

Anti-Trinitarianism and the Republican Tradition in Enlightenment Britain

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WRITING IN THE OPENING MONTHS OF THE French Revolution and in response to the accusation of anti-monarchical republicanism, Joseph Priestley explained in self-defense that if he was a “unitarian in religion” he remained “a trinitarian in politics.”¹ The republican-leaning Priestley was making a subtle distinction, but if the image of a political Trinitarian who held faith in Commons, Lords, and monarch could concisely illustrate what was surprising, if not paradoxical, about the political outlook of a religious Unitarian, it was because the link between republicanism and anti-Trinitarianism was so common.² Milton had embodied it in the mid-seventeenth century; so had the classicist John Biddle, the “father of English Unitarianism,” who crossed over with Harringtonian republicanism, as Nigel Smith has recently written, in his disdain of priest-

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¹ Joseph Priestley, *Familiar Letters, Addressed to the Inhabitants of Birmingham in Refutation of Several Charges, Advanced Against the Dissenters and Unitarians* (Birmingham, 1790), 89. The italicization is Priestley’s. Citing the same dictum that his father “used frequently to say,” Priestley’s son added that when his father “came to America he found reason to change his opinions.” *Memoirs of the Rev. Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the year 1795, written by himself; with a continuation, to the time of his decease by his son, Joseph Priestley* (London, 1809), 108.

² On Priestley’s politics, see Martin Fitzpatrick, “Joseph Priestley, Political Philosopher,” in *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, ed. Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Much depends on whether or not he wrote the thoroughly republican *A Political Dialogue on the General Principles of Government*, published in 1791. Fitzpatrick entertains the possibility; cf. Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773–1804* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 282n43.



craft, his “vision of an exemplary Son and a life of virtuous action.”³ Probably more active in late eighteenth-century memories was the anti-Trinitarian moment of the late 1680s and 1690s. A “Unitarian controversy,” triggered by a relaxation of censorship at the end of James II’s reign and by the publication of Stephen Nye’s *Brief History of the Unitarians* (1689), raged amid a revolutionary settlement with republican implications.⁴ These same implications could be drawn from the revolution’s anti-Trinitarian ideologues, Locke and Newton.⁵ And as Restoration Tories seemed to foresee when they linked Whig-republicanism and Socinianism, what would the reduction of monarchical power suggest—a reduction like that the Glorious Revolution brought about—if not a diminution of some degree of the monarch’s divinity?⁶ This may not have been Priestley’s idiosyncratic view in 1790, but it was implied by the mix of anti-Trinitarianism, republicanism, and appreciation for the Glorious Revolution that could be found in a group of his contemporaries: Richard Price, John Jebb, Theophilus Lindsey, Samuel Rogers, Charles James Fox, one-time subjects of the crown like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, and so on.⁷

But if there was an elective affinity between republicanism and anti-Trinitarianism, it was all the more striking to find it where the Toleration Act of 1689 so explicitly criminalized, for what would be the next 124 years, any denial “in preaching or writing [of] the doctrine of the blessed Trinity.”⁸ By the time the Unitarian Relief Bill was passed in 1813 (not before the passage of the Catholic Relief Acts of 1778 and 1791), serious opposition to anti-Trinitarianism in Britain may have evaporated. But that opposition had taken expression throughout the century after 1689. The last execution for blasphemy in the British Isles, of the anti-Trinitarian Thomas Aikenhead in 1696, occurred in Scotland, where the English Toleration Act did not yet apply; but as appalled as Locke was by the episode, some Scottish clergy—future Britons—thought “God was glorified by such an awful & exemplary punishment.”⁹ By the terms of England’s Blasphemy Act

³ Nigel Smith, “‘And if God was one of us’: Paul Best, John Biddle, and anti-Trinitarian Heresy in Seventeenth-Century England,” in *Heresy, Literature, and Politics in Early Modern English Culture*, ed. David Loewenstein and John Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 174–75; also relevant here is Henry Stubbe, see James R. Jacob, *Henry Stubbe, Radical Protestantism and the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 71.

⁴ John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion, and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 389–98.

⁵ On the overlap between Locke’s theology and Socinianism, see John Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism, ‘Socinianism,’ and Unitarianism,” in *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). On the political meaning of Newtonianism, see J. R. Jacob and M. C. Jacob, “The Anglican Origins of Modern Science: The Metaphysical Foundations of the Whig Constitution,” *Isis* 71 (1980): 251–67. On Newton’s religion, which was anti-Trinitarian even if hard to define with specificity, see Richard S. Westfall, *Never at Rest: A Biography of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Frank E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); cf. Thomas C. Pfizenmaier, “Was Isaac Newton an Arian?” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 1 (1997): 57–80.

⁶ Smith, “‘And if God was one of us,’” 175; Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁷ Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism: Political Rhetoric, 1770–1814* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 43–53.

⁸ Article XVII of the Toleration Act, quoted in E. N. Williams, ed., *The Eighteenth-Century Constitution 1688–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁹ Michael Hunter, “Aikenhead, Thomas (bap. 1676, d. 1697),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) (hereafter cited as *ODNB*). The last person to be burned as a heretic in England was also an anti-Trinitarian. See David Como and Ian Atherton, “The Burning of

of 1698 anti-Trinitarians could face up to three years in prison and deprivation of civil rights.¹⁰ Demoting Jesus' divinity cost William Whiston his Lucasian chair in the 1710s; that scandal in turn made Samuel Clarke equivocate trying to protect his career and reputation.¹¹ Even amid increasing de facto acceptance of anti-Trinitarians in the second half of the century John Wilkes suffered a longer sentence under the Blasphemy Act for the anti-Trinitarianism expressed in his *Essay on Women* (1763) than for his mockery of George III in *North Briton*—"ridicule of divine majesty," writes John Marshall, "remained a more serious crime in England than ridicule of human majesty."¹² By the end of the century, in the paranoid 1790s—when, whatever his subtle outlook, "Gunpowder Joe" Priestley could be construed as a Guy Fawkes style terrorist—Edmund Burke helped defeat the Unitarian Relief Bill of 1792 in the Commons by comparing Unitarians to "insect reptiles" that "fill us with disgust" and "if they go above their natural size . . . become objects of the greatest terror."¹³ And all this is to say nothing about the popular prejudices that fed the church and king mobs of the 1790s or the regular and inimical association between anti-Trinitarianism and Islam.¹⁴

Given the republican implications in the Glorious Revolution and the century of Enlightenment it helped set in motion, anti-Trinitarianism therefore presents something of a paradox: republicans were drawn to it in great enough numbers to make it an unofficial religious outlook of the republican tradition, but it was explicitly criminalized in the state that was more republican, at least up to 1776, than any other major Atlantic state apart from the Dutch Republic.¹⁵ In only slightly different form, this was the tragicomic irony Voltaire found in the 1730s. Arianism, he lamented before commencing his celebration of British constitutionalism, chose "a very improper season to make its appearance." "Wretched authors" like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli

Edward Wightman: Puritanism, Prelacy, and the Politics of Heresy in Early Modern England," *English Historical Review* 120, (2005): 1215–50.

¹⁰ If the number of persecutions was relatively low, the Blasphemy Act was still symbolically loaded for Unitarians. See John Seed, "A Set of Men Powerful Enough in Many Things': Rational Dissent and Political Opposition, 1770–1790," in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and "Gentlemen Dissenters: The Social and Political Meanings of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s," *Historical Journal* 28, no. 2 (1985): 299–325.

¹¹ James A. Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹² John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration, and Early Enlightenment Culture: Religious Intolerance and Arguments for Religious Toleration in Early Modern and "Early Enlightenment" Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 128.

¹³ Schofield, *Enlightened Joseph Priestley*, chap. 8. Burke quoted in Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism*, vi.

¹⁴ Justin Champion and Nabil Matar have shown that in the few years surrounding 1688, association with Islam made Socinianism and Arianism seem particularly dangerous. See Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, and Matar, *Islam in Britain 1558–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). In fact this prejudice seems to be one of the eighteenth century's continuities. A broadside circulating in Birmingham as late as 1790 claimed the belief of anti-Trinitarians had "no more foundation in Divine Revelation than *Mohomet's*"; ten years later the *Anti-Jacobin Review* claimed that Priestley was actuated by the same spirit of proselytizing that led "Mahomet . . . to raise a party against the Christian World." Jan Albers, "'Papist Traitors' and 'Presbyterian Rogues': Religious Identities in Eighteenth-Century Lancashire," in *The Church of England, c. 1689 – c. 1833*, ed. John Walsh, Colin Haydon, and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 323; Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism*, 158.

¹⁵ On what was (and wasn't) revolutionary about the "Glorious Revolution," at least for the years 1690 to 1720, see the final chapter in Tim Harris, *The Revolution: The Great Crisis of the British Monarchy, 1685–1720* (London: Penguin, 2007). The case could also be made that England had been republican for much longer. See Mark Goldie, "The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England," in *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500–1850*, ed. Tim Harris (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 153–94.

could claim successful religious movements; “the greatest philosophers”—Newton, Locke, Clark, and Le Clerc—have barely “been able to raise a little flock.”¹⁶

Much in the history of eighteenth-century religious intolerance supports Voltaire’s cynicism and along with it the view that persistent *anti-anti-Trinitarianism* represents the limits of the republican tradition in Britain, especially at the revolutionary moments around 1688 and 1789 when anxiety about political experimentation made a religious philosophy that reconfigured the meaning of God especially dangerous. But there is more than this to the story. If we turn our attention away from the big names and revolutionary moments and toward the few decades that separate Voltaire’s comments from the beginning of denominational Unitarianism in the 1770s, we can see a more complex relationship between anti-Trinitarianism and republican interests developing at the congregational level. In English Presbyterian chapels, in particular, a mixture of self-governance, the repudiation of Calvinist theology, the embrace of the criminal doctrine of anti-Trinitarianism, and the increasing prosperity of parishioners encouraged the expression in printed works, private letters, and congregational behavior of the major tenets of the Atlantic republican tradition.¹⁷ The heterodox occupants of the pews and pulpits of these chapels were not as radical as Unitarians often were at the end of the century: nowhere here is there advocacy for social leveling, abolition, or dramatically extending the franchise; women are invisible except for the occasional benefactor; if these men were trying to get to the root of their religion to recover a “primitive Christianity,” so were the magisterial reformers of the early 1500s.¹⁸ But the language of any political “-ism” may in any case be limiting. The articulation of attitudes and approaches evident here—the pursuit of religious tolerance, the right to private judgment, political and religious liberty, the separation of church and state; suspicion of military power; a commercial ethos—derived from a republican tradition influenced by a range of thinkers and experiences broader than what can be captured by “liberal republicanism,” “radicalism,” “classical republicanism,” or any of the other narrower categorical options.¹⁹

It is also not simply the case that the denial of the Trinity by itself had the cancerous effect Jonathan Clark has attributed to it. If Jesus were not part of the Trinity, Clark has argued, then the doctrine of the atonement was meaningless; without that doctrine, redemption was unnecessary and humans were not born with the sins of Adam. Denying Christ’s divinity further undermined “a priesthood descending by apostolic succession and exercising its mediatory powers by virtue of that divine right. . . . If even the Church could not claim divine institution, the State was

¹⁶ Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (London, 1733), 49–50.

¹⁷ The big names and revolutionary moments have been well covered in other studies. Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, examines the connection between deism and political radicalism in the first third of the century; James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism*, shed light on the last third, although Bradley gives more attention to the earlier part of the century; on Priestley, see Fitzpatrick, “Joseph Priestley, Political Philosopher”; on the political implications of Newtonianism and the anti-Trinitarianism of the latitudinarians, see M. C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689–1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976); on Locke, see Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion, and Responsibility*; J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), drew attention to the political implications of Arianism, Socinianism, and deism.

¹⁸ On the late century radicals, see Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism*.

¹⁹ For a recent overview of the vast historiography of eighteenth-century political thought, see Lee Ward, *The Politics of Liberty in England and Revolutionary America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); still relevant is Daniel T. Rogers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 11–38.

still more obviously secular.”²⁰ This line of reasoning distills what conservatives like Edmund Burke found alarming in anti-Trinitarian doctrine by the 1790s.²¹ But the idea that Jesus was not wholly divine might as easily follow as precondition the idea that humans were not wholly depraved. Suspicion of the Trinity in midcentury Presbyterian chapels was typically part of a more general program of Arminian reform imported into England from Dutch Remonstrants via Locke.²² By the 1730s, the primary concern of Presbyterian Arminianism was to bring reason and revelation into a theology truer to their vision of original Christianity, and it was as part of this broader project, which also undertook to rescue human nature from Calvin’s notion of inherited sin, that the doctrine of the Trinity, in the words of an orthodox critic, became “a matter of jest and ridicule.”²³

It may in fact be that much of the linkage between republicanism and theology could also be made with reference to midcentury Presbyterian Arminianism, or to what J. G. A. Pocock has suggestively called the “Arminian Enlightenment.”²⁴ But anti-Trinitarianism is nevertheless a thread worth following specifically. If it was not necessarily the starting point for heterodoxy, it still, unlike Arminianism, incurred stiff penalties (official persecution, the risk of exclusion from the congregation, the potential spiritual penalties that could follow embracing one of Christianity’s great heresies); and it was the persistence of those punishments, which went beyond those meted out to Trinitarian Dissent, that made heterodox Presbyterians acutely aware of religious intolerance and especially committed to securing religious liberties. In much the same way that, as Tim Harris has shown, the persecution of Dissent galvanized Restoration Whigs whether they were actual Dissenters or simply defenders of religious rights, the persecution of anti-Trinitarians led even Trinitarian Presbyterians to defend the right to worship freely.²⁵

What may be most interesting about the anti-Trinitarian-republican connection, at least in the eighteenth century, is its commercial facet. Here I want to follow a lead that historians as diverse as E. P. Thompson and R. G. Wilson suggested several decades ago and that more recently and specifically has been pursued after the 1770s, when Unitarianism became an official denomination.²⁶ John Seed, for one, has shown that rational Dissenters made inroads into the circles of Whig power because they possessed the necessary economic power.²⁷ With an eye for the importance of cultural motives and the dynamic relationship between the worldly and spiritual,

²⁰ Clark, *English Society*. The point has been elaborated on by A. C. M. Waterman, “The Nexus between Theology and Political Doctrine,” in Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion*.

²¹ J. G. A. Pocock summarizes Clark’s argument with respect to the 1790s and where it works best. See his introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, by Edmund Burke (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), xvii–xviii.

²² On Locke’s role here, see Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion, and Responsibility*, 331–33.

²³ C. G. Bolam, Jeremy Goring, H. L. Short, Roger Thomas, *The English Presbyterians* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), 22.

²⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chap. 2.

²⁵ For a concise summary of Whigs and Dissent, see Tim Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and His Kingdoms, 1660–1685* (London: Penguin, 2005), 300–309.

²⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963), 30; Richard G. Wilson, *Gentlemen Merchants: The Merchant Community in Leeds, 1700–1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 189–90; Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters*, vol. 1, *From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 380; D. L. Ouren, “Some Major Unitarian Chapels in Great Britain” (unpublished MS in 2 vols., Andover School of Divinity, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1984), 1.

²⁷ Seed, “Rational Dissent and Political Opposition.”

Margaret Jacob has recently explored the Unitarianism of industrialists in the late eighteenth-century Midlands, “the epicentre of the Industrial Revolution.” In the diaries and personal papers of the Watts and in Priestley’s sermons, Jacob finds industrious hearers in the 1780s in agreement with Priestley’s insistence both on the primacy of religious doctrine and on the more novel notion that there was nothing wrong with “riches, honors, and pleasures.”²⁸ In his massive study of Dissenters, Michael Watts has also noted that if “Dissent as a whole produced fewer wealthy men than their strength in the total population would have predicted”—mainly because working-class Methodists bring the overall number down—it was also the case that for England and Wales by 1851 “there were nearly ten times the proportion of Unitarians among the millionaires and half-millionaires as in the general population.”²⁹

For historians of such varied interests to have recognized the same thing means Unitarian congregations were probably not wealthy by chance. But it is also the case that the more detailed studies of this economic connection have examined the moment after both Unitarianism and material acquisitiveness were better established, much as the studies of the link between heterodoxy and politics have focused on the three decades before 1789, if not the three after 1688. In the middle third of the century this mode of heterodoxy shaped and reflected the needs of congregations that were filled with prosperous merchants, proto-industrialists, and an emerging middle class, as well as ministers who wanted to be unencumbered in their practice of religion. They may have been the direct ideological ancestors of the Dissenter radicals of the 1770s and beyond, but for these more moderate republicans the divide between the divinity of Christ and the depravity of humanity was shrinking in inverse proportion to their growing material ambition.



Anti-Trinitarians did not embrace heterodoxy by any single consideration, and it is useful even when trying to hone in on the affinity with secular needs and motives to note first what else was involved.³⁰ So many early modern English anti-Trinitarians, who were often classicists or more informally knew ancient languages, came to their belief by critically examining a Bible they also regarded as authoritative.³¹ When John Biddle found the “Holy Trinity was not well grounded in Revelation, much less in reason,” he still took the Revelation seriously.³² According to Stephen

²⁸ Margaret C. Jacob, “Commerce, Industry, and the Laws of Newtonian Science: Weber Revisited and Revised,” *Canadian Journal of History* 35 (August 2000), 288–90.

²⁹ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters*, vol. 2, *The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 332.

³⁰ Although Stephen Nye used the word “Unitarian” in 1689, what the word would come to mean for most denominational Unitarians who applied it to themselves after the 1770s was typically covered in the midcentury by the abusive terms “Arian” and “Socinian.” “Arian” was applied to those who believed Jesus had some sort of divine status even though it was not as great as God’s. “Socinian” tended to be applied to anyone who reasoned Jesus was merely human. The precise meaning of these terms is never fixed in early modernity. For a fuller view, see *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe: For, Against, and Beyond Persecution and Toleration*, ed. John Christian Laursen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), passim.

³¹ For one of the earliest early modern English anti-Trinitarians on record, who also promoted the joint criteria of reason and revelation, see John Assheton, Lillian Hromiko, ed., “Words of John Assheton,” *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* 28, no. 2 (2001–2): 22–27.

³² Biddle’s arguments and writings were printed by John Farrington in *The Faith of One God, Who is Only the Father; and of One Mediator Between God and Man, who is only the Man Christ Jesus; and of one Holy Spirit, the Gift (and sent) of God...* (London, 1691).

Nye it was Scripture that plainly said Christ was subservient to God—“My father is greater than I” (John 14:28); “The Head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3), and so on. In addition, Nye explained, the list of biblical scholars both Catholic and Reformed who through the Christian centuries had apparently noticed the scriptural problems associated with the Trinity was long; it was little known only because holding anti-Trinitarian beliefs required secrecy to avoid “exception, envy, or legal prosecution.”³³ It was suggestive to Nye, for example, that Erasmus emphasized that God “always signified the father” or that the French Jesuit Denis Pétau (Petavius) argued, in Nye’s words, “the doctrine of the Trinity, and the divinity of the Son and Spirit, cannot be proved by scripture only.”³⁴ Newton and Locke, the latter of whom read Nye with interest, said much the same thing on the basis of textual criticism, and said it to each other.³⁵ And this was the collective refrain of midcentury Presbyterian ministers, so many of whom had vast knowledge of ancient languages: reason plus revelation gives no evidence that Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father were one and the same.

Authors from whom anti-Trinitarian implications could be drawn were also staple reading in Dissenter academies.³⁶ By itself this did not lead to shifts in belief, but David Wykes has shown that students at the academies could be encouraged to pick up heterodox opinions, or at least acquire an open-mindedness about doctrine, since tutors often stressed the need for free inquiry when investigating differences of opinion about doctrine.³⁷ Ministers could just as easily arrive at heterodox opinions as they continued to read works on doctrine well into their ministries.³⁸ A mid-eighteenth-century diary describes a Dissenter preacher who after eleven years of agreement with his church was ejected “by a superior number of one vote” because he “had changed his method of preaching, and by reading other works had changed his sentiments on articles of faith to the great Dissatisfaction of a many of ye members of the Society.”³⁹ The deciding vote by one is curious and suggests yet another basis for shifting belief: parishioners could be persuaded to change their religious outlook by engagement with their ministers.

Accident also largely explains why, at least in the first instance, so many anti-Trinitarians ended up in Presbyterian chapels. Before 1719, “Presbyterian” and “Independent” typically referred to ecclesiastical structure. This began to change after 150 leading Dissenters met in 1719 in Salters Hall in London in order to address the question of how to pursue subscription to belief in the Trinity. By a slight margin Presbyterians clustered among the “Nonsubscribers,” namely those put off by a clause stating that denying the Trinity ran counter to Scripture and the spirit of the Reformed churches. Independents generally voted to require subscription to the orthodox position. But many who voted on opposite sides of the issue saw the importance of the Trinity itself in more or less the same way. The Independent Isaac Watts and the Presbyterian Edmund Calamy, for ex-

³³ Stephen Nye, *A Brief History of the Unitarians called also Socinians*, in *Four Letters* (London, 1691), 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ Herbert McLachlan, *The Unitarian Movement in the Religious Life of England*, vol. 1, *Its Contribution to Thought and Learning, 1700–1900* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1933), 24. On Locke reading Nye, see Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility*, 404–5.

³⁶ McLachlan, *Unitarian Movement in England*; David L. Wykes, “The Dissenting Academy and Rational Dissent,” in Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion*.

³⁷ Wykes, “Dissenting Academy and Rational Dissent,” 128.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁹ “Diary of Joseph Ryder,” Unitarian MSS, Q/6, John Rylands Library, Manchester (hereafter cited as JRD), 20 April 1761.

ample, both later argued that the real question in 1719 concerned doctrinal freedom. It was mainly over the course of the next few decades that the Presbyterians—the Calvinist line-toers of the previous generation whose founder had burned Michael Servetus at the stake in Geneva for anti-Trinitarian heresy—became a haven for the heterodox. The Independents, despite the connotations of their name, came to be known for the next few decades for their orthodoxy.⁴⁰



The political and economic links to heterodoxy become visible in the correspondence network built around the London minister and classicist George Benson (1699–1762), the unofficial leader of the heterodox Presbyterians.⁴¹ Benson’s network tied together ministers throughout England (so many of whom, by virtue of being excluded from the ancient universities, earned degrees in Glasgow). Some of these ministers wrote to Benson looking for advice or intellectual support at a time when all liberal Protestants had to walk a thin line between enthusiasm and deism. But from 1740 until 1762 Benson was also the manager of the Presbyterian Fund, a trust established in 1689 and presided over by ministers, big donors, and elected lay representatives of contributing congregations with the intention of supporting Dissenter ministers and the academies.⁴² Benson may have offered sage advice, but his financial position made him a magnet for ministers looking for money.

Benson had been an Arian at least as early as the 1720s and probably a Lockean for even longer.⁴³ His major early work in biblical criticism from the 1730s was modeled on Locke’s commentary on Paul’s epistle to the Romans,⁴⁴ while his *Reasonableness of the Christian religion* (1743) made favorable mention of Newton, Samuel Clarke, and John Tillotson as it relied on some four thousand quoted words of “that judicious and free inquirer, the excellent Mr. Locke” to challenge Henry Dodwell’s deistic *Christianity not founded on Argument* (1741).⁴⁵

Benson did not confine his scholarship to theology. Along with other Presbyterian opponents of subscription in the Salters Hall controversy, he was one of the major regular contributors to the anticlerical—anti-Catholic but just as deeply anti-High Church—*The Old Whig: Or, Consistent Protestant*, a weekly newspaper that ran anonymously written essays in 160 issues between March 1735 and March 1738.⁴⁶ The paper’s origins in an anti-Trinitarian moment provoked by the “Rundle Crisis” of 1733–35 speaks to the interdependency of religion and politics for these ministers. The Arian divine Thomas Rundle had been the chaplain of the Latitudinarian bishop William Talbot in the 1710s, and years later in 1733 Talbot’s son Charles, who had recently been made lord chancellor, attempted to use his influence to appoint Rundle to a vacant see in Gloucester. Ed-

⁴⁰ Bolam et al., *English Presbyterians*, 160–74.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴² W. D. Jeremy, *The Presbyterian Fund and Dr Daniel Williams’s Trust* (London, 1885).

⁴³ G. Fothergill to G. Benson, 28 December 1728, JRL, Benson Collection, General, B116/26.

⁴⁴ George Benson, *A Paraphrase and notes on six of the epistles of St. Paul* (1734); also see G. Benson to Macro, 1 September 1748, British Library, Add. MS 32, 557, Letter 142.

⁴⁵ George Benson, *The reasonableness of the Christian religion, as delivered in the Scriptures... in three parts* (London, 1743), 246; Bolam et al., *English Presbyterians*, 189.

⁴⁶ On the origins of *The Old Whig*, see Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725–1742* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Andrew C. Thompson, “Popery, Politics, and Private Judgement in Early Hanoverian Britain,” *Historical Journal* 34, no. 2 (2002): 333–56. Two bound volumes of the first 103 issues of the paper were published in 1739. Subsequent citations refer to these editions.

mund Gibson, the staunchly Trinitarian bishop of London, blocked the move; Walpole, in need of clerical support following the Excise Bill, sided with Gibson and the orthodox Anglican establishment; and what followed was an “unholy row,” as Christine Gerrard describes it, in which Gibson’s defenders smeared Rundle as a Socinian, freethinker, deist, and atheist while Talbot’s (and Rundle’s) defenders subjected Gibson, in the words of a contemporary diarist, to “all the opprobrious language that envy and malice ever threw at eminence and power.”⁴⁷

The Dissenters behind the *Old Whig* took it as their major task to defend freedom of conscience amid Gibson’s defeat of the Rundle appointment and found their intellectual justification in the figure of an “old Whig,” the sort of political creature who had been present at the party’s making during the Exclusion Crisis. As Andrew Thompson has shown, the paper vehemently defended civil and religious liberties and the right to private judgment as it also expressed an equally Exclusion-era anti-Catholicism. Benson, interestingly, was not so rabidly anti-Catholic: he extended the right to private judgment to Catholics, as long as Catholic judgment did not translate into the sort of action that put the pope above the state.⁴⁸ The *Old Whig* also borrowed freely from republican traditions.⁴⁹ Alongside its Lockean arguments for greater liberties, it made recourse to classical authors and praised seventeenth-century republicans who took their cue from antiquity. The author of one essay, for example, laments that “the spirits of a Sidney, a Milton, or an Harrington” are missing from discussions of coffeehouse politicians who, in the absence of full rights for Dissenters, mistakenly think English liberty is secure.⁵⁰ The paper’s verdict on the value of the capitalist ethos similarly reads as neither Smithian nor Harringtonian but rather as something in between. It defined “Undue” credit as “the Parent of Luxury, and Ruin of Liberty.”⁵¹ But what was wrong with trade corporations, on the other hand, was not their erosion of virtue. In an analogy meant to illustrate the problems of regulating religion, but which also reveals a favorable view of the free market, one contributor writes that “corporations in trade and religious establishments, are neither of them calculated for the good of the community, and the publick welfare of mankind. The one destroys all free liberal commerce, the other cramps mens understandings, and checks all free liberal inquiries into truth.”⁵² Just as idiosyncratically republican, although clearly defensive of Dissent, was the *Old Whig*’s suspicion of the military. Standing armies were problematic, but only when deprived of religious diversity (as they were by the Test and Corporations Acts), at which point it was better to have no army at all.⁵³

Benson’s private letters confirm much of what appears in the *Old Whig* and his other printed works. To one correspondent he vigorously defended his views on the separation of church and state that the right to private judgment demanded—a right he claimed he would rather die for than lose.⁵⁴ To another he stood up for his anti-Trinitarianism against the accusation that it was “repugnant both to Reason & Scripture.”⁵⁵ Much in these letters is also admit-

⁴⁷ Gerrard, *Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, 27–29.

⁴⁸ George Benson, *In commemoration of the happy accession of the illustrious house of Hanover to the throne of Great-Britain. A sermon preached at Little St. Helens, August 2, MDCC XLII* (London, 1742), 8.

⁴⁹ Thompson, “Popery, Politics, and Private Judgement,” 336, 351–56.

⁵⁰ *The Old Whig: Or, the Consistent Protestant* (London, 1739), 2:428.

⁵¹ *Old Whig*, vol. 1, in the un-paginated Index.

⁵² *Old Whig*, 2:109.

⁵³ *Old Whig*, 1:206.

⁵⁴ G. Fothergill to G. Benson, 28 December 1728, JRL, Benson Collection, General, B116/26.

⁵⁵ J. Dolland to G. Benson, 20 May 1748, JRL, Benson Collection, General, B116/21.

tedly obscure.⁵⁶ But overall they suggest a pattern that fits even with David Wykes's very cautious notion that if the Presbyterian Fund "did not seek to influence the religious principles of those they assisted, some of the policies they adopted did help encourage the growth of heterodoxy."⁵⁷ Similarly, if Benson did not tell fellow ministers exactly what to profess, he still seems to have given plenty of financial support to those who shared his more adventurous beliefs. One thing these letters therefore illustrate is a cause of the changing meaning of Presbyterianism in the wake of the Salters Hall controversy. If the connection between anti-Trinitarianism and Presbyterianism could easily be accidental in the years immediately following 1719, Benson's patronage gave heterodox ministers a more stable place in the denomination; this patronage, which was much more intentionally anti-Trinitarian than the vote in 1719, must in turn have reinforced the perception of the relative radicalness of Presbyterianism.

The Benson letters further indicate that the unorthodox ministers who received funding were meeting the spiritual needs of wealthy parishioners and prosperous parishes. Thomas Milway, a minister from Haverhill, explained in a letter to Benson (6 March 1748) that a recently deceased "old woman" from Norwich had left the interest on £1500 to be applied to the congregations of Norfolk and Suffolk.⁵⁸ The next we hear from Milway is his response to Benson, written 20 June 1748, in which Milway expresses gratitude for having been sent some of Benson's sermons before explaining that while in school Benson's *Paraphrases* "was a means of keeping me from the enthusiasm of one of my Tutors."⁵⁹ Was Benson sending his Arian sermons to Milway as a sort of heterodox litmus test?

If so, it was a test Milway appears to have passed. Between Milway's two letters, Benson received a note of assurance from the Norwich anti-Trinitarian minister, John Taylor (1694–1761), another classicist (one of the century's leading Hebraists) and another self-proclaimed Lockean:

You need not doubt but your application on Behalf of Mr T. Milway will have its weight with Mrs Loughor's Trustees; but as it is, not any present sum, by the coming interest of £1500 South-Sea Stock, that is to be apply'd to ye support of dissenting ministers in Norfolk & Suffolk[.] [It] will be near a twelve-month before the first distribution is made, and then, if Life be continu'd, you may be sure your expectations will not be disappointed.⁶⁰

Benson and Taylor were clearly aware that material support for the ministers depended on financial devices as worldly as stock holdings in overseas ventures. (One of the founding contributors to the *Old Whig*, Samuel Chandler, had lost his wife's savings in the South Sea Bubble.⁶¹) If like twenty-first-century academics hustling for grants, these ministers had to angle for whatever money was made available by the generosity of the wealthy, it is tempting to imagine that in the process they connected their theological distinctiveness to the wealth that distinguished their benefactors from the bulk of society. More undeniably, this letter reads as further

⁵⁶ The theological views of two ministers who did get support, John Hodgson (Lincoln) and John Bent (Chorley), remain unclear. With another, Joseph Carpenter (Warwick), the evidence is more suggestive if this is the Carpenter family that can be traced back to the Unitarian Lant Carpenter (1780–1840). See Alexander Gordon, "Carpenter, Lant (1780–1840)," rev. G. M. Ditchfield, in *ODNB*.

⁵⁷ Wykes, "Dissenting Academy and Rational Dissent," 125.

⁵⁸ T. Milway to G. Benson, 6 March 1747–48, JRL, Benson Collection, 7, B115.

⁵⁹ T. Milway to G. Benson, 20 June 1748, JRL, Benson Collection, 7, B115.

⁶⁰ J. Taylor to G. Benson, 29 March 1748, JRL, Benson Collection, 3, B111.

⁶¹ John Stephens, "Chandler, Samuel (1693–1766)," in *ODNB*.

evidence of a heterodox network supported by wealthy donors. Taylor, an anti-Trinitarian, was assuring Benson, another anti-Trinitarian, that Milway was in line for the money because he met with the approval of Mrs. Loughor's trustees.

Loughor's actual beliefs can be only guessed at, but her trustees must have felt some affinity with heterodoxy by virtue of their connection to Taylor. One historian of Dissent claims Taylor's *Original Sin* "did more than any other [book] to emancipate the English Presbyterian Dissenters from Calvinism."⁶² Like Benson, the deeply anti-Trinitarian Taylor radically defended private judgment.⁶³ While students at the Independent Dissenter Academies were learning lists of Calvinist tenets by repetition, Taylor prefaced his lecture on theology with the admonition to be "open to the evidence," to banish "all prejudices, prepossession, party zeal," to "study to live in peace and love with all your fellow Christians . . . and freely allow to others the inalienable rights of judgment and conscience."⁶⁴ Old Dissenters found his repudiation of Calvin's doctrine of human depravity destructive to Christianity—so, in print and on more than one occasion, did the Methodist leader John Wesley. Adam Smith, on the other hand, found Taylor compelling enough to support publicly his doctorate in divinity at Glasgow in 1756.⁶⁵ This leading administrator and opinion maker of Presbyterianism, was, in other words, the sort of person in whom worldliness, tolerance, and heterodoxy seem seamlessly to have coexisted.

Milway is more obscure. A nineteenth-century church history makes brief mention of his ordination (on 8 December 1737), the certificate of which noted his disputation of "a question in divinity" in the presence of his certifiers.⁶⁶ Two printed sermons Milway gave also survive. Both are relatively formulaic glosses on biblical passages, although in the first, written in the 1750s, Milway distills the Gospel to the lesson that "no privilege of descent or birth, no external advantages whatever will avail, where purity of heart and life are wanting."⁶⁷ In the second, written a decade later, he repudiates orthodox Calvinism with the argument that "it is abusing the scriptures to tell men . . . that good works are of no avail to their final acceptance with God."⁶⁸ If nothing else Milway had a meritocratic view of salvation and some kind of willingness to go against the grain in expressing his beliefs. But his final letter to Benson gives us both better evidence of his outlook and another glimpse of the state of his heterodox coreligionists in the

⁶² Alan P. F. Sell, "Taylor, John (1694–1761)," in *ODNB*.

⁶³ Both Taylor and Benson studied at Whitehaven Academy under Thomas Dixon (1679–80 to 1729) and presumably knew each other at least as early as their late teenage years. Alexander Gordon, "Dixon, Thomas (1679/80–1729)," rev. Aidan C. J. Jones and B. Anne M. Dick, in *ODNB*. Taylor was also heavily influenced by Samuel Clarke's *Scripture-doctrine of the Trinity* (1712), which in 1735 encouraged Taylor to write his *Scripture-doctrine of Original Sin* (1740). Edward Haywood also remarked in a sermon preached at Taylor's funeral that "if ever [Taylor] expressed an uncommon warmth and honest indignation against anything, it was against Athanasianism [the Trinitarian position that Arius refuted], which he thought one of the greatest corruptions of pure and genuine Christianity, as this doctrine entirely subverts the unity of God." E. Harwood, *A sermon occasioned by the death of the Rev John Taylor, DD* (London, 1761), 40.

⁶⁴ Quote in Jeremy, *Presbyterian Fund*, 58.

⁶⁵ Sell, "Taylor, John," *ODNB*.

⁶⁶ John Browne, *History of Congregationalism and Memorials of the Churches in Norfolk and Suffolk* (London, 1877), 505n§.

⁶⁷ Thomas Milway, *The righteousness of faith explained, in a sermon preached at Stanborn in Essex, July 19, 1750* (London, 1751), 29–30.

⁶⁸ Thomas Milway, *Salvation without works, in St. Paul's sense of it, considered, in a sermon preached at Haveril, December 14, 1760* (London, 1761).

1740s. On 18 September 1748, Milway wrote to Benson to offer his thanks for having received the support that he had sought the previous March:

We are not upon ye whole I think a Declining Interest, which I sometimes wonder at since I almost stand alone, & tho I think my self of middling orthodoxy yet am represented by my more Orthodox Bretheren as ye arch heretick of ye corner. But I reckon ye testimony of a good conscience an[d] ample support against such insinuations, this I hope I would value above all ye world.⁶⁹

The signifiers here are telling: “middling orthodoxy” was likely a reference either to Milway’s Arianism (between strict orthodoxy at one end of the continuum and Socinianism at the other) or his Arminianism; “Interest,” which has an additional layer of economic meaning given that it is a return on Loughor’s principal that gives Milway his paycheck, suggests more directly his congregation or likeminded ministers (or both), but in whatever case “not . . . Declining” points to ongoing support for his unorthodox views; “arch heretick of ye corner”—even if the exaggeration of “more Orthodox Bretheren”—is a stronger suggestion of anti-Trinitarianism. And then Milway finally explains what keeps up his hope: “good conscience” and “ample support.” Read in a Lockean tradition according to which religious conscience should not and could not, salvifically, be regulated by the state, Milway’s articulation of these words resonates with the push for religious liberty.⁷⁰ That “ample support” could easily refer both to financial support from Loughor via Benson (and Taylor) and the theological support of heterodox brethren shows how thin the line separating commerce and religion could be.

The hints of anti-Trinitarianism in Milway’s case come into sharper relief in the correspondence between Benson and Samuel Bourn (1689–1754). Priestley once called his own Birmingham New Meeting congregation “the most liberal, I believe of any in England,” and then followed the thought with: “and to this freedom the unwearied labours of Mr Bourn eminently contributed.”⁷¹ Bourn, who preached the opening sermon at New Meeting in 1732, had become an Arian in the wake of the Salters Hall controversy.⁷² This alienated him from orthodox Presbyterians, many of whom refused to attend his ordination, although amid this rebuke Bourn found support, one contemporary source tells us, in “a worthy family with which he contracted a very honourable and an happy Alliance.”⁷³ It may have been this support that empowered him to go so strenuously after Calvinist orthodoxy. In 1736 he wrote a short attack on the standard Presbyterian catechism, the main problem of which, he argued, was its acceptance of the Trinity—“There are *not* three Persons, but one Person only in our Idea of God. For, what is a *Person*, but an individual, intelligent, free, active Being or Substance.”⁷⁴ Bourn then went on to publish a re-

⁶⁹ J. Milway to G. Benson 18 September 1748, JRL, Benson Collection, vii, B115.

⁷⁰ For a fuller discussion of the role of private judgment in the *Old Whig*, see Thompson, “Popery, Politics, and Private Judgement.”

⁷¹ Alexander Gordon, “Bourn, Samuel (1689–1754),” rev. Alan P. F. Sell, in ODNB.

⁷² Wykes, “Dissenting Academy and Rational Dissent,” 129.

⁷³ Samuel Blyth, *The good soldier of Jesus Christ characterized. In a sermon preached at Birmingham, March 31, and at Coseley, April 7. occasioned by the sudden and much-lamented death of the Reverend Mr. S. Bourn, who died March 22, 1754, in the 66th year of his age* (London, 1754), 12–13.

⁷⁴ Samuel Bourn, *An Address to Protestant Dissenters. Or an Inquiry into the Grounds of the Attachment to the Assemblies Catechism; Whether they Act upon Bigotry or Reason...* (London, 1736), 7. On the general types of philosophical arguments anti-Trinitarians might use—here Bourn points to the problem of individuation—see Udo Thiel, “The

vised and expanded anti-Trinitarian catechism that won the support of Benson and Samuel Chandler, among others.⁷⁵ This was the “first manifesto” of heterodox Presbyterianism, in a mid-nineteenth-century historian’s description.⁷⁶ It offered Jesus’s life as mere “example” of how to be saved—a reading of Christ’s significance that hints at Socinianism—and by the 1750s its multiple editions were largely responsible for a shift away from the Calvinist catechism in the Presbyterian schools and toward “the principles of common Christianity.”⁷⁷

This is not to give the impression that the laity passively accepted heterodoxy. On the contrary, the Bourn-Benson letters also give us an image of activist lay support for the most doctrinally radical of these Presbyterian ministers. In the early 1750s, Bourn wrote to Benson for advice:

I have a fair opportunity of conveyance, and an affair of moment to communicate. On Monday last 100 Gentlemen, deputed from the Protestant Dissenters in Bolton, came to me with an Invitation to remove there and settle among them; assuring me it was unanimous. . . . They are good people & growing the offspring of my Father’s flock, consisting very much of young thriving tradesmen, the old generation of my acquaintance being almost all gone. The situation is, I think, as agreeable as any I know in the kingdom; a house convenient . . . over a river, a pleasant little town, a weekly lecture, where several ministers usually attend, a sett of worthy friendly bretheren round about free from bigotry.⁷⁸

When the letter was sent, Bourn was preaching in Coseley, ten miles outside of Birmingham; Bolton, where Bourn’s father had been minister and where Bourn had been taught classics, was nearly a hundred miles north. That so many men made this far from trivial journey to deliver the invitation—the sight by itself would have been dramatic—speaks to just how much this congregation of young tradesmen wanted Bourn; and Bourn intimates that it was by virtue of their youth that the congregation’s support for an anti-Trinitarian would be unanimous. Less than three weeks later Bourn still had not gotten a response from Benson and wrote again, in the process supplying additional information. The formal invitation had come from “177 heads of families in Bolton” who were willing to pay more than Coseley, although Bourn took the congregation he would be leaving behind “to be three times as rich.”⁷⁹

Trinity and Human Personal Identity,” in *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 217–43.

⁷⁵ Bourn modified the catechism written by James Strong of Ilminster. T. S. James, *The History of the Litigation and Legislation Respecting Presbyterian Chapels and Charities in England and Ireland Between 1816 and 1849* (London, 1867), 35.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* Any characterization made in this text, the work of a Birmingham lawyer and conservative congregationalist, should not be accepted uncritically. James’s learned but tendentious history focused on the Wolverhampton Chapel (1817) and Hewley Fund (1830) cases, which ruled against anti-Trinitarians’ property rights to certain chapels, and the Dissenters’ Chapels Act (1844), by which the Wolverhampton and Hewley rulings were overturned. In many ways the crux of Trinitarians’ argument in the first two cases was that anti-Trinitarians had staged a hostile doctrinal takeover of Dissent, and with a sense of paranoia James’s one-thousand-page history pursued this theme. For James, early eighteenth-century Presbyterianism before 1719 was, for example, filled with crypto-anti-Trinitarians who saw Salters Hall as an occasion to go public, after which they aggressively spread their views. Arianism, for James, had been “the convenient disguise by which to conceal a denial of all that is super-natural in Christianity and carry on war with it to the best advantage. For there is a freemasonry in unbelief, those regularly entered can soon make themselves known to each other, initiate any willing to join their camp or take part in their orgies, and pass each other through the degrees of illumination.”

⁷⁷ Bolam et al., *English Presbyterians*, 216, 148.

⁷⁸ S. Bourn to G. Benson 22 June 1751, Benson Collection, vi, B114/4.

⁷⁹ S. Bourn to G. Benson 7 July 1751, Benson Collection, vi, B114/14.

Bourn declined the offer, but in any case what is significant is the invitation's illustration of the nexus of the threads we have been following. As further evidence of an elective affinity between commerce and heterodoxy, here were two wealthy congregations on the eve of industrialization—one from outside Manchester, the other outside Birmingham—fighting for the spiritual services of a minister whose anti-Trinitarianism was widely known. The invitation was additionally invested with symbolic political meaning. The case has been made that the Reformed churches were inherently more democratic than other early modern forms of Christianity, with their diffuse power structure and their lay oversight of discipline, poor relief, and economic administration. Any such view should be qualified by Calvin's own aristocratic political theory and the fact that state-sponsored Presbyterian churches like those in Scotland gave less of an economic role for the laity to play.⁸⁰ But in this decentralized English Presbyterianism, with Locke as its figurehead, it was a group of prosperous laymen the size of a legislative assembly, and not a handful of its elders, speaking on behalf of Bolton's congregation and actively looking for an anti-Trinitarian minister.



North of Coseley and east of Bolton, in the proto-industrial West Riding, interests were similarly joined in Leeds's Mill Hill chapel.⁸¹ Mill Hill had been orthodox Presbyterian throughout the first third of the century, but it took a dramatic turn in the direction of heterodoxy with the appointment of Thomas Walker (d. 1763) in 1748. Priestley, who would also preach at Mill Hill from 1767 to 1773, fleetingly referred to Walker in his memoirs as one of the two "most heretical ministers" who frequented his aunt Sarah Keighley's house, a "resort," Priestley called it, for Dissenter ministers throughout the north of England.⁸² Walker, just as tellingly, was also the legal guardian of his much better known nephew, George Walker (d. 1809), whose republicanism, abolitionism, and remarkably broad learning suggest the outlook of the uncle the nephew cited as a major influence.⁸³

Walker's anti-Trinitarianism would nonetheless be mostly invisible to us were it not for the diary of the Leeds clothier Joseph Ryder (1695–1768), a comparatively orthodox eighteenth-century Dissenter and diligent recorder of around five thousand sermons he attended throughout Yorkshire.⁸⁴ No one Ryder frequently heard was as heterodox as Walker, who aroused controversy almost on arrival at Mill Hill. In late 1749, Ryder made a note of a meeting of coreligionists following Walker's first noticeably Arian sermon "where we had a good many argument of a religious nature."⁸⁵ Like many of Leeds's Dissenters, Ryder was troubled by what was coming from Mill Hill's pulpit. But however diligently Ryder kept information on his minis-

⁸⁰ For the relevant historiography and the qualifications that need to be made, see Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 536–38.

⁸¹ On proto-industrial Leeds, see Pat Hudson, *The Genesis of Industrial Capital: A Study of the West Riding Wool Textile Industry, c. 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁸² *Memoirs of the Rev. Dr. Joseph Priestley*, 4, 11.

⁸³ Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism*, 132–33.

⁸⁴ On Ryder, see Matthew Kadane, "Success and Self-Loathing in the Life of an Eighteenth-Century Entrepreneur," in *The Self-Perception of Early Modern Capitalists*, ed. Margaret C. Jacob and Catherine Secretan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 253–71.

⁸⁵ JRD, 13 April 1749.

ters, much that came from the pulpit did not make it into his diary. We get an interesting piece of evidence of this as Ryder happened to be traveling through Wakefield in the fall of 1752 when Walker preached his one sermon that was ever published. Walker had been brought in to consecrate Wakefield's new chapel at Westgate—a chapel whose congregation John Seed has described as one of the wealthiest in Yorkshire⁸⁶—and Ryder sat among the congregation, later that night summarizing the event in his diary. Walker, Ryder noted, had showed “worship in spirit . . . as differing from all bodily worship,” although Ryder seemed slightly miffed that Walker did not “pretend to a Consecration” of the new chapel, instead using the occasion to argue that “ye Canopy over our heads, or ye Starry Vault for our covering” were the house of God and gate of heaven. And yet, as Ryder concluded with a sense of assurance, Walker still “did not discommend a Decent place for the worship of God, and Gave ye Contributors a fine Encomium of praise for their Generosity in supporting ye ministry, as well as building the place.”⁸⁷

These themes Ryder noted do in fact run through the published sermon, but assuming that little changed before Walker sent his text to the printer it is striking to notice what else the minister said—and how in contrast to Ryder's Bunyan-esque prose he said it. Walker sounds like a Newtonian aesthete in an analogy he makes early in the lecture:

Pure religion . . . is founded in the nature and truth of things, and when exhibited to the world in this light is an amiable and a grand thing; as far superior to what is commonly professed, as the original paintings of some of the greatest artists to the vulgar pieces of low performers. In the former, you see simplicity, proportion and truth; every thing calculated to instruct and please. In the other, so many unmeaning strokes, and unnatural attitudes, and such a vast quantity of whimsical and ill-judged drapery, as unavoidably occasion disgust or ridicule.⁸⁸

Walker goes on, with a likely intent in the order he gives the characteristics of worship: “no worship but what is intelligent and rational, spiritual or moral, can be acceptable or pleasing to him.”⁸⁹ (Nowhere do “intelligent” or “rational” appear in Ryder's summary.) Worshiping God in spirit varies by method across time and place “and some [methods], it must be allowed, as absurd, ridiculous, and dishonourable to God, as could well have been devised. But still as in all ages and in all parts of the world something like the face of religion has been kept up.”⁹⁰ You can do as you wish with your body during worship, he continued, kneel, look to heaven, fall on your face, just as Jesus did, “but the worship of the body *without the mind* is none.”⁹¹ Walker then closed by finding in the new structure's completion the essence of a multivalent liberty. “In an age in which a taste for elegance in almost all things prevails I see not why a discreet and moderate degree of the *same taste* may not be allowed *in this*. . . . *This house*, not inelegantly finished, is an evidence and will be a monument of a pious munificence.”⁹² It was, finally, “in the use of this liberty we both erect and

⁸⁶ Seed, “Rational Dissent and Political Opposition,” 149.

⁸⁷ JRD, 1 November 1752.

⁸⁸ Thomas Walker, *The true Christian Worship Explained and Recommended: a Sermon Preached at the Opening of the New Chapel in Wakefield, Yorkshire. Wednesday, Nov. 1. 1752* (London, 1753), 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 30–31 (emphasis is Walker's).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 32 (emphasis is Walker's).

support our places of worship.”⁹³ “You, my fellow Christians, are still steady. *This house* is proof of it. It shows you are yet the friends of liberty, piety and the rights of conscience.”⁹⁴

Liberty, piety, and the rights of conscience—the closest thing to a Trinity for these anti-Trinitarians—were here built symbolically into the new church. But in the liberty, in particular, Walker was also locating the confluence of political, economic, and religious interests. To put his logic baldly, the value of political freedom was that it allowed for prosperous—including, if not especially, newly prosperous—members of society to support a rational religiosity that doctrinally met their needs and, as the elegant interior space of the new church attested, materially suited their tastes.

If Walker’s line of reasoning seems theologically radical, at least from the perspective of what Presbyterianism had been even at the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was just as supportive of an emerging middling sort and commercial elite. A Yorkshire version of Samuel Bourn, Walker was likewise helping to draw Leeds’s proto-industrialists and cloth merchants to his anti-Trinitarian chapel. Even Ryder admitted by the 1750s that confrontation with anti-Trinitarianism had left him unable to furnish a counterargument.⁹⁵ Leeds’s younger generation of Dissenters, on the other hand, more actively embraced Walker’s message. At the moment that the Bolton contingent of tradesmen invited Bourn to become their minister and Milway went fishing for money from Benson, Ryder fretted in his diary that his younger cousin David Ryder, who had just baptized his daughter, “denies the Trinity.”⁹⁶ All that we know about David is that he was a clothier whose daughter, Olive, besides eventually inheriting her older cousin’s massive spiritual diary, would go on to marry Arthur Lupton (1748–1807), one of the town’s most successful cloth merchants.⁹⁷ Paltry as it is, this bit of information gels with the general trajectory of Mill Hill in the late eighteenth century. By the 1780s, after Joseph Priestley had presided over the church’s transition to Unitarianism, a quarter of the woolen cloth in Leeds’s booming industry, and in a town still overwhelmingly Anglican, was passing through families tied to a rational Dissenter community of which the Presbyterian Mill Hill, and not the Independent Call Lane, had become the focus.⁹⁸



What can we conclude about the republican outlook of English Presbyterians? In one sense it played out as a type of oppositional politics. If there was a republican tradition in early modern England, as Mark Goldie has recently written, in which the essence of a good polity was the active involvement of citizens, then really all Dissenters were limited, by virtue of the Test and Corporation Acts, in their self-expression as political beings.⁹⁹ The group examined here nevertheless must have acutely felt this limitation. Their religious history was, for one, largely defined by self-

⁹³ Ibid., 37

⁹⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁵ Ryder’s attitudes on the Trinity are considered at greater length in Matthew Kadane, “The Watchful Clothier: The Diary of an Eighteenth-Century Protestant Capitalist” (PhD thesis, Brown University, 2005), chap. 6.

⁹⁶ JRD, 18 May 1753.

⁹⁷ “The Register of the Parish Church of Leeds,” *Publication of the Thoresby Society* 25 (1917, 1918, 1920, 1922): 262. On Lupton, see Wilson, *Gentlemen Merchants*, 245.

⁹⁸ Seed, “Rational Dissent and Political Opposition,” 150.

⁹⁹ Goldie, “Unacknowledged Republic,” 154.

governance and personal liberty: elected officials and trustees played an active role in the selection or ejection of ministers; ministers, even at the risk of civil disobedience, pursued the limits of their theological imaginations; writing about politics in the *Old Whig* was itself a political act. For another, because heterodox Presbyterians were almost invariably anti-Trinitarians, their violation of the Toleration Act exposed them to the state's continued criminalization of their belief.

But the republican tradition discoverable in this milieu did not solely exist in opposition to the state or within a closed universe. Their very modes of opposition were forms of public participation, no different in essence from the sort of associational political involvement of pressure groups or political campaigns. The democratic administrative structure of the churches was also not just evidence that institutionalized intolerance must have been acutely felt; it was an expression of the political form from which they were denied participation at the official state level. It is telling, after all, that for their many deviations from convention, the heterodox left the political structure of their church untouched. Finally, the economic activity of the congregations was a mode of participation, although here we come to what may be both most distinctive and most difficult to explain about this anti-Trinitarian moment. Dissenters *tout court* may not have made better capitalists, but anti-Trinitarians undeniably did. In part, the evidence presented here is consistent with Michael Watts's suggestion that the prosperous sort who were drawn to a more rational religion (as so many more Dissenters and Anglicans embraced the "heart religion" of Methodism) likely gained from it some social distance from the lower orders.¹⁰⁰ But if by virtue of coming from Calvinist backgrounds, Presbyterians also needed psychological relief from the sinfulness long associated with the dramatic financial successes relatively common by midcentury in places like Manchester, Birmingham, and Leeds, then they may have found it in chapels that were making Jesus more human and better able to understand the needs and desires commercial people have to mix with the world.¹⁰¹ "Rational religion" was certainly rational, but if it helped solve the psychological and moral dilemma that arose when neo-Calvinist "Old Dissent" ran up against the unprecedented economic activity of eighteenth-century Britain, there may have been as much emotion as reason in the motives that shaped its elective affinity with the free market.

Exactly what causal role social distancing and psychological and emotional need played here deserves further investigation. What we should notice, in any case, is that already by the 1730s and 1740s, and at the very moment that they were promoting human dignity and demoting Jesus's divinity, heterodox chapels found a way to make the pursuit of wealth and commonwealth part of the same enterprise. If it solved one of the great dilemmas of eighteenth-century political and economic thought—how to preserve republican principles, in Donald Winch's phrase, amid commercial realities—then this anti-Trinitarian and republican moment is a reminder that innovations within the broader culture of republicanism owe as much to lived experience as to the theoretical tradition.¹⁰² A

¹⁰⁰ Watts, *Dissenters*, 1:379–80. For the very different Methodist experience of religion at this same moment, see Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰¹ Jacob, "Commerce, Industry, and the Laws of Newtonian Science," 288–90; Margaret C. Jacob and Matthew Kadane, "Missing, Now Found in the Eighteenth Century: Weber's Protestant Capitalist," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 20–49.

¹⁰² Donald Winch, "Commercial Realities, Republican Principles," in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, vol. 2, *The Values of Republicanism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 293–310.