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Judaism and the Jews in the British Deists’ Attacks on Revealed Religion

Abstract: This article deals with the conceptualization of Judaism, Jewish history, and the Jewish people that characterized the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British deists’ criticism of revealed religion, from Herbert of Cherbury to Peter Annet. Although all the British deists aimed at setting aside revelation and at asserting the primacy of natural religion, they developed various epistemological methodologies in their analyses of positive religions. This article hence points out the similarities and differences in the deists’ works concerning revealed religion, with special focus on their considerations of Judaism.

1. Introduction

Enlightenment views of Judaism are characterized by a hardly reconcilable dichotomy. As Adam Sutcliffe pointed out in Judaism and Enlightenment (2003), “the core values of Enlightenment—justice, reason, toleration, self-actualization, freedom of thought and speech—provide the fundamental grounds on which the entitlements of minorities such as Jews are protected in modern societies.” On the other hand, the Enlightenment vision of universal tolerance and emancipation stood uneasily alongside the identification of Judaism as so atavistically contrary to all emancipatory values and modes of thought. Judaism was thus profoundly ensnared in the relationship between

1 Adam Sutcliffe, Judaism and Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [2003]), p. 11.
the Enlightenment and the Christian worldview from and against which it emerged.\textsuperscript{2}

According to Sutcliffe, an ambiguous idea of Judaism characterized the age of Enlightenment, in spite of the differences and contradictions presented by this crucial period of European history. Recent historiography on the Enlightenment has indeed highlighted the complexity of European intellectual and cultural life from the mid-seventeenth century to the French Revolution. On this point, Jonathan Israel has identified three main currents in his books \textit{Radical Enlightenment} (2001) and \textit{Enlightenment Contested} (2006). First, Israel has attached great importance to the so-called Radical Enlightenment, which was inspired by the rational and critical analyses of Spinoza, Fontenelle, and Bayle regarding politics, religion, and society and proclaimed the primacy of reason and principles such as equality, freedom, justice, and democracy—that is, the fundamental principles of modern secularized societies. Second, he has focused on the “Mainstream Moderate Enlightenment,” based on methodologies that combined the new critical–mathematical rationality and theological concepts, such as Descartes’ dualism, Locke’s “way of ideas,” and Newton’s physico-theology; moreover, the major representatives of the Moderate Enlightenment, such as Locke, Hume, and Voltaire, pursued not the democratization of the political institutions, but only partial forms of political emancipation and religious toleration. Finally, according to Israel, in examining the age of Enlightenment, one must also take into account the so-called Counter-Enlightenment, which consisted of anti-rationalist and relativist tendencies.\textsuperscript{3}

Differences and contradictions also characterized seventeenth- and eighteenth-century attitudes toward Judaism. Enlightenment interpretations of Judaism were indeed diverse and often conflicting, ranging

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 6.

between two extremes: from the original source of wisdom and the foundation of an admirable political model that had been gradually perverted by false prophets and malicious priests, to an ill-grounded series of superstitions that subsequently became the primary cause of the deterioration of social and political life in Western civilization. However, in the so-called age of Enlightenment, despite the divergent views of the origins and development of Jewish culture, contemporary Judaism was mostly regarded as an obsolete system of beliefs and practices—a system radically different from the “emancipatory values and modes of thought” that both radical and moderate thinkers asserted, though to different degrees and for diverse goals. And the Jews, who abided by their peculiar, ancestral, “obsolete” laws and doctrines though living in Europe, were regarded as the “others” par excellence, in a civilization whose fundamental beliefs, lifestyle, and social institutions were rapidly “evolving.” As Ronald Schechter has observed in examining the representations of Jews in eighteenth-century France, the Jews were actually a small, marginal, and powerless element of the European population, but the philosophes considered them “good to think” when focusing on concepts such as toleration, national identity, civilization, and modernity.

Marginalized because of their religion and culture, in a society that, emerging from and against a Christian worldview, was modifying its basic principles and modes of life, the Jews represented a good subject to address when dealing with the most essential philosophical and political questions evoked in the age of Enlightenment. They were viewed through various ideological lenses that obscured the true sense of their beliefs, customs, and hopes; therefore, they “were far more important to Gentiles for what they symbolized than for who they were.” This attitude toward the Jews as “radically others,” radically different from those among whom they lived—an attitude that Adam Sutcliffe, borrowing from Zygmunt Bauman, has defined as “allo-Semitism”—is hence at the basis of the ambiguous view of Judaism and the Jews that was widespread in almost all the rival currents of the Enlightenment. And allo-Semitism did not come to an end with the civil and political emancipation of the Jews in western Europe, produced by a number of emancipatory, or rather “regenerative” programs—although emancipation was often accompanied by most Jews’ assimilating into the new, secularized, modern society (and worldview) generated by the turmoil of the age of Enlightenment.


5 Cf. Sutcliffe, Judaism and Enlightenment, p. 9.
Deists and freethinkers such as Toland, Collins, and Tindal wrote extensively in favor of religious toleration and were influenced by Spinoza’s, Locke’s, and Bayle’s theories of toleration, which extended to the Jews. Thus, deist writings concerning toleration generally revealed positive attitudes toward the Jewish people. But in their writings on revealed religion and the Judeo-Christian tradition, the deists’ considerations of Judaism and the Jews were ambiguous at best—and, in some cases, openly contemptuous. This paper thus investigates how British deists conceptualized Judaism and the Jews in those places. I focus on the various epistemological approaches that produced different considerations of Judaism and the Jews in the writings of the British deists—in spite of their common goal of setting aside revelation and asserting the primacy of natural religion.

2. The Significance of British Deism

The definition of such a complex intellectual current as British deism is still an issue for debate. Not long ago, James Force noticed that even a long time after its coinage, the term “deism” is still hard to define, and Robert Sullivan used the expression “elusiveness of deism” in order to point out the difficulty in explaining the fundamental principles of this current. Originated by the sixteenth-century Swiss Calvinist Pierre Viret as a pejorative label, the word “deist” was later adopted in the British Isles to define those who “are not altogether without religion, but reject all revelation as an imposition, and believe no more than what natural light discovers to them.” Although they aimed at belittling or rejecting revelation, and some elements of Toland’s pantheism and Collins’

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determinism implied basically atheistic conclusions, the deists were far from being unquestionably atheists.\textsuperscript{10} As Rosalie Colie stressed, deism rather implies the worship of a divinity, not deliberate ignorance or denial of Him; though individual deists were in polemic often called atheists, deism itself was recognized as a theistic program. That program (if so varied a set of principles can be called by so stringent a name) denounced as superstition all the mysteries, miracles, and supernatural aspects of religions—all religions, including Anglican Christianity; and the deists sometimes went so far as to deny, with the Socinians, the supernatural quality and powers of Christ Himself. Deism strove to be an altogether natural religion: ‘natural’ in uncorrupted ‘natural’ man; ‘natural’ in its reliance upon the orderliness of the physical world; ‘natural’ as opposed to supernatural.\textsuperscript{11}

Colie underlines the influence of Socinianism on the deists’ concept of “natural,” a notion that several deist thinkers also used in their works on the history of positive religions in order to explain the merely historical, anthropological, “natural” (and not supernatural) origins of a number of theological beliefs, including the dogma of Trinity. On this point, Justin Champion has observed that “from the Socinian and Unitarian insistence on the value of a history of monotheism developed the radical interest in other religions.”\textsuperscript{12}


and, in doing so, they often idealized Judaism, primitive Christianity, and Islam. However, the Socinians adhered to the principle of the concurrence of reason and Scripture and to the assumption that revelation was necessarily valid; they indeed aimed at reforming the Christian religion by emphasizing its reasonableness and moral precepts. Conversely, in the deists’ works on the Bible, revelation did not enjoy special status but was carefully examined by reason.

In the deists’ doctrines, revelation became secondary and superfluous relative to the achievements of mere human reason in matters of religion. Thus, in spite of the significant differences among various authors defined as deists, it is possible to recognize some common characteristics, consisting of, namely, principles that ultimately intended to discard revealed religion: the plea for rational liberty, the preeminence of reason, the rejection of religious privilege, theories about the “wisdom of the ancients” and the priestcraft hypothesis, the rejection of the supernatural, and the denigration of testimony. Briefly, “if any one thing unites the thinkers now called ‘deists,’ it is their readiness to question aspects of traditional, revealed religion.” And the deists’ attacks on revealed religion demonstrated clear political aims. In fact, the most profound achievement of the deists

lies in their critical and methodological discourses designed to undercut priestcraft. The deist authors were engaged in a polemical and ideological war against a prevailing system of authority and cultural power represented by the *de jure divino* (divine right) institutions of church and state. However, in their polemical and ideological war, the deists did not merely pursue toleration and freedom of thought. Toleration and freedom had to be achieved because they were the essential conditions for the free search for truth:

13 A blatant idealization of Jewish culture and the Jews, and of Islam and its fundamentals, characterizes the work of Toland (see section 4, below).


Arguing tactically, against the false Anglican monopoly of true religion, the radicals could and did defend (on epistemological grounds) the right to a political toleration of different beliefs (what Toland called an ‘indifference of temper’). They did not, however, abandon all to intellectual and religious pluralism…. Civil society needed a didactic institution that could educate individual reason into a perception of true rationality. Reason was enshrined, for the radicals, not simply because it endowed each individual with a potential political and ethical autonomy, but because to be rational was to have achieved the highest state of human existence. True religion and reason became one and the same thing.\footnote{Champion, \textit{The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken}, p. 230.}

The principles on which most deist doctrines were based—rational liberty; the primacy of reason; the rejection of the privileges enjoyed by clergymen and aristocrats; a naturalistic view of man and human history, including the history of religions; and the rejection of the supernatural—emerged in the late seventeenth century and inspired the current that Margaret Jacob and, more recently, Jonathan Israel have defined as the “Radical Enlightenment.”\footnote{Cf. Jacob, \textit{The Radical Enlightenment}; Israel, \textit{Radical Enlightenment}; Israel, \textit{Enlightenment Contested}.} Thinkers such as Spinoza, Fontenelle, Bayle, Toland, Collins, Giannone, Radicati, Diderot, and d’Alembert indeed emphasized the preeminence of reason in their pursuit of freedom of thought and expression, toleration, equality, justice, and the democratization and secularization of political institutions. In view of the importance that most deists attached to the role of unprejudiced and independent reason in any field of human knowledge, and in consideration of the goals that they pursued, the major deist thinkers of late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain hence ought to be considered as representatives of the Radical Enlightenment, as both Margaret Jacob and Jonathan Israel have maintained in their definitive works.

However, the British deists developed various concepts of reason, based on different epistemological methods, such as Edward Herbert of Cherbury’s protodeism; Spinoza’s pantheism and biblical hermeneutics; the Christian rationalism of the Dutch and British anti-Trinitarians (Arminians, Socinians, Unitarians); and Locke’s epistemology, which was radicalized and employed by both Toland and Collins. These differences in the deists’ concepts of reason, as well as the consequences of these differences regarding the deists’ views of Judaism, are highlighted in the following sections.
3. The Judeo-Christian Tradition in Seventeenth-Century Deism

In the deists’ attacks on revelation and religious authority, it was Christianity that most attracted their attention; they fitted the history of religion “into an ever-repeated pattern whereby philosophic virtue is swamped by the corruptions of civic superstition to the detriment of human happiness and liberty. Christianity is no exception to this pattern.”¹⁹ Thus, “the deists made some attempt, however crude, to set Christianity in a large context of the history of religion and to show how an anthropocentric, naturalistic history of it might be possible.”²⁰ And, in order “to fragment the narrow Christocentric view of the past,”²¹ the deists also focused on Judaism, regarded as the root of Christianity.

In demystifying the Judeo-Christian tradition, several deists used a number of apologetic studies on the history of ancient religions. In the seventeenth century, scholars such as Vossius, Bochart, and Huet indeed noticed a number of similarities between Judaism and pagan religions. The research of these authors had apologetic aims: they traced the origins of pagan religions to Judaism, so that they could integrate all religions in a providential plan, fulfilled by the coming of Christianity.²² But this research also entailed a significant side effect, which the deists intensively exploited:

Such inquiries… also seriously involved the nature of Judaism and Christianity. Both religions traditionally conceived of themselves as unique repositories of truth and regarded paganism as diabolical in origin and blatantly false. The discovery of conformities between pagan and Judaic practices deprived Israel of its birthright, its election among the nations, the exclusivity of its covenant with God. The surrender of a belief in the Israelites as the chosen people meant the abrogation of a fundamental article of Judaic faith that had been accepted by most Christians, even when they proclaimed that the once-chosen Jews had been superseded by Christians, who were now the chosen of God.²³

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²⁰ Ibid.
The uniqueness of Judaic monotheism was denied in the works of the protodeist thinker Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648). In *De veritate* (1624), Herbert pursued a sort of religious agreement by defining the essentials of natural religion, innate to all human beings and hence common to all positive religions:

1. A supreme God exists.
2. This supreme God must be venerated.
3. The good conformity of human faculties has always been considered as the foremost part of religious worship.
4. Any vice and evil deed must be expiated through repentance.
5. There is a reward or a punishment in the afterlife.  

These articles of natural religion are the only universal and necessary principles of religious sentiment. Herbert thus made revealed religion, as John Leland pointed out, “useless and needless.” On the other hand, Herbert did not deny that revelation makes sense:

> It is important to stress that he does not reject revelation; but he does insist that it must be a personal affair, valid only when it comes directly and specifically, and that in the documentation of historical revelations we must examine the nature and the circumstances of the particular revelation before according it our faith.

Moreover, he believed that some revelations are actually divine; in fact, “Herbert suggests that all the revelations claimed by priests should be re-examined, although he accepts the Decalogue as a genuine revelation because the commandments were directly revealed to Moses and because they order us to do good.”

Judeo-Christian monotheism was, however, only one of the many religious traditions presenting the essential principles of natural religion, as demonstrated by *De religione gentilium* (1663). Herbert wrote this work because he could not “accept the idea that so many just men of antiquity were condemned to eternal damnation because they had not recognized

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24 Edward Herbert de Cherbury, *De veritate, prout distinguitur a revelatione, a verosimili, a possibili et a falso* (London, 1633 [1st ed. Paris, 1624]), pp. 212–213. Unless otherwise noted, translations into English throughout this article are my own.


the true God.”28 This would be “too rigid and severe to be consistent with the Attributes of the Most Great and Good God.”29 He thus traced the origins of ancient pagan religions back to a sort of “wisdom of the ancients,” which basically consisted of the religion of nature. He indeed wrote that “the heathens approved, without hesitation and doubt, the five Articles above, so far as these Articles were written in their hearts,”30 and they, worshipping God’s creatures, wished to adore the supreme Creator and his magnificence.31 But natural religion was later perverted into a number of positive religions, idolatrous and full of superstitions, because of priestly frauds.32

Although based on innatist theses that were later questioned by Locke and Hume, Herbert’s view of the history of religions was “revolutionary”:

Traditional Christian thought had treated all heathen religion as an epitome of diabolic superstition, idolatry and irreligion. Herbert, with a typical Erasmian optimism, argued that all non-Judaeo-Christian societies had some form of true religious worship because human nature had an innate tendency to worship the supreme deity without the commodious aid of revelation.33

Thus, “Herbert’s tract on the ancient religion of the Gentiles was in effect a natural history that would be amended and reproduced many times in the eighteenth century.”34 And also before the eighteenth century, Herbert’s theories were used to openly challenge needless revelations, prophecies, and miracles—as is manifest in the works of Charles Blount (1654–1693).

Blount elaborated a naturalistic view of the history of religions. In Great Is Diana of the Ephesians (1680), he analyzed the corruption of natural religion into idolatrous forms of polytheism. He set up the philosophers’ religion, consisting of “Virtue and Piety,” against the frauds of

28 Manuel, The Broken Staff, p. 176.
30 Herbert de Cherbury, De religione gentilium, p. 167.
31 Ibid., pp. 4–10.
32 Ibid., pp. 167–168.
33 Champion, The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken, p. 141.
34 Manuel, The Broken Staff, p. 177.
the “crafty and covetous Sacerdotal order,” which managed to impose its authority by means of “pretended Revelations.”

In *Great Is Diana of the Ephesians*, Blount’s criticism of priestcraft acts as an implicit assault on Christian priesthood. But Blount also attacked the Judeo-Christian tradition directly. In *Religio laici* (1683) and *The Oracles of Reason* (1693), he focused on miracles, prophecies, and the nature of the Scriptures. He equated biblical prophecies and pagan oracles, because both prophecies and oracles have always been ambiguous and cryptic. He also dismissed miracles with statements involving the style of Scriptures: “Those things may seem *Miraculous* to my weak Capacity, which appear not so to wiser Men. Besides, things may be done by Natural Means, which some may mistake for *Miracles* and * Conjuration*,” and “in relation to Divine Miracles, there is oftentimes great Errors committed in the manner of reading Scripture; as when that is taken in a general Sense, which ought to be particularly understood.” For Blount, the authors of the Bible had indeed to make their writings suitable “to the weak Understanding of the Vulgar (who were uncapable of Philosophy, or any higher Notions) thereby to imprint in them a true Sense of one Supreme God, and of his Power, as also of the Original of the World.” Spinoza’s influence on this English deist is manifest here.

Blount also borrowed from another seventeenth-century thinker who undermined the authority of the sacred books, Isaac La Peyrère. Blount indeed maintained that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch, but only the main character of those books. Moreover, he used La Peyrère’s pre-adamitic theory to question the dogma of original sin. Blount drew inspiration from the thesis that Adam was the progenitor not of all

39 Ibid., pp. 2–3.
41 Blount, *The Oracles of Reason*, pp. 16–18.
mankind, but only of the Jewish people, in asserting that “not from Adam’s Sin proceed our Diseases, but from our own Corrupt and Rotten Natures”; and the reasons for the corruption of human nature can be understood through a rational analysis of human history.\textsuperscript{42}

Blount was not an original writer, but he was able to exploit Herbert’s doctrine of natural religion, Spinoza’s hermeneutics, and La Peyrère’s theories about the Bible to deny that the Scriptures and, in general, the history of religions had any supernatural trait. Indeed, in his work, “the use of the innate principles, borrowed from Lord Herbert, is aimed... not at reaching a criterion of truth, but at allowing men’s independence from any revealed religious principle.”\textsuperscript{43} Like Herbert, Blount dismissed the idea of revelation as a precondition of salvation, because revelation is not known to all mankind; but, unlike Herbert, Blount regarded no revelation as divine. Elaborating a naturalistic conception of human history and of the “sacred” books, and presenting any claim to divine revelation as ill-grounded, irrational, and unjust, he hence dealt a blow to the pretended uniqueness of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

4. Judaïsm in Toland’s and Collins’ Attacks on Revealed Religion

Unlike Blount, who died prematurely in 1693, John Toland (1670–1722) and Anthony Collins (1676–1729) “began from Locke’s epistemology... but drew consequences from this approach, which Locke had deliberately avoided.”\textsuperscript{44} Indeed, Toland maintained that the mind receives ideas “whether by the Intromission of the Senses or by the Soul’s considering its own Operations about what it thus gets from without.”\textsuperscript{45} And Collins defined reason as “that faculty of the mind whereby it perceives the truth, falsehood, probability or improbability of propositions.”\textsuperscript{46} But, unlike Locke, they rejected any truth above reason. Toland asserted, “I hold nothing as an Article of my Religion, but what the highest Evidence forc’d me to embrace”;\textsuperscript{47} in fact, “since Religion is calculated for reasonable Creatures, ’tis Conviction and not Authority that should bear weight

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., pp. 13–15.
\textsuperscript{43} Ugo Bonanate, Charles Blount: libertinismo e deismo nel Seicento inglese (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1972), p. 177.
\textsuperscript{45} John Toland, Christianity Not Mysterious (London, 1696), p. 10.
\textsuperscript{46} Anthony Collins, An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions (London, 1707), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{47} Toland, Christianity Not Mysterious, preface, p. ix.
with them."\textsuperscript{48} Collins was even more explicit in opposing the concept of "above reason," saying, "All propositions, consider'd as objects of assent and dissent, are adequately divided into propositions agreeable or contrary to reason; and there remains no third idea under which to rank them."\textsuperscript{49}

On the basis of their radicalized version of Locke’s epistemology, and largely borrowing from Spinoza’s hermeneutics, Toland and Collins led a formidable attack on the Scriptures and the history of religion.

In \textit{Letters to Serena} (1704), Toland developed a naturalistic interpretation of the history of positive religions in order to strengthen his pantheistic, monistic doctrines, which opposed "any idea of nature that is both a scientific theory and a theological as well as political ideology"\textsuperscript{50} and, hence, Newtonian physico-theology.

Dealing with the roots of religious biases, of belief in the immortality of the soul, and of idolatry, Toland revived the motif of the \textit{sapientia veterum}:

The most ancient Egyptians, Persians, and Romans, the first Patriarchs of the Hebrews, with several other Nations and Sects, had no sacred Images or Statues, no peculiar Places or costly Fashions of Worship; the plain Easiness of their Religion being most agreeable to the Simplicity of the Divine Nature, as indifference of Place or Time were the best Expressions of infinite Power and Omnipresence.\textsuperscript{51}

However, he focused not "on the intentional frauds as causes of prejudices..., but on the necessary rise of prejudices in the historical as well as social context wherein men live."\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, Toland questioned the theories on the cultural primacy of the Jews among ancient peoples in order to undercut providentialist interpretations of human history, centered on the excellence of the Judeo-Christian tradition. To Toland, it is indeed "manifest from the Pentateuch and the Series of other History, that many Nations had their several Religions and Governments long before the Law was deliver’d to the Israelites."\textsuperscript{53} It was impossible that the Egyptians and other Middle Eastern peoples inherited their knowledge

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. xv.
\textsuperscript{49} Collins, \textit{An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions}, pp. 24–25.
\textsuperscript{53} Toland, \textit{Letters to Serena}, p. 20.
and institutions from the Jews, who “were of all Eastern People the most illiterate.”\(^\footnote{Ibid., p. 39.}\) And it was equally impossible that Moses was educated in the Jewish tradition:

> It is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles for the Honor of Moses, not that he follow’d the Doctrins of Abraham, but that he was educated and had excell’d in all the Learning of the Egyptians. The Pentateuch itself makes mention of their Religion and Sciences long before the Law was deliver’d to Moses, which is an indisputable Testimony of their Antiquity before any Nation in the World.\(^\footnote{Ibid., pp. 39–40. As regards the theory of the primacy of Egyptian culture, Toland borrowed from two seventeenth-century English Orientalists. Cf. John Marsham, *Chronicus canon aegyptiacus, hebraicus, graecus* (London, 1666); and John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus libri tres* (London, 1675). The theory of Egyptian primacy was also proposed by Lord Shaftesbury and Thomas Morgan; however, unlike Toland, both Shaftesbury and Morgan viewed the influence of Egyptian culture on Moses and the Jews in purely negative terms (cf. Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* [London, 1711]; on Morgan, cf. section 6, below). This theory was questioned by Bishop William Warburton, who asserted that after receiving divine revelation, Moses rejected Egyptian idolatry and superstition. Cf. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, 2 vols. (London, 1738–1741).}\)

Toland attempted to “deprivilege the Jewish past, by providing a purely secular, historicist reading of the Old Testament,”\(^\footnote{Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, p. 198.}\) and he did the same in two works written in the early 1700s, “Hodegus” (published only in 1720) and “Origines Judaicae” (1709).

In “Hodegus,” Toland focused on the pillars of fire that, in Exodus, led the Jewish people through the desert; he denied that such pillars were miraculous, because several ancient peoples used to lead their armies through carts laden with burning stacks when they crossed deserts or plains.\(^\footnote{John Toland, “Hodegus,” in Toland, *Tetradyamus* (London, 1720), pp. 6–7.}\) The most common theories on theological accounts of these pillars demonstrated, for Toland, that the lack of details in the biblical text has often produced wrong interpretations.\(^\footnote{Ibid., pp. 24–27.}\) In fact, the authors of the Scriptures frequently left out important details, now essential to comprehend the biblical text correctly but considered superfluous in ancient times; moreover, as stated by Spinoza, the style of the Old Testament is hyperbolical, and in the Bible anything great, wonderful, or excellent is attributed to God.\(^\footnote{Ibid., p. 25.}\) Thus, modern readers mistake many passages of the Scriptures and consider several events as miracles, while the authors of
the Bible did not report such things as miracles and did not want others to regard them as such.\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.}

In “Origines Judaicae,” “a full-blown assault upon orthodox Christian understandings of Moses as the \textit{vir archetypus},”\footnote{Justin Champion, \textit{Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture}, 1696–1722 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 174.} Toland, also borrowing from ancient authors such as Cicero, Strabo, and Tacitus, attacked Huet’s views of Judaism as the source of any ancient religion. Jewish culture to Toland was greatly indebted to Egypt:

> Since Moses, one of the Egyptian priests who also governed a part of the country, could no longer stand the local institutions, he emigrated, and many people who worshipped the divinity that he preached followed him. In fact, he maintained and taught that the Egyptians were wrong because they regarded snakes and cows as gods; Africans and Greeks were wrong too, because they represented their gods in human shape.\footnote{John Toland, “Origines Judaicae, sive Strabonis de Moyse et Religione Judaica Historia, breviter illustrata,” in Toland, \textit{Adeisidaemon, sive Titus Livius a Superstitione vindicatus} (Hagae Comitis, 1709), pp. 121–123.}

Here emerges the duality of Toland’s attitude toward Judaism, influenced, on the one hand, by Spinoza’s hermeneutics and, on the other, “by the Christian tradition of the idealization of the Mosaic Republic, which James Harrington had emphatically placed at the core of English republican thought.”\footnote{Sutcliffe, \textit{Judaism and Enlightenment}, p. 199. In fact, Toland published an edition of Harrington’s works: cf. James Harrington, \textit{The Oceana of James Harrington, and His Other Works}, ed. John Toland (London, 1700).} Toland indeed viewed Moses as a “pantheist” thinker and a wise legislator, who distinguished religious power from political authority.\footnote{Toland, “Origines Judaicae,” pp. 148–153.} Repudiating the idolatry that corrupted Egyptian culture, Moses acknowledged a unique God—and “the unique God is what includes us all, and earth, and sea, and what we call sky, and world, and nature.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 123.} Also Tacitus, as Toland noticed in order to strengthen his theory, maintained that the Jews “infer God by means of mere reason and blame those who represent God in human shape through mortal materials: they regard the Supreme God eternal and immutable.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 155.} Moreover, Toland asserts that in the Pentateuch, the terms that mean God “suit both atheism and theism, since one can truly assert them when he means a
pretended eternity of the universe.”

Toland thus explains openly his view of Moses as a pantheist:

Many people believe that Moses had the same opinions as the pantheists had, because of certain phrases that have not been fully understood, and because he never dealt either with the immortality of the soul or with rewards and punishments in the hereafter. Hence, they deduce that the name Jehovah simply stands for the necessary being, that is to say, what exists in itself, in the same manner as the Greek words to on mean the incorruptible, eternal, infinite world.

By presenting Moses as a pantheist thinker and a just legislator, and re-constructing Jewish history in the context of a historical and worldly dimension, Toland aimed at corroborating not only his pantheist philosophy, but also his radical, rationalist, republican political views. According to Justin Champion,

Toland’s work on Moses was not simply impious but... laid the foundation for practical suggestions in reforming the confession-alism of political culture.... The republican reading of Moses as a ‘legislator’ laid the foundations for establishing a tolerant state. His intentions were twofold, both making a point about the historical nature of Scripture and providing a prescriptive model for the relationship between religion and the state.

To Toland, the corruption of ancient Judaism was caused not by Moses’ precepts, but by the blending of politics and religion. Actually, Moses’ successors preserved his institutions for some time. Later, when they took over religious power, they became first superstitious, then tyrannical. Superstition caused the ban on eating certain food, from which the Jews still abstain, and it also produced circumcisions, mutilations, and the like: arrogance and robberies derived from tyranny.

However, for Toland, the corruption of Judaism did not invalidate the rational foundations of this tradition. This is demonstrated in another work written in 1709–1710 and published in 1718, Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity. In Nazarenus, Toland described an alleged apocryphal writing, the Gospel of Barnabas, which he had

67 Ibid.
69 Champion, Republican Learning, p. 185.
recently analyzed in Amsterdam and which, in Toland’s opinion, was
anciently worshipped by the Muslims. Explaining the contents of this
alleged gospel, Toland elaborated an innovative strategy to defend religious
tolerance. He indeed aimed at demonstrating that Judaism, Christianity,
and Islam are the three phases, or manifestations, of the same monothe-
istic tradition; he hence followed the example of British Socinian and
Unitarian authors such as Arthur Bury, William Freke, and Stephen Nye,
who aimed at refuting the dogma of Trinity by comparing Christianity
with more coherent forms of monotheism. In this respect, Toland’s
attitude toward Islam was consistent with the radicals’ views of Islamic
culture and religion. In fact, whereas an ambiguous view of Judaism and
the Jews mostly characterized both branches of the Enlightenment, a new
complex of ideas regarding Islam emerged in the late seventeenth and
early eighteenth centuries, especially in writers such as the Orientalist
Adrian Reland and Pierre Bayle, who strongly influenced Toland. On this
point, Jonathan Israel has noticed

a striking divergence between the two wings of the Enlightenment
in their respective attitudes towards Islam. If both streams jettis-
soned much of the prejudice and wildly biased attitude of the
past, and sought to be more objective and fairer, the moderate

71 The diplomat Johann Cramer recommended that Toland read this writing, con-
sisting of a fifteenth-century Italian manuscript. Toland explained his theses on this
work in a manuscript in French, Christianisme Judaique et Mahometan, which he do-
nated to his friends Eugène of Savoy and Baron de Hohendorf. He did not publish this
writing but later expounded his theories on the Gospel of Barnabas in Nazarenus, a
more complex—and less radical—essay on original Christianity and its relationships
with Judaism and Islam. The authenticity of the Italian manuscript that Toland ex-
amined in Amsterdam is still subject to discussion. Cf. Lonsdale L. Ragg, The Gospel
of Barnabas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907); Luigi Cirillo, Un nuovo vange-
lo apocrifo: il vangelo di Barnaba, in Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa 2 (1975),
pp. 391–412; Luigi Cirillo and Michel Freamaux, Evangile de Barnabé: recherches sur la
composition et l’origine (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977); David Sox, The Gospel of Barnabas
and Nazarenus, see Giuntini, Panteismo e ideologia repubblicana, pp. 399–414; Justin
Champion, introduction to John Toland, Nazarenus, ed. Champion (Oxford:
University Press, 1999), pp. 1–106; Chiara Giuntini, Introduzione to John Toland,
Opere (Turin: Utet, 2002), pp. 56–63; Diego Lucci, “Cristianesimo e islam secondo
John Toland. Cristianesimo originale, concezioni islamiche e tolleranza religiosa nel
Nazarenus (1718),” Atti dell’Accademia di Scienze Morali e Politiche 116 (2005), pp. 349–
370; Lucci, Scripture and Deism, pp. 112–113.

72 These authors actually believed that nothing but the Athanasian creed distin-
guished the fundamentals of Christianity from the essentials of Islam. See Arthur
Bury, The Naked Gospel (London, 1690); William Freke, A Vindication of the Unitarians
(London, 1690); [Stephen Nye], A Letter of Resolution Concerning the Doctrines of
the Trinity (London, 1691). On the Islamic material in Nazarenus and the debate
pp. 99–132; Lucci, “Cristianesimo e islam secondo John Toland”; Lucci, Scripture and
Deism, pp. 116–118.
mainstream (other than the providential Deists, such as Voltaire) was still far from the partially positive attitude adopted by the radicals toward Muslim traditions of thought, moral teaching, revelation, and prophecy.... It is true that something of the old fierce hostility to the figure of Muhammad as an “impostor” lingered on in the aggressively anti-religious and materialistic Traité des trois imposteurs.... It is true also that the Radical Enlightenment evinced some sharp criticism of post-medieval Islam, for lapsing from its early intellectual openness and love of philosophy and science, as well as its former commitment to toleration. By and large, though, traditional antipathy yielded in radical texts to an image of Islam as a pure monotheism of high moral calibre which was also a revolutionary force for positive change and one which from the outset proved to be both more rational and less bound to the miraculous than Christianity or Judaism.73

The shift in the radicals’ attitude toward Islam culminated in Boulainvilliers’ Vie de Mohamed, written before 1720 but published in 1730, which explicitly proclaimed the superior rationality and morality of Islam. However, no radical thinker aimed at replacing the Christian institutions of the Ancien Régime with laws and political bodies typical of the exotic Islamic world. In fact, although Islam was considered more rational than a number of Christian theological and ecclesiastical traditions, it was still far from coinciding with the forms of materialism, pantheism, or natural religion proposed by the radicals. Moreover, although Islamic laws and institutions were more tolerant, in many respects, than most of their European counterparts, democracy was unknown in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Islamic world; indeed, the theme of “Oriental despotism” was one of the leitmotifs in the moderates’ criticism of Islamic societies.74 The radicals hence developed a positive concept of Islam merely to attack the irrational dogmas of Christianity, as well as their implications for social and political life.75

Like other radicals, Toland underscored the continuity of the three main monotheistic religions and pointed out the consistency of Judaism, 73 Israel, Enlightenment Contested, pp. 615–616.


75 On the re-thinking of Islam in the age of Enlightenment, see Israel, Enlightenment Contested, pp. 615–639. Besides Bayle, Toland, and Boulainvilliers, the major radical thinkers who elaborated positive views of Islam were Giannone, Radicati, Jean-Frédéric Bernard, Fréret, and d’Argens.
original Christianity, and Islam, in order to criticize the corruption and “paganization” suffered by the Christian religion over the centuries. Toland maintained that “the Mahometans may not improperly be reckoned and call’d a sort or sect of Christians, as Christianity was at first esteem’d a branch of Judaism,” because “Jesus did not, as tis universally believ’d, abolish the Law of Moses, neither in whole nor in part, nor in the letter no more than in the spirit: with other uncommon particulars, concerning the true and original Christianity.”

In fact, to Toland, the early Christians were Jews who adopted Christ’s precepts and therefore chose to live in poverty and share all their goods; but they did not give up the law, and regarded Jesus as “a mere man” who had revived the ethical precepts of Judaism; thus, “they enjoin’d the observation of the Legal ceremonies, as strictly as the others [that is, the Jews].” Later, also Gentiles joined the early Christian community; and they were regarded as members of “one body or fellowship” along with the Jewish Christians, although they were not required to observe Jewish practices and ceremonies.

The Jews actually considered their law to be no less national and political than religious and sacred: that is to say, expressive of the history of their peculiar nation, essential to the being of their Theocracy or Republic, and aptly commemorating whatever befell their ancestors or their state; which, not regarding other people, they did not think them bound by the same, however indispensably subject to the Law of Nature.

In addition, several elements of Jewish law were “no part of the ceremonial Law of the Jews, but a Noachic precept, equally binding all the world upon a moral account.” Nevertheless, the Jews “generally mistook the means for the end,” because they were wrongly led by sacerdotal sects that perverted the law; hence, most Jews refused Christ’s message.

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76 Toland, *Nazarenus*, p. 135.
77 Ibid., pp. 151–153. In his analysis of primitive Christianity, Toland largely borrowed from—and often misquoted or misrepresented—the fathers of the church and modern scholars such as Johannes Albertus Fabricius, author of *Codex Apocryphus Novi Testamenti* (Hamburg, 1703); the famous Hebraist and Orientalist John Selden; and the leader of the English Unitarians, Stephen Nye.
78 Toland, *Nazarenus*, p. 117.
79 Ibid., p. 160.
80 Ibid., p. 165.
81 Ibid., p. 118.
82 Ibid., pp. 181–182. These observations are consistent with Toland’s “anti-Judaic” attitude, strongly influenced by Socinian doctrines, expressed in *Christianity Not Mysterious*. In this work, Toland indeed asserts that the Mosaic law put a veil of mystery on the word of God, which was later clarified by Christ. He also maintains that the
On the other hand, many Gentiles who accepted Christ’s preaching introduced “into Christianity their former polytheism and deifying of dead men” and, therefore, corrupted Christianity. Eventually,

the true Christianity of the Jews was over born and destroy’d by the more numerous Gentiles, who, not enduring the reasonableness and simplicity of the same, brought it into by degrees the peculiar expressions and mysteries of Heathenism, the abstruse doctrines and distinctions of their Philosophers, an insupportable pontifical Hyerarchy, and even the altars, offerings, the sacred rites and cere monies of their Priests, tho they wou’d not so much as tolerate those of the Jews, and yet owning them to be divinely instituted.

To Toland, it was mainly Saint Paul who was guilty of “having wholly metamorphos’d and perverted the true Christianity.” Indeed, the early Christians were mortal enemies to Paul, whom they stild an Apostate... and a transgressor of the Law: representing him as an intruder on the genuin Christianity, and, tho a stranger to the person of Christ, yet substituting his own pretended Revelations to the doctrines of those with whom Christ had convers’d, and to whom he actually communicated his will.

Briefly, Paul was the man who first set up Christianity against Judaism; as Chiara Giuntini has pointed out,

Paul was the first who manifested that sort of paganized Christianity against which the Socinian thinkers, before and after Toland, argued at length: in the Irish author’s interpretation, Paul is a symbol of the spirit of intolerance destined to irreparably undermine the unity of Christianity and to become more and more exaggerated in the works of the Fathers.

law of the future is “very imperfectly known to the Jews” (p. 97) and “whatever right Conceptions the Jews might have of the Father, they had not that full Knowledg of Christ and his Doctrines, which are the inestimable Privileges we now enjoy” (p. 101). Finally, for Toland, “the Jews, who scarce allow’d other Nations to be Men, thought of nothing less than that the time should ever come wherein those Nations might be reconcilid to God, and be made Coheirs and Partakers with them of the same Privileges” (p. 103).

83 Toland, Nazarenus, p. 187.
84 Ibid., pp. 186–187.
85 Ibid., p. 150.
86 Ibid., p. 153.
87 Giuntini, Panteismo e ideologia repubblicana, pp. 409–410.
Toland constructed his anti-Paulinism on a demystified use of the Scriptures and early Christian writings, which he considered not as material for authorising a 'system' of theological doctrine, but as an historical record of religious practice…. The construction of 'systems of divinity' and the imposition of these as uniform true belief were no part of primitive practice, but the corrupt establishment of priestcraft.\textsuperscript{88}

Toland also regarded the Old Testament as a mere historical record, concerning the history, beliefs, and practices of the Jews. Like Cunaeus and Harrington, he demonstrated his appreciation for the rationality of Jewish law in a section of the appendix to \textit{Nazarenus}, entitled “Two Problems, Historical, Political, and Theological, concerning the Jewish Nation and Religion.” Here, Toland compared the legal and political system of the Jews with those of Sparta, Rome, and Venice, and with Plato’s Atlantis and Thomas More’s \textit{Utopia}. However, Toland considered the Commonwealth of Moses better than other ancient or utopian governments, because it actually existed in ancient times and, in modern times, the Jews still observed the law of Moses worldwide. Toland nevertheless denied that the persistence of the Jewish juridical system was due to God’s will, and, in light of his secularized interpretation of Jewish history, he acknowledged the merits of the essential rationality of Jewish law.\textsuperscript{89}

Toland hence had a positive view of contemporary Jews, which is evident in a work whose title is emblematic: \textit{Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland, on the Same Foot with All Other Nations, Containing also a Defence of the Jews Against All Vulgar Prejudices in All Countries} (1714). In this tract, which Frank Manuel has defined as “the most psychologically acute analysis of Judeophobia in the eighteenth century,”\textsuperscript{90} Toland indeed advanced a plea for the emancipation of the Jews, based on a liberal view of political and social life and strengthened by mercantilist arguments and the refutation of several anti-Judaic stereotypes.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{88} Champion, introduction, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{89} Toland, \textit{Nazarenus}, pp. 235–240.
\textsuperscript{90} Manuel, \textit{The Broken Staff}, p. 187.
Collins also “betrayed no particular animus against the Jews,” although his attack on the Scriptures was even more corrosive than Toland’s one. In *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, he indeed maintained:

Now there is not perhaps in the World so *miscellaneous* a Book, and which treats of such Variety of things as the *Bible* does.... To understand the Matter therefore of this Book, requires the most Thinking of all other Books; since to be master of the whole, a Man must be able to think justly in every Science and Art."93

Borrowing not only from Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, but also from Richard Simon’s and Henry Dodwell’s theses on the obscurities, corruptions, and interpolations that the Bible presents, Collins pointed out the necessity to refer to philosophical, historical, philological, as well as scientific knowledge in order “to enter into the Meaning of the several Passages of Scripture.”94 And he put these methodological premises into practice in *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), a book written as a retort to the Newtonian thinker William Whiston’s theories on the corruptions suffered by the Old Testament.

For the Newtonians, “the Bible, though corrupt and unreliable in parts, contains a core of prophetic truth revealed to man by God.”95 Studying the biblical text, one is able to recognize “that the predicted has happened in exact detail over and over again. Hence, in studying the scriptural text, one is also studying what remains to be fulfilled.”96 For the Newtonians, as Whiston maintained,

a single and determinate sense of every Prophecy, is the only natural and obvious one; and no more can be admitted without putting


92 Manuel, *The Broken Staff*, p. 186.
94 Ibid., p. 11.
a force upon plain words, and no more assented to by the Minds of inquisitive Men, without a mighty bypass upon their rational faculties.97

In fact, any nonliteral, allegoric interpretation of the biblical text would produce a number of conflicting interpretations, hence opening the Bible to the misuse that enthusiasts and visionaries as well as skeptics and deists could make of it. Nevertheless, the Scriptures presented several discrepancies between Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment, narrated in the New Testament. In An Essay Towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament (1722), Whiston maintained that some Jewish scholars in ancient times deliberately corrupted the Old Testament passages concerning prophecies in order to contradict the New Testament.

Rejoining Whiston, Collins denied that some Jews intentionally corrupted the Scriptures in order to disprove Christianity, but he noticed that “the Jews themselves allow of the lawfulness of making alterations or emendations of their sacred books; provided they think them for the honour of God and for religion.”98 Therefore, as demonstrated by the Dutch Orientalist Surenhusius, the Jews, interpreting the Bible, used “to change the mean literal sense of the words into a noble and spiritual sense.”99

Also, the authors of the New Testament did not apply the Old Testament prophecies “in their true literal sense, but in a sense contrary to that”—that is to say, “in an allegorical sense.”100 Indeed,

the allegorical method of explaining and applying prophesies should seem very proper for the apostles; who were Jews; and who were used not only to the parabolical and mystical discourses of our Saviour (many of which are suppos’d to have been common among the Jews, and are now to be found in their Talmud), but to his mystical prophesies.101

However, Collins pointed out, the allegorical method causes uncertainties, ambiguities, and differing interpretations. Thus, Collins exploited “both


100 Ibid., pp. 233–237.

101 Ibid., p. 254.
Surenhusius against Whiston, by granting the former that the allegorical method is the only possible one, and Whiston against Surenhusius, by suggesting that the allegorical method is absurd.” Briefly, Collins’ remarks on the nature of biblical prophecies and the allegorical method aim at presenting the Scriptures—and, hence, the primary testimonies of Judeo-Christian revelation and the scriptural foundations of the Judeo-Christian tradition—as incoherent, unreliable, and misleading.

5. Judaism, Christianity, and the Revival of Innatism: Wollaston and Tindal

Whereas Toland and Collins mainly drew inspiration from Spinoza’s hermeneutics and Locke’s epistemology and also borrowed from a number of “unorthodox” hermeneutical methodologies developed by Christian authors, other eighteenth-century British deists and freethinkers revived and employed Herbert of Cherbury’s doctrines—in spite of Locke’s attacks on innatism. Two of these thinkers are especially worth being mentioned, because of the fame they enjoyed in their age and, in at least one case, because of the influence exercised on the following generations of deists: William Wollaston (1659–1724) and Matthew Tindal (1657–1733).

In The Religion of Nature Delineated (1724), Wollaston described a sort of natural religion whose main elements consist of moral precepts; he asserted that “the foundation of religion lies in that difference between the acts of men, which distinguishes them into good, evil, indifferent.” Wollaston based man’s ability to distinguish between good and evil on the innate capability to discern between truth and falsehood:

The great Law of which religion, the law of nature, or rather of the Author of nature is,... that every intelligent, active, and free being should so behave himself, as by no act to contradict truth; or, that he should treat every thing as being what it is.104


Moreover, Wollaston, who was an esteemed Hebraist, largely borrowed from Jewish rationalism in order to strengthen his theses about God and mankind. Actually,

Christianity plays no part whatever in Wollaston's Religion of Nature.... The deeper reasons for Wollaston's remarkable independence from Christian theology lie not so much in his 'Free Thinking' as in the influence which Jewish theology exercised upon him.  

To Wollaston, in fact,

the most significant Jewish rationalistic trends, including some currents of Talmudic rabbinism, present a number of philosophical as well as ethical doctrines that can be taken into account independent of their relation to the Jewish rituals, laws, and history.  

Therefore, Wollaston remarked on the rational elements of Judaism, which were consistent with the religion of nature as described, one century earlier, by Herbert of Cherbury; and although accepting Jewish revelation as divine, he emphasized “the self-sufficiency of Reason” and constructed “a system of morality without recourse to Revelation.”

Although Wollaston’s book was reprinted several times in the eighteenth century and provoked a long-lasting debate, the British deist whose work was most influential between the 1730s and the 1760s was Matthew Tindal, author of a book whose title is emblematic: Christianity as Old as the Creation or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature (1730). Tindal indeed considered Christ’s message as a confirmation of natural religion. He asserted

that the Christian Religion has existed from the Beginning; and that God, both Then, and Ever since, has continued to give all Mankind sufficient Means to know it; and that ‘tis their Duty to know, believe, profess, and practice it: so that Christianity, tho’ the Name is of a later Date, must be as old, and as extensive, as human Nature;


and, as the Law of our Creation, must have been then implanted in us by God himself.... If God designed all Mankind should at all times know, what he wills them to know, believe, profess, and practice; and has given them no other Means for this, but the Use of Reason; Reason, human Reason, must then be that Means.  

The use of reason is hence enough to grasp the fundamentals of natural religion, as Tindal maintained:

> By *Natural Religion* I understand the Belief of the Existence of a God, and the Sense and Practice of those Duties which result from the Knowledge we, by our Reason, have of him and his Perfections; and of ourselves, and our own Imperfections; and of the relation we stand in to him and our Fellow-Creatures: so that the *Religion of Nature* takes in every thing that is founded on the Reason and Nature of things.  

In this respect, Tindal asserted:

> True Religion can’t but be plain, simple, and natural, as designed for all Mankind, adapted to every Capacity, and suited to every Condition and Circumstance of Life.... Natural Religion... carries its own Evidence with it, those internal, inseparable Marks of Truth.

Natural religion is hence sufficient: “*The Religion of Nature is an absolutely perfect Religion; and... external Revelation can neither add to, nor take from its Perfection.*”

Like Toland, Tindal mentioned the early Christians and their beliefs in order to prove that original Christianity was based on mere moral precepts, consistent with the universal law of nature. He indeed maintained

> that all Mankind, Jews, *Gentiles*, *Mahometans*, & c. agree, in owning the Sufficiency of the Law of Nature, to make Men acceptable to God; and that the primitive Christians believ’d, there was an exact Agreement between *Natural* and *Reveal’d Religion*; and that the Excellency of the Latter, did consist in being a Republication of the Former.

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109 Ibid., p. 11.
110 Ibid., pp. 217–218.
111 Ibid., p. 49.
112 Ibid., p. 387.
In presenting Christianity as a “republication” of natural religion, Tindal exploited and modified a strategy already used by many seventeenth-century latitudinarian thinkers, most notably by Archbishop Tillotson. Several latitudinarians, in view of their irenic goals, considered the religion of nature, described by Herbert, as consistent with revealed religion in order to point out the essential rationality that characterizes the latter.\(^{113}\) Conversely, as Henning Graf Reventlow has stressed,

> although Tindal sets out to demonstrate in a large-scale system the parallel in content between the religion of nature and the Christian revelation..., his work has in fact demonstrated precisely the opposite.... While we can concede that subjectively, Tindal's intention is to savage revealed religion, in fact he has only demonstrated the difficulties of discovering its permanent content. Thus ultimately he has shown that revealed religion is superfluous, as the religion of nature is enough for human salvation, and is so much more easily accessible to man.\(^ {114}\)

The superfluity of revealed religion is also demonstrated by the uncertainties, ambiguities, and discrepancies presented by the Scriptures. Tindal indeed remarked on the allegorical style of the Bible and decidedly dismissed any literal reading of the Scriptures, which, “if taken literally, represent God not only falsifying his Word, but his Oaths.”\(^ {115}\) The imaginative style of the Bible provokes doubts and disagreements; therefore, true faith must be based not on the Bible but on the rational principles of natural religion.\(^ {116}\)

However, Tindal, like Herbert of Cherbury, considered some revelations to be consistent with natural religion. For Tindal, positive religions originated either in a perversion of natural religion or in divine revelations; in the latter case, positive religions “are only the Law of Nature adjusted, and accommodated to Circumstances.”\(^ {117}\) Tindal's considerations of Jewish law were consistent with this view of revealed religion. He focused on the precepts “relating to the Jewish Oeconomy; which,

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115 Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, p. 231.

116 Ibid., pp. 297–306.

117 Ibid., p. 53.
in an hundred Places, we are told, are to last for ever.” On the other hand, these precepts were practicable only in some specific circumstances. Analyzing the relationship between Jewish law and natural law, Tindal indeed maintained:

Nor were they [i.e., the other nations] concerned to know, or when known, obliged to observe them; nor did they [that is, the precepts of Jewish law] bind the Jews themselves, but for a time; and even then, they were for the most part impracticable, out of the Land of Canaan; where God... acted not as Governor of the Universe, but as King of the Jews, by virtue of the Horeb Covenant; which he obtained at his own Request. But when God acts as Governor of the Universe, his Laws are alike designed for all under his Government; that is, all Mankind: And consequently, what equally concerns all, must be equally knowable by all.119

Briefly, Jewish law is to last forever; but, in comparison with the universal law of nature, delivered by the “Governor of the Universe” and available to mere human reason, Jewish law becomes superfluous and, in some respects, obsolete and impracticable—and this is almost a secularized version of the Christian view of Judaism, also known as “replacement theology.” But, in Tindal’s thought, it is the acknowledgment of the sufficiency of natural religion, and not a new revelation, that replaces Jewish law.

6. Anti-Judaic Deist Thinkers: Morgan and Annet

Although Tindal’s masterpiece did not present any contemptuous judgment about the Jews, its dismissal of Jewish law inspired two authors who attacked not only Judaism as a religion but also the Jews as a people: Thomas Morgan (d. 1743) and Peter Annet (1693–1769).

In The Moral Philosopher (1737), Morgan, a Protestant dissenter who turned to deist doctrines in his maturity, asserted that Jesus Christ did not renew Jewish law, but admonished mankind to respect the eternal and universal law of nature. Borrowing largely from Tindal, Morgan made a clear distinction between natural religion and revealed religion:

It is very well known, that there are, and always have been, two Sorts or Species of Religion in the World. The first is the Religion of Nature, which consisting in the eternal, immutable Rules and Principles of moral Truth, Righteousness or Reason, has been

118 Ibid., p. 390.
always the same, and must for ever be alike apprehended by the Understandings of all Mankind, as soon as it comes to be fairly proposed and considered. But besides this, there is another Sort or Species of Religion, which has been commonly call’d positive, institute, or revealed Religion, as distinguish’d from the former. And to avoid Circumlocution, I shall call this the political Religion, or the Religion of the Hierarchy.120

The political religion “has been always different in different Ages and Countries.”121 It is indeed based on particular historical, cultural, and social factors, although “the several Passions and Interests of every Party, and of every Man, are divinely instituted by immediate Revelation.”122 However, the resort to revelation has always caused disagreements and conflicts between believers, as demonstrated by the divergence of Jews and Christians, and between Christians as well, about the meaning of the Old Testament:

The Jews would never admit of the Sense which the Christians have always put upon the Writings of Moses and the Prophets; and some have thought that those Jewish Authors never had any such Christian Meaning, because they never expressed it. But that is not all, for the Christians themselves could never agree about the Sense of their own Revelation, but have run into as many different and contrary Parties and Schemes upon it, as Men of the Most distant and opposite Religions in the World.123

Morgan openly blames those who base the Christian religion on the Old Testament and who believe that

literal Judaism... was figurative Christianity, and literal Christianity is mystical Judaism; the Letter of the Law was the Type of the Gospel, and the Letter of the Gospel is the Spirit of the Law; the Law was the Gospel under a Cloud; and the Gospel is the Law unveil’d and farther illuminated; Moses was the Shadow of Christ, and Christ is the Substance of Moses.124

121 Morgan, The Moral Philosopher, p. 95.
122 Ibid., p. 96.
123 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
124 Ibid., p. 19.
For Morgan, this view of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is ill-grounded, because Jewish law originated merely in the customs, beliefs, and political plans of the ancient Hebrews. To Morgan, before the books of the Old Testament were written and collected, ancient peoples comprehended the meaning of natural religion, which “consisted in the direct, immediate Worship of the one true God, by an absolute resignation to, and Dependence on him in the Practice of all the Duties and Obligations of moral Truth and Righteousness.” But when the Jews lived in Egypt, this country was “the Mother of Superstition, the Parent and Patroness of new Gods, and the Mistress of Idolatry throughout the World. Every new God was a new Revenue to the Priests, and all Nations received their Gods from Egypt.” While Toland considered Egyptian culture as rooted in the sapientia veterum, to Morgan, Egyptian superstitions had such an Effect upon the Israelites, in the Course of two hundred and ten Years, while they remained in Egypt, that nothing could influence them but Miracles; they could not believe in, or trust God in the ordinary Course of Providence, and would never have regarded Moses if he could not have out-done the Egyptian Sorcerers.

The Jews were “perfectly Egyptianiz’d,” and “under this State of Blindness, Obstinacy, and moral Wickedness, Moses brought them out of Egypt, and in the same Condition God left them at last. Therefore, after their going out of Egypt..., they could scarce be paralleld, by any other Nation upon Earth, for their gross Ignorance, Superstition and moral Wickedness, which ran through all their successive Generations, till their final Dissolution and Destruction, while with a most amazing Stupidity and Impudence they continued to claim the Blessings of the Abrahamick Covenant, as God’s peculiar People.

In such an intricate situation,

Moses gave them a Law, not as a Law or Religion of Nature, but as the immediate Voice and positive Will of God, the Grounds

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125 See ibid., pp. 23–30.
126 Ibid., p. 230.
128 Ibid., p. 242.
129 Ibid., p. 247.
130 Ibid., p. 255.
131 Ibid., p. 259.
and Reasons of which they were never to examine or enquire into, nor to look upon it either as founded in the eternal, immutable Fitness of Things, or the Result of any human Wisdom and Prudence. And having this Opinion of their Law in general, they made no Distinction between Morals and Rituals, between eternal, immutable, and temporary and mutable Obligations, or between the Laws of Nature, and the perfect Reverse of them.\textsuperscript{132}

Morgan regarded Jewish law as absurd and inhuman:

It was not only the Abuses of this Law, but the Law itself, that in St. Paul's Language and Style, was carnal, worldly and deadly, a most intolerable Yoke, or cruel Bondage; and a Constitution that could serve only to blind and enslave those that were under it.\textsuperscript{133}

Not only Moses, but, later on, also “the Prophets were under a Necessity... of accommodating themselves to the Passions, Prejudices, and rooted Superstition of the Nation, or People to whom they were sent.”\textsuperscript{134} The Old Testament was thus written for an uncouth and irrational people, and essentially represents a perversion of the religion of nature. This is the reason the Jews were not able to understand Christ’s message. They actually regarded Jesus as their Messiah; but they rebutted him because, according to their reading of Old Testament prophecies, the Messiah was a temporal prince, who had to make them conquer and rule the world.\textsuperscript{135} Conversely, Jesus tried to revive natural religion and thus opposed Jewish law—\textsuperscript{136}—which, as the evangelists and Saint Paul reported, was “only an occasional, temporary Thing, never intended for Perpetuity, but to last only for a few Ages.”\textsuperscript{137} Indeed, in Morgan’s thought,

natural religion is quite sufficient for man’s salvation and in principle can be recognized by reason, but in practice it has disseminated so much obscurity and ignorance in the world that the teaching of Jesus was very necessary to put the authentic principles of nature and reason in a true light again.\textsuperscript{138}

And Jesus’ teaching, according to Morgan, earned him martyrdom: “After he had introduced and recommended the true Religion to the

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., p. 271.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., p. 40.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p. 288.
\textsuperscript{135} See ibid., pp. 325–329, 350–354.
\textsuperscript{136} See ibid., pp. 50–80.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{138} Reventlow, \textit{The Authority of the Bible}, p. 397.
World,... he stood to it to the very last, died a Martyr in the Defence of it, and sealed its Truth with his Blood.”

Rejecting the traditional theory that Jesus died to save mankind, Morgan remarked that Christ was executed because “it was an establish’d Principle with the whole Jewish Nation, that without shedding of Blood there could be no Remission”; and this principle was interpreted not in a metaphorical sense, but according “to the rigid, literal, and most absurd Sense of the Jewish Law.”

Here the Christian accusation of deicide is expressed in secularized terms: the Jews are regarded as guilty of having killed not the son of God, but an innocent man who revived the religion of nature against “obscurity and ignorance.”

After Jesus, Saint Paul attempted to persuade the Jews “to set aside that absurd, tyrannical, binding and enslaving Law” because it “could be no longer obliging to the Jews any more than to the Gentiles, after they had embraced Christianity.” Morgan thus stressed Saint Paul’s “Sufferings and Persecutions,” which “arose from his struggle as much as possible for natural Right and Reason, against the Superstition of the Christian Jews, and their pretended religious Obligations to the Law of Moses.”

Morgan’s appreciation of Saint Paul and his negative view of Moses and Jewish law are much different from Toland’s high regard for Moses and from the Irish thinker’s anti-Paulinism. Morgan indeed considered Saint Paul “the great Free-thinker of his Age, the bold and brave Defender of Reason against Authority, in Opposition to those who had set up a wretched Scheme of Superstition, Blindness and Slavery, contrary to all Reason and Common Sense.” He believed that it was mainly the persistence of a number of Jewish traditions, not the Apostle’s teaching, that corrupted Christianity. A number of Jews converted to Christianity, but “they confin’d Salvation to themselves” and corrupted Christ’s doctrine with apocalyptic hopes, dogmatism, and authoritarianism, which, for Morgan, are typical features of Judaism. Thus, “the Judaizers

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140 Ibid., p. 163.
141 Ibid., p. 165.
142 Ibid., pp. 52–53.
143 Ibid., p. 58.
144 Ibid., p. 80.
145 Ibid., p. 71.
146 Ibid., p. 367.
147 See ibid., pp. 373–390.
prevailed, upon St. Paul's Death, and assum'd the Name and Dignity of the Catholick Church." And, after the Catholic Church was established, irrational dogmas and theological controversies gradually perverted Christianity into a “political religion.” In fact, the leaders of the church have always used the concept of damnation in order to strengthen their power; and this concept, to Morgan, is “a most horrid and diabolical Notion, which they took from the wicked, revengeful Jews, and which was not at all founded in any Thing that Christ or the Apostles had said of it.” Conversely, Christ’s doctrine is “a Revival of the Religion of Nature”; it is “purely an internal Thing, and consists ultimately in moral Truth and Righteousness, considered as an inward Character, Temper, Disposition, or Habit in the Mind.”

To Morgan, hence, “no two Religions in the World can be more inconsistent and irreconcileable, than Judaism and Christianity.” He remarked on the differences between the Old and the New Testaments and interpreted the two parts of the Scriptures as inconsistent with each other. On this point, according to Reventlow,

the vigour with which Morgan disputes the validity of the Old Testament for Christianity can be explained only in connection with the natural way in which, over the centuries, Old Testament models had been adopted by the established church and constitutional theory had been based on its theology…. Therefore Morgan’s work also represents a landmark in English intellectual history because it denotes the definitive end of the Old Testament in this role. Though large and imaginative books appeared, to defend it against Morgan,… the days when it had normative validity for the contemporary forms of church and state had gone for ever.

The view of the Old Testament as a collection of texts written, in an imaginative style, for an uncouth audience dates back to Spinoza and also characterizes the works of Toland and Tindal. But for thinkers such

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148 Ibid., p. 396.
149 Ibid., pp. 414–420.
150 Ibid., p. 400.
151 Ibid., p. 392.
152 Ibid., p. 416.
153 Ibid., p. 441.
154 See ibid., pp. 441–444.
as Toland and Tindal, Jewish law was essentially consistent with natural law. Moreover, these thinkers regarded ancient Hebrews as illiterate, uneducated people, but they did not express bitterness toward postbiblical and contemporary Jews. Conversely, Morgan revived, and modified in light of his deistic views, a number of anti-Judaic prejudices. He indeed described the Jews not only as the “enslaved” followers of an “absurd” religion who complied with a “carnal,” “worldly,” and “tyrannical” law, but also as perpetually living in a state of “Blindness, Obstinacy, and moral Wickedness.”

It was indeed “their gross Ignorance, Superstition and moral Wickedness, which ran through all their successive Generations,” with their “most amazing Stupidity and Impudence,” that led them to respect a tyrannical law and an absurd religion, keeping themselves separated from other peoples. Even the conversion to Christianity could not eradicate the “wickedness” of the Jews; it was rather the converted Jews who perverted Christianity and turned it into a political religion. Thus, in Morgan’s work appears a view of the Jews as a people characterized by intrinsic, unchangeable negative features, independent of their religious affiliation.

Morgan strongly influenced one of the last British deists, Peter Annet, who set up natural religion against the Old Testament and Jewish institutions. But unlike Morgan, Annet combined a contemptuous opinion of Judaism with a remarkable anti-Paulinism, even harsher than Toland’s.

The motif of the priestly frauds was at the root of Annet’s attack on revealed religion:

Annet’s criticism is founded on a prominent Deistic hypothesis that the major world religion grew out of struggles for political power in ancient communities. Ancient priests used spiritual coercion to control their tribes or nations, usually claiming both a revelation from God, and miracles to confirm that revelation. Thus, all revealed religion had its origins in political tyranny and thus such religion cannot contribute to spiritual liberation.

156 Morgan, The Moral Philosopher, p. 255.


158 Ibid., pp. 135–136.
In Annet’s work, the scriptural foundations of revealed religion are questioned: Annet indeed stresses quite clearly that for his (static and ethical) concept of ‘religion’ a historical tradition like that of the Bible remains meaningless precisely because it is historical: his purpose has been “to convince the world that an historical faith is no part of true and pure religion, which is founded only on truth and purity. That it does not consist in the belief of any history, which whether true or false, makes no man wiser nor better.”

Annet’s goal was to show that there was no agreement between the universal, rational, sufficient religion of nature and the Scriptures, not only the Old Testament. He indeed considered Saint Paul as the true father of Christianity as a positive religion, and he regarded him as an enthusiast, an impostor, a liar, guilty of countless frauds. To Annet, the separation of the soul from the body was a “ridiculous” invention of Saint Paul, and the visions of Christ that he claimed to have were merely impostures. In fact, “Superiority and Love of Power were no small ingredient in the Composition of Paul’s Temper; he affects Humility to raise himself, and boasts of his sufferings to exalt himself.” Saint Paul was indeed “subject to Paroxism of a Fever, or a spiritual Fever.” Besides, his writings produced meaningless dogmas, such as the Trinity and Christ’s incarnation and resurrection, which later perverted Jesus’ moral teaching.

Whereas Saint Paul was the impostor who corrupted Christ’s precepts, Moses was the one who anciently turned natural religion into a complex of senseless beliefs and practices. In the periodical The Free Enquirer, whose nine issues were published in 1761, Annet bitterly criticized Scripture and emphasized the powers of reason. He asserted that “the Intention of the following Remarks on Moses and his Writings, is not to subvert Christianity... but to show that the Body of it does not stand on the Legs of Judaism, or on any false Bottom which may fail the

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159 Reventlow, The Authority of the Bible, p. 373. Reventlow quotes a passage out of Annet’s The Resurrection of Jesus Considered (London, 1744); cf. p. 72. Annet wrote this work in order to criticize the theories on the resurrection of Christ that Thomas Sherlock, later bishop of London, expounded in his very popular writing The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus (London, 1729).

160 See [Annet], “The History and Character of St. Paul,” pp. 35–42.

161 See ibid., pp. 48–49, 61, 68.

162 Ibid., p. 57.

163 Ibid., p. 66.

164 See ibid., pp. 82–83.
Building.” To Annet, true Christianity “was before Judaism, and is independent of it: in short,... true Christianity is as old as the Creation” (here Annet openly refers to Tindal). Therefore, “Christianity is not created in the moveable Sands, which Winds and Waves may blow down and wash away; but... it is built on a Rock; on the Rock of Nature.” Annet hence presented Moses as the author of an irrational religion, based on the worship of an anthropomorphic and imperfect God: “Thus tyrannical, thus wrathful, and thus revengeful, does Moses represent the all beneficent God.” Moreover, he regarded the Jews as ignorant people who were always eager to accept uncritically any claimed wonder and “easily report and assert, as Truth, what they believe,” and he ridiculed the miracles reported in Exodus.

Briefly, this unoriginal deist thinker, borrowing especially from Tindal and Morgan, openly equated Moses and Paul, and Judaism and Christianity as a positive religion; he was “one of the most aggressive deists that the eighteenth century produced” and was esteemed by another aggressive and much more famous enemy of revealed religion, the French philosophe Voltaire.

7. Conclusion

From Herbert of Cherbury to Annet, the deists had a goal in common: all of them aimed at demeaning—or, in some cases, at clearly discarding—revealed religion. For several deists—namely, Herbert, Wollaston, and Tindal—some revelations can be regarded as divine, rational, and hence consistent with natural religion. This is the case of the Mosaic law

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166 Ibid., p. 20.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid., p. 22.
169 See ibid., p. 27.
in Herbert and Tindal, of the fundamental principles of Jewish faith for Wollaston, and of Jesus’ precepts, which were essentially a re-affirmation of natural religion, in Tindal. For all these deists, only natural religion is universal and therefore sufficient. Thus, revealed religion can be left aside, as it is secondary, particular, and ultimately superfluous; indeed, no revelation is needed if human reason is enough to grasp the basic principles of religion.

Other deists described revelation in a markedly negative light. Blount regarded supernatural revelations as mere products of priestly frauds, and Morgan and Annet refuted the very concept of revelation and interpreted Jesus’ teaching as a merely human, historical phenomenon, consistent with the perpetual principles of natural religion.

Deists and freethinkers such as Toland and Collins pointed out the inconsistencies and ambiguity that characterized the scriptural foundations and testimonies of revealed religion, remarking on the sufficiency of human reason in religious matters; and they, discarding innatist theories, employed and radicalized Locke’s way of ideas. But their attacks on revealed religion reveal two different approaches to Judaism. While Collins focused on the discrepancies characterizing the Scriptures and demeaned Judaism and Christianity together, the view of Judaism and the Jews that characterizes Toland’s works on the Scriptures and on the history of religions is fundamentally split—mainly because of the influence on him both of Spinoza’s hermeneutics and of Harrington’s view of the Jewish political model. As Adam Sutcliffe has pointed out,

although Toland sets out… to secularise Jewish history, Judaism persistently eludes a fixed rational analysis, and remains in his texts powerfully charged with mythic significance. While he de-mystifies Judaism in order to undermine the historical authority of Christianity, he simultaneously remystifies it in new terms, as an originary source of natural religion and as a model of utopian politics.\textsuperscript{172}

In conclusion, far from presenting a uniform view of the Jewish people and of the Jewish juridical and political traditions, the British deists’ criticisms of revealed religion essentially entailed the rejection of Judaism as a revealed religion. Toland’s ambiguous attitude is emblematic in this sense. On the one hand, he openly pointed out the corruptions suffered by Judaism because of merely historical factors. On the other, in appreciating the Jewish political model and the achievements of Moses, he integrated the fundamentals of Jewish tradition into his deist worldview.

\textsuperscript{172} Sutcliffe, \textit{Judaism and Enlightenment}, p. 204.
In still other cases, Judaism and Jewish tradition were simply discarded as outdated and needless—although based on a revelation considered consistent with natural religion—or as ill-grounded and unjustified, because based on alleged, but actually impossible, supernatural revelations. And such an unequivocal rejection of Judaism, proclaimed in different ways and on the basis of different approaches, ultimately shaped the ambiguous attitude of the Enlightenment toward the Jews, in England as well as in Continental Europe.

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