embarrassment about it, see Stewart 2006, pp. 199 ff.

36. Stewart rightly emphasizes how consequential the *Tractatus* was for biblical criticism (the subtitle of Stewart 2006 is *Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*). Stewart does not acknowledge, however, that biblical criticism had been growing - albeit quietly - all through the 17th century (Stewart does not mention La Peyrère or Fisher, the Quakers or Collegiants, and does not note that before the *Tractatus* was published Richard Simon was already at work on his *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*).

37. Popkin 1985, p. 219. For additional argument that for his biblical criticism Spinoza was indebted to Fisher and to Quakerism see Travis Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

38. See Popkin 1985, p. 221: "Spinoza's opponents in the *Tractatus*, chapters 7-12, are exclusively Jewish scholars. Spinoza, it is believed, developed his theory of Bible interpretation as an answer to his excommunication from the Synagogue. We are told that he wrote a two hundred page response. Such a work, with a Spanish title, existed among his papers at the time of his death, but has not been found since."

39. See Emil Kirchner, in his introduction to Kirchner, ed., *Liberal Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 2: "Although the origins of liberalism date back to the seventeenth century and are an important component of the 'Enlightenment' period in Europe, the term 'liberalism' first came into use in English in 1815."

40. Romans 13:1-3 (AV). Paul wrote this letter early in the reign of Nero, who was shortly to become one of the worst of the Roman emperors.

41. On this episode see Patrick Lambe, "Biblical Criticism and Censorship in Ancien Régime France: the Case of Richard Simon," *HthR* 78 (1985), pp. 149-177.

42. Lambe 1985, p. 156, n. 27.

43. A serial devoted to locating, publishing, and interpreting the *clandestina* has been published in France by the Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne since 1992: *La Lettre clandestine. Bulletin d'information sur la littérature philosophique clandestine de l'âge classique.* On *clandestina* in Germany see Martin Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund: Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680-1720* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 2002). This was Mulsow's 1999 doctoral dissertation.

44. On which see now Michael Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

45. Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749) was a young but famous scholar of history, the classics and myth. His *Sur l'origine des Francs* (1714) created a row because he - correctly - saw the Franks as a collection of German warriors and raiders. He was sent to prison for his book because it upset the patriotic consensus, based on the so-called *Chronicle of Fredegar* (from the 7th century),

which described the Franks as descended from Trojans who had escaped during the Achaean sack of Troy.

46. Hand-written copies of the *lettre* circulated until the 1760s, when a printed edition was published (the printer did not identify himself).

47. On the rise of deism see Roger Emerson, "Heresy, Social Order, and English Deism," *Church History* 37 (1968), pp. 389-403.

48. According to Emerson 1968, p. 389, not only did the fanatics push their opponents to advocate rationalism, but "the experience of disillusionment among the fanatics themselves may have driven some of them to the acceptance of a rational religion of nature." On the date for the maturing of deism see Emerson 1968, p. 401: "The best evidence that the mid-century was the period in which Deism took shape is the fact that it was not refuted until the Restoration. Deists were then numerous enough to be defined as a distinct group and taken seriously."

49. On Blount see J. A. Redwood, "Charles Blount (1654-1693), Deism, and the History of English Free Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (1974), pp. 490-98. Redwood here tries to rehabilitate Blount from the denigration that Thomas Macaulay heaped on him. Redwood observes (p. 490) that "Blount was widely condemned, and was considered to have written the worst books of anyone between Hobbes and Toland."

50. The full title of the booklet was *Christianity not Mysterious: or, a TREATISE shewing that there is nothing in the GOSPEL contrary to REASON nor ABOVE it: and that no Christian Doctrine can be properly called a MYSTERY* (1696).

51. On Bayle see Popkin 2003, Chapter 18 ("Pierre Bayle: Superscepticism and the Beginnings of Enlightenment Dogmatism"), pp. 283 ff. Popkin's survey of skepticism ends with Bayle.

52. Israel 2006, p. 51.

53. See Popkin 2003, p. 289: "Bayle announces over and over again that when man realizes the inadequacy and incompetency of reason to resolve any question, he should seek another guide - faith or revelation."

54. Popkin 2003, p. 291.

55. Popkin 2003, p. 287.

56. In the large folio edition of P. Brunel at Amsterdam in 1740 the *Dictionnaire* filled four volumes. In the 1820 Paris (Desoer) edition, it was printed in sixteen smaller volumes.