

JOHN TOLAND - THE FORGOTTEN PHILOSOPHER

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

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Ireland has a global standing in world intellectual history. It is most noted for its poets, novelists and playwrights, such as Yeats, Joyce and Shaw, and has been formally recognised by, among other things, the number of Nobel prizes which have been secured by some authors, as well as by some of our scientists. However, one would be hard put to name Irish philosophers who have obtained equivalent recognition.

Perhaps the person who would be most likely to feature on university philosophy courses is George Berkeley of the 18th century, whose subjective idealism has not exactly had a tremendous impact on the modern mind. Otherwise, there was the much earlier philosopher-theologian John Scotus Eriugena of the 9th century. And there is the example (lesser known, apart from some standing within academia) of Francis Hutcheson (Ulsterman as well as Irishman), who was contemporaneous with Berkeley. But he is identified more with the Scottish Enlightenment, because he mostly discharged his teaching responsibilities in Glasgow. Nonetheless, it is commonly accepted that he was a decided influence on David Hume and Adam Smith. And he is understood himself to have been influenced by Toland. Edmund Burke is chiefly remembered as a political analyst, but he was also a philosopher to some extent, having produced the book entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*.

The subject of our consideration today, John Toland, who lived from 1670 to 1722, was an Irishman, and Ulsterman, who made a distinctive mark in the intellectual and public life of Europe in the 18th century. Yet he secured practically no significant acknowledgement in English-speaking academia until the 1980s. But, before we consider him in detail, it is desirable to place Toland in broad historical context.

He was in fact a figure in what has been called the Enlightenment.

European intellectual history has been divided into various phases. It begins with the classical period from Ancient Greece through to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476.

Next came the Dark Ages, which were dominated, religiously and politically, by Christianity and characterized at the upper levels of society philosophically by what has been called scholasticism, i.e. a kind of neo-Aristotelian and neo-Platonist religiosity. This focused on the theological and religio-ethical, while superstition was prevalent to a large extent among the masses. Much classical literature, being viewed as pagan, was lost or destroyed during this period.

By the 13th century, the Renaissance had commenced, as heralded by Petrarch. Classical learning was rediscovered, not least owing to its preservation by Islam and transmission thence to the Europe of the time. Additionally, and related to this development, a more humanocentric perspective was cultivated which thus had greater regard for this world, while acceptance of overall Catholicity continued.

The Enlightenment effectively began in scientific mode and its early stirrings were with Copernicus in the mid-16th century upon publication of his account of heliocentricity (that is, the circulation of the earth around the sun rather than the contrary). This was the first significant salvo in the conflict that was to take place between science and religion, which has continued right into the modern period. However, despite immediate criticism from orthodoxy, it was to take over seventy years before the Vatican moved forcefully against Copernicanism as contradictory of holy scripture, because of previously being engrossed in a struggle against Luther and others of the Reformation. In 1633, Galileo was convicted of heresy for adhering to heliocentricity. It was only by recanting his error that he avoided the fate of Giordano Bruno of Italy who previously had advocated the same position and had been burned at the stake.

An overall scientific revolution was nonetheless taking place and soon saw developments on various fronts such as those pioneered by Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton. This science meant critical reasoning and an evidenced approach to knowledge, instead of scholastic speculation and scriptural

reference along with acquiescence in church authority. It was not long before this way of thinking began to inspire philosophers in asking basic questions about life and existence. Two such prominent figures in John Toland's day were Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. In other words, Toland was born into a world much affected by the ascendancy of reason which was not lost on him. He acknowledged the influence of Hobbes and knew Locke personally, and somewhat idealised him. There was also the ongoing debate within Christianity about the trinity, revelation and miracles, which was increasingly to do with their rationality or otherwise. In a nutshell, rationalism begat Toland just as it did several other luminaries.

And the new enlightened age was accompanied by ideas of personal liberty, social progress, and human happiness. In fact, it is not generally known that what was to become a slogan of utilitarianism in the 19th century, namely the greatest happiness of the greatest number, was first enunciated by the Francis Hutcheson already mentioned. Therefore, life was no longer just about preparing for the hereafter.

So, let us now turn specifically to the life and works of John Toland.

He was born in County Donegal into a Gaelic environment in the Inishowen peninsula, was brought up in the Catholic faith and was known probably known by the surname Ua Tuathaláinn. His parenthood is uncertain, with the hostile Swift repeating the allegation that he was the illegitimate son of a Catholic priest, probably based on hearsay that may have been just malicious. There is a dearth of information about his boyhood otherwise, and Toland seemed not at pains himself to render it less obscure, perhaps thus indeed reflecting back on the status of his birth. One morsel of information we do have about this period of his life is that he was nick-named "Eoghan na Leabhair", because of his precocious bibliophilia.

Anyway, we know that at the age of sixteen he rejected Catholicism in favour of Protestantism and also that he became a student at an associated school in Redcastle on the peninsula. One might ask why he reneged on the faith of his upbringing. Was it just because of persuasive Protestant ideas

or opportunistically wishing to integrate to the establishment faith? Or was it because, having entered into a reflective and critical stage of adolescence, he came to the conclusion that Catholicism was, as he later put it, imbued with “the grossest superstition and idolatry”; “Reason”, he said was “the happy instrument of my conversion.” In any event, he maintained this attitude to Catholicism throughout the rest of his life and, given what we learn about his general disposition, it seems likely that his aversion to it was intellectually genuine.

Next, he proceeded to study divinity at Glasgow University where he became particularly involved with the Presbyterians there. He completed his education by obtaining an MA in theology at the University of Edinburgh in 1690. After that, he went to London and became friendly with a group of dissenters, including Daniel Williams, a leading nonconformist. It was there that he probably first came into contact with deviations from Scottish Calvinism in the shape of the more lax Arminianism.

He so impressed by his learning and zeal that his new friends sponsored him to study further at Leiden in Holland. There he was exposed to a tolerant, open-minded atmosphere and encountered what were regarded by some as heretical influences of a materialist nature and anti-literalism in respect of biblical studies. It seems that this experience led him to reject all forms of spiritual authority.

In 1693, he returned to England and Oxford where, among other things, he worked on a dictionary of the Irish language. One person advised him there that he was “a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion.”

Oxford was a centre of Socinian ideas. Socinianism, is so-called after an Italian and his nephew both named Sozzini. In other words, it rejected the trinity, because the idea of three persons in one god simply appeared a contradiction to Socinians. In modern terms, it would probably seem to them like implying god had a multiple personality disorder. Socinianism also stressed the role of reason in interpreting scripture generally. It was quite influential in England in the 17th century and came to be known there as unitarianism, although not all the general teachings of Sozzini

were adhered to. I believe its role in preparing the way for Lockean philosophy has been underestimated, as Locke himself was quite familiar through friendships with Socinian ideas. It was at this time that Toland developed an acquaintance with Locke. He then went back to London and also became familiar with the Socinians there.

In 1695, two important books appeared concerning reason and Christianity. One was entitled *Christianity Not Mysterious* by Toland and the other entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity* by Locke. Whatever about publication dates, it has been suggested that Locke may have read Toland's manuscript first before composing his own. In any event, contemporaries alleged that Locke's general work paved the way for Toland's. Nonetheless, a notable difference between the two was that Locke accepted that at times there had to be faith in divine revelation "above reason", as he put it, whereas Toland insisted that revelation (in scripture or otherwise) should always be in accord with reason and thus intelligible and never "above" it. In other words, a call for faith in what was inherently mysterious could never be justified. This, his opponents said, meant that the idea in particular of the trinity, which he alluded to in his work, was implicitly rejected by him - a charge which he denied. In fact, avoidance rather than affirmation, one way or the other, was the order of the day. He also held generally that the veracity of Christian teachings should be discerned by the individual, independent of clerical guidance and, throughout his life, inveighed against what he called obscurantist "priestcraft.", whether Catholic or Protestant.

Yet religious mysteries were an essential part of orthodoxy. As a result, proceedings were initiated against him in England, leading to a judgement that the book should be burned, subsequent to which he went to his native Ireland where the book was promptly also declared heretical by the King's Bench in Dublin. There was much public denunciation of it and people were warned against "Tolandists". He was, they said, impugning the very divinity of Christ. Locke was kept abreast of these developments by correspondents and consequently took pains to distance himself from Toland. The Irish Parliament also ordered that *Christianity Not Mysterious* should be publicly burned by the hangman and, moreover, its author taken into custody. Some MPs advocated that Toland should be burned with it.

However, he fled the country before he could be arrested. At the same time, he protested that he was in fact neither an Arminian nor a Socinian, both of which tendencies had been attributed to him among others.

In *Christianity Not Mysterious* Toland's rejection of any alleged revelation or miracle which conflicted with reason led to him being classified as a Deist. He stressed his opposition to clerical domination in all denominations, which he saw as preventing people thinking for themselves and thus greatly irritated the pastors. He further accused all established churches of being riddled with hangovers of pagan imagery and rituals, and as obfuscating, with their particular interpretations of the Bible, the true Christian message. What caused particular outrage was that having attacked the infallibility of the Pope, he went on to censure "fallible Protestants". But, worse than that, he appeared to slight the very idea of Protestantism by saying that the proper religion was "not yet fully restored by the purest Reformations in Christendom."

The work caused a scandal generally and numerous refutations of it were attempted and published, the latter being fifty in all. It even contributed to the passing of a Blasphemy Act in 1697 which, among other things, made it punishable to "deny any one of the persons in the holy Trinity to be God ...".

But the worry about it was not only theological. Any undermining of faith at the time was considered socially and politically disruptive of the established order. There seemed to be an attitude of the ruling classes similar to that later expressed by Napoleon when he said that "Religion stops the poor from killing the rich." Or, as Toland later put it, there was a "mutual compact between the prince and the priest". Or yet again, he was to observe how some held "that fraud and superstition were necessary means, to keep the common people in good order."

In 1698, Toland published his *Life of Milton*, a figure of decided republican outlook who in his later years at times seemed to veer towards a form of pantheism. Toland was accused of challenging the authenticity of the New Testament in the course of this biography, but he denied doing so and stated that, in highlighting the questioning of certain holy texts, he was referring to inauthentic pieces treated as scripture by some. Nonetheless,

his critics felt that there was at least a certain doubt by association cast on the New Testament. If the texts he was addressing were alleged to be blatant fabrications, could it not be taken that he was in fact having an indirect go at Holy Scripture? However, the basic problem for the establishment was that he advocated that the most up to date techniques of historical research and philological analysis should be applied to all texts and this made the ecclesiarchy decidedly nervous. It also raised the issue of the validity of excluding certain texts from the canon before the latter had been decided on. He had further cast suspicion on the value of interpretations of scripture provided by the so-called Fathers of the Church since Christ.

In 1701, he was again in trouble insofar as his work in general was condemned by the Lower House of Convocation of the Church of England to the point of calling him an atheist. In response, in his pamphlet *Vindicius Liberior*, he sought to defuse the situation somewhat and appeared to an extent apologetic, but without surrendering on principle. In any event, the overall deciding episcopacy did not proceed against him.

Altogether, his literary output was to amount to over 35 publications and, apart from, philosophy, covered several aspects of politics, economics, law, history, and foreign policy. Notable among these was *A History of the Celtic Religion*, with special reference to the Druids. In this, among other things, he tilted against the sexual prudery of religion in his day when he referred approvingly to the ancient Irish practice of cohabiting with a possible spouse for a year before any marriage and then deciding whether or not to go ahead with it: “It was a custom I must own, like to prevent a world of unhappy matches.” Also, he discerned a pristine Christianity in Ireland, as elsewhere, which was later corrupted by Romanism. It was suggestive of a theme to be taken up by others of proto-Protestantism, which survives to this day. And there was also a slight deference shown towards antecedent sun-worshipping paganism which connected with the pantheist perspective.

It has to be noted that he was wont to particularly stress the usage of terms, definitions and meanings in a way that had a touch of the Wittgensteinian about it. He also said about the author that one does not fully comprehend the meaning of all that one writes and that what is said mingles with all

other pronouncements in the determination of meaning. Here, no less than Roland Barthes in his post-structuralist phase comes to mind.

He was to make several visits to Germany from 1701 on official State business and met Leibniz in the process with whom he had many and long philosophical debates. By 1704, his philosophical position had developed further as expressed in his book *Letters to Serena* dedicated to the Queen of Prussia, Sophie Charlotte, with whom he regularly corresponded about philosophical matters.

In this, he suggested that the supernatural, inclusive of the notion of immortality, was just human invention. Also therein, he asserted “the parity of the intellectual organs in both sexes”. Women, he insisted, were potentially capable of apprehending the highest, philosophy, virtue and religion. He went on to refer specifically albeit selectively and critically to the ideas of Spinoza who is viewed as a pantheist. *Serena* is a potent onslaught on religious convention, while of course including the occasional, but necessary, disingenuous genuflection to orthodoxy.

Also, he was impressed by the writings of Giordano Bruno, one of whose works he translated. Bruno is likewise regarded as a pantheist. His translations further included *l’Incredulité* by the suspected Socinian Jean Le Clerc. Toland was further an admirer of the materialist poet Lucretius, and was wont to quote lavishly from the philosophical naturalist, Pliny the Elder. Toland’s work also had a major influence on the French-based secular intellectual Baron d’Holbach who paraphrased some of his writings and translated others, in particular *Letters to Serena*. These efforts then reverberated throughout the French and wider European enlightenment.

In 1705, Toland brought out the book *Socinianism Truly Stated* based on a work by Jean Le Clerc. In this, Toland professed himself openly as a pantheist, a term indirectly derived from a book in Latin by Joseph Raphson. Subsequently, in a letter to Leibniz, he said that a pantheist was someone who believed “in no other eternal being but the universe.” By 1708, he had incurred the wrath of Jonathan Swift who denounced him as “the great oracle of the anti-Christians”. George Berkeley denounced him as a “freethinker”. Burke dismissed him out of hand.

In a further work of 1710 entitled *Pantheisticon*, Toland averred that “God was simply a way of referring to the universe or the sum total of reality” and stated “The universe is divine.” *Pantheisticon* was written in Latin, as an act of caution, so that only a limited audience could read it, yet again reflecting the perils of the time. Moreover, in this, as in other instances, Toland also wrote anonymously or used pseudonyms and controlled and thus confined distribution. Like Spinoza, he rejected the view that these positions entailed atheism.

Apart from his writings on religious matters, in 1700 Toland had published *The Commonwealth of Oceana* by James Harrington, a virtual republican who nonetheless interacted to a certain extent both with both Cromwell and the two Charles. Toland also published other radical writings, such as the republican tracts by Algernon Sidney and Edmund Ludlow. But he realistically accepted the Williamite monarchy and its successors, and politically worked within that framework which he found in substance to be at least in advance of Cromwellian authoritarianism and Stuart absolutism. Liberty, he said, was a defining characteristic of what it meant to be human. Reason and tolerance he opined were the twin pillars of a good society. He subscribed to the need for equal rights among freeborn citizens and subscribed to merit-based reward in place of hereditary advantage. But he still thought of society as comprised of higher and lower orders.

Moreover, like a lot of metropolitan radicals, he could also be quite colonialist in attitude, not least towards his native country of Ireland in which he said he was “only fortuitously born”. In fact, his loyalty to empire and abhorrence of popery combined in the disreputable position of advising against any unity of Catholics and Protestants in Ireland and indeed urging the fostering of hostility between them. Moreover, the preponderant popery of the Irish justified them being made subordinate to the English, although he was in favour of a colonialist Irish parliament based on the Protestant ascendancy. He was clearly no anticipation of Wolfe Tone.

On the other hand, he was untypically liberal for his time in writing a pamphlet about Jews, advocating their full inclusion in the community. Another significant publication concerned Hypatia, the famous female mathematician and philosopher of Alexandria, who was publicly murdered in 415 by Christians incited by St Cyril for her non-Christian lack of orthodoxy. And misogyny was not absent from her killers' motives. Toland praised her as most virtuous and learned in a manner which one modern scholar has called "proto-feminist".

He was also an avowed cosmopolitan of sorts in the progressive sense and wrote that: "the sun is my father, the earth my mother, the world my country, and all men are my relations".

In 1718, towards the end of his days, he published *Nazarenus*. This was a wide-ranging tome, again emphasising an early uncorrupted Christianity, while reiterating denunciations of priestcraft and the distortions of scripture by the revered fathers of the church, who were often contradictory of each other. Once more, the doubt was reinforced about the gospel canon and contradictions therein, as well as revelation and miracles. There was also the related question of possibly 'lost gospels'. Sclerotic traditions and customs were further deprecated. And, as early as his publication of *Amyntor* in 1699, he had been stressing that he could not be accused of casting aspersion on the teachings of Christ since there were no writings of the messiah, only reports of what he was alleged to have said. In addition, the written gospels could be classed as not being authored by actual apostles, however they were eventually designated.

He was obviously sympathetic to the Ebionites of the immediate post-Jesus period who were like an early foreshadowing of humanocentric unitarianism. And looking world-wide, he envisaged a coming together in some form of Jew, Christian and "Mahometan". He had already earned earlier on the mocking designation of "Mahometan Christian". As for the Christians in general, he abhorred interdenominational feuding among Protestants. In a similar vein, he dreamed of a world in which peace would ultimately prevail. Catholicism, however, remained beyond the pale.

So, was Toland a deist, a theist, a pantheist or an atheist, all of which descriptions have been applied to him, both in his own time and today?

***Christianity Not Mysterious has been* classified as a work of Deism. This stance generally entails acceptance of a god as creator of the universe or instigator of nature, but not as intervening beyond that with Jesus being seen as, at most, a moral prototype rather than an avatar, while miracles are perceived as fanciful or misconstrued natural events. But Deism can also have the more limited meaning of simply denying revelation and miracles. To a certain extent, it is a god-of-the-gaps theory, primarily occasioned by the felt need to supply a first cause for the universe. In fact, the religious regarded Deists as atheists in all but name, because their god was indifferent to living humanity. It was Lucretiously distant.**

With regard to theism, or belief in a supernatural and superior being or like beings, characterized, among other things, by intervention in human affairs from time to time, the usual scenario is either monotheism or polytheism. That is, either there is just one god or more than one of whatever number.

Monotheism, however, may further be viewed as either unqualified or qualified. The unqualified variety holds that there is one god consisting, in theological terms, of only one person. Today, in the world that principally refers to Judaism and Islam. The qualified variety which holds that the deity may have more than one person is to be found chiefly in most Christian denominations in the form of a trinity of father, son and holy spirit. Unitarianism is the self-evident exception; in fact, it is thus structurally rather like Islam in asserting that Jehovah is god and Jesus is his prophet. (Of course, in all these cases there is no question of an almighty goddess.)

But it has been argued that this portrayal of qualified monotheism is not correct insofar as mainline Christianity should be seen as in effect polytheistic, with at least a triad of gods at its head, as in the instance of Presbyterianism and Anglicanism, and additionally, in the instance of Roman Catholicism, with an ancillary goddess, i.e. Mary, and a range of demigods, i.e. patron saints.

Polytheism is, however, most explicitly represented in the world by strands of the Vedic traditions, which were dubbed Hinduism by Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries, although that term has by now been accepted in India.

As for pantheism (which Toland explicitly ascribed to himself), despite its etymology, it is really not clear what it generally means in substance. One can say that god is nature and nature is god, but such a statement is fraught with semantical and logical difficulties. If god is defined as an almighty, personal, spiritual being and nature is defined as autonomous, impersonal, material being, pantheism is a contradiction in terms. And insofar as the emphasis in pantheism is foremostly on nature, Schopenhauer not surprisingly said that it simply amounts to a euphemism for atheism; indeed, in the time of Toland, it was widely viewed as a synonym for same. In fact, Spinoza himself helped to inspire this summation by using the expression “god *or* nature”. In other words, pantheism seems, at times, to amount to *gently* removing god out of existence. Otherwise, the only meaningful way of construing nature as spiritual would involve reversion to animism (tree and river spirits etc), although that is certainly not what Toland and others meant by pantheism.

At the same time, for some, pantheism seems to have at least a certain awe-inspiring *mystical* quality, but that would appear to align more with the Taoism of China than the Christianity of the West; and the relevant text then would be more the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu than the Bible.

The pantheist Spinoza, who heavily influenced Toland, was often accused of being an atheist. While Spinoza rejected this description, he was certainly not a conventional Christian and accepting of the usual dogmas. However, as one modern philosopher (Gottlieb) has observed of him, “a case can be made for saying that he was an atheist without realising it”. One wonders if the same might be observed of Toland.

But one has to note that Toland and others would not necessarily have agreed with the succinct definition of pantheism that I have given. Sometimes, pantheists would articulate their view as a god being

omnipresent, yet not juxtaposed to nature as in orthodoxy, but rather intraposed in it, which would still conflict with the established church view of a god as a separate supreme being. In any event, the essence of Toland's position seemed to be caught in a phrase from his correspondence of 1710 wherein he referred to pantheists as "those who believe in no other eternal being but the universe." While he still disavowed atheism, his interlocutor Leibniz did not appear to believe him.

However, Toland's disavowal did not seem motivated just by fear of persecution, but also as deriving from his assessment of the socially stabilizing necessity of some form of religion or equivalent for the masses. Again, one is reminded of Napoleon when he is alleged to have said: "We don't need god, but we do need religion." He had the good grace not to refer to opium.

Another interesting connection was between Toland and Newton. Toland openly admired Newton and his physics which led the scientist to strongly distance himself in public from possible association with pantheistic ideas. What also disturbed the wider community basing itself on Newtonianism was Toland's belief that the universe was in perpetual flux which he recognised as harking back to Heraclitus. They were also afraid, from an Establishment point of view, of analogies with society. If pantheism implied no Lord in the sky and a dispersion of authority, could this not signal no need for a King and a ruling class? In other words, horror of horrors, was pantheism the thin end of the wedge for democracy? And if some pantheists like Toland also denied immortality, might not the lower orders seek compensation for ills in this life, should there be no other to offer redress?

The problem with trying to assess Toland, and later, Hume and others, in the matter of religious belief or disbelief, is that in fact they had to be coy about what they really thought and indeed sometimes had to dissimulate about their real views, especially publicly (as Toland freely admitted). Indeed, at the very beginning of his publishing career, in the Preface to his 1696 work, Toland gives an assurance: "that the well-meaning Christian may not suspect ... that I am more than I declare, and cunningly disguise some bad principles under the fair pretence of defending the true religion

... ”. Therein, he also acknowledged his concern that, when any part of conventional religion is challenged, people “are ready to call the whole in question.” Methinks thou dost protest too much?

Indeed, on occasion, Toland and others had to strongly and explicitly contradict that they were in any way non-religious or to act in conformity accordingly. Remember that the last person to be burned alive for blasphemy in these islands was Edward Wightman of Leicestershire, in the year 1612, and the last person to be executed for the crime was a twenty-year old student, Thomas Aikenhead of Edinburgh, who was hanged in 1697. In 1733, the English theologian Thomas Woolston died from the conditions of his imprisonment, having been locked up for denying the trinity and the authenticity of miracles. So, in the space of just over 120 years, the religious establishment had moved from incineration to strangulation to incarceration and death by neglect. Thus, to expect frankness about non-religious views and to castigate dissembling about them in the 17th and early 18th centuries, would be like saying that, in World War II, a member of the French resistance should have gone to Gestapo headquarters in Paris and owned up to being a member of the maquis. It is not startling that Toland remarked on “how dangerous it is to tell the truth”.

Yet public adherence to orthodoxy by radicals was often ironic or paradoxical, and otherwise subversive in that a technique was developed by them of presenting their ‘loyalty’ in an ineffectual manner that thus discredited the establishment position. There was also just a notable absence of affirmation, such as concerning the divinity of Jesus or his resurrection, while the Holy Spirit seemed to disappear altogether. Berkeley, among others, could clearly see all this when he warned about “untoward defences and explanations of our faith.” At times, one might have said: “Methinks thou dost proclaim too little.” For example, Toland did not explicitly reject all revelation, but given his requirement that it always be reasonable it is hard to see what so-called revelations could remain.

The radicals also often cleverly promoted oppositional perspectives in the course of appearing to attack them by stating so eloquently the case

seemingly to be controverted. Of course, the other things that one has to allow for in reviewing a person's output over a lifetime is that people often change their minds somewhat across the years or are not always consistent even at any one point in their views.

It is a matter of trying to get the overall drift and end-result of their philosophy, taking all these considerations into account.

But Toland could be quite unambiguous about his radicalism within a confined circle. He had two levels of expression which he called the exoteric and the esoteric. And it was the latter that revealed the true Toland. The fact is that what is concealed is often more likely to be true than what is open, whether it be in the case of a spy or a philosopher installed under a repressive regime.

In summary, my conclusion is that Toland politically was, like Harrington, a virtual republican. In the course of promoting him and others, he recorded himself to be a tolerant liberal (except regarding 'papists', and indeed atheists insofar as they were what we would call nihilists). He also had a cosmopolitan bent, while at the same time he recognised the base of society in his time as consisting of the uneducated masses. He did comment, in quotation of an old saying: "We must talk with the people and think with the philosophers." But the 'people', as is often the case, were, at best, the bourgeoisie. He was not, he said, "for a ['pure'] democracy which I think to be the worst form of a commonwealth." In short, it may be taken that his perspective was that of a Lockean, property-owning polity. But he displayed scorn for the ivory tower of universities and any academic obscurantism, while stressing the need to communicate clearly with ordinary persons.

Philosophically, while appearing publicly to be just concerned about restoring pristine Christianity, he basically rejected the religions of his day, proceeding initially from deism to ultimately a naturalistic interpretation of the world, which he characterized as pantheism. In fact, it is difficult, in broad terms, to distinguish between the core of this and what would later be called a modern humanist world view. He first thought himself out of Roman Catholicism in his youth and then, in his adulthood, also critiqued

Protestantism to the point of transcending both perspectives in the general direction of Spinoza. His further promotion of Bruno and regard for Lucretius consolidate our view of his effective apostasy and seemingly deified materialism.

In regard to both religion and politics, unlike some of today's cognoscenti, he realised that deconstruction has to be complemented by reconstruction, and that, if we cannot achieve perfectibility, we need to fulfil possibility. Thus his proposals for developing civic constitutionality and promoting pantheistic sodalities, as he called them, which makes one think of current humanist associations and secular rituals.

Finally, here, I would comment that a key late text of Toland in 1720 which is often either ignored or not fully appreciated is his *Clidopherus* (i.e. 'Bearer of the Key', subtitled 'Of the Esoteric and Exoteric Philosophy'). Therein, is a terse and favourable reference to the Stoics who, he recalls, "reduced all the fabulous and popular theology to the natural; ... ". This reflects the overall tone of one of his most sceptical texts.

For all the patronage he received in his earlier life, Toland lived in poverty for much of his final two years, not least through becoming an investor victim of the South Sea Bubble, and died at the early age of 52 in Putney, England.

Earlier in this talk, I dwelt on the intellectual environment in which John Toland emerged and, in order to fully understand his place in intellectual history, I think one should refer briefly to developments which occurred following his death. It was 57 years afterwards that David Hume's work entitled *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was posthumously published. This carried the rational critique of religion much further. Although there is some dispute about his disbelief, I fail to understand how it cannot be accepted that Hume was in fact a discreet and somewhat dissembling atheist, given the admission of his conviction to James Boswell in the days before he died. The extent of his influence on the metaphysician Immanuel Kant was, in arousing that thinker from his "dogmatic slumber", as Kant himself put it. Thereby, it forced Kant to accept that none of the three principal rationalizations for theism was provable, as

Hume had effectively asserted, namely the ontological, the cosmological and the schematological, in other words - innate predisposition towards belief in a divine or a transcendent first cause for the universe or a godly design of the complex world in which we live. Kant then rested on the idea of a god as necessary for underpinning moral behaviour and guaranteeing an afterlife to allow for justice after death when it had not been realised in life. But he was left a somewhat insecure theist and a dubious Christian who admired Jesus but did not view him as the son of a god. As a result, he fell out with the Prussian State and was for a while silenced. His posthumously discovered papers, published as *Opus Postumum*, suggest that, towards the end of his days, he doubted that there was a personal god as distinct from an ideal concept. This is the stream to which Toland belongs.

People generally have heard of Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, and Kant. But, while Toland was widely recognised in his day, and has never been forgotten on the Continent, only comparatively recently has he been increasingly seriously addressed in learned discussion in anglophonia. Although his corpus was not of the same calibre as that of the others, he can be seen as featuring adjunctively to that group. That is so, because, with Spinoza and Hume in particular, he could be viewed as helping to pave the way for the secular humanism of our time. This was signalled to an extent when he provoked Molyneux, in a letter to Locke, into neologism through inventing the term 'freethinker' to describe him. However, it must be stressed that the tendency of which Toland was a part was not just about theism or a critique of specific religious formulations and practices; it was about placing humanity at the centre of philosophy and of *rationaly* defending and promoting free thought, morality, civil liberty, and tolerance throughout the human race, although qualified regarding what he viewed as subversive moral and political elements.

Toland's place in history is that of an Irishman, who unfortunately was not among those who strove for self-determination and reconciliation in his own country, or for full democracy anywhere, but, nonetheless, made a marked contribution to the emancipation of intellect and to the encouragement of broad philosophical thinking. One might end simply by a concluding remark of Toland from *Christianity Not Mysterious*:

“I acknowledge no orthodoxy but the truth.”