British views on religion and religions
in the age of William and Mary

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Abstract

The article provides a glimpse into the antecedents of the modern study of religion and religions by outlining the extent and variety of the different attitudes to other religions that are to be found in works published in Britain around the last decade of the seventeenth century. After noting the character of the contemporary debate about reason, religious belief and revelation that provides the background to many of the references to other religions and that significantly moulds their content, the article considers, in turn, the style and range of references to other religions, views on so-called “natural religion” and on the universality of religious belief, and the ways in which Judaism and Islam were treated. The article closes with some remarks on what this material suggests about the motive, source materials and method involved in the study of religion.

Although there are excellent reasons why Eric Sharpe’s standard study of the subject, Comparative Religion: A History (1975), classes materials produced before the middle of the nineteenth century as belonging to “the antecedents” of what is now regarded as the modern historical, critical and comparative study of religion, those interested in the history of the subject should not overlook the considerable amount of material that was produced in earlier years. It is important, however, to see this material in its context, for while some of it was produced to satisfy curiosity about what was believed and practised elsewhere, much of it emerged as part of current debates about the reasonableness of belief. Among the issues debated were claims about the status and content of natural religion, the superiority and finality of the Christian faith, the validity of a particular understanding of Christian belief, the justification of claims to revealed truth about the divine, and the identification of corruptions and abuses in prevailing forms of Christianity.

1 For more on these materials in relation to British thought, see such works as Harrison (1990), Marshall (1970), Almond (1988; 1989), and Pailin (1984).
While, however, alleged knowledge of other faiths was thus often “used” as part of intra-Christian disputes, it is interesting both to note that in earlier centuries theological controversialists were prepared to regard references to other faiths as a significant (even if not a large) part of their apologetic task, and to discover what they claimed to know about these other faiths.

In this article I want briefly to indicate the kind of material that appears in British thought in the reign of William and Mary— that is, from the so-called “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 to the death of William in 1702. The justification of these geographical and temporal limits is that they allow a glimpse of how comparative religion was actually understood and practiced in the context of a particular society at a particular period some time before most studies of comparative religion begin. What I offer, however, is only a glimpse of a representative selection of the materials: an exhaustive study of the materials within the limitations of this reign would be much more extensive than is appropriate to a single article.

What, then, was the state of comparative religion around three hundred years ago in Britain?

1. The debate about faith and reason

However one judges its political and social significance, the “Glorious Revolution” occurred towards the beginning of a great age of debate about faith and reason in British thought. The basic principle of this debate—that reason rather than scriptural authority or doctrinal tradition or ecclesiastical magisterium should determine what is to be believed—had been canvassed by various authors in the previous two generations. Herbert of Cherbury, for example, had attempted in his De Veritate (1624; 3rd edition 1645) to identify through the study of reason the “common notions” of religion that, once they have been apprehended, are recognized by all right-thinking people to be true. They provide the touchstone by which authentic faith and practice is to be distinguished from the corruptions introduced into religion by priestcraft and the errors of misunderstood tradition. Later, in the posthumously published De Religione Gentilium (1663; English trans. 1705), Herbert followed up his pioneering metaphysical study by seeking to show that his thesis may be seen to be consistent with the evidence of comparative religion. In this latter work he maintains that, in spite of what may appear to be the case, the

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2 It is interesting that the United Kingdom government, under Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, did not organize any major celebration of the events of 1688. One wonders whether this was due to a desire not to upset Irish republicans (and their transatlantic backers) or to an unwillingness to remind the country that would-be dictators can be deposed!
religions of humankind show that the five common notions of religion have been entertained by people in every part of the world.

In the decades before the “Revolution” various others put forward the principle underlying Herbert of Cherbury’s response to the conflicts, fanaticism and scepticism that resulted from the post-Reformation disputes over the authentic character of Christian belief. In different ways they assert that reason must be the ground of correct understanding in religion. The Cambridge Platonists, for example, describe reason as “the candle of the Lord within us” They maintain that a purified reason gives people a true perception of the divine and allows them to judge the claims of revelation. In the same period Edward Stillingfleet (who was to become Bishop of Worcester in 1689) asserts in his Second Discourse in Vindication of the Protestant Grounds of Faith that “faith” is “a rational act” whose assent “can be no stronger” than the “reasonable grounds” upon which it is based (Stillingfleet 1673: 377, 395).

The classical statement of what may be called the canon of reason for determining religious belief was given, however, by John Locke in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690). In Book IV, chapter xvii, he states that “he governs his Assent right, and places it as he should, who in any Case or Matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves according as Reason directs him.” Although the application of this canon to matters of religion is challenged by some people (for instance, by John Edwards, a Calvinist divine, who demands in The Socinian Creed that true faith be determined by the revelation given by God in the sacred scriptures of the bible [see John Edwards 1697]), the principle that Locke here enunciates and that guides his own comments on religious belief determined the basic character of the debates about religious thought in Britain for the next century

The protagonists in these debates cover a wide spectrum of theological understanding. It is interesting to note, however, that even among those who assert the supreme status of divinely revealed truths contained in the bible as the proper source and ultimate norm for theological understanding, there are some who consider it important to try to justify that position against possible challenges from other records and other faiths by claiming that extrabiblical sources either independently confirm biblical accounts or are derived, sometimes in highly distorted forms, from those accounts. John Edwards, for example, seeks to show in one of his studies of the bible that “Prophane Writers testify the Truth” of various matters reported in the Old Testament. Among the accounts alleged to be supported by classical texts are the stories of “the Gigantick race of Canaanites” and “the Miracle of the Sun’s standing still” as well as those of the sacrifice of Jephtha’s daughter (held to be the origin of the story of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia) and of Sampson’s being shaved (linked with “the Fable of the Fatal hair of Nisus”)
Furthermore he argues that "the Heathens had their Gods from Scripture": Adam "without doubt was Saturn" while it is "not to be question'd" that "Eve, the first of the Fair Sex, the Mistress of the World, and the Mother of all Mankind, was made a Goddess by the Pagan World" as Minerva (John Edwards 1693: 204-206). Similarly Cain is linked with Jupiter, Noah with Bacchus, Joseph with Serapis, Moses with Mercury, and Jonah with Hercules (John Edwards 1693: 208-220). It is perhaps an indication that John Edwards is conscious that some may regard these attempts to support "the truth and authority of the Holy Scriptures" as speculative and unconvincing that he asserts that he has "purposely avoided . . . far-fetch'd Conceits" and "the suggestions of those Writers, who have let their imaginations run too high". In seeking to demonstrate how "the Pagans borrowed from the Sacred Writings" he has, in his judgement, "always trod where there is some tolerable ground and footing" (John Edwards 1693: 266-267).

In 1700 Thomas Hyde, an English orientalist and successor to Edward Pococke as Professor of Arabic at Oxford, published his extensive Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum eorumque Magorum. This study of ancient and contemporary Zoroastrianism, which is based on Hyde's knowledge of oriental texts and a friend's enquiries in Persia, indicates the reasons for certain practices which might seem offensive to his readers (for instance, he reports that Zoroastrians do not bury corpses out of a desire not to pollute the earth) and seeks to correct several misrepresentations of that faith (such as that the Zoroastrians worship the sun and fire). It also includes a life of Zoroaster, who is placed by Hyde in the time of Darius Hystaspes and is claimed not only to have been a servant of the prophet Ezra and to have gained his knowledge of God from Jewish sources but also to have foretold the coming of Christ.

The underlying reasons why attempts were made by writers like John Edwards and Hyde to show that other faiths had derived their beliefs either from the bible itself or from events recorded therein are that temporal primacy was regarded as a mark of superiority (an application to religious belief of the principle of primogeniture!) and that the authority of the bible was considered to involve the historical accuracy of what it recorded. It was widely held, therefore, that the Christian faith (with its Jewish antecedents) would be seriously threatened if it could be shown that other faiths had existed earlier or that the scripture records were in error about some matters of historical fact. When, therefore, Robert Jenkin's study of The Reasonableness and Certainty of the Christian Religion appeared in 1698, it included arguments to show

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3As Mark Pattison observes in a still valuable essay, this work became "the "Paley" of divinity students" in the following decades (Pattison 1861: 288).
that the evidence of "the Religions of the Heathen" justified the conclusion that "no other Religion ever was of like Antiquity" to that "deliver'd in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament" (Jenkin 1715: I, 331). In maintaining "the Novelty of the Religions amongst the Heathen (of whom we have any certain Account from their Writings) in respect of the Scriptures" and hence the correlative temporal priority and religious superiority of the latter, Jenkin not only deals with the chronological claims of the ancient Egyptians, the Chaldeans, and the Greeks and Romans but also with "the pretensions of the Chinese to Antiquity" – which are said to be "equally vain" since, he argues, they are found from their records to have "understood little or nothing of Astronomy" (Jenkin 1715: I, 332, 336–337; see I, 332–340). Among Jenkin's other claims are that the Egyptians' knowledge of astronomy was gained from Abraham, and that "the very best of the Heathen Gods, were but Men, whom the Scriptures mention as Worshippers of the True God, such as Noah, Joseph, Moses, &c." (Jenkin 1715: I, 340). By such (question-begging) arguments, then, attempts were made by some traditional believers to defend both the temporal and the religious primacy of the faith revealed through the bible – "question-begging" because the "evidence" used in making these arguments often largely presupposed the accuracy of the biblical records being justified thereby.1

Although published in the months before the "Glorious Revolution" and so properly outside the scope of this paper, it may be noted that another example of this kind of treatment of the bible and non-biblical materials is to be found in a work by Peter Allix, a pastor of the French reformed church who had fled to England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. In his Reflexions Upon the Books of the Holy Scripture to Establish the Truth of the Christian Religion, having given grounds for holding that Moses is the author of Genesis (Allix 1688: I, 23–33), he presents a number of arguments to defend the Mosaic chronology against objections that "Atheists" may raise against it on the basis of "what we read in the most ancient Authors concerning the Egyptian and Chaldean History, and in the Modern ones concerning that of China." (Allix 1688: I, 95) Among various points that he makes in defence of the biblical record are that "Menes the first king of Egypt, is no other than the Ham of Moses; and there is very little difference between the Chronology of the Egyptians and that of the Scriptures"; that the Chaldean claim that their ancestors had followed "the Study of Astrology for 472000 years successively" is impossible because of "the certainty of the Flood"; and that what the Chinese say "concerning the Thirteen Successors of the first man named Fuoncuus is agreeable enough to the History of Genesis" when it is realised that "the Chinese, by a foolish Ambition of appropriating all to themselves, maintain that those Thirteen Kings were all in China" – an agreement whose significance is then somewhat undermined,
however, when Allix goes on to remark that the Chinese themselves regard their records about the earliest times as “false and ridiculous” (Allix 1688: I, 102, 103, 110, 111; see I, 95–120). In a later chapter Allix claims that certain biblical records can be seen to have extra-biblical warrant by their “strict Connexion” with “the oldest Monuments which we have of Prophane History”. In developing this case he identifies, for example, the “Fable of the Phoenician Hercules” with “the history of Joshua” and “the Story of Phaeton” with that of Elijah’s chariot of fire. He cites, as well, a number of classical texts that give much the same story of historical events as the bible (Allix 1688: II, 8–9, 10; see II, 11–15).

Others, however, appreciated that the appeal to scripture – or to some other institutional authority – as normative did not solve disputes about authentic faith. They accepted that reason must be the final court of appeal. Those who accept the canon of reason in matters of religious belief range from rational defenders of the full tradition of Christian faith through more or less orthodox revisionists (Locke’s own Reasonableness of Christianity [1695] is attacked by John Edwards and Stillington on the grounds that it presents an interpretation of Christianity marred by “Socinian” reductivism) to sceptical non-believers. On the one hand, arguments were put forward to show the reasonableness of believing in the revealed truths of the Christian faith as well as of asserting to the reality of God. John Tillotson, who was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1691 on Sancroft’s deposition for refusing to make the oath of allegiance to the crown after the “Revolution”, delivered sermons that enjoyed considerable popularity because of their reasonableness in expounding the Christian faith. Published after his death in 1694, they sold well. Their character, however, also led to him to be described by Anthony Collins, perhaps only somewhat unfairly, as the acknowledged head of “all English free-thinkers” (Collins 1713: 143). On the other hand, reason was used to criticize both such arguments and the positions that they were supposed to warrant. The term “deist” came to be attached to those who were the more severe among such critics. The designation, however, is vague. While it is generally used pejoratively, its descriptive content, like the current use of the word “radical”, depends on who is using it. It typically connotes those whom the user considers to be too restricted in what they believe as a result of their understanding of the demands of reason rather than the adherents of a specifiable set of doctrines.

During the last decade of the seventeenth century, among the most radical – i.e., “deist” – works to appear were The Oracles of Reason (1693) and John Toland’s Christianity not Mysterious (1696). The former includes pieces by Charles Gildon and others but is mostly the work of Charles Blount, a plagiarist. It was reprinted in the posthumous Miscellaneous Works of Charles Blount, Esq. (1695). The collection contains some sceptical remarks about
certain traditional Christian beliefs. The latter caused considerable indignation. The Irish Parliament ordered it to be burnt. Toland’s argument in it is basically that nothing can be believed which is not intelligible. As he puts it, a person could not “justly value himself upon being wiser than his Neighbours” if he had “infallible Assurance” of the existence of “something call’d Blictri” but at the same time “knew not what this Blictri was”. On this basis he suggests that just as people cannot be blamed for not believing “in hum of whom they had not heard”, so they should not be “condemn’d for not believing” what they cannot “understand” (Toland 1702: 119–120). Unfortunately for Toland this principle was held by many to be unacceptable since they considered it to challenge the credibility of various Christian “mysteries” such as that of the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1698 Toland’s Life of Milton created further excitement by appearing to cast doubt on the authenticity of works in the New Testament (see Toland 1761, 77). Toland defended himself, however, the next year, in Amyntor: Or, A Defence of Milton’s Life on the grounds that his remarks referred to apocryphal writings (see Toland 1761, 163–165).

2. References to other religions in arguments about authentic belief

What is of particular interest for the study of the history of comparative religion is the way in which some of the participants in the debates about the reasonableness of belief introduce what they know (or rather, perhaps, think that they know) about other religious faiths in support of their arguments about the contents and truth of authentic belief. For instance, part of Toland’s defence of the canon of reason as the final court of appeal in matters of religious belief against claims for the normative status of the Christian revelation (as made, for example, by John Edwards) includes the point that otherwise “a Christian Preacher” would have no way of countering the claim of “a Siamese Talapoun” (footnote: “Or Priest”) that it was illegitimate to subject his beliefs to rational scrutiny since “Somnonocodom” (footnote: “The God of the Siameses”) “forbad the Goodness of his Religion to be tri’d by the Light of Reason” (Toland 1702: 136). It must never be forgotten, however, that what these authors say about other faiths is not presented for the sake of giving accurate scholarly information. It is presented in the context of and moulded by its significance for debates within English Christianity. Their remarks are thus likely to be misunderstood and misjudged if the apologetic reason for “using” this “knowledge” is overlooked.

Charles Blount, for example, presses home his attack on priestcraft in Great is Diana of the Ephesians (1680; reprinted in Blount 1695) by referring to ways in which heathen priests counterfeit miracles and manipulate
religious practices for their own selfish gain. In contrast, William Turner, a vicar in Sussex, defends what he considers to be an orthodox Anglican position by confidently maintaining that while rational reflection shows it to be necessary to be religious (for "a perfect Atheist is fit for Bedlam"), a full and impartial comparison shows Christianity (and in particular Christianity as practised in the Church of England) to be superior to all other religions. Unfortunately the "Vertigo, and Spirit of Giddiness" which has recently "possessed the Nation", making people unwarrantably "unequited and discontented", has obscured this fact. Therefore, in order to make his fellow-countrymen conscious of their good fortune, Turner presents a comparative account of religious thought and practice in The History of All Religions in the World: From Creation down to this Present Time (1695: A4, A2).

Whereas Alexander Ross' PIANSEBEIA, or A View of All Religions in the World, whose sixth edition was published in 1696, basically treats each region and its religion in turn, Turner's study takes up various aspects of religion and very briefly notes how each of them is treated in different faiths. For instance, under the general heading of "Places of Divine Worship", he lists the form of such places under the subheadings of "Jewish", "Christian", "Mahometan", "Ancient Heathen", "Modern Heathen" (in which section he mentions those of "the Chingulayes in Ceylon,... the Inhabitants of Guinea the Persees, the Bannyans, the Indians" and "the Mexicans"—covering them all in thirty-six lines!) and "Diabolical" (Turner 1695: 6–11). What Turner provides in effect are titbits of information culled from the limited resources available to him—and he says that he hopes that he will not be charged with felony for his "gross Plagiary" in citing some of them (Turner 1695: A5).

The following extracts illustrate the variety of matters on which Turner illuminates his readers:

Among the Samodies, the Priest in his Divine Service doth not Sing, but Howl, and that so long, till he become like a Mad-man, and then falls down, as if he were dead, but riseth again, orders five Deer to be Sacrificed, and then thrusts a Sword half way into his belly, still singing or howling rather &c. (Turner 1695: 139–140)

Circassia: They have one thing remarkable, that they never enter their Churches, till they resolve to leave off Vice; that is, till after forty years of Age; after which time they rob no more. (1695: 350–351)

In Japan the Departure of great Lords is commonly attended by the Voluntary Execution of 20 or 30 Vassals or Slaves, who nip up their Bellies, and dye with their Masters. But it is for the most part Slaves weary of Life, that offer themselves so freely to Death. (1695: 442)

Mahometans: They give excellent Rules for binding the Passions, and shunning of Vice, e.g. If thou wouldst have Hell shut its seven Gates, take heed thou Sin
not with thy seven Members. They believe, a good Life in all Religions will bring a Man to Paradise; which would seem to destroy their principle of forcing all to their Religion, did they not affirm the Musselmen are all in a higher and more excellent Paradise than the best of the rest of the World. (1695: 375–376)

These quotations are a tiny sample of the materials in Turner’s compendium. They were amassed not only to satisfy the “inquisitive humour of the Age” but also to show that Christianity is “Examination-proof” (Turner 1695: A4) – i.e., that it has no need to fear the test of comparison with other religions since it is clearly superior to them all!

Another example of the apologetic use of information about other religions to discredit them is given by Jenkin when he writes that “all the Heathen Nations throughout the World offered Humane Sacrifices upon their Altars; and this not on certain emergencies, and in imminent Dangers only, but constantly, and in some places every day; but upon extraordinary Accidents, multitudes were sacrificed at once to the bloody Deities.” (Jenkin 1715: I, 358) Although he illustrates this mainly by reference to classical authors, he also mentions reports about Peru and Mexico. He further maintains that those who “introduced the Heathen Religions, were either Men of Design” who did it to bolster their own position, or “Men of Fancy and Fiction, as the Poets” Their gods were “more wicked than their Votaries” and the greatest immoralities occurred in the prescribed forms of worship. Hence, Jenkin concludes, with final references to what happens in India and China, the Heathen Religions cannot “be from God” since they teach ideas and practices that are “utterly inconsistent with the Goodness and Purity of Almighty God” (Jenkin 1715: I, 361–363). The “Heathen Philosophy” of Greece, Egypt, India and China is likewise held to be “very defective and erroneous” (1715: I, 364). Where it does have some merit it is where it has preserved “those Principles which were at first delivered by God himself to Noah, and were propagated amongst his Posterity” throughout the world in more or less corrupted forms (1715: I, 377–378).

3. The question of natural religion and the universality of religion

As has already been pointed out, most of the references to other faiths appear in the context of apologetic arguments concerning authentic Christian belief. Among those that may be briefly mentioned are some that are concerned with so-called “natural religion”. John Tillotson, for example, contradicts Socinus’ claim that God is not “naturally known to Men” He challenges his listeners to present reliable evidence that there has ever been “a City”, let alone “any Nation”, whose inhabitants were “professed Atheists” (Tillotson 1712: I, 404–405). The evidence rather is that “the Principles of Natural
Religion” — the reality of God, the immortality of the soul, and a future state — are recognized more or less clearly among “the Heathens” through the “Natural Light” of human understanding. The effect of this recognition is “to make Men Religious, and like God” since it makes clear to them the basic rules of conduct. Furthermore, although this “natural knowledge” needs to be augmented by revealed truths, it is a necessary foundation for the acceptance of the latter. As Tillotson points out, people cannot consider something to have been revealed by God unless they first believe that there is a God to give the revelation (1712: II, 433–436; see I, 405–407; 1701, 485, 568–570). The “Natural Notions which Mankind have of God” also provide standards against which the authenticity of any supposed revelation is to be judged (Tillotson 1712: I, 436, 579).

John Harris’ refutation of atheism in his Boyle Lectures in 1698 shows that he shares Tillotson’s positive appraisal of the natural knowledge of God. Citing various classical authors, he states that “it appears very plain, that the most ancient Writers had a good clear Notion of God” (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 393). Others, in comparison, are less sanguine about the possibilities of natural religion. They cite evidence about other religions to point to what they regard as its manifest errors and inadequacies. According to their judgement this evidence shows the need for divine revelation as the basis of faith. In his Boyle Lectures for 1695–1696, for instance, John Williams (who was appointed a chaplain to William and Mary and preferred to a prebend at Canterbury) allows that “a reasonable Mind” may naturally reach some “Knowledge of Divine Things.” He is more concerned, however, to emphasize that “so much is the Subject above our Reach, and so dark and intricate are all our Reasonings upon it, that the sagest Philosopher, in the Conclusion, is left as unsatisfied as the meanest Peasant; and perhaps more unsatisfied with his Knowledge than the other is with his Ignorance” (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 155; but see 219). Similarly, while Williams allows that in spite of the inventions, errors, and inconsistencies in their reports, pagan authors express fragments of the truth (sometimes in garbled forms as when Adam, Eve, and Noah are referred to in stories about Saturn, Pandora and Deucalion), he asserts that the pure and complete truth is only to be found in the divinely authorized Scriptures (1739: I, 194). The Bible alone provides a correct account of “the Creation of the World, the Formation of Man, the Dispersion of Nations” and the order of events (see 1739: I, 190). Where the accounts of these matters in “Pagan Writers” disagree with what Scripture reports, the disagreement shows that the former are in error!

Samuel Bradford preached before William III in 1698. He so pleased the King that in the following year he was appointed to be a royal chaplain. In that same year he also delivered the Boyle Lectures. While in these lectures he recognizes the “Excellency and Dignity” of human nature as created by God,
he finds that in practice the story of humankind has been one of increasing corruption and wickedness. Apart from a few exceptions among the Jews, the history of the “generality of Men” is one of degeneration into “the most unreasonable and unnatural Practices that can be thought of” (Bentley et al. 1739· I, 442, 446). He is concerned, however, about the question of the saving love of God towards the majority of humankind who have not had opportunity to respond to the Christian Gospel. In an appended sermon (which he delivered in his own church in January 1700) Bradford gives his answer. In part it is that we must recognize that we cannot fathom “the entire Scheme of Providence” and that “the Divine Spirit” may secretly influence “the Minds of Men, in all parts of the World” (1739· I, 516, 522); in part that “the Efficacy of our Saviour’s Undertaking for Men, doth certainly extend much farther than the actual Knowledge of him doth” (1739· I, 520); and in part that God may accept those who repent, and in any case will judge people “with due Regard to their respective Advantages or Disadvantages” (1739· I, 521–523).

Other treatments of non-Christian faiths consider the significance of the universality of religious belief. Francis Gastrell, for example, who was appointed to give the Boyle Lectures in 1697 at the wish of Archbishop Tenison, includes in his arguments against current atheism reference to “the general Concurrence of Mankind” He claims that there has been no period nor any nation “in which the Being of a God was not acknowledged by a vast Generality” of the people. From this he infers that whatever “false Representations of the Deity” may infect it with error, the basic belief in the reality of the divine must be recognized to agree with “all the Principles of our Knowledge” and hence that it is not plausible to regard it as erroneous (Bentley et al. 1739· I, 287–288).

A similar argument is presented by Edward Stillingfleet in the unfinished revision of Origines Sacrae—a task which the author, who had been in poor health for some time, gave up in 1697 after becoming involved in controversy with Locke. Stillingfleet first refutes the charge that religion is “only a contrivance” which “Priests and Politicians” combine to invent and foster “for their own ends” (Stillingfleet 1701. 65). Then, after holding that the argument for the existence of God from motion is in accord with humanity’s interest in discovering the cause of things, he examines the evidence which is supposed to show that there is no “common consent of Mankind, as to God and Providence” (Stillingfleet 1701. 73). In this respect he considers travellers’ reports about various parts of the world including the Cape of Good Hope, Horn Island, Jessö or Yedso (which has not yet actually been discovered!), Cuba, Paraquaria, and Brasil. He argues that in each case the supposed evidence is either unreliable or not significant. The general agreement of humanity is thus to be judged in-
dicate "the vanity and folly" of those who are prejudiced against religion (Stillingfleet 1701: 2).

A different defence of religion, by appeal to its beneficial effects, is adopted by Richard Bentley, who became keeper of the royal libraries in 1694 and a royal chaplain in 1695. The first of his Boyle Lectures, delivered in 1692, concerns "The Folly of Atheism, and (what is now called) Deism" (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 1). In it he describes "the present Advantages which we owe to Religion", both individually and corporately (1739: I, 7). Among those advantages are its "Practical Rules and Duties". Whatever future rewards their observance may offer, they are "conducive to the temporal Interest of them that observe them" since they inculcate qualities which prosper "a Man's Health, or his Credit, or Estate, or Security in this World". Furthermore, according to Bentley, the basic tenets of morality are not only taught by Moses and Christ. When current "Infidels" complain that "those Ordinances" are "unreasonable and tyrannical Impositions", they are protesting against principles "which the Sense of All Nations has thought to be reasonable: Which not only the Philosophers of Greece and Italy, and the learned World; but the Banians of Mogul, the Talapons of Siam, the Mandarins of China, the Moralists of Peru and Mexico, and all the Wisdom of Mankind have declared to be necessary Duties." Moreover, he rejects the excuse offered by those whom he calls "voluptuous Atheists", namely, that "their Sins" are due to "the Infirmity of human Nature", since "Flesh and Blood cannot resist those Temptations" that are backed by "long Custom and inveterated Habit". In reply to this claim Bentley asserts that empirical evidence shows that people may change morally for the better. He offers this example:

In the latest Accounts of the Country of Guiana we are told, that the Eating of human Flesh is the beloved Pleasure of those Savages: Two Nations of them by mutual Devouring are reduced to two Handfuls of Men. When the Gospel of our Saviour was preached to them, they received it with Gladness of Heart; they could be brought to forego Plurality of Wives, though that be the main Impediment to the Conversion of the East-Indies.

References to other religions are thus used by him in confuting those whom he regards as libertine opponents of Christianity by showing both that many of its principles of conduct are recognized around the world and that its precepts are not impossible to obey (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 8–9). In contrast he claims that those like "the Natives of Newfoundland and New France in America" who are "said to live without any Sense of Religion, are

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4 In view of Bentley's unbroken feud as Master of Trinity College, Cambridge – to which position he was appointed by the Crown in 1700 – with the Fellows of that college, it is amusing to note that he says in this respect that "Pride and Arrogance infallibly meet with Contempt".
known to be destitute of its Advantages and Blessings.” They are “without any Law, or Form of Community; without any Literature, or Sciences, or Arts, no Towns, no fixed Habitations, no Agriculture, no Navigation.” It is, in his view, only through “the Power of Religion” that the people of the world enjoy these benefits (1739: I, 10).

4. The treatment of Judaism

One faith that received special attention at this time was Judaism. The attacks that are made on it, however, are often somewhat confused because the authors apparently are not clear in their own minds whether they are attacking the religion of the Old Testament (a difficult project for Christian theologians in any case, since the books of the Old Testament form part of their canonical Scriptures, supposedly divinely authorized), or the Jews of Jesus’ day for their rejection of him as the Christ, or contemporary Jews. In addition many of the apologetic arguments concerning the need for and the authenticity of the Christian revelation which are ostensibly directed against the Jews are in reality primarily aimed at current doubters and critics (of the “deistic” tendency) of that revelation who were currently to be found within Christianity.

In 1689 Richard Kidder was appointed by the Crown to be Dean of Peterborough. Two years later he became Bishop of Bath and Wells in place of Thomas Ken, the deprived non-juror. In his Boyle Lectures for 1693–1694 Kidder, who had already attempted to confute the Jewish position in 1684 in A Demonstration of the Messias: In which the truth of the Christian Religion is proved especially against The Jews, returned to the attack. He makes his position clear in the opening sentences of his lectures:

It is one of the most amazing Things in the whole World, that the Nation of the Jews should obstinately continue in their Unbelief to this Day. Their Fore-Fathers had great Advantages of knowing the Truth of Things; and our Jesus gave sufficient Proof that he was the Messias. The Jews in succeeding Times have been often baffled in their Expectation of a Messias, and have out-lived the Times that by their Prophets, and other wise Men, have been assigned for his Coming in to the World: And yet, after all, they continue to reject our Jesus, and live in an Expectation of a Messias still to come. (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 91)

On the grounds that Jesus performed greater miracles and made more impressively fulfilled prophecies than Moses, he argues that it is inconsis-

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5 They are, however, not properly to be classed as “atheists” since they have never considered the question of the existence of God: “they no more deny the Existence of a Deity, than they deny the Antipodes, the Copernican System, or the Satellites Jovis: about which they have no Notion or Conception at all” (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 10).
tent of the Jews to believe Moses to be “a true Prophet” while refusing to acknowledge Jesus “to be the Messias” He further argues that while the traditions about Moses are credible, the reports about Jesus are more reliable, and that there is “as much Reason”, if not more, for Jews to “receive the four Gospels, as the five Books of Moses” (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 92, 100–101). In developing the last of these arguments Kidder replies at length to what he holds to be Jewish objections to the credibility of the Gospels. As a result of these considerations he confidently maintains that the Jews ought, if they think in an unprejudiced and rational way about the matter, to see that they must accept the truth of the Christian faith. Accordingly he calls on Christians to pray that God will graciously “remove the Veil that is upon their Hearts, and bring” the Jews “to the Knowledge of the Truth” (1739: I, 116).

Kidder’s arguments are a typical expression of Christian polemic against the Jews at this time. Similar arguments are presented, for instance, by Charles Leslie, a militant non-juror, and George Stanhope, who was appointed a royal chaplain in 1697. The former augmented his Short and Easy Method with the Deists (1698), in which he argues for the historical reliability of the records about the authenticating miracles of Moses and Christ, with A Short and Easy Method with the Jews, wherein the Certainty of the Christian Religion Is demonstrated by Infallible Proof from the Four Rules made use of against the Deists; Shewing that these Four Rules do oblige the Jews as much or more than the Deists to the Acknowledgment of Christ. With an Answer To the most Material of their Objections and Prejudices against Christianity. Appearing in 1699, this long-titled companion work not only maintains that the historical evidence shows Jesus to have been the Messiah and answers Jewish objections to the Christian faith; it also accuses the Jews, among other things, of inventing ways “to hide and obscure” the “true meaning” of their Scriptures and the principles of their faith in order to evade the Christian case (Leslie 1721: I, 77).

In his Boyle Lectures, The Truth and Excellence of the Christian Religion Asserted: against Jews, Infidels and Hereticks, particularly in the first series delivered in 1701, Stanhope argues, like Kidder, that when the same kinds of argument are applied to each, the Christian faith is clearly seen to be superior to the Jewish. He maintains, for example, that since the grounds for regarding the revelation contained in the Old Testament as divine, namely attendant miracles and prophecies, are found “upon a fair comparison” to be inferior to those warranting that given in the New Testament, “there appears no Reason, why They who receive the Jewish should, upon their own Principles, reject the Christian Revelation” (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 656–657). Among the other arguments that are presented are that Jesus did not destroy the Law but exalted it by teaching “a more perfect Rule of Virtue”; that the “Spiritual and
Inward Worship” found in Christianity is “more acceptable to God” than the
“outward and Ceremonial” forms of the Jews; that “the Mosaic Institution”
of “Sacrifices and Purifications” was insufficient to secure “the Justification
of Sinners”; and that God had indicated to the Jews that “the Ceremonial
Law was an occasional Institution” which would eventually cease;6 and that
examination vindicates the Christian interpretation of the Messianic prophe-
cies and their application to Jesus (Bentley et al. 1739: I, 671, 687, 689; see
727).

Whatever the effect of his arguments on the Jews might be, Stanhope
urges Christians to pay attention to them so that they may come “to learn the
ture Grounds, to form a right Notion, to discover the charming Beauties, and
to make a just Estimate, of our most Blessed Religion” (1739: I, 735). This
indeed was probably the intention behind the presentation of many arguments
of this kind. References to other religions, and in particular to Judaism and
Islam, were ways of arousing interest in arguments for the Christian revelation
in opposition to the doubts raised about it by the rationally radical (“deist”)
tendency in contemporary theological understanding.

There was, however, also considerable prejudice against the Jews as such.
Tillotson, for example, in a Fast-Sermon preached before the Lord-Mayor of
London in 1690, accuses the Jews of completing “the Measure of their Sins”
by crucifying Jesus. Hence they are held to suffer “the Judgment of God” on
their evil. This is not simply through what the Romans did to them (for the
Romans are said to have been “too good and gentle” to inflict on them what
they deserved!) but through the “cruelty and inhumanity” of the degenerate
state to which they have sunk (Tillotson 1701: 437, 440-441). In another
sermon Tillotson describes the Jews as “the great Patterns of Infidelity” and
accuses them of

6 See Peter Allix’s interpretation of the fate of the Jews by the analogy of “the pulling down
of the Scaffolds which were only set up to build a Palace” as “an infallible sign that the Building
is finished” Allix argues that “total defacing of the Model, which God had formed in the Law”,
for the recognition of the Messiah “is an unanswerable proof that he is already come”. Having,
in support of this argument, pointed out that the Jews are now banished from Palestine, are
“wholly deprived” of temporal power, and have no Temple, no determinable “Genealogies” and
“no more lawful priests”, he concludes that it cannot “be supposed that God should be true in his
Oracles (as we must acknowledge him to be)” except by holding that “the term of the Messiah’s
coming is past” (Allix 1688: II, 312-315). Jenkin similarly argues in one of the “Discourses”
appended to The Reasonableness and Certainty of the Christian Religion that in the coming of
Christ as the Messiah the Jewish Law had been fulfilled and so, as the prophets had foretold,
had come to an end. That the Law has come to an end is held by him to be proved not only
by the ways in which the life of Christ satisfied the prophecies about the Messiah but also by
the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, by the dispersion of the Jewish people,
and by the fact that the Law has “become impracticable, and impossible to be observ’d” (Jenkin
1715: II, 316; see 300-323).
(1) Monstrous Partiality, in denying that which had greater Evidence than
other matters which they did believe.
(2) Unreasonable and groundless Prejudice.
(3) A Childish kind of Perverseness.
(4) Obstinacy and pertinacious persisting in Error.
(5) Want of Patience to consider and examine what can be said for the Truth.
(6) Rudeness, and boisterous falling into uncivil terms.
(7) Fury and outrageous [sic] Passion.
(8) Infidelity is usually attended with bloody and inhuman Persecution
(Tillotson 1712: II, 584; see II, 599–605 where he expounds these
charges).

This material is part of a series of sermons on "The Excellency and Uni-
versality of the Christian Religion, with the Sin and Danger of rejecting it"
Even though any Jews who happened to be confronted with it might not be
persuaded of its accuracy, it might help supposed Christians to recognize
"the unreasonableness of infidelity" and thus to live by the "light which God
hath afforded us" both by "natural Religion" and by "the revelation of the
Gospel" (Tillotson 1712: II, 607).

5. The treatment of Islam

The other faith to receive particular attention at this time was Islam. Tillotson,
for example, makes some passing references to Muhammad. In one sermon,
as part of a discussion of the title "the Word" as applied to Jesus, he points
out that he is so called "By Mahomet in his Alchoran" while in another he
states that Muhammad seems to have taken his notion of "a sensual Paradise"
and other ideas from "Jewish traditions" (Tillotson 1701: 509, 253).

A number of those who discuss Islam do so while looking over their
shoulders at internal debates within Christianity In particular conviction by
supposed association and the charge of being crypto-Muslims was not uncom-
mon in the debates about real and alleged Socinianism at this time. Jonathan
Edwards, for instance, in A Preservative Against Socinianism, suggests that
for some the adoption of Socman notions threatens to be a stage on the way
to Islam. He mentions the story of certain Socmans who (during the reign of
Charles II) had written to "Ben Hamet, the late Embassador here from the Em-
peror of Fez" to propose that "a good correspondence might be settled, and a
close League enter'd into, between the English Unitans, and the Orthodox
Churches of Algiers and Morocco." Accordingly he holds that if Unitarian
ideas are not checked, some may "in good time be disposed, to exchange
the Bible for the Alcoran" (Jonathan Edwards 1694: 130). Similarly John
Edwards, in arguing that Socian writers cannot be regarded as genuinely
Christian, suggests that “they indusently comply with Jews and Turks in opposition to all Sober Christians” He goes on to assert that “their Old Friend Servetus declar’d his approbation of the Alcoran, and thought it reconcilable with the New Testament, if the doctrine of the Trinity were laid aside.” (John Edwards 1697: 227) It is a coupling that he had already used in condemning Locke’s The Reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures as a fundamentally Socinian work. While generally charging that Locke’s views in it unquestionably have a “Tendency to Irreligion and Atheism” (John Edwards 1696: 68; see 43), he specifically claims that readers should note that its “Lank Faith” is that of “a Turk” since it claims for Christ nothing more than what “the Alcoran acknowledges” Recognizing that “Mahometans call themselves Believers” (from the Arabic verb meaning to believe – “whence the Mahometan Religion is call’d Islamismus”), he asks “what difference is there between one of them and our Author’s Believer?” confident that if there is no significant difference, the Lockean understanding of a reasonable Christian is manifestly condemned (John Edwards 1696: 53–55).

A different, political use of references to Islam was made by Samuel Johnson. Having suffered considerably in the previous reign for, among other things, having suggested in Julian the Apostate (1682) and Julian’s Arts (1683) that Roman Catholicism was modern paganism and the Duke of York a contemporary Julian, he was disappointed after the “Glorious Revolution” that the Crown only offered him the Deanship at Durham. He wanted a mitre. He then managed to upset the new establishment by criticizing the officially preferred view that the accession of William and Mary was justified by the right of conquest. In An Argument proving that the Abrogation of King James by the People of England and the Promotion of the Prince of Orange was according to the Constitution of the English Government he described the view that the crown was held by right of conquest as “no better Argument than Mahomet’s Miracle of Success and Settlement” (Johnson 1710: 263). Nevertheless, although Johnson persisted in maintaining that the crown is in the gift of the “People of England” represented in Parliament (see Johnson 1710: 269; cf. 269–277), William III eventually granted him a bounty of £1000 and a pension of £300 p.a.

Elsewhere standard themes in Christian anti-Muslim apologetics are rehearsed. Tillotson, for instance, repeats the charge that whereas Christianity was propagated by the power of its truth, “the Religion of Mahomet” was “planted by force” and is maintained by “violence” (Tillotson 1712: 148; see II, 501). In two other sermons he denounces reports about Muhammad’s miracles. According to one of them, Jesus “did all his Miracles publickly” but “Mahomet’s Miracles were wrought by himself alone, without witness” Tillotson adds the comment that this was “the best way” for someone who
could not work miracles but "could persuade the People what he pleased" (Tillotson 1712: II, 538). In the other he describes Muhammad's alleged miracles as

either grossly absurd and ridiculous, as that of part of the Moon coming down into his Sleeve, and his remanding it to its place again; or else destitute of all proof and witness, as that of his Pigeon whispering to him in the Ear; which if it had been intended for a Miracle, the Pigeon should not have whispered, but have spoken out, that others might have heard it.

Tillotson is, however, aware that Muhammad himself did not claim miracles as a divine testimony to his mission and interprets this as showing that Muhammad was "conscious" of "his own defect" in this respect (Tillotson 1712: II, 501).

Jenkm similarly seeks to support his confidence that proper "Consideration of the Grounds and Reasons" of the Christian religion shows its superiority to all other faiths (Jenkin 1715: xxxvii) by attacking Islam on various counts. Among the charges that he levies are that Islam is novel "in respect both of the Old and New Testament", has spread only by "the Power of the Sword" in spite of "all its sensual Allurement", bans "all Disputation and Discourse about Religion" and makes it a capital offence "to contradict the Alcoran", and is not authenticated by prophecies and miracles (Jenkin 1715: I, 389, 390; see I, 389–392). The Qur'an is accused of being false ("as when it makes the Virgin Mary Sister to Aaron" and "asserts that Christ was not crucified"), absurd and ridiculous (as in the stories "of Solomon's Army, composed of Men, Devils and Birds" and of "Solomon's Discourse with the Bird call'd the Whoop"), impious and immoral (as in permitting Muslims to have many wives and to take the wives of their slaves, and in commanding the extirpation of infidels), and not now to be the text first written by the Prophet (Jenkin 1715: I, 393; see I, 394). Finally Muhammad himself is criticized both for being "lustful, proud, fierce, and cruel" and for "blasphemously" introducing God as "speaking to him" to justify these characteristics (Jenkin 1715: I, 397; see I, 397–399).

Jenkin's arguments repeat what had long been standard charges in Christian apologetics against Islam. Furthermore, while Jenkin acknowledges that "some learned Men" have recently suspected that Christians in earlier times have misrepresented Islam in their attacks on it, he suggests that "any impartial and judicious Man" would recognize that it is more likely that some Muslims once did believe and practice what they were charged with (even if they have now given it up) than that the Christians who were

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7 Where, however, disputes about religion are permitted, as in Persia, Jenkin claims that the reading of the bible "has been the means of bringing over many Persons of great Note to the Christian Faith" (Jenkin 1715: I, 391).
seeking to convert them had objected to “imaginary and feigned Absurdities, when there are visibly so many real ones, even in the Alcoran itself” (Jenkin 1715: I, 394–395). He thus concludes that “there is nothing” in Islam which may lead one “to believe it to be of Divine Revelation”. Those who want to know more about “this vile Imposture” are finally referred by him to the study “lately publish’d by the Learned Dr. Prideaux” (Jenkin 1715: I, 399).

The most famous and extensive treatment of Muhammad in the reign of William and Mary is the work by Humphrey Prideaux to which Jenkin refers. When James II had made a Roman Catholic Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, Prideaux had left the college for Norwich where he held a canonry. He welcomed the Revolution and was appointed Dean of Norwich in 1702. In 1697 he published a polemical study of Muhammad, The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display’d in the Life of Mahomet. With A Discourse annex’d for the Vindicating of Christianity from this Charge, Offered to the Consideration of the Deists of the Present Age. As its preface further indicates, this study of Muhammad is primarily intended to counter “the great prevailing of Infidelity in the present Age” and in particular to bring those “who have cast off Christianity as an Imposture” to see “the Error of their Apostacy” (Prideaux 1716: iii). Even though the appended “Account of the Authors quoted in this Book” shows that Prideaux was acquainted with a number of Muslim texts (see Prideaux 1716: 259–274), it is not surprising in view of its underlying apologetic intention that the treatment of Muhammad and of the Islamic faith is somewhat hostile. The style of this study may be illustrated by the following extracts:

In the 38th year of his Age, affecting an Eremetical Life, [Mahomet] used every Morning to withdraw himself into a Solitary Cave and there continue all day, exercising himself, as he pretended, in Prayers, Fastings, and holy Meditations; and there it is suppos’d he first had his Consults with those Accomplices by whom he made his Alcoran. On his Return home at Night, he used to tell his Wife Cadigha of Visions and strange Voices; but she rejecting these Stones as vaine Fancies of his own disturbed Imagination, or else Delusions of the Devil; at length he feigned a Converse with the Angel Gabriel, which she was also as backward to believe, till she consulted with a fugitive Monk who being in the Plot, helped to confirm her in the belief of what Mahomet had communicated unto her. (Prideaux 1716: 12–13)

For the People calling on him for Miracles to prove his Mission, and he being able to work none, to salve the matter he invents this Story of his Journey to Heaven; which must be acknowledged to have Miracle enough in it; by all those

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8 To be fair to Jenkin, however, on the same basis he does excuse Muslims for treating “the Gospel of Hieronymus Xaverius” as “the Gospel profess’d by all Christians” even though in fact it reflects only the views of “an erroneous and very corrupt part of them” (Jenkin 1715: I, 391).
who have Faith to believe it. And yet it being believed by all that profess the *Mahometan Religion*, however absurd soever it be (1716: 46)

The Governor of Egypt, being informed of his Brutish Passion sent him this Maid for a Present, she being then only Fifteen Years old. But how secret soever he manag'd the Amours for fear of his Wives, Ayesha and Haphsa found it out, and catch'd them together in the Fact. Whereon they reproached him bitterly for it, that he who called himself a Prophet sent from God to teach Men Righteousness, should do such a thing [Which raising a great Noise, and many being offended, to smooth the Matter again, he hath recourse to his old Art, and out comes a New Revelation to justify him in it, the Sixty sixth Chapter of the Alcoran Which Law being published, it gave much content to his licentious Followers. (1716: 124–125)

Having provided a tendentious account of Muhammad, Prideaux turns to the “Deists.” Listing seven characteristics of “Imposture,” he argues that all belong to “Mahometanism and that none of them can be charged upon Christianity” (Prideaux 1716: 144). He thus concludes by hoping that what he has said will have shown that “our Holy Christian Religion cannot be such an Imposture, as you [the “deists” whom he is addressing] would have it to be, but really is that Sacred Truth of God, which you are all bound to believe.” (1716: 246) For Prideaux, then, comparison of Christianity with “all the other Religions that are in the World” shows it to be “vastly above them all, the worthiest of God for him to give unto us, and the worthiest of us to observe” (1716: 258).

To conclude this brief survey, however, it should be noted that not every description of Islam published at this time sought to present it in a bad light and that not everyone was convinced of the manifest superiority of Christianity, at least as it was practised by many who claimed to be Christians. Albertus Bobovius’ treatise is an example of the former and Joseph Pitts’ description of Islam an example of the latter.

Albertus Bobovius or Bobowski was a Pole who, having been captured by Tartars as a child and sold to Turks, was brought up as a Muslim and took the name the name Ali-Beigh (or Ali-Bei). Eventually he became an interpreter for the Turkish Emperor, Mehmet IV. In 1690 a treatise by him on the faith and practice of Islam was published in Oxford by Thomas Hyde, together with notes by Hyde, under the title of *Annotatiunculae in Tractatum Alberti Bobovii de Turcarum Liturgia, peregrinatione Meccana, Circumcisione, aegrotorum Visitatione, &c.* It was republished in the following year in an Appendix to Hyde’s edition of Abraham Petitso’s *Itinera Mundi.*

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9 Hyde had received the manuscript from Thomas Smuth (an English divine who first went to Constantinople in 1669 as Chaplain to the Ambassador and who published in 1680 *An Account of the Greek Church*) for whom Bobovius had written it. In 1712 an English translation, *A Treatise Concerning the Turkish Liturgy, The Pilgrimage to Mecca, Circumcision, Visitation of*
Hyde’s ‘Preface’ to the treatise is interestingly ambivalent. On the one hand, he points out that since Bobovius is a Muslim he is able to give an accurate description of ‘the Rites of the Turks’, including the pilgrimage to Mecca, and that Muslims both ‘worship the true God’ and in many cases are ‘shining Examples for Alms, Justice, and other Moral and Theological Virtues’. On the other hand, Hyde expresses typical Christian hostility to Muslims when he suggests that this treatise reveals ‘their Folly so freely, and gives us Christians Occasion to laugh at their plainly ridiculous and superstitious’ ceremonies which have been ‘invented by cunning rogues to seduce and sooth the Minds of the wild Arabians by a vain shew of Religion’ (Bobovius 1712: 106-108). His footnotes to the text, however, are non-tendentiously expository and one corrects at some length Christian misrepresentations of Muslim views of Paradise (see Bobovius 1712: 142 n. ‘d’).

Bobovius’ treatise is a straightforwardly informative description of Muslim practice of prayer, of their different kinds of magistrate, of their religious functionaries, of what happens on the pilgrimage to Mecca, of the ceremonies used on visiting the sick and the dying, of funeral rites, and of the rite of circumcision. Finally, somewhat incongruously, there are three paragraph-long chapters giving the titles of the Cham of the Crimean Tartars, of the Emperor of the Turks, and of the Grand Vizier (Bobovius 1712: 109-150). The text emphasises the importance attached to the practice of prayer in the Muslim community, the serious behaviour required of pilgrims to Mecca, the significance attached to visiting the sick, and the character of their beliefs about post-mortem judgement (see Bobovius 1712: 120, 127-129, 136-137, 139-145). Bobovius’ description of Muslim faith and practice hardly justifies the negative elements in Hyde’s prefatory comments – but perhaps they were expected since Hyde was Archdeacon of Gloucester and an Oxford D. D.!

Joseph Pitts discovered that there are good things to be said about Islam – though it was in several ways a painful discovery. Having sailed from England in 1678 as an apprentice on a merchant ship, he was captured by Algerine pirates captained by ‘a Dutch Renegado’ and was sold as a slave. In 1680 he was bought by a ‘Patroon’ who refused a ransom offered by the English consul and who, having failed to persuade Pitts by arguments and entreaties to become a Muslim, cudgelled him into conversion, seeing it as a meritorious act. Shortly after this Pitts went with his master on pilgrimage to Mecca. Eventually, after being sold to a third master with whom he ‘wanted nothing’, he escaped through the aid of the English consul at Smyrna and returned to

the Sick, &c. together with the preface and notes by Thomas Hyde, was included in the Four Treatises Concerning the Doctrine, Discipline and Worship of the Mahometans. It is from this translation that the quotations are given.
England in 1694. He had discovered much more about Islam than he had presumably ever desired and at very undesirable cost!

When, however, he came to publish his Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mahometans in 1704, it is clear that he came away with considerable respect for the reverence and "Zeal of those poor blind Mahometans" in observing the rules of their faith (Pitts 1738: xi; see 118, 156). He admits that he was tempted to "continue a Mussulman" (Pitts 1738: 238) and, in spite of some critical remarks, the underlying tone of his comprehensive survey of Muslim beliefs and practices is broadly sympathetic. In the course of his account he provides one of the very few firsthand reports by non-Muslims (for Pitts regards his conversion as a forced aberration and notes that "several Ministers" judged it not to be "the unpardonable Sin" [Pitts 1738: 204]) of what happens and what is to be seen on a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. He also takes various opportunities to correct Christian propaganda about Islam, pointing out that in his case "I speak what I know, and have been an Eyewitness of." (Pitts 1738: 156) He denies, for example, reports that Muhammad's coffin is suspended in the air by means of a lodestone, that converts must throw a dart at a picture of Christ, and that "the Vulgar are not permitted to read the ALCORAN, but (as the poor Romanists)" must depend upon what they are taught by the priests (Pitts 1738: 157, 199, 147). Perhaps most surprisingly of all to his readers, he denies that Christian captives are usually tortured into becoming Muslims: in this respect it was his bad luck to be "so unmercifully dealt with" (Pitts 1738: 181).

In his "Preface" Pitts notes the view that it was because of their "Heresies, and blasphemous Errors" that God was provoked "to deliver the Eastern Churches over to the cursed Mahomer" He trusts that professing Christians will take warning and conform their belief and practice to the Gospel (Pitts 1738: xii). It is a hope which typically motivates the treatment of other religions at this time, whether they originate in the experiences of a sailor, the studies of a scholar, or the learning of an archbishop.

6. Motive, materials and method for the study of religion

For modern scholarly study of religions and even of the history of the study of religions, the kind of material about other faiths that is to be found in these writings of the reign of William and Mary may properly be seen to tell us much more about the internal debates over faith and reason in Christianity and about the ignorance and prejudice of those who used this material than about what was actually believed and practised in other faiths. Bobovius' treatise and Pitts' story are the rare exceptions of works by authors who could claim to know from their own experience what is being described. Nevertheless, it
is out of this somewhat unpromising stable that the supposed thoroughbreds of the modern study of religions eventually emerged.

In his study of the history of comparative religion Eric Sharpe suggests that the existence of the subject depends "at its simplest" on the satisfaction of "three elementary conditions": there must be a motive for the study, materials to it carry out, and an acceptable method by which to organize the material (Sharpe 1975: 2). How were these three conditions met by the discussions of other religions that have been referred to in this paper?

In the first place the principal motive that lies behind most, though not all, of the discussions of other religions in the reign of William and Mary is a desire to contribute to internal debates within Britain about the proper content and truth of Christian belief and practice. Although, that is, there are a few attempts simply to give supposedly objective information to satisfy curiosity (see the works of Bobovius and Pitts), the great majority of discussions use (and not infrequently abuse) references to other religions to augment arguments about the reasonableness of some form of Christian belief, about the status of claims to revelation, and about the erroneousness of certain notions and practices. While, then, there was a motive, it is not one of presenting phenomenologically neutral information. However, before we are tempted to write off what may be alleged to be "theological" (mis)use of the study of other religions and assert the superiority of a contemporary "scientific" approach, perhaps two questions ought to be pondered. First, are we so sure that the contemporary "non-theological" approach is better able to understand what is going on in other faiths? At least our prejudiced forebears did take religious faith seriously and so approached the confessions and practices of other religions as issues concerned with matters of fundamental importance to human welfare. In spite of their dogmatic prejudices, they did not treat the matters they discussed as matters of merely antiquarian and cross-cultural curiosity. Secondly, are we so clear that the modern approach is decisively more value-free than the studies which have been discussed? The modern desire to be "objective" – and what often seems to go with this, namely, an abhorrence of confessional commitment – may sometimes conceal an unacknowledged (and so more dangerous) secularist prejudice. At least in the use and abuse of other religions in the time of William and Mary the bias is generally clear and so may be compensated for, however deep the prejudicing distortions may be.

In the second place, there clearly were materials available for work in comparative religion at this time even though they were somewhat limited and mainly concerned the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic family of faiths. The treatment of other religions in the reign of William and Mary indicates, however, that there were no major developments in the discovery and use of sources at this time. The great opening up of texts from and information about the
Indian sub-continent in particular was not to come for several decades. Nevertheless, while the debates still largely refer to evidence culled from classical texts, there was a steady, if not yet very large, continuing introduction of new materials gathered by travellers to foreign parts (including a certain methodological awareness of the somewhat arbitrary selectivity of such evidence – see Jenkin 1715: I, 396–397) as well as a growing corpus of understanding arising from scholarly investigations into collections of oriental texts such as those to be found in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Prideaux, for instance, as has been mentioned, discusses over thirty “Arabic Authors” in his “Account of the Authors quoted in this Book” that is appended to his True Nature of Imposture Fully Display’d (see Prideaux 1716: 259–274). When the distinguished orientalist Edward Pococke died in 1691, he was followed in his Chair at Oxford by Thomas Hyde, while a few years later Simon Ockley became a student at Cambridge and embarked on his studies of oriental languages and texts.

As for the third condition for the study of comparative religion mentioned by Sharpe, that of an acceptable method, the discussions of other religions in the reign of William and Mary may well be considered to offer perhaps a cautionary note to the comments made under motive rather than a guide to safe practice. Most of the descriptions and evaluations are not only made from the standpoint of a fundamental commitment to the superiority of some form of Christian belief (or of current rational criticism of it) but also use the structure of contemporary arguments about Christian self-understanding as the hermeneutical model for interpreting other religions. The result is that beliefs and practices tend to be apprehended and judged as acceptable or not according to whether or not they agree with what is considered to be true Christian belief. While, however, this approach can lead to major distortions in the apprehension of what is supposedly being understood, it at least has the merit of not pretending to be able to produce a supra-cultural, value-free phenomenological treatment. In principle it takes religious faith seriously and the differences between faiths as important and then seeks to determine what ought to be held and done. Perhaps in these days of dialogue between believers more light will be shone on what is believed and practised by adherents of apparently mutually critical faiths by allowing the adherents of each to reflect on and be corrected by the adherents of the others than by the adoption of a supposedly neutral approach to faiths that fails to appreciate the fundamental commitments of their followers!

These are much debated questions in the study of the method and theory of the study of religion. Behind the above comments from the perspective of someone whose prime interests are in the history of thought and philosophical theology lies the conviction that we must seek objectivity as a regulative ideal while recognizing in practice that we can never escape the anthropolog-
ical conditioning of our human nature in general and our particular cultural setting in particular. The question that then should trouble us is, What will be the ignorance and prejudice that a commentator three hundred years from now will detect in our comments on other faiths — and on our own? The comfort of aging is that we will not be around to discover! The value of considering what our predecessors did — and, in the case of this article, those who discussed other religions in the reign of William and Mary — is that their differences from us help to highlight conditioning factors that may influence understanding and thereby help us to appreciate what may be happening when we think we understand. And if this is not a sufficient justification for studying this material, there is the fundamental one that the material is interesting and often fascinating.

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