

# Science, Religion, and the Rise of Biblical Criticism

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## ATHEISM, ATOMS, AND THE ACTIVITY OF GOD: SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN EARLY BOYLE LECTURES, 1692–1707

by Paul C. H. Lim

*Abstract.* The last-half of seventeenth-century England witnessed an increasing number of works published questioning the traditional notions of God's work of creation and providence. Ascribing agency to matter, motion, chance, and fortune, thinkers ranging from Hobbes, Spinoza, modern-Epicureans, and other presented a challenge to the Anglican defenders of social and ecclesiastical order. By examining the genesis of the Boyle Lectures that began in 1692 with a bequest from Robert Boyle, we can see that while the Lecturers—three of whom will be examined in detail (Richard Bentley, John Harris, and William Whiston)—assiduously defended classical notions of the God–world relationship, they did so without a great sense of panic or pessimism. This transitional period in the mode of conflict or concord between religion and science sheds interesting lights on matters such as argument from design, biogenesis without purposive, personal agents, and scriptural exegesis and scientific inquiries.

*Keywords:* argument from design; Richard Bentley; Robert Boyle; exegesis of scripture; natural philosophy; prophecy; theology; William Whiston

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Thou Sun, of this great World both Eye and Soule,  
 Acknowledge him thy Greater, sound his praise  
 In thy eternal course, both when thou climb'st,  
 And when high Noon hast gaind, & when thou fallst.

(Milton 1667, Book 5, lines 171–74)

#### INTRODUCTION: BOYLE LECTURES IN SITU

In *The First Two Books of Philostratus, concerning the life of Apollonius Tyanus*, Charles Blount (1654–1693) excoriated what he perceived to be an incredulous fideism that was wrecking “true Christianity.” Blount’s typical rhetorical flair and excess notwithstanding, his critique of the putatively vacuous nature of Christianity is worth engaging:

What proceeds from common Reason we know to be true, but what proceeds from Faith we only believe it; and there is a vast difference between *knowing* and *believing*. I will never embrace an Opinion, only because a great many hold it...Neither will I build my Religion upon that weak Basis of Antiquity...Nor will I altogether depend upon Miracles, lest *Simon Magus, Pharaoh's Magicians, Apollonius*, and others, pretend to be my Rivals. Nor to those Rules of Self-denial, Mortification, and Patience, which our Doctrine teaches...No, I will rely wholly upon my Reason, and yet not obstruct my Christianity. (Blount 1680, 20)<sup>1</sup>

Blount situated his polemical dictum within the context of the struggle between Faith and Reason, and he clearly preferred the latter due to the unbridgeable chasm between knowledge and belief. True Christianity could not be built upon majority opinion (“then I must turn *Turk*”); nor could antiquity offer the requisite buttress because if that were so, then Judaism or Paganism would have upper hand and “supplant me.” Numerical abundance of martyrs could not suffice either, even though John Foxe—in *The Book of Martyrs*—had vouched for the apostolicity of Edwardian and Elizabethan Church of England based upon the fact that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church (à la Tertullian).<sup>2</sup> Miracles were also castigated as unreliable; just look at Simon Magus, Apollonius, and Pharaoh’s Magicians! Self-denial or mortification also failed to qualify as the vindicating proof of true Christianity since “some *Indians*” recently brought to the English consciousness exceeded the level of flesh-denying zeal. Then the only firm foundation for true Christianity left was reason, unfettered by any commitment to belief in miracles, or historical majority, or antiquity (Blount 1680, 20). Published in 1680, Blount’s declaration helps us to situate the levels of anxiety on both sides regarding the pursuit of true Christianity: orthodox defenders of traditional notions of God, providence, miracles, and prophecy on the one hand, and the heterodox detractors of the same on the other, whether they were called Deists,

libertines, atheists, Hobbists, Spinozists, or modern Epicureans. Throughout the seventeenth century, a small yet forcible segment within science began to champion materialistic, mechanistic conceptions of universe, thereby rendering either irrelevant or irrational the traditional doctrines of God's creation of all *ex nihilo*, and God's providential guidance of the universe. For some, especially in the latter-half of the seventeenth century, there was a conspicuously emerging hegemonic struggle between theology and science as *the* leading explanatory matrix of true human flourishing.<sup>3</sup>

For historian of science Richard S. Westfall, the seventeenth century was "more crucial" than any others in "the relations of science and Christianity." He noted that the ongoing conflicts of religion that began *c.* 1517 with the Lutheran Reformation continued to be felt throughout the succeeding century. Consequently, it was fitting to see that the word "Christian" was the "single most suitable adjective" to depict the cultural-political landscape of Europe in the sixteenth century. However, Westfall argued that by the end of the century, the word to best encapsulate the *zeitgeist* of the years 1699 or 1700 would be "scientific." (Westfall et al. 1986, 218; Blair 2008, 435–38) While I found much of Westfall's trajectory of argument persuasive, I wondered how the numerous participants in the exchange of ideas and ideals of "science" and "Christianity" at that time—in *situ*—saw their task at hand. They were clearly unaware of the inevitable consequence of the hydraulic relationship between religion and science. "As the latter gained ascendancy, the former indubitably dwindled as the dominant mode of describing and prescribing the *esse* and *bene esse* of human existence": this would be an *ex post facto* interpretation of the "inevitable" triumph of reason and science over fideism and superstition. Yet as we shall see below, most of the protagonists on both sides felt the tension, yet the election results were too early to call!

We will examine a number of lectures—delivered in the format of sermons—called the Boyle Lectures, with particular attention given to the following clerics who sought to defend orthodoxy and demolish any pretenders thereof: Richard Bentley (1692), John Harris (1698), and William Whiston (1707), as representative figures of three distinct ideological perspectives and foci employed in their lectures. These lectures were an "extraordinary index of official Anglican theology," particularly how the post-revolutionary English politics of religion and elite promulgators of Protestantism would interface with the emerging threat of scientific materialism, natural philosophy, and *ars critica* as applied to the critical studies of scripture (Colie 1963, 302; Hardy 2017). Established at the bequest of Robert Boyle (1627–1691)—a leading "Christian Virtuosi" in late seventeenth-century England, indeed of Europe—of the Royal Society, Boyle Lectures were known as a "major site" of a "joint defense of Newtonianism and Christianity" (Shapin 1981, 197; Wojcik 1997; Holden 2007; Mandelbrote 2007).<sup>4</sup> Starting with Richard Bentley's highly

popular sermons in 1692, designed to criticize the illogicality of attributing to “Matter and Motion” ultimate causality of sentient existences, they have a pride of place as one of the few endowed lectureships specifically designed for explorations of the compatibility or conflict between Christianity, science, natural philosophy (Bentley 1693a; Bentley 1693b; Haugen 2011, 100–5). Before we get to an analysis of Bentley, Harris, and Whiston, it would behoove us to get a sense of Robert Boyle who bequeathed to posterity this lectureship with the desire to prove the validity and veracity of “Christian religion against notorious Infidels, viz. Atheists, Theists, Pagans, Jews and Mahometans, not descending lower to any controversies, that are among Christian themselves.”<sup>5</sup> The cumulative weight of evidence of these Boyle lectures between 1692 and 1707 demonstrates the high level of confidence they had in their task at hand, irrespective of how menacing the threats of Hobbes, Spinoza, Blount, Epicureans, and others might have appeared. Even at their most pessimistic moments, all the Boyle lecturers remained utterly confident that Christianity and science—conducted “rightly”—could not result in conflict, or divorce.

As John J. Dahm summarized, the Boyle Lectures allowed the participating lecturers—all of whom were Anglican clergy—to devote themselves “anew to the age-old exercise of utilizing the discoveries of science in the service of their faith.” The first lecture was delivered in 1692, and it was a period of increasingly numerous assaults and challenges against Christian orthodoxy, and they were “based implicitly or explicitly on a materialistic and mechanistic science,” which left God at best a god of Deism, namely, an absentee figure, or at worst, the “god” of atheism, a nonexistent being (Dahm 1970, 172).<sup>6</sup> It must be asserted clearly here, though, that there was almost no intellectual in the late seventeenth century to mid-eighteenth century who rejected the belief in God as being morally repugnant, existentially untrue, and intellectually incoherent (Febvre 1982; Berman 1990, 110–33). Nonetheless, the fear factor was not negligible (Greaves 1992; Keeble 2002; De Krey 2005).

#### ROBERT BOYLE: SCIENTIFIC *AVANT-GARDE*, ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL DEFENDER

Robert Boyle’s *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly received Notion of Nature* (1686) captured amiably the problem of ascribing personal qualities to nature, as medieval Aristotelianism had done. Although it was true that “nature is a thing of” God’s “establishing, and subordinate to him,” many of Boyle’s contemporaries “seldom or never lifted up their eyes to any higher cause” than nature, thus the “agency of God is little taken notice of in their thoughts” (Boyle 1744, 4:361). One of the key doctrines of orthodox theology was the fundamental Creator-creature distinction. For Boyle, the main culprit for flattening the ontological distinction between nature

and God was Aristotle. His propagation of the doctrine of the “eternity of the world” inevitably led to an open denial of God’s creation of the world *ex nihilo* since by “ascribing the admirable works of God to what he calls nature, he tacitly denies him the government of the world” (Boyle 1744, 4:362) Yet, when Boyle read Scripture, he noticed a devastatingly countervailing evidence. When Genesis 1 recounts the story of creation (1:11; 1:24; 1:25), Boyle averred that the “divine historian ascribes the formation” of all of creation to “God’s immediate *fiat*” without the intermediary of nature. Furthermore, Boyle continued:

And I do not remember, that in the *Old Testament*, I have met with any one Hebrew word, that properly signifies nature, in the sense we take it in...So likewise, though *Job*, *David*, and *Solomon*, and other *Israelitish* writers, do, on diverse occasions, many times mention the corporeal works of God, yet they do not take notice of nature, which our philosophers would have his great viceregent in what relates to them...And when St. *Paul* himself, who was no stranger to the Heathen learning, writing to the *Corinthians*, who were *Greeks*, speaks of the production of corn out of seed sown, he does not attribute the produced body to nature. (Boyle 1744, 4:368)

This quote above highlights two themes in tension: nature as a putative key and eternal element in Aristotle’s philosophy, and Scripture’s deafening silence concerning its role in creation narratives in Jewish and Christian Scriptures. For Boyle, the ultimate and sufficient “architectonic” being in the world was none other than God, not nature, as Aristotle would aver. Similarly, Boyle was equally convinced of the erroneous ways of Epicurean renaissance in England. The Epicureans had thrust the “coalition or convention” of the “numberless atoms” that had “wildly roved in their infinite vacuity” previously as the beginning of the world. Thus, for the Epicureans, it was not God, nor even nature, but “chance” that framed the universe (Boyle 1744, 4:372. Boyle’s conclusion was as pithy as it was poignant: “the fundamental errors” of the “Heathen Philosophers” was to confuse categories and misattribute to things that are “merely corporeal” or “inanimate” as if they were “endowed with life, sense and understanding,” thereby “ascribing to nature” causality and creativity that belong only to God. That was the chief of the “grand causes of the polytheism and idolatry of the gentiles” (Boyle 1744, 4:374; Deason 1986, 180–81).

In what follows, we will see the Richard Bentley’s (first Boyle lecturer, 1692) critique of the “folly” and “unscientific” nature of atheism by invoking the incredulity of belief in matter and chance as the architectonic principle behind all creation, more incredulous than the traditional Christian account of divine creation *ex nihilo*, thereby mounting an argument for intelligent design. Then we will discuss John Harris’s (1698 lecturer) relentless attack on Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, as well as early modern Epicureans as deviators from true and orthodox views on God-world relationship, as well as the problem of theodicy, moral necessity,

and their consequence on sustenance of social order. The final section will focus on William Whiston's (1707 lecturer) insistence on the single-reference theory of interpretation of biblical prophecies, and its desired impact on both the rise of critical biblical scholarship and traditional defense of the authenticity of Christian prophetic hermeneutical imagination. They offered what they deemed to be cogent and sufficient responses to illustrate the larger issues of conflict between science and religion.

RICHARD BENTLEY: INSANITY OF ETERNITY OF MATTER AND  
CLARITY OF ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

Richard Bentley (1662–1742) is often regarded as the pre-eminent philologist, critic, royal librarian, academic administrator (Master of Trinity College, Cambridge), and one who “shone more brightly than any other contemporary” English scholars (Haugen 2011, 1). Likely through the patronage of Edward Stillingfleet, then Bishop of Worcester, or the same of Isaac Newton, Bentley was appointed the first Boyle Lecturer, a duty he dispensed with a strong desire to draw “extensively on contemporary science in his many proofs for the existence of God” (Haugen 2011, 101). The title page of his first Boyle Lecture lists Bentley as “Chaplain to the Right Reverend Father in God, Edward, Lord Bishop of Worcester,” thereby boosting and bolstering his credibility. Kristine Haugen’s point concerning the dilemma for Bentley applies, perhaps equally, to all subsequent Boyle Lectures: “How was he to present the fruits of his learning for an audience that included not only the expert but also the fashionable and other interested laity?” (Haugen 2011, 102).

Although he was not a trained scientist, Bentley possessed one of the keenest intellects of his generation. Bentley, thus, utilized his prodigious intellect in the service of traditional Christian theism by defending it vis-à-vis atheism, Deism, and other variants of moral-and-intellectual revolt against the God of Scripture. He did so by showing the folly or illogicality of unbelief, as Richard Baxter had offered similar idea in *The Unreasonableness of Infidelity* (1655), as John Locke would follow Baxter and Bentley with his *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As delivered in the Scriptures* (1695).<sup>7</sup> Thus, paramount in the concerns of Bentley, Baxter, and Locke was demonstrating the utter logicity of belief in traditional Christianity, and the obverse of it: the illogicality of atheism.

In his first sermon, Bentley identified the fact that in the 1690s, it was existentially unviable to profess openly one’s own atheism, thereby prompting those with such sensibilities to “shelter and screen themselves under a new one of *Deists*, which is not quite so obnoxious.” Yet, they did “impugn” divine Providence, denied the “*Immortality of the Soul*,” “*Universal Judgment to come*, and of any *Incorporeal Essence*” (Bentley 1692c, 5–6). In terms of the intellectual genesis of modern-day atheism, Bentley

identified the “birth” of Deism as no birth at all, but a *renaissance* (re-birth) of Epicurus and Democritus, their idea of Atomism (Bentley 1692c, 7–8).

As a starter, the deity of the Deists was no more than “some eternal inanimate Matter, some universal Nature, and Soul of the World” devoid of sense, cogitation, “Infinite Wisdom and Goodness,” thereby deserving the sobriquet of “Fools” as the text of Bentley’s sermon declared from Psalm 14:1 (“*The Fool has said in his Heart, There is no God; they are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doth good*”) (Bentley 1692c, 9). To prefer the genesis of all beings in the world to have come from “*Atoms, and Vacuum, and Necessity, and Chance*” seemed to Bentley a cruel joke, and “extremely absurd” (Bentley 1692c, 12, 14).

For Bentley, the notion that all things that exist now are “mere bungling and blundering” without any discernible finger of God’s creative design, but rather “cobbled and jumbled together by the unguided agitation and rude shuffles of Matter” inexorably led to the absence of design and destiny, without morals, without hope, thereby leading to a collapse of social order. In other words, atheism was not merely a religious problem; it had scientific and political implications, indeed for the entire edifice of the English public sphere, just as his mentor and patron, Edward Stillingfleet would argue in his *Origines Sacrae* that “no principle can be so dangerous to a State as Atheism, nor any thing more promote its peace than true religion,” and that the “wisest and the most Philosophical men of Greece and Rome” all embraced theism and repudiated atheism (Stillingfleet 1662; Bentley 1692c, 24, 383, 391). Margaret Jacob argued similarly by connecting the political fears, public spheres and theological ideas about creation, judgment, and life in between, and by arguing that the Newtonian ideological structure was designed to offer the best solution to the various “encroachments” (Jacob 1976, 143–200;<sup>8</sup> Bentley, as we shall see, will base much of his argument from design on Newton’s theories, especially that of gravity.

Bentley’s second sermon title encapsulated his homiletical strategy: *Matter and Motion cannot Think: Or, A Confutation of Atheism from the Faculties of the Soul*, which was delivered on April 4, 1692. Bentley’s main thrust was naïvely simple: the binary existence of body and soul indicated the separate-yet-connected existence of the constitutive elements of a human being. The distinction further “necessarily evinces the Existence of a Supreme and Spiritual Being.” This would be the most rudimentary element of an argument from design (Bentley 1692b, 13).

Since “Matter and Motion” were not cogitative entities—this term, “cogitative” will gain significance when we discuss Spinoza—Bentley was optimistic that “if these powers of Cogitation, and Volition, and Sensation, are neither inherent in Matter as such, nor acquirable to Matter by any motion and modification of it; it necessarily follows, that they proceed from some cogitative Substance, some incorporeal Inhabitant within us, which we call Spirit and Soul” (Bentley 1692b, 14). Full of acerbic wit,

Bentley ridiculed the idea that we came from Atoms as as preposterous as the idea that “Cocks and Bulls might discourse, and Hinds and Panthers hold Conference about Religion” (Bentley 1692b, 37). By showing on the positive side, the possibility of argument from design, and the impossibility of atoms, matter, motion, and chance giving birth to the universe, Bentley was self-consciously engaging in *mimesis* of his mentors: Edward Stillingfleet, John Tillotson, and Thomas Tenison, especially Stillingfleet’s argument found in *Origines Sacrae* (Haugen 2011, 102–3).<sup>9</sup> Seeking to register high on the rhetorical Richter scale in terms of the unlikelihood, Bentley averred that “an Ape casually meeting with Pen, Ink, and Paper, and falling to scribble, did happen to write exactly the *Leviathan* of *Thomas Hobbes*: Would an Atheist believe such a story?” (Bentley 1692b, 38).

Bentley repeatedly excoriated the “inane” logic of the Atheist in his Fifth Sermon of the Boyle Lecture. The quote below reveals Bentley’s logic to unveil the ludicrously improbable likelihood of “blind Fortune or Chance” to bring forth life:

It hath been excellently well urged...by Ancients and Moderns, that to attribute such admirable Structures to blind Fortune or Chance, is no less absurd than to suppose, That if innumerable figures of the XXIII Letters be cast abroad at random, they might constitute in due order the whole *Aeneis* of *Virgil* or the *Annales* of *Ennius*. Now the Atheists may pretend to elude this Comparison; as if the Case was not fairly stated. For herein we first make an Idea of a particular Poem; and then demand if Chance can possibly describe That: and so we conceive Man’s Body thus actually formed, and then affirm that it exceeds the power of Chance to constitute a Being like That. (Bentley 1693a, 28)<sup>10</sup>

Bentley sought to poke holes in the atheistic logic that the flow of time, with “Fortune or Chance” as purposive agent, could never result in products of such sublimity, whether Virgil’s *Aeneid*, or the complexity of human body. In the foregoing quote, Bentley showed his preference for Platonism’s category of “Ideal” as the pre-existing Form of beauty of poems or human beings. Within the Aristotelian or Lucretian system where eternity of matter *without* teleological intelligence produced all contingent beings, nothing could be intrinsically right or true or beautiful (Bentley 1692a, 28–29). For Bentley, the pivot for dismantling natural materialism of the atheists was by showing that argument from design by a personal, benevolent deity to be the far better theory in the quest for cosmological origins. “For blind insensible Chance cannot grow cunning by many experiments,” averred Bentley, neither have preceding genetic codes and combinations have any influence upon subsequent births and productions (Bentley 1692a, 32–33).

Bentley concluded his lecture with a discussion of what would be called subsequently an “anthropic principle.” John Calvin had argued in his Commentary on Genesis 1 that God in the act of creation deliberately



calibrated *all things* in order to maximize the likelihood of human survival. In fact, he would even go further and say that God created the universe so that humans would not merely survive, but rather thrive and flourish. For both Calvin and Bentley, if creation had not been carried out by intelligent design, life on the planet would have turned out much differently. Put crudely, humans would have become extinct a long while ago. Thus, we find Bentley following Calvin's hermeneutical logic from Genesis 1:26 that "God at the beginning gave Mankind *Dominion* (an impressed awe and authority) *over every living thing that moveth upon the Earth*" (Bentley 1692a, 35). Calvin's perspective on anthropic principle of human creation is nicely encapsulated here: "And hence we infer what was the end for which all things were created; namely, that none of the conveniences and necessities of life might be wanting to men." (Calvin 1847, 96). Bentley astutely queried the atheistic logic here as to "what security" has the atheist provided for the "Preservation of Humane Race from the Jaws of ravenous Beasts"? Then Bentley went for the jugular and pointed out that "in the Atheist *Hypothesis* there are no imaginable means of Defence" since so many lions and tigers would arrive "at the top of their Strength in one year or two" and could easily have "devoured those forlorn Brats of our Atheists." An ecosystem created by chance and fortune, according to Bentley, would always see human population decrease, but their beastly "Enemies always increase" due to the survival of the cruelest (Bentley 1692a, 35). However, a world created by an intelligent and beneficent Deity would ensure that human beings reflect the *Imago Dei* vis-à-vis all animals by dominion and humane governance.

In his fourth Boyle lecture entitled, *A Confutation of Atheism from the Structure and Origin of Humane Bodies, Part II*, Bentley attacked Girolamo Cardano and Andrea Cesalpino by calling them "Astrological undertakers" whose putative cosmological theories, especially concerning human origins spoke of raising "Men like Vegetables out of some fat and slimy soil well digested by the kindly heat of the Sun, and impregnated with the influence of the Stars upon some remarkable and periodical conjunctions" (Bentley 1693a, 3–4). Then he proceeded to attack the "Mechanical or Corpuscular Philosophy" (Bentley 1693a, 4–6). However, more than any other proofs he had adduced until that point, gravity was the proof that "great Basis of all Mechanism" is not mechanical, but the "immediate *Fiat* and Finger of God" (Bentley 1693a, 6). However, in his correspondence with Newton himself, we see that Newton was much more reticent on this point and reluctant to call gravity the fiat and finger of God, as had Bentley. In fact, Newton wished the readers to draw the conclusion as to whether the agent causing and upholding gravity was "material and immaterial," and had not said so in his *Principia*.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Newton's concerns about Bentley's rhetorical and philosophical over-reach, the first Boyle lectures, judged at least by its publication

history, was a moderate success. Therefore, it escalated the anticipation from the public sphere that the future lecturers might offer fresh insights into the way Christianity could protect itself from the rumors and realities of strange notions, beliefs and religions, ancient and modern. We shall our attention to John Harris's Boyle lecture of 1698 which sought to defend the fundamental aspects of the doctrine of God: divine attributes, without which much of God-talk would be nothing but pious-yet-vacuous nonsense.

#### JOHN HARRIS'S CRITIQUE OF HOBBS, SPINOZA, AND MATERIALISTIC NECESSITY

John Harris (c. 1666–1719) was a “high-flying clergyman” whose ecclesiastical aspirations failed to match reality throughout his career, with the exception of his appointment as the Boyle lecturer of 1698. Darling of some of the Whigs, especially William Cowper, who would rise to be Lord Chancellor, Harris became Cowper's private chaplain. His uneventful rise in ecclesiastical hierarchy was reaching the role of prebendary in Rochester Cathedral in 1708. However, he seemed to have had slightly better luck as a person with mathematical and scientific penchant; he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1696, and his perspective on the “microscopical observations of animalcular” was published in the *Philosophical Transactions*, the journal of science of the Society.<sup>12</sup>

The identity of God defended by the intelligent design argument was antecedent to and independent of material creation, and this was crucial in Harris and others' critique of Spinoza, and Hobbes. Rosalie Colie's astutely observed that critics of Hobbes and Spinoza in the Boyle Lectures chose to regard them and the Deists “as a common body of thought rather than as separate systems, and too often responded to all three systems as to one” (Colie 1963, 204). Although Colie is helpful as a general statement about a number of anti-Hobbist and anti-Spinozist perspectives, Harris does seem to evince a more specific knowledge of the corpus of Hobbes and Spinoza, and responded accordingly, regardless of how fairly and accurately he managed to interpret them (Wigelsworth 2009, 85, 86, 95, 96, 101, 150, 155, 156). Harris's sermons sought to rescue Christianity from the attacks of the Deists (primarily Charles Blount), Hobbes, and Spinoza. For Blount, Harris noted in particular the “Preface” from *The Two First Books of Philostratus*, the bloody and oft-misguided zeal of those who “fight the Devils Battle under a counterfeit Banner of Christ” led to the conclusion that “Religion is all a *Cheat* and *Imposture*” (Blount 1680, sig. A4r; Harris 1698e, 16–17). Aside from Samuel Clarke, Harris's critique of Hobbes and Spinoza was most thorough and differentiated the two divergent—albeit convergent at times—strands of materialistic, mechanistic and Pantheistic philosophies of Spinoza and Hobbes (Colie 1963, 205–6; Jacob 1976, 145, 158, 163, 170, 178, 179, 182).

Deists cast aspersions and repudiated unequivocally as superstition all the mysteries, miracles, supernatural origins of Scripture and fulfillment of prophetic discourses of scripture. For them—similar to Socinians and anti-Trinitarians—the effort to reform religion and purge it from the dross of priestcraft had only gone halfway, thereby rendering the state of religion more dubious and unsatisfactory. They had rejected Tradition, Trinity, and Transubstantiation as irreconcilable with reasonable religion (Lim 2012, 16–68). Furthermore, their Christology was equally as truncated as the Socinian, anti-Trinitarian version in that Christ was no more than a great sage, perhaps endowed with special *sense* of mission from God, but clearly not the type of mediator whose death was required for salvation. Deists rejected the necessity of satisfaction of Christ’s death; his resurrection was deemed to be fable, attuned for the incredulity and docility of first-century Jewish religious milieu; and nature *qua* nature was not in any cataclysmic need of divine intervention, for the natural human being was not as far fallen as all the Calvinistic divinity of the puritan past had fastidiously maintained (Colie 1959; Wigelsworth 2009; Hudson et al. 2014).

Harris blasted that the emerging theories of religion that defined Christianity as “nothing but a mere Human and Political Institution, and the Invention of a Crafty and designing Order of Men, to promote their own Interest and Advantage.” For both Hobbes and Spinoza, as well as the increasing coterie of Deists, religion was no “manner of Divine Authority, nor Universal Obligation.” The inexorable upshot of this “*Calenture of Mind*” was to rush them “headlong into this *Foolish Paradise*,” which leads to nothing but “Eternal Destruction.” The greatest culpability of the atheists that Harris sought to expose was their retrenchment of the “Deity of all his Attributes” and denial of God’s “Presidence over the Affairs of the World” (Harris 1698c, 5). Then what is left of this stripped down Deity was “nothing but a kind of *necessary and blind Cause of things, Nature, the Soul of the World*,” thereby making the tri-personal God into an impersonal force, without purpose and without love. Furthermore, Harris connected the *renaissance* of ancient Epicurean and Lucretian ideas with those of his opponents, especially Hobbes and Spinoza. Harris averred that if God cannot be conceived of, thus no ideas about God can be obtained, then the inevitable conclusion was: “there can be no such thing as a God,” which would advance to “absolute Infidelity and Atheism” (Harris 1698c, 6).

Harris’ opening salvo against Hobbes was the fundamental repudiation of God being an “*Immaterial Substance*,” which was “words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound,” thus were “*Absurd, Insignificant, and Non-sense*.” To call God an immaterial substance was as absurd as seeking to understand “a *round Quadrangle*” or “*accidents of Bread in Cheese*,” and as such Harris was convinced that, Hobbes’ resolute denial notwithstanding, the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes would inescapably lead to lexical confusion, philosophical quagmire and ultimately to

atheism (Hobbes 1651; Harris 1698d, 8, 19). So, Harris quoted Hobbes' perspective on "Immaterial Substance," and averred that these two words "imply a contradiction," thus to say an "Angel, or Spirit is" an incorporeal substance was "to say in effect, there is no Angel nor Spirit at all" (Hobbes 1651; Harris 1698d, 9, 214).

By arguing for a physical and mechanical necessity even for God, then Hobbes inexorably reduced God to be "the *Servant of Necessity*, and cannot possibly himself avoid the destined fate." Then why was that so troublesome, not only for philosophical theology but also for the well-being of the Empire? As Margaret Jacob argued persuasively, political philosophy was designed to bring about a peace and equilibrium in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. Harris's fear was that Hobbes's political philosophy was to foment war of "all against all." Combine that with Spinoza's equally troublesome determinism! Harris quoted Spinoza to that effect: "That the Will of Man cannot be called free, but is only a necessary Cause....all things are Governed by Absolute Necessity." Then the ultimate punch line was: "That Good and Evil are not by Nature; but that the Notion of them came only from Men's mistaken Opinion, that all things were made for them; and who therefore call that Good which is agreeable to their Fancy, and that Evil which is contrary to it." In other words, there were no permanent categories of good, because everything was happening out of necessity. Consequently, humans came to fix moral categories of good onto things that enhanced their pleasure, and evil onto things that detracted from it. For Harris, "*Spinoza* was a Corporealist, as also why Mr. *Hobbs* advanced the same Notions" (Harris 1698d, 51–52).

For the Anglican apologists of the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution, Hobbes's political philosophy encapsulated in *Leviathan* was in support of the republican regime, namely, the Interregnum, and as such it must be stopped at all costs, and his credibility reduced to nothing by hereticating him, thus even possibly have him executed for breaching the writ *de haeretico comburendo* (Collins 2005; Malcolm 2002; Parkin 2007, 23, 46, 284, 413, 473, 483, 531, 532). The irony here is that Hobbes was a fairly consistent Erastian, and with the founding of the Church of England by royal fiat of Henry VIII, England was nothing if not Erastian. And yet, for the turbulent political context of the Glorious Revolution, Hobbes's Erastianism of *Leviathan* would be an easy target for fresh flaming arrows. So, Harris preached that the Hobbesian idea that "the Civil Magistrate ought to determine what Attributes shall be given to the Deity" was the implication of Lucilio Vanini and "plainly of Mr. *Hobbs*," both of whose perspectives could be traced to Sextus Empiricus (Harris 1698b, 7–8).

Applying his radical agnosticism concerning the attributes of God aside from the fact that "there is a God," Hobbes argued that "those Attributes which the Sovereign Power ordaineth, in the Worship of God, for signs

of Honor, ought to be taken and used for such, by private men in their publique Worship” (Hobbes 1651, 191, 192; Harris 1698b, 8). That meant the identity of God could depend on the ebb and flow of political powers, and would “expose the Belief and Notion of a Deity” to be “so Precarious, that it can be the Object of no Rational Man’s Faith” (Harris 1698b, 9). Thus, Hobbes, Spinoza and their cohorts were the “most Dangerous and Mischievous” since “*Profess’d Atheists* can do no great Harm” since everyone would be leery of them to justly “abhor their Writings.” But these were purveyors of atheism who came in a “fairer Dress and a softer Name.” Their putative “most Profound Respect for the Supreme and Almighty Being,” upon closer scrutiny would reveal itself to be “the most abominable Abuse...and a most wicked and Blasphemous Idea of the Deity” (Harris 1698b, 10, 20, 21). Although related and perhaps indebted to Hobbes, let’s turn to Harris’s critique of Spinoza.

Noel Malcolm mentioned that naturalism was virtually identical with materialism and Hobbes and Spinoza were known in late seventeenth century as the chief culprits for propagating this idea (Malcolm 2002, 482). If Hobbes had popularized the Epicurean anthropomorphism “there is no other *Substance* but *Body*,” then Spinoza—known as “Hobbes’s lickspittle”—furthered the argument by insisting that “*Extended Substance* (that is *Body*)” was one of the “Infinite Attributes of the Deity.” God was both corporeal and cogitative: “*Deus est res extensa*” (Springborg 2016; Spinoza 1677b; Harris 1698d, 9). For Harris, their main problem here was a collapse of the ontological distinction between the being of God and beings of all contingent beings. By insisting that God can only be conceived of, indeed, thus the only logical category of contemplating the reality of God was in human categories, Hobbes and Spinoza made God a little bigger, superior and older than human beings. For Harris, this was not novel to Hobbes or Spinoza, but mere copies of the “Sentiments of the Ancient Atheists” (Harris 1698d, 9). In this assessment, Harris himself was not being original, either. In 1676, a French Jesuit René Rapin had already called Hobbes “one of the boldest Epicureans of modern times” who followed Epicurus “without compromise” (Rapin 1676, 54, cited in Malcolm 2002, 499).

For Harris, Spinoza and Hobbes were the prototypical “Modern Atheists.” Standing on the shoulders of Ralph Cudworth’s immense erudition, especially *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), Harris argued that Epicurus’s objections to Plato (“*There can be no Incorporeal God...because no man can frame a Conception of an Incorporeal Substance*”) was precisely the point parroted by Hobbes and Spinoza (Cudworth 1677; Harris 1698d, 10, 20). Harris identified the chief issue with assigning bodily attributes to God was that since in traditional Christianity, God was always conceived of and spoken about as spiritual, having Hobbes and Spinoza repudiate the concept of immaterial substance was an “*Unconceivable Thing*”

was fanning the flame of atheism, arriving at the unavoidable logical conclusion that the notion of God was “consequently Nonsense and Impossible” (Harris 1698d, 11).

Harris was nothing, if not unoriginal. Yet, perhaps precisely because of his being an intellectual weathervane of his contemporaries, Harris’s refutation of “the Atheists,” such as Hobbes and Spinoza was invaluable. Lucretian atomism was a heterodox philosophical notion revived in Spinoza, and Harris fastidiously attacked Spinoza on that. As Rosalie Colie observed, “Spinoza himself never asserted directly such Epicureanism.” Spinoza instead argued that “*All Substance is essentially Cogitative and Extended*; so that there is no Substance but what is *Material*.” For Spinoza, “Cogitation and Extension” were two “*Infinite Attributes...of the Deity*” (Spinoza 1677b; Harris 1698d, 44, 12, 14; Colie 1963, 206).

Harris then delivered his putatively devastating blow to Spinoza’s idea of God. He argued that if cogitation was as essential to matter as extension, then all particles must be an independent entity of “*Thinking Substance or Body*.” Then, every atom will be equal to every other atom in regard to “this *Cogitative Power*.” The *reductio ad absurdum*, according to Harris, was: “either there is no Deity at all, or else that every Particle of Matter must be a God by itself” (Spinoza 1677b; Harris 1698d, 46, 12). Thus, “if this be his [Spinoza’s] Opinion, there cannot possibly be a more unaccountable, absurd and impossible Notion of God advanced” since if “*Substance, Matter and God*, signifie all the same thing, and all Matter be *Essentially Cogitative*,” then all is God, thus underscoring Spinoza’s pantheism. However, the only trouble was that Spinoza had actually never gone that far (Spinoza 1677b; Harris 1698d, 47, 14). The chilling conclusion was that rather than affirming the one true God, Spinoza’s system would deliver a “Swarm of Innumerable Deities.” Harris himself was not so clear because he thought there was a logical incoherence in Spinoza’s metaphysics itself. How can substance be simultaneously divisible and indivisible? (Melamed 2011).

Similar to Hobbes’s materialistic mechanism, Harris was convinced that Spinoza’s view of “*Natura Naturata*” would indicate a “Physical Necessity” excluding all “Freedom and Liberty of Will among” humans, and most significantly “destroy all Notions and Distinctions between Good and Evil.” The twofold fears for Harris concerning Hobbes and Spinoza were: (1) their materialism or pantheism would dismantle traditional theological doctrine of God; (2) their adherence to predeterminism or necessity would rob free agency, even that of God, and thus no moral culpability could be traced, thus dismantling of the category of good and evil, thereby creating an infinite regress of theodicy (Harris 1698d, 49). Harris’s perspective here is worth engaging. If God were to be subjugated to a “Physical necessity,” then it makes God “nothing at all but Nature, and deprives” both God and humans the “Noble Principle of *Freedom of Will*: and then they know that

there can be no such things as Rewards and Punishments proportionable to Men's Actions; but that all things are alike, without any distinction of Good and Evil." All of that because of Hobbes's and Spinoza's insistence on being such "zealous Sticklers for a *Corporeal Deity*." Thus, Harris continued that the "God of the Corporealists is not the True Deity, whatever they may pretend, but a blind, stupid, senseless Idol," that has the name of God immorally affixed to it (Harris 1698d, 49, 50, 50–51). This fear factor was not inconsiderable, so Harris repeated this in the Sixth of his Boyle Lectures: "That *Justice is founded in Power, and that whatever is Enacted by a Sovereign Power can't be Unjust*," thereby making room for the quintessence of arbitrary creation of moral and judicial categories as the terminus ad quem of Hobbism and Spinozism (Harris 1698b, 21). And it became the burden of homiletical proof for Harris's Seventh Lecture: *A Refutation of the Objections against Moral Good and Evil* (1698).

What is significant about Harris's Seventh Lecture is that he brought Hobbes, Spinoza, and Charles Blount into one category of dangerous "Adversaries" whose (im)moral philosophy Harris was determined to "batter down and demolish." Their "Two great Objections" against revealed religion of Christianity were:

- (1) That there is in reality no such thing as Moral Good and Evil; but that all Actions are in their own Nature indifferent.
- (2) That all things are determined by Absolute Fatality: And that God himself, and all Creatures whatsoever, are Necessary Agents, without having any Power of Choice, or any real Liberty in their Nature at all (Harris 1698a, 4).

These two were the "strongest Holds of Atheism and Infidelity," shared equally among the author of *Oracles of Reason* (Blount), Hobbes and Spinoza. Whether it was from the assertion that "*Good and Evil are only Thetical things*," or Spinoza's view that "*Bonum et malum nihil Positivum in Rebus scilicet, in se consideratis indicant*" or Hobbes's view that "There is nothing simply nor absolutely Good or Evil, nor any common Rule about them to be taken from the Objects themselves, but only from the Person; who calleth that Good which he likes or desires, and that Evil which he hates." Another quote of Hobbes that Harris utilized for his polemical purpose was: "That Good and Evil are only Names that signify our Appetites and Aversions; which in different Tempers, Customs, and Doctrines of Men are different" (Spinoza 1677a, *passim*; Spinoza 1677b, 164; Hobbes 1651; Steenbakkers 1997; Harris 1698a, 6, 24, 79). Harris was convinced that were these triumvirate of "atheism" were tolerated, then it would "bewilder us in the Infinite Mazes of Errour, and to expose us to Roam and Float about in the boundless Ocean of Scepticism, where

we can never find our Way...to the Discovery of any Truth whatsoever” (Harris 1698a, 26, 28).

Interestingly enough, Harris prefers, and thus adopts, the moral grounding provided by John Locke’s *Essay of Human Understanding*, in which he averred that moral knowledge is “*as capable of real Certainty as well as Mathematicks*” since moral and mathematical ideas were both “*Archetypes* themselves.” This Lockean belief in the innate presence of things that are “*good and lovely* in their own Natures” was sufficient refutation for Harris against Hobbes, for they were “antecedent to the Obligations of Human Laws, Customs or Fashions of particular Counties” (Harris 1698a, 18, 19; Locke 1696, 216, 217). Harris surely believed that he was the victor vis-à-vis Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Deists, especially as he espoused the Lockean view of moral theory, political philosophy, and Christian theology. We shall now turn to the final Boyle lecturer, William Whiston, for whom rightly interpreting biblical, messianic prophecy was the key to preserving true religion over against the encroachment of atheism.

#### WILLIAM WHISTON: PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY, FAULTY MANUSCRIPTS, AND PROPHECIES FULFILLED

William Whiston (1667–1752) was a transitional figure in multiple ways. His putative Arian anti-Trinitarianism cost him a prestigious endowed professorial chair at his alma mater, Cambridge (Duffy 1976; Wiles 1996, 93–110; Snobelen 2004). His move away from allegorical interpretation was foreshadowing of “modern biblical scholarship” and its near-complete dismantling of spiritual readings of scripture. Nevertheless, his dogged adherence to single-referent interpretation of biblical prophecy as pointing to Jesus the Messiah put him at odds with a growing coterie of Deists and other critical biblical scholars whose strand of critical biblical scholarship led them *away from* affirmation of messianic fulfillment, which was the sole purpose of Whiston’s espousal of single-referent theory of prophetic interpretation.

For Whiston, the key to interpretation of all prophecies in both the Old and New Testaments was the messianic identity of Jesus, thus the title of his Boyle lectures of 1707, published the following year as *The Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies*. These Boyle lectures were, for Whiston, his riposte to the cultured, Deistic despisers of traditional Christians who had gullibly believed the “Fable of Jesus Christ.” James E. Force, taking cues from an earlier article by Henry Guerlac and Margaret C. Jacob, strongly suggested that Newton might have been the *éminence grise* for promoting Richard Bentley and William Whiston, and that both Bentley and Whiston reflect the cutting-edge scientific theories and hermeneutical



trajectories espoused by an *overt* Christian (Force 1985, 74–76; Guerlac 1969).

Whiston, similar to his academic patron Newton, espoused the belief that the bedrock foundation of Christianity was the literal and historical fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies. He lamented the rise of “this double Sense and Interpretation” of prophecies that he deemed to be “so absurd...so unlimited in its extent, so pernicious to the Scripture proofs of our Christian Faith, so wholly a Stranger to Christ and his Apostles” (Whiston 1708, 29). Put differently, by rejecting the *prima facie* “evidence” of a literal reading of Old Testament messianic prophecies as having been fulfilled in Jesus and referring to the messianic kingdom mediated through the Church, “many of the modern Divines and Commentators” could hardly acknowledge “in a literal sense, that the Devil has set up so great an Empire,” which could only be combatted by “the coming of the Messias” (Whiston 1708, 30–31). As a powerful rhetorical device, Whiston blasted that “to speak my Thoughts freely, I never expect that the Holy Scriptures will be thoroughly understood, the unhappy Disputes and Contests among Christians prevented, the ancient Order and Discipline of the Church restor’d, its present Schisms and Wound heal’d, true solid, unaffected Piety, Zeal, and Charity effectually promoted...and the Christian Religion spread over the face of the whole Earth” until “we leave off our admiration for all bare human Schemes and Systems in divine Matters,” and instead submit to the teachings of “those honest and unbiased Judges, the *most Primitive* Writers of the Church of Christ, for our satisfaction” (Whiston 1708, 31–32). In other words, Whiston’s hermeneutical strategy was a Newtonian primitivism. Whiston found the idea of double-meaning or allegorical interpretation of prophecies repugnant to and deviating from primitive Christianity. Thus, he clearly affirmed that biblical prophecies showed the “footsteps of this double coming” of the Messiah “all along” (Whiston 1708, 41, 42, 43, 106, 175, 184–185; Allix 1690). Whiston appropriated the philosophical insights of the Newtonian design argument to “confirm the verisimilitude of Scripture.” Whiston further claimed the Newtonian connection and influence by contending that his own Boyle Lectures were at Newton’s urging (Force 1985, 7).

Since Whiston was committed to a discovery of literal and single meaning and reference of all scriptural texts, prophecies were no exception at all. In *Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecy*, we see his “nonallegorical, historical fulfillment of several biblical prophecies” in the life and work of Jesus. The ultimate *telos* of such historicist interpretive method of prophecies was to show “God’s especially provident control and direction over his creation” (Force 1985, 64). Juxtaposing Whiston’s hermeneutics of prophecies next to his English contemporaries and predecessors, especially Joseph Mede of Christ’s College, Cambridge, whose *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627, with English translation in 1643 as *Key of the Revelation*), the

Christocentric and historicist interpretation comes to the fore as a distinctive contribution Whiston made (Mede 1643; Bauckham 1978; Jue 2006). Whiston's was Christocentric in that most of the Old Testament prophecies had a converging vector in the person of Jesus, and historicist in that most of the prophecies had already been fulfilled, thereby leaving little to none to chiliastic fervor and furor of those who left the *aporia* of future fulfillment ever so slightly possible.

He interpreted the "very first Prophecy of all given to *Adam* and *Eve*" as referring to, however "*obscurely...yet directly* and singly" to the Messiah, the "*seed of the woman*," as it was found in Genesis 3:15. Rather than interpreting this via allegory, for Whiston this one and only referent had to be the Messiah, who would crush the "*head of the old Serpent*" (Whiston 1708, 35). Furthermore, the descendant of Abraham through whom blessings to many nations would come was also the Messiah. For Whiston, the fact that in both Genesis 22:18 and Galatians 3:16 used the word "*Seed* in the singular Number" meant that it was referring only to the "Messiah himself" (Whiston 1708, 35–36). Whiston exposed a frequent hermeneutical habit of the then-modern commentators: "that a Prophecy of the Old-Testament belongs to some particular Person or event of old time" without sufficient ground for such an assumption. This hermeneutical method of Renaissance humanism, as refracted through some Calvinistic interpreters (including Calvin), led the then-modern critic to conclude that the referent to many Psalms was David himself, not a messianic figure (Pak 2009). Whiston relentlessly criticized "any form of allegorical interpretation of scriptural history, especially the Mosaic account of creation," which *was* literally and historically true, and then the task of mathematically inclined scientist à la Newtonian sensibilities and convictions such as himself was to seek to "square the circle" of reconciling the two sets of data from God's Word: (1) the visible world as a "theatre of God's glory"; and (2) the written word as a testament to divine economy and identity (Force 1985, 63). Due to the wholesale Protestant rejection of allegorical or spiritual interpretation of the Bible as part of the fourfold meaning, options of interpreting Prophetic writings of both Old and New Testaments became considerably more limited. Whiston was no exception, as was Newton (Force 1985, 63–89). Nevertheless, there could only be a single-referent to *all* biblical prophecies, and giving up even of an inch would have tragic consequences.

This principle of vindication of Christianity is also seen in a relatively obscure publication, which predates Whiston's Boyle lectures. His 1696 publication, *A New Theory of the Earth*, was an amalgamation of geography, biblical interpretation, and natural philosophy. In the "Introductory Discourse," Whiston refuted Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* in which he ridiculed the Mosaic creation story to be "mere Popular, Parabolick, or Mythological relation" (Whiston 1696, 2; Force

1983). At the end of this Introductory Discourse, he not only dismantled Burnet and others who had even a shred of doubt about the reconcilability between Genesis account of creation and actual geo-historical “fact,” he summarized it in a three-point “Postulata.” This helps us to understand Whiston and Newton’s hermeneutical commitment, especially concerning texts whose reportage seems to stretch beyond the limits of human credulity.

- (1) The Obvious or Literal Sense of Scripture is the True and Real one, where no evident Reason can be given to the contrary.
- (2) That which is clearly accountable in a natural way, is not, without reason, to be ascribed to a Miraculous Power.
- (3) What Ancient Tradition asserts of the constitution of Nature, or of the Origin and Primitive States of the World, is to be allowed for True, where ’tis fully agreeable to Scripture, Reason, and Philosophy (Whiston 1696, 95).

Many skeptics of traditional Christianity—Deists, Hobbesians or Spinozists, or otherwise—pummeled the insane insistence on the part of orthodox Christians to hold onto the “Fable of Jesus Christ.” Whiston’s response and polemical strategy in *Astronomical Principles of Religion* (1717) was the same as when he delivered the Boyle Lectures. He acknowledged that “the present gross *Deism*, or the Opposition that has of late so evidently and barefacedly appeared against Divine Revelation, and the Holy Scriptures” had its principal cause in their discarding “the principal way of Examination into the main Evidence for the *Jewish* and Christian Revelations, I mean Ancient Facts and Testimonies” (Whiston 1717, 243–44; Force 1985, 65–66).

Whiston unequivocally believed in the suspension of nature’s normal course by way of miracles in order to vindicate the validity of Christ’s and the Apostles’ mission. While he certainly believed in miracles as *a* litmus test of divine providence against the Deists, Whiston preferred fulfilled prophecies as a better buttress for continuing special providence of God. The reason for such an elision was due to the fact that with the increased scientific discoveries and theories to account thereof, there was “less room” for “miraculous events,” whereas fulfillment of prophecies does not involve God as a disruptive agent of the flow of nature and history, especially since, for Whiston, most of the prophecies had *already been fulfilled* (Force 1985, 70).

Whiston was deeply troubled that the “allegorization of messianic prophecies trivializes them and converts them into mere ‘fables’ of no interest to modern, deistic freethinkers” (Force 1985, 78). In *Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies*, Whiston listed five main reasons why the “double sense of Old Testament Prophecies” was inimical to true Christian faith.

They were: (1) single sense of prophecy was the “only natural and obvious” meaning; (2) if more than one fulfillment and meaning were allowed, then a hermeneutical proliferation occurs since there is no “controlling meaning”; (3) single meaning of prophecy was the “proof of our common Christianity”; (4) the double sense of prophecies had no Apostolical precedents; (5) this tragic misstep also had no precedents among the “most ancient Fathers of the Church” (Whiston 1708, 13–14, 15, 16–20, 21–25, 26–27).

As a way to bolster his claims, Whiston adduced a pivotal Apostolical proof: Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. The writer of Acts had Peter conflate Psalms 16 and 110 as they were both by David and—as Whiston interprets them—“primarily intended of *David*.” After noting that most “Moderns” would speak of the first fulfillment as David (by applying their typological exegesis) and only secondary fulfillment in Jesus, Whiston clearly repudiated their claim by stressing that Peter preached “the direct contrary; that *David* speaketh concerning *Christ*, and the resurrection of *Christ*; that *his* Soul was not left in *Hades*, neither *his* Flesh did see Corruption” (Whiston 1708, 23). In other words, for Whiston’s hermeneutical strategy, it was crucial to see that the early Church’s *kerygma* interpreted the saving significance and messianic identity from the Old Testament prophecies—in this case Psalms 16 and 110—and Jesus was the primary referent and fulfillment.

Another example from Whiston should suffice. Again, his deep concern was to show that the Early Church knew nothing of double meaning or fulfillment of messianic prophecies. Contrary to the notions of “modern interpreters,” St. Paul—whom Whiston assumes to have been the author of Hebrews—interpreted the “8th Psalm” in a Christological fashion rather than “of Mankind in general, because the Expression is more full and exact” if applied to Jesus rather than to humankind. Thus “in the strictest acceptation of the words,” the words of Psalm 8 could refer to “no other but to him” [Christ]. Psalm 8:4-6 is quoted almost verbatim in Hebrews 2:6-8 (“But in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man that thou visitest him? Thou has made him a little lower than the angels; thou crownest him with glory and honor, and didst set him over the works of thy hands: Thou has put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him.”). For Whiston, this Pauline interpretation of the quotation from Psalm 8 was unequivocally Christologically grounded. Here is Whiston’s polemical punch line; Paul was, “of all the inspired Writers,” most influenced by the “mystical Notions of the *Jews*, in allegorically Expounding the Histories and Ceremonies of the Old Testament.” Yet when it came to finding out the referent of Psalm 8, thus arrive at the right interpretation, Paul did not indulge in the “reasoning on

a secondary and typical Sense,” but argued that the “Prophecy was only meant of Jesus Christ, to whom it could most exactly be applied; and not to Man in general” (Whiston 1708, 23–25). The account of the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip, recorded in Acts 8, focusing particularly on the interpretive quagmire faced by the Eunuch and how Philip resolved the referent in Isaiah 53 was the last example by Whiston. In doing so, Whiston contended that the Early Church knew nothing of secondary meanings and allegorical interpretations, especially surrounding texts that had to do with messianic exegesis (Whiston 1708, 26; Juel 1992).

Whiston knew that Origen (185–254 CE) and the catechetical school in Alexandria was the epicenter of allegorical interpretation, and the proliferation of such a hermeneutical strategy inexorably muddied up the waters for subsequent generation, including those of the “fourth and fifth Centuries” (Whiston 1708, 33; Boyarin 2010). These “later Fathers” of Nicene- and post-Nicene perspectives were more accurately to be described as the “*first and most valuable of the Modern Writers,*” according to Whiston. Among other possible interpretations, one obvious reason for this riposte by Whiston is that in his quest for primitive Christianity—which meant anti-Trinitarian and non-Nicene—he came to see that allegory and the Trinity doctrine were joined at the hip, a thesis he will develop more fully in the “Historical Preface” of his own *Primitive Christianity Reviv’d* (1711), a four-volume takedown of the erroneous and powerful influence of Council of Nicaea and the “culpability” of Athanasius therein (Whiston 1708, 33; Whiston 1711; Gilliam 2015). Ultimately, Whiston’s literalistic hermeneutic and Eusebian views on the Trinity cost him the Lucasian Professorship in Mathematics at Cambridge in 1710, a chair previously held by Newton himself, a compadre and mentor of Whiston, not merely in mathematics and science, but also in primitive Christianity and prophetic hermeneutic.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that the Boyle Lectures had similar but divergent specific *modus vivendi* for achieving that goal. The overarching objective of propagating a Christianity untrammled by the rise of Deism, Atheism, libertinism, Hobbism and Spinozism, already presaged in Boyle’s own writings. Richard Bentley’s Lectures emphasized the intelligibility of the universe by his appeal to an argument from design, and in contrast, by his insistence of the illogicality of ascribing ultimate causality to matter, motion and atoms. John Harris’s detailed critique of Spinoza and Hobbes was designed to be both comprehensive, correct, and sufficient, even though it would, unfortunately, turn out this both Hobbes and Spinoza would outlive in the pantheon of crucial philosophical minds, something Harris himself was blithely unaware of, and unhindered by in his defense of

traditional Christianity. Finally, we saw that in Whiston, defense of biblical prophecy, especially adherence to a single-referent theory of interpretation was what he believed to have been the practice of primitive Christianity *before* allegorical accretion and Nicene philosophy-laden-divinity replaced the simple and true Christianity with something fundamentally alien to the ethos of Christianity. In short, all three of the Boyle lectures sought to re-instantiate the Renaissance desideratum of returning to the sources of pure religion and praxis. This reverse trend would inexorably turn out to be a losing proposition. Yet to *all* the Boyle lecturers of the period knew nothing of the sort; troubles there might be, but tragedy shall never be. For them the ultimate “genre” of Christianity was not a tragedy, but a divine comedy with a tragic twist.

## NOTES

1. On Blount, see Shapin (1981), Redwood (1974), and Champion (1992, 1, 7, 8, 10, 22, 100, 114, 121, 134–35, 166, 211, 235).
2. The 1563 production of Foxe’s peripatetic endeavors to produce the best Protestant martyrology was called *Actes and Monumentes of these latter and perilous days, touching matters of the Church*, see Evenden and Freeman 2011.
3. Keith Thomas called works of theology and philosophy as illuminators of “the desires and dilemmas of ordinary life,” see Thomas 2009, 5.
4. Boyle’s, *The Christian Virtuoso* (1690) in some ways pinpoints the question *du jour* for many engaged in natural philosophy, science, and theology in the subtitle: “Can a Christian pursue ‘experimental philosophy’ and remain a good Christian?”
5. For details on the codicil that contains this will and testament for establishment of the lectureship in his honor, see Boyle 1744, 1:105.
6. On the role of Royal Society and decline of magic while promoting science *and* robust belief in Christianity, see Hunter 2011.
7. On Baxter and logicity of Christianity, thus his distaste for antinomianism, see Lim 2004 and Sytsma 2017. On Locke, see Lucci 2021 and Marshall 2006, 429, 470, 478, 480, 483, 518, 617, 660, 671, 705, 710, 711.
8. For a judicious re-assessment of Jacob’s thesis that deemed too deterministic and dependent on Newton, see Ingram 2010, 278 and Holmes 1978.
9. See Stillingfleet 1662, 421–70 for his design argument, drawn heavily from his exegesis of Genesis 1–2.
10. Here, again, Stillingfleet’s perspective is clearly replicated: “When once I see a *thousand* blind men run the *point* of a *sword* in at a *key-hole* without *one* missing...when I once find as *Tully* speaks, the *Annals* of *Ennius* fairly written in a *heap* of *sand*...I may then think the *Atomical Hypothesis* probable, and not before” (Stillingfleet 1662, 378).
11. Isaac Newton to Richard Bentley (February 25, 1693), perhaps indicating his hesitance to endorse Bentley’s conclusion drawn at the Boyle lectures (see Bentley 1842, 1:70). It seems that while Newton was relatively certain of *some* role played by a divine, intelligent agent, he was considerably less so regarding “gravity as essential and inherent to matter.” He wrote to Bentley: “So, then, gravity may put the planets into motion; but, without the divine power, it could never put them into such a circulating motion as they have about the Sun; and therefore, for this, as well as other reasons, I am compelled to ascribe the frame of this Systeme to an intelligent Agent.” Newton to Bentley (January 17, 1693), in Bentley 1842, 1:61.
12. Biographical details of Harris’s life are from Larry Stewart’s entry of Harris in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

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