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John Toland's Pivotal Version of Secularism at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century

by
Edward Jayne

John Toland (1669-1722) bore a remarkable career throughout his life-long confrontation with religion. He was raised a Catholic in Ireland, but converted to Protestantism during his education at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities in Scotland. He later became what was described as a latitudinarian (or Low Churchman) at Leyden University in the Netherlands, and while completing his education at Oxford University he could be more accurately described as “a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion.” Most of the rest of his life was spent in London with a brief stay in Ireland, several interludes across Europe, and his final four years in the town of Putney, located outside London. He seems to have been at least as active in Whig politics as in classical and Biblical philology, and he actually boasted of having mastered ten languages. Altogether, he was said to have published almost two hundred books, pamphlets and tracts pertaining to a large variety of issues as well as religion.

The word “freethinker” was actually invented by Bishop Berkeley to describe Toland, and the modern intellectual historian David Berman describes him as “perhaps the first professional freethinker.” As to be expected, he was loathed by priests and clergymen alike, and remained intensely controversial throughout his life. The Catholic satirist Jonathan Swift depicted him with obvious irony as “the great oracle of the anti-Christians,” and upon his death he was attacked in a scathing Tory obituary:

He had a smattering in many languages, was a critic in none; his style was low, confused, and disagreeable . . . Dabbling in controversy was his Delight, in which he was rude, positive, and always in the wrong. His being known in the world is owing chiefly to the Animadversions of learned men upon his Writings among whom 'twas a common trick in their Disputes with one another, to charge their Adversary with an agreement to, or resemblance of Mr. Toland's Notions, as the greatest infamy, and the surest criterion of error. [cited by Pierre des Maizeaux, “Some Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. John Toland,” included as an Introduction to *A Collection of Several Pieces of John Toland* (May 26, 1722), pp. xc-xci.]

Today, Toland is all but forgotten by most readers and scholars, but in retrospect his intellectual contribution was quite remarkable, in fact far more interesting to the modern freethinker than the likes of such detractors as Swift and Berkeley.

In 1691 Toland published his first book, *The Tribe of Levi*, an attack on clericalism, and five years later, in 1696, at the age of twenty-seven, he published his notorious and most famous book, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, in which he challenged orthodox Christian assumptions with arguments derivative of Locke's theory of knowledge in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published just six years earlier. Unexpectedly, his book provoked as many as fifty published refutations and was condemned by Parliament in Ireland, where he resided at the time. The local hangman was ordered to burn all copies, and an order was issued for Toland's immediate arrest. He fled to England, and later authored two defenses, *Apology for Mr. Toland* in 1697, and five years afterwards *Vindicius Liberi*, in which he described *Christianity Not Mysterious* as a youthful indiscretion. He even went so far as to insist on his conformity to established doctrine, but by most accounts it was indeed *Christianity Not Mysterious* that launched England's eighteenth century revision of deism, the first major secularist "cause" in modern European history.

Toland had begun his preface to *Christianity Not Mysterious* with the ambiguous proclamation, "Defenders of Truth, only for Truth's sake, will be found to be a small handful with respect to the numerous Partisans of Error." [p. iv] He had also argued that an avoidance of truth was in fact "the deplorable Condition of our Age" relevant to "Divine Matters," forcing too many individuals either to "keep perpetual Silence" or to resort to fictitious identities when expressing their views. His own purpose, he declared at the end of the book was to "acknowledge no ORTHODOXY but the TRUTH," presumably a truth that can and should be tolerated by organized religion. "Wherever the TRUTH is," he asserted, "there must be also the CHURCH of God . . ." [p. 172—caps in the original]

By implication Locke's grasp of religion helped to confirm this necessity as Toland explained in his book's subtitle, *a treatise Shewing That There is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above It: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd A Mystery*. He first chapter demonstrated how reason is superior to belief as the primary "Instrument" of the truth, since "there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to Reason, nor above it." [pp. 5-6] Toland declared, "Nothing in Nature can come to our Knowledge but by . . . four means, viz. the Experience of the Senses, the Experience of the Mind, and Human and Divine Revelation." [p.

28] He later reduced these four categories to two by proposing a simple Lockean interaction between mind and experience on one hand, and divine revelation grasped by transcendent human consciousness on the other. He warned that skepticism results when these categories conflict with each other," for no genuine satisfaction is possible unless one can conceive what he believes." [pp. 18, 32, 36-37] In the simplest possible terms, he insisted, "There is nothing mysterious or above reason in the Gospel," thus by implication dispensing with the role of miracles and much of Christian idolatry. [p. 66]

Toland's use of Locke's defense of materialism was suggested by the resemblance between his title and that of Locke's book, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, which was published just a year earlier. Their primary assumptions were similar, and their differences a matter of degree. It seems, then, that Toland took a stance only slightly more radical than Locke's assumptions. Locke had stretched materialist epistemology to a new but respectable extreme, and Toland extended the argument even further by using Locke's achievement to challenge Christian assumptions still acceptable to Locke. Locke had assigned to Biblical revelation the unique status of being *above* reason and the laws of logic, whereas Toland eliminated this obvious escape clause, necessitating a new version of faith divested of mystery supposedly impervious to rational analysis. Explaining Biblical miracles on a strictly realistic basis, he rejected all aspects of mystery in Christianity as a corruption of scriptures that had been adopted by church authority well after Christ's death. Though personally acquainted with Toland, Locke did not appreciate being linked with this particular extension of his theory, and, as to be expected, his effort to justify his assumptions relevant to this issue led to his debate with Bishop Stillingfleet and still later his publication of his influential *Letter on Toleration* in 1689. Toland actually took pleasure in Locke's disapproval and even boasted that he [Toland] had "made use of his principles to support notions he [Locke] never dreamt of." [Maizeaux, p. lxxv]

Toland also had the audacity to enlarge the concept of the soul to illustrate the transparent operations of the human mind, arguing, "We certainly know as much of the SOUL as we do of any thing else, if not more." For in fact, he insisted, "The Idea of the Soul . . . is every whit as clear and distinct as that of the Body." More specifically, he argued, "We form the clearest Conceptions of Thinking, Knowing, Imagining, Willing, Hoping, Loving, and the like Operations of the Mind. Similarly, all we do not know [about God] is the *Subject* [or essence] wherein these Operations exist, " so the same opportunity applies to the God concept:

As for GOD, we comprehend nothing better than his Attributes. We know not, it's true, the Nature of that eternal subject or Essence wherein Infinite Goodness, Love, Knowledge, Power and Wisdom co-exist; but we are not better acquainted with the real Essence of any of his Creatures. As by the Idea and Name of GOD, we understand his known Attributes and Properties, so we understand those of all things else by theirs; and we conceive the one as clearly as we do the other. [pp 85-86]

Toland accordingly concluded,

Nothing is a Mystery, because we know not its Essence, since it appears that it is neither knowable in itself, nor ever thought of by us. So that the Divine Being himself cannot with more reason be accounted mysterious in this Respect than the most contemptible of his Creatures. [p. 87]

The question, therefore, was (and remains) how to account for the totality of Biblical mysteries and miracles that presumably defy rational explanation. If all experience is conceptual, no aspect of religion eludes this necessity any more than the rest of experience.

As suggested by Toland's title, *Christianity not Mysterious*, religious mysteries might have been featured in the Old Testament, but they were rejected in the New Testament when Christ told his disciples in Luke 10.24 of the need "to see those things which you see, and have not seen them, and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them." Also relevant, Toland continued, was Paul's insistence in 2 Corinthians 3.12-18 that Christ's "plainness of speech" takes the veil off the face, permitting the truth to be observed and his disclosure in Romans 16.25-26 that mysteries kept secret since the World began were at last "made manifest." Unlike Locke's effort to grant Biblical truth special validity, Toland argued that Christian Religion no longer had any "need of such miserable Shifts and Artifices, there being nothing in it *above* or *contrary* to the strictest *Reason*." [p. 97]

Toland surveyed all the Biblical passages that specifically referred to mysteries, using Christ's Resurrection as one particular example. Then he submitted to analysis parables, revelation, and finally miracles as the "last refuge of mysteries." Toland explained miraculous action as "something in itself intelligible and possible, though the manner of doing it be extraordinary." [pp. 145, 150] He also insisted that miracles cannot be contrary to reason because they "served to confirm the authority of those that wrought it, to procure Attention to

the Doctrines of the Gospel, or for the likewise and reasonable purposes." [p. 147] Then again, he insisted that miracles cannot contain contradictions: "No Miracle is contrary to Reason, for the Action must be intelligible, and the Performance of it appear most easy of the Author of Nature." Moreover, he warned, "that all Miracles secretly perform'd or among that Party only to whose Profit and Advantage the Belief of them turns, must be rejected as counterfeit and false." [p. 149] Obviously, his effort to justify their validity was at odds with his own theoretical stance in later publications as well as the effort of later deists to challenge the authenticity of all Biblical miracles without exception.

Toland risked public rejection once again in the final portion of his book by comparing Christian mysteries with likely ancient pagan antecedents on a variety of grounds: (1) that they used the same terms such as *initiation* and *perfection*; (2) that their services required the same preparations (washing, fasting, abstinence from certain kinds of meat); (3) that they kept their Mysteries secret; (4) that they avoided speaking intelligibly before unbelievers; (5) that such goals as the attainment of perfection were the same. Toland also explained that Christian Mysteries were infrequent for perhaps two hundred years after Christ, for example in the writings of the Apostles, but were later featured with increasing emphasis on such practices as fastings, baptism, anointing, exorcisms, omens, apparitions, consecrations, ceremonies, and so on. The same applied, he suggested, to the hallowed practices of Popes, Cardinals, Patriarchs, Archdeacons, Vicars, and so on, all of which "did strangely affect, stupefy, and amaze the Minds of the ignorant people." [p. 166] In the end, Toland argued--

Our pretended Christians outdid all the Mysteries of the Heathens; for the Honour of these might be destroyed by Discovery, or the babbling Tongue of any initiated Person: But the new *Mysteries* were thus securely placed above the Reach of all Sense and Reason. Nay, so jealous were the CLERGY of their own Order, lest any of them should irreligiously unfold those sublime Mysteries to the profanely inquisitive LAITY, that they thought fit to put it as much out of the Power of the HOLY Tribe itself, as out of ours, to understand them; and so it continues, in a great measure, to this day. [p. 169]

Toland obviously had the Catholic Church in mind with this final sally, but his argument also applied to the Church of England and all established religion at least to a certain extent. Elsewhere in the text he rejected scholastic philosophy, but in several contexts he also expressed his doubts regarding ancient Greek philosophy including academic skepticism. [see pp. 64, 96, 121, 123, 154, and

164] Obviously he continued to adhere to his own version of God at the time and did his best to defend the Bible not as a source of revelation that transcends rational truths as emphasized by Locke, but as a holy document that effectively merged revelation and rational judgment. In his conclusion Toland insisted,

For I acknowledge no ORTHODOXY but the TRUTH; and, I'm sure, where-ever the TRUTH is, there must be also the CHURCH, of God I mean, and not any human Faction or Policy. [p. 172—caps. in the original]

Simply enough, Toland assumed that whenever church doctrine deviates from the truth, the necessary modifications can and ought to be sought in church doctrine itself. On the next page, however, he conceded:

Some good Men may be apt to say, that, supposing my Opinion never so true, it may notwithstanding occasion much harm; because when People find themselves imposed upon in any part of Religion, they are ready to call the whole in question. [p. 173]

And this would seem exactly what happened in the case of Toland himself in his later books. In fact he could not have more effectively anticipated his later rejection of Christianity and finally even religion itself in its entirety.

In 1698 Toland published *Life of John Milton*, as what might have seemed a relatively uncontroversial project. However, he used the book to justify modern misinterpretations of Christianity by declaring that numerous forgeries had been written about Christ even in ancient times. Not surprisingly, he once again provoked widespread public reaction among orthodox Christians supportive of Biblical authenticity against all detractors. In defense of his argument, Toland published *Amyntor* with an extended list of over seventy apocryphal texts rejected by the early church fathers. By calling attention to this neglected issue, Toland enlarged the controversy stirred by Blount's critique of Biblical authenticity, helping to prolong the negative interpretation of the Bible that culminated with Paine's *The Age of Reason*, published in 1794, as well as David Strauss's *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, published in Germany in 1835.

In 1704 Toland published two letters, "To a Gentleman in Holland" and "Motion Essential to Matter," to defend his Christian status by declaring his rejection of Spinoza's version of materialism that was at the time almost universally criticized for being atheistic. His critique would seem to somewhat aligned him with Spinoza's orthodox critics. However, he obviously drew upon

Spinoza's philosophy in his *Letters to Serena*, published in the same year, and in his letter, *Socinianism Truly Stated*, published just a year later, he was actually willing to declare his support for Spinoza's philosophy. In other words as documented by four of his publications, he can be said to have actually converted within a single year from an irregular Christian to a pantheist aligned with Spinoza. In fact, it was Toland himself who coined the word *pantheist* to describe any philosopher inclusive of Spinoza in his willingness to identify God with the universe itself. French authors adopted this term and soon extended its use to include the noun *pantheism* with reference to the belief of pantheists. Both words obtained currency a few decades after Spinoza's death though Spinoza himself had apparently never used them.

At about the same time Toland also fell under the influence of an earlier version of pantheism advocated by the Italian philosopher Bruno, who had been burned at the stake in 1600, a full century earlier, for his materialist assumptions inspired by Democritus and Epicurus. In 1713, Toland and his brother-in-law W. Morehead apparently collaborated in translating Bruno's ethical tract, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, and Toland himself provided a translation of the introduction to Bruno's *Infinite Universe and Innumerable Worlds* that was included in his posthumous text, *A Collection of Several Pieces*, published in 1726. The combined pantheist vision of both Bruno and Spinoza thus served to offset the contemporary influence of Locke, Newton, and others in inspiring Toland's final materialist perspective in both *Letters to Serena* and *Pantheisticon*. Obviously, his very title *Pantheisticon* suggested a new and more cumbersome variant of the word *pantheist*, suggesting its purpose as a "lexicon" of Pantheism.

In 1701, Toland's publication of both *Art of Governing by Parties* and *Anglia Libera* led to his friendship with Sophia Charlotte, the wife of King Frederick I of Prussia and the mother of Frederick II (the "Great"). As an amazing coincidence, just as Sophia became friends with Toland, arguably the inventor of deism in its latest and most advanced version, her son Frederick became a close friend of Voltaire, who can be said to have almost single-handedly brought Toland's modernization of deism from England to France. Moreover, Leibniz, the dominant German philosopher at the time, was also a frequent visitor of Frederick I and Sophia's court, where it seems that both he and Toland often met with the Queen in discussing a variety of religious issues from what must have been what might have been considered a radical perspective. Toland and Leibniz continued to exchange letters for years afterwards, and their influence upon each other is said to be discernible in the later writings of both. In 1704 Toland authored *Letters to Serena*, addressed to both Sophia and Leibniz ("our

common Friend, who alone philosophizes at Court”) as well as two unidentified friends in London and Amsterdam. He chose his title of the book to suggest a polite exchange of epistles with an inquisitive debutante rather than six extended essays derivative of sustained discussion upon religion with both Queen Sophia and Leibniz, the most distinguished philosopher in continental Europe at the time. Here in Toland’s most ambitious text upon religion, he sought to articulate his doubts about Christianity that had mounted over the preceding eight years.

The six extended letters inclusive of Toland’s 55-page Preface might seem loosely connected. However, careful examination discloses that they provide an extended logical critique of Christianity and religious belief in general. The radical implications of the project as a whole conveyed far greater disbelief than *Christianity Not Mysterious*, as becomes obvious through sustained analysis. The first letter, “The Origin and Force of Prejudices,” focused on religion’s dependence on superstition. The second, “The History of the Soul’s Immortality,” rejected the concept of an afterlife. And the third, “The Origin of Idolatry,” did the same relevant to Christian religious conventions apparently obtained from earlier religions. The final two letters were supposedly critiques of Spinoza based on post-Newtonian cosmology, and might accordingly seem irrelevant, especially because they were specifically addressed to a friend in London. The loose connection between the theoretical emphasis of these final two letters and the historical emphasis of the three preceding ones might accordingly seem arbitrary except that both of the theoretical letters almost furtively shifted from their supposed topics to more basic considerations, the first culminating as an attack on the belief in God’s creation of the universe and the second as an attack on God’s very existence except as a total outsider to the very universe He supposedly created. Understood in this light, the five letters offered in sequence for perhaps the first time in the modern history of western philosophy a thorough if loosely organized challenge to the validity of religion and Christianity in particular without going so far as to suggest atheism as an alternative. Somehow, Toland’s perspective both exceeded deism and fell short of outright atheism.

In Letter I, described as “The Origin and Force of Prejudices,” Toland described the harmful impact of orthodox religious assumptions on all aspects of human behavior. He listed in sequence the “successive Growth and Increase of Prejudices thro every step of our Lives, and proving that all the Men in the World are join’d in the same Conspiracy to deprave the reason of every individual Person.” [p. xxxiii] As he explained, this hurtful influence effectively begins with the birth process itself: “The very Midwife hands us into the World

with superstitious Ceremonies," then went on to mention "ignorant Women of the meanest Vulgar, who infuse into us their Errors with their Milk," followed by "ignorant Servants, whose chiefest Entertainments are Discourses of Fairys, Elves, Witchcrafts . . or such other chimerical Doings." This is followed, he argued, by an early education that infects children with Daemons, Nymphs, etc., followed by later education when "We greedily devour the Poets, Orators, Mythologists, committing great Extracts of their Fictions to our memory . . . whereby . . . we swallow the Poison of their Errors with inexpressible Pleasure, and lay a large Foundation of future Credulity." [pp. 4-6]

Worse yet, he insisted, is one's college education, since "The University is the ultimately the most fertile Nursery of Prejudices, whereof the greatest is, that we think there to learn every thing, when in reality we are taught nothing." He warned, "the Professors (right or wrong) must accommodate all things to the Laws and the Religion of the Country" and either make us "trust too little or too much to our senses, or amus[e] us with illusory Abstractions and Subtiltys." Also, he argued, theology are taught to speak "a barbarous Jargon which commonly has no Signification," and learn "to treat of very ordinary Matters in very extraordinary Terms." [p. 7] Finally in our full maturity we must submit to the Orthodox Clergy who seek "not to undeceive, but to retain the rest of the People in their Mistakes." Those of us who cannot accept received dogma, he suggested, learn the necessity of hypocrisy perhaps best described as prudence: "If by some lucky chance we should happen to be undeceiv'd, yet the prevailing Power of Interest will make us hypocritically (or, if you please, prudently) to pretend the contrary, for fear of losing our Fortunes, Quiet, Reputation, or Lives." [pp. 4-9]

In Letter II, described as the "History of the Soul's Immortality among the Heathens," Toland argued that the Christian promise of an afterlife was anticipated by a variety of religions that preceded Christianity by many centuries. As explained in the Preface, he sought to prove that life after death originated as a prehistoric notion "taken up by the mob" rather than the invention of any particular philosopher or theologian. It was only later that more sophisticated apologists sought to give it credibility. [pp. xl-xli] In the first letter itself, Toland suggested the possibility that the immortal-soul concept might have taken root as the "opinion" of one or more individuals preceding classical civilization—more than likely the innovation of a single individual whose identity cannot possibly be ascertained in modern times:

To Persons less knowing and unprejudic'd than SERENA, it would sound strange perhaps to hear me speak of the Soul's Immortality, as of an Opinion, which, like some others in Philosophy, had a Beginning at a certain time, or from a certain Author who was the Inventor thereof, and which was favour'd or oppos'd as Peoples Persuasion, Interest, or Inclination led 'em. [21]

Based on the Old Testament, Toland rejected any possibility of an ancient Jewish source, and instead proposed the likelihood that it had first been suggested by Egyptian priests, Chaldaean Magi, and/or Indian Bramins. Among these three he rejected the Chaldaean option for a relative lack of evidence, and, partly based on Herodotus and Macrobius' accounts of Egyptian religion, he attributed the Indian version of eternal life to cultural diffusion brought from Egypt by the largely mythical king Sesostris at an earlier time.

Toland also mentioned Egyptian funeral rites that involved embalming dead bodies to preserve them into the indefinite future as possibly having encouraged the belief in immortal souls:

Their way of burying, you know, was by embalming the dead Bodys, which they deposited in subterranean Grots, where they continu'd intire for thousands of Years, so that before any notion of separate or immortal Souls, the common Language was, that such a one was under ground, that he was carry'd over the River Acherubsia by CHARON . . . and laid happily to rest in the Elysian Fields, which were the common Burial-place near Memphis. [p. 45]

Toland also quoted the first century, B.C. Greek historian Diodorus Suculus to the effect that Greek society rejected Egyptian assumptions about the "Honor of the Just and Disgrace of the Wicked" confirmed by their "fictions of hell" as an extension of life after death:

But among the Egyptians, the Punishment of the Wicked and the Recompence of the Good, not being contain'd in Fables, but exhibited to our Eyes, each Party is every day put in mind of their dutys, and by this Custom there grows the best and most useful Reformation of manners." [pp. 49-50]

The essential benefit of the notion of eternal bliss was the encouragement of obedience and ethical behavior, and the mythology of an afterlife that separated

the good from the bad had been of such unique value, Toland suggested, that its abandonment presumably risked the fate of any particular civilization, for example ancient Greece after the Age of Pericles.

As for the identity of the individual who first transcribed to written prose the suggestion of an immortal soul, Toland cited Cicero, St. Augustine and others to the effect that the early sage-philosopher Pherecydes, a contemporary of Thales, would seem to have been the most likely author in his text *Pentemychos* (or *Hetamychos* according to some ancient scholars), which later came to be recognized as the first prose transcription of mythology in ancient Greece. On the other hand, Toland mentioned the possible input of Pythagoras, supposedly a disciple of Pherecydes who was able to travel throughout the region to acquaint himself with pagan customs.

Toland quoted a variety of sources to demonstrate that Thales, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, and Plato had been either directly or indirectly inspired by Pherecydes' notion of an immortal soul, but he also emphasized that Epicurean and even Pythagoras himself were willing to reject the notion of an afterlife, as did Pliny with his argument that "the State of all Men is the same after the last Day of their Life, as before the first." [pp. 56-7, 64] The best explanation, Toland suggested, was that most ancient philosophers—perhaps almost all of them—necessarily resorted to the prudent expedient of adhering to two contradictory doctrines, one for the masses and the other for fellow philosophers able to share in promoting this deception:

For most of the Philosophers had two sorts of Doctrins, the one internal and the other external, or the one private and the other publick; the latter to be indifferently communicated to all the World, and the former only very cautiously to their best Friends, or to some few others capable of receiving it, and that wou'd not make any ill use of the same. {pp. 56-57]

Proposed in this context as an almost incidental observation, this stance became essential to Toland's perspective as a freethinker in his final years. The implications seems obvious that the idea of an afterlife and other such aspects of Christian dogma do provide useful—even essential—mental benefits for many individuals as well as society at large, thus obliging prudent philosophers to keep their more heretical assumptions to themselves. The argument somewhat resembled Averroes' use of the "double truth" in granting the expression of orthodox theory in order to justify the expression of otherwise unacceptable ideas. Toland's more variable approach, first suggested by Cicero based on

Aristotle's practices, more simply involved the choice between consistent materialism and popular myths that appease the fears and concerns of ordinary people.

Surprisingly, Toland neglected to mention perhaps the most striking example of this double truth in ancient religion. In Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, published in 1702 and undoubtedly familiar to Toland, a long footnote to the story of the ancient Chinese prophet called Foe, who identified himself as a god and thereby attracted a flock of 80,000 believers by having taught the usual wisdom to be expected of such a divine. When he died, however, Foe confessed to his closest disciples that he had not told the truth, which was simply "that there was nothing to seek, nor anything to put one's hopes on, except the nothingness and the vacuum that is the principle of all things." According to Bayle, Foe's disciples were horrified by this death-bed revelation and decided among themselves to continue teaching his original truths as "exterior" wisdom for the benefit of the majority of his flock, but to cultivate among themselves and their equals exactly the opposite "interior" wisdom that Foe had ventured to confess at the time of his death. [Bayle, 289-90] Toland's emphasis on the double truth, first mentioned in his second letter to Serena and later in both *Clidophorous* and *Pantheisticon* toward the end of his career bore a remarkable similarity to this story of Foe, but with an emphasis on the task of secular philosophers rather than any religious prophet.

In Letter III to Serena, "The Origin of Idolatry, and Reasons for Heathenism," Toland argued that Christianity has accumulated so many barbaric rituals and practices that it has predictably degenerated from Christ's original teachings to an essentially pagan ideology that could only serve the convictions of the "common people":

. . . Notwithstanding the nice Distinctions of supreme and absolute, of inferior and relative Worship; all the common People are downright gross idolaters; and as to the multitude of their Observations, the Impostures or Power of their Clergy in the places where this Worship is established, the Superstitions of the whole World put together woud, in respect of them, make a very easy and tolerable Religion. [p, 123]

In other words, the reduction of religion to nothing more than sheer idolatry uncontaminated by doubts and inconvenient scientific findings (such as Anaxagoras' discovery that the moon "had but a borrowed light from the Sun") has always served well in meeting the needs of most worshippers, to say nothing

of rulers dependent on patriotic obedience as guaranteed by religious belief. Toland went so far as to suggest that this shared agenda has persisted from the very beginning as sustained collaboration between priests and rulers:

Moreover, there was not wanting sometimes a mutual Compact between the Prince and the Priest, whereby the former oblig'd himself to secure all these Advantages to the latter, if he in return would preach up his absolute Power over the People, on whose well-meaning Understandings he could make what Impressions he pleas'd at any time. [p. 104]

In retrospect what seems remarkable is the enormous assortment of rites and practices listed by Toland that were borrowed and revised from one society to the next through cultural diffusion. To illustrate his point, for example, Toland recorded numerous supposedly original rites and practices of Christianity acquired from ancient Egyptian religion:

. . . We may remark that almost every Point of those superstitious and idolatrous Religions are in these or grosser Circumstances reviv'd by many Christians in our Western Parts of the World, and by all the Oriental Sects: as Sacrifices, Incense, Lights, Images, Lustrations, Feasts, Musick, Altars, Pilgrimages, Fastings, religious Celibacy and Habits, Consecrations, Divinations, Sorcerys, Omens, Presages, Charms, the Worship of Dead Men and Women, the Continual Canonization of more, Mediators between God and Men, good and evil Daemons, guardian Genus's, Male and Female tutelary Powers to whom they dedicate Temples, appoint Feasts and peculiar Modes of Worship, not only cantoning all Places among 'em but likewise the Cure of Diseases, and the disposal of every thing which Men are glad to want or enjoy. [127-28]

Egyptian practices that Toland neglected to include in his Christian list included traditional factors such as a hierarchy among Priests and Priestesses, the use of religious colleges to improve their education, and religious Houses to provide them with maintenance as well as an abundance of sacred books and strictures insistent on sexual abstinence. [p. 126]

Toland maintained that most of this assortment of practices had been ignored if not discouraged by Christ himself, only to be adopted by his later worshippers anyway. Toland's response was indignant: "But how little right these have to the Denomination of Christians, who defend the very things which JESUS CHRIST went about to destroy." This stark revision, Toland argued,

resulted from the emphasis on enforcing religious acquiescence at the expense of Christ's more stringent version of the truth: "In plain and proper Terms this is Antichristianism, nothing being more diametrically repugnant to the Doctrin of Christ . . ." [p. 128] Resulting from this collective effort, much the same level of unintelligible absurdity has resulted comparable to that of pagan religions,

. . . The plain Institution of Jesus Christ cou'd degenerate into the most absurd Doctrins, unintelligible Jargon, ridiculous Practices, and inexplicable Mysterys and . . . almost in every corner of the world Religion and Truth cou'd be chang'd into Superstition and Priestcraft. [p. 130]

And thus Toland's disdain for religious idolatry supplemented his rejection of both religious conventions as described in his first letter and the pious expectation of an afterlife as described in his second letter.

In Letter IV, Toland might seem to have reversed his stance supportive of Spinoza's version of pantheism in light of recent findings in astronomy as well as Bruno's earlier version of pantheism that he did not specifically identify in this context. Toland argued, "It is not my present Design to confute all his [Spinoza's] Errors one by one, but to show that his whole System is altogether groundless, which at one stroke destroys whatever is built upon it. [p. 139] Toward this end, he quoted Spinoza's wording on motion in his *Ethic*, "Motion and Rest are the Causes of all the Diversitys among Bodys, thence proceeds the distinction of particular Bodys," but then went on to argue that Spinoza's failure to define motion on a more inclusive basis led to his inability to explain God's role as the first cause of the universe:

I say, having given no count how Matter came to be mov'd or Motion comes to be continu'd, not allowing God as first Mover, neither proving nor supposing Motion to be an Attribute (but the contrary) nor indeed explaining what Motion is, he [Spinoza] cou'd not possibly show how the Diversity of particular Bodys is reconcilable to the Unity of Substance, or to the Sameness of Matter in the whole Universe; wherefore I may safely conclude that his System is intirely precarious and without any sort of ground, undigested and unphilosophical. [pp. 144, 147]

This categorical rejection of Spinoza's theory seems excessive to the modern reader, even more so in light of Toland's concession in his fifth letter,

I question not but you'll allow that Motion ought to enter into the Definition of Matter, no less than Extension or Solidity. But if you demand the Definition of Motion it self, I answer that I cannot give it, nor any other man, tho never so able; not that we know it the less for all this, but on the contrary because we know it better than anything which is capable of Definition. [pp. 226-27]

Here Toland admitted that he himself was unable to define on an *a priori* basis the principle of motion as a transition from one site (or context) to another, thereby acknowledging all the limitations he had previously disdained in Spinoza's theory derivative his inability to explain God's role as the first mover.

Toland expressed his appreciation for Spinoza's "lucky thoughts" in having effectively disposed of Descartes' "ingenious Philosophical Romance based on the supposition that "God [had] at the beginning . . . "given a shake to the lazy Lump from which His Matters of the first, second, and third Elements successively existed." [pp. 133, 152] On the other hand, Toland felt that Spinoza's principal deficiency was that he left his task incomplete, necessitating an even more radical explanation of the universe as an essentially physical realm devoid of God's involvement at all levels of manifestation inclusive of both God's initial creation of the universe and God's full identity with the universe (i.e. pantheism) as proposed by Spinoza.

The crux of Toland's rejection of Spinoza's theory at this point was that Spinoza supposedly neglected to take into account the interaction between matter and motion. Inspired by the recent findings of Newton and Halley in astronomy, Toland expanded the principle to explain all existence. In other words, he argued that the universe involves both extension and motion and that the two are in fact interdependent: "I have made it very clear, that Motion is but Matter under a certain Consideration." [pp. l-li] Spinoza's simplistic emphasis upon matter at the expense of motion was thus supposedly deficient both relevant to all local contexts (e.g. atoms and molecules as understood today) and relevant to the universe as a whole at its very inception (e.g. the so-called Big Bang, again as understood today). All change, Toland went on to explain, necessarily involves both:

We agree on every side that the perpetual Changes in Matter are the Effects of Motion, which produces an Infinity of different Figures, Mixtures, and sensible Qualitys. But we must distinguish between local Motion and the moving Force or Action; for local Motion is only a Change

of Situation, or the successive Application of the same Body to the respective Parts of several other bodies; so that this Motion is nothing different from the Body it self . . . [p. 140]

It might seem self-evident to the modern layman that local motion is an intrinsic feature of matter essential to its very existence. However, by sheer serendipity Toland anticipated Einstein's theory of relativity involving the interaction between mass and energy (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared) supportive of today's scientific version of creation that the universe began as an enormous eruption of sheer energy described as the Big Bang. Granted, mass as described by modern physics is not exactly Toland's concept of matter nor is motion exactly the same as energy, but the interplay between these antithetical categories--thing versus action—is similar, especially in light of today's version of cosmology based on the assumption that all energy released by the big bang converts to mass that ultimately accumulates in black holes. Moreover, needless to say, the concept of "local motion" suggests a microscopic realm of quantum mechanics distinct from the cosmic dynamics of a Big Bang.

Toland actually used the word *hypothesis* in proposing his theory as opposed to Spinoza's use of the words, "gratuitous suppositions," [p. 153] and he specifically applied the word *hypothesis* to suggest a new version of First Cause rooted in motion:

Whoever then goes about to explain by their first Causes the Origin of the World, its present Mechanism, or the Affections of Matter, must begin with the first Cause of Motion: for no manner of Variety is included in the bare Idea of Extension, nor any Cause of Alteration; and seeing it is Action alone that can possibly produce any Change in Extension, this Action or Principle of Motion must be well clear'd and establish'd, or the System must quickly be found defective. If it be only taken for granted, the System will be but a Hypothesis, but if prov'd and explain'd, then we may expect to find some greater Certitude than hitherto in natural Philosophy. [p. 141]

Both Plato and Aristotle had referred to the concept of hypothesis, Plato having done so in his dialogue, "Protagoras," suggesting the possibility of its earlier use among the Sophists. In any case, Toland specifically applied the term to ideas taken for granted as opposed to confirmed propositions. More specifically—

I hold then that Motion is essential to Matter, that is to say, as inseparable from its Nature as Impenetrability or Extension, and that it ought to make a part of its definition. . . . I deny that Matter is or ever was an inactive dead Lump in absolute Repose, a lazy and unwieldy thing . . . [p. 159]

In other words, the entire universe has never been a “stuff” set in motion, suggesting the possibility that God’s role has been redundant at least as the originator of such a universe, as more or less conceded by such modern cosmologists as Stephen Hawking and Steven Weinberg.

Toland concluded his fourth letter to Serena with an obligatory concession to the orthodox belief in God — “that God at the beginning endu’d [the universe] with Action as well as with Extension; and those who believe it eternal, may as well believe it eternally active, as eternally divisible . . .” [p. 161] Here Toland seems to have backtracked on his earlier stance, but he retrospectively disclosed in his fifth letter his conviction that “all the Matter in Nature, every Part and Parcel of it, has bin ever in motion, and can never be otherwise,” a principle that continues to deserve serious consideration relevant to our particular universe. [p. 167] In any case, Toland insisted his simple purpose was “to prove mater [*sic*] necessarily active as well as extended, . . . but not to meddle in the Disputes which others may raise about its Original or Duration.” [p. 161] He also insisted the inception of the universe was basically amoral, irrelevant to ethics. Somehow an enormous discharge of energy (he called it motion) initiated a grand transition to mass without the “fatal consequences” that a personal God (or more satanic figure) could be blamed as “the author of all the Wickedness of Nature . . . the Tongue of a lying Witness, the Hand and Dagger of a Murderer.” [p. 157]

In his fifth and final letter, “Motion Essential to Matter,” Toland enlarged the materialistic perspective suggested in Letter IV. Just as Letter IV was his shortest chapter, thirty-one pages in length, Letter V was by far his longest, seventy-six pages in length. What might be described as the hidden agenda of Letter IV entailed the dubious validity of creationism as a theory, and the hidden agenda of Letter V went to the very root of this consideration by exploring the presumably unthinkable possibility of a godless universe. Here his vision of the “truth” was perhaps as close to uncompromising atheism as at any time in his career, but without his having altogether ruled out the possible existence of God. One suspects this might have been through his prudent effort avoid conflict with religious believers who were unable to make the needed concessions to accept such a possibility.

Toland had no problem explaining Newton's theory of systems within systems: "Vortexes, or Whirlpools of Matter . . . subdivided into other Systems greater of less, which depend on one another, as every one on the whole . . ." [182-3, 185, 187-88, 194, and 217] However, he confessed that in the final analysis he was not able to define motion except as an occurrence intrinsic to matter and its generation by means of action. [pp. 226, 209-12, 230]. Even what might seem at rest manifests motion as the product of action, he argued, through the interactive resistance between two motions:

Since Rest therefore is but a certain Determination of the Motion of Bodys, a real Action of Resistance between equal Motions, 'tis plain that this is no absolute Inactivity among Bodys, but only a relative Repose with respect to other Bodys that sensibly change their place. [p. 199]

Inanimate objects accordingly remain the same over a period of time because the "action of resistance among equal motions" imposes temporary stasis, for example the fixed position among passengers on a boat taking them across a body of water. Toland did not mention the resemblance, but a comparable resistance to entropy can be applied to biology in Darwinian terms both in the prolongation of individual life and in the prolonged existence of any particular species. Durability is necessarily temporary and results from a viable standoff among conflicting actions until death occurs and the cycle of life may be said to have completed itself relevant to whatever has completed this transition. This is when "action" comes to an end both for the individual and for the species as a whole upon its extinction. Of course Toland did not try to extend his argument to biology on this basis, but its implication seems obvious in modern terms.

What primarily concerned Toland relevant to this principle was the "vulgar Error of absolute Rest," and he proposed on this basis the corollary that the final and most questionable aspect of the God concept was His explanation as a fixed source of "motion from elsewhere." Toland also argued that the assumption of creation from total non-existence to total existence is impossible, since nothing is added or subtracted as insisted by Bruno. [203, 214, 216] Moreover, Toland suggested, the God concept becomes redundant if the eternal universe entails perpetual motion without beginning or end. In effect he implied without specifically declaring that there is no need for a creator if matter is perpetually active without beginning or end:

. . . Seeing that every Part of Matter is prov'd to be always in motion, you shou'd conclude that Motion is essential to the Whole, for the same reason

that you think Extension to be so [as did Spinoza] because every Part is extended. [p. 204]

Toland's conclusion was simple enough:

And as for the Infinity of Matter, it only excludes, what all reasonable and good Men must exclude, an extended corporeal God, but not a pure Spirit or immaterial Being. [p. 236]

Toland thus argued in so many words that a tangible and intrusive God is simply not possible. Indeed, God can only exist as an immaterial spirit—a presence without any direct impact on the universe, much like the helpless gods dismissively suggested by Epicurus and Lucretius as captives in their own garden. If so, such a God is necessarily irrelevant to human behavior and all else that manifests itself in the physical universe. In effect Toland's argument seemed atheistic but not specifically declared. He used logic to force readers to recognize the likelihood that God does not exist, but without articulating this conclusion himself.

Toland's presumably thoughtful advice to a bright young lady not identified by name (in fact the queen of Prussia) had turned into nothing less than a five-tier manifesto that cleared away a thicket of uncritical piety to justify the outright rejection of the orthodox God concept in and of itself. However, he did not go so far as to assert this final necessity, and the most basic question remained whether it could be ascertained with any confidence either that a personal God exists or does not exist. Toland seems to have avoided confronting this choice for the next sixteen years, until two years preceding his death, and even then he fell short of fully declaring himself. During this nearly two-decade interlude he addressed issues of Biblical exegesis, Catholicism, the citizenship of Jews, and a large variety of denominational and domestic political issues, but nothing directly relevant to the issue of God's existence or lack thereof.

In 1720, two years before his death, Toland published *Clidophorus* (39 pp.) and *Pantheisticon* (appx. 80 pp.), both of which argued that religion is effectively a collective fabrication but fulfills genuine emotional needs of the vast majority of the populace. He suggested that the so-called "esoteric" truths acknowledged by philosophers among themselves are inescapably different from the so-called "exoteric" mythology among with the public at large. In *Clidophorus*, he sought to summarize this double task among ancient philosophers, and in *Pantheisticon* he suggested how it occurs in modern times and should even be enlarged.

As well as Maizeaux, Toland's friend and first biographer, could recollect, *Pantheisticon* was published in 1720, while *Clidophorus* was published later in the year with three unrelated texts in *Tetradymus*. As a result, *Pantheisticon* has been considered Toland's final and most radical freethought testament, while *Clidophorus* has been consigned to almost complete obscurity, perhaps cited but not read. This is a mistake, since *Clidiphorus* was at least as important in Toland's intellectual development as *Letters to Serena*. Moreover, *Clidophorus* could well have been written at just about the same time as *Pantheisticon*, explaining more thoroughly Toland's supposedly final assessment in the latter text. Moreover, the imbalance between the two in their depth of information suggests the advantage of first interpreting *Clidophorus's* basic assumptions followed by his relatively superficial conclusion in *Pantheisticon*.

It is also to be noted that Toland authored *Pantheisticon* in a Latin version that was finally translated into English in 1751, three decades after his death. Toland may well have felt that *Clidophorus* was safe to publish in English because it referred to arguments many of which were over a thousand years old, whereas *Pantheisticon*, relevant to current assumptions was in effect better and more safely expressed in Latin, at least during his lifetime. Yet the link between the two texts seems close enough that neither can be fully understood except in light of the other.

As already indicated, Toland's basic thesis in *Clidophorus* was that classical poets, philosophers, and theologians commonly expressed their ideas at two levels: (1) as complex and strictly interpretive arguments intended for initiates and fully educated "esoteric" readers, and (2) as lively but simplistic narratives accessible to "exoteric" uneducated readers who were incapable of grasping truths except as useful fables. Toland seems to have been inspired by Cicero's distinction in *De Finibus Bonorum*, between popular and more carefully wrought texts by Aristotle and his followers who seemed at times to have dealt with issues from entirely different perspectives:

Their books on the subject of the Chief Good fall into two classes, one popular in style, and this class they used to call their *exoteric* works; the other more carefully wrought. The latter treatises they left in the form of note-books. This distinction occasionally gives them an appearance of inconsistency; but as a matter of fact in the main body of their doctrine there is no divergence. [Book 5, sect. 5]

As so-called “Acroatics,” Aristotle’s unfinished lecture notes were said to have been kept fully accessible to his students, providing a more inclusive perspective than his published lectures which were intended for a popular audience. Citing the explanation of the second-century Latin grammarian, Aulus Gellius, Toland also indicated that Aristotle himself also more or less consigned politics and rhetoric to the Exoteric category, and nature and dialectical analysis to the Acroatic category. [p. 74]

Expanding Cicero’s brief definition, Toland identified as “exoteric” doctrine the orthodox truths addressed to the multitude at large; and he identified as “esoteric” doctrine the inner truths whose general diffusion possibly disruptive of social cohesion. Exoteric doctrine he described as being “external” in the sense that it could be shared by all; on the other hand he described Esoteric doctrine as being “internal” in the sense that it was necessarily covert, representing an inner and more risky explanation best left to the experts.

Toland also used both the Jewish Talmud and Christ’s parables to illustrate esoteric insistence only slightly less dramatic than the Chinese prophet Fo’s disclosure upon his death as recounted by Bayle. For example, Toland quoted Rabbi Hillel in response to a question about the nature of God, “If I knew it, my son, yet I shou’d-be farr from telling you my thoughts about it.” [sic--p. 90] Toland also quoted Paul’s explanation to the same effect, “We speak wisdom among them that are perfect,” (p. 78, see Corinthians 2.6). By implication followers less than perfect could be provided with comfortable “truths” inferior to genuine wisdom. Needless to say, all of these examples in the context of religion suggested an adherence to spiritual insight rather than materialist knowledge Toland considered the final truth.

Usually, as in Homer’s epic and Egyptian religion, exoteric and esoteric truths were harmonious, both simple and more complex, for example with Aphrodite having been both a beautiful goddess and the symbol of love and beauty. However, esoteric and exoteric truths necessarily became “duplicitous” (i.e. doubled) when the multitude was led to accept a superficial interpretation incompatible with a somewhat different and possibly more elusive underlying truth. For, as Toland explained in the first sentence of his book, “To know the TRUTH is one thing, to tell it to others is another thing: and as all men profess to admire the first, so few men practice the last as they ought.” [p. 63]

Toland also warned that scoundrels now and again took advantage of this unavoidable disparity:

Some cunning persons . . . boasted of a superior and supernatural knowledge, not subject to the rules of Criticism, nor a proper object of the Understanding. Nay, they went a greater length, openly maintaining that it was lawful to ly for the public good; so that the common people (said they) being incapable of reflection ought to be manag'd by guile, and to be deluded by agreeable fables into the obedience of their Governors. [p. 64]

Among a large variety of leaders Toland mentioned as having resorted to this manipulative practice were the Egyptian king Mnevis, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Minos, Mahomet, as presumably insisted by five contemporaries Toland was able to mention by name. With obvious irony he vigorously rejected their accusation, explaining that Moses' laws were "truely divine, without any mixture of weakness or folly." However, by mentioning the possibility of doubt, he obviously suggested Frederick II's supposed earlier accusation that Moses, Jesus and Mohammed were the world's three principal impostors, an accusation Toland himself was said to have featured earlier in his writings. Whatever Toland' feelings about the sacred status of Moses, he deplored the excesses encouraged by religious fraud, especially when enforced by homicidal means:

. . . perceiving that what was built upon fraud, cou'd onely be supported by force, they made it capital [i.e. a capital offense] to question their dictates, and highly disreputable so much as to examine, let alone to doubt of them. The Priests, for their own interest, were not wanting any where to promote such penal law; and the Magistrates (partly thro Superstition proceeding from their ignorance; and partly thro Policy, to grasp at more power than the laws allow'd, by the assistance of the Priests) have been commonly very ready to enforce those laws.

This secularization of religious oppression could be observed in the medieval and Spanish inquisitions, but also in the conduct of modern warfare, when patriotism is too often reinforced by increased religious devotion. In response to this collective assault upon the truth, according to Toland, a predictable duplicity becomes essential among otherwise honest philosophers. [pp. 63-66] Toland went on to explain that this choice necessarily divides authors and philosophers who pursue intellectual harmlessness from those who risk expressing more dangerous truths at odds with received assumptions.

Toland thereupon sought to demonstrate that the exoteric/esoteric distinction was relevant to all ancient philosophy and religion. His most obvious

examples were the “secret discipline” of Pythagoras as well as Plato’s assessment in *Timaeus*, “To discover the creator and parent of the Universe was difficult: but to explain his nature to the Vulgar, impossible.” [p. 90] Toland went so far as to describe the Academic philosophers without identifying them by name, as having been the “true followers of Plato,” at least to this extent, suggesting that their relentless pursuit of answers had indeed been the primary goal of Plato shared with Socrates as opposed to the simplistic notion of Platonic forms featured by most so-called Platonists. This is hard to believe, and it seems more likely, in fact, that Plato featured as esoteric doctrine a system of categories that took on remarkable exoteric appeal, especially among Christian theologians.

Toland also mentioned the blunt advice of Strabo, a contemporary of Christ, in the first book of his *Geography*:

. . . for tis impossible to govern the bulk of women, and of the promiscuous vulgar, by Philosophical discourses, or to lead them into religion, piety, or fidelity; but to this purpose SUPERSTITION is found to be necessary, which can never subsist without fictions and miracles. [pp. 81-82]

Even more cynical in Toland’s opinion was the political wisdom of Marcus Varro, a contemporary of Cicero: “. . . that many things were true, which it was not onely useful the People shou’d not know; but that, tho absolutely false, it was expedient the People shou’d believe otherwise.” In other words, the public should be furnished with more or less credible alternative “truths” to help suppress the real truth. Toland explained as an aside relevant to early eighteenth century politics, “This is at present the favorite maxim, not of two or three persons only in a country, who juggle with the public, and imagine that deceiving the people is the highest *Reason of State*.” [p. 93] Obviously this particular “truth” seems relevant now and again even today.

In any case, Toland explained the essential difference between priests and philosophers in pursuit of public acceptance: Priests “industriously conceal their Mysteries,” whereas philosophers “conceal their sentiments of the Nature of things, under the veil of divine allegories lest being accus’d of impiety by the Priests . . . they might be exposed . . . to the hatred, if not to the fury of the Vulgar.” As a result, Toland concluded, the “threefold passion of a true [i.e. honest] philosopher “ entails “despising the MOB [i.e. the populace], detesting the Priest, and delighting in his own LIBERTY.” [p. 94] By “liberty” Toland would seem to have meant the respectability secured by philosophers able to

minimize challenging the validity of received assumptions. It certainly did not apply to those like himself who were driven into poverty and public disgrace through an uncompromising pursuit of the truth.

Obviously, Toland was discussing the circumstances in play relevant to his own destiny at the time he wrote *Clidophorus*—not later than 1720—when there was arguably more intellectual freedom since the Renaissance, but with ample room for greater latitude yet. Toland opened his final chapter, XIII, with the remark—

I have more than once hinted, that *the External and Internal Doctrine*, are as much now in use as ever; tho the distinction is not so openly and professedly approv'd, as among the Antients. [p. 94]

By “external doctrine,” he obviously referred to less controversial assumptions that philosophers could share with the populace without risk, and by “internal doctrine” he referred to concepts that were best implied without further analysis. He thereupon told the story of Lord Shaftesbury, once his patron, who declared in the presence of a lady that “all wise men are of the same religion.” When she demanded to know exactly what that religion was, he replied, “Madam, wise men never tell.” [p. 95] In Toland’s opinion, this exchange perfectly illustrated the risk involved in admitting to others one’s potentially heretical beliefs. On the other hand, he cited examples of heretics, deists, and atheists having been lured into admitting their disbelief, only to find themselves drawn into a snare of public opprobrium. The only effective alternative to such a persistent pitfall, he argued, was genuine freedom of speech:

Let all men freely speak what they think . . . and leaving their speculative opinions to be confuted or approv'd by whoever pleases; then you are sure to hear the whole truth, and till then but very scantily, or obscurely, if at all. [pp. 95-6]

Until this much freedom of speech is granted, Toland maintained, it is difficult to know what one believes discounting the risk involved in admitting this belief.

Toland finally expressed his acceptance of what might be described as an esoteric defense of exoteric practices as proposed by the Christian monk and ascetic Evagrius, who lived toward the end of the fourth century A.D.: “. . . that it may sometimes be expedient to ly, in order to do good, exact philosophical truth not being necessary for the vulgar, who may receive hurt from their knowledge.”

For this reason, Evagrius concluded, "I shall freely philosophize at home, and tell fables abroad; neither teaching nor unteaching, but suffering people to live in their prejudices." [p. 99] Toland seems to have expressed his full agreement with Evagrius, in a published essay, albeit in Latin. Toland concluded his remarkable text by quoting Senesius of roughly the same period in history: ". . .how hard it is to come at TRUTH yourself, and how dangerous a thing to publish it to others." [p. 100]

Toland's final philosophical text, *Pantheisticon: or, the form of celebrating the Socratic-Society*, seems to have been a somewhat hasty compilation of esoteric/exoteric distinctions relevant to modern philosophy as well a summary new scientific data relevant to the fourth and fifth Letters to Serena. In his first chapter of *Pantheisticon*, "Preface to the Learned and Ingenious," Toland once again warned of the chronic ignorance of religious believers, "The Generality of Mankind is averse from Knowledge, and vents Invectives against its Partizans," and he accordingly went on to concur with Seneca ". . . every Man chuses rather to believe than judge, Life then is never brought to a Scrutiny . . . Error handed down from Father to Son embarrasses our Thoughts in its Mazes." In response to this collective affliction, Toland asked the simple question, "What therefore remains to be done?" In effect he recommended the avoidance of hostile confrontation with the ignorant masses as much as possible. "We shall be in safety, if we separate ourselves from the Multitude," he asserted, "For nothing is so vulgar . . . as to have no Relish for Knowledge." Quoting Cicero, he asserted, "Philosophy contents itself with a few Judges; it designedly shuns the Multitude . . ." Toland went on to paraphrase Cicero's categorical distinction between truth and ideas steeped in religious belief, concluding ". . . for there's a wide Difference between unfolding Nature's Mysteries, and discoursing on Religion." [pp. 5-8] Since the benighted multitude cannot be entirely excluded from one's proximity, Toland concluded, they should effectively be kept at arm's length and allowed to adhere to their simplistic answers with relative peace of mind. As consolation, the inevitably small minority of the population with more serious conceptual demands can sequester themselves now and again in relative privacy to share their speculative perspective rooted in a more adequate knowledge of science and philosophy.

Toland then spent an entire chapter describing various ancient and modern social organizations favorable to this arrangement somewhat comparable to that of modern Freemasonry. These included brotherhoods, fellowships, banquets, Cicero's "Collecta," Plutarch's symposia, and Socratic societies, all of which supposedly shared the unorthodox materialist assumption

of a benign and holistic material universe. Without mentioning the role of God, all members of comparable societies in modern times would be able to concern themselves with the paradox of an infinite universe as a “perpetual Change of Forms, and a certain and most beautiful Variety and Vicissitude of Things” in “everlasting circulation.” God’s role in stabilizing this tumultuous inevitability would be limited to a pantheistic vision of the universe itself in its entirety:

The Force and Energy of the Whole, the Creator and Ruler of All, and always tending to the best End, is GOD, whom you may call the *Mind*, if you please, and the *Soul* of the universe [p. 17]

Just as Toland insisted that secularists identify God with the universe itself, he wanted the brain to be identified as the “principal Seat of the Soul.” Thought and sensation were to be understood as the product of “Motion of the Brain,” an “ethereal fire” that would much later be identified as an electrical field of neural circuitry:

It is this Fire alone, more fleet than Thought itself, and by far more subtil than any other Kind of Matter, which can with so quick a Motion run over the tended Cords and Ligaments of the Nerves, and variously agitate them, according to the different Impressions of Objects upon the Nerves. [p. 23]

Toland was willing to retain what was later identified as a Lockean emphasis on the function of human intelligence, but with the understanding that since the brain “is corporeal and very complex, it can produce nothing but what is corporeal.” [p. 24] Toland went on to discuss on a similar basis human anatomy, geology, paleontology, Copernican astronomy, the possibility of a cosmic cycle among earth, fire, water and air, and other such issues both ancient and up to date with a pantheistic emphasis on “divine necessity” rooted in the interaction between constancy and variation of particles.

In Chapter XVI Toland again returned to the principal topic featured by *Clidoporous*, the necessity of a viable balance between simplistic popular religious assumptions on one hand and the more sophisticated inquiry of secular philosophers identified as Pantheists based on the issues listed above. Toland indicated that philosophy had already been “divided by the Pantheists as well as other ancient Sages into *External*, or popular conceptualization; and *Internal*, or “pure and genuine” conceptualization, in order to avoid as much social discord

as possible on the assumption that philosophers cannot benefit from declaring serious disagreement with the essentially illiterate multitude:

They [sophisticated philosophers] never enter into a Dispute upon scholastic Baubles, supposing that, in *indifferent Matters*, nothing is more prudent than the old Saying, *We must talk with the People, and think with the Philosophers*. [p. 57]

Pantheists thus continued to be justified in their tacit opposition to revelations, forged miracles, unreasonable mysteries, etc., and when their host nations intensified their imposition of repressive orthodoxy, these presumably radical philosophers were encouraged to seek out more tolerant societies abroad, for example the Netherlands at the time:

But should the Religion derived from one's Father, once forced by the Laws, be wholly, or in some respects, wicked, villainous, obscene, tyrannical, or depriving Men of their Liberty, in such Case the *Brethren* [i.e., fellow Pantheists] may, with all the Legality in the World betake themselves immediately to one more mild, more pure, and more free. [p. 57]

Toland seems to have concluded that the best choice was not to destroy populist religion but to link it more effectively with science and thereby dilute its thrust if not altogether eliminating the impact of superstition: "Wherefore, as the Religion is to be propagated, that's joined to the Knowledge of Nature, so all the Roots of Superstition are to be plucked out, and cast away." [p. 87] Such had already been achieved, for example, with the termination of witchcraft trials and public executions, the last of them having occurred in England in 1612. The problem at this stage in Toland's exposition was that one could not be sure whether he was addressing initiates fully supportive of his "esoteric" secular assumptions, as would be suggested by his reliance on Latin prose, or declaring an "exoteric" stance to wary churchgoers possibly sympathetic with his effort. To put it more simply, was he "talking" or "thinking" when he proposed this concession?

In his final chapter, "Of a Two-fold PHILOSOPHY of the PANTHEISTS that should be followed," Toland would seem to have answered this question by suggesting that the Pantheist religion he was proposing could be both esoteric and exoteric:

But perhaps it may be imputed as a Fault to the PANTHEISTS for embracing two Doctrines, the one *Exoteric* or popular, adjusted in some measure to the Prejudices of the People, or to Doctrines publicly authorized for true; the other *internal* or philosophical, altogether conformable to the Nature of Things, and therefore to Truth itself. [p. 96]

Of course he realized that too many believers were fully confident of their own shared versions of the final “truth,” however misguided their assumptions, and that their commitment had been the source of extraordinary social disruption over the centuries:

. . . To the Superstitious, or pretended Worshippers of Supreme Powers, I mean, to spirit-haunted Enthusiasts, or scrupulously Pious, are owing all Feuds, Animosities, Mutinies, Mulcts, Rapines, Stigmates, Imprisonments, Banishments and Deaths. [p. 99]

Toland thus maintained that the worthy effort of pantheists to confront and help mitigate this tendency probably obliged Christian toleration in the fullest sense of the word, not that Toland mentioned it by name:

If those who are going astray are pleased to be put upon the right Road, they [pantheists] will courteously point it out to them; if they persist in their Error, they will, notwithstanding, friendly and from their Hearts exercise a Commerce of Life with them. They know, and lay it down for a Principle, that no Man is to be disdained or scorned upon Account of indifferent and harmless Opinions, and that whatever Nation or Religion he is of, his Company, for the Virtues and Excellencies of his Mind, is to be sought for, and in no wise to be avoided, but for his Vices, and the Corruption of his Morals. Therefore a Pantheist will never punish or disgrace any Man for a mere Sentiment. [pp. 100-101]

Nevertheless, Toland insisted, the pantheist cannot totally submit to blatant erroneous thinking: “. . . neither shall he be altogether Silent, when a proper Occasion presents itself except “in Defence of his Country and Friends.” [p. 107] Often this constraint is tested to the limit, he suggested, since most people heedlessly weigh issues “in the Scales of Opinion, but very few in those of Truth.” As a result, a “Silence and prudent Reservedness of Mind” becomes a necessity, and pantheists need to accept the fact that they cannot be “more open . . . till they are at full Liberty to think as they please, and speak as they think.” [pp. 107-8] On this tautological basis he was advocating an interplay between

candor and withdrawal dependent on one's circumstances with particular individuals. This was substantially different from the implications of his original distinction.

To an unusual extent Toland himself exercised the flexibility he seems to have advocated. He had excelled at four universities and enjoyed the temporary friendship of the queen of Prussia as well as both Locke (briefly) and Leibniz (at greater length), the two most eminent philosophers of his time. He had also temporarily benefitted from the patronage of Lord Molesworth, the Duke of Newcastle, Prince Eugene of Savoy, the Earl of Shaftesbury and the Lord Oxford. Whatever brought to an end his earlier relationships with patrons, he seems to have unfortunately squandered the patronage first of the Earl of Shaftesbury for publishing one of his manuscripts without telling him and later the Lord Oxford for having twice hinted in print his doubts about his loyalty to the Hanoverian succession. When reduced to severe poverty by financial losses incurred by the South-Sea Bubble in 1720, Toland partially authored the expose, *The Secret History of the South-Sea Scheme*, without having improved his financial difficulties, and when an incompetent doctor aggravated his modest disorder into a terminal illness, he survived long enough to publish an exposé of quack medicine, *Physic without Physician*.

At the early age of fifty-two Toland died in poverty, and even his last words on his deathbed in 1722 were controversial. His seemingly humble assertion that he was going to sleep implied his continuing rejection even at the point of death of the notion of a fully experienced afterlife. This was also suggested by the epitaph he wrote just before his death, "*Ipse vero aeternum est resurrecturus, at idem futurus Tolandus nunquam.*" Loosely translated: "He shall be eternally resurrected, but no longer as Toland." As insisted by Bruno and Toland himself in *Letters to Serena*, "the death of our bodies is but matter going to be dressed in some new form. [p. 191] Toland accordingly seems to have expected his entire body inclusive of his brain to survive death if in a presumably non-conscious manifestation as promised by Bruno's interpretation of Democritus and Epicurus's theory of atomism that "an unchanging number of particles of identical material . . . perpetually undergo transformation, one into another." [Singer's *Bruno*, p. 24]

At Toland's request, another presumably final epitaph addressed an entirely different issue, his pride in his success as an author always at the brink of controversy: "If you would know more of him Search his Writings." Unfortunately, most of his published writings fell into almost total obscurity

along with the decline of deism in mid-century. One can only conclude that few have truly “searched” his writings to the extent he might have wished.

As indicated in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Toland was a latitudinarian, a freethinker, a deist, a materialist, and a pantheist. He might not have been “a really original thinker but one who reflected many influences.” [vol. 8, p. 142] In any case he was far more active in this pursuit of synthesis than anybody else, and he can be admired for having said exactly what he thought—including his awareness that one cannot indulge this freedom excessively. His *Religion not Mysterious* can also be admired for having sustained deism to its limit preceding the transition to full atheism. Moreover, in his *Letters to Sabrina*, perhaps with assistance from Leibniz (with whom he exchanged letters in his later years), he suggested at the turn of the eighteenth century a strictly materialist cosmology that combined Bruno, Spinoza and Newtonian physics at a fascinating level of interpretation. Moreover, his later publications, *Clidophorus* and *Pantheisticon*, were entirely justified in having cautioned freethinkers to recognize that the public at large could not readily cope with the fullest implications of secular cosmology at such a level, necessitating an unclear double standard that persists even today between the stringent demands of “esoteric” analysis and more comfortable “exoteric” assumptions supportive of society’s ordinary spiritual needs. As to be expected, this necessity still seems important today across much of the world. Pity the honest philosopher.

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