JOHN TOLAND : THE POLITICS OF PANTHEISM

Justin A. I. CHAMPION

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article traite de la sincérité de la foi chrétienne publique de John Toland (1670-1722) et la confronte à ses croyances privées peu orthodoxes : le public et le privé dans la pensée de Toland sont séparés depuis trop longtemps. L'une des conséquences de cette reconstruction des idées religieuses de Toland sera de suggérer que ses opinions religieuses (publiques ou privées) étaient intimement liées à un programme politique. La plupart des études historiques le concernant se sont penchées principalement sur les aspects critiques de son attaque contre les intrigues sacerdotales du « papisme protestant » mais très peu de recherches ont été engagées sur l'idée de Toland comme « réformateur chrétien ». En explorant la définition précise que Toland donne du panthéisme et en la reliant à ses doctrines néo-stoïciennes sur la politique de la cité, le présent article propose une révision de la réflexion actuelle sur la signification de la vie publique de la foi chrétienne dans la polémique de la libre pensée.

Mots clés : panthéisme, public/privé, stoïcisme, libre pensée.

SUMMARY : *This paper will try to address the question of the sincerity of John Toland's public Christianity and relate it to his private and unorthodox beliefs : the public and the private in Toland's thought have been bifurcated for too long. One result of this reconstruction of Toland's religious ideas will be to suggest that his religious opinions (whether public or private) were intimately related to a political agenda. Much historical attention has focused upon the critical aspects of his assault upon the priestcraft of "protestant popery" but very little interest has been paid to the idea of Toland as a "Christian reformer". By exploring Toland's precise definition of pantheism and relating it to his neo-stoic doctrines of civic politics the paper hopes to revise current thinking about the significance of public Christianity in the freethinking polemic.*

Keywords : *pantheism, public/private, stoicism, freethought.*

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG : *In diesem Artikel geht es darum, wie aufrichtig John Tolands öffentliches Bekenntnis zum christlichen Glauben war, das seinen durchaus unorthodoxen privaten überzeugungen gegenübergestellt wird. Die Frage, was im Denken von Toland öffentlich bzw. privat war, ist lange vernachlässigt worden. Aus der Rekonstruktion von Tolands religiösen Vorstellungen ergibt sich unter anderem, daß seine religiösen Überzeugungen — sowohl die für die Öffentlichkeit bestimmten als auch die privaten — eng mit einem politischen Programm zusammenhingen. Bisher haben sich die meisten einschlägigen historischen Untersuchungen mit den kritischen Aspekten seines Angriffs gegen das Priestertum des "protestantischen Papismus" beschäftigt, während es nur wenige Untersuchungen über Toland als "Reformator des Christentums" gibt. Im vorliegenden Artikel wird Tolands präzise Definition des Pantheismus untersucht und mit seinen neo-stoischen staatspolitischen Lehren in Verbindung gebracht. Dadurch soll die bisherige Ansicht von der Bedeutung des öffentlich praktizierten Christentums für die Polemik der Freidenker revidiert werden.*

Stichwörter : *Pantheismus, öffentlich/privat, Stoizismus, Freidenkerei.*

Justin Adrian Ivan CHAMPION, born in 1960, MA PhD, (Cantab), F.R. Hist. Soc., is lecturer in early modern history. He researches on freethought and irreligion in England (17th-18th c.).

Address : Department of History, Royal Holloway College, University of London, Egham Hill, EGHAM, Surrey, TW20 OEG, G.-B.

« Religions safe, with Priestcraft is the war,
All friends to Priestcraft, Foes to Mankind are. »
John TOLAND, *Clito : A Poem on the Force of Eloquence*, 1720, p. 16.

« I defended myself before from the horrible charge of atheism, which is not only the Denyal of God, but also of the future Existence and Immortality of the Souls, of the rewards attending the good, and the punishments due to the wicked : all of which I stedfastly believe. I have no doubts concerning the Excellence, Perfection and Divinity of the Christian Religion in general as is delivered in the Holy Scriptures, and I willingly and heartily conform to the Doctrine and Worship of the Church of England in particular. »
John TOLAND, *Vindicus Liberius : or Mr. Toland's Defence of Himself*, 1702, p. 105-106.

« Religion pure and perfect, as it was originally taught, without the corrupt additions and alterations of ignorant or interested persons, I both profess and recommend [...] I never wrote a syllable against any one article of the Church of England. »
John TOLAND, *Tetradymus*, 1720, p. xvii.

« In all the books I ever wrote, there's not one word against religion; but on the contrary, several vindications of its purity and excellency from the superstitions practises and worldly usurpations with which it has been often deform'd, but chiefly by Priests. »
John TOLAND, *The Second Part of the State-Anatomy*, 1717, p. 21.

In an obituary written in the immediate aftermath of Toland's death on the 11th of March, 1722 (at 3 : 00 o'clock in the morning) Abel Boyer commented « As for religion [...] it is more easy to guess what he was not, than to tell what he was. 'Tis certain, he was neither Jew nor Mahometan : But whether he was a Christian, a Deist, a Pantheist, an Hobbist, or a Spinozist, is the Question »[1]. Another obituary in the *Weekly Journal* simply commented « Mr Toland the Antichristian died on Saturday »[2]. Boyer sugges-

1. Abel BOYER, *The Political State of Great Britain*, XXIII, London, 1722, p. 339-345, at p. 342.
2. Giancarlo CARABELLI, *Tolandiana*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1975, p. 245.

ted that, although Toland's writings had « alarm'd all sober well-meaning Christians, and set the whole clergy against him », he lived his life « like a perfect philosopher ». If doubts voiced about the orthodoxy of Toland's private beliefs were hardly unsurprising at the end of his career, clerical worries about the integrity of his Christian faith were also manifest before he made his mark in the intellectual firmament. In a letter to the Church historian John Strype, John Bonnell described the young Irishman as « an engine fit for some mens purpose [...] of smart parts, & good breading; plausible in conversation, & smooth & ready in speech ». It was reported that Toland had declared that

> « he must do something extraordinary in the World. At 14 he said he would be head of a sect before 30. I find no Effect his Mission has here as yet, but that loose young fellows cry, from his Authority, that Religion is a plain & easy thing, & that there is not so much in it, as Priestcraft would persuade : taking it for granted to be part of his Doctrine, that what is to be done in order to Salvation, is as easy, as what is to be known, is plain »[3].

The suggestion that Toland was intent upon creating some sort of unorthodox religious sect was repeated by others and dogged him in his early days at Oxford[4].

Indeed an exchange of letters between Toland and an anonymous cleric "AA" published by Pierre Des Maizeaux in the posthumous collected works (1726) provides us with an interesting perception of the gap between Toland's public reputation and private faith very early in his academic and polemical career. Some time in early 1694 the concerned cleric had left Toland a long letter expressing his anxieties that the newcomer was a man of « great learning but little religion ». The letter had been sent care of a local Oxford coffee house and, more irritatingly for Toland, had been (deliberately?) left unsealed : anyone might peruse the contents. Following from this missive Toland responded by sending an open letter to his anonymous correspondent, rebutting the charges about « were I an Atheist or Deist ». Toland's (sincere) outraged reply insisted that he was an orthodox Christian. He gave a short *credo* summarising in three points the fundamentals of his Christian faith : first, he believed in an « infinite, good, wise and powerful Being, which in our language we call God, substantially different from the universe he created » ; second, he upheld belief in Christ, foremost as a « perfect example » for humanity sanctified by the Holy spi-

3. John Bonnell to Rev. John Strype Dublin, 26th May 1697, « Amongst a Collection of Letters to Rev Strype », BL Add ms 5853/385. I owe this reference to Dr John Hettet.

4. See, for example, Peter Browne, *A Letter in Answer to a Book Entitled Christianity not Mysterious*, Dublin, 1697, p. 196 : « we can't guess he designs to be no more than a Head of an ordinary Sect, but to be as famous an impostor as Mahomet. »

rit; and thirdly he insisted that it was the duty of all Christians to « live temperately, justly and piously : to love God above all things; and my neighbour as myself »[5]. Although Toland maintained these statements as his rule of faith he was also very keen to suggest that he did not consider such a faith to be dogmatic. Much of the letter stressed the necessity of toleration clearly indicating to the recipient that while potentially doctrinally orthodox in ecclesiological terms Toland subscribed to Whiggish principles. "AA" replied to Toland in careful and cautious language. He had clearly not intended to provoke the young scholar in fact when he accused Toland of being of « little religion » he meant not that he was irreligious but that « you were one who dealt somewhat too freely with it, a man of aspiring and uncontrouled reason, a great contemner of credulity ». Part of the evidence "AA" brought was that Toland had been an outspoken « undervaluer of the two extraordinary cures wrought lately in London ». "AA" continued to try and dissuade Toland from publishing his *Christianity not Mysterious* : such works might unintentionally corrode the protective varnish of true religion : he directed Toland to read the hyper-orthodox Anglican Richard Allestree's *Causes of the Decay of Christian Piety* (1667) if he had any doubts about the danger of public disputes. Naively, and rather foolishly, "AA" finished his letter with the pious hope that « you are, and design to continue a very good Christian »[6].

What can we say about this exchange? Clearly one part of Toland's concern was not to have his public reputation damaged. Aspersions against his orthodoxy perpetrated in a public space like a coffee house were potentially very dangerous. As Molyneaux commented later to John Locke, Toland already had a reputation for careless disputation in public places : « coffee houses and public tables, are not proper places for serious discourses relating to the most important truths »[7]. It was incumbent, then, upon Toland to rebut such accusations, but the sense of doing so by such a public exchange of letters was debatable. How should Toland's remarks about his public beliefs and confession be interpreted? Toland's *credo* was far from orthodox, for example it contains little reference to the sacramental or soteriological components of established doctrine, but it seems to have satisfied "AA". Reiterated public assurance of Christian orthodoxy seems to sit rather uneasily with Toland's private knowledge that he was about to publish *Christianity not Mysterious*, a work reviled by Convocation and the Church as blasphemy. It might be fair to suggest that Toland's public expression of orthodoxy was not more than self-interested canting : but to do so would be to suggest that virtually the entire corpus of Toland's

5. John TOLAND, *A Collection of Several Pieces*, Londres, 1726, II, p. 301-304.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 309-313.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

published writings on religion, theology and ethics were insincere and contrived. This might plausibly be the case, and indeed if so rather than simply so characterising his printed work it would surely be important to inquire why he devoted so much intellectual effort and penmanship to such efforts. Before attempting to answer some of these questions it would be worth trying to reconstruct Toland's public Christianity.

Obviously, given the limitations of space, here is not the place to give a systematic account of Toland's life and thought, but by dealing with a few key texts it is possible to illustrate the sort of Christianity he applauded[8]. The three texts most relevant are his *Nazarenus* (1718), the *History of the Druids* (1726) and the *Primitive Constitution of the Christian Church* (1726). These three works, amongst the many other shorter and more obscure pieces in his canon, represent simultaneously Toland's most ambiguous and scholarly works. Anglican fears about the danger to Christian revelation embodied in *Nazarenus* were voiced even before the work was published in 1718, no doubt because Toland had been hawking around abstracts of the work from as early as 1709 when he had undertaken the research in Leiden. One cleric even condemned it in print before he had seen a text. Although the *History of the Druids* and the *Primitive Constitution of the Christian Church* were only published post humously, manuscript versions were widely circulated amongst his friends and patrons. One friendly commentator even bracketed *Nazarenus* with the *History of the Druids* when he wrote to Toland in June 1718 :

> « I saw my Lord Chanc. yesterday, who amongst other papers gave me your project of a history of the Druids, which he told me he did not understand, but which he suspected to be level'd agst Christian Priests, etc. His Lp also seem'd offended at your title of *Nazarenus* as if intended with contempt like *Julians Galileans* »[9].

All three works are composed as learned and erudite dissertations into the primitive times of early Christian history. In *Nazarenus*, Toland took the opportunity to give an account of two early (apocryphal ?) Christian texts — the Gospel of Barnabas and « an Irish manuscript of the 4 Gospels » described by Toland as the « *Codex Armachanus* » — which, when combined with his expert hermeneutics, overturned many of the shibbo-

8. The best accounts of Toland's life and thought are : Franco VENTURI, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1971; Robert E. SULLIVAN, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982; Justin A. I. CHAMPION, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken : The Church of England and its Enemies (1660-1730)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, addresses some of these themes.

9. BL Add ms 4295, folio 27, « from J. Chamberlayne ».

leths of orthodox Christian doctrine and ecclesiology. Priestcraft and clericalism were refuted : the Church was not originally « a political empire, or an organis'd society with a proper subordination of officers and subjects; but the congregation of the faithful thro-out the world »[10]. Original Christianity had none of the liturgies or rituals of either contemporary Catholicism or Protestantism : « faith consisted in a right notion of God, and the constant practice of Virtue »[11]. In the extended preface to his Biblical criticism, Toland announced he would very soon reveal to the world in detail a description of his private faith. It would not consist of « naked theorems », it would not « be a mechanical and artificial religion, consisting more in stupid respect for received forms and a lifeless round of performance by rote, than as a reasonable worship or unaffected piety ». He continued to stress that there will « be more subjects of practice than belief in it; and nothing practised but what make a man the better, nor anything believ'd but what necessarily leads to practice and knowledge »[12]. So, even as Toland dissected the historical corruption of true Christianity, he projected himself as a religious reformer.

In the *Primitive Constitution of the Christian Church* the duality between what might be called a reforming Christian humanism and a freethinking criticism are even more starkly inscribed. « Those who live according to Reason are Christians », insisted Toland, citing Justin Martyr and embracing both Socrates and Heraclitus within the Christian fold. There could be no legitimate historical defence of anything remotely resembling an apostolic succession of priests or bishops. But in the same textual breath as he confounded clericalism he lauded Christ and the Gospel. The moral precepts of the Gospel and Christ were contrived for

> « purifying the mind, and rectifying the manners; of illuminating the understanding, guiding the conscience, and directing particular duties; of confirming the hopes of recompense to the good, and denouncing the dread of punishment to the bad, of propagating mutual love, forbearance, and peace among all mankind; of cementing, maintaining, and supporting civil society »[13].

How to interpret Toland's combination of critical philology (that redefined words like *ecclesia* and « ordination » away from Christian orthodoxy) and more positive descriptions of the meaning of Christ is problematic. Again is Toland's literary technique merely a witty way of exposing priestcraft by adopting the idioms of Protestant anti-popery or was a more pro-

10. J. TOLAND, *Nazarenus*, London, 1718, Part II, p. 34-35.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 16-17 and p. 19ff.
12. *Ibid.*, pref., p. xiv.
13. J. TOLAND, *op. cit. supra* n. 5, II, p. 134-136, 138 and *passim.*

found intention lurking? Again this same tension between a profound and bitter anticlericalism and a more benign treatment of the original intentions of Christian religion are displayed in his *History of the Druids*. As he declared his intentions had always been to « reduce Christianity to that pure, simple, and unpompous system, which Christ and his Apostles established ». All priests corrupted true faith which ought not to be identified with « devised fable » but with simplicity and « social virtue »[14].

Toland was aware of these ambiguities. In a letter to Leibnitz in February 1710, he stressed the importance of « carefully distinguishing Religion from Superstition; lest the one be unwarily involv'd in our censure of the other »[15]. This concern not to be identified as irreligious, but as anti-superstitious, was reiterated in some of Toland's projected writings. One such title « Priesthood without Priestcraft, or Superstition distinguished from Religion, Dominion from Order, and Bigotry from Reason » made the point simply. The fact that he also proposed another treatise with more precision rehearsed his central theme : the more detailed proposal read as follows « Superstition Unmasked : wherein the nature and effect of this vice in all religions are fairly displayed ». This work was to be composed of three parts : the first would republish Plutarch's « admirable treatise of Superstition, with concise notes », the second « the preliminary Discourse of the celebrated Tanaquil Faber » and lastly a « letter on the same subject, principally distinguishing Superstition from religion »[16]. At least one contemporary acknowledged the sincerity of Toland's intentions when he wrote in June 1720 to « tell you that having perused most of your excellent Tracts I admire not only your rare learning, but also your Heroick spirit in defending ye Divine truth against the [...] world enchanted by prejudices & Popish witchcraft »[17]. Further evidence that this ambiguity was perceived by others is also found in a letter written to Toland by an unidentified writer from Edinburgh in November 1718. The author who was only identified by the name « Philocles » claimed the title of « freethinker, and I glory in the Character ». He continued to muse, « some people are pleased to say that I am no good Christian; and in good faith if these two characters are in the last incompatible I shall very frankly yield it to them that I am not ». However Philocles insisted : « But if to prove all Things & to hold fast that only which is good be true Christianity; I am as orthodox as any man can pretend to be. I neither regard custom, nor fashion, authority, nor power; truth and reason are the only things that determine me »[18]. Again

14. ID., *A Critical History of the Druids*, London, 1820, p. 42, 48, 53.
15. J. TOLAND, *op. cit. supra* n. 5, II, p. 391.
16. BL Add ms 4295, folio 66 and folio 71.
17. BL Birch 4465, folio 20, from Martin Eagle « a true Ebionite ».
18. *Ibid.*, folio 17.

the language of these two letters gives some insight into a mentality that insisted upon the separation between religion and superstition, a language that spoke of the defence of « divine truth » and « true Christianity », but also one that rejected the dogmas, doctrines and institutions of orthodox Christian authority.

Toland's disposition towards the Christian religion can be regarded as duplex : in one manner he saw it has inherently corrupted, in another as pure and divine. His public and private beliefs were constructed from a combination of seemingly contradictory intellectual resources. For example an examination of his private working library left in his lodgings (in a carpenter's house) at Putney displays a curious mixture of pagan, Christian and secular writings including Sarpi's *Letters*, « Ricoldus et alia Mahomedica », Archbishop Ussher's « Religion of the Ancient Irish », Pliny, Seneca, Hermes, Lucretius and numerous volumes of Cicero, as well as suspect volumes such as Selden's *Table Talk* and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* [19]. Apocryphal gospels, hermetic meditations and muslim histories provide a varied texture of sources on religion whether true or false. Similarly the list of « manuscripts of mine abroad » reveals a combination of what might be legitimately regarded as Christian apologetic (« Revelation No Rule »), Biblical criticism (« The Cloud & Pillar », or « History of the Canon ») and sceptical and unorthodox writings (« Translation of Bruno's Assera Dialogues » or « Bruno's Sermon ») [20]. Much of Toland's published scholarship addressed key issues in contemporary scriptural studies. For example his work on the apocryphal writings, although regarded as speculative and certainly provocative, was respected in many of the learned universities on the continent, particularly in Holland and Germany, where faculties of Theology persevered throughout the eighteenth century in their vocation of rebutting Toland's dissertations. Contemporaries, then, were concerned about the ambiguity of Toland's public faith and commitment to orthodoxy : some cast specific aspersions about the precise taxonomy of his heterodoxy labelling him amongst many alternatives as an atheist, a freethinker, or a deist. Toland himself in public and private identified himself with a variety of names. The uncontroversial « True Christian », and the highly unusual « Nazaren » were two of the most common Christian labels, while the neologism coined by Toland — « pantheist » — was the most frequently cited non-Christian name used in private and in print.

While little critical attention has been paid to the sincerity of Toland's public profession of Christianity, « Nazarene » or otherwise, much historiography has focused on the meaning of the private theology that Toland

19. BL Add ms 4295, folio 41, « Books in my room at Mr Hunton's a Carpenter in Putney. October 1720 ». There are 118 specific works plus reference to others in closets and trunks.
20. *Ibid.*, folio 43.

called « pantheist ». Modern historical interpretation falls into two broadly complimentary positions. The first is perhaps best represented by David Berman's suggestion that the difference between public statement and private belief in Toland's writings are a useful representative of a strategy commonly adopted by covert atheists threatened with exposure and ruin if their « real » opinions were known in the wider sphere. The « art of theological lying » was a way of prevaricating in print using irony and other literary devices to self-expose authorial duplicity : in this manner although a work might appear with the veneer of orthodoxy, irreligious and atheistical propositions might be insinuated into the reader's mind. Disclaimers of heterodoxy were intended to provoke the opposite of what they seemed to propose. Berman has a point. Toland and many other Freethinkers used a panoply of literary devices and rhetorics to convey subversive meanings to their audiences, but in Berman's interpretation these strategies « were concerned with exoteric protection against enemies, and esoteric communication to friends »[21]. Toland was then, in this interpretation, a covert « pantheist » from his earliest writings (*Two Essays, sent in a letter from Oxford*, 1695) to his last works (*Clidophorous* and *Pantheisticon*, both 1720) : his public writings and professions of Christianity (a man « well affected to the church of England, and not in the least tinctured with atheism ») were little more that insincere instruments to undermine orthodox belief. Implicit in this case is that the « real » Toland is the secret one, the closet pantheist; the public Toland on the other hand is deceitful and insincere. What I hope to try and suggest is that this is a misreading of Toland's own thoughts about the relationship between public statements and private beliefs. The suggestion will be that Toland's public language was not hypothetical (or instrumental) but in one profound sense was categorical. That is that Toland's public theology although ambiguous was something he believed to be necessary and correct.

In one sense, Berman prioritised the importance of Toland's private beliefs because he wishes to locate him in a genealogy of atheists : public writings defending Christianity (however unorthodox) do not sit well with the membership qualifications for a club that included Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell. If Berman's suggestions are bound by a mythology of prolepsis, then Margaret Jacob's influential account of Toland is hobbled by an interpretative determinism. Again the public/private distinction is central to Jacob's thesis that a radical materialism was spawned by the

21. David BERMAN, « Disclaimers in Blount and Toland », *in* Michael HUNTER, David WOOTTON, ed., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 263. See also « Deism, Immortality and the Art of Theological Lying », *in* John A. Leo LEMAY, ed., *Deism, Masonry and the Enlightenment*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1987, and *A History of Atheism in England*, London, Routledge, 1988.

English Revolution in the 1650s and was borne through to the High Enlightenment in the clandestine circles of early Freemasonry. If Berman suggests the lineage of atheism was carried forward by propositional affinities between successive authors, Jacob describes a continuity based in the personnel and practices of continental sodalities between the 1690s and the 1750s. The life and work of John Toland is central to much of the narrative in both *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720* (1976) and *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981). Unconcerned with the problems of public/private distinctions that rightly prompted Berman's inquiries, Jacob ignores the vast bulk of Toland's biblical criticism and venerates his pantheism as constitutive of the revolutionary implications of materialism[22]. It is part of Jacob's thesis that pantheism was wedded to political radicalism : republicanism and social equality, if not the social levelling of the 1640s, was the civil analogy of this private materialism. Drawing from her readings of *Letters to Serena*, *Pantheisticon* and other works, Jacob insists that Toland constructed a

> « civil religion dependent solely upon man's participation in the natural order [... and asserted] republican principles of government based upon *de facto* theories of political obligation and upon the notion that any man, if educated to it, had the right to attempt to mould government to his interests ».

For Jacob, « Toland found in pantheism justification for a utopian Republic, free from clerical influence and religious intolerance, where intellectual and political freedom amounted to a loosely defined social equality ». Not only did Toland and his « radical coterie » reject Christian doctrine, metaphysics and institutions, but « they also formulated an entirely new religion of nature and gave it ritualistic expression within Freemasonry ». Toland's *Pantheisticon* was literally a liturgy for such a new religion which was practised by the Knights of the Jubilation[23].

Jacob's interpretative method, and use of evidence, has been subject to profound criticism much of which has perhaps obscured the major insights of her arguments[24]. However the emphasis laid upon the sources, purpose and meaning of Toland's pantheism should be subject to radical revision. Laying aside the unwillingness to integrate Toland's biblical criticism with his other writings, Jacob's characterisation of his pantheism has seriously obscured his intentions and objectives as a public writer. Fundamentally,

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22. Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment : Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1981, p. 49.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 87-88, 23 ; M. C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1976, p. 248.

24. See, for example, the devastating review of *The Radical Enlightenment, op. cit. supra* n. 22, by Graham C. Gibbs in the *British Journal for the History of Science, 17*, 1984.

Jacob's account has clouded the relationship between Toland's religious beliefs (again public and private) and his politics. Although Toland's political thought was determined by (and indeed determined the eighteenth-century understanding of) the Republican heritage of the 1650s (after all he was the editor of Harrington, Milton, Sidney and Ludlow), this should not be taken to imply (as it clearly does in Jacob's work) that he was committed to democratic and egalitarian principles[25]. Toland's republican politics was (as will be shown below) premised upon an hierarchical distinction between the vulgar and the philosopher that was manifest in the differentiation between a public religion (for the vulgar) and a private belief (for the philosopher). Much of Jacob's case rests upon her understanding of Toland's pantheism, and in particular the significance of his (pseudo-) masonic liturgy dispersed in *Pantheisticon* (1720). In order to illuminate both Jacob's obscurity, and highlight Toland's intentions, it is worth turning in some detail to examine what the freethinker actually meant and implied by the term « pantheist ».

As is frequently noted, Toland made the word up in 1705. It was not created however to describe a philosophical system, but to represent an intellectual disposition. The word occurs first in a very short pamphlet entitled *Socinianism Truly Stated; Being an Example of Fair Dealing in all Theological Controversies* (1705) which included on the title-page « Recommended by a PANTHEIST to an Orthodox Friend ». Toland's short discussion was supplemented by a translation of Jean Leclerc's « Digression » on Johann Fabritius' (Sacrae Theologia Doctoris & Professoris primarii) *Consideratio variarum controversiarum* (1704). The thrust of Toland's piece was to consider the value of intellectual controversy. Rejecting the suggestion that complete conformity in belief was either desirable or even obtainable, Toland insisted that « indifference of temper » was crucial to establishing universal social peace. This distinction between those who tolerated other's beliefs and those « men-devouring monsters » who wished to establish uniformity was the mark of a group of men whom Toland called « pantheists », « of which number I profess myself to be one ». Pantheists were people who « not only were, but also appear'd intirely unconcern'd in all Disputes ». Pantheists revelled in the variety of opinions : « their variety must delight your Contemplation, their opposition will augment your Knowledge, and their difficulty shou'd abate your censure. » Commenting on Leclerc's review of Fabricius' work (which summarised « the sum of all the Controversys that are now on foot about Christ-

25. See A. Blair WORDEN, ed., *Edmund Ludlow : A Voyce from the Watchtower*, « Introduction », London, Royal Historical Society, Camden Society, vol. 21, 1978; Caroline ROBBINS, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthsmen*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1959; J. A. I. CHAMPION, *op. cit. supra* n. 8, chap. 6., « Civil Theology ».

ianity »), Toland deduced that there ought to be civilised rules of disputation that would render all debates useful to society. For example, disputants should be men of « probity and piety, learned and laborious, attentive and judicious, an equal lover of peace and truth; that he act without Passion or Prejudice, and that he be not rash in his Suspicions, Censures or Imputations »[26].

Importantly, then, Toland's definition of pantheism in its public inception was one not concerned with the more abstruse components of a systematic philosophy of nature, but constructed a prescription for how men ought to debate and function as possessors of reason in the public sphere. He supplemented his own discussions with Leclerc's analysis of the threefold components of public debate which drew categorical distinctions between controversies about « opinions » in religion, doctrine and theology and implicitly suggested (at least in Toland's translation) that only opinions about things religious (*i.e.* pertaining directly to salvation) were important. Controversies about speculative matters of doctrine or theology (« difficult and obscure subjects ») were to be considered as areas where « men may follow different sentiments »[27]. In one straightforward manner, Toland and Leclerc's notions of indifference could be perceived as a revision of Anglican languages of *adiaphora*, although intriguingly the latter position was contrived to justify obligation to authority, whereas the former was to free individuals from such obligations. The main point to be made, however, is that Toland's definition of pantheism was dispositional rather than propositional : he was not concerned to write about the precise philosophical meaning of pantheism, but about how a « pantheist » might operate in public discourse.

Berman and Jacob construct Toland's pantheism from three other major sources : *Letters to Serena, Clidophorous* and *Pantheisticon*. But what precisely does Toland propagate in these writings? Reading modern historians, we might expect a systematic and almost programmatic philosophy of nature. Indeed, following the aphorism *jovis omnia plena*, Toland, especially in letters four and five to « Serena », did discuss his ideas of the relationship between matter, motion and divinity in published texts. In his revisions of contemporary natural philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza and Newton, Toland made the point that while he wished to avoid debates about the « original or duration » of the nature of the universe « my main business is to prove *Matter necessarily active as well as extended* »[28]. Quite consciously, discussions of whether the universe was created by God

26. J. TOLAND, *Socinianism Truly Stated; Being an Example of Fair Dealing in all Theological Controversies*, London, 1705, p. 5-6, 7, 9-10.
27. *Ibid.*, « Digression », p. 15.
28. J. TOLAND, *Letters to Serena*, London, 1704, p. 161 and *passim* letters 4 and 5.

or self-perpetuating and eternal were ignored. Although the dissertations in *Letters to Serena* were robust and complex, they can hardly be described as a pellucid description of a pantheistic theology. Turning to *Pantheisticon*, originally published in Latin in 1720 and translated into English in 1751, the possibilities for exploring the contours of Toland's pantheism look a more enticing prospect. Indeed, it is this text that is at the heart of Jacob's suggestion that an esoteric theology underpinned the radical Enlightenment : it is worth then paying some very close attention to the structure and meaning of the work. Toland insisted « that it is a Philosophical, and not a Theological Description, that's here given of the Society, (for there's a wide Difference between unfolding Nature's Mysteries and discoursing on Religion) » : the ambition of the work was then not to construct a theology but to explain a philosophical understanding of the world. « All things are from the Whole and the Whole is from all Things » was the enigmatic aphorism which laid the foundation for Toland's assertions that the universe was « infinite both in Extension and Virtue, but one in the Continuation of the Whole, and contiguity of the Parts ». Intelligence, an « eminent reason » defined as « God, whom you may call the *Mind*, if you please, and *Soul* of the Universe », was not separated « from the *Universe* itself, but by a distinction of Reason alone »[29]. Throughout the work, « Reason » and « God » are conflated as eternal administrators of the Universe. Importantly, Toland interlaced his construction of this philosophy with citations from Galen, Hippocrates, Linus, Seneca, and most frequently, and pointedly, Cicero. Supplementing this analytic section, Toland also included a « FORM » of celebrating this philosophy that opened with the injunction « May Philosophy Flourish » and was « consecrated » to a trinity of « Truth, Liberty, Health » : a liturgy that also venerated a genealogy of pantheistic saints, perhaps in impious parody of orthodox patterns of worship[30].

Undoubtedly, there is then material in *Pantheisticon* that might lead the historian to suggest that Toland developed a systematic alternative to established Christianity. Contrary to Jacob's suggestions, however, there is also some evidence that militates against reading the text as a « real » working, practised and enacted liturgy that was used by the Knights of the Jubilation. At various points, Toland does imply that there are « real » sodalities of pantheists meeting in Paris, in Venice, in « all the cities of Holland, especially at Amsterdam », even at Rome, « but particularly, and above all other places, they abound in *London* [... the] See, and as it were, the Citadel of their sect ». One theme of the work is that pantheists can

29. ID., *Pantheisticon*, London, 1751, p. 5, 15-17.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 63 and following; second mispagination, p. 64.

only function beyond the gaze of the vulgar, in private : « we must talk with the people, and think with the philosophers ». The mass of the people were « averse from knowledge » and would « vent invectives against its partisans »[31]. Indeed, as with the *True Nature of Socinianism*, Toland explicitly addressed the issue of how a pantheist ought to conduct himself in public discourse : public language must be « adjusted in some measure to the prejudices of the people, or to Doctrines publicly authorised for true ». This legitimated a public insincerity, or Hobbist conformity, to established Christianity : « thus it necessarily must happen, That one Thing should be in the Heart, and in a private meeting : and another Thing Abroad, and in Public Assemblies. » It would be foolish to « run counter to the received Theology » but « neither shall he be altogether Silent, when a proper occasion presents itself, yet he shall never run the Risque of his life, but in defence of his country and Friends ». These remarks succinctly betray much of Toland's vocation[32].

Superficially these remarks tend to reinforce Jacob's representation of Toland's pantheism : public insincerity clothing a radical and subversive counter-religion. But if we read on in the text, this interpretative foundation becomes fragile. All the scholarly labour that has been expended upon revising, or rejecting Jacob's suggestions about the reality of a masonic religion reified in *Pantheisticon* might have been conserved if careful attention had been paid to the content of the work. Towards the end of an additional dissertation Toland posed the rhetorical question « whether in Effect such a Society exists ? Whether the Form we exhibited is there recited ? », or indeed whether the description was a type of Platonic model of what the best Socratic society might look like. As he continued « Figure to yourself, that they are not true, not withstanding you must acknowledge them to be probable ». Toland's point was that the « real » existence of such a society was ultimately irrelevant : readers might reap no less advantage from a representation than from an accurate account : « if a person in Poetry, or Painting, should frame to himself a Mistress adorned with all possible Beauties and Graces, though in reality he's not in the possession of such a one, yet he will not be thought to be devoid of Love, or averse from Beauty ». There are undoubtedly pantheists, they do undoubtedly meet up and converse, but whether they used such a « FORM » Toland concluded : « I leave undecided. For your Part, Reader, whoever you are, make use of it, and I heartily wish, that it may tend to your advantage »[33]. It seems uncontentious to interpret these concluding statements as fairly severe evidence that *Pantheisticon* was probably not a « real » account of a

31. *Ibid.*, « To the Reader ».
32. *Ibid.*, p. 57-58, 48, 96, 99, 107.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 108, 109, 110.

« real » masonic theology : what was it then ? How should the text be understood ? How was it instrumental ?

One of the problems that has dogged the realist interpretation of *Pantheisticon* has always been the contradiction between the position that argued that it was a private, clandestine theology, but failed to acknowledge that it was also a public and published text. If Toland's pantheism was so unorthodox, so dangerous, would it have not been more politic (as he himself acknowledges) to have kept the whole thing quiet. Why if the « FORM » was only a Platonic device did he risk being publicly associated with it ? In order to explore these contradictions again it is worth turning to Toland's writings — in particular the early *Two Essays [...] from Oxford* (1695) and *Clidophorous* (1720) — to explore his ideas about the value of public discussion about things religious (orthodox or heterodox). In these works, and embedded in many others, Toland projects a theory of the distinction between public and private doctrines : between exoteric and esoteric discourse. Berman, in particular, has regarded this differentiation between public and private as a literary strategy to avoid exposure. The suggestion here will be, following Toland's own strictures, that the distinction was epistemological and political : the case may be then that the theology of *Pantheisticon* was not esoteric but in fact exoteric. The thrust of Toland's argument was that from ancient times, philosophers and legislators, because of the very nature of human understanding and the difficulty of true knowledge, had constructed public discourses that in themselves were fictional or fabulous but easily digestible by society at large. From the ancient Egyptians to the days of Christ all public language relating to religion was so constructed, and indeed, it was « as much now in use as ever »[34]. In the past :

> « The Sacred writers spoke to a generation of men, who were never famous in Arts and Sciences ; therefore they adapted all their sayings to the Vulgar ideas of that Time and Nation ; their design being not to compose a Natural System of the World, but to establish the True Theocracy, and good Morals »[35].

Although reason was a spark that might illuminate all humanity, in general the « Vulgar » were incompetent, bound by the limitations of their understandings and the prejudices of their passions and educations. As Varro commented, philosophers developed « certain masks of truth, or rather ingenious subterfuges from telling it ». Toland applauded Plato, who « spoke divinely, when he said, that to discover the creator and parent of the universe, was difficult, but to explain his nature to the vulgar, impos-

34. J. Toland, *Clidophorous*, London, 1720, p. 94-95.
35. Id., *Two Essays [...] from Oxford*, 1695, p. 11.

sible ». Moses too did frequently « accommodate his words, when speaking of GOD himself, to the capacity and preconceiv'd opinions of the vulgar ». Repeatedly citing classical sources (Plato, Cicero, and Varro most insistently), Toland suggested then that public discourse about religion, philosophy or « truth » was a different category of knowledge than the internal, private and esoteric variant. Varro put it most succinctly when he wrote of a « *threefold theology*, the Mythical, Physical and Political; or the Fabulous, Philosophical and Civil »[36].

The implication of this position was not simply that public languages were simply artifice and subterfuge to mask truth but that when speaking of God or Nature in public it was imperative to construct such civil or political theologies in order to communicate with the vulgar at all. Public language was the only functional method of speaking with the people. Indeed as part of the secondary thrust of Toland's polemic he was relentless in his argument that philosophers had to engage in this practice because other wise corrupt priests would deform such civic theologies to their own interests. The point was that while esoteric doctrine undoubtedly protected the philosopher from the fury of the vulgar it also was the only way of ensuring that the same vulgar were directed away from superstition and ignorance. The esoteric-exoteric division then, has a crucial role to play in Toland's conception of society and politics, rather than purely being a protective strategy for a covert atheism. If we accept this revision of the public-private distinct it is possible to re-evaluate the significance of Toland's public Christianity and integrate it with what might be anachronistically regarded as his political theory.

Let me try and summarize what has been suggested here so far. Starting with the issue of Toland's public professions of orthodoxy, the intention has been to open debate about how these statements of orthodoxy should be related to Toland's private beliefs about God and Nature. Rather than positing a model of public insincerity and private candour, the intention has been to try and understand the value of public discourse for Toland. By exploring how this public discourse related to his « political » doctrine I hope to submit that in one profound way Toland thought that his public writings were as important, if not more so, as his « true » private beliefs. Little historiographical attention has been paid to the shape of Toland's political ideas beyond the assertion that he was a radical republican and therefore was committed to a socially egalitarian view of politics. The anachronism of such descriptions is almost painful to behold. Although it is clear that Toland was responsible for constructing and preserving the Republican canon from the years of revolution, it is simply not tenable that

36. J. TOLAND, *op. cit. supra* n. 34, p. 90-91, 78, 91.

the programmatic republicanism of the 1650s could obtain in post 1689 politics[37]. Toland made the point himself in a number of pamphlets. In *Anglia Libera* (1701), he defined his commonwealth principles as those that did not recommend « a pure Democracy, nor any particular Form of Government; but an independent community, where the Commonweal or Good of all indifferently is design'd and pursu'd, let the Form be what it will »[38]. Indeed beyond a rather unexceptionable use of the language of the « ancient constitution » (which he combined with positive hopes for the Hanoverian monarchy) it would be difficult to characterise Toland's political thought as radical. Jacob's ascription of socially egalitarian principles is (at one level) difficult to sustain. For example in his *Memorial on the Accession of George I*, Toland reviled the indolence of vagabonds and gypsies in the same breath as he complained against the dangerous practice of educating the lower orders, and called for the stricter enforcement of anti-poaching laws. Toland's social conservatism was of a Platonic bent : every individual in society had a specific vocation whether it was as a carpenter or philosopher. To disrupt such natural hierarchy was dangerous. The lower orders should cultivate their virtue through the pursuit of sturdy pastimes as « wrestling, cudgel-playing [and...] throwing the barr »[39]. Toland was hardly out of kilter with his times in holding these sort of opinions about the lower orders.

If we turn from considering Toland's notions about the institutional structure of politics to examining what might be called his political philosophy it is possible to reconstruct in much more detail his ideas about the teleology of political society. Toland reinvigorated a Ciceronian understanding of stoic ideas : the public role of religion was at the very heart of this structure. Following Cicero, Toland described man as by nature a sociable creature « herding together in communities for their common safety ». Political society bound men in community united by reason and virtue. But as with other creatures mutual society also caused dissension : « they quarrel among themselves, or oppress each other, just upon the same motives and topicks with other animals. » The quest for food and love, the dangers of sickness and old age, combined with a general « want of understanding » meant that society needed « rules » to establish harmony. « True Virtue, Religion and understanding » were the balm that would « provide against these evils of society, by good education and good laws »[40]. These

37. See John G. A. Pocock most recently in *The Varieties of British Political Thought, 1500-1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, and J. A. I. Champion, *op. cit. supra* n. 8, *passim*.
38. J. Toland, *Anglia Libera*, London, 1701, p. 92.
39. J. Toland, *op. cit. supra* n. 5, II, p. 249-257.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 246-247.

plain and simple « rules for Virtue and Religion » were part of « civil government and wholly depending upon the same » : if successfully established they would make « humanity shine, justice flourish and communities happy ». Because « men differ » in perception of their true interests civil institutions must bring them to virtue and reason : it was crucial then, for Toland, that « Religion, that was designed to calm, does not ruffle men's tempers by irreligious wranglings »[41]. The Church should teach the precepts of civil duty without corruption. The role of each individual (according to his capacities) was to contribute to good government « to render the members of it wise and vertuous, which leads them of course to be peaceable and obedient, to bottom their felicity on the publick welfare wherein their particular interest is involved »[42]. Restrictions of space limit a full exposition of the Ciceronian idiom of this philosophy : safe to say in more extended discussions Toland interlarded his writings along these themes with critical passages from *Tusculan Disputations* (Book 5 chapter 2), *De Re Publica* (Book 3) and *De Legibus* (Book 1) : in effect Toland translated the Stoic idea of the city into eighteenth-century discourse, adapting its key motif of a « substantive conception of reason » shared by a community of enlightened men to the social and cultural structure of metropolitan life where the ignorant vulgar outnumbered the few wise men. Correspondingly in Toland's adaptation of Stoic politics the role of religion, as an institution which could lead the Vulgar to reason and virtue, was emphasized and pivotal[43]. Participation in some form of republican citizenship was (although commended to those who could) not necessary for an harmonious community.

Given this accent upon the civic role of religion it may now become apparent why Toland devoted so much effort to his public discourse. Reforming the Church of England from priestcraft to virtue was a substantial part of what Toland considered to be the urgent agenda of establishing a true commonwealth. In practical terms Toland's stress upon the important civil role of public religion was displayed in his pamphlet contributions to the debates about the preservation and extension of toleration of non-Anglican beliefs. Although Toland defended the principle of « Entire liberty of Conscience », which was « equally the right of all men, upon the nature of things, and upon the differences of Education as well as capacities »[44], this was not incompatible with his insistence that this would not compromise the maintenance of a « National Church ». Toland repeatedly

41. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
43. See Malcolm SCHOFIELD, *The Stoic Idea of the City*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, especially p. 69-72, 102-103.
44. J. TOLAND, *The State-Anatomy of Great Britain*, London, 1717, p. 27-28.

claimed membership of the established Church (much to the irritation of the clergy) even going so far as acknowledging that he took the sacrament as a « public sign » of this membership[45], but saw no contradiction in also up holding principles of toleration. Citing Harrington, he made the point that the national church « must not be a publick Driveing, but a public leading »[46]. Accordingly (and again to the infuriation of the orthodox clergy), he applauded the practice of occasional conformity (whereby non-conformists would take communion to satisfy the conditions of the Test and Corporation Acts) as « the most charitable, generous and Christian practice that can be »[47]. Toland did not merely concede the value of the Church of England for pragmatic purposes of self defence : as a religion was natural to each individual so it was « for every government to have a natural religion, or some public and orderly way of worshipping God, under the allowance, indowment, and inspection of the civil magistrate »[48]. Toland's Christian writings then were not mere subterfuge and insolence but had a profound and instrumental value to his programme of reform.

But what of his pantheism? One suggestion that could be developed is that Toland's « pantheism » was projected in public for pragmatic purposes; that in effect what historians have regarded a covert private system of doctrine was in fact a strategy for provoking criticism of the corrupt popular religion. Toland's publication of *Pantheisticon* was not perhaps an exposure of his « real » beliefs but was a suggestion of how individuals (if knowledgeable) could construct their own religious beliefs. Remember he coined the word to describe an intellectual disposition, not to define a « true » theology : according to *Clidophorous* true philosophical doctrine must always be private otherwise it becomes corrupted and compromised. The pantheist was some one who ruminated

> « on the law of Nature, that true and never deceiving *Reason* [...] by the brightness of whose Rays they dispell all Darkness, exempt themselves from trifling cares, reject all pretended Revelations, (for what Man of sense doubts of true ones) explode forged miracles, unreasonable Mysteries, ambiguous Oracles, and lay open all Deceits, Tricks, Fallacies, Frauds, Old Wives Tales, whereby a Thick Cloud envelops *Religion*, and a pitchy Night overspreads *Truth* »[49].

The pantheist brought to « a scrutiny all Things, as well sacred (as the saying is) as prophane »[50]. The public role of the pantheist was then to cri-

45. ID., *op. cit. supra* n. 5, II, p. 375.
46. ID., *op. cit. supra* n. 44, p. 28.
47. ID., *The Second Part of the State-Anatomy*, London, 1717, p. 70-71.
48. ID., *op. cit. supra* n. 38, p. 95-96.
49. ID., *op. cit. supra* n. 29, p. 62.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

ticize and reform the exoteric opinions that governed the vulgar. Importantly in a short piece, published first in 1711 and included in his posthumous collected works, *A New Description of Epsom*, Toland hinted at the sort of private life that the pantheist might pursue. Central themes stressed the importance of retirement and withdrawal from bustling metropolitan life : Epsom was an ideal place, close enough to the City but rural enough to allow private and discreet conversation. In Epsom, as in Holland, the learned could communicate without falling prey to either « ecclesiastical savageness » or « political enthusiasm »[51]. Though men still differed in opinions « as all men must unavoidable do, in their sentiments » this did not compromise their ability to converse : social peace was not sacrificed to self-interest. Indeed as Toland explained « we prefer the quiet good-natured Hypocrite to the implacable turbulent Zealot of any kind. In plain terms we are not so fond of any set of notions, as to think 'em more important than the peace of society »[52]. In private society it should be possible to discuss all matters without reference to any form of religious taxonomy, but in public it was necessary to participate using the canons of vulgar language because it was important to be able to communicate and reform. Reconstructing Toland's public belief in Christianity is as central to exploring his mental world as understanding his private notions. There was not necessary priority of private over public, or vice versa, the two modes were categorically distinct forms of knowledge, although (for Toland) united by their common rationality.

The purpose of this discussion has been to revise how Toland's corpus has been understood. Very often historians over-keen to map Toland onto some wider picture of intellectual change have marginalized his public contribution to debates about Christianity, either dismissing such work as insincere or on the other hand laying much more emphasis upon the significance of his esoteric opinions and possible connections with continental freemasonry. Thinking carefully about Toland's own construction of the differences and purposes of private and public discourse will enable a more cogent picture of his life and writings. This reading projects Toland's pantheism as form of cultural critique not purely as a system of philosophy. It also offers an interpretation that attempts to place Toland's ideas about Christianity much closer to his wider political agenda. Writing scriptural criticism and professing his membership of the established Church was consistent with his neo-Stoic view of political discourse. As to the real pri-

51. J. TOLAND, *op. cit. supra* n. 5, II, p. 107 ; for further discussion of this text, see Pierre LURBE, « Epsom as Emblem : John Toland's *Description of Epsom* », *Eighteenth-Century Ireland, 9,* 1994, p. 129-136.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

vate opinions Toland may have entertained about things theological and philosophical, perhaps we can get no further than acknowledging his own admiration for an aphorism borrowed from the First Earl of Shaftesbury : « Wise men never tell »[53].

Justin A. I. CHAMPION
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53. J. TOLAND, *op. cit. supra* n. 34, p. 94-95.