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'Whiston's Affair': the trials of a Primitive Christian 1709-1714

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Historians of the eighteenth century have written of William Whiston, if at all, with an ill-concealed smile. 'The engaging Whiston', that 'most amiable of heretics', is duly noted in every account of the development of Arianism in England, but his lunatic vagaries are kept well to the fore.¹ Yet Whiston has some claims to serious historical attention. His heresies were considered dangerous enough to provoke the champions of both high and low-church to counter attack, and to unite the warring factions in the turbulent Convocation of 1710/11 in a concerted attempt to silence 'this corrupter of our common Christianity', this 'fallen star of our church'.² To Whiston, rather than to Samuel Clarke, belongs the dubious credit of having revived the Arian heresy in England, and although Clarke's less flamboyant teaching was ultimately more influential, Whiston, in converting the dissenters Joseph Hallett and James Peirce to Arian views, was indirectly responsible for the conflagration at Salter's Hall in 1719, and the spread of Unitarianism in English dissent.³ The story of the discovery of 'Primitive Christianity' and the prolonged persecution which Whiston's attempts to propagate his new gospel provoked is not without elements of farce, but there is a serious side to the episode. The abortive attempt to cite Whiston before the 'court of Convocation' in 1711, and his subsequent prosecution in the Court of Delegates, were seen by churchmen as yet another demonstration of the impotence of the Church of England in the face of her enemies, and by latitudinarians and unbelievers as a dangerous attempt

¹ E.g. Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the 18th Century*, ed. London 1962, i. 138, 179-180; C. J. Abbey and J. H. Overton, *The English Church in the 18th Century*, ed. London 1906, 203-4; R. Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism in 18th Century England*, Oxford 1954, 40, 43n.

² (R. Smalbroke), *Reflections on the Conduct of Mr. Whiston in his Revival of the Arian Heresy*, London 1711, 3; (F. Lee and J. Knight), *Considerations on Mr. Whiston's Historical Preface ... in a Letter to the Author of the History of Montanism*, London 1711, p. iv.

³ Roger Thomas, 'Presbyterians in Transition', in C. G. Bolam and others, *The English Presbyterians*, London 1968, 149, 155-6; William Whiston, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Whiston ... written by Himself*, London 1749, 143, 146-150 (hereafter referred to as *Memoirs*).

on the liberties of protestant Englishmen.¹ Like the Sacheverell trial, to which it forms a pendant, the Whiston affair was, while it lasted, a *cause célèbre*, and casts further light on the eighteenth-century debate on the place and function of the Church in Society.

Three elements in Whiston's character must be grasped if he is to be understood as anything more than an amusing crank; all three characteristics were held in common with many of his contemporaries, and serve to relate him more firmly to the mainstream of religion in the reign of Anne. These characteristics are his puritanism, his apparently rationalistic quest for new discoveries in science and religion, and his yearning for a return to the primitive purity of the apostolic age. Whiston was born at Norton-juxta-Twycrosse in Leicestershire on 9 December 1667, from stout puritan stock. His father, Josiah Whiston, a former presbyterian, was rector of the parish, having conformed at the Restoration. Two clerical uncles, Edward and Joseph, had refused conformity, and kept dissenting chapels, though the puritanism of all three brothers seems to have been moderate. This background marked Whiston very deeply; his uncompromising readiness to suffer for his convictions is one manifestation of its influence. At a more everyday level, his ministry as vicar of Lowestoft at the end of the century followed traditional puritan patterns, and despite his own firm Anglicanism he made and maintained many close friendships among the dissenters.²

Cambridge helped to determine the second strand in Whiston's character, his eagerness for 'discoveries'. In 1686 he was entered at Clare Hall, and began a university career which was to last, with interruptions, until 1710. The prevailing religious ethos at Cambridge in the 1680s and 1690s was tolerant, rationalist and optimistic, for it was Newton's Cambridge. The dominant philosophy was still Cartesian,³ but, for the discerning few, Newton's work presented a new vision of cosmic order and coherence, the excitement of which is difficult now to recapture, but impossible to overestimate. Conceived by Newton himself on 'such principles as might work with considering men for the belief in a Deity',⁴ the universe revealed in the *Principia* seemed with blinding clarity to utter forth its divine authorship. The first generation of Newton's Cambridge disciples was filled not only with a sense of wonder, but with a sense of mission. Richard Bentley's *Boyle Lectures* in 1692, and Samuel Clarke's refurbishing of the standard Cambridge Cartesian text book with Newtonian notes were each in their own way intended to popularise and

¹ For 'infidel' use of Whiston's troubles cf. (Anthony Collins), *A Discourse on Freethinking*, London 1713, 45, 83; *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion*, London 1724, iii-lxii; (Thomas Gordon), *The Tryal of William Whiston, Clerk, for defaming and denying the Holy Trinity, before the Lord Chief Justice Reason*, London 1734, passim.

² A. G. Mathews, *Calamy Revised*, Oxford 1934, 523-4; *Memoirs*, 2-4, 11-12, 123ff.; J. Hunt, *Religious Thought in England*, London 1871, iii, 13.

³ Benjamin Hoadly, *Sermons . . . By Samuel Clarke D.D. . . . with a Preface, giving some Account of the . . . Author: by Benjamin, Lord Bishop of Salisbury*, London 1732, p. ii (hereafter cited as *Hoadly's Clarke*); *Memoirs*, 35-6.

⁴ J. H. Monk, *The Life of Richard Bentley D.D.*, London 1833, i, 44.

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propagate the insights of that 'Divine Genius'.¹ Whiston himself expressed the force of this revelatory experience almost in the language of conversion. 'When in my younger days', he wrote in 1725, 'I had with great Difficulty and Pains attained to the Knowledge of the true system of the World, and of Sir Isaac Newton's wonderful Discoveries thereto relating, I was not only fully convinc'd, but deeply and surprizingly affected with the Consequences ... the Deepness of the Surprize and Impression ... can never be so sensible and affecting as it was upon the first Knowledge of such amazing Truths, and momentous Corollaries from them'.² From that experience Whiston dated his 'warm and zealous endeavours ... for the Restoration of true Religion'. Many divines, impressed by the majesty of the Newtonian scheme, looked for an improvement not only in the 'Humane Arts and Sciences' but in 'Divinity, the great Art of Arts'.³ Filled with a sense of the 'present great light, and mighty advantages we enjoy' over all previous generations, Whiston was to come to see the 'wonderful Newtonian Philosophy' as an 'eminent prelude and Preparation to those happy times of the Restitution of all things'.⁴ Accordingly, his early writings are already full of the search for a 'breakthrough', the love of 'discoveries' which was to pervade all his work. He would never hesitate to 'take an untrodden path, and to rely on (his) own thoughts and observations'. 'I have long since resolved', he wrote in 1698, 'to give no occasion that any one should take me for a Plagiary'.⁵

The emphasis on the 'primitive' in Whiston's thinking derived largely from his involvement with the English pietist movement. The last quarter of the seventeenth and the first quarter of the eighteenth century saw the heyday of English pietism, of the 'Religious Societies', and of a tremendous missionary and philanthropic movement to the nation and beyond. Organisations such as the S.P.G., S.P.C.K. and the Societies for the Reformation of Manners drew together Churchmen and Dissenters for the purpose of 'doing good'. Whiston's hereditary puritanism made it inevitable that he should be attracted by the movement; his appointment as

¹ Ibid.; Hoadly's *Clarke* iii-iv; William Whiston *Historical Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Dr. Samuel Clarke*, 3rd ed. London 1748, 3-4 (hereafter cited as *Whiston's Clarke*); *Memoirs*, 36.

² William Whiston, *Astronomical Principles of Religion, Natural and Revealed ... with a Preface on the Temper of Mind necessary for the Discovery of Divine Truth*, London 1725, 257-8.

³ Richard Brocklesby, *An explication of the Gospel Theism and the divinity of the Christian religion, containing the true account of the system of the Universe*, London 1706, preface (no pagination); John Edwards, minister of the Round Church in Cambridge, quoted by Owen Chadwick *From Bossuet to Newman*, Cambridge 1957, 78, 220.

⁴ *Memoirs*, 38; William Whiston, *Sermons and Essays upon Several Subjects*, London 1709, 199.

⁵ William Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth ... wherein the ... Deluge ... and Conflagration as laid down in the Holy Scriptures are shown to be perfectly agreeable to Reason and Philosophy*, London 1696 passim; *A short view of the Chronology of the Old Testament and of the Harmony of the Four Evangelists*, Cambridge 1702, 'Epistle Dedicatory'; *A Vindication of the New Theory of the Earth from the Exceptions of Mr. Keill and others, with an Historical Preface of the Occasions of the Discoveries therein contain'd*, London 1698, Preface sigs. A2-A6v. For the approval of John Locke himself of Whiston's originality, cf. *The Works of John Locke*, London 1801, ix, 397; Locke to Molyneux 22 February 1696/7.

chaplain to bishop Moore of Norwich in 1694 gave him the opportunity of active participation, by bringing him frequently to London, and in the work of the S.P.C.K. and the Charity Schools he played a vigorous and effective part.¹ The first Religious Societies had aimed at a rediscovery of holiness, the 'excellent Primitive Temper' of sincere piety. The means by which this renewal was to be effected was a return to 'ancient Christian Acts of Piety and Devotion, practiced in the purest times of Christianity'—frequent communion, fasting, prayer and vigil.² While still an undergraduate Whiston had lamented the passing of those primitive times—'Oh when will that Golden Age again visit the languishing Church of Christ? when will that daily Piety and Devotion; that strict Justice and Sincerity; that hearty Love and Charity grow warm in these frozen Regions of the World anymore?'³ It was a cry echoed by high and low churchman and dissenter alike, and the Religious Societies and their offshoots were envisaged as an answer to those questions. And if the decay of piety was one of the evils to be remedied by the appeal to antiquity, the disunity of protestants was another. Works such as Peter King's *Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church* were intended to go behind the divisions and corruptions of modern Christianity and to discover a simpler and purer pattern in antiquity on which all men might agree. These concerns were to pre-occupy Whiston throughout his life, and lie behind his efforts for the restoration of Arianism, the 'Primitive Christianity'. Idiosyncratic as Whiston's expression of the ideal was, however, it is essential to grasp that his concerns were never simply the fads of an eccentric don. The fanatic zeal which was to bring him before the Court of Delegates on heresy charges was an exaggerated pursuit of an ideal which was treasured by many pious men in the reign of queen Anne; in that fact lies the explanation of much of Whiston's overwhelming confidence of success, and of part at least of his opponents' alarm.⁴

The years between Whiston's matriculation at Cambridge and his notoriety as a heretic were by no means years of obscurity. His university career was a successful and productive one. In 1691 as a fellow of Clare he threw himself heart and soul into the politics of college reform, and his

¹ For the Religious Societies and related groups see J. Woodward, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies in the City of London . . . and of the Endeavour for Reformation of Manners*, 2nd ed. London 1698, passim; C. F. Secretan, *Memoirs of the Life and Times of the Pious Robert Nelson*, London 1860, 90–155; M. G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement*, Cambridge 1938, 3–41; F. W. B. Bullock, *Voluntary Religious Societies 1520–1799*, St. Leonards on Sea 1963. For Whiston's part in the Cambridge schools see *Sermons and Essays*, 99 ff., 124 ff.

² Woodward, *op. cit.*, 60; Robert Nelson, *A Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the Church of England*, 23rd ed. London 1773, vi–vii, xiii; Secretan, *Nelson*, 175, 243; Edward Stephens, *A True Account of the Unaccountable Dealings of Some Roman Catholic Missioners of this Nation*, London 1703, 9.

³ *Memoirs*, 64.

⁴ (Peter King), *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity & Worship of the Primitive Church That Flourished within the First Three Hundred Years after Christ*, London 1691, preface Sigs. A2–A3v; *Biographia Britannica*, London 1757, iv. 2856; Woodward, *op. cit.*, 117.

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associates at Cambridge were all Whigs and 'coming men'—Richard Bentley, Francis Hare, Benjamin Hoadly, Robert Cannon and Elias Syddall, most of them latitudinarians and Cannon 'one of the greatest Scepticks that ever was born'.¹ Among these men the work of Newton and Locke had produced a severely critical attitude towards sacred matters, and although at times their friendship must have been a source of unease to Whiston, in their company he felt himself to be at the heart of intellectual advance in England, particularly after 1701, when he succeeded Newton as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge.²

Whiston was a conscientious teacher of mathematics, but his principle interests lay elsewhere. Between 1702 and 1707 he published several works on scriptural topics which, like his *New Theory of the Earth*, achieved considerable fame and provoked a certain amount of controversy. His critics recognised his learning and sincerity, but it was clear that he was by nature a 'daring speculatist', and friend and foe alike took occasion to warn him of the 'Liberties' he took, and to urge him to prudence.³ The warnings were timely, for he was turning his attention to the explosive issue of the Trinity. The last decade of the seventeenth century had seen a fierce dispute in the Church of England over trinitarian doctrine. The debate, in which Whiston had taken a deep interest, had been between two factions. One, led by William Sherlock, stressed the 'Distinction of Persons', and was accused of a tendency to tritheism. The other, led by Robert South, stressed the 'Unity of Essence', and was accused of a tendency to Sabellianism.⁴ Here again, Whiston's Cambridge training helped to determine his position. Ralph Cudworth in his *Intellectual System of the Universe* had been at pains to deny that the 'ancient Orthodox Fathers' had ever asserted the Son 'to have one and the same Singular or Individual Essence with the Father': he had emphasised the necessity of some Dependence and subordination of the Persons of the Trinity . . . of Dignity as well as Order', and taught that the Father alone is 'Originally of itself (sic), and Underived from any other'.⁵ Cudworth was considered the source of Sherlock's teaching, and his emphases were current at Cambridge, where Newton himself held Arian views. Whiston, too,

¹ J. R. Wardle, *Clare College*, London 1899, 137 ff.; *Clare College Letters and Documents*, Cambridge 1903, 111-124; W. J. Harrison, *Life in Clare Hall Cambridge 1658-1713*, Cambridge 1958, 85-89; *Memoirs*, 45-9, 106-119, 127.

² From that date, too, Whiston occupied a set of work-rooms at Trinity given him by Bentley, who was intent on building up a scientific 'school' at Trinity: Monk, Bentley, i. 202-4.

³ D. A. Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge*, Cambridge 1935, 129-132; Peter Allix, *Remarks upon some Places of Mr. Whiston's Books, either Printed or in Manuscript*, London 1711, 5-6; John Wright, *Some Remarks on Mr. Whiston's Dissertation about Christ's Ascension; his Lectures of Mr. Boyle's Foundation; and his Essay on the Revelations . . . In a Letter to Dr. Waterhouse at Sheffield*, London 1709, 3, 7-8, 14; *Whiston's Clarke*, 9.

⁴ H. McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England*, Oxford 1951, 332-4; J. H. Colligan, *The Arian Movement in England*, Manchester 1913, 13-27; Stromberg, op. cit., 34-40; Allix *Remarks* 3-5.

⁵ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, London 1678, 598-600, 605-611.

accepted the 'Platonick Inequality' of Cudworth and his followers, as 'more Rational and ... agreeable to the Scriptures'. The disputes, however, were driven underground by the secular power¹ and Whiston's speculations remained dormant until 1705, when he became aware that his friend Samuel Clarke had been 'looking into the Primitive Writers and began to suspect, that the Athanasian Doctrine of the Trinity was not the Doctrine of those early Ages'² Whiston's own desultory reading in this area convinced him that 'Mr. Clarke was not mistaken in that matter', but his energies during the next two years were taken up with his commentary on the Apocalypse and his Boyle lectures,³ and it was not until the Autumn of 1707 that he had the leisure to examine the question in detail. In a series of papers written about this time he concluded that most 'infidel' objections to Christianity applied to 'the modern Explications and Hypotheses only', and 'do very little affect the Native Simplicity of the First and Purest Ages of the Church'. The doctrine of the Trinity was the clearest example of this gradual over-elaboration of the simple Gospel. That Gospel could be recovered by an open-minded examination of the Scriptures and the Fathers of the first centuries, who were to be valued as witnesses 'according to their Nearness to Christ and his Apostles and to their less intermixing their own peculiar Notions and Reasonings in their delivery of the Christian Doctrines'. From such an examination Whiston concluded that 'the Arian Doctrine was certainly the original doctrine of Christ himself'.⁴ In July 1708 his attention was drawn by a friend to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a fourth century Arian compilation containing a large and elaborate collection of disciplinary, ethical and liturgical matter. This book, he decided, was 'plainly sacred, and belonging to the Companions of the Apostles, if not to the Apostles themselves'. The received opinion of the Constitutions as a 'spurious and grossly interpolated writing' he attributed to hostility to that 'old plain Christianity or Arianism contained in it without the least Color(sic) for any of those Novel Notions or expressions which philosophy began to introduce in the very second Century; and which advanced to a mighty system in the fourth under ... Athanasius'.⁵

¹ H. McLachlan, *The Religious Opinions of Milton, Locke and Newton*, Manchester 1941, 117-172; Robert Nelson, *The Life of Dr. George Bull, Late Lord Bishop of St. David's*, London 1713, 339-340; William Whiston, *Several Papers Relating to Mr. Whiston's Case before the Court of Delegates*, London 1715, 'Mr. Whiston's Defence of Himself', 51-2; Edward Cardwell, *Documentary Annals of the Reformed Church of England*, Oxford 1839, ii, 339-341.

² *Sermons and Essays*, 55 (Sermon preached 10 June 1699); Leicestershire Record Office, Barker Family Papers, Whiston Manuscripts, item 90: Richard Allin to William Whiston, 29 November 1699 (hereafter cited as *Whiston MS.*); *Whiston's Clarke*, 7-8.

³ William Whiston, *An Essay on the Revelation of Saint John so far as concerns the past and present times*, Cambridge 1706; *The accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies, being eight sermons preached at the ... Lecture founded by the Hon. R. Boyle*, Cambridge 1708.

⁴ William Whiston, *An Historical Preface to Primitive Christianity Reviv'd; with an Appendix containing An Account of the Author's Prosecution at, and Banishment from the University of Cambridge*, London 1711, 2, 6-7 (hereafter cited as *Preface*); *Sermons and Essays*, 197-221, 235-255, 298; *Whiston's Clarke*, 10.

⁵ *Whiston's Clarke*, 10; *Preface*, 12-13.

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 12-13.

For Whiston, every new discovery was a crusade begun; a man of 'very quick and ardent spirit', he was a born talker, and Cambridge under queen Anne provided ample scope for talk. His views rapidly became known inside and beyond the university, and his friends grew alarmed.¹ Whiston was not a man to rest content with talk. On 17 July 1708 he wrote to the two archbishops, informing them of his discovery that the original doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation were 'very different from those of the Fourth and following (centuries)', and declaring that he considered it his duty 'to propose the Consideration and Examination of these matters to the *Christian World*'.² The manner of this public examination he left to the discretion of the archbishops. Archbishop Tenison's reply was characteristically brief, expressing the hope that 'your second Thoughts may be different from your first'. Sharp of York, a high-churchman with whom Whiston was on friendly terms, was more communicative. Assuring Whiston that he knew no author whose works he read with more pleasure, and that he believed him to be 'a sincere, honest, undesigning Man', he nevertheless engaged in some plain talk. 'Give me leave to add' he wrote, 'that, if you have a weakness, it is this, that you are too fond of new Notions, and often time lay too great stress upon them ... lay aside this project ... till you have opportunity of talking freely ... with your friends ...'.³

By now 'Whiston's affair' was becoming public knowledge, and even the government of the day took notice. After the Tory disaster in the General Election of 1708 the ministry was increasingly reliant on the Whig Junta, and was anxious to afford the disgruntled high-church party no opportunity of raising the cry 'Church in danger'. Godolphin, therefore, dispatched Robert Cannon to Cambridge to put a stop to Whiston's activities. Whiston was adamant. 'If we must never set about a Reformation in Church Affairs 'till a Lord Treasurer send us word 'tis *Proper time* ... it would be long enough before that time would come'; he declared his resolution to 'have no regard to the Lord Treasurer's Opinions in that Point at all'.⁴ By far the most urgent plea for caution came from the aged bishop Lloyd of Worcester. Lloyd had ordained Whiston, and they had maintained a close friendship and collaboration in their scriptural researches for many years. On 30 July Lloyd despatched an agonised protest to Whiston. 'I have been very much grieved', he wrote, 'to see that one with whom I had so great a Friendship, and of whom I expected so much good ... should suffer himself to be carried away as you have been, by an extravagant fancy greedily set upon hunting after novelties ... in every book you have published of late. And now at last ... I hear you are running into Socinianism, and are about to publish a Book of that sort. Which, if it be

¹ *Cambridge Under Queen Anne*, ed. J. E. B. Mayor, Cambridge 1911, 179; *Preface*, 3; *Whiston's Clarke*, 9; *Memoirs*, 139-143.

² *Preface*, 15-18.

³ *Preface*, 18-20.

⁴ *Whiston's Clarke*, 30-31; *Preface*, 17.

true, will make it necessary for me to break friendship with you once for all . . . God forbid it should ever come to this. But knowing you so much as I do, . . . I fear you'.¹ Whiston was able to reassure Lloyd that he was no Socinian, but the bishop continued to urge him 'not to break the peace of the Church'. 'Can you think it possible', Lloyd asked, 'that any part of the Faith once delivered to the Saints hath been lost ever since the Nicene Times, and had been so still, but that my friend Mr. Whiston hath found it?'² This, of course, was precisely what Whiston did believe, and, as he later admitted, his response was 'rather too sharp'. 'If persons of your Lordship's character shall discourage this honest and Christian design, I shall be obliged to let all the Church see how grossly they have been imposed upon, by putting all the testimonies into English . . . What is Popery and Priestcraft if this be no so? to suppress or corrupt the ancient Books . . . to make Metaphysical Niceties articles of the Christian Faith; to overlook or evade express Testimonies . . . because we dare not own the plain truths of God when they are under the Odium of Men'. This he would set right, or 'perish in the attempt'.³

He began in Cambridge. Whiston held a catechetical lectureship at the parish church of St. Clement; he now openly taught Arian doctrine to his hearers there, and when reading prayers omitted the trinitarian petitions in the litany. Complaints were heard from local clergy of his 'black and aggravating expressions'. The bishop of Ely was formally advised of Whiston's activities; unsuccessful attempts were made to dislodge him from his lectureship, and to carry a grace through Senate for his expulsion from the University and degradation from his degrees. A number of university clergy began to preach against his doctrine.⁴ The protests and wise counsels of friends, 'greatly affrighted at what they heard I was going about', did nothing to deflect him. In August he burned his boats with the publication of a volume of *Sermons and Essays* openly proclaiming Arianism to be 'Primitive Christianity', and announcing his intention to print a collection of proof texts from ancient sources.⁵ The *Sermons and Essays* added fuel to the flames of hostility.⁶ Opposition at Cambridge became more menacing, and was extended to his friends. While the University was still ringing with the notoriety of the *Sermons and Essays*, Samuel Clarke, whose sympathy for Whiston's views was widely suspected, performed the disputation necessary to qualify for his doctorate in Divinity. The Regius Professor of Divinity, Dr. James, who conducted the disputation, arrived carrying a copy of Whiston's book, and in the course of the debate, which passed into university folklore as a battle

¹ British Museum Add. MS 24197 fol. 1: William Lloyd to William Whiston 30 July 1708. Printed in part, *Preface*, 21. (minor variations in orthography).

² B.M. Add. MS 24917 fol. 9^v ff.; *Preface*, 22: Whiston to Lloyd 26 August 1708. B.M. Add. MS 24917 fol. 11^r-12; *Preface*, 25: Lloyd to Whiston 8 September 1708.

³ B.M. Add. MS 24917 fol. 12^r-13; *Preface*, 26-9: Whiston to Lloyd 18 September 1708.

⁴ *Preface*, 72-6.

⁵ *Memoirs*, 151; cf. Bodleian Library Rawl. Letters 105: Robert Fleming to Whiston, 4 October 1709; Whiston to Fleming, 6 October 1709, and 19 October 1709; *Sermons and Essays*, i.

⁶ *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, Oxford 1886, ii. 252-3, 261.

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'WHISTON'S AFFAIR': THE TRIALS OF A PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN

of the giants, pressed Clarke hard to repudiate Whiston's notions, un-
successfully. When Clarke subsequently gave his formal subscription to
the Thirty-nine Articles, James ominously told him that 'he hoped he
would not go from his subscription'.¹ Exaggerated accounts of Whiston's
difficulties and setbacks began to circulate, as his notoriety grew. Sir John
Perceval, that stout Whig but stouter churchman, believed Whiston to be
'threatened very hard' with the loss of 'a small living (which is all he has to
subsist a large family)'. Perceval had some sympathy with the unfortunate
mathematician, but his admiration was tinged with misgiving. 'He
despises the worst they can do to him', he told George Berkeley, 'and says
they cannot hurt him, though they may the body. Thus he speaks like a
Philosopher, but like an enthusiast too. When they tell him his wife and
children will starve, he is not moved at all, but says God will help them.
He is very positive and warm'.²

But even Whiston was becoming aware of the need for caution. At the
opening of the new year the topic in all men's minds and mouths was the
trial of Dr. Henry Sacheverell for high crimes and misdemeanours. The
tidal wave of tory feeling and the cry of 'Church in danger' which accom-
panied that trial boded ill for all disturbers of the *Pax Ecclesiae Anglicanae*,
and Whiston's writings were cited among the passages of 'Blasphemy,
irreligion and Heresy' produced by Sacheverell's advocates during the
trial.³ Late in February, therefore, he sought to forestall trouble by
addressing himself to Charles Roderick, Provost of King's, Vice-
Chancellor, and one of the few Whigs among the Cambridge Heads of
Houses. He offered his growing collection of papers and testimonies to
Roderick for examination by the university, and expressed the hope that
the Reformed churches '... begin to lay aside that Antichristian Spirit of
Persecution which has so long prevented the free Enquiries of Christians
into the Original Doctrines and Duties of the Gospel'.⁴ Roderick ignored
the letter, but Whiston seems to have been reassured by the very inactivity
of the university. He had other causes for optimism. He was by now
internationally notorious, and already a number of Cambridge friends
had become convinced of the truth of his claims; in the spring of 1710
came news of disciples farther off. At the Dissenting Academy at Exeter
a group of young men had begun to speculate on the doctrine of the
Trinity. They were led by Joseph Hallett, son of the academy's tutor.
Hallett had been greatly excited by Whiston's *Sermons and Essays* and now
wrote to him for advice on further reading, but pleading also for

¹ Preface, 76-80, Appendix 5; Whiston's *Clarke*, 11-14; Hoadly's *Clarke*, xviii-xxiii; J. Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, London 1812, iv. 718-9.

² *Remarks and Collections*, ii. 306-9; Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Egmont Manuscripts*, ii (1909), 248-5.

³ *The Tryal of Dr. Henry Sacheverell before the House of Peers for High Crimes and Misdemeanours*, London 1710, 220; William Whiston, *An Essay upon the Epistles of Ignatius*, London 1710, 46-8. On the Sacheverell trial in general, see Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Dr. Sacheverell*, London 1973.

⁴ Preface, 84-88. On Roderick's Whiggery and the university's Toryism, see Monk, *Bentley*, i. 281-2. For a revealing summary of Roderick's career, see B. M. Lansdowne MS. 987, fol. 200.

anonymity, since if his correspondence with an open heretic were known 'he should be ruined'. Whiston hastened to reassure him, 'Blessed be God', he wrote, 'I have been all along so providentially directed and preserved in this perilous Undertaking, that my losses have been none at all from the Publick, and my Dangers soon over; So that now I esteem these Sacred Truths past Danger of being suppress'd, and myself in great part past the Danger of violence on their account'.¹

He badly miscalculated. Through the long summer of 1710 Sacheverell made his triumphal progress through the Midlands, stirring up Tory and high-flying feeling as he went. The general enthusiasm showed itself at Cambridge early in July in the famous confrontation at the Rose Tavern, when the Senior Proctor, Whiston's Whig friend Richard Laughton, attempted to turn out of the tavern a group who were drinking with the university's Tory M.P.s. The company refused to budge, and maddened Laughton by repeatedly pledging toasts to Sacheverell.² It was a straw in the wind, but Whiston chose to ignore it. In June he scandalised the university by baptising one of his own children using an Arian form drawn from the *Apostolic Constitutions*. In July he attempted to persuade the charity school stewards at Cambridge to adopt Arian doxologies for the Tate and Brady psalters printed for the schools. In October the tide of events overtook him. England was in the throes of a General Election, and on 5 October, amidst a tremendous upsurge of Tory feeling, the university returned its two Tory M.P.s, whom no Whig had dared oppose.³ The Heads of Houses determined that now, if ever, was the time to root out this disturber of the Church's peace. A number of possible measures were discussed, including proceedings in the ecclesiastical courts, or even at the Assizes. On Friday, 20 October, twelve of the Heads met in the Vice-Chancellor's lodge and agreed to act on the 45th statute of the university, against the teaching of heresy, and to give Whiston a formal warning. On Sunday a sermon was preached against his teaching in the university church, and he was summoned to appear the next day before the Vice-Chancellor.⁴ Whiston arrived in a thoroughly uncooperative mood. He refused even to acknowledge that the *Sermons and Essays* were his, or to make any defence at that time, contenting himself with demanding a copy of the statute under which he was being tried, and due time to present a formal defence. A series of written depositions were then taken, giving ac-

¹ R. Thomas in *The English Presbyterians*, 255-6 (quoting John Fox, one of the students concerned); *Memoirs* 147-150: Whiston to Hallet, 1 May 1710; Mayor, op. cit., 178-9; Preface 51.

² Holmes, op. cit., 233-255; Monk, *Bentley*, i. 286-90. Styan Thirlby, one of the company present, wrote a burlesque account of the incident; he was later to attack Whiston in print: Mayor, op. cit., 456-469; Styan Thirlby, *An Answer to Mr. Whiston's Seventeen Suspicions Concerning Athanasius*, in his *Historical Preface*, Cambridge 1712.

³ Monk, *Bentley*, i. 289-290; Preface, 109-113, Appendix 5-6.

⁴ Cambridge University Archives CUR 39.8(6): Copy of Whiston's banishment from Cambridge, on the back of which are rough jottings of the meeting of 20 October 1710; Preface, Appendix 1.

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'WHISTON'S AFFAIR': THE TRIALS OF A PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN

counts of Whiston's public avowals of Arianism. Of these, too, Whiston demanded copies.¹

The attitudes of his judges varied. Dr. James assured him that 'No body there had any Intention to Persecute (him)', but others were less charitably disposed. The fiercest hostility came from the staunchest Tories among the Heads—Lany of Pembroke, Balderston of Emmanuel and Fisher of Sidney. These opposed any extension of time allowed to Whiston to prepare his defence, and Balderston considered that Whiston should leave Cambridge at once, 'since (he) had there perverted some already'.² It was informally agreed that Whiston should be allowed a week to prepare a defence, but in the event he was summoned again two days later. On this occasion he was presented with a series of 'articles' taken from his *Sermons and Essays*, his *Essay on the Epistles of Ignatius*, and from the proposals for his forthcoming *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*. These formed the substance of the charges against him, and included denials of the equality of Father, Son and Spirit, attacks on the Athanasian creed, and on the accepted canon of scripture. In reply, Whiston read a protest against the proceedings, pointing out that the statute under which he was being prosecuted applied only to doctrines taught officially and publicly within the university, and therefore could not be applied to books published in London, or lectures given in a parish church. But the 'Torrent was too strong to be stopp'd'. The Vice-Chancellor insisted that the doctrines specified were 'plainly contrary to the Church's Doctrine; and sufficiently proved against (him)'. He was solemnly admonished that if by three o'clock on the following Monday he had not 'left his errors' and returned to the Church they would proceed to execute the Statute against him by banishing him from the university. With this Whiston had to be content. On the following Monday, 30 October, he delivered to the Vice-Chancellor a protest against the action of the Heads, and the same day he was formally banished from the university.³

The banishment was not necessarily so disastrous as might at first appear. Though excluded from Cambridge itself, he was not yet deprived of his Chair, and continued to enjoy its revenues for another year. Moreover, he had many friends in the university, even among the heads themselves, and might reasonably have hoped for reinstatement when the Tory backlash to the Sacheverell trial and the General Election had died away. He had, however, already formed a plan to ensure the public examination of his 'evidence' for 'Primitive Christianity'. He compiled a fully documented account of his 'discoveries' and his attempts to gain a hearing for them, up to and including his banishment from Cambridge, and early in the new year it was published as *An Historical Preface to Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*. The book was dedicated to the bishops and clergy 'in Convocation assembled', and his doctrines 'with all due Submission Offer'd to Their . . . Consideration'. This move was subsequently

¹ Ibid., *Preface*, Appendix I, 2-8.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 10-27; CUR Collect. Admin. 23, 293; CUR 39. 8. (6).

seen as a considered insult, a defiance of Convocation 'under the invidious Compliment of a Dedication'.¹ In fact it seems to have been Whiston's maladroit implementation of a suggestion made by bishop William Wake of Lincoln. In September Wake had passed through Cambridge and had encouraged Whiston to submit his writings to the forthcoming session of Convocation. Wake's motives may have been more mixed than Whiston suspected. In the upsurge of high-flying and Tory feeling which predominated throughout England a turbulent and rebellious Convocation was certain, and the bishops were anxious to limit the deliberations of the Lower House to non-party issues. A heresy hunt, with the opportunities it offered for endless discussion and filibuster, may well have appealed to Wake as a suitable diversion; certainly archbishop Sharp attempted to limit the agenda of the Lower House to strictly 'ecclesiastical' topics, the discussion of heretical books among them.²

At the end of January 1711 a committee of both Houses was appointed to draw up a *Representation of the Present State of Religion*. The first draft was the work of Francis Atterbury, Prolocutor of the Lower House, who was determined to make the *Representation* a manifesto for something approaching a Tory counter-revolution in Church and State; it contained a virulent attack on Whiston's 'Arrian' publications.³ On 9 March William Binkes, high-flying dean of Lichfield, proposed in the Lower House that application be made to the bishops to determine what steps could be taken against Whiston. The motion was one calculated to appeal both to low-churchmen anxious to turn the discussions in the Lower House to 'safe' topics, and to high-churchmen eager to assert the authority of the church: Binkes was seconded by the chief low-church spokesman in the Lower House, White Kennett.⁴ An address to the Upper House was drafted, but even before it was presented the bishops had taken up the matter. George Hooper, bishop of Bath and Wells and a high-churchman, denounced Whiston during the session of 14 March, and a committee was appointed, to meet and examine Whiston's case at Wake's lodgings on 17 March.⁵ This committee appealed to the archbishop for guidance as to the best method of proceeding against the culprit. The archbishop had not read Whiston's book, but thought it 'not to be passed over'. He was anxious, however 'to keep clear of the Statute'

¹ (Smalbrooke), *Reflections on the Conduct of Mr. Whiston*, 4.

² *Memoirs*, 257-9; G. V. Bennett 'The Convocation of 1710: An Anglican attempt at Counter Revolution', in G. J. Cumming and L. G. D. Baker, *Studies in Church History*, vii, Cambridge 1971, 311-19.

³ Lambeth Palace Library, Acts of the Lower House of Convocation, (hereafter cited as *Lambeth Conv.*) 1/2/11, fols. 59 ff. Printed in *The Political State of Great Britain* i. 472-485; Gilbert Burnet, *History of My Own Times*, Oxford 1823, vi. 48 (hereafter cited as *H.O.T.*); George Every, *The High Church Party 1688-1718*, London 1956, 135-6; Bennett, loc. cit., 315-9.

⁴ B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 280^v-281; *Lambeth Conv.* 1/2/11, fol. 47.

⁵ *Lambeth Conv.* 1/2/11, fol. 47; Christ Church Oxford, Wake MS. 308/32-33 (proceedings of the Upper House, cited hereafter as Wake Arch. Inf.); William Whiston, *An Account of the Convocations Proceedings with Relation to Mr. Whiston*, London 1711, 6 (hereafter cited as *Convocation's Proceedings*).

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and thought it proper 'to have some advice about it'. He promised to
examine whatever precedents there might be, and to communicate his
findings to his suffragans.¹ His caution may have stemmed from his
remembrance of one such precedent, for in 1701 an ultra-Tory Lower
House had attempted to censure bishop Burnet for heresy, though civil
lawyers had warned that such a procedure might well be illegal. That
stormy episode cannot have been far from the minds of the committee of
the Upper House when they determined to meet again to 'get all the light
they can' on the matter. Burnet himself summed up the difficulties. 'The
uncontested way of proceeding in such a case was, that the Bishop of the
diocese, in which he lived, should cite him into his court . . . from whose
sentence an appeal lay to the Archbishop, and from him to the crown: or
the Archbishop might proceed in the first instance in a court of audience:
But we saw no clear precedents of any proceedings in convocation, where
the jurisdiction was contested . . . so that . . . we were at a stand'.² The
high-flyers in the Lower House may also have remembered their frustra-
tion in 1701, and the remembrance possibly sharpened their determina-
tion that the whole assembly should act as a court, and proceed to 'cen-
sure and Excommunication' immediately.³

During the Easter recess feeling outside Convocation itself mounted.
An Oxford high-churchman published open letters to Convocation and
to parliament, urging stern action against this 'single stubborn Heretick',
and cautioning Convocation against entering into debate with Whiston.
What need was there, he asked, 'to use any other weapon than that of
Authority?'. Disclaiming any wish to see Whiston coerced by 'violent
Persecution, or any Temporal Fire', he nevertheless called on parliament
to support 'Common Christianity' on an issue on which party divisions
paled to insignificance.⁴ All this was very alarming, and on 5 April
Whiston wrote to the archbishop what was intended to be a conciliatory
letter. Admitting that the 'Warmth and Vehemence' of (his) natural
Temper' had sometimes led him in his writings to exceed the 'meekness
and gentleness of Christ and his religion', he 'heartily begged
forgiveness', and promised that he would be more careful in the future.
He went on to deny that he was attempting to revive 'the *Arian Heresy*,
strictly so called'. The doctrine he propagated was 'the Doctrine of that
part of the Church which was called *Arian* in the fourth century; and not
the Doctrine of *Arius* himself only, with a few of his particular Followers'.

¹ *Convocation's Proceedings*, 7-8; Wake Arch. Inf., 308/35-6; *H.O.T.*, vi. 50 (note by Lord Dartmouth).

² Wake Arch. Inf., 308/39; (White Kennett), *The History of the Convocation of the Prelates and Clergy of the Province of Canterbury, Summon'd . . . February 6 1700*, London 1702, 72-5, 112-4, 128-131, 148-152, 219; *H.O.T.*, vi. 49; Norman Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker*, Cambridge 1959, 58-63.

³ *Convocation's Proceedings*, 9.

⁴ Michael Mattaire, *The Present Case of Mr. William Whiston Humbly Represented in a Letter to the Reverend the Clergy Now assembled in Convocation*, London 1711, 4, 12; Mr. William Whiston's Case Represented to the Honourable the House of Commons: in a Letter to the Honourable the Members for Both Universities, in this Present Parliament, n.p. 1711, 4, 6-8.

This distinction, he insisted, excluded those 'Rash and Novel assertions and Expressions of Arius which were condemned by the Council of Nice'. He concluded by asking for a proper examination of his writings before any censure should be passed.¹ The letter did him little good. The distinction between Arianism proper, and Whiston's version, which he elsewhere dubbed Eusebianism, genuine enough as it appears to have been in Whiston's mind, bore to other men's way of thinking the appearance of sophistry and insincerity. The letter displayed, wrote Kennett, 'more cowardice than he yet shew'd, and was a sort of shuffling between submission and Justification . . . My Lord the Ar[chbisho]p said it was a *knaves Letter*'.²

On 11 April, when the Upper House reassembled, Tenison delivered his opinion. Distinguishing between the censure of the man and of his doctrine, he considered that the most straightforward way of proceeding against Whiston was either in an archepiscopal Court of Audience, with an appeal to the crown, or through a diocesan court, with an appeal to the archbishop. The 'most desirable' and solemn method, however, would be through a Court of Convocation. To this method, however, there were a number of objections. From such a court, Tenison thought, there was no appeal, and it might, therefore, appear to usurp the crown's Supremacy. Moreover, a Court of Convocation resembled in some respects the now illegal Court of High Commission. Tenison therefore proposed that the whole matter should be laid before the queen, for clarification by the judges.³ These recommendations divided the Upper House, for the Tory bishops were jealous for the independence of the Church, and resented the submission of the case to civil judges. London, Rochester, Bath and Wells and St. David's 'were for proceeding without such an Address and Opinion', while Bristol considered that the queen herself, not the judges, might be consulted. But even low-churchmen were dismayed by Tenison's timidity. 'It is supposed' wrote White Kennett, 'that her Majesties laying this matter before the Judges will admit of great delay and uncertainty'.⁴ Nevertheless, the archbishop's recommendation was accepted, and an address to the queen was drawn up. To the misgivings of his supporters in the Lower House Tenison replied that some of the bishops had been 'too forward to assume a power of judicature in this matter'. He declared that although he 'utterly disliked Mr. Whiston and the more since his last letter of apology to him, w[hilch] shew'd him to be now become a shuffling and insincere Man, nevertheless the Body of Convocation must take care to act legally and safely'. He did, however, agree to recommend to the bishops 'the censuring of his Doctrine before they could come at the Man'.⁵

¹ Convocation's Proceedings, 10-14.

² B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 295.

³ Lambeth Conv. 1/1/17, fol. 243-7; Lambeth Palace Library, Lambeth MS. 1029/112a; Convocation's Proceedings, 15-19.

⁴ Convocation's Proceedings, 20; B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 299-300.

⁵ Ibid., fol. 300-301.

The judge not unanimous might condemn before crown law which, contrary reserved the brought before already made formed Tenison and the omission the 'power' Houses was the Church of meeting of but the session Whiston's afflicting text amidst growth Case of the nature, & in finish the De have laboured This was on 2 By now, however the Upper House of Religion, and 'there could be dragged into action from Judgment on V... to call for the Bishops'.¹

On 28 May intervened. He (bury) claiming before their D chose to deliver who had been vocating Unitarian out in Atterbury

¹ Lambeth Conv.

² Lambeth Palace day in Convocation

³ Lambeth MS.

⁴ B. M. Lansdowne

⁵ Lambeth Conv.

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h Palace Library, Lambeth MS. 1029/112a;
owne MS. 1024, fol. 299-300.

'WHISTON'S AFFAIR': THE TRIALS OF A PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN

The judges' opinions were not delivered until early May, and they were not unanimous. Four of the twelve considered that although Convocation might condemn writings, it had no power to act as a court or to cite persons before it for 'any . . . spiritual offence'. The other judges and the crown law officers ruled that Convocation *might* act as a court, from which, contrary to Tenison's belief, an appeal would lie to the crown. They reserved the right, however, to reverse this ruling should the case be brought before them at any future date.¹ On 8 May the queen, who had already made clear her desire for strong measures against Whiston, informed Tenison of the Judges' opinions, and despite their disagreement and the ominous reservation of the majority urged Convocation to exercise the 'power which belongs to them'. On 11 May a committee of both Houses was set up to compare Whiston's writings with the formularies of the Church of England, and the same evening Tenison held an informal meeting of bishops to discuss the implications of the case.² This was brisk, but the session had dragged on too long, tempers were frayed, and even Whiston's affair was losing its fascination. Throughout May the work of collating texts and selecting propositions for condemnation went on, amidst growing impatience. The archbishop himself was restless. 'The Case of the Arian Heresie', he told bishop Trimnell, 'does both in its nature, & in the straitness of the time, require dispatch: & I hope you will finish the Declaration against it by Wednesday. I know how much you have laboured . . . But my request to you is that you will quicken others'.³ This was on 20 May; by 23 May the work of the committee was complete. By now, however, the two Houses were at loggerheads over the refusal of the Upper House to accept Atterbury's ultra-Tory *Representation of the State of Religion*, and members of the Lower House were openly declaring that 'there could be no agreement with the Bishops'. Whiston's affair was now dragged into that quarrel. Atterbury was despatched to demand swifter action from the Upper House, then considering the committee's draft *Judgment* on Whiston's doctrines. 'But all this for show', wrote Kennett, '... to call for proceedings against Mr. Whiston was to cast the neglect on the Bishops'.⁴

On 28 May, with his usual chronic tactlessness, Whiston himself intervened. He sent a letter to the Prolocutor of the Lower House (Atterbury) claiming the 'known confessed Privilege of all men, to be heard before their Doctrines are censured or condemned'.⁵ The messenger he chose to deliver this appeal was Thomas Emlyn, a dissenting preacher who had been imprisoned in 1703, amidst considerable publicity, for advocating Unitarian doctrines, and whose meeting-house had been singled out in Atterbury's *Representation* for special attack. A more disastrous

¹ Lambeth Conv. IX/10/4, fols. 17-18.
² Lambeth Palace Library, Lambeth MS. 803: Tenison to 'my substitute in the chair this day in Convocation', undated (but 11 May); *Convocation's Proceedings*, 22-8.
³ Lambeth MS. 803: Tenison to bishop of Norwich (Trimnell), 20 May 1711.
⁴ B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 317-8.
⁵ Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fol. 58-58^v; *Convocation's Proceedings*, 30.

choice could scarcely be imagined, as one of his critics pointed out: '... so grossly to affront that Body of Men, whom he acknowledges to be his Judges, is a new sort of Politicks, peculiarly suited to Mr. Whiston's warm paradoxical Temper'.¹ Yet there were many in Convocation eager to grant Whiston his request for a hearing, despite the offensive mode in which that request had been made. Atterbury's supporters in the Lower House were only too ready to establish the judicial authority of Convocation, and Whiston's plea provided the perfect opportunity. Despite bitter protests from Kennett it was agreed that Whiston's letter should be forwarded to the bishops, with the request that he should, as he asked, have '... a copy (sic) of the Propositions which have been extracted out of his Book and that in order to his receiving such Copy he should be forthwith cited by the authority of Convocation to appear before the Synod'.² For the time being the bishops ignored this blatant attempt by the Lower House to 'exercise a jurisdiction over the man before censuring his Doctrine', merely agreeing to let Whiston have a copy of the condemned propositions when they should be agreed on by both Houses.³ In the aimless bickering which continued between the Houses Whiston's friends, Robert Cannon and George Smalridge, succeeded in having the number of condemned propositions reduced.⁴ At last, however, the *Judgement of the Archbishops and Bishops and Clergy of the Province of Canterbury in Convocation Assembled* was completed, condemning fifteen propositions from Whiston's writings as 'False and Heretical, Injurious to our Saviour and the Holy Spirit, Repugnant to the Scripture, and contrariant to the Decrees of the Two first General Councils, and to the Liturgy and Articles of our Church'. On 4 June the Upper House ordered a fair copy of the document to be prepared, and took the opportunity to 'acquaint the [Lower] House that if they desire a Copy of the Extracts which is now agreed on should be sent to Mr. Whiston, this is the time for it. But then it must be considered whether the Judgement of the Convocation, now prepared, should be suspended till they receive an answer from Mr. Whiston upon it'.⁵ Clearly, there was to be no citation of the offender before either House. Foiled of judicial proceedings, the Lower House had no desire to provide Whiston with a further opportunity of airing his 'offensive matters'; they informed the bishops that '... if Mr. Whiston be not cited, the L. House are of opinion that the sending him such a Copy

¹ *Convocation's Proceedings*, 31; *Political State of Great Britain*, i. 474; *Dictionary of National Biography*, xvii. 356; (Smalbrooke), *Reflections on the Conduct of Mr. Whiston in his Revival of the Arian Heresy*, London 1711, 31-2.

² B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 319; Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fols. 59, 61.

³ *Wake Arch. Inf.*, 308/53; B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 319; *Historical Manuscripts Commission Various Collections*, viii. 252.

⁴ Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fol. 62-3; B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 321. Kennett was worried that Whiston would capitalise on the fact that some propositions were dropped from the original list, by claiming that their omission from the censure was an admission of their orthodoxy. Whiston did exactly this in *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*, London 1712, i. appendix 2, postscript, 74-7.

⁵ Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fols. 73, 78-82; Lambeth Palace Library, Lambeth MS. 951/25, fol. 114; *Convocation's Proceedings* (Supplement), 112-7.

is not Proper' before the question and futility for the winter controversy over destined new government's a Clarke's *Scripture* of the Publick were for liberty publication of Memorials sent Judgement showed the court by the June 1712 were muster a respectance which nevertheless, perhaps again, this time

The failure of Atterbury's Oxford campaign sought to 'undermine' was essential to the propositions can convince the pass of his duty only use to be made and make us scarce of Samuel Clarke Atterbury himself confronted Whiston and Dr. 'Your Lordship' Upper House looking Mr. Whiston Out of Convocation usefulness and schemes of peace ought I can see,

¹ Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fol. 62-3.

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is not Proper'.¹ On 12 June the *Judgement* was sent to Tenison to be laid before the queen. On the same day, amidst a universal sense of frustration and futility, Convocation was prorogued. By the time it reassembled for the winter session the ministry, determined to avoid any public controversy over religion, had adroitly mislaid the *Judgement*, and it was destined never to be published. Its loss is illuminated by the government's attempt, at about this time, to prevent the publication of Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* on the grounds that '... the affairs of the Publick were with Difficulty then kept in the Hands of those that were for liberty: that it was therefore an unseasonable Time for the publication of a Book that would make a great Noise and Disturbance'.² Memorials sent up from the Lower House demanding that the Synodical Judgement should be published to the world, and repeated application to the court by the archbishop himself, had no effect.³ Renewed efforts in June 1712 were hampered by the inability of a depleted Upper House to muster a respectable number of signatures to the document—a circumstance which disgusted the Lower House and the queen.⁴ Anne, nevertheless, promised to promulgate the document; but it disappeared again, this time for good.

The failure of the attack in Convocation dismayed all parties. Atterbury's Oxford crony Jonathan Edwards thought that, at a time when men sought to 'undervalue the Church, trampling its authority under foot', it was essential to make an example of 'this incendiary' whom no 'instructions can convince, no monitions or rebukes ... keep ... within the compass of his duty'.⁵ White Kennett was hardly less vehement. 'I doubt the only use to be made of us', he told Samuel Blackwell, 'is to play with us and make us scratch and bite where the Masters please'.⁶ The publication of Samuel Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine* increased the gloom. Francis Atterbury himself complained to bishop Trelawney of the 'blasphemies of Mr. Whiston and Dr. Clarke', but recognised that nothing could be done. 'Your Lordship well knows the present sad situation of things ... the Upper House look upon themselves to have taken a large step, in censuring Mr. Whiston's opinions, and will not be induced to go further ... Out of Convocation, the thoughts of those who alone can restore the usefulness and dignity of such assemblies are so much taken up with schemes of peace, as not to be at liberty to mind our concerns so that, for aught I can see, we must be contented to wait another opportunity, and

¹ Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fol. 74; Lambeth Conv. IX/4, fol. 74.

² Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fol. 86; Bennett, op. cit., 319; *Whiston's Clarke*, 30.

³ Lambeth Conv. 1/2/12, fols. 100-1, 108; Lambeth Palace Library, Lambeth MS. 941, (Gibson Papers) 36; Tenison to Dartmouth, 20 June 1713; E. F. Carpenter, *Thomas Tenison*, London 1948, 308-9.

⁴ Wake Arch. Inf., 308/595; B. Curtis Brown, *The Letters and Diplomatic Instructions of Queen Anne*, London 1935, 370.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Doctrine of Original Sin ... Asserted and Vindicated from the Exceptions ... of ... Daniel Whitby*, Oxford 1711, 109-118.

⁶ B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1013, fol. 179; White Kennett to Revd. Samuel Blackwell, 11 July 1712.

in the meantime, the Freethinkers must go on to do their pleasure'.¹ 'So Whiston's affair sleeps', wrote Burnet, not without relief. The attempt to turn his heresies into a test of the legal powers of a counter-revolutionary Convocation had failed, and further opposition seemed doomed to proceed no further than pulpit or pamphlet. What could be done there was done² meanwhile, the notoriety of this 'Ecclesiastical Maggot', this 'freakish writer' grew apace.³

Tory frustration sought an outlet in November 1712, when John Pelling, rector of St. Anne's Westminster, inaugurated proceedings for heresy against Whiston in the Court of Arches, on the basis of the propositions censured by Convocation. Pelling himself was unknown to Whiston, and it was alleged that the prosecution was directed by bishop Compton of London, who asked Pelling to allow his name to be used, 'though it was carried on by the order and at the charge of the Bishop'.⁴ Compton had certainly not concealed his disgruntlement at the failure of the *Judgement* from Harley, but as Whiston's diocesan might have been expected to take the more straightforward step of proceeding against him in the diocesan court, as indeed the archbishop had suggested.⁵ But Whiston lived within the peculiar jurisdiction of the dean and chapter of St. Paul's, and there was some uncertainty as to who had the right to proceed against him. At any rate Pelling presented himself initially before the commissary of the dean and chapter, John Harwood, who ruled that since, as a layman, it was not in his power to degrade a clergyman, so 'by consequence it was not in his power to judge of the Crime of Heresy, whereto that Degradation belong'd'.⁶ He gave Pelling Letters of Request to the Dean of Arches, desiring him to hear the case. The Dean of Arches, John Bettesworth, refused on precisely the same grounds—the Dean of Arches had no more power 'to declare what is heresy, and to excommunicate a Clergyman' than Harwood. The proper judge, according to Bettesworth, was the bishop of London, since only he could 'degrade and

¹ *The Epistolary Correspondence of the Right Reverend Francis Atterbury D.D.*, ed. J. Nichols, London 1799, i. 460: Atterbury to Trelawney, 10 February 1712-13.

² For sermons against Whiston see *Remarks and Collections*, iii. 192; R. Ibbetson *The Divinity of our Blessed Saviour Prov'd . . . in which Mr. Whiston's attempt to revive the Arian Heresy is consider'd*, Oxford 1712. For a review of some of the pamphlets against Whiston, see *Primitive Christianity reviv'd*, v (1712), Appendix II, 31 ff.

³ For an entertaining example, *Remarks and Collections* iii. 379; cf. also, *Will with-a-Wisp; or, The Grand Ignis Fatuus of London*, London 1714; W. Whiston *Mr. Whiston's Letter to the Reverend Dr. Henry Sacheverell . . .*, n.p. 23 April 1713; Myles Davies, *Athenae Britannicae: or, a Critical History of the Oxford and Cambridge (sic) Writers . . . Part II*, London 1716, 394; *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd* I, [Appendix II of 2nd ed. *Hist. Pref.*], 72-4.

⁴ Historical Manuscripts Commission *Portland MS.*, vii. 172: William Stratford to Edward Harley, 19 November 1713.

⁵ H. M. C. *Portland MS.*, v. 76: Bishop of London to the Earl of Oxford, 27 August 1711; B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 301.

⁶ Lambeth Palace Library, *Lambeth MS. 813*, 'A Summary View of the Proceedings against Mr. Whiston as they relate to the Court of Arches' fols. 1-9; (William Whiston), *Reasons for not Proceeding against Mr. Whiston, By the Court of Delegates. In a Letter to the Reverend Dr. Pelling . . .*, London 1713, 3.

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¹ Lambeth MS. 813

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⁴ *Reasons for not Pro*

⁵ Lambeth MS. 813

⁶ *Memoirs*, 226-9.

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depose' a minister.¹ Pelling refused to accept this decision, however, and petitioned the Lord Chancellor for a Court of Delegates to hear an appeal against it. This request was granted, and among the Delegates appointed were bishops Trelawney, Hooper and Bisse, three of the most determined of Whiston's opponents in the Upper House of Convocation.²

Bettesworth's case was that the Commissary of the dean and chapter of St. Paul's, not being the 'proper ordinary' in Whiston's case, had no power to issue Letters of Request to the Court of Arches. He maintained that the correct procedure was for the bishop of London to cite Whiston into his diocesan court, and in the event of any legal difficulties arising because of the exempt jurisdiction in which Whiston lived, to apply for process through the Court of Arches. Since Compton had neither formally refused to proceed against Whiston, nor requested the Court of Arches to intervene, Pelling's appeal should be dismissed.³ The Delegates however, were unconvinced by this reasoning, and ruled in favour of Pelling, declaring that the cause did lie before the Dean of Arches, and that 'he ought to have proceeded therein'.⁴ Instead of returning the case to the Court of Arches, however, the Delegates now cited Whiston himself to appear before them, to answer the charge of heresy, on 26 October. This move was unusual for a number of reasons. The Court of Delegates had been appointed as a court of appeal in the case *Pelling v. Bettesworth*. Having settled that case, the Delegates had fulfilled their commission, and would normally have disbanded. In any case, the Court of Delegates was by its very nature an appeal court; in citing Whiston on heresy charges heard in no other court it might be argued that the Delegates, whatever their mandate, acted illegally.⁵

The work of the Delegates was hampered by internal disagreement. Even the predominantly Tory episcopal Delegates were not at one. Hooper of Bath and Wells was determined that the Court should proceed no further than excommunication, while hotter brethren like Trelawney were prepared to consider civil sanctions against the unfortunate heretic. The lay Delegates were unhappy about trying a case of heresy at all, and made no attempt to conceal their misgivings. Baron Price, a stout churchman and a Tory, declared openly that he considered Whiston 'the honestest Man in the World', and told Trelawney that he could not 'take Heresy upon [his] shoulders nor upon [his] conscience'. Robert Tracy, another of the lay Delegates, urged Whiston's counsel to move for a prohibition in Chancery, 'that they might get rid of it'.⁶ The proceedings

¹ Lambeth MS. 813, fols. 10–18.

² Lambeth MS. 813, fols. 19–31; *Reasons for not Proceeding*, 4; *A True Copy of the Articles Exhibited against William Whiston, Clerk, by the Reverend Dr. John Pelling, to the Bishops, Judges etc.*, n.p.d., 4 (list of the delegates). On the Court of Delegates itself, cf. G. I. O. Duncan, *The High Court of Delegates*, Cambridge 1971.

³ Lambeth MS. 813, fols. 32–46.

⁴ *Reasons for not Proceeding*, 4.

⁵ Lambeth MS. 813, fols. 52–4.

⁶ *Memoirs*, 226–9.

dragged on into June 1714, while depositions were collected to establish that Whiston was indeed a clergyman, the author of the condemned writings, and that he had subscribed to the Thirty-nine Articles.¹

During all this, Whig supporters rallied to Whiston, whose case now became something of a mirror image of the Sacheverell trial. His defence counsel included Sir Peter King and Nicholas Lechmere, both of whom had served as prosecution lawyers at Sacheverell's trial, and who now gave their services without charge. The duke of Newcastle provided money for legal expenses, and Richard Steele and Joseph Addison found Whiston employment as a mathematical lecturer at that haven of Whigs and infidels, Button's Coffee-House. And as if this line-up of anti-Sacheverell forces required emphasis, Whiston throughout this period was engaged in acrimonious debate, in person and in print, over his right to worship as a member of his local parish church. The rector who wished to deny him that right was none other than Henry Sacheverell himself.²

To the material aids offered by the Buttonists was added less tangible but equally effective support. In June 1714 the Lower House of Convocation made an unsuccessful attempt to censure Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine*. The attempt called forth an anonymous pamphlet on *The Difficulties and Discouragements which attend the Study of the Scriptures in the Way of Private Judgement*. This brilliantly ironic squib was the work of Whiston's friend Francis Hare, and was intended to expose the folly and inconsistency of doctrinal persecution by a protestant Church. Cast in the form of a letter to a young clergyman, the pamphlet painted a lurid picture of the intellectual, moral, and especially economic and personal dangers which beset divines who stray from the beaten track and dare to think for themselves. To illustrate his point Hare dwelt at length on the persecution of Clarke and Whiston for their heterodoxy. His discussion of Whiston is unflattering, but sympathetic. 'Tis the poor Man's misfortune', he wrote, '(for Poor he is, and like to be, not having the least preferment) to have a Warm Head and to be very zealous in what he thinks the cause of God . . . you every Day hear his Performances run down as Whimseys and Chimeras, by Men who never read them, and, if they did, could not understand them . . . They that speak most favourably, look upon him as craz'd, and little better than a Madman. This is the poor Man's Character, and, low as he is, they cannot be content to leave him quiet in his Poverty'.³

¹ The papers of the Court of Delegates for this period, among which are the depositions of witnesses in Whiston's case, are in process of sorting. Details were kindly supplied to me by Dr. C. Kitching of the Public Record Office.

² *Memoirs*, 227; Carroll Camden (ed.), *Restoration and 18th century Literature*, Chicago 1963, 292 (letter from H. Newman to Richard Steele, 10 August 1713). For the debate with Sacheverell, see *Will with-a-Wisp: or, The Grand Ignis Fatuus of London*, London 1714; William Whiston *Mr. Whiston's Letter to the Reverend Dr. Henry Sacheverell* . . . n.p. 1713; Myles Davies *Athenae Britannicae: or, a Critical History of the Oxford and Cambridge (sic) Writers* . . . Part II, London 1716, 394; *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*, i (Appendix 2 to the 2nd ed. of Preface), 72-4; Holmes, op. cit., 9-10, 259-262, 266.

³ (Francis Hare), *The Difficulties and Discouragements which attend the Study of the Scriptures* . . . London 1714 (quotations from 2nd. ed. same year), 23, 40.

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'WHISTON'S AFFAIR': THE TRIALS OF A PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN

Hare's pamphlet was itself censured in Convocation, but there is little doubt that it expressed the general unease over heresy hunting felt by the laity and liberal clergy. A last desperate bid by Trelawney and his supporters to rush a verdict through during the Christmas Vacation of 1714, so as to forestall a motion for a prohibition at Westminster Hall, was prevented by Hooper's refusal to leave his diocese at that season. Hooper's scruples about the lengths to which some of his colleagues seemed willing to push matters led him to propose an adjournment of the Court *sine die*, which an uneasy Lord Chief Justice was only too eager to grant. Queen Anne had died on 1 August; among the 'Acts of Grace' of the new monarch, anxious to avoid the addition of religious strife to the many troubles of the new dynasty, was one which pardoned 'all such pretended heresy whatsoever'. The trials of William Whiston had ended.¹

Whiston's part in the subsequent evolution of Arianism and Unitarianism in England is difficult to assess. Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine*, free from the eccentricities of Whiston's five-volumed *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*, and without that commitment to the rules of fasting and ritual observance found in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and which Whiston considered so vital, was infinitely more influential. 'I think', wrote one of Clarke's correspondents in 1714, 'you have carefully and prudently avoided those Rocks, on which he hath almost split'.² It was to the *Scripture Doctrine* that the overwhelming majority of eighteenth-century Arians looked as their founding charter. Yet Whiston's part in the development of Unitarian thought was far from negligible. The notoriety won for him by his trials set many a parson thinking for the first time on the tangled mystery of the Trinity. Nor was his influence confined to the clergy; the Salisbury glover, Thomas Chubb, was set upon the path that would make him one of the most famous of English Deists by reading Whiston's *Historical Preface*.³ The 'Primitive Library' which Whiston set up at his house in Hatton Garden seems to have served as a clearing house for the dissemination of Arian and Unitarian books unobtainable elsewhere.⁴ His circle of acquaintances was enormous, and he was frequently consulted by seekers moving towards Unitarianism.⁵ He had few whole-hearted disciples, because there was too much that was 'merely speculative' in his thought; in the centre of a movement towards rationalism, away from mystery, there were many, like John Jackson, who found his views 'too positive and Ceremonious' for the Simplicity of the Christian Religion, the Nature and design of which is . . . to approach as near as may be, *not* to the Levitical, but the true uncorrupted *natural Religion*.⁶

¹ *Memoirs*, 227-9. I have been unable to trace the 'Act of Grace' in question.

² *The Works of Samuel Clarke*, London 1738, iv. 568.

³ T. L. Bushell, *The Sage of Salisbury: Thomas Chubb*, London 1968, 8-9.

⁴ Whiston MS., item 105: John Jackson to Whiston 31 October 1716; cf. Myles Davies, *op. cit.*, 242: 'Such a Pamphlet stall as is that pretended Primitive Library'.

⁵ *Memoirs*, 311-5; B.M. Add. MS. 4276, fol. 191: Whiston to Mr. Seymour (?), 2 December 1713.

⁶ Whiston MS., item 106: John Jackson to Whiston, 17 April 1717.

'Whiston's affair', for all that, marked a watershed in the endeavour to enforce orthodoxy within the National church. The Convocation which had so fiercely fallen upon him was the last in which a concerted effort was made to impose an authoritarian Anglican pattern upon the nation. The Sacheverell trial and the brief Tory revival which accompanied it had lent a hectic vigour to that attempt, but the resolute moderation of the queen's ministers and, more devastatingly, the accession of a Lutheran king, put an end to all such endeavours. Both sides saw the Whiston affair in this light, from Swift, who 'hated Whiston like a toad' and who saw Lechmere and the rest as patrons of infidelity and enemies of the old order,¹ to freethinkers like Anthony Collins and Thomas Gordon, who found Whiston a convenient peg upon which to hang their attacks on Christianity and church power.² With the accession of the Hanoverians the Whig victory was assured, and in the euphoria of victory Jekyll would go so far as to raise the possibility of bishoprics for Whiston and Clarke, and the hardly less outrageous consecration of Benjamin Hoadly would actually be accomplished. All this lay in the future, but even before the queen's death both sides understood the nature of the conflict. The failure of the Lower House's attack on Samuel Clarke's book in the summer of 1714 was another pointer to Whig victory, but less clearly than Whiston's affair. The attack on Clarke was inspired by the high-church members of the Lower House, reluctantly entered into by the bishops, and was foiled by the willingness of a friendly Upper House to put the best possible interpretation on Clarke's words.³ Whiston had been the object of the animosity of both Houses and of every level of churchmanship, and at a time when prelates and presbyters were divided in all else, had drawn upon himself their united fire. The failure of that attack is eloquent testimony to the extent to which internecine strife and the increasing complexity of English society had vitiated the effectiveness of the church's traditional machinery. In urging Whiston's prosecution Kennett had declared that 'if we have any Discipline left I hope it may be exercised upon One, who has more than once subscribed our Articles'.⁴ The course of the Whiston affair demonstrated that in an age in which Hoadly was considered a fit candidate for the episcopate even so moderate a churchman's expectations in the matter of 'Discipline' might be too high.

¹ *Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. H. Williams, Oxford 1937, i. 171; *Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. H. Davis, Oxford 1940, iii. 71.

² (Anthony Collins), *A Discourse on Freethinking*, London 1713, 45, 83; *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion*, London 1724, iii-bxii; (T. Gordon), *The Trial of William Whiston ... before the Lord Chief Justice Reason*, London 1734.

³ *Memoirs*, 168; N. Sykes *William Wake*, Cambridge 1957, ii. 108, 154-60.

⁴ B. M. Lansdowne MS. 1024, fol. 281.