

# 12

## Hobbes and Early English Deism

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In 1754 the Presbyterian minister John Leland published a book called *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers that Have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century*.<sup>1</sup> Leland was determined to provide a thorough account of those whom he considered to be the prominent English deists, their writings, and the controversies in which they were involved. The deists, according to Leland, ‘reject all revealed religion, and discard all pretences to it as owing to imposture or enthusiasm.’<sup>2</sup> Their aim, therefore, is ‘to set aside revelation, and to substitute mere natural religion, or . . . no religion at all, in its room.’<sup>3</sup>

Leland’s list starts with Lord Herbert of Cherbury, ‘the first remarkable Deist in order of time.’<sup>4</sup> The second figure on Leland’s list of deistical writers is Thomas Hobbes. Leland explained that there ‘have been few persons, whose writings have had a more pernicious influence in spreading irreligion and infidelity than his.’<sup>5</sup> According to Leland, Hobbes took Scripture as the word and the law of God on the one hand but ridiculed inspiration and revelation on the other; and he sometimes saw inspiration as a supernatural gift but also described the pretence to it as a sign of madness.<sup>6</sup> Leland’s attack on Hobbes touched on a range of issues in his theory, such as the authority of Scripture being dependent on the authority of the sovereign, the questioning of aspects in the old and new testaments, the denial of our ability to know any more about God than that He exists, and so on. Leland argued that ‘Hobbes’s scheme strikes at the foundation of all religion, both natural and revealed’ and that ‘it tendeth not only to subvert

<sup>1</sup> John Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers that Have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century* (London, 1754). A second volume was published in the following year.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Herbert’s main contribution to deism was in his theory of the common notions of religion that are rationally, naturally, and universally true. See Edward Herbert, *De Veritate*, ed. and trans. Meyrick H. Carré (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1937), especially 291–307. Recent scholarship has shown, however, that although the common notions were *also* influential for deism, there is not enough evidence to suggest that they were in themselves deistic. See R. W. Serjeantson, ‘Herbert of Cherbury before Deism: The Early Reception of the *De veritate*’, *The Seventeenth Century* 16.2 (2001), 217–38.

<sup>5</sup> Leland, *A View*, 40.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

the authority of the scripture, but to destroy God's moral administration?<sup>7</sup> Leland concluded:

the manifold absurdities and inconsistency of his scheme, and the pernicious consequences of it to religion, morality and the civil government, have been so well exposed, and set in a clear light, that there are not many of our modern Deists that would be thought openly to espouse his system in its full extent. And yet it cannot be denied, that there are not a few things in their writings borrowed from his; and that some of them have chosen rather to follow him than Lord Herbert in several of his principles; and particularly in asserting the materiality and mortality of the human soul, and denying man's free agency.<sup>8</sup>

According to Leland, the deists borrowed much from Hobbes, and in some ways more than they did from Herbert, who Leland himself considered to be the first English deist. They did so, however, without always declaring they were adopting Hobbes, due to his dubious reputation at the time. Particularly in his materialism, Leland argued, Hobbes had gone further than Herbert and had subsequently been followed by the 'modern deists'.

Leland seems right to have acknowledged the complexity of Hobbes's position, holding that 'none of his treatises are directly level'd against revealed religion.'<sup>9</sup> But was Leland also right in recognizing that Hobbes was in fact, alongside Herbert, one of the fathers of English deism, at least in some respects?

The relevant scholarship takes Hobbes to be influential for the English deists of the late seventeenth century to some extent.<sup>10</sup> However, the full scope and the precise nature of the relationship between Hobbes and the deists remains a puzzle. It is arguable that Hobbes inspired them with his anticlericalism, his sceptical and even mocking attitude towards revelation and miracles, and his thorough exegesis of Scripture, including his questioning of its authorship and authority. At the same time, it would be slightly anachronistic to identify Hobbes himself as a deist, nor is there any historical evidence for such a claim. Moreover, there are several reasons to separate him from these 'radicals', mainly his alleged pessimism regarding human nature and consequently his absolutist

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.      <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–8.      <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Parkin has argued that 'Hobbes's critical treatment of religion could be added to a deist's conceptual toolkit', *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England, 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 405–6. See also Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies 1660–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 133–7. For other brief (and sometimes hesitant) suggestions in this direction, see Peter Gay, *Deism: An Anthology* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1968), 22–4; Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 75–7; Richard Tuck, *Hobbes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91; Edwin Curley, '“I durst not write so boldly” or, How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise', in *Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. D. Bostrenghi (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1992), 572. Finally, see Patricia Springborg's illuminating paper where she focuses on Hobbes's possible reception as a deist based on some heterodox aspects which she identifies particularly in his 'long-neglected *Historia Ecclesiastica*', namely, '1) his equation of God and Nature; 2) his materialist epistemology and atomist ontology; and 3) his theory of representation, in particular his doctrine of the Trinity'. See Patricia Springborg, 'Hobbes the Atheist and his Deist Reception', in *I filosofi e la società senza religione*, ed. Marco Geuna and Gianbattista Gori (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), especially 150–1.

political theory, or alternatively his voluntarist theology.<sup>11</sup> This has led some scholars, most recently and famously Jonathan Israel, to claim that it was Spinoza, rather than Hobbes, who was the main influence on the ‘radical enlightenment’, English deism included.<sup>12</sup>

In the first part of this chapter I will show that Hobbes was a significant influence for subsequent deists and that this can be clearly inferred from many of their texts.<sup>13</sup> I will focus on the core figures of English deism from its early stages in the 1670s until its peak in the early eighteenth century, namely Charles Blount, John Toland, Matthew Tindal, and Anthony Collins. In the second part I will go back to Hobbes and suggest that in some important respects he anticipated the deist project—mainly in his anti-clericalism alongside his hope for natural reason—even if in other respects he was more traditional or conservative than the later deists. Accordingly, Leland’s assessment was far from being mistaken: Hobbes was indeed a father of English deism.

## 12.1 The Deists and Hobbes

### 12.1.1 Charles Blount

Some—usually denunciatory—references to the deists were made in England from the late sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Yet it took another century for the debate on the phenomenon called deism to gather momentum, first in England and later on the Continent. It is from the late 1670s, with the appearance of the writings of the young political activist, Charles Blount (1654–93), that we can date this development.

There is some evidence that from an early stage Blount was drawing on Hobbes. In 1678 he sent Hobbes a copy of his publication *Anima Mundi*, in which he explored various ancient views on the immortality of the soul. Accompanying this work, Blount sent Hobbes a letter, praising the manuscript of his ‘Treatise of Heresie’ that would eventually be published posthumously as *An Historical Narration Concerning Heresie*

<sup>11</sup> See for example Jeffrey Barnouw, ‘The Separation of Reason and Faith in Bacon and Hobbes, and Leibniz’s Theodicy’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42.4 (1981), 618; Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 76. Furthermore, it is arguable that Hobbes’s God was the philosophical God as a first cause and the historical God as a person. For this distinction, see for example George Wright, *Religion, Politics and Thomas Hobbes* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 599–627. See also Rosalie Colie, ‘Spinoza and the Early English Deists’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20.1 (1959), 23–46.

<sup>13</sup> Demonstrating intellectual influence requires some caution. See Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, i: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74–6. Here I will rely on cases where there is definite textual evidence of the deists having engaged with Hobbes, following Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*, 12. I am grateful for the comments that I received from the participants of the workshop ‘Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Religion’, King’s College London (April 2015), which made me rethink this methodological issue.

<sup>14</sup> For the earliest mention of the ‘deists’ in England, see Josias Nichols, *An Order of Household Instruction* (London, 1595).

in 1680.<sup>15</sup> Blount wrote in the letter that Hobbes had provided ‘a more accurate and faithful Account of the Nicene Council... than is any where else to be met with.’<sup>16</sup> To Blount, Hobbes was ‘the great instructor of the most sensible Part of Mankind in the noble Science of Philosophy.’<sup>17</sup>

In his *Historical Narration*, Hobbes returned to the primitive church and the problem of the Trinity to give an account of the events that had led to the Council of Nicaea. Hobbes emphasized the role that Constantine the Great had played as the sovereign in making Christianity the public religion and settling the disputes over its creed, first and foremost the one that was provoked by Arius who claimed that Jesus was inferior to God and in fact not divine. The Council of Nicaea decided against the Arians.

In his letter, Blount also went back to the primitive church. His aim was to expose the cynical political interests behind the major Christian debates. He argued that Constantine had treated the Arians as Louis XIV treated the Huguenots: he supported them as long as he needed them in order to gain power, but then he turned against them to assure that their own power was restricted. Blount concluded that ‘there is as little Trust to be reposed in General councils, who have been Guilty of so much Ignorance and Interest, as well as so frequently contradicting one another’<sup>18</sup>

Blount did not attribute this view to Hobbes, but he presumably felt that Hobbes would be sympathetic. In one thing Blount clearly followed Hobbes’s position: ‘You your self have very well observed, when Reason is against a Man, a Man will be against Reason; and therefore ’tis no wonder to see, from several Interests, so many Opinions and Animosities arise.’<sup>19</sup> This is a paraphrase on Hobbes’s statements in *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*.<sup>20</sup> In both cases, Hobbes argued that truth might be in danger once certain interests are at stake. The context was clearly anticlerical. The implication was a strong position against persecution of heresies, since declaring a doctrine as heresy was itself the machinations of clerical interests. Another implication—although much less straightforward—could be a call for toleration of dissenters.<sup>21</sup> This was arguably also the message of his *Historical Narration*.<sup>22</sup> Clearly familiar with these texts, Blount

<sup>15</sup> C, p. 759.      <sup>16</sup> C, p. 759.      <sup>17</sup> C, p. 763.

<sup>18</sup> C, p. 762. As Jeffery Collins argues, Blount’s letter drew on ‘the subversive account of the Nicene Council found in the *Historical Narration*’, which can serve to show how Hobbes’s writing of sacred history ‘prefigured the deism and anticlericalism of the early Enlightenment’. See Jeffrey Collins, ‘Thomas Hobbes’s Ecclesiastical History’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, ed. A. P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 541–2.

<sup>19</sup> C, p. 759.      <sup>20</sup> EL, ‘Epistle Dedicatory’; L, 11, p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, this Hobbesian quote had already been used in 1668 by MP Edward Seymour to support toleration: he mentioned ‘the strictness of the institution of the Spanish Inquisition, one of the greatest causes of the decay of that Monarchy’, and added: ‘Mr Hobbes says, That when reason is against a man, a man is against reason—Why should we proceed in a way, that answers not our end?’ See Anchitell Grey, *Debates of the House of Commons, From the Year 1667 to the Year 1694* (London, 1763), i, 103–4. See Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*, 243; Parkin, ‘Baiting the Bear: The Anglican attack on Hobbes in the Later 1660s’, *History of Political Thought* 34.3 (2013), 445–6. See also Richard Tuck, ‘Hobbes and Locke on Toleration’, in *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*, ed. Mary G. Dietz (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 153–71.

<sup>22</sup> Hobbes redefined heresy historically as ‘no more than a private Opinion’, and argued that there was no English law against it, a tactic that was presumably meant to defend toleration, if not his own fate.

used precisely these arguments, analysing religion primarily in terms of interests, and priestly interests in particular. In another letter of 1678, Blount stated ‘that a Temporal Interest was the great Machine upon which all human Actions moved; and that the common and general pretence of Piety and Religion, was but like Grace before a Meal.’<sup>23</sup> In *A Just Vindication of Learning* (1679), he similarly argued that ‘Faction and Heresie were things unknown in the World, till the increase of Interest, and abatement of Christian Simplicity.’<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, however, in this tract Blount combined this Hobbesian idea with others, derived primarily from Milton, in order to argue for freedom of the press, a cause which Hobbes himself hardly championed.

In 1680 Blount subsequently published two works that presented organized religion in a dubious light, in one of which—his translation of the *Life of Apollonius*—he cited passages from *Leviathan*.<sup>25</sup> He encouraged an impartial inquiry of religion, emphasizing that people do not usually see beyond their interests: ‘self-love is so predominant in mankind’ and so ‘Most men are apt to flatter their own Party, calling that Religion in themselves which in others they term Irreligion or Superstition.’<sup>26</sup> He followed Hobbes’s naturalization, or rather humanization, of religion in order to show that it had come to be nothing but a social convention.<sup>27</sup>

Blount’s subsequent two works were both published in 1683. In *Religio Laici* he followed Herbert in formulating the common notions of religion. This text corresponded to a text by John Dryden from a year earlier with an identical title, which was a defence of revealed religion and an open attack on those who were trying to diminish it in favour of natural religion, namely the deists.<sup>28</sup> Blount’s response to Dryden was thus arguably the first public declaration of deism. Here, too, there are loud echoes of Hobbes. For example, Blount’s sceptical argument that miracles can be pretended ‘by Confederacy, where one helps the other to abuse the People’ is essentially the same one made in *Leviathan*.<sup>29</sup> But the influence became even clearer in the second work that Blount published in that year, *Miracles No Violations of the Laws of Nature*. His message there is that the laws of nature are themselves the decree of God and, therefore, there is no reason to believe that God would work above or contrary to them, that is, in the

See *An Historical Narration Concerning Heresie, And the Punishment Thereof* (London, 1680), 3; Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government 1572–1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 335–45.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Blount, *Oracles of Reason... In Several Letters to Mr. Hobbs and other Persons of Eminent Quality, and Learning* (London, 1693), 156.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Blount, *A Just Vindication of Learning, or, An Humble Address to the High Court of Parliament, In behalf of the Liberty of the Press* (London, 1679), 15.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Blount, *Great is Diana of the Ephesians, or, The Original of Idolatry Together with the Politick Institution of the Gentiles Sacrifices* (London, 1680); Blount, *The Two First Books of Philostratus, Concerning the Life of Apollonius Tyaneus: Written Originally in Greek, and Now Published in English* (London, 1680). Also published in the same year, *The Last Sayings, or Dying Legacy of Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London, 1680) was a short collection of Hobbes’s more critical and radical statements, mainly on religion. Blount was thought to be its author, but recently it has been suggested that he was only connected to the authors. See Noel Malcolm, ‘Charles Blount’, in C, pp. 793–4.

<sup>26</sup> Blount, *Books of Philostratus*, 5–6. <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–9, 32–3, 151–2, 212.

<sup>28</sup> John Dryden, *Religio Laici, or, A Laymans Faith. A Poem* (London, 1682).

<sup>29</sup> Charles Blount, *Religio Laici Written in a Letter to John Dryden, Esq.* (London, 1683), 36. Cf. L, 37, p. 692.

form of miracles. Consequently, one should not look for God's dominion or providence in supernatural phenomena, but rather in the immutable and fixed order of nature, namely, the ordinary course of causes and effects. This argument was copied from the sixth chapter of Spinoza's *Tractatus: Of Miracles*.<sup>30</sup> To that, Blount added other passages from Hobbes, borrowing his extreme scepticism towards the possibility of the occurrence of present miracles. For example, Blount inserted a passage from *Leviathan* in which Hobbes argued that admiration is a function of experience, and therefore phenomena like the eclipses of the sun and the moon were considered miracles only until more knowledge became available.<sup>31</sup>

While relying upon Herbert, Spinoza, and Hobbes, Blount structured his deism as natural religion combined with a systematic attack on priestcraft. But it was ten years later, in 1693, the year of his death, that Blount's most famous book was published. There Blount's admiration for Hobbes finally became public and explicit, as indicated by its full title, *Oracles of Reason . . . In Several Letters to Mr Hobbs and other Persons of Eminent Quality, and Learning*. The *Oracles* included the letter that Blount had sent to Hobbes, but this is not the only place where he paid respect to Hobbes. Another example is found in the first letter in the collection, in which Blount mentioned the 'late and great Modern Philosopher of this Nation', according to whom 'It is not an Argument sufficient to prove those Books were written by Moses, because they are call'd the Five Books of Moses'. Blount repeated the arguments and examples given by Hobbes in *Leviathan* to question Moses' authorship, for example, the claim that the section on Moses' sepulchre must have been written after his death.<sup>32</sup>

Hobbes clearly inspired Blount's scepticism and anticlericalism, as well as his approach to Scripture and its treatment as a historical document. Hence, Blount recruited Hobbes for his cause, even if Hobbes's claims were sometimes not as explicit as Blount's. He took the issues that were raised by Hobbes and others further, developing his version of deism through them. In some cases, Blount did not have to radicalize Hobbes but simply to follow him and Spinoza where they had already been radical enough, as with the case of the Pentateuch. In these instances, Blount was simply a transmitter of ideas and, as his critics recognized, quite an efficient one.

The *Oracles* became the most notorious deistic tract of the early 1690s, provoking numerous responses by outraged Anglicans. The critics of the emerging deism did not miss the links to Hobbes. Sometimes they emphasized these to discredit deism through association with Hobbes, or alternatively, to use deism to discredit Hobbes. The combined attacks on deism and Hobbes—made consistently in the Boyle Lectures for example—emphasized the influence of Hobbes's work upon the emergence of deism. Perhaps they even drew the attention of the 'radicals' themselves to

<sup>30</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 81–96.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Blount, *Miracles No Violations of the Laws of Nature* (London, 1683), 2–3. Cf. L, 37, p. 684.

<sup>32</sup> Blount, *Oracles of Reason*, 16–18. Cf. L, 33, pp. 590–2. See also Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 429.

their closeness to some Hobbesian ideas.<sup>33</sup> As we shall see next, deism developed in a number of directions in the early eighteenth century and Hobbes's footprints can be traced in many of them.

### 12.1.2 John Toland

In the case of John Toland (1670–1722), deism is at best a partial label for his somewhat eclectic work. He combined republicanism with pantheism, anticlericalism with a call for a civil religion.<sup>34</sup> His most famous text, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), sent a clear message to the readers: they must not believe in things they cannot conceive by their own reason, as the gospels are not contrary to, nor above, reason.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, *Christianity Not Mysterious* stated boldly what Blount had suggested earlier and, consequently, it was perceived as an escalation of the attack on revealed religion.

Toland's main point was that Christianity in its original and uncorrupted form, as found in Jesus's teachings and the gospels, had been simple and plain. Mysteries were introduced later by the Jews and Gentiles, and were maintained by the ambition and craft of the priests, with the assistance of philosophers, or 'divinity schools'. Eventually, Christianity ceased to be intelligible and degenerated into mere paganism, consisting of ridiculous and foolish rituals and ceremonies.<sup>36</sup> Some of these arguments follow Hobbes's anticlericalism closely. Like Hobbes, Toland saw the actions of the clergy as 'Usurpations upon Mankind' and believed that it was this political interest that led the clergy to keep for themselves the sole right to interpret Scripture and, most importantly, to claim infallibility.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Toland explicitly acknowledged his debt to Hobbes elsewhere. In an essay 'Concerning the Rise, Progress, and Destruction of Fables and Romances' (1695), Toland similarly investigated the historical origins of fables 'thought necessary to sweeten and allure the minds of men, naturally Superstitious and Credulous.'<sup>38</sup> This time, however, he credited Hobbes openly:

To this Essay of Fables and Romances, the History of Daemonology doth properly belong, with all the terrible troops of Spirits and Witches; but I find this Part is so Judiciously and Learnedly Treated of by our Countryman Mr. Hobbs in that Book of his Leviathan, called the Kingdom of Darkness.<sup>39</sup>

Toland also identified his biblical criticism with Hobbes's. He believed that the reading of Scripture had to be adjusted to reach a better, more natural, understanding of the

<sup>33</sup> See for example Humphrey Prideaux, *A Letter to the Deists* (London, 1696); William Stephens, *An Account of the Growth of Deism in England* (London, 1696). See also Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*, 391–6.

<sup>34</sup> For a thorough account of Toland's project, see Justin Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696–1722* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious, or, A Treatise Shewing That There Is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above It: and That No Christian Doctrine can be Properly Call'd a Mystery* (London, 1696).

<sup>36</sup> For example, *ibid.*, 141–2, 151–69. <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. Cf. L, 47, p. 1108.

<sup>38</sup> L. P. [John Toland], *Two Essays Sent in a Letter from Oxford to a Nobleman in London* (London, 1695), 29.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

world. Indeed, people like Galileo, Descartes, Mersenne, and Gassendi made new discoveries, and yet, they were ‘not esteem’d the worse Christians, because they contradict the Scriptures in Physical or Mathematical Problems.’<sup>40</sup> Clearly, however, this development was still disputed: ‘The Philosophick History of the Bible, is not always to be embraced; for what an outcry against Mr. Hobs! because he describ’d God Almighty as Corporeal, though Moses and the Scriptures had done so before him.’<sup>41</sup> For Toland, Hobbes’s materialist position was not only compatible with flourishing natural philosophy but also with Scripture once thoroughly investigated. Furthermore, Toland’s explanation for the attacks on Hobbes was no less interesting, in that he explained them in terms of sectarian interests: ‘Things are denominat’d Heresie and Atheism, not by any certain Rules of Truth, or Falshood, but according to the Caprice, or Interests of Sects and Parties.’<sup>42</sup> As we have seen, this was the precise view of both Hobbes and Blount.

Thus, Hobbes’s materialism and his biblical criticism, combined together, were powerful tools for subsequent deists who dared to question the unquestionable. As John Harris argued in one of his Boyle Lectures, ‘there must be some substantial Reason why Deists and Antiscripturists are always Corporealists.’<sup>43</sup> For Harris, Hobbes and Spinoza were the greatest corporealists, and consequently atheists, of all; deism was nothing but another manifestation of the same dangerous approach.

### 12.1.3 *Matthew Tindal*

During the 1690s, the lawyer and All Souls fellow Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) frequented the London coffeehouses and became a strong critic of the Church of England’s clergy.<sup>44</sup> Tindal’s reputation was dubious at the Oxonian college, where it was said posthumously that he had attempted ‘to cultivate and improve what Mr. Hobbs and his Disciples had begun.’ Tindal, according to this anonymous report, ‘was desirous, that the Generality of Mankind should imagine he had stopt short at Deism; but he was too reserved and cunning to profess himself a Deist in an explicit and open manner.’<sup>45</sup> Using Hobbes, or deism, to stain a person’s reputation was not an original trick. Nor was it a groundless accusation.

In 1706 Tindal published his most notorious work, *The Rights of the Christian Church Asserted*. Like previous deists, Tindal believed that the clergy had complicated and mystified religion to gain an independent power in church matters. He argued that people should make their own judgement in religious matters unrelated to the public interest, including the manner in which they worship God or even the religion they choose. Moreover, the magistrate must protect the subjects’ conscience as a natural

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ii.      <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. ii–iii.      <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iii.

<sup>43</sup> John Harris, *The Atheist’s Objections, Against the Immaterial Nature of God, and Incorporeal Substances, Refuted* (London, 1698), 50.

<sup>44</sup> B. W. Young, ‘Tindal, Matthew (bap. 1657, d. 1733)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27462>>, accessed 16 June 2017.

<sup>45</sup> [Anon.], *The Religious, Rational, and Moral Conduct of Matthew Tindal, L.L.D.* (London, 1735), 19–20.

right and forbid any act of persecution, which Tindal considered a severe crime.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, Tindal argued that the civil magistrate should have the supreme power in all religious matters insofar as they affect the public good. It is here that the link to Hobbes becomes apparent.

Like Hobbes, Tindal reached an Erastian position driven by a strong anticlerical motivation.<sup>47</sup> He argued fiercely against the coexistence of two independent powers in society: magisterial and ecclesiastical, precisely those that Hobbes identified as the danger of 'seeing double'.<sup>48</sup> Tindal was aware of this resemblance, and he acknowledged that the exclusive power that he gave to the sovereign could seem 'as great a power as Hobbs complemented him with'.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, he distanced himself from Hobbes because he wanted to leave greater room for people to act upon their own judgement than he thought Hobbes had granted. This was no negligible difference. Tindal genuinely disagreed with Hobbes on this issue. Nonetheless, he also recognized that he had arrived at a result that was in a sense rather Hobbesian. Both Tindal and Hobbes despised the political aspirations of the clergy. As a solution they made the civil magistrate the superior authority in the religious matters that they perceived as relevant for the public good. The disagreement was on what constituted the public good—but that, both agreed, is ultimately left for the sovereign to decide.

Tindal quoted Hobbes favourably, but without giving him the credit. In his *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, also known as the 'bible of deism', he argued against those 'who, on Pretence of magnifying Tradition, endeavour to weaken the Force of Reason; (tho' to be sure they always except their own;)' But, he added, 'as long as Reason is against Men, they will be against Reason. We must not, therefore, be surpris'd, to see some endeavour to reason Men out of their Reason; tho' the very Attempt to destroy Reason by Reason, is a Demonstration Men have nothing but Reason to trust to'.<sup>50</sup> As Blount had done before him, Tindal used this Hobbesian quote in 1730 to argue against priestcraft, which threatened to suppress human reason. Even when the deists disagreed with substantial parts of Hobbes's political theory, then, they nevertheless recognized him as a most resourceful ally in their urgent campaign to undermine the power of the priests.

#### 12.1.4 Anthony Collins

Another figure central to these debates was Anthony Collins (1676–1729). Collins knew Toland and Tindal personally and was also known for his close friendship with

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Tindal, *The Rights of the Christian Church Asserted, Against the Romish, and All Other Priests Who Claim an Independent Power over It* (London, 1706), 17–20.

<sup>47</sup> Erastianism is taken here as the doctrine according to which the church should be entirely subordinated to, and controlled by, the state. On the association between Tindal's Erastianism and Hobbes see also Mark Goldie, 'The Reception of Hobbes', in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700*, ed. J. H. Burns with Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 612–15.

<sup>48</sup> L, 39, pp. 732–4. <sup>49</sup> Tindal, *Rights*, 28.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: Or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1730), 179.

John Locke.<sup>51</sup> Collins's philosophical work included a theory of materialism and determinism, which he presented fully in his *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty* (1717). Collins attempted to prove that man is 'a necessary agent', thereby rejecting free will. He argued that God's prescience must suppose the necessity of the existence of all future things and hence could not be reconciled with free will.<sup>52</sup> It is clear that this position was deeply influenced by Hobbes.<sup>53</sup> Joseph Priestley, who followed Collins in converting to determinism, mentioned in the preface to his edition of the *Philosophical Inquiry* that 'Mr. Hobbes... was the first who, in this, or any other country, rightly understood, and clearly stated, the argument; but he wrote nothing systematical, and consequently nothing that could be of much use to a student. For this purpose this treatise of Collins is excellent.'<sup>54</sup>

Collins identified himself as a freethinker. In *A Discourse of Free-thinking* (1713), he argued that everyone is capable of freethinking in matters of religion by their own reason: it is our right and duty to perform such thinking for our own sake as well as for the sake and progress of the whole society. The aim of freethinking is to expose superstitious beliefs that otherwise cause dangerous and unnecessary fears. Collins followed earlier deists and Hobbes in asserting that priests do not necessarily teach the truth as such, but doctrines that serve their own interests, hence the differences between the teachings of the various sects in Christianity, and consequently, the need for free and individual inquiries.<sup>55</sup>

Collins took the deistic criticism of the church and channelled it into a manifesto for freedom of thought and belief, and for religious toleration. He sided with the deists against the church and recruited Hobbes for his justification of freethinking. He praised Hobbes as 'a great instance of Learning, Virtue and Free-Thinking' despite his 'several false Opinions, and his High-Church Politicks'.<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere, he went so far as to describe Hobbes as one 'of the greatest Droles and Wits that any Age ever produc'd', who surrounded King Charles II during his education.<sup>57</sup>

Freethought was not a common position to attribute to Hobbes, who was perceived even by deists like Tindal as someone who allowed the sovereign a certain degree of control over the subjects' thoughts.<sup>58</sup> Collins's case, however, shows that the deists and their allies could still relate to Hobbes and even use him for some proto-liberal arguments. Once again, the responses were quick to appear. In the *Remarks Upon a Late Discourse of Free-thinking*, Richard Bentley argued against Collins:

<sup>51</sup> J. Dybikowski, 'Collins, Anthony (1676–1729)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5933>>, accessed 19 June 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty* (London, 1717), 82–4.

<sup>53</sup> James O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins: The Man and His Works* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 96–107. See this position in Hobbes's debate with Bramhall, EW 5, pp. 17–18.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty, Republished with a Preface by Joseph Priestley* (Birmingham, 1790), pp. iii–iv.

<sup>55</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-thinking* (London, 1713), 38–61.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 170–1.

<sup>57</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Discourse Concerning Ridicule and Irony in Writing* (London, 1729), 43.

<sup>58</sup> See also Teresa M. Bejan's chapter in this volume, 'First Impressions: Hobbes on Religion, Education, and the Metaphor of Imprinting'.

O the glorious Nation you would be! If...Free-thinkers appointed Tutors to your young Nobility and Gentry. How would Arts, Learning, Manners and all Humanity flourish in an Academy under such preceptors? Who instead of your Bible should read Hobbes's *Leviathan*; should instill early the sound doctrines of the Mortality of the soul, and the sole Good of a voluptuous Life.<sup>59</sup>

Bentley was certainly right in at least one respect: in the academy of the freethinkers and the deists, *Leviathan* was indeed an obligatory book.

We can conclude that Hobbes was a significant influence for early English deism. The deists were familiar with Hobbes's texts. Not only did they follow some of his ideas and methods, but they also made approving references to him despite the dangers of doing so. Together with various other sources, such as Herbert and Spinoza, Hobbes's contribution was crucial for the development of deism. He was influential for early deism in his religious scepticism and anticlericalism; in his careful and arguably subversive reading of Scripture; in his historical account of Christianity, especially in tracing elements that had been brought into it from the heathens; in his psychological analysis of the origins of religion; in his preference for the natural over the supernatural, and adherence to natural law; and in his materialism, with its implications for questions regarding the role of God, the immortality of the soul, and the existence, or lack thereof, of free will. Hobbes's Erastianism was also linked to deism, aspiring to undermine the power of the corrupt clergy. Finally, the 'absolutist' Hobbes was even employed as a freethinker known for his clear and witty writings.

An anonymous book from 1704, *Visits from the Shades*, contained a fictional dialogue between Hobbes and an interlocutor, in which the latter tells Hobbes: 'had you not writ at all, I question whether the *Oracles of Reason*, or *Christianity Not Mysterious*, had ever seen the Light.'<sup>60</sup> Indeed, both the deists and their critics acknowledged this debt. Here I have attempted to emphasize how significant and deep this debt was.

## 12.2 Hobbes

As we have seen, there is enough evidence to suggest that the deists knowingly took much from Hobbes, and that in this sense they saw him as one of their predecessors. However, there are still obvious objections to the association of Hobbes with deism in particular, and the 'radical enlightenment' in general, as set forth by Jonathan Israel:

But in the final analysis, Hobbes could not serve as the philosophical underpinning of a broad-based philosophical radicalism opposed to all existing structures of authority and tradition, ecclesiastical power, and the existing social hierarchy, as well as divine-right monarchy, precisely because of his anti-libertarian politics, High Church sympathies, and support for rigorous political and intellectual censorship. Hobbes was an absolutist in politics and a pessimist about human nature, on top of which he admitted (however half-heartedly) miracles and Revelation, and temporized on the immortality of the soul.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Richard Bentley, *Remarks Upon a Late Discourse of Free-thinking* (London, 1713), 18–19.

<sup>60</sup> [Anon.], *Visits from the Shades* (London, 1704), 34. <sup>61</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 602.

For Israel, radical deism and atheism alike provided the framework for the revolutionary ideas of the ‘radical enlightenment’, which sought to sweep away the existing institutions and the existing civil order.<sup>62</sup> Israel thus disqualifies Hobbes from serving as an influence upon the ‘radicals’. Instead, he argues that it was Spinoza who ‘emerged as the supreme philosophical bogeyman of Early Enlightenment Europe’ and that ‘[n]o one else during the century 1650–1750 remotely rivalled his notoriety’.<sup>63</sup>

There are a few objections to Israel’s argument. First, that Spinoza was a key influence upon the deists and others does not necessarily exclude others from being influential as well. Indeed, as we have seen, in some instances it was the combination of a few sources which shaped the new positions formulated by the deists. Second, Hobbes’s politics—even if we accept that it was more authoritarian or conservative than that of subsequent deists—need not disqualify him from being influential in other fields of his thought, especially his critical approach to religion, which was clearly notorious enough. As we have seen, both the deists and their critics recognized in Hobbes much more scepticism about revelation and miracles, and about the immortality of the soul, than Israel allows. Third, the deists themselves were arguably not as radical as Israel suggests. They certainly rejected ecclesiastical authority insofar as it sought to be independent—as we have seen in the case of Tindal—but it is far from clear that their positions were aimed either against the monarchy or against religion as such.<sup>64</sup>

There are therefore two answers to arguments like Israel’s. The first, ‘softer’, answer is that the deists could pick and choose what they took from Hobbes, ignoring his absolutism and taking other aspects from his writings that they found more compelling. As we have seen, this is certainly the case, but I will argue here for another, ‘stronger’, answer: that is, even politics would not necessarily have been a point of contention between Hobbes and the subsequent deists. I will suggest that we need to read Hobbes’s theory as *primarily* anticlerical both on the religious and the political levels. When understood as such, Hobbes’s absolutism can be seen as part of a more complex story which was meant to deal with the problem of religion out of control. Furthermore, once natural reason is free from suppression by clerics, and the primary obstacle to peace and stability is thus removed, Hobbes’s theory could offer some ‘enlightened’ elements that bring him even closer to the ideas of the freethinkers.

It is worth stressing that anticlericalism was not the preserve of deism and freethinkers alone, and I do not mean to suggest that identifying these features in Hobbes

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>64</sup> For the first two objections, see Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, especially 535–7; for the third objection, see Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics, and Newtonian Public Science* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), especially 206–7. See also Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*, 402–9. Finally, also criticizing Israel’s interpretation of Hobbes, Edwin Curley notes that Israel told him in personal communication that he had modified his reading of Hobbes’s religious views: ‘He now thinks he was inclined to take Hobbes’s statements about religion too literally when he dismissed him as a radical Enlightenment figure’. See Curley, ‘Hobbes and the Cause of Religious Toleration’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes’s Leviathan*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially 329, n. 23.

is sufficient to classify him as a (proto-)deist. My ‘stronger’ answer to Israel instead involves narrowing the gap between Hobbes’s and the deists’ politics, such that the deists might be seen as developing a broadly Hobbesian approach to the politics of religion. As Wayne Hudson has recently argued, ‘the term “deism” has different meanings in different contexts and no one knows a priori what any particular deist believed.’<sup>65</sup> In light of the preceding survey, however, a few general—even if slightly simplified—points can be made to further the comparison with Hobbes. The deists in question all subscribed to natural religion, while discarding almost entirely the *need for* revealed religion. In doing so, the deists went further than most other anticlerical thinkers of their time. Natural reason alone became sufficient to know all we need in order to live, including our religious duties. Accordingly, no religious doctrine should be mysterious, or above or contrary to reason; hence the grave suspicion towards any phenomenon claimed to be supernatural, including present miracles, prophecies, and revelation. Furthermore, Scripture should be seen as a historical document subject to rational examination, which should not be a prerogative of the church. Finally, freethinking and religious toleration are crucial for the prosperity of any society, whereas persecution of opinions and beliefs is the biggest danger to society.

Indeed, Hobbes’s theory was more complex than simply subscribing to mere natural religion, and his tolerationist tendencies were at best questionable. Yet, in what follows I will argue that Hobbes’s anticlericalism could pave the way to the more radical positions of the deists. Furthermore, Hobbes’s belief in the important role that natural reason could play, once liberated from the harmful influence of interested parties, and his later arguments against persecution of so-called heresies—all clearly structured against the dangerous political aspirations of the clergy—can make him look more like a proto-deist than is usually appreciated.

Hobbes’s anticlericalism—famously directed at the ‘unpleasing priests’<sup>66</sup>—was quite straightforward, as evident for example in the second half of *Leviathan*. He made extremely harsh accusations against the clergy for attempting to gain independent political power, but he did not argue against Christianity as such. Rather, quite realistically, Hobbes admitted that religion is inherent to human nature, and that it is human curiosity that leads men to derive rationally the existence of God.<sup>67</sup> Hobbes’s anticlericalism was perhaps radical but not atheistic: as Sarah Mortimer puts it, Hobbes ‘did not want to throw the Christian baby out with the clerical bathwater.’<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Hobbes’s notorious arguments about Moses and Jesus as political rulers who also represent the persons of God were clearly heterodox, but more than anything else, their purpose was to deliver the message that God was, and will be, a sovereign in His own kingdom

<sup>65</sup> Wayne Hudson, ‘Atheism and Deism Demythologized’, in *Atheism and Deism Revalued*, ed. Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci, and Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 19.

<sup>66</sup> L, 12, p. 186. <sup>67</sup> L, 12, pp. 164–6.

<sup>68</sup> Sarah Mortimer, ‘Christianity and Civil Religion in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, 517.

properly speaking, but He is not at the moment.<sup>69</sup> Presently, God works only through His natural kingdom, governing mankind through the natural dictates of reason, which in turn should guide men to obey their earthly sovereign.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, Hobbes notably reduced the faith required for salvation to ‘the only necessary article’, according to which ‘Jesus is the Christ.’<sup>71</sup> This article has the virtue of being relatively easy ‘For if an inward assent of the mind to all the Doctrines concerning Christian Faith now taught, (whereof the greatest part are disputed,) were necessary to Salvation, there would be nothing in the world so hard, as to be a Christian.’<sup>72</sup> It is in light of this article that one should examine any prophecy in which one is asked to believe, using natural reason, to determine whether it is true or false.<sup>73</sup> Hobbes’s version of Christian faith was thus minimalistic and rationalistic. The main message was about the need to question any pretended prophet while, at the same time, always obeying the civil sovereign. But even the sovereign may at no point take away one’s natural reason:

we are not to renounce our Senses, and Experience; nor (that which is the undoubted Word of God) our naturall Reason. For they are the talents which he hath put into our hands to negotiate, till the coming again of our blessed Saviour; and therefore not to be folded up in the Napkin of an Implicite Faith, but employed in the purchase of Justice, Peace, and true Religion.<sup>74</sup>

Hobbes’s anticlericalism was closely related to his hope for human rationality. He believed that ‘The Ecclesiastiques take from young men, the use of Reason, by certain Charms compounded of Metaphysiques, and Miracles, and Traditions, and Abused Scripture, whereby they are good for nothing else, but to execute what they command them.’<sup>75</sup> Hobbes’s project was aimed precisely at fixing that: as Malcolm puts it, in this sense it was a project of liberation from falsehood and from the groups that manipulate falsehood for their own ends.<sup>76</sup> For Hobbes, it is our own reason—given to us by God and nature—that we must follow and that must be protected from the clergy who attempt to take it away in order to make us ‘natural fools.’<sup>77</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that this precise conviction lay at the heart of English deist ideas. Moreover, the deist principle according to which individual inquiries should lead to true religious judgments and beliefs can already be found in Hobbes’s famous statement that ‘there ought to be no Power over the Consciences of men, but of the Word it selfe.’<sup>78</sup> The word of God, namely natural reason, was the medicine against the most dangerous illness that threatened the safety of society, that is, the power-hungry clerical establishment. In developing this idea, the deists were Hobbes’s immediate successors.

It is true that life under a Hobbesian magistrate might not be the ideal of freedom. However, here too, the picture is clearly more complex. Hobbes supported censorship imposed by the magistrate—although only in matters of peace and defence.<sup>79</sup> He argued

<sup>69</sup> L, 40–1, pp. 736–72.

<sup>70</sup> L, 31, p. 556; 43, p. 932.

<sup>71</sup> L, 43, p. 938.

<sup>72</sup> L, 43, p. 940.

<sup>73</sup> L, 36, pp. 676–80.

<sup>74</sup> L, 32, p. 576.

<sup>75</sup> L, 47, p. 1120.

<sup>76</sup> Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, 544.

<sup>77</sup> L, 47, p. 1120.

<sup>78</sup> L, 47, p. 1116.

<sup>79</sup> L, 18, pp. 270–2.

that the magistrate should determine the form of the worship of God—although only in public—and that a citizen should obey even religious dictates from an infidel sovereign—although only in words.<sup>80</sup> Hobbes was certainly more concerned with issues of life and death rather than with matters such as freedom of the press that preoccupied some of the subsequent deists. But he also maintained that private thoughts and consciences were not subject to any civil law, an argument made explicitly against attempts of ‘*Inquisition*’.<sup>81</sup> Thus, we can identify in Hobbes an early, even if underdeveloped, version of the call for freethinking.<sup>82</sup> For him, as for Tindal and Collins, the basis for this position was a deep sense of anticlericalism, and an attempt to elevate human reason as an answer to superstitions maintained by priestcraft. This was also the motive for all of them to take an extremely strong position against persecution. Hobbes believed that truth was being suppressed but he was not without hope for the future: the knots on liberty had been untied, and religion could be brought back to take a stabilizing, rather than destabilizing, role in the commonwealth.<sup>83</sup>

Hobbes was not simply authoritarian nor was he a typical tolerationist. As Jon Parkin has shown, his reception demonstrates that his theory was used to support both—somewhat opposite—positions.<sup>84</sup> We can at least say that Hobbes’s absolutism need not *always* imply authoritarian measures and *could* be consistent with the subjects enjoying various liberties. He clearly thought that appropriate limits on liberty depended on the circumstances.<sup>85</sup> A strong form of authoritarianism was at present the most effective way to neutralize the disruptive power of religion; but once peace was established, natural reason was liberated, and philosophy and science flourished, a brighter future would await.<sup>86</sup> There is good reason to believe that in such a peaceful and stable situation, when individuals are more rational and less superstitious, we might need a sovereign who is less authoritarian, and who might not even need to exercise his or her right of censorship very often. In this sense, Hobbes’s theory contained elements that could lead to something approaching a deist future.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>80</sup> L, 31, p. 570; 42, p. 784.      <sup>81</sup> L, 46, p. 1096.

<sup>82</sup> See also Franck Lessay’s chapter in this volume, ‘Tolerance as a Dimension of Hobbes’s Absolutism’.

<sup>83</sup> L, 47, pp. 1114–16. It is this line of argument that has led some to claim that Hobbes’s project was meant to bring about a ‘cultural transformation’, and to identify proto-liberal and even utopian elements in Hobbes’s thought. A few prominent examples are David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Alan Ryan, ‘Hobbes, Toleration, and the Inner Life’, in *The Nature of Political Theory*, ed. David Miller and Larry Siedentop (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 197–218; Ryan, ‘A More Tolerant Hobbes?’, in *Justifying Toleration*, ed. Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37–59; Richard Tuck, ‘The Utopianism of *Leviathan*’, in *Leviathan After 350 Years*, ed. Tom Sorell and Luc Foisneau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 125–38; Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, 27–52; and the additional works by Malcolm, Curley, and Tuck cited in notes 10, 21, 22, and 64. On the other hand, it is important not to make Hobbes more ‘tolerant’ than he really was, since establishing uniformity—rather than embracing diversity and promoting the freedoms of worship and association—was his main goal. This position is well summarized in Glen Newey, *The Routledge Guidebook to Hobbes’ Leviathan*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2014), 231–53.

<sup>84</sup> See for example Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*, 242–4.      <sup>85</sup> L, 21, p. 340.

<sup>86</sup> ‘*Leisure* is the mother of *Philosophy*; and *Common-wealth*, the mother of *Peace*, and *Leisure*’. L, 46, p. 1054.

<sup>87</sup> See also Jon Parkin’s chapter in this volume, ‘Hobbes and the Future of Religion’.

Hobbes and the deists did not hold precisely the same political positions. We have seen that there are *some* political ideas that they had in common, such as their thoughts on the nature of what constituted heresy and their consequent objection to persecution. Perhaps most important, however, is the fact that all of them shared a common goal. As Hobbes's friend, the poet Edmund Waller, once commented about him, 'what was chiefly to be taken notice of in his eulogie was that he, being but one, and a private person, pulled-downe all the churches, dispelled the mists of ignorance, and layd-open their priest-craft.'<sup>88</sup> Early English deism followed Hobbes precisely in this task.

### 12.3 Conclusion

Hobbes and the deists were often accused by contemporaries—and indeed, they are still sometimes interpreted accordingly—of being covert atheists.<sup>89</sup> But their philosophy and theology were much more sophisticated than this accusation suggests. Moreover, once seen in their full complexity, the positions of Hobbes and the deists are close in many respects. Hobbes cast serious doubt on our ability to believe in revelations that take place in present times. Anyone who pretends to have had a revelation might lie, and people would lie as it serves their interests. The deists continued this line of thought and radicalized it. The very fact of present revelation became questionable. Moreover, it became redundant. Revelation could only confirm what natural reason tells us. If there is a contradiction, reason should always take priority. This argument was much more explicitly heterodox than Hobbes's. The motive, however, was precisely the same. The fairy tales of revelation were part of priestcraft and, as such, they were used by the corrupt clergy who endlessly sought to gain and maintain an independent power. The deists' war against priestcraft was Hobbes's war against the kingdom of darkness taken one step further.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, none of them was trying to deny the existence of God, nor, in fact, His providence. Their goal was one: to disprove any *story about* God that could benefit only the storyteller.

Hobbes could not know with any certainty who would benefit from his doctrine, but he did know that it was innovative. The deists, indeed, identified everything that was innovative in Hobbes. He was their resource and ally in the historic battle against priestcraft. Together with others, and primarily Spinoza, Hobbes was *one* of the fathers of deism; and deism was *one* possible highway to what may be called a multifaceted *Hobbesian enlightenment*. It was an enlightenment that combined traditional with

<sup>88</sup> John Aubrey, *Brief Lives, Chiefly of Contemporaries*, ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), i, 358.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Routledge, 1990); Berman, 'Deism, Immortality and the Art of Theological Lying', in *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 61–78.

<sup>90</sup> A similar argument leads Mark Goldie to suggest that 'it does not require much foreshortening of historical explanation to say of Hobbes that, ecclesiologically, he was a Whig'. See Goldie, 'Priestcraft and the Birth of Whiggism', in *Political Discourses in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 217.

unusual premises. It was not necessarily Israel's 'radical enlightenment', but also not exactly a 'clerical enlightenment'.<sup>91</sup> There was an *anticlerical enlightenment*: an enlightenment that was aimed principally against the self-interested priests.

Thus, the English deists were not wrong in identifying the various anticlerical elements in Hobbes, and Leland was not wrong at all in asserting that some of the deists chose to follow Hobbes in several principles. In fact, they may have understood him better than many of the interpretations that we still encounter today.

<sup>91</sup> For the idea of a clerical or conservative English enlightenment, see for example Roy Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–18.