

**HM 4.1 – Puritan Perspectives on Ministry**  
**Seventeenth Century Forerunners of Liberalism**

**1. What might 'liberalism' mean ?**

**2. Movements**

Arminianism  
Socinianism  
Deism  
Atheism

Great Tew Circle  
Cambridge Platonism  
Latitudinarianism

**3. Issues**

- Empiricism, inductivism, rise of science
  - Probability and certainty
  - Ancients and moderns
  - Rel to natural religion
- Reason
  - Right reason / conscience
  - Reason as against special revelation
  - Reasonableness as against enthusiasm
- Moderation / coolness / eirenicism
- Anti-voluntarism / anti-materialism
  - Hobbes
  - Primacy of Mind/Goodness over Will in God
  - Eternal reasons of things
- Anti-determinism
  - Providence
  - Predestination
- Anti-dogmatism
  - Toleration
  - Creeds and Scripture Sufficiency
- Natural Religion and Natural Morality

**Empiricism / inductivism**

- Rise of science / inductivism / empiricism: "It is not an exaggeration to claim that between 1626 and 1660 a philosophical revolution was accomplished in England" (Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration*, p.xiii)
- Wilkins, Sprat, Ray – "these men turned away from the problems of sin, grace, sacraments, holy orders and the like .... [it was] a natural religion of moral virtue and bourgeois values and one that was irenic in dogma and ecclesiology [which] could stabilize society." ("A.D. 1689: The End of the Clerical World" – L.J. Trinterud, 40-41)
- Ancients/ moderns - anti-authoritarianism, inductivism and utilitarianism. Joseph Glanvill, in his *Plus Ultra*, had been led, by his sympathy with the progressive tendencies of the Royal Society, to pass a rather indiscriminate censure on the scholastic Aristotle. This evoked from Henry Stubbe a reply, *The Plus Ultra reduced to a Non Plus*, setting forth the "Advantages of the Ancient Education in England over the Novel and Mechanical." Debate for rest of century
- Probability not certainty – feeds into anti-dogmatism / associates with anti-enthusiasm. "The seventeenth-century movements toward toleration and latitudinarianism were ultimately related to changing theories of knowledge and new claims about the degree of probability or certainty that might be assigned to religious doctrine". (B.J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth Century England*, p.10.)

## Anti-voluntarism and views of God

- *Theological or metaphysical voluntarism* asserts the priority of will over intellect in God's decrees and acts.
- *Ethical voluntarism* is the doctrine that moral acts are good or right because they conform to the will of God over against the view which maintains that God wills moral acts because they are independently good or right. The latter view is often expressed in the assertion that 'there are "eternal and indispensable reasons" (ideas) of good and evil'
- "God Himself, from whom all law takes its rise and emanation, is not *ex lex*, and without all law, nor, in a sober sense, above it. Neither are the primitive rules of His economy in this world the sole results of an absolute will, but the sacred decrees of reason and goodness." (John Smith, *Select Discourses*, 1660, p.156.)
- Whichcote: "the Religious represent God to themselves as Amiable; the Superstitious represent God to themselves as Formidable." (Benjamin Whichcote, *Moral and Religious Aphorisms* [1703], ed. by W.R. Inge (1930), no. 947)
- Smith develops this thought in his 'Discourse on Superstition' and drawing on Cicero's definition of superstition as 'an over-timorous and dreadful apprehension of the deity' he attributes the whole phenomenon to false views of God as "austere and apt to be angry" and tells of "that picture of God which some Christians have drawn of Him, wherein sourness and arbitrariness appear so much." (*Discourses*, p.26)
- The particular problem of dread arises from misunderstanding of and over-concentration on God's power and sovereignty on the one hand, and failure to dwell on and delight in his goodness, on the other. Smith asserts that the superstitious, "converse not with the goodness of God", whereas in fact, "contemplations of a Deity ... should always be the most serene and lovely". (*Discourses*, pp.27, 28)
- John Wilkins: without God's goodness, "his other Attributes would not afford any sufficient ground for our Love and Adoration of him. Knowledge and Power without Goodness, would be but craft and violence". (John Wilkins, *Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (1672), p.138)
- Represented Calvinists as "peremptory Assertors of [God's] absolute will and Power". (George Rust, *A Letter of Resolution concerning Origen* (1661), pp.31-2.)
- Smith: "heaven's monarchy is [not] ... an arbitrary thing ... governed by nothing else but by an Almighty absolute will" ... [God] "contains the archetypal ideas of all things in Himself ... He measures all by His own eternal goodness ... God's unchangeable goodness is also the unchangeable rule of his will ... neither can He anymore swerve from it, than He can swerve from Himself." (*Discourses*, pp.442, 406.)
- Cudworth objects to those "novelists" who "make a contracted idea of God consisting of nothing else but will and power". (Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, translated by John Harrison, 3 vols (1845), vol.III, 3, p.540)

## Anti-determinism (predestination)

- God as author of sin
- Henry More: "Reprobation, or Predestination to eternall death, ... is the great reproch to the Reformed Religion" To believe in the "inevitable damnation of innumerable myriads of men, Providence determining them upon the wayes and means thereto" was to demonstrate "utter insensibility of that Principle of Divine love into which every true Christian is regenerated". "It has ever seemed to me an Opinion perfectly repugnant to the nature of God that he should Predestinate any souls to endless and unspeakable misery for such sins as it was ever impossible for them to avoid." (Henry More, *Divine Dialogues* (1668), Dialogue IV, p.72f; *An Exposition of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1660), p.xxv.)
- Joseph Glanvill, accused Calvinists of "representing God as the Eternal Hater of the far greater part of his reasonable Creatures, and the designer of their Ruine, for the exaltation of meer power and arbitrary Will". (*Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion* (1675-6), Essay 7, p.21.)

## Anti-enthusiasm

- Intensity / fanaticism / certainty / dogmatism - coolness / detachment
- Uneducated, socially revolutionary
- Claims to inspiration and immediate revelation
- Cant and immorality
- Reasonableness

## Rejection of total depravity; optimism about human goodness and reason

- Increased optimism about the goodness of humans. Reason, morality. The positive expression of this rejection of the doctrine of depravity has been variously called the ‘doctrine of benevolence’, ‘an optimistic view of the potentialities of human nature’, ‘the older and saner appreciation of the normal man’ and ‘a more worldly and genial pragmatism’ and in it ‘man emerges as a basically good rather than a sinful creature’. (C.Hill, *A Turbulent, Fictious and Seditious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford, 1988), p.130; O.M. Griffiths, *Religion and Learning: A study in English Presbyterianism from 1662 to the foundation of the Unitarian movement* (Cambridge, 1935), p.94; B.J. Shapiro, *John Wilkins: An Intellectual Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), pp.153, 63; John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646-1689* (1991), pp.323-7.)

## Reason and revelation

- Reason = ‘natural instinct’, ‘common sense’, ‘the common sense of the morally upright’, ‘religious instinct’, ‘rigorous logic’, ‘the voice of God’, ‘sinful opposition to revelation’, ‘the arbiter of what is reasonable’, ‘innate ideas’, ‘empirical knowledge’

## Toleration

- Calls for wider toleration from Separatists, sceptics, liberals and Arminians.

## Natural religion

- See Wilkins’ *Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* below

## Anti-dogmatism

- Practice before doctrine – tendency to moralism; doctrine divides; all but the fundamentals are uncertain; fundamentals are few; hostility to “speculation”; Scripture sufficiency.
- Baxter: If there be nothing against Socinianism in the Scripture, it is no heresy. If there be, as sure as there is enough and plain enough, judge them by that rule and make not new ones.” (Rel Baxt iii.63, 65)
- The Remonstrants’ Confession had referred to a ‘very few things which alone are precisely necessary to be known and believed for the obtaining of eternal salvation’.
- John Locke reduced the essence of Christianity to the single fundamental of recognition of the Messiahship of Jesus.
- Whichcote wrote of ‘doubtful Doctrine’ and of ‘uncertain Truth’. “Because I may be Mistake, I must not be dogmatical”. (*Aphorisms*, nos. 37, 981.)
- Henry More, “[to] make more Fundamentals then Christ or his Apostles; which Errour is the very Essence and Substance of Antichristianisme”. (*Grand Mystery*, p.xiii.)
- Whichcote: “Morals ... are nineteen parts in twenty of all Religion ... the Obedience of the Penitent is the Evangelical Righteousness of men: and the Forgiveness of Sins is the Imputed Righteousness of Christ”. (*Aphorisms*, nos. 586, 850)
- Smith: “purity of heart and life ... are the best grounds and preparations for the entertainment of truth” (*Discourses*, p.1.)

## Great Tew Circle

- Lucius Cary, William Chillingworth and John Hales. While the ‘latitude’ of Falkland and Chillingworth was developed over against Roman Catholicism, Hales’ reaction was against the dogmatic Calvinism he encountered at Dort. Hearing either Episcopius or Martinius on John 3.16 led him to ‘bid John Calvin good night’ and on observing the Dort debate on schism he formed the conviction that “dogmatism was above all other influences mostly largely responsible for the contention and intolerance of his age”.
- William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford, 1638): “all necessary truths are plainly and evidently set down in Scripture” ...“the Creed containes all necessary points of meere belief”.
- “The Bible, I say, the Bible only is the Religion of Protestants”. Note, though, that the force of those words in their original context was precisely to stress that it was not in the words of this or that creed, confession or doctor of the church but in Scripture itself that Protestants found their authority. Chillingworth’s position,

although on the face of it exalting Scripture was actually more concerned to argue against the “multiplying articles of faith and narrowing the bottom of religion by dogging it with creeds and catechisms and endless niceties” and to assert the right of private judgment of the Scriptures. (*Religion*, p.375)

- “Why should men be more rigid than God ? Why should any error exclude any man from the Churches Communion, which will not deprive him of eternal salvation?” (*Religion*, p.210.)

### The Cambridge Platonists

- Gilbert Burnet, in his *History of his Own Times*: English church herself would have “quite lost her esteem over the nation, had it not been for the appearance of a new set of men of another stamp” at that crisis. “These were generally of Cambridge, formed under some divines, the chief of whom were Drs. Whitcote, Cudworth, Wilkins, More and Worthington.” He describes Whichcote as “much for liberty of conscience,” and one who, “being disgusted with the dry systematical ways of those times,” “studied to raise those who conversed with him to a nobler set of thoughts,” and, with this aim, “set young students much on reading the ancient philosophers, chiefly Plato, Tully, and Plotin, and on considering the Christian religion as a doctrine sent from God both to elevate and sweeten human nature.”
- Thought shaped in large measure by reaction to the Calvinist orthodoxy of the 1640s.
- They held the eternal existence of moral principles and of truth and that the human mind is equipped with the principles of reason and morality. Their optimistic view of human nature is underscored by their emphasis on the freedom of the will. Their anti-determinism led them to propose arguments for human autonomy. They were all dualists for whom mind is ontologically prior to matter, and for whom the truths of the mind are superior to sense-knowledge. They were nevertheless moderns in natural philosophy who accepted post-Galilean science, and propounded an atomistic theory of matter. But they repudiated mechanistic natural philosophy in favour of the view that spirit is the fundamental causal principle in the operations of nature.

### Benjamin Whichcote

- “The main source for his philosophical views are his posthumously-published sermons and aphorisms. Whichcote’s tolerant, optimistic and rational outlook set the intellectual tone for Cambridge Platonism. Whichcote’s philosophical views are grounded in his liberal theology. He held that God being supremely perfect is necessarily good, wise and loving. Whichcote regarded human nature as rational and perfectible, and he believed that it is through reason as much as revelation that God communicates with man. By reason Whichcote did not mean the disputatious logic of the schools but discursive, demonstrative and practical reason enlightened by contemplation of the divine. He held that moral principles are immutable absolutes, exist independently of human minds and institutions, and that virtuous conduct is grounded in reason.”
- Vice-Chancellor, 1650–1. Commencement oration led to correspondence with Tuckney, his former tutor at Emmanuel.
- Whichcote, as Tuckney understood him, had said “that *all* those things wherein good men differ, may not be determined from Scripture,” inasmuch as Scripture itself “in some places seems to be for the one part and in some other places for the other,” which, says his critic, “I take to be unsafe and unsound.” Still “more dangerous,” as it appeared to him, had been the advice given by the preacher, that Christians, when seeking a common ground of agreement, should be willing to restrict the language of belief solely to “Scripture words and expressions,” and “not press other forms of words, which are from fallible men.” “Christ by his blood,” wrote Tuckney, who discerned the drift of such a limitation, “never intended to purchase such a peace, in which the most orthodox, with Papists, Arians, Socinians, and all the worst of heretiques, must be all put in a bag together.” To this, Whichcote’s rejoinder (had he thereupon expressed his whole mind) would, doubtless, have been, that, as he himself lays it down in his *Aphorisms*, “Determinations beyond Scripture have indeed enlarged faith, but lessened charity and multiplied divisions.” In the first instance, however, he contented himself with a purely defensive affirmation of his view—namely, that the devout Christian was entitled to advance as his own individual conviction, whatever “upon search he finds cause to believe, and whereon he will venture his own soul.” In his next letter, however, he made bold to assert his position in the following pregnant terms: “Truth is truth, whosoever has spoken it, or howsoever it hath been abused: but if this liberty may not be allowed *to the university*, wherefore do we study? We have nothing to do, but to get good memories, and to learn by heart.”
- Tuckney – you’re too interested in Plato. Says some good stuff – which you’d not really expect: “And hence, in part, hath run a veine of doctrine which divers very able and worthy men, whom from my heart I much honour, are, I fear, too much known by,—the power of Nature in morals, too much advanced, reason, too much given to it, in the mysteries of Faith,—a *recta ratio* much talked of, which I cannot tell where to find.”

## Nathaniel Culverwel

- *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature* of 1652. “giving to reason the things that are reason’s and unto faith the things that are faith’s”. “Reason is the first-born, but the other has the blessing.”

## John Smith – The Gospel according to his *Select Discourses*

- “All true happiness consists in a participation of God, arising out of the assimilation and conformity of our souls to Him” (p.150)
- Smith’s ‘gospel’ is that even wicked men have ‘the faint strugglings of a higher life within them’. In order to gain and give advantage from and to these, ‘we must ... endeavour more and more to withdraw ourselves from these bodily things, to set our soul as free as may be from its miserable slavery to this base flesh’. This in turn will yield a clearer knowledge of God’s will for ‘purity [is] the best way to thrive in all spiritual understanding’. All are the children of God, having in our souls the ‘heavenly fire of the divine love and goodness ... the protoplasmic virtue of our being’; our duty is to become ‘true metaphysical and contemplative men’, beholding the perfections of God, and being renewed in receiving them. Then we will live lives of ‘humility, meekness and modesty ... doing good, showing mercy and compassion, advancing justice and righteousness, being always full of charity and good works; and look upon ourselves as having nothing to do here but to display and blazon the glory of our heavenly Father, and frame our hearts and lives according to that pattern which we behold in the mount of a holy contemplation of Him’. And when we ‘express the purity and holiness of the divine life in being perfect as God is perfect, then [we] manifest [our]selves to be His children’. (pp.15, 16, 9, 159, 21, 158-9.)
- Smith does speak of “free grace in Jesus Christ” and this is displayed in two ways. Firstly, Christ came as “pattern of Godlike purity ... His main scope was to promote a holy life”. But also he opens the way into the holy of holies. Smith explains this as follows: “The way into the holy of holies, or to eternal happiness, is laid as open as may be by Christ, in His doctrine, life and death: in all which we may see, with open face, what human nature may attain to, and how it may, by humility, self-denial, divine love and a Christlike life, rise above all visible heavens into a state of immortal glory and bliss.” In fact, there are clearer references to justification, pardon, to the ‘righteousness which is of Christ by faith’ and to the remission of sins but these are peripheral to Smith’s main concerns and his mention of them not only lacks conviction but is smothered by the succeeding warnings. The great danger is ‘that we profanely make the unspotted righteousness of Christ to serve only as a covering, wherein to wrap up our foul deformities and filthy vices; and when we have done, think ourselves in as good credit and repute with God as we are with ourselves’. (pp.62, 9, 358, 339, 344, 339.)
- Smith is at his most fervent and committed when he is at his least evangelical. Real enthusiasm and religious feeling enter his writings in a passage such as this from his discourse, ‘On the Excellency and Nobleness of True Religion’: “Let us therefore labour to purge our own souls from all worldly pollutions; let us breathe after the aid and assistance of the Divine Spirit, that it may irradiate and enlighten our minds, that we may be able to see Divine things in a divine light: let us endeavour to live more in a real practice of those rules of religious and holy living, commended to us by our ever-blessed Lord and Saviour: so shall we know religion better, and knowing it, love it; and, loving it, be still more and more ambitiously pursuing after it, till we come to a full attainment of it, and, therein, of our own perfection and everlasting bliss.” (p.459)

## Latitudinarianism

This critical label became attached to a group of Anglican divines in the late seventeenth century whose thought displayed a high regard for the authority of reason and a tolerant, antidogmatic temper (“gentlemen of a wide swallow”). In many ways products of the Cambridge Platonists (to whom the term was originally applied), they nevertheless lacked their mystical and imaginative depth. Moreover, though mostly Cambridge men, they became prominent churchmen. They included John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury; Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester; Simon Patrick, Bishop of Chichester and Ely; Gilbert Burnet, Reformation historian and Bishop of Salisbury; and Thomas Tenison, Archbishop of Canterbury. They reacted against the Calvinism of the Puritans and were broadly Arminian in outlook. They aligned themselves with progressive and liberal movements in the contemporary intellectual world.

Hostile to scholasticism and Aristotelianism, they drew inspiration more from Descartes’s new “mechanical” philosophy. Respect for “the theatre of nature” led them to support scientific developments such as the Royal Society. Thomas Sprat, Bishop of Rochester, was its historian, and Joseph Glanvill was a fellow of the Society as well as rector of Bath and the author of *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* and *The Agreement of Reason and Religion*. The new mathematics of Isaac Barrow and Isaac Newton they hailed as signs of a new age of light.

Their comprehensiveness allowed only a narrow core of fundamentals in religion. They resisted the Laudian or High Church insistence on conformity in nonessentials such as church order and liturgy. Stillingfleet’s *Irenicum* advocated “comprehension” between Anglicans and Presbyterians; Burnet tried to incorporate Nonconformists into the Church of

England. They approved "that vertuous mediocrity which our Church observes between the meretricious gaudiness of the Church of Rome, and the squalid sluttishness of Fanatick conventicles" (Patrick). Above all they held that "true philosophy can never hurt sound divinity," which in practice normally meant harmonizing Scripture and the fathers with the light of reason. Theologically vague and spiritually insubstantial, their religion was strongly moralistic. Their emphasis on reasonableness looked forward to the skepticism of Hume and the reductionist theology of the next century. They were also the precursors of the Broad Churchmen of the nineteenth century, e.g., the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (1860), and of the modernists and radicals of more recent Anglican divinity.

D F Wright <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/latitudi.htm>

### Socinianism

Socinianism is the name given to the specific form of anti-trinitarianism or Unitarianism stated by the Italian theologian Socinus (Fausto Paolo Sozzini, 1539-1604) and developed during the early 17th century, particularly in Poland. Socinus grew up in Italy under the influence of his uncle Laelius Socinus. When he raised doubts about the divinity of Christ, he came into conflict with the teachings of both Roman Catholicism and the Reformation. After a short period in Transylvania, Socinus took refuge in Poland, where he spent the rest of his life in leadership of the antitrinitarian movement there. In 1598 he was forced to flee from Krakow, and he spent the rest of his life in the village of Luclawice.

Socinus prepared drafts for the Racovian Catechism, the first formal statement of Socinian beliefs, which was published at Rakow, in southern Poland, in 1605. It set forth a moderate form of unitarianism that stated that Christ was a man who received divine power as a result of his blameless life and miraculous resurrection. The movement was suppressed in Poland after 1658, but Socinian groups survived in Transylvania, England, and elsewhere. John Biddle, the founder of English unitarianism, was influenced by Socinianism.

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Anti-Trinitarian religious movement organized in Poland in the 16th cent. by Faustus [Socinus](#). Antecedents of the movement were such Italian humanist reformers as Bernardino Ochino, Georgio Blandrata, and Laelius [Socinus](#), who fled to Poland from persecution first in Italy and then in Calvinist Switzerland. Michael [Servetus](#) appears to have influenced their anti-Trinitarian views. Socinianist reformers organized (1556) the Minor Reformed Church of Poland and established Rakow as an intellectual center. Faustus went to Poland in 1579 and became the movement's leader and principal theologian. Socinianism represented an extreme attempt to reconcile Christianity with humanism.

- The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was rejected;
- the Scriptures were considered authoritative but were interpreted in the light of the new rationalism;
- the sacraments were viewed as spiritual symbols;
- the Nicene and Athanasian creeds were rejected;
- Jesus was held to be only the human instrument of divine mercy;
- the Holy Spirit merely the activity of God.

Under Faustus the movement became known as the Polish Brethren, and communities were formed in imitation of the early Christian church. Its members refused to hold serfs or to participate in war. Never strong, the movement dissolved (c.1638) in the face of severe Roman Catholic persecution. Some of its members settled in Holland and there played a part in liberalizing Reformed doctrine. Faustus's teachings were compiled by disciples as the Racovian Catechism (1605). Socinianism is sometimes called Old Unitarianism and, erroneously, Polish Arianism.

<http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/socinian.htm>

### John Wilkins' *Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 1675

1614-72

Married Cromwell's sister.

Calvinist up until to the Restoration

Gt interest in science and maths; founder of the Royal Society

Warden, Wadham, Oxford, 1648 -59

Master, Trinity, Cambridge, 1659-60

Bishop Chester 1668-72

Latitudinarian

- *Ecclesiastes: A Discourse concerning the Gift of Preaching*, 1646. (Puritan preaching manual).
- *The Beauty of Providence*, 1649 (defense of universal providence extending not only to 'random' events but also to the sinful actions of men - 'When men thwart God's will of Precept, they serve his will of Providence').
- *A Discourse concerning the Gift of Prayer*, 1651 (thoroughly Calvinist)
- *The Character of the Best Christians* in 1668 (broadsheet).

Published posthumously - prepared for the press by his son-in-law and latitudinarian disciple, John Tillotson:

- *Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 1675
- *Sermons Preached upon Several Occasions*, 1682.

*Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* - is composed of two books, the first of which concerns 'The Reasonableness of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion'. Its first three chapters contain a discussion of the ways of knowing and the degrees of knowledge as they relate to the knowledge of the truths of religion. The next four chapters present four leading arguments for the existence of a deity; those from 'Universal Consent', from 'the Original of the World', from 'the admirable contrivance of Natural things', and from 'Providence and the Government of the World'. Chapters eight to eleven describe the 'excellencies and perfections of the Divine Nature' which, in accordance with the intention of writing a natural theology are proved, 'both by the consent of the wisest Heathen ... and from the nature of the things themselves; their congruity to the principles of Reason, and the absurdities that will follow upon the denial of them'.<sup>1</sup> The last six chapters of the first book are 'Concerning the Duties of Religion naturally flowing from the consideration of the Divine Nature and Perfections'. Book Two expounds 'The Wisdom of Practising the Duties of Natural Religion', concentrating upon the benefits of religion to its exponents. These benefits comprise aspects of present external welfare such as health, safety, riches, pleasure and honour, present internal welfare meaning the right ordering and use of our faculties with the peace, joy and contentment which follows, and future welfare. They are described in chapters one to eight while the ninth and concluding chapter deals with the superiority of Christianity over natural religion.

Wilkins' definition of natural religion: "I call that Natural Religion, which men might know, and should be obliged unto, by the meer principles of Reason, improved by Consideration and Experience, without the help of Revelation."<sup>2</sup>

He regards the foundational truths and demands of religion as being within the reach of man's reason if only man is willing to think: 'Principles of Religion are ... Morally certain ... that which is necessary to beget this certainty in the mind [is] impartial Consideration ... the Moral Law [is] ... discoverable by natural light, to every man, who will but excite the principles of his own reason'. There can be no conflict between reason and revealed religion: Wilkins refers to 'the Christian Religion ... whose Precepts are most agreeable to the purest and sublimest reason'.<sup>3</sup> And thus the tools available for the construction of an apologetic with the materials of natural theology are 'the consent of the wisest Heathen ... and from the nature of the things themselves; their congruity to the principles of Reason, and the absurdities that will follow upon the denial of them'.

Barbara Shapiro about Wilkins, Stillingfleet, Boyle, Tillotson and Locke: 'they considered their efforts as preparatory to Christian Revelation and Christian ethics' and yet at the same time, 'it must be admitted, however, that as a group, the rationalists rarely discussed Christ; their emphasis was on God the Creator, not the God who in His mercy gave His Son to man'.<sup>4</sup>

To bring men to embrace natural religion appears to be the sum of Wilkins' apologetic ambition; when he speaks of revealed religion it is defined in the same terms as natural religion and differs from it not in content but only in the certainty it offers regarding the same truths as natural religion and the strength of the motives it employs in enjoining the same duties as natural religion.

These things are to be seen in a number of ways. In the absence of a plain statement of purpose from Wilkins we have Tillotson's preface in which he describes the threefold 'design' of the work:

First, to establish the great Principles of Religion, the Being of God and a Future State; by shewing how firm and solid a Foundation they have in the Nature and Reason of Mankind ... Secondly, To convince men of the natural and indispensable obligation of Moral Duties ... Thirdly, to perswade men to the practice of Religion, and the vertues of a good life, by shewing how natural and direct an influence they have not only upon our future blessedness in another World, but even upon the happiness and prosperity of this present life.<sup>5</sup>

The book is consistent with this declaration of intent. At all points the assumed audience consists of those who either do not believe the principles of natural religion or those who do not practice the duties of natural religion. Wilkins asserts the rational sufficiency of the evidence for the principles of natural religion and plainly states that 'impartial Consideration is in a man's power, therefore the belief or disbelief of these things is a proper subject for Rewards and Punishments'. It is a 'particular virtue and felicity to keep the mind in such an equal frame of judging'. And Wilkins even considers this 'teachableness and equality of mind in considering and judging of matters of importance' to be worthy of the name 'faith'.<sup>6</sup> He says that even sinful man has the power to be unprejudiced although this is a moral victory to be called faith and deserving of reward. Further, Howe makes it clear that even where by the strength of natural light a man

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, pp.103-4.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, p.39.

<sup>3</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, pp.31, 229, 185.

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro, *Problem*, p.88.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, Preface, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, pp.31, 35, 36.

is intellectually convinced about the truth of the principles of religion this intellectual conviction has insufficient strength to determine the man's loves and hates, the ultimate orientation of his life and his behaviour. There is not a hint of this in Wilkins - when a man's mind is won and strong enough motives are added, his whole self, all that he is and does, must follow. This theme surfaces again when Wilkins turns his attention to the difference between natural religion and Christianity as revealed religion. For Howe the difference involves both new content and a new power - the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit which enables men to receive the truth. For Wilkins, as will be seen, there is little difference in content between natural and revealed religion. But since in his view there was no question of men not being capable of receiving the truth prior to the Gospel, the manner in which revelation comes is also qualitatively no different from the coming of natural religion; there is a quantitative improvement - greater clarity and stronger motives, but there is no new power, no need for it to effect what it announces. In Wilkins' theology the message of the Gospel has rather more pages than the message of nature and reason but it is still a body of evidence to be appraised, a quantity of data to be accepted. The dynamic, living power of the Gospel which imparts life as it announces it, which opens eyes as it is presented, which grants hearing while it is declared has no place in Wilkins' scheme.

Disproportionate amount of attention given to the present benefits of religion - Wilkins devotes seventy two pages to describing the present benefits of religion and then six pages to its future benefits. He defends these proportions,

because these things I have mentioned (especially those of them which concern our external happiness in this world) are the great aims and designs, by which the generality of men are chiefly swayed in their actions; and therefore like to prove very powerful motives to make men religious, if they could be once effectually persuaded, that Religion is the most proper means for the attaining of these things.<sup>7</sup>

The appeal to self-interest in Wilkins' apologetic was developed over the last quarter of the seventeenth century into a utilitarian line of argument by a number of writers. William Talbot suggested,

that although all the Arguments that are urg'd for the proof of a God, a Providence and a future Judgement, should not be allow'd to come up to a demonstration; Tho the Atheist has his Arguments against them, and the Sceptick his Scruples, which they think are not satisfactorily answered; Though they are not convinc'd of them, yet it is a very great Folly not to believe them, and to say, and persuade others that there are no such Things.<sup>8</sup>

Tillotson takes this pragmatic approach even further:

It would be no kindness to any man to be undeceived in these principles of Religion, supposing they were false ... so necessary is God to the happiness of mankind, that tho there were no God, yet the Atheist himself upon second thoughts, would judge it convenient that the generality of men should believe there is one.<sup>9</sup>

Theism, in short, is best for the community and the individual. The unbeliever is invited to take part in what we know as Pascal's wager. Otherwise he runs 'infinite hazard upon inconsiderable motives', he 'ventures his eternal interest; whereas the Religious man ventures only the loss of his Lusts'. Wilkins argued for the duties of religion on the basis of the benefits received by the religious; followers of his, archbishops among them, were soon to argue for the truths of religion on the same grounds.<sup>10</sup>

To what religion does he hope to convert his readers? The answer is clear; he is aiming to convince men of the principles and persuade men to the duties of natural religion. The principles include the 'Being of God', 'the Excellencies and Perfections of the Divine Nature', and 'the distribution of future Rewards and Punishments to men according as their lives and actions have been in this world'. The duties enjoined are holding and expressing a right attitude to God and obeying the 'Moral Law ... discoverable by natural light'. But the most significant thing about all this is that writing in a land to which the Gospel had come (that is, he is not dealing with the case of the 'heathen'), Wilkins describes this religion not as a hypothetical pre-Fall life and worship but as something to which men and women are called in the present. Sin is not mentioned - neither its reality nor its effects upon man's relationship with God nor its effects upon the constitution of man himself. As an example of this we might quote Wilkins' definition of worship:

By worship, I mean in the general, the highest esteem and admiration of him in our minds, whereby we do continually bow down our souls before him, in the acknowledgment of his Excellencies; depending upon him, invoking of him in our necessities, making our acknowledgments to him as being the Author of all the mercies we enjoy; together with such external services, as may be fit to testify unto others that inward veneration which we have for him.<sup>11</sup>

It cannot be objected that there is no mention of sin or of the need for atonement or regeneration or for a Mediator, no mention of the Trinity and no mention of revelation in this definition because Wilkins is describing natural religion. But

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<sup>7</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, p.314.

<sup>8</sup> William Talbot, *The Unreasonableness and Mischief of Atheism* (1694), p.7.

<sup>9</sup> Tillotson, *Works*, p.24.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Tenison, *The Folly of Atheism* (1690-1), p.11; Tillotson, *Works*, p.25.

<sup>11</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, pp.179-80; see also the similar 'Fundamentals of Religion' in Glanvill, *Philosophia*, pp.156-8.

Wilkins nowhere declares the inadequacy of this and he everywhere implies that such a religion is a spiritual possibility for his readers. Natural religion is a reality for Wilkins.

But the clearest indication of Wilkins' confidence in natural religion comes in the final chapter of his book. Its title is hopeful, 'The Conclusion of the whole, shewing the excellency of the Christian Religion, and the advantages of it, both as to the knowledg and practice of our duty, above the meer light of Nature'. It is here that one would look for a recognition of the inadequacy of natural religion for fallen man, of the need for revelation to aid ruined reason, the need for redemption to restore guilty men to a holy God and the need for regeneration to render them subjectively willing and able to return in repentance and faith. But one looks in vain. In what are perhaps the most important sentences in the whole book from the point of view of assessing Wilkins' theological position, the author states that it has not been his intention,

to derogate from the necessity and usefulness of Divine Revelation, or to extenuate the great blessing and benefit of the Christian Religion; but rather to prepare and make way for the entertainment of that Doctrine which is so agreeable to the clearest dictates of Natural light. For notwithstanding all that hath been said of Natural Religion it cannot be denyed, but that in this dark and degenerate state into which Mankind is sunk, there is great want of a clearer light to discover our duty to us with greater certainty, and to put it beyond all doubt and dispute what is the good and acceptable will of God; and of a more powerful encouragement to the practice of our duty, by the promise of a supernatural assistance, and by the assurance of a great and eternal reward. And all these defects are fully supplied by that clear and perfect Revelation which God hath made to the World by our blessed Saviour.<sup>12</sup>

But the assurance which Wilkins seeks to give in these sentences is belied by the terms in which he gives it. It is to derogate from the necessity and usefulness of Divine Revelation and it is to extenuate the great blessing and benefit of the Christian Religion to suggest that greater certainty and more powerful encouragement are all that need be added to natural religion. Wilkins calls the state of man in sin 'dark and degenerate' but a little more clarity and a few stronger motives are all that are required to raise him from it rather than life, pardon and a thoroughgoing renewal of the soul. Wilkins may call Jesus Christ 'Saviour' in the last sentence but the function which is being spoken of is that of Revealer or Teacher and indeed there is nothing in Wilkins' description of the inadequacy of natural religion which requires any more than a Teacher to deal with it. The death and resurrection of Christ were to Wilkins, as to all moralists, something of an embarrassment.

When Wilkins summarises the superiority of the Christian religion over natural religion he declares that the End of revealed religion is 'the eternal vision and fruition of God'. But he has already stated that this is the end of natural religion in the eleventh chapter of Book One. He says that the means to attaining this end are right worship and right living with and before men. But he has already said the same of natural religion in the twelfth to seventeenth chapters of the first book. Revealed religion is in essence the same as natural religion. It has no new content, just new clarity and new force.

Wilkins' understanding of Christianity as qualitatively identical to natural religion meant that his religious and evangelistic instinct was satisfied with the production of a natural theology. Westfall's comment applies:

While the virtuosi concentrated vigorously on the demonstration of natural religion and proved to their own satisfaction that the cosmos reveals its Creator, they came to neglect their own contention that natural religion is only the foundation. The supernatural teachings of Christianity received little more than a perfunctory nod, expressing approval but indicating disinterest.<sup>13</sup>

That disinterest arose from a failure to fully appreciate the teaching of orthodoxy on man's need for redemption and this in turn arose out of a practical, and in many a conscious, rejection of Calvinistic views of the plight of man in sin. It appears, therefore, that the best general explanation of the similarities and differences to be found in a comparison of Howe and Wilkins is this: Wilkins, eager to assert the continuity of natural and revealed religion for a number of reasons, has lost hold of their radical discontinuity which is located in the doctrine of the fall and the guilt, corruption and helplessness of man in sin. Howe is also eager to assert the continuity of natural and revealed religion, partly in order to show the inexcusableness of those who reject the latter, partly in order to stress the moral content of even a religion of grace, partly perhaps to demonstrate his kinship as a 'mere Christian' with apologists from other 'parties'. But the firmness of his grip on Calvinist essentials immunises him against the deficiencies of Wilkins' doctrine of sin and its effects.

How is it that Howe and Wilkins can have the same enemy, use the same arguments, speak in the same tone and agree on so many matters both of content and style, and yet have fundamentally different conceptions of religion, the essence of Christianity, and of their apologetic task?

The answer, already hinted at, is to be found in their respective doctrines of humankind in sin. In short, Howe the moderate presbyterian has not departed from Calvinist convictions regarding the guilt, corruption and above all, the spiritual inability of fallen humankind. Wilkins, on the other hand, in spite of what he believed and wrote as a young man, has adopted, and expressed in his *Principles* the other writings of his later phase, a far more optimistic view of the

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<sup>12</sup> Wilkins, *Principles*, pp.394-5.

<sup>13</sup> Westfall, *Science*, p.106.

race. This more optimistic view was more a presupposition than a principle of the rational divines. It did not form the content of their preaching and writing but it underlay them both. And some writers have seen in it one of the single most significant doctrinal shifts of the whole seventeenth century.

Criticisms of Calvinism in, for example, its Westminster Assembly form, and the growth of scepticism after the Restoration required some sort of response. Some who had earlier embraced Calvinism abandoned it and both in reaction to that Calvinism and in their endeavours to show the reasonableness of Christianity to sceptics they stressed the continuity of natural and revealed religion, the this-worldly benefits of religion, the attainableness of the moral life required by God, and the dignity and power (rational and moral) of man. John Wilkins is representative of this group.

In his estimate of the character of religion, Howe is clearly among those who stress both the rationality and the reasonableness of Christianity. But he is in no danger of attributing an ability or a virtue to the mind of fallen man which would be inconsistent with his puritan theological affiliations. Wilkins abandons Calvinism; Howe restates it.

'In theory natural religion was supposed to supplement Christianity, to provide it with a rational foundation; in practice it tended to displace it'.<sup>14</sup> Wilkins, the latitudinarian, a strong example of this.

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<sup>14</sup> Westfall, *Science*, p.106.

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Attitude - relative authority of Scripture  
Anti-intellectual  
Humanist  
Authority - epistemologically  
Elevate some characteristics of God  
Attitude to doctrine - judgmental, exclusive, narrow, ungenerous  
Relationship with surrounding culture  
Pantheist  
Downplay secondaries  
Tolerant  
Deny - original sin, judgment, uniqueness  
Anti-intensity