

ROMANTIC ATHEISM

Poetry and freethought, 1780–1830

MARTIN PRIESTMAN



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The atheism debate, 1780–1800

Be it therefore for the future remembered, that in London in the kingdom of England, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-one, a man has publickly declared himself an atheist.

This declaration was made by someone calling himself William Hammon, introducing a pamphlet called *Answer to Dr Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* (1782).¹ An unpacking of some of its context will help to set out the terms on which an 'atheism debate' was initiated in Britain in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. First, its authorship: the otherwise unidentified 'Hammon' claims to be merely the editor of the main body of the pamphlet, whose anonymous author was subsequently identified as Matthew Turner, a 'physician at Liverpool: among his friends a professed Atheist'.² The situation of a respectable figure known personally as an atheist but unable to put their name to such views in print is one we shall encounter again repeatedly. The murkiness surrounding 'Hammon' – whether a pseudonym for Turner or the real (or indeed false) name of someone else publishing his views as a partial cover for their own – is also of a piece with the often crooked routes through which atheist ideas gradually came to be aired at this time.

Next, its addressee: as the title suggests, the pamphlet inserts itself into an on-going debate initiated by Dr Joseph Priestley, in the first part of a series of published 'letters' to a supposedly atheistic correspondent who may or not be a specific individual, but who offers him a pretext for attacking the views of two writers to be discussed shortly: David Hume and Baron d'Holbach.³ One of the stars of this chapter and indeed this book, Priestley was a protean figure who at this time played an equally leading role in three apparently disparate spheres of activity: the physical sciences (he discovered oxygen); radical, anti-establishment politics; and religious

‘Rational Dissent’. As a Unitarian minister, he briefly helped to turn that form of anti-trinitarian Christianity into one of the most powerful intellectual forces in the country, whose intimate, sparring partner relationship with out-and-out atheism will form one of this book’s major leitmotifs. While for most of the present chapter Priestley will figure as the hectically versatile defender of Christianity against attack from many directions, it is important to remember that, as he himself pointed out in his reply to Hammon (*Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, 1782), a declared Unitarian like himself was legally a heretic and as such arguably ‘in more danger than a declared *unbeliever*’.⁴

Priestley is referring to the series of laws and legal precedents based on William and Mary’s Toleration Act of 1689, supposedly the cornerstone of English religious freedom but specifically debarring non-believers in the Trinity as well as Roman Catholics from the protection of the law. The Blasphemy Act of 1698 outlawed further specific doctrines, though the enforcement of Trinitarianism was removed for those (such as the Jews) who had never been Christians: hence perhaps Priestley’s remark. Legislation was supplemented by specific judges’ decisions, and William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–9) had recently confirmed that ‘Christianity is part of the laws of England’ and proscribed ‘blasphemy against the Almighty, by denying his being or providence; or by contumelious reproach of our Saviour Christ’. Though the eighteenth century is often described as an irreligious ‘age of reason’, the publication of freethinking views without a decent veneer of orthodoxy was still very dangerous, and produced a long list of ‘martyrs’ legally punished or socially persecuted for it, from the deist and proto-Unitarian John Toland to Peter Annet, imprisoned and pilloried in 1763 at the age of seventy for denying the divine inspiration of the Pentateuch.⁵

It is against this legal background that Hammon/Turner and Priestley play an intricate but revealing game of buck-passing. In his prefatory address, Hammon declares he was neither a philosopher nor an unbeliever till he read Priestley’s *Letters* and asked for an anonymous ‘friend’s’ (i.e. Turner’s) comments on them: if the letters alone would not ‘quite have made me an Atheist!’, the fusion between them and the friend’s response *has* achieved that effect (*Answer to Priestley*, p. ix). Hammon goes on to query Priestley’s claim to be ready to extend the arguments of his *Letters* if the first part is

well-received. How will Priestley *know* how it has been received by unbelievers themselves? Will their views be legally publishable, and will he respond to them? In a postscript, Hammon states that he first sent the *Answer* personally to Priestley, requesting a reply as well as his protection for a work which he himself has solicited, since ‘your opponent has to dread, beside ecclesiastical censure, the scourges, chains and pillories of the courts of law’ (p. 60). His concluding remark, ‘To this letter Dr Priestley sent no answer’, in fact received a very prompt answer in Priestley’s *Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in Answer to Mr Wm Hammon* (1782). This begins with a circumstantial description of Priestley’s several attempts to reach Hammon at his stated address, at which no one of that name seemed to live; a public response (which quotes generously from Hammon/Turner’s hitherto obscure *Answer*) is thus the only option. Such complex interfacing between the private and public functions of ‘letters’ are endemic in the early stages of the atheism debate.

In content, the *Answer* usefully encapsulates a number of the main positions of late eighteenth-century atheism. As Priestley’s offered label ‘Philosophical Unbeliever’ implies, these positions include a general orientation towards the physical sciences (‘natural philosophy’) but also a more specific one to the French *philosophe* tradition. Claiming that ‘Modern philosophers are nearly all atheists’, Hammon cites particularly Hume, Helvétius, Diderot and d’Alembert (p. xxiv). The last two were chiefly responsible for the great *Encyclopédie* (1751–72), which was generally held to have smuggled atheist tendencies into popular discourse under the cloak of general knowledge – something also achieved in a more satirically focussed way by Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764). Of the other two, Hume was a notorious sceptic and Helvétius was the author of *De l’esprit* (1758), a materialist account of the mind which bypassed the idea of the soul, though in naming him Hammon probably means Baron d’Holbach, another member of the *philosophe* circle whose *Système de la nature* (1770) was published pseudonymously and known in Britain as being either by Helvétius or ‘Mirabaud’.

In the main body of the pamphlet, Turner quotes *Système* repeatedly, echoing its arguments that matter might have existed forever and has no need of God to direct it since it is endowed with its own ‘energy of nature’, whereby it constantly forms new combinations. Drawing on the discussions of prehistoric remains by such scientists as Buffon and Cuvier, he argues that the present range of living

species, supposedly created once and for all by God, depends on the present environment: ‘bones of animals have been dug up which appertain to no species now existing, and which must have perished from an alteration in the system of things taking place too considerable for it [*sic*] to endure’ (p. 41). With another change, the ‘energy of nature’ might produce them again – as envisaged in the ‘Epicurean system’. This system, postulating a universe made entirely of ‘atoms and void’, and most widely accessible to classically educated readers through the Roman poet Lucretius, was acknowledged even by the seventeenth-century Christian apologist Cudworth as giving ‘a weight to atheism not to be overturned’. Unlike the Christian, the atheist has a sense of ‘his relative importance’ in the great chain of Nature, and ‘If the world has so good a mother, a father may well be spared’, especially one so apparently ‘haughty, jealous and vindictive’ as the Christian God (p. 47). And if this God exists, why does he not make himself known, why ‘require a Jesus, a Mahomet or a Priestley to reveal it’? Or as the author of *Système de la nature* asks, ‘How does he permit a mortal like me to dare attack his rights, his titles, or his very existence?’ (p. 49). As a good scientist, Priestley really agrees with Turner and d’Holbach that everything in nature is determined and that ‘Necessity is therefore the first God’; but at a certain point he exchanges emotion for empiricism and simply worships what he wants to believe in, making God in his own image like all religious devotees: ‘They are all idolators and anthropomorphites to a man; there is none but an atheist that is not the one or the other’ (p. 21).

All these ideas – of Epicurean atoms, unexplained bones, necessity, the energy of nature, misguided self-projection, the redundancy of revelation, and the preference for a natural mother over a cruel father – will recur constantly throughout this book, sometimes in some unexpected mouths. A great many of them were first brought systematically together in what Priestley called ‘the Bible of Atheism’, d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature*.

A thoroughgoing materialist, d’Holbach appeals both to Epicurean atomism and to Newton’s theory of *vis inertiae* (the force needed to resist other forces even in resting bodies) to argue that motion and energy are aspects of matter itself, and therefore have no need of injection into an otherwise ‘dead’ universe by an external deity.⁶ Man is himself merely an arrangement of matter, who may either have existed forever, like the earth, or have developed to

adapt to a changing environment if, for instance, the earth itself began as a comet, or has undergone cataclysmic changes in which earlier species have been destroyed – as man may in turn have to give way to new species if the environment changes again. That life can develop spontaneously is demonstrated by the growth of microscopic animals in sealed jars of flour paste, and ‘the production of a man, independent of the ordinary means, would not be more marvellous than that of an insect with flour and water’ (*System of Nature*, I, 6 and 2, pp. 52–4, 15–16). Given the materiality of all nature, psychological and moral forces can be described in similar terms to physical ones: ‘those modes of action which natural philosophers designate by the terms *attraction, repulsion, sympathy, antipathy, affinities, relations*; that moralists describe under the names of *love, hatred, friendship, aversion*’; ‘Natural philosophers call [the tendency to self-conservation] SELF-GRAVITATION. Newton calls it INERT FORCE. Moralists denominate it, in man, SELF-LOVE’ (I, 4, pp. 29–32).

Another influential part of d’Holbach’s argument relates to the early development of religion. Man embodied powerful natural forces as separate beings, beginning with fire: ‘Thus he . . . fancied he saw, the igneous matter pervade every thing, . . . he gave it his own form, called it Jupiter, and ended by worshipping this image of his own creation’ (I, 6, p. 50). Similarly, Saturn represented time, Juno wind, and Minerva wisdom; Osiris, Mithras, Adonis and Apollo all represented the sun, while Isis, Astarte, Venus and Cybele all represented nature ‘rendered sorrowful by his periodical absence’. The founders of this mythology, however, understood that it was only ‘the daughter of natural philosophy embellished by poetry; only destined to describe nature and its parts’. The Orphic Hymn to Pan demonstrates that ‘It was the great whole they deified; it was its various parts which they made their inferior gods.’ Such knowledge was, however, confined to the élite ‘mystery’ cults: ‘Indeed, the first institutors of nations, and their immediate successors in authority, only spoke to the people, by fables, allegories, enigmas, of which they reserved the right of giving an explanation: this, in fact, constituted the mysteries of the various worship paid to the pagan divinities’ (II, 2, pp. 269–72). d’Holbach argues that the habit of allegorizing natural processes is also evident in some biblical myths, and that Moses’ account of the birth of Eve from Adam’s rib reflects a belief he had picked up in Egypt that humans were

originally hermaphrodite, like aphids. He explains how ‘Moses, who was educated among these Egyptians’ wrote in Genesis that “‘in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them’”: ‘It is not therefore presuming too much, to suppose, as the Egyptians were a nation very fond of expressing their opinions by hieroglyphics, that that part which describes Eve as taken out of Adam’s rib, was an hieroglyphic emblem’ (II, 2, p. 268).⁷

Despite the odd disrespectful aside, however, d’Holbach shows little interest in attacking biblical Judaeo-Christianity in detail, presenting Mosaic monotheism as an attempt to reform older systems and ‘the first doctors of Christianity [as] Platonists, who combined the reformed Judaism, with the philosophy taught in Academia’. For him, it is sufficient to lump them with other types of ‘theism’, whose adherents, ‘undeceived upon a great number of the grosser errors, . . . hold the notion of unknown agents . . . full of infinite perfections; whom they distinguish from nature, but whom they clothe after their own fashion; to whom they ascribe their own limited views’, and hence can have ‘no fixed point, no standard, no common measure more than other systems’ (II, 7, pp. 389–90). For d’Holbach, ‘theism’ includes what is usually called ‘deism’, differing from ‘superstition’ in that in theism ‘the tints are certainly blended with more mellowness, the colouring of a more pleasing hue, the whole more harmonious, but the distances equally indistinct’. At best, such enlightened theism is only a short stop on the route to atheism which, ironically, is travelled faster under more oppressive regimes: ‘Theism is a system at which the human mind cannot make a long sojourn . . . Many incredulous beings, many theists, are to be met with in those countries where freedom of opinion reigns; . . . atheists, as they are termed, will be found in those countries where superstition, backed by the sovereign authority, most enforces the ponderosity of its yoke’ (II, 13, pp. 482, 479). While the same argument was used to reverse effect by many British apologists for Protestant toleration as against papist tyranny, Turner’s *An Answer to Dr Priestley* picks up precisely on d’Holbach’s coolly dialectical argument that religious suppression has put the French *philosophes* ahead of the game.

Of the slew of French texts with a bearing on the atheism debate in Britain, the *Système* and one other (Volney’s *Ruines*) are all I shall have room to include here. Both had a considerable ‘underground’ reputation as high-watermarks of infidelism, but both were also

inscribed into what may be called the 'official' debate through the tireless publications of Priestley. And interestingly, his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* speaks of the *Système* with some respect as at least more 'frank and open' than Priestley's main object of attack, David Hume (Letter XI, *Works*, IV, p. 389).

Hume, famously, refused to be pinned down as a deist, let alone an atheist: once, on introduction to a group of leading *philosophes* in France, he claimed not to believe in the existence of atheists, even when told by d'Holbach himself that there were fifteen in the room.⁸ Though Britain's most formidable sceptical philosopher, his refusal to push that scepticism into avowed disbelief made him a difficult, often frustrating target for defenders of religion, while many of his arguments nonetheless went straight into the kitty of atheist polemic. His essay 'Of Miracles' (1741) carefully scraped away at the grounds for our accepting reports of miracles we have not witnessed, or of our preferring biblical reports over equally circumstantial pagan ones. The controversial eleventh chapter of *An Enquiry into Human Understanding* (1748) puts the case for thoroughgoing materialism into the mouth of an Epicurean philosopher, and rejects the standard arguments for outlawing that position on grounds of morality. *A Natural History of Religion* (1757) presents both polytheism and monotheism from a largely psychological or anthropological perspective, as natural cyclical correctives to each other's considerable drawbacks. Written about the same time, but intentionally published long posthumously, in 1779, *Dialogues on Natural Religion* launches a devastatingly sceptical assault on deist arguments that any deity, let alone a benign one, can be deduced from the evidence available to us from the natural universe. All these texts, however, cover Hume's retreat with variations of the argument that scepticism cuts all ways, and therefore ultimately impels us towards accepting revelation as the only possible guide to the truth.

In *Letters*, Priestley acknowledges the skill with which Hume allows good arguments to the opponents of the *Dialogues*' sceptical spokesman Philo, who then retracts his views at the end, but 'when, at the last, evidently to save appearances, he relinquishes the argument, on which he had expatiated with so much triumph, it is without alleging any sufficient reason; so that his arguments are left, as no doubt the writer intended, to have their full effect on the mind of the reader . . . [T]hough the debate seemingly closes on the side of the theist, the victory is clearly on the side of the atheist'.⁹

Priestley's apparent preference for d'Holbach's forthright atheism is of a piece with his refusal to carry on playing the polite game of hide-and-seek claimed as the proper forum for such debates by Hume and his friend Edward Gibbon. It was in his express wish to open up the rules of debate to include all 'sincere' views as theoretically legitimate that Priestley prompted Hammon/Turner's *Answer*.

Priestley's alacrity in prolonging such debates, or stirring them up unilaterally, is evident in his challenges to Gibbon, his brief correspondence with whom (also in 1782) is an interesting reverse echo of his skirmish with Hammon. Having attacked Gibbon in *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), he sent him a copy with the clear intention of extracting a public reply or at least permission to publish Gibbon's private one, which Gibbon declined in a tone making very clear the impertinence of such an ill-bred and *ad hominem* approach.

The main objects of Priestley's attack were the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) which, after paying due deference to divine causes, account for the early spread of Christianity in terms of an unappealing psychology of fanaticism and intolerance. Gibbon contrasts these qualities with the tolerance of the long-established polytheism and suggests that they eventually undermined the stability of the empire; furthermore, the failure of non-Christians to confirm the miraculous events of the New Testament is noted in tones of somewhat exaggerated mock astonishment.¹⁰ From their publication in 1776 as the climax to the first volume of *Decline and Fall*, the two chapters were the focus of controversy. Their most respectable opponent – certainly the most respected by Gibbon himself – was Richard Watson, Cambridge Professor of Divinity and later to become Bishop of Llandaff, whose *An Apology for Christianity, in a Series of Letters, addressed to Edward Gibbon, Esq.* was a model of courteous and scholarly rebuke. While praising Gibbon for his 'great work' and probably pious intentions, Watson suggests that other minds might be led to believe that Christianity spread by human means alone, and goes on to argue that the cohesion, morality and courage of the first Christians was in itself a mark of divine guidance, as was their message, which attracted converts solely thanks to its self-evident truth.¹¹ Watson goes on to cite examples of the intolerance of Roman polytheism, and of reasons why such a miracle as the

universal darkness at the moment of crucifixion might have been overlooked by Italians used to the clouds of Etna and Vesuvius. In a final letter, addressed over Gibbon's shoulder to strayers into deism or even atheism, he insists that the only basis for morality is the Christian system of rewards and penalties after death, whose truth is firmly underpinned by miracles, and dismisses the ideas that some biblical prophecies may have been falsified later, that new geological evidence dates the earth well before the supposed creation, and that science and philosophy are fundamentally opposed to religious belief.

In *A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1779), Gibbon praises the 'liberal and philosophic' Watson for his declared wish not to prolong the debate and his refusal 'to descend to employ the disingenuous arts of vulgar controversy'.¹² Since Watson accepts that *some* secondary causes probably assisted the spread of Christianity, their disagreement is only one of degree. Gibbon only takes issue with one of Watson's arguments: that the Roman authorities' hostility to the Christians' refusal to give even token recognition to the pagan gods showed their imperviousness to rational arguments for religious toleration. Gibbon argues that since neither Roman polytheists nor sceptical philosophers would refuse such recognition to any gods, as a matter 'not of *opinion*, but of *custom*', they simply could not understand the Christians' stubbornness.¹³

The Christian impoliteness to which Gibbon hopes Watson will understand his implied objections is, arguably, of a piece with what he clearly finds offensive in Priestley's various approaches to him. 'Considerations addressed to Unbelievers, and especially to Mr Gibbon' opens the general conclusion to Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782). While repeating many of Watson's arguments about the miraculous persuasiveness of the early Christians, Priestley does so in a far more hectoring tone, accusing Gibbon of sharing Voltaire's anti-Semitism and of writing 'sarcastms . . . founded on ignorance' with a 'sneer of triumph'. While modestly disclaiming the role of 'champion of Christianity, against all the world', Priestley owns he will 'have no objection to discuss this subject with Mr Gibbon, as an historian and philosopher', and repeatedly speaks as if this challenge had already been accepted, 'admonishing' him as to what points he should reply to and, worst of all, enlisting him as a potential ally in his own Unitarianism by

stressing the various trinitarian and other superstitions from which both of them are equally free.¹⁴

In reply to Priestley's gift of a copy of his book, Gibbon wrote back declining the offered challenge and querying 'to whom the invidious name of *Unbeliever* more justly belongs: to the historian who, without interposing his own sentiments, has delivered a simple narrative of authentic facts, or to the disputant, who . . . condemns the religion of every Christian nation as a fable'. Further, 'since you assume the right to determine the objects of my past and future studies', Gibbon passes on the 'almost unanimous . . . wish of the philosophic world' that Priestley return to his scientific studies and abandon religious controversy, taking warning from the Swiss Unitarian Servetus, burned by the Calvinists for heresy but now only remembered for his work on the circulation of the blood.¹⁵ In reply, Priestley insists that for all his protests Gibbon's real aim 'has been to discredit Christianity in fact, while, in words you represent yourself as a friend to it; a conduct which I scruple not to call highly unworthy and mean, an insult on the common sense of the Christian world'. As a means of hiding from the law (from which Priestley himself is in greater danger) such double-talk is valueless, and by now too hackneyed to seem 'ingenious and witty'.¹⁶ Since Gibbon had claimed to write the *Vindication* to defend his 'honour', surely Priestley has now insulted him enough to make him enter the lists again? As for Servetus, Priestley respects his martyrdom more than he would the greatest scientific discovery; and his own scientific researches are proceeding apace, in no way interrupted by his theological involvements. To Gibbon's curt reply that the letter's 'style and temper' make him decline all further correspondence, Priestley riposted with a request to publish the correspondence so far, and met Gibbon's brusque refusal by stating that he would in any case circulate it among friends, and that Gibbon would be wise to say nothing more since any further protest would only increase the volume of the correspondence to be thus circulated. Gibbon seems to have followed this advice, and Priestley subsequently published the correspondence in *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, going on to attack Gibbon again in *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part II* (1787).

As we have seen, d'Holbach's *Système* touches lightly on the idea that some of the fundamental images and events of biblical narrative

derive from Egyptian or other mythologies which are really attempts to describe natural processes metaphorically. Similar ideas were discussed in less committedly 'atheistic' but in some ways more shocking terms by Richard Payne Knight's *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1785), privately published for the learned Society of Dilettanti, along with a shorter essay by Sir William Hamilton. To be discussed more fully in the next chapter, Knight's essay threatened to ruin his career as an MP and was hastily withdrawn from even the limited circulation it had enjoyed. Seen as a disgraceful mixture of obscenity and impiety, it was a jaunty but largely serious attempt to trace the phallic worship still to be found in parts of Italy (the subject of Hamilton's contribution) back through many religions from Greek paganism to Hinduism, and then forward again into certain aspects of Christianity itself. In its mythographic approach to the links between Christianity and other religions, *The Worship of Priapus* is not new, but for Britain at least it made very clear the possible dangers of this rising field of research. The more acceptably orthodox face of such comparative mythography had been seen in Jacob Bryant's *Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1775), and in the oriental researches of Sir William Jones, a major source for Knight but also for many subsequent 'proofs' of the primacy of Christianity over other religions.

I shall be turning shortly to the massive impact of the French Revolution on the atheism debate once we enter the 1790s, but for now I would like to anticipate that moment slightly by following the mythographic issues just noted through into that decade, first by considering a key text of 'revolutionary atheism': Constantin de Volney's *Les Ruines, ou, revolutions des empires* (1791; English translation 1792). The book opens with the narrator musing on the ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra in Lebanon, and then being whisked up out of his body into space by a spirit or 'Genius' who shows him the ruins of many other seats of empire, and explains that with them passed many belief systems which once seemed as universally valid as Christianity does now. In the dream vision which takes up the rest of the book, the Genius conjures up a tribunal in which all the world's religions have to justify themselves before the legislators of 'a free people' recently liberated from superstition – clearly France.¹⁷ In chapter 22, after the contradictions and failings of all have been exposed in turn, the revolutionary legislators outline the true history of all religions: most, apparently, sprang from early Egyptian

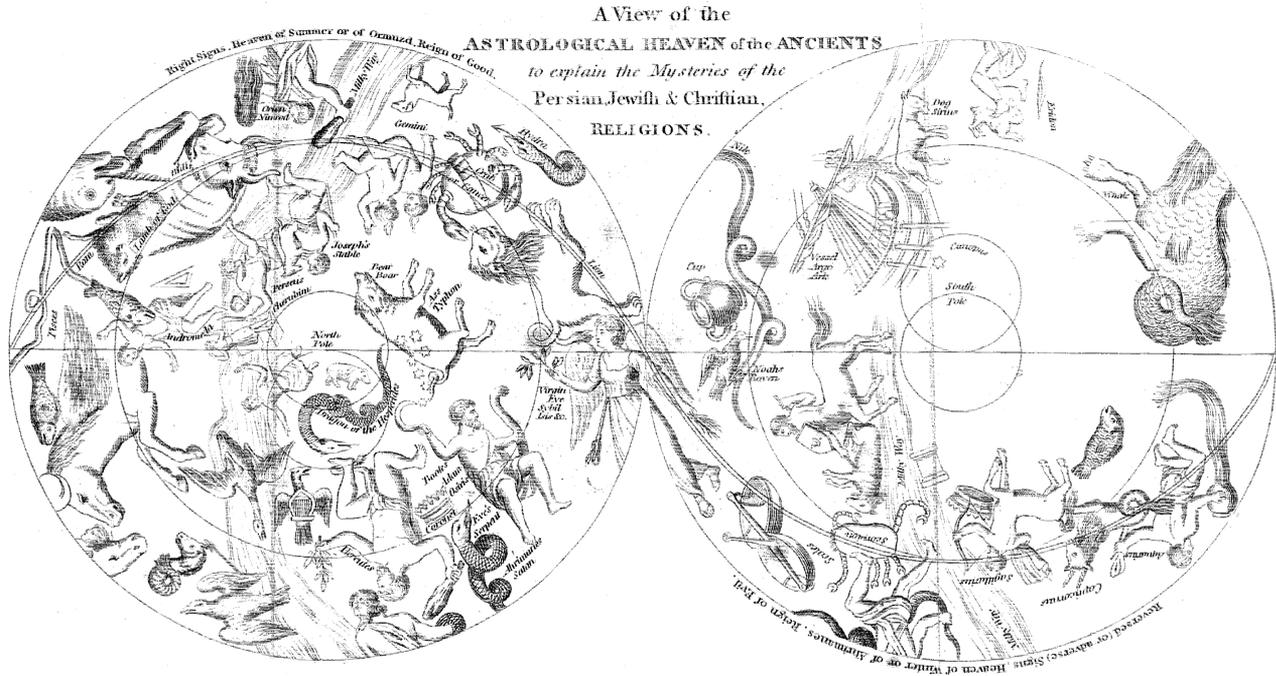


Plate 1. Astrological chart from Volney's *Ruins* (1791), showing figures from various religions including Christianity as personifications of astronomical configurations. Describing one depiction of the twelve signs of the zodiac, Volney says 'that of the Virgin represents a young woman with an infant by her side: the whole scene, indeed, of the birth of Jesus is to be found in the adjacent part of the heavens. The stable is the constellation of the charioteer and the goat, formerly Capricorn; a constellation called praesepe Jovis Heniochi, stable of Iou, and the word Iou is found in the name Iouseph (Joseph)' (London: Thomas Tegg, 1826, pp. 323–4, 196).

attempts to predict the seasons, weather and fluctuations of the Nile according to astronomical configurations which later became personified as gods, whose natures changed as their cults spread round the world. Numerous ingenious comparisons of divine names and attributes (along lines prefigured by d'Holbach, Bryant and Jones, as well as Knight) include with deliberate lack of special treatment figures from the Christian narrative usually accepted as historical, even by the most sceptical. Thus Joseph and Mary become variants of the constellations Capricorn and Virgo, and the name of Jesus Christ is seen as derived from or related to 'Yes-us' (a variant of Bacchus) and Krishna.¹⁸ At the end of the tribunal, the legislators rule that all religions have been vehicles for the personal aggrandisement of priests and rulers, and that henceforth only the Laws of Nature should be followed.

In Part I of his long anti-radical poem *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794), T. J. Mathias attacks both Knight and Volney. A note on Knight's *Priapus* states that 'all the ordure and filth, all the antique pictures, and all the representations of the generative organs, in their most odious and degrading protrusion, have been raked together and *copulated* . . . with a new species of blasphemy'. As for Volney, 'by a jargon of language, and antiquity, and mythology, and philosophy, he labours to confound and blend *them all* in uncertain tradition and *astronomical* allusions'. In making Jesus a version of the sun-god, Volney 'requires of his reader *only* the surrender of his common sense . . . [yet] demands the admission of *all his* allegories and mystical meanings (. . . in the true French stile)'.¹⁹

A fuller response to Volney was made (inevitably) by Priestley, first briefly in Letter IV of *Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France, on the Subject of Religion* (1793), then in *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity* (1794), then at greater length in a third edition expanded to include 'Animadversions on the Writings of several Modern Unbelievers, and especially The Ruins of M. Volney' (1797), whom a revised preface invites to reply. When he did so, in a tone expressing a Gibbonian wariness about joining a public debate on Priestley's terms, Priestley gleefully rejoined with *Letters to M. Volney, occasioned by a Work of his entitled Ruins, and by his Letter to the Author* (also 1797). After expressions of respect and regret over Volney's personalizing of their debate, Priestley argues that 'the splendour of your imagination, and the fascinating charms of your diction' are particularly dangerous in their attractiveness to young readers, too ill-informed

to resist the false arguments of one ‘of your celebrity and shining talents’ (*Works*, XVII, p. 117). Citing much evidence for Christ’s historical existence, he goes on to challenge Volney for evidence on eleven specific points, including his assertion that the God of Moses was Egyptian, his linking of Christ with Bacchus and Krishna, and his claim that the world is at least 17,000 years old, ‘which entirely overturns the *Mosaic* account of the origin of the human race’. This account, confirmed by no less an authority than Newton, can hardly be overturned by passing references to one Dupuis, whom Priestley has never heard of. Ending with a reminder of his own honorary French citizenship, Priestley concludes by wishing Volney ‘*health and fraternity*’ (pp. 126–8).

By 1799, Priestley had remedied his ignorance of Charles Dupuis’s *Origine de tous les cultes, ou religion universelle* (1795), which he challenged in *Remarks on M. Dupuis’s Origin of all Religions* (1799) in terms similar to his attacks on Volney. Despite the latter’s acknowledgements to the former, Priestley suggests that the views of Dupuis’s more ponderous but later-published work are too ‘strange’ to derive from anyone but Volney himself. Along with further challenges for astronomical and mythographic evidence for these views, Priestley also attacks the residual apparent deism of Dupuis’s assertion that ‘There is nothing but *the universe itself* that can correspond to the immense idea which the name of *God* presents to us’ (*Works*, XVII, p. 322). Volney too is prone to such pantheist pronouncements, and in identifying as atheistic any view which identifies the creation with the creator, Priestley assists in the slow stopping-up of deist escape holes which is a main feature of this period.

The brief *Remarks on Dupuis* were published as a pendant to Priestley’s more ambitious *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations* (1799). Drawing largely on Sir William Jones’s Asian studies (particularly *Institutes of Hindu Law, or the Ordinances of Menu* and *Dissertations and Miscellaneous Pieces relating to the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia*), Priestley demonstrates impressive if newly acquired mastery of the rapidly expanding field of Orientalist knowledge which, if not carefully patrolled, might lead to all kinds of marginalization of Christianity by comparison to other cultures and belief systems. This danger is here represented by yet another Frenchman, Langles, who sees ‘the religion of the Hindoos’ as a source for ‘those of the Egyptians and Jews who have done nothing but ape

the latter, of the Chinese, of the Greeks, of the Romans, and even of the Christians'. The five Hindu Vedas are the prototype of 'the five books of Moses, who . . . only copied Egyptian works, originally from India'. Furthermore, Langles accepts a non-Mosaic chronology whereby 'many thousand years before' the Egyptians or Jews 'formed themselves into societies, or ever thought of forming a religion, the civilized Indians adored the Supreme Being, eternal, almighty and all-wise, divided into three persons' (*Works*, xvii, pp. 139–42, 324).

On the chronological question, Priestley again invokes the authority of Newton as well as detailing Jones's determined efforts to reduce the enormous time span of Hindu mythical history to proper Mosaic proportions. While normally cited as a reliable bulwark against Langles's impious suggestions, Jones is also not completely to be trusted: sound on the absurdities of Hinduism, and its clear status as a corruption of the Persian branch of the proto-Christian ur-religion destroyed at Babel, he waxes dangerously sentimental over the Hindus' 'spirit of sublime devotion, of benevolence to mankind, and of amiable tenderness to all sentient creatures'. To counter such religiously levelling tendencies, Priestley compares a long list of absurd superstitions with the rational worship enjoined by Moses and Christ, which for Priestley of course does not include the division of God 'into three persons' cited by Langles and others (including Jones at times) as proof of the fundamental identity of the two systems. For Priestley, the evils of Hinduism range from irrational vegetarianism and teetotalism to widow suicide and the obscenities of phallic lingam worship (pp. 141, 149, 172). While emphasizing Hinduism's distance from Judaeo-Christianity, however, Priestley does pay credence to such confirmatory aspects as its possession of a deluge myth (on which Jones too laid much stress), and on any links with Western paganism which can be used to illustrate what a powerful world system of superstition the Jews and Christians were up against.

In tracing the mythographic dimension of the atheism debate up to 1799, I have had temporarily to bypass the most important phase of the whole debate: the intensely politicized furore surrounding the French Revolution. As early as 1790, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was using the charge of deep-laid atheist conspiracy to blacken both the revolution itself and the Enlightenment atmosphere leading up to it:

The literary cabal [i.e. the Encyclopaedists] had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal which hitherto had been discovered only in the propagators of some system of piety. They were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree; and from thence, by an easy progress, with the spirit of persecution according to their means.²⁰

Come the revolution,

We cannot be ignorant of the spirit of atheistical fanaticism, that is inspired by a multitude of writings, dispersed with incredible assiduity and expense, and by sermons delivered in all the streets and places of public resort in Paris. These writings and sermons have filled the populace with a black and savage atrocity of mind, which supersedes in them the common feelings of nature, as well as all sentiments of morality and religion.²¹

These quotations can perhaps stand for now for what was to become an increasingly standard British association of ideas, especially in the deliberately anti-radical works of Hannah More, T. J. Mathias and the *Anti-Jacobin* group.

Within this context, Priestley's radical politics were more to the fore than his campaign for revealed religion. Elected an honorary French citizen by the National Assembly, his pro-French sympathies occasioned the famous 'Church and King' Birmingham riot of 1791, in which, possibly at government instigation, a crowd destroyed his meeting-house, library and laboratory – an event which led directly to his later emigration to Pennsylvania in 1794. The official deposition of Christianity in such ceremonies as the installation of the worship of Reason in Notre-Dame Cathedral in 1793 divided his loyalties, but his conviction that the new France was engaged in a slow struggle from Catholic oppression to Protestant enlightenment soon received a boost from Robespierre's execution of the more extreme atheizers such as Hébert, and his installation of the deistic cult of the Supreme Being instead. It was in this context that Priestley published *A Continuation of the Letters addressed to the Philosophers and Politicians of France* (1794), in which he informs his 'Fellow Citizens' of his satisfaction at Robespierre's and the Assembly's reintroduction of '*morals and religion*': this bodes better than in Priestley's visit to France in 1774, when 'every person of eminence to whom I had access, and . . . every man of letters almost without exception, was a professed Atheist, and an unbeliever in a future state on any principle whatever'.²² Now the existence of God, a

future state and the immortality of the soul are all accepted, and he trusts Christianity itself will follow in time. Priestley then proceeds to mount the kind of assault on natural religion which in the hands of Hume or Shelley might be taken as a plea for atheism: nature gives us no assurances of God's goodness, the existence of a human soul as distinct from those of animals, an after-life or, hence, any reason for good moral conduct (*Works*, XXI, pp. 113–17). Robespierre's idol Rousseau, who denied the evidence of miracles (in the 'Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar', in *Emile*, Book v), offered no way out of these problems, nor can the Assembly simply *decree* the doctrine of a future state on Robespierre's grounds of its 'use' (pp. 119–24). Pagans such as Cicero and the English seventeenth-century deists alike attempted to deduce the immortality of the soul from first principles, but then abandoned the idea. In fact, however, the French have only given up on Christianity because of its Catholic 'corruptions': if they examine the Bible itself they will find plenteous evidence of verified miracles, which all confirm the truth of an after-life and the rest of the teaching of Christ, who was himself a champion for the 'liberty and equality of man' (pp. 125–6).

In the same year as Priestley's letters to the French politicians, another work appeared which credited 'the determination of mind which gave birth' to it to the French Revolution, and acknowledged 'the *Système de la Nature*, the works of Rousseau, and those of Helvétius' as its most immediate influences.²³ William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) does not spend much time on religion, but its relegation of specific religious ideas to the heading of 'Opinion Considered as a Subject of Political Institution' (what a Marxist might call 'ideology') is deliberately icy. Continuing from a chapter on 'The Political Superintendence of Opinion', the chapter 'Of Religious Establishments' (VI, 2) argues that 'the system of religious conformity is a system of blind submission' whose priests are 'fettered in the outset by having a code of propositions put into their hands, in a conformity to which all their enquiries must terminate', so that the people are 'bid to look for instruction and morality to a denomination of men, formal, embarrassed and hypocritical, in whom the main spring of intellect is unbent and incapable of action' (*Writings*, III, pp. 324–6).

Hard-hitting though this is, Godwin's own roots as an ex-Dis-senting preacher appear in his willingness to stop at this point: 'if I think it right to have a spiritual instructor to guide me in my

researches and at stated intervals to remind me of my duty, I ought to be at liberty to . . . supply myself in this respect'; 'If [public worship] be from God, it is profanation to imagine that it stands in need of the alliance of the state' (*Writings*, III, p. 327). Perhaps only the cool detachment of those 'ifs' signals Godwin's personal atheism, though this could easily be read into some of *Political Justice's* most contentious claims about the non-utility of such emotional reflexes as gratitude, obedience to parents and commitment to marriage partners when these are socially imposed rather than individually and rationally motivated.²⁴

Godwin's fullest explanations of his 'conversion from Christianity' were unpublished in his lifetime and will be considered in a later chapter. As far as the debate of the 1790s is concerned, his atheism was widely known to critics and friends (and those who were both, such as Coleridge), but conveyed in his published work chiefly by the sort of studied silence about religion – except under the heading of political coercion of opinion – whose significance will be reconsidered when we come to Wordsworth. His 'circle' of friends and debating partners constitutes, however, such a significant section of the intelligentsia of the time that an important phase of the debate can be explored by considering some of their interactions, whether or not conveyed in explicit published polemic on religious matters.

The 1794 trial for treason of Godwin's atheist friends Thomas Holcroft and John Thelwall, among others, was one of the key political events of the 1790s, setting the government's seal on its determination to root out 'Jacobin' republicanism, but also establishing – with their eventual jury acquittal – that there was widespread sympathy for their views. Some of the credit for their acquittal belongs to Godwin's pamphlet 'Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, October 2, 1794', whose chilling ending 'and the Lord have mercy on your souls!' brings out the barbarism of the sentence of execution that awaits them if convicted.²⁵ While the charge did not involve atheism, the fact that the leading defendants *were* known atheists helped to forge further the link in conservative minds between infidelity and political republicanism, which increasingly became the mental association both radicals and infidels had to contend with even when it was not justified.

It often was justified among the circle surrounding Joseph Johnson, who was responsible for publishing an extraordinary

number of the left-leaning books of the 1780s and 1790s, and whose house was the centre for an immense cross-fertilization of ideas among his authors. These included Mary Wollstonecraft, who first met her future husband Godwin here. Famously, it was his *Memoirs* (1798) of her after her death that ruined her reputation for more than a generation by revealing too much about her love life; a situation not helped by his proud affirmation that as she was dying, 'during her whole illness, not one word of a religious cast fell from her lips'.²⁶

She was not, however, an atheist: the religious views expressed in her works are broadly those of the 'rational' end of Rational Dissent, as promulgated at the Newington Green Academy where she had met Richard Price, the main British butt of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In her rapid riposte to Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), she proclaims 'I reverence the rights of men. – Sacred rights!', but adds 'The fear of God makes me reverence myself'.²⁷ In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her portrait of the ideal woman who has used her abilities to the full concludes 'The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death, and rising from the grave, may say – Behold, thou gavest me a talent – and here are five talents' (*Political Writings*, p. 119). By the time of *A View of the French Revolution* (1794), however, the idea of religion has become much more a matter of disputed symbolisms:

We must get entirely clear of all the notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin: the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora's box, and the other fables, too tedious to enumerate, on which priests have erected their tremendous structures of imposition, to persuade us, that we are naturally inclined to evil. (*Political Writings*, p. 294)

On the other hand, religious terms can be used positively when describing the realization of human potential: 'Respect thyself – whether it be termed fear of God – religion; love of justice – morality; or, self-love – the desire of happiness.' More apocalyptically, 'Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face' and hence 'The image of God implanted in our nature is now more rapidly expanding' (p. 296). In all these various references there is a constant equation of God with reason and the fulfilment of potential; in the last, the idea of an imminent realization of 'the image of God implanted in our nature' comes close to the antinomian and millenarian 'enthusiasm' to which we shall return in relation to Blake.

Mary Hays, the friend and admirer of both Wollstonecraft and Godwin, was a Unitarian whose first major publication in 1791 argued for the efficacy of prayer against the more hardline rationalism of the leading Unitarian radical Gilbert Wakefield. By the time of her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), however, she presented in the character of Mr Francis an approving portrait of Godwin's opposition to all accepted forms of religion as a clog to progress:

That immutability, which constitutes the perfection of what we (from poverty of language) term the *divine mind*, would inevitably be the bane of creatures liable to error; it is of the constancy, rather than the fickleness, of human beings, that we have reason to complain . . . Bigotry, whether religious, political, moral, or commercial, is the canker-worm at the root of the tree of knowledge and virtue . . . These are the truths, which will slowly, but ultimately, prevail; in the splendour of which, the whole fabric of superstition will gradually fade and melt away.²⁸

These ideas, along with numerous references to Helvétius and such daring speculations as whether the soul is 'a composition of the elements, the result of organized matter, or a subtle and ethereal fire' (p. 25), aid the heroine Emma as she battles through a wasteland of sexual disappointment based on Hays's own long-standing passion for William Frend, the radical scholar whose expulsion from Cambridge in 1793 for attacking the Trinity converted Coleridge to Unitarianism.

Along with the avowed feminists Wollstonecraft and Hays, many other woman writers were prominent 1790s radicals, and I shall consider some of the work of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and others later in this book. All identified 'superstition' as one of the chief barriers to the advance of human equality, but it was not until the 1820s that it became possible for women to put themselves on record as atheists: partly because such views would have been hard to publish until the emergence of a fiercely radical press unintimidated by legal or social pressures, and perhaps partly because in the 1790s Rational Dissenting circles had proved immensely enabling to women's explorations of radical and emancipatory ideas.²⁹

When Wollstonecraft and Godwin met in 1791, the latter was lured to the dinner at Joseph Johnson's by the chance of meeting by far the most celebrated and notorious radical of the time, Thomas Paine.³⁰ The two parts of Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–2) outsold any other political work ever up to that time, partly thanks to the direct,