# REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXTS FOR THE QUEST

## Jesus in the Rhetoric and Methods of Early Modern Intellectual History

**Abstract:**

This article contributes to a new perspective on the historical Jesus in early modern intellectual history. This perspective looks beyond German and academic scholarship, and takes account of a plurality of religious, social, and political contexts. Having outlined avenues of research which are consistent with this approach, I focus on radicalised socio-political contexts for the emergence of 'history' as a category of analysis for Jesus. Two contexts will be discussed: the late eighteenth century, with reference to Joseph Priestley, Baron d'Holbach, and their associations with the French Revolution; and the interregnum period in seventeenth-century Britain, with reference to early Quaker controversies and the apologetic work of Henry More. I identify ideas about Jesus in those contexts which have echoed in subsequent scholarship, while challenging the notion that there is a compelling association between sympathetic historical conceptions of Jesus (as opposed to theological) and a tendency towards radical and revolutionary politics.

**Key Works:** Historical Jesus, Revolution, Enlightenment, Priestley, d'Holbach, More, Reimarus, Quakers, Nayler

# REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXTS FOR THE QUEST

## Jesus in the Rhetoric and Methods of Early Modern Intellectual History[1]

### Narrating the Origins of the Quest

There are many ways of narrating the origins and development of the quest for the historical Jesus (hereafter 'the quest'). Depending on how loosely one defines the project, it could be considered as old as the earliest attempts to keep alive the memory of the Galilean.[2] The priorities of the first evangelists were not, of course, the same as modern historians,[3] but the flesh and blood reality of Jesus as a figure of the past has always mattered to some followers of the movement gathered in his name.[4]

For all the earlier precedents that exist for thinking about Jesus as a figure of history, however, the rise of history as a dominant discourse on Jesus is a modern development. If we attend to this period, we see that there are many historiographical entry points to illuminate the origins of the quest as a research tradition and cultural phenomenon. There are the 'great man' theories of historiography, with Albert Schweitzer's *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (1906) the paradigmatic example.[5] The quest here arrives like a 'thief in the night' with the posthumously published work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1684-1768) and his reading of the birth of Christianity as the deliberate miscarrying of Jesus' aims: his political-messianic ambitions to restore the Kingdom of Israel crushed by imperial power, only for them to be reimagined as a messiahship directed towards eternal salvation for the whole world.[6]

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[1] This article grew out of a paper I delivered at a joint meeting of the International Society of Biblical Literature and the European Association of Biblical Studies (Berlin, 2017). My thanks go to the organisers of the research group on the Study of the Historical Jesus, Cristiana Facchini and Fernando Bermejo-Rubio. Their comments at that session were very helpful in the subsequent development of this piece.

[2] The dedicatory opening of the Gospel of Luke is explicitly concerned with making a contribution to literary traditions about Jesus (Luke 1:1), which involved παρηκολουθηκότι (investigating) existent sources (1:3) and aiming at ἀσφάλειαν (truth) with respect to the account (1:4).

[3] The 'truth' of which the author of Luke writes concerns the messiahship of Jesus and the meaning of God's revelation to the world. These issues concern some modern historians, too, but they are typically regarded as transcending the limits of what can be demonstrated through the methods of historical inquiry. There are of course notable exceptions: see N. T. Wright's projected six volume series *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (vols. 1 – 4, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992 - 2013).

[4] Especially when threatened by theologies denying the bodily existence of Jesus (see 1 John 4:2).

[5] For an English translation that takes all subsequent German editions into account, see Albert Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus: First Complete Edition*, ed. John Bowden, trans. Bowden and W. Montgomery (London: SCM Press, 2000).

[6] The key texts are *On the Resurrection Narratives* (*Über die Auferstehungsgeschichte*, 1777) and *The Aims of Jesus and his Disciples* (*Vom dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*, 1778). They are collected together in a translation which reverses the order in which they were originally published, but which is consistent with the order in which they were presented in Reimarus's own manuscript: ed. Charles Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments*, trans. Ralph S Fraser (S. C. M Press: 1971), pp. 61 – 269.

Elsewhere I have sought to track pathways to Reimarus to demonstrate the extent to which he was working in critical spaces that had already been opened by others.[7] This has necessarily involved looking at particular individuals who Reimarus was reading, or individuals who anticipated some of his arguments. A complementary approach is to consider the intellectual, social and political contexts which produced appraisals of Jesus through the medium of historical writing, then honing in on exemplary individuals. [8] Some of those contexts have been concisely mapped by Mauro Pesce,[9] in categories which are similar but not identical to my own. When we incorporate this contextual approach, many avenues open up for historians of the quest.

*Some Plausible Contexts*

There is the much discussed 'deism' of Anglophone and German theology, which impacted the rationalistic hermeneutics of Reimarus and some of his less celebrated predecessors.[10] But there are also the traditions of Socinianism, Arianism and Unitarianism: anti-Trinitarian Christian theologies where the historically grounded humanity of Jesus was especially important.[11] These rationalist and 'heretical' theologies can be discussed in relation to the

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[7] See Jonathan C P Birch, 'The Road to Reimarus: Origins of the Quest for the Historical Jesus', in ed. Keith Whitelam, *Holy Land as Homeland? Models for Constructing the Historic Landscapes of Jesus* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2011), pp. 19 – 47*;* and 'Cracking the Canon: John Toland, "Lost" Gospels and the Challenge to Religious Hegemony', in A. K. M. Adam and Samuel Tongue, *Looking Through a Glass Bible: Post Disciplinary Interpretations from the Glasgow School* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 85–112.

[8] The 'great man' approach can be deployed in both contextual analysis and when trying to account for the initial emergence of specific reconstructions; for example in Charlotte Allen's *The Human Christ* (New York: Free Press, 1998), Isacc Newton (1642 – 1726) is credited with creating the intellecual paradigm for the early quest, while the rationalist theologian and philosopher Thomas Chubb (1679 – 1747) is credited with providing the 'template for nearly every subsequent reconstruction of the historical Jesus' (p. 109).

[9] See Mauro Pesce, 'The Beginnings of Historical Research on Jesus in the Modern Age', in ed. Caroline Johnson Hodge et al, *"One Who Shows Bountifully": Essays in Honor of Stanley K Stowers* (Providence RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), pp. 77 – 88. Although not discussed here, because my focus is on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Pesce is right to emphasise the impact of Renaissance Humanism, the Reformation, and the great voyages of discovery, with their revelations of unimagined religious diversity. The 'wars of religions' (also rightly emphasised) remains important in my discussion of seventeenth century Britain below.

[10] The historiographical resources for a more generous estimation of pre-Reimarus scholarship among 'deists' existed in German before Schweitzer took up the subject: see Gotthard Victor Lechler, *Geschichte des englischen Deismus* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cottascher Verlag, 1841). In the twentieth century there have been many more: see A. C. Lundsteen, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und die Anfänge der Leben-Jesu Forschung* (Copenhagen, 1939); and Henning Graf Reventlow, 'Das Arsenal der Bibelkritik des Reimarus: Die Auslegung der Bibel, insbesondere des Alten Testaments, bei den englischen Deisten', in ed. Wolfgang Walter, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768 ein,"bekannter Unbekannter"derAufklärung in Hamburg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1973), pp. 44 – 65; and Pesce, 'Per una ricerca storica su Gesù nei secoli XVI-XVIII: prima di H.S. Reimarus', *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi*, 28/1, 2011, pp. 433 – 464.

[11] If there is any truth in Allen's claim that the shadow of Isaac Newton and his scientific theories hung over sceptical biblical scholarship in the first half of the eighteenth century (and I think she overstates it), it should be noted that Newton was a closet Arian: see his 'Twelve Articles on Religion', *The Newton Project,* University of Sussex, accessed 15 March 2019: http://www.newtonproject.sussex.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/THEM00008 Although Chubb is typically characterised as a 'deist', he wrote as a self-conscious Arian at the outset of his career in *The Supremacy of the*

empirical turn in natural philosophy, which helped to establish a new paradigm for the justification of knowledge claims across intellectual disciplines, and which was influential among these minority religious movements (although the influence of the 'Scientific Revolution' on the quest can also be discussed as a factor in its own right).[12]

There are Jewish traditions of writing on Jesus and Christian origins, and especially their cross fertilisation with rationalist and non-Trinitarian treatments,[13] which took on a new and subversive significance in the early modern period, where the lines between reporting non-Christian perspectives on Jesus and advocating those perspectives were often blurred.[14] This appropriation of Jewish writings on Jesus could also be looked at alongside sceptical and apologetic uses of classical and patristic scholarship during the period, which prioritized going *ad fontes*,[15] bypassing the medieval theological commentary which had shaped perceptions of these traditions.[16]

We should also be exploring the crisis in historical consciousness which attended the seventeenth-century rise of modern Pyronism: radical scepticism about all knowledge claims, and the consequent need to place the historical Jesus on a sound footing as part of a wider epistemological project to combat this threat of scepticism.[17] This gave fresh urgency to the harmonising tendency which had always been present within Christianity among those dissatisfied with the plurality of sources and the discrepancies within and between them. But

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*Father Asserted: Or, Eight Arguments from Scripture, to Prove, that the Son is a Being, Inferior and Subordinate to the Father* (London: J. Roberts, 1715). On continental Socinianism as well 'deism' see Pesce, 'prima di H.S. Reimarus'.

[12] See Pesce, *L'ermeneutica biblica di Galileo e le due strade della teologia cristiana* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 2005); Allen, *Human Christ*, pp. 92 – 92; Robert W Funk, Roy Hoover and the Jesus Seminar (eds.), *Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Polebridge Press, 1993), p. 2.

[13] See Anthony Le Donne, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Revisionist History through the Lens of Jewish-Christian Relations', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (vol. 10.1, 2012), pp. 63-86; and Facchini, *Religione, scienza e storia in un rabbino tra Sei e Settecento: Yishaq Hayyim Cantarini* (Bologna: Baiesi, 2004).

[14] See, for example, Alan Charles Kors, 'Le Christ des Incrédules A L'Aube Des Lumieres', in ed. Maria-Christina Pitassi, *Le Christ Entre Orthodoxie et Lumières* (Geneva: Droz, 1994).

[15] See Dmitri Levitin, 'From Sacred History to the History of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European Historiography from Reformation to "Enlightenment",' *The Historical Journal* (vol. 55.4, 2012), pp. 1117-1161. Although many scholars have argued for the influence of Anglophone deism on Reimarus, in terms of his development as a historical scholar he probably owed more to the early modern tradition of the polymathic historians from whom he learned the art of profane hermeneutics: see Martin Muslow, 'From Antiquarianism to Bible Criticism?', in ed. Muslow, *Between Philology and Radical Enlightenment*: *Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768)* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011).

[16] This intersects with Pesce's highlighting of Protestantism and Humanism: see 'Research on Jesus', pp. 77 – 78.

[17] The classical treatment of this phenomenon is Richard Popkin's *The History of Scepticism: From Savonaola to Bayle* (rev. edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). I have discussed Bayle in 'Road to Reimarus', especially pp. 26 – 29.

this well-established genre of the 'gospel harmony' now demanded explicit methodological apparatus to meet the new evidential requirements for knowledge.[18]

*The Contexts and Case Studies in Focus*

The contexts discussed in this article intersect with several of those outlined above. The rise of Quakerism and Christian Platonism in seventeenth-century England are not typically associated with the quest, nor are pseudonymous aristocrats waging a publishing war against the Church in late eighteenth-century France. But without these kind of reference points, the history of scholarship tends towards familiar, rarefied academic narratives which tell us little about the interplay between biblical scholarship, religious cultures, and socio-political history: the matrix of contexts which helped to generate modern ideas and methods concerning the historical Jesus, and to make them available to the reading public.[19]

Whenever there have been competing visions of Jesus and the truth of Christianity more generally—especially in intellectually, socially and politically fractious contexts—the need to 'set the record straight' historically has often become a priority among writers inside and outside of the Church.[20] It is within just such fractious contexts in early modern Europe that we find historical issues concerning Jesus and the Gospels that were deliberately sought out by Christian writers to be refuted in the service of rational apologetics. And yet those very same issues would reappear in the work of sceptical writers with destructive intent and become reoccurring themes in historical Jesus studies. The common denominator in these excursions into history, polemical or apologetic, is not to be found in any theological or philosophical worldview, or any particular political project. It was the religiously, socially, and politically radicalised contexts which helped to create intellectual imperatives that otherwise may not have occurred precisely as and when they did.

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[18] Important examples of this are Jean LeClerc's *The Harmony of the Evangelists* [*Harmonia evangelica*, 1700], trans. anonymous (London: Sam Buckely, 1701); and in the following century, Joseph Priestley's *A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek; to which are Prefixed Critical Dissertations in English* (London: J. Johnson, 1777). For more on harmonies, see Pesce, 'Research on Jesus', p. 81.

[19] See, for example, James D G Dunn, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus and its Implications for Biblical Interpretation', in ed. Alan J Hauser and Duane F Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume III: The Enlightenment through the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), pp. 300 – 318. Dunn briefly acknowledges the challenge to credibility of miracles by the 'English deists' (p. 303) before moving on with his version of the familiar story from Reimarus through to the early nineteenth century.

[20] The writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Celsus are among the earliest and most comprehensive anti-Christian polemics we have evidence for. Celsus's attack on the messianic status of Jesus is comparable to much of the Enlightenment incredulity at the miracles and Christianity's questionable historical-theological position as the heir to Judaism. His work has been reconstructed out of the substantial quotations contained in Origen of Alexandria's (c. 184 – 253) rebuttal *Contra Celsum*: see *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

**The French Revolution as a Context for the Quest**

One novel suggestion for understanding the origins of the quest points us away from standard histories of eighteenth-century New Testament scholarship and towards the tumultuous political events which defined the age like no other. In his provocative essay, 'The Historical Jesus as a Justification for Terror', Charles T Davis III argues that the quest was 'spawned by the [French] Revolution'.[21] At the outset of an essay which is packed with suggestive ideas but rather lacking in primary source evidence, Davis notes a comparison drawn by the poet and critic C. J. Heinrich Heine (1797 – 1856)—a comparison between Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), and Maximilien Robespierre (1758 – 1794).[22] The juxtaposition is not an obvious one given the very different temperaments of the protagonists, but the point of the comparison would seem to be this: whereas Robespierre helped to topple the *Ancien Régime* through a radical and ultimately violent political movement, Kant helped topple that same regimen in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781) by undermining the rational force of the traditional arguments for the existence of God through his radical critique of speculative reason.[23] When the metaphysical certainty of God's existence is questioned, the divine right of kings falls with it. According to Davis, alongside the social and philosophical assault on religious and political authority, the biblical scholarship exemplified by writers like Reimarus is said to have 'energised the propaganda of the Revolution'; for while 'it is true that the first Life of Jesus scholars are German, it was the French Revolution and the Enlightenment that made the Quest so imperative.'[24]

The conjunctive phrase 'and the Enlightenment' opens up such a capacious period of history and broad set of issues that it threatens to remove anything distinctive at all about Davis's proposal, so for the purposes of this discussion I shall focus on the first part of the thesis: the proposal that historical inquiry into the life of Jesus became an imperative because of the revolutionary atmosphere pouring forth from France, with its cultural lust for undercutting all authority. There is an intuitive if loose resonance between the two, and given the persistence of politically subversive, and even militant interpretations of Jesus,[25] there is

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[21] Charles T Davis, 'The Historical Jesus as a Justification for Terror', in ed. J Harold Ellens, *Religion, Psychology and Violence*, vol. 2 of 4 (London: Praeger, 2004), pp. 111 – 129.
[22] See Davis, 'Justification for Terror', p. 114.
[23]See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1st and 2nd edns.), eds. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[24] Davis, 'Justification for Terror', p. 122.
[25] See the discussion in James Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, especially chap. 1; Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, "Between Gethsemane and Golgotha, or Who Arrested the Galilean(s)? Challenging a Deep-Rooted Assumption in New Testament Research", *Annali di Storia dell Esegesi* 33/2 (2016), pp. 311 – 339, and '(Why) was Jesus the Galilean

nothing prima facie implausible about the notion that those aspects of the Gospels which suggest a seditious quality to some readers today may have struck readers with equal force in late eighteenth-century France. Indeed, there is some evidence that they did just that: Davis draws on the landmark work of John McManners (1916 – 2006), which depicts revolutionaries paying due 'reference…to an unecclesiastical Jesus, whose only possessions were his virtues, and whose only crown was his thorns.'[26] Davis could have made a more explicit connection between Reimarus's historical hypothesis that Jesus was in a sense a political revolutionary himself,[27] and the history of radical politics and irreligion in the decades leading up to 1789 (the very decades when Reimarus was writing his clandestine *magnum opus*).[28] But there is no evidence that Reimarus's theories were conceived for radical political ends.[29]

One of the problems with any attempt to locate the starting point of the quest—as I alluded to in my opening remarks—is one of definition: What exactly do we mean by 'the historical Jesus?' In his influential article on the history of the discipline,[30] N. T. Wright observes that the historical Jesus 'is sometimes used in a broad sense to refer to Jesus as he actually was (whether or not we can know anything about him…), and sometimes to refer to Jesus as he can be reconstructed by historians working within a particular frame of reference.'[31] It seems fair to say that many of the scholars who undertook the project of reconstruction prior to the twentieth century—when scholars were more inclined towards positivism—were confident that the picture they were offering *was* Jesus 'as he actually was'. There were of

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Crucified Alone? Solving a False Conundrum?', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (vol. 36.2, 2013) pp. 127 – 154; the popular scholarship of Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013); and last century, eds. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule, *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[26] Davis, 'Justification for Terror', p. 120, quoting John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (New York: Harper 1970), p. 102. One important text missing from Davis' bibliography is Daniele Menozzi's *Letture politiche di Gesù: Dall'Ancien Régime alla Rivoluzione* (Brescia: Paideia, 1979). My own study of Menozzi's work has been restricted to the French translation by Jacqueline Touvier, *Les Interprétations politiques de Jésus de l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution* (Paris: Du Cerf, 1983).

[27] See Bammel, 'The Revolution Theory from Reimarus to Brandon', in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, pp. 11 – 68.

[28] See Alexander, Gerhard (ed.), *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes / Hermann Samuel Reimarus*, 2 vols. (Joachim-Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften in Hamburg, Frankfurt: Insel, 1972).

[29] See Jonathan Israel, 'The Philosophical Context of Hermann Samuel Reimarus' Radical Biblical Criticism', in *Between Philology and Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 183 – 200.

[30] See Wright, 'Quest for the Historical Jesus', in ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3 of 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 796 – 802. The 'three quest' model deployed by Wright in that article has been unravelling over the last ten years, not least in the pages of this journal: see Bermejo-Rubio, 'The Fiction of the "Three Quests": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historical Paradigm', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (vol. 7.3, 2009), pp. 211 – 253. In fairness to Wright, he identified the notion that the quest began with Reimarus one of six 'commonly held but erroneous views' which pervade scholarship ('Quest', p. 296), but the focus of his own article remained on the aftermath of Reimarus.

[31] Wright, 'Quest', p. 797.

course studies in this tradition which had a certain methodological self-consciousness, but the only study by a French author that Davis discusses which comes close to the second of Wright's definitions is Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863).[32] So the 'historical Jesus' that Davis refers to seems to be the Jesus of the *belles lettres* or the pamphlet and propaganda wars in late eighteenth-century France, centred on that idea of Jesus 'as he actually was' regardless of what anyone (especially Church authorities) maintained.

It is certainly true that writers such as Montesquieu (1689 – 1755), and even Voltaire (1694 – 1778), invoked Jesus and the Gospels to argue against the worst excesses of religious intolerance.[33] Before, during, and after 1789, the French revolutionary priest Henri Jean-Baptiste Grégoire (1750 – 1831) would appeal to Jesus and the Gospels in his arguments for a whole raft of radical social and political reforms concerning education, race, religious freedom and equality.[34] But this approach to the 'historical Jesus' as a challenge to the existing religious and political order is neither the preserve of historical scholars nor a creation of the French Revolution: it is apparent throughout the history of Christianity.[35] And given the initial impact of the posthumous publication of Reimarus's work by G. E. Lessing (1729 – 1781),[36] along with the German translations of, and commentaries on, many works by Anglophone writers challenging received historical wisdom on Christian origins,[37] it seems reasonable to maintain that a preoccupation with the historical Jesus took root in and grew out of German intellectual culture without any direct dependence on socio-political developments in France. Davis argues that Jesus was 'depicted as the great teacher of natural morality wherever the impact of the Revolution was strong'—[38]that is to say, a morality which can be grasped through reason, without deference to either priestly or scriptural authority. The connection between Jesus conceived as a teacher of natural morality, radical politics and the French Revolution has been studied, for example by Daniele Menozzi, where Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) is to the fore),[39] but this connection is not dependent on historical reconstruction nor is it restricted

[32] See Davis, 'Justification for Terror', pp. 121 – 124. Davis defends the originality of Renan's work (against Schweitzer's estimate) and argues for its continuity with the French revolutionary spirit.
[33] See Menozzi, *Les Interprétations politiques*, pp. 11 – 12, 32 – 46.
[34] For a collection of essays on this extraordinary intellectual and political life, see eds. Jeremy D Popkin and Richard H Popkin, *The Abbé Grégoire and his World* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000).
[35] I discuss seventeenth-century instances of this perennial interpretive tendency below, and it is a theme running throughout my forthcoming *Jesus in an Age of Enlightenment: Radical Gospels from Thomas Hobbes to Thomas Jefferson*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
[36] See Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought: 1778 – 1860* (Pasadena, Calif: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2008), chap. 1.
[37] In the *Apologie* there are references by Reimarus to the work of John Toland (vol. 1, p. 434; vol. 2, p. 658), Anthony Collins (vol. 1, pp. 728, 742, 905; vol. 2, p. 271), and Conyers Middleton (vol. 2, pp. 377, 387).
[38] Davis, 'Justification for Terror', p. 121.
[39] See Menozzi, *Les Interprétations politiques*, pp. 46 - 69

to eighteenth-century France and its sympathetic onlookers.[40] So does Davis's proposal leave anything of interest for historians of the quest to work with? There are a number of fruitful lines of inquiry one can undertake, which lay outside the scope of Davis's essay: it was published within the context of a multivolume work on the theme of religion and violence, where pairing the historical Jesus with the French Revolution may have been irresistible. This pairing in not without warrant so long as we do not exaggerate its importance for the historical study of Jesus in the German academy or in the creation of dissident images of Jesus.

*The Jesus of Dissenting Enlightenment: The Spectre of Revolution in England*

The French Revolution probably divided European opinion like no other political event in the eighteenth century. It scandalised many in Britain, but the Revolution had many supporters there too.[41] They included one of the foremost public intellectuals in the English-speaking world, Dr. Joseph Priestley (1733 – 1804). Few New Testament scholars have reached such a level of infamy that they have large-scale public disturbances named after them, but the so-called 'Priestley riots', which played out over three days in Birmingham in the summer of 1791, are worthy of mention in this context.[42] Of course Priestley was not just a New Testament scholar, but then neither was Reimarus, Strauss, Renan, Schweitzer, or any of the other polymaths who contributed to the early history of the quest. Priestley is best remembered today for his pathbreaking contributions to experimental science, and especially his chemical analysis of oxygen.[43] But he was also a bestselling grammarian, metaphysician, historian, educational theorist and practitioner, and a political philosopher.[44] More significant for our purposes, however, is the fact that for thirty years Priestley, a dissenting minister from West Yorkshire, had been revising the history of the development of Christian doctrine.[45]

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[40] Davis is on stronger ground when he emphasises the radical implications of the later thought of Renan, which has been studied through his reception in North America: see David Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[41] See Clive Elmsley, *Britain and the French Revolution* (London: Longman, 2000).

[42] Trailblazing work on this began to appear in the first half of the twentieth century: see Bernard Allen, 'Priestley and the Birmingham Riots', *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* (2, 1932, pp. 113 – 132; for more recent scholarship see Robert Barrie Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', *Past and Present* 18 (1960), pp. 68 – 88; and John Money, *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977) pp. 219 – 231.

[43] For a comprehensive study of Priestley and his work, but with particular emphasis on his scientific achievements, see Robert E Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of his Life and Work from 1733 to 1773* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); and *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773 to 1804* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

[44] For a multi-authored appreciation, see ed. Isabel Rivers and David L Wykes (ed.), *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher and Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[45]See Priestley, *The Scripture Doctrine of Remission* (London: C. Henderson, 1761); *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*: *An Essay on the Best Method of Communicating Religious Knowledge to the Members of*

In his works on Christian origins Priestley wrote as a Unitarian theologian no less than a historian. His aim was to demonstrate the unity of the Godhead in primitive Christian thought, impugning Trinitarian theology as an intellectual and spiritual pollutant which had infected the sacred body of Christian theology through the profane contingencies of human history. Inevitably this meant revising the orthodox image of the historical Jesus: incarnational interpretations were denied while messianic Judaism was emphasised as a critical historical context.[46] Priestley's Jesus was no political revolutionary (in a way that Reimarus's arguably was): he was a miracle-working teacher of repentance and ethical wisdom who fulfilled the messianic prophesies of the Old Testament and set in motion the conversion of the pagan world to monotheism.[47] If there is an element of (potentially) revolutionary spirit in Priestley's account then it would have to be the egalitarian tendency, which sought to bring women and the socially marginalised within the fold. In his famous comparison between Jesus and Socrates, which was really a distillation of his thoughts on religion and morality in Greco-Roman antiquity over many decades, he argued that, 'The object of Socrates was the instruction of a *few*, but that of Jesus of the *many*, and especially those of the middle or lower classes, as standing in most need of instruction, and most likely to receive it with gratitude and without prejudice.'[48]

As a public intellectual Priestley sought a more inclusive social order: standing outside the Anglican Church, and more dangerously still as a non-Trinitarian Christian, he was limited in terms of access to the academic world and to political influence. He campaigned for the repeal of the 1678 Test Act and 1661 Corporation Act,[49] and defended the toleration of Roman Catholics before it became a popular cause among English progressives.[50] Notwithstanding the Toleration Act of 1689, to dissent against the Anglican Church, headed as it was by the monarch, was still considered by some to be too close for comfort to a repudiation of monarchy itself. And given the association of religious heterodoxy with republicanism and revolution in

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*Christian Societies*, 3 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1772 – 1774); *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1782); *An History of the Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ: Proving that the Christian Religion Was at First Unitarian*, 4 vols. (Birmingham: J. Johnson, 1786).

[46] See Priestley, *Early Opinions*, vol. 3, chaps. i, viii, xi; vol. 4, pp. 303 – 319; *Corruptions of Christianity*, vol. 2, pt. i, sects. i -ii.

[47] See Priestley, *A General History of the Church* [vol. 1 of 4]: *To the Fall of the Western Empire* (Andrew Kennedy, Northumberland, 1803), pp. 1 – 27; *Socrates and Jesus Compared*, London: J Johnson, 1803, sects. 1, 8.

[48] Priestley, *Socrates and Jesus*, p. 45.

[49] Priestley, *A Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt. on the Subjects of Toleration and Church Establishments; occasioned by his Speech against the Repeal of the Test and Corporation* (London: J. Johnson, 1787).

[50] See Priestley, *Essay on the First Principles of Government, And on the Nature of Political, Civil and Religious Liberty* (London: J. Johnson, 1768).

France, Priestley's public sympathy for the rebellion of 1789 made him a lightning rod for conservative criticism and popularist reaction.[51] And when Priestley became associated publicly with the organisation of a dinner to celebrate the two year anniversary of the storming of the Bastille,[52] it proved the catalyst for mob aggression which caused thousands of pounds of damage to properties in Birmingham, and the complete destruction of twenty-seven of them, including Priestley's house, library and laboratory.[53]

How relevant was Priestley's scholarship on Jesus and Christian origins to all this social unrest? It is difficult to quantify. It is certainly true that Priestley's reputation as a holder of heterodox views about Jesus and the New Testament, and his promulgation of these views in historical terms, were known beyond educated elites.[54] Priestley was one of those rare intellectuals of his time who was familiar to some of the provincial unlettered; he was one of the most widely caricatured and satirised figures of his age,[55] sometimes juxtaposed with Thomas Paine (1737 – 1809) as a similarly dangerous enemy of Church and State.[56] The flurry of literary exchanges in the wake of the riots, before Priestley relocated to the United States, gave considerable prominence to his views on the Gospels and Jesus.[57] In his *Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the Late Riots in Birmingham*, Priestley falls short of comparing himself to Job, but he manages to write an account of his woes which is consistently biblical in its frames of reference: 'If I were deposed to boast', he writes, 'it will be, like Paul, of my sufferings.'[58] Priestley concedes that St. Paul's sufferings were probably greater than his own, but 'with respect to *calumny*', his victimhood was second to none: in this 'one respect I need not yield to him, or to any man whatsoever'; for this 'can hardly go deeper, or extend farther, than it had done yet to me.'[59] Priestley is especially concerned to repudiate 'old

[51] See Arthur Sheps, 'Public Perceptions of Joseph Priestley', *Eighteenth Century Life* (vol. 13.2, 1989), pp. 46 - 64.
[52] Although initially a staunch defender of Priestley against the charge of his involvement, Ronald Dixon came to acknowledge that Priestley had more of a role than many had previously thought: see Dixon, 'Was Dr Priestley Responsible for the Dinner which started the 1791 Riots?', *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* (vol. v, 1931 – 1934), pp. 299 – 323; for a later confirmation and development of the thesis, see Edward Robinson, 'New Light on the Priestley Riots', *The Historical Journal* (vol. 3:1, 1960) pp. 73 - 75.
[53] The most substantial recent study is Jonathan Atherton's *Rioting, Dissent and the Church in Late Eighteenth Century Britain: The Priestley Riots of 1791,* unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leicester, 2012.
[54] See Sheps, 'Public Perceptions'.
[55] See Sheps, 'Public Perceptions'; and Martin Fitzpatrick, 'Priestley Caricatured,' in eds. A. Truman Schwartz and John G McEvoy, *Motion Toward Perfection: The Achievement of Joseph Priestley* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1990), pp. 161 – 167.
[56] Priestley repudiated such comparisons in *The Speech of Mr Hardinge as Counsel for the Defendants in the Case of Priestley Against the Hundred of Hemlingford* (London: J. Johnson, 1792).
[57] See Priestley, *An Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the Late Riots in Birmingham,* 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson 1791 - 1792).
[58] Priestley, *Appeal*, vol. 1, p. xxix.
[59] Priestley, *Appeal*, vol. 1, p. xxix.

calumnies…now circulated with as much confidence as ever, such as my having declared that I would never rest till I had pulled down that imposter Jesus Christ'.[60] Less sensationalist but still damaging was the charge of 'rejecting the testimony of the apostles concern the Person of Christ,' which was repeated by critics despite Priestley having 'shewed the absurdity of it.'[61] Priestley defended the robust language he was famed for using on religious and political matters, and in this he modelled himself on Jesus:

> I sincerely pray for them [Priestley's enemies] in the language of the liturgy, for which they pretend they have so nobly exerted, that as my "enemies, persecutors, and slanders, God would forgive them and turn their hearts." As to the doctrine of christian meekness, forgiveness of injuries, and love of our enemies, it should be interpreted by our Saviour's own conduct. For it will not be said that *he* felt otherwise than he ought to have done with respect to his enemies; and certainly his language is of the strongest indignation and reproof.[62]

*Jesus and Transatlantic Dissent*

Priestley's indignation at the 'deliberate' mischaracterisation of his view of Jesus was just one of several reasons why he considered it expedient to leave the land of his birth for a new life in the United States. And perhaps the most compelling relationship between a 'non-ecclesiastical' Jesus of history and sympathy for revolutionary action is to be located in a transatlantic exchange between scholars, one of whom did understand Jesus as a teacher of natural, universal moral wisdom, and who lay the 'personal saviour' dimension to rest. But this only came to full fruition in the decades that followed the French Revolution and Priestley's flight from England, (although its genesis lay many years before the fall of the Bastille). I am referring here to the intellectual synergy between Priestley and the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson (1748 – 1826). Jefferson considered the doctrine of the Trinity to be the most pernicious doctrinal component of Christianity,[63] and he was a great admirer of Priestley's critical histories for unmasking the emergence of this theological 'chimera' in the early Christian centuries. Priestley's *Socrates and Jesus Compared*, evaluating the merits of Jesus and Socrates as educators of humanity, helped persuade Jefferson that there was something in the Christian inheritance that was worth preserving: the moral teachings of the historical figure

[60] Priestley, *Appeal*, vol. 1, p. xxix.
[61] Priestley, *Appeal*, vol. 1, p. 20.
[62] Priestley, *Appeal*, vol. 1, p. xix.
[63] See Eugene R Sheridan, Introduction to Dickinson W Adams and Ruth W Lester (eds.), *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels*: *'The Philosophy of Jesus' and 'The Life and Morals of Jesus'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 3 – 42: 39 – 40.

of Jesus. The first fruits of this revelation for Jefferson was the now lost *Philosophy of Jesus*,[64] and the more ambitious *Life and Morals of Jesus*.[65]The historical authenticity of the 'life and morals of Jesus', recovered by Jefferson from the Gospels, were based on material as 'distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill'.[66] Over two hundred years of subsequent scholarship rather suggests that what seemed blindingly obvious to Jefferson has been more difficult to discern for lesser mortals. The result of Jefferson's confident exercise in historical intuition and deduction is what became known as The Jefferson Bible, which dispensed with much of what was essential to Priestley's account of Jesus, not least his miracles and his salvific efficacy. Nevertheless, if one were looking for two major public intellectuals associated with the support of Revolutions on two continents, both of whom looked upon the historical Jesus as a universal moral sage (though not *only* that in the case of Priestley), then we find them in these two dissenters. But while both Priestley and Jefferson accepted the use of force as a necessary evil in the cause of human emancipation,[67] and Priestley at least found in Jesus a rhetorical model for coruscating righteous indignation, there is no evidence that either used the historical Jesus as a 'justification for terror'.

**The Anti-Christian Enlightenment**

*Jesus Among Hostile Materialists*

In so far as the intellectual atmosphere of the French Revolution is significant for historical Jesus scholarship, we could consider the role of that cadre of eighteenth-century French materialists and scourge of the *ancien regime*: those *philosophes* who had very definite views on 'Jesus as he actually was', some of whom deployed historical methods in their analyses. But contrary to Davis's proposal about perceptions of Jesus among French political radicals, not all these figures were persuaded that Jesus could be understood as a fellow traveller in their revolutionary cause. At least one, Baron d'Holbach (1723 – 1789) sought to present Jesus and early Christianity in historical terms: attending to what is true or false, plausible or incredible, in the canonical Gospels and other ancient witnesses to Jesus and early Christianity. But what he found in these sources was the reflection, if not indeed the genesis, of almost everything he detested about human nature, history, and culture. There was nothing to be salvaged from this

[64] It has been reconstructed by Adams and Lester in *Jefferson's Extracts*, pp. 55 – 105.
[65] See Adams and Lester, *Jefferson's Extracts*, pp. 127 – 297.
[66] Jefferson, letter to 'John Adams, 12 Oct. 1813', in Appendix to *Jefferson's Extracts*, pp. 351 – 355: 351.
[67] See Jefferson's contribution to the *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms*, in Julian Boyd (ed.), *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (Vol. 1): 1770 – 1776* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 187 – 218.; and Priestley, *Letter's to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke: Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Johnson, 1791).

cultural crime scene: nothing that a reasonable person could hope to preserve, reimagine, or reclaim; the kernel was no more nourishing than the husk, and it had been poisoning the European spirit for two thousand years. This is *le Jesus des incredules hostiles*.[68] It was not the first—and it would not be the last— negative assessment of Jesus, but there has probably never been a more sustained and belligerent example.

*D'Holbach: Curator of Irreligion*

Paul Heinrich Dietrich was born in Hildesheim, but his destiny lay outside Lower Saxony. The year of his death (1789) is inextricably associated with the nation that became his childhood home,[69] and a nation which provided the socio-political context in which he would forge his shadowy intellectual career. The privileged German boy who grew up to become Baron d'Holbach, a naturalised Frenchman, was a magnetic figure in eighteenth-century radical circles,[70] whose reputation has been enhanced most recently by Jonathan Israel's monumental studies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.[71] Israel has sought to elevate d'Holbach's status as one of the intellectual architects of the revolutionary impulse in France, which functions in part as a corrective to an alleged overemphasis on the influence of Rousseau.[72] Israel's thesis is controversial, and well beyond the scope of this article, but d'Holbach's importance as a patron and disseminator of radical thought, as well as a composer of radical works in his own right, is not in doubt.

D'Holbach rarely if ever published under his own name, and certainly not his controversial works on religion, many of which were collaborations with likeminded intellectuals.[73] D'Holbach was a contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, yet even here he carefully guarded his identity as a writer, such that outside of d'Holbach's circle of friends (and possibly close intellectual associates) no one would be able to identify him as the author of the *Système de la Nature*, his materialist *magnum opus* which caused such controversy on its appearance in 1770.[74] Like Reimarus, d'Holbach kept up the appearance of piety, in his case within the

[68] See Kors, 'Christ des Incrédules'; and Pesce on the 'negative interpretations of Jesus' ('Research on Jesus', pp. 84 – 86).
[69] See Michael LeBuffe, 'Paul-Henri Thiry (Baron) d'Holbach', in Edward N Zelta (ed.), *Sandford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2015, sect. 1, accessed 26 January 2018: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/holbach/.
[70] For a forensic and compelling study see Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976).
[71] See Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, chaps. 24, 30; and *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution: From* The Rights of Man *to Robespierre* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), chaps. 4, 23 – 24, 30.
[72] See Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, chaps. 4, 23 – 24, 30.
[73] Especially the zealous atheist Jacques-André Naigeon: see Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie,* pp. 27 – 29.
[74] See Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, pp. 13 – 14.

Roman Catholic tradition in which he was baptised.[75] Unlike Reimarus, however, who was a professional educator and highly accomplished classical scholar, d'Holbach was the heir to an enormous fortune and had no need to work a day in his life.[76] He was a literary gentleman of leisure, more famous among his contemporaries for his twice weekly social gatherings than he was for his own works of materialist philosophy and anti-Christian polemic: Rousseau, Voltaire, Denis Diderot (1713 – 1784), Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717 – 1783) and David Hume (1711 – 1776)—are just a few of the more celebrated figures who were dinner guests of the Baron.[77]

In d'Holbach's polemical oeuvre we find an atheistic attack on the foundations of Christianity, which is explicitly linked to his perception of the state of the Church in the eighteenth century—that its members credulously worship an immoral God, whose existence is only attested by incredible stories in texts of uncertain provenance, all of which serves the interests of corrupt priests and their despotic (or cowardly) political sponsors.[78] This is quite the reverse strategy of many scholars from the radical Reformation to the radical Enlightenment, who used primitive Christianity as the standard against which to judge the modern Church and state and hold them to account.[79] For d'Holbach, Christianity was a pernicious force from its inception, intellectually and morally. Unlike Reimarus, d'Holbach did publish his most combative historical writings on Jesus and Christian origins in his lifetime: his *Histoire critique de Jésus-Christ: ou Analyse raisonneé des Evangiles* (1770) appeared in the same year as *Système de la Nature* and four years before Lessing even began publishing the *Fragments*.

Methodologically, for a metaphysical materialist like d'Holbach, the only plausible form of inquiry open to him in a study of Jesus and Christian origins was the empirical study of material history—hypotheses ventured to explain the natural causes underlying our existent records of the birth of the movement. While neither necessary nor sufficient, materialism seems well suited to the modern style of historical explanation. Was this a driver for the historical study of Jesus in the early modern period? Perhaps it was in the case of d'Holbach, but modern

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[75] See Andrew Hunwick, editorial Introduction to d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!: An Eighteenth Century Life of Jesus,* trans. Hunwick and Houston, critical edn. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 1 – 37: 6.
[76] See Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie,* pp. 11 – 12.
[77] See Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie,* chap. 1, where the historian distinguishes between 'members' and 'participants' of the group.
[78] Works such as *Christianisme dévoilé, ou, Examen des principes et des effets de la religion Chrétienne* (Nancy, 1756) were written under pseudonyms (in this case M. Boulanger). This was a moral and philosophical critique of Christianity, but it did not betray the outright atheism of *Système de la nature, ou des loix du monde physique et du monde moral*, 2 vols., (Amsterdam, 1770).
[79] This was even true of fellow philosophical materialists and political radicals such as Priestley (see above).

materialism and a critical historical sensibility do not always align. Priestley was a materialist with respect to the constitution of human beings,[80] which was still highly controversial,[81] and although his historical work sought to overthrow some orthodox Christian ideas, it did not stop him insisting on a supernatural dimension to the life of Jesus.[82] In marked contrast, Reimarus was a vociferous critic of materialism (especially French) and defended a dualist ontology.[83] And yet Reimarus cast a much more incisive historical-critical eye—naturalistic in orientation—over the Bible than many of the more metaphysically and politically radical thinkers of the Enlightenment.[84]

*Ecce Homo!*

The *Histoire critique de Jésus-Christ* was placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum in the same year Lessing published Reimarus's seminal *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* (1778).[85] The elaborate and clandestine journey of d'Holbach's work after composition followed the usual pattern: the manuscript was posted to Liège, transported to the Amsterdam based publisher Marc-Michel Rey, before being smuggled back into France where it was in circulation by 1770.[86] There were two further French editions in the 1770s, and the text was translated in full into English by George Houston as *Ecce Homo!* (1799).[87] Like many of d'Holbach's works, the conception and execution of the first French manuscript is hard to trace, but there is an added complication in this case.

The final work was probably compiled in Paris in the 1660s, certainly some years before its official publication.[88] We have already acknowledged that d'Holbach, who was neither a noted stylist nor linguist, relied on the editorial support of friends and collaborators who shared his worldview. But according to a recent critical edition of *Ecce Homo!*, only around one quarter of the work was originally penned by d'Holbach himself, with approximately seventy-

[80] See Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (London: J. Johnson, 1777).
[81] See John W Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[82] Priestley, *Institutes* (vol. 1), pt. ii, chap. iii, sect. i, p. 218.
[83] See Reimarus, *The Principal Truths of Natural Religion Defended and Illustrated, in Nine Dissertations* [*Die Vornehmsten Wahrheiten der Natürlichen Religion: in zehn Abhandlungen auf eine begreifliche Art erkläret und gerettet*, 1754], trans. R. Wynne (London: B. Law, 1766).
[84] Although Rousseau was not a materialist, he was specifically targeted for criticism by Reimarus; see the subtitle of the English translation: *Wherein the Objections of Lucretius, Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau, La Mettrie, and Other Ancient and Modern Followers of Epicurus are Considered, and Their Doctrines Refuted*.
[85] See Hunwick, Introduction, p. 13.
[86] See Hunwick, Introduction, pp. 13 – 20.
[87] Full title *Ecce Homo! or a Critical Inquiry into the History of Jesus Christ, Being a Rational Analysis of the Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1799).
[88] See Hunwick, Introduction, pp. 13 – 20.

five percent of the text 'plagiarised' from an anonymous manuscript called *Histoire critique de Jésus, fils de Marie*, attributed (almost certainly falsely) to a French Jew called 'Salvador'.[89] Only one copy of *Jésus, fils de Marie* survives, but one scholar who has examined the text has dated it to the end of the 1750s or start of the 60s.[90] The hypothesis that d'Holbach was 'guilty of plagiarism' is not implausible given his penchant for shameless misattribution.[91] But as the *éminence grise* of the radical French underground it is also conceivable that he commissioned the original and reworked it to his satisfaction.[92] Whatever the provenance, d'Holbach based his representation of Jesus on a pre-existing text, so when I attribute the work to d'Holbach hereafter I do so in large part because it reflects his intellectual perspective throughout a long writing career. His additions and embellishments to the underlying text are testament to that: the text was substantially revised by d'Holbach along lines he found more persuasive (or congenial), with additional chapters and a fresh preface. [93] The final text became more anti-clerical, atheistic, and more critical of Jesus himself as the originator (or chief propagator) of the decadent traits and tendencies which bedevilled European thought and culture.[94] This Jesus was not a light to the world, but a moderately artful practitioner of a social role that eighteenth-century writers thought well attested in the Ancient Near East: the religious magician, who used sorcery for the means of attracting followers and giving supernatural authority to otherwise obscure pronouncements.[95]

Unlike Reimarus's contributions to the quest, which are penetrating historical essays on the aims and motivations of Jesus and the disciples, d'Holbach offers his readership a 'life of Jesus', covering his story from birth to death and purported Resurrection—the kind that has appealed to modern writers as diverse in religious temperament and historical context as Renan, David Friedrich Strauss (1808 – 1874) and Joseph Ratzinger.[96] D'Holbach's 'life of

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[89] See Hunwick, Introduction, pp. 13 – 17.
[90] See Roland Desné, Sur un manuscript utilisé par d'Holbach', in Oliver Bloch (ed.), *Le Matérialisme du Xviiie Siècle Et la Littérature Clandestine* (Paris: Buchet Castle, 1982), pp. 169 – 176: 175.
[91] Hunwick, Introduction, p. 14.
[92] It was not unusual for literary 'hired guns' to have patrons who sponsored works of underground literature. A prime example of the latter was John Toland: see Justin Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
[93] See Hunwick, Introduction, pp. 14 – 16.
[94] See Hunwick, Introduction, pp. 14 – 17.
[95] Examples would include two nominally Roman Catholic priests, Herman van Rijswijk (d. 1512) and Giulio Cesare Vanini (1585 – 1619), and the deistic writer Charles Blount (1653 – 1693): all three are discussed in my 'Road to Reimarus', pp. 36 – 39. On Giordano Bruno's (1548 – 1600) conception of Jesus as a magician, forged within the context of developments in natural philosophy and the Hermetic tradition, see Pesce, 'Research on Jesus', pp. 80 – 81. In twentieth-century scholarship, the 'magician' paradigm for understanding Jesus was famously advanced by Morton Smith in *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
[96] In English see Ernest Renan, *Life of Jesus* (London: Watts, 1935); and Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, who did not take a chronological in publishing his trilogy: *Jesus of Nazareth*, pt. 1: *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J Walker (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); pt. 2: *Holy Week—From the*

Jesus critically examined'—*very* critically examined in this case—anticipates the title of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (1835),[97] but it lacks the singular methodological commitment of the latter, and any of the romance or theological edification of the other examples of the genre.

*The Method of the Histoire critique de Jésus-Christ*

One feature that d'Holbach's treatment shares with Reimarus, and indeed most other writers on Jesus before Strauss, is that he does not explicitly discriminate between canonical Gospel traditions—moving freely, whenever it suits, between the Synoptic and the Johannine.[98] Although d'Holbach notes in the early chapters that the author of John, with its 'mystic and Platonic theology',[99] seemed particularly intent on proving Jesus' divinity,[100] this does not precipitate any source criticism which might prioritise some canonical sources over others. Although d'Holbach repeatedly refers to apocryphal sources, these usually serve to furnish brief ironic asides and footnotes, insinuating that they are not prima facie less plausible that the canonical sources.[101] But there is no attempt to argue for the greater historical authority of alternative Gospels, or to give it the kind of sustained consideration that John Toland (1670 – 1722) gave the *Gospel of Barnabas*.[102]

D'Holbach lets John's temporally expansive account of the public ministry of Jesus guide his presentation of material, while acknowledging that his manner of proceeding was to 'follow the most generally received order of events, not meaning to guarantee that they occurred precisely in that order'.[103] Following John's overall narrative framework, but incorporating as much Synoptic material as he judged possible, d'Holbach has Jesus delivering two provocative sermons at the Jerusalem Temple: one at the outset of his

*Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Vatican Secretariat of State (San Francisco, Calif: Ignatius Press, 2011); and pt. 3: *The Infancy Narratives*, trans. Philip J Witmore (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

[97] See David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 3 vols., trans. George Elliot (London: Chapman, 1846).

[98] One of Strauss's greatest legacies in *Das Leben Jesu* was to marginalise John's Gospel as a reliable historical source.

[99] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 71.

[100] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 100

[101] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 48 – 49, 79 – 80, 85, 88 – 89, 280 – 285.

[102] See the clandestine Toland, *Christianisme Judaqique et Mahometan*, and the published English version (1718), *Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile and Mohometan Christianity*; they are collected in ed. Champion, *Nazarenus* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, 1991).

[103] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p.110.

ministry,[104] and one again towards the end.[105] According to d'Holbach the labour intensive work of trying to determine correct chronology would serve only to show that

> the history of Jesus, dictated by the Holy Spirit, is much more incorrect than that of celebrated Pagans…it would also prove that the writers inspired with this important story contradict themselves at every instant, by making their hero act at the same time in different places, and often remote from each other. [106]

Despite the uncertainties of historical chronology, d'Holbach takes an atomistic approach to reported facts in the Gospel, arguing that 'Time and place change nothing in the nature of facts',[107] and where more than one source agrees on an account of an event, this is to be taken as the more authoritative.[108] These blocks of data are then assembled to form an overall impression of Jesus, the man and his mission. Where plausible naturalistic explanations can be offered for any supernatural occurrences reported in the Gospels, they should be advanced.[109] Where no such explanation seems plausible, the event can be discounted as the invention of the evangelists themselves: d'Holbach employs the principle favoured ever since by sceptics, whereby assent to extraordinary claims requires the production of extraordinary evidence to support them.[110]

When the Gospels are analysed using the methods sketched above they reveal a figure who was, 'an artisan, a melancholy enthusiast, unskilful charlatan, emerging from a Carpenter's shop, in order to deceive men of his own cast; miscarrying in all his projects, himself punished as a public incendiary, dying on a cross.'[111] It is of course true that 'after his death', Jesus became 'the legislator and God of a great many nations, and an object of adoration to beings who pretend to common sense.'[112] How then to explain the success of the Christian movement from such unpromising beginnings? On d'Holbach's interpretation, through the animal cunning of imposturous fanatics; the stupidity of the people they co-opted; and the economic and political interests served by maintaining both.

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[104] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 104 – 106.
[105] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 199.
[106] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 110.
[107] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 110.
[108] This is a recognisable version of multiple attestation: 'In historical matters we must prefer two writers who agree, to a third who disagree' (d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 130).
[109] The subject matter of d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, chap. 2.
[110] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 230 - 231.
[111] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 44.
[112] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 44 – 45.

*The Birth of Jesus*

Having established in general terms the impious, ironic, and sometimes satirical tone in his introductory materials, d'Holbach unleashes this on concrete Gospels stories, starting with the theologically sensitive matter of Jesus' conception. For d'Holbach, the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:26-38) is easily demystified, a process carried out through a rationalisation more profane than anything H. E. G. Paulus (1761 – 1851) ever entertained in his quintessential rationalist hermeneutic:[113]

> Nothing is simpler than to separate St. Luke's narrative from the atmosphere of wonderment…[I]f we substitute a young man for the angel, the gospel passages contains nothing that is unbelievable. In fact, many have thought that the angel Gabriel was none other than a Gallant who, profiting by the absence of Joseph, discovered how to declare and gratify his passion.[114]

D'Holbach details but does not seriously entertain the 'Rabbinical fables' which claim that Jesus' biological father was a Roman solider,[115] before proceeding to expound upon the philosophical problems of the Incarnation and the cross-cultural comparisons with disreputable traditions which only serve to discredit it.[116]None of this is original, of course. What is striking is the relentless nature of the polemic, consistently utilising the rhetoric of history and occasionally its methods across a reconstructed life of Jesus extracted from the Gospels, and by an author whose ideas were disseminated (relatively quickly) throughout a continent and its reading public.[117]

*Jesus the Magician and the Imposture Theory of Christian Origins*

The imposture theory of religious origins, which had been applied to non-Christian religions throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was increasingly applied to Christianity too in clandestine manuscripts in the eighteenth century.[118] It finds expression in elements of Reimarus's analysis of the psychology of the disciples and early apostles,[119] but it is not developed explicitly in relation to Jesus himself. D'Holbach anticipates the main thrust of

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[113] See Heinrich E G Paulus, *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 2 vols., (Heidelberg: C.F. Winter, 1828).
[114] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 73 – 74.
[115] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 75.
[116] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 75 - 79.
[117] See Hunwick, Introduction, pp. 17 – 23.
[118] See eds. Silvia Berti et al, *Heterodoxy, Spinozism and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des trois Imposteurs* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), pp. 333 – 335.
[119] See Birch, 'Road to Reimarus', pp. 33, 35 – 42.

Reimarus's psychological explanation for the disciples commitment to the Resurrection narratives and, as such, the continuation of the movement; for we 'have the testimony only of men whose subsistence depend on that absurd romance: and as roguery continually belies itself, these witnesses could not agree among themselves in their evidence.'[120] But for d'Holbach there was no reason to make an exception to Jesus in the application of an otherwise popular method (among sceptics) of interpreting the origins of religion, and a hermeneutic of acute and cynical suspicion runs deep into d'Holbach's analysis.

At the outset of the most famous French life of Jesus, Renan places Jesus within the grandiose context of world history.[121] Reimarus began his analysis by setting Jesus' story within the more confined context of the history of religious thought, and especially the development of the doctrine of the immorality of the soul, which he judged to be of great significance.[122] D'Holbach was more focused still: his account centres on the history of the 'Jewish people and their prophets'.[123] The topic constitutes the first chapter of the *Histoire critique*, and the opening remarks telegraph the hostility of the analysis to follow:

> If we so much as glance at the history of the Jews, such as is handed down in their sacred books, we are forced to acknowledge that this people were at all times the blindest, the most stupid, the most credulous, the most superstitious, and the silliest that ever appeared on earth.[124]

According to d'Holbach, Moses had liberated his people from Egypt only to exploit their wretchedness for the rest of his days, leaving in place a legal legacy which would serve to keep them under the yoke of priests and despotic kings for ever more.[125] In connection with this, d'Holbach argues for the likely historicity of Luke's tale of Jesus' childhood stay in Egypt—though not the massacre of the innocents—[126]applying something approaching an argument from embarrassment to justify its authenticity and explain its deliberate omission by the other evangelists:[127] Egypt was assumed to be the epicentre of magic, and it was here that Jesus (like Moses) learned the craft that would enable him to fabricate the marvels necessary to recruit followers to his doomed messianic cause. Set piece events such as the feeding of the multitude and the raising of Lazarus could be organised, using willing

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[120] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 239 - 240.
[121] See Renan, *Life of Jesus*, p. 1.
[122] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', p. 61.
[123] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 56.
[124] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 56.
[125] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 56 – 58.
[126] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 81 – 88.
[127] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 89.

assistants, prepared to stage grand acts of deception for the persuasion of the ignorant.[128] Jesus' technical limitations were exposed, however, whenever he was challenged by more educated authority figures within confined spaces, such as Herod's Palace.[129]

The 'flight to Egypt' (whatever the reason for going there) is circumstantially connected to another proposal by d'Holbach for understanding the substance of some of Jesus' teachings, which for him bear an uncanny resemblance to the asceticism of the Therapeutae sect:

> The Therapeutes abaondoned father and mother, wife children and property… They abstained from oaths. They lived in common. They suffered with resolution in the misfortunes of life, and died with joy. From all this it may be concluded either that Jesus had been a Therapeutae before his preaching, or at least he had borrowed their doctrines.[130]

The Therapeutaes have been compared in their outlook to the Essenes,[131] and the latter compared with John the Baptist,[132]though these connections are not exploited by d'Holbach. Like Reimarus, d'Holbach does take seriously the tradition of a familial relationship between Jesus and John.[133] The failure of the 'cousins' to recognise each other in any of the four Gospels raises suspicions in d'Holbach of their collusion to elevate Jesus' public standing,[134] though this is not as well developed as it is in Reimarus.[135]

Although d'Holbach sometimes presents Jesus as a cynical manipulator, he tends towards the possibility that Jesus had been raised on stories of his Davidic ancestry (d'Holbach makes no attempt to refute this tradition),[136] which had produced in him a delusional sense of religio-political destiny.[137] Genuine messianic self-consciousness and manipulative strategies are not mutually exclusive; indeed, d'Holbach claims that, 'Nothing in the world is more common than a combination of enthusiasm and deceit'.[138] He even represents Jesus as trying to advance his own case at the expense of the prophets of old, most

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[128] On the feeding of the multitude see d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 80 – 83; on the raising of Lazarus, pp. 204 - 207.
[129] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 178 - 180.
[130] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 244 - 255
[131] See Joan Taylor, *Jewish Woman Philosophers of First Century Alexandria: Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 52 – 73.
[132] See James H Charlesworth, 'John the Baptizer and the Dead Sea Scrolls', in ed. Charlesworth, *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, vol. 3 of 3 (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 1 – 36.
[133] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 97.
[134] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 97 – 100.
[135] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', pp. 138 – 141.
[136] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 243.
[137] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 244.
[138] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 245 - 246.

notably Moses: arguing that the words of Jesus in John 5:37 were intended to undermine the authority of God's supposed address to Moses (Exodus 3:7-22).[139] At times d'Holbach seems less concerned with constructing a coherent vision of the historical Jesus and his motivations: he may have been a mad man, one among many deranged religious fanatics who have exerted a baleful influence on human history; he may have been malevolent (consciously exploiting the gullible for minor celebrity); or he may have been both, with his derangement providing the 'higher cause' to justify his manipulative actions. D'Holbach's overall rhetorical strategy is to lay out a range of interpretations that he considers at least as plausible (usually more so) than any that might be offered by Christian exegetes. The overall effect is a text which remorselessly destabilises the Christian picture of Jesus as the incarnate word and fulfilment of God's promise to Israel. More unusually in that context, it is also an attack on Jesus as a figure worthy of respect by the rationally minded, and it is really only such people that d'Holbach can have hoped to reach, since he claims again and again that the person guided by faith is impervious to rational critique.[140]

Like some other intellectuals associated with revolutionary thought, d'Holbach at times showed contempt for the very people who typically suffer most under inequitable political and religious regimes: the poor and the un-educated.[141] This contempt manifests itself when considering ancient civilisations no less than his own, and it is everywhere apparent in his derisory remarks about Jews at the time of Jesus. Like some later historians, including Reimarus,[142] he initially claims that the Jewish people were the only intended targets of Jesus' mission: 'in its cradle', he writes, this religion was 'destined solely for the vilest population of a nation, the most abject, the most credulous, the most stupid on earth.'[143] On a generous interpretation, d'Holbach was simply deploying a consistent imposture theory of religious origins, of a kind he 'took over' from the known author of *Jésus, fils de Marie*, a thesis which inevitably presupposes a cynical or deluded principal actor (or actors) and a credulous audience. But d'Holbach actually introduced passages to the text of *Jésus, fils de Marie* singling out the Jews as *especially* lacking in moral and intellectual qualities.[144] If one wants to search for anti-Jewish, and proto anti-Semitic sentiments at the origins of modern

[139] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 137 - 138.
[140] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 41 – 42, 110, 131 – 132, 157, 208, 238 – 239.
[141] See *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 45 - 58.
[142] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', p. 71.
[143] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 44.
[144] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 56.

biblical criticism, the circle of blame is large indeed and by no means restricted to those schooled in Lutheran and orthodox Protestant traditions of exegesis.[145]

*Jesus, Prince of Priestcraft: Decline and Fall*

One of the persistent criticisms of the Church that runs throughout d'Holbach's *oeuvre* centres on the parasitic priest, whose livelihood is dependent on the financial support of the ignorant, or on the more powerful and knowing who use the clergy to maintain social and moral order.[146] This had in fact been a staple of radical religious thought since the Reformation, and the sentiment intensified in the seventeenth century.[147] Politically, d'Holbach appears at times to be motivated by meritocratic value: judging that the Church was undeserving of the social privileges it enjoys, not least because its institutional authority rests on a man whose teachings were at times impenetrable and at others inhumane in their denial of natural pleasures, natural desires, and natural justice.[148] The fact that d'Holbach was the unmerited beneficiary of inherited wealth and titles—which facilitated his education, his extravagant social life, and gave him the opportunity to act as a propagandist for his own irreligious fixations—does not seem to be an irony that he reflected upon in print (if at all). Unlike many before and since, who have appealed to Jesus *against* priestly and political corruption, d'Holbach locates that vice in Jesus himself—his apparent abandonment of his father's craft, his promotion of begging, his enthusiasm for charity—all for the purpose of storing up treasure in heaven.[149] The latter was of course an illusionary promise for d'Holbach.

The denouement of Jesus' story in d'Holbach's account centres, naturally, on his final journey to Jerusalem (following John's account, the third such visit). According to d'Holbach, Jesus' entry to the city on the back of an ass, in a pose of humility, was well designed to win the approval of the ignorant among the urban population, but this was laughable to everyone else. Not for the first time, d'Holbach goes beyond the sources to

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[145] On the theological problems with this tradition see Krister Stendahl, 'Judaism and Christianity: A Plea for a New Relationship', *Cross Currents*, vol. 17, 1967, pp. 445 – 458; and on its darkest hour in European history, see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christianity, Nazis and the Bible*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

[146] Especially d'Holbach's *Christianity Unveiled: Being an Examination of the Principles and Effects of the Christian Religion* [*Le christianisme dévoilé, ou Examen des principes et des effets de la religion chrétienne*, 1755], trans. W. M. Johnson (New York, 1835).

[147] See Berti et al (eds.), *Heterodoxy, Spinozism and Free Thought*; and Champion, *The Pillars of Priest Craft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies, 1660 – 1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992).

[148] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, throughout chap. x, especially pp. 147 - 148.

[149] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 94, 144 – 146.

conjure a scene he thought more plausible:[150] Jesus cleverly uses the threat of insurrection against his accusers in Jerusalem, although it seems he did this without any expectation that support would be forthcoming.[151] This contrasts sharply with Reimarus, for whom the 'extraordinary public procession' was undertaken in the hope that 'all the people of Israel who were there gathered together should unanimously proclaim him king.'[152] As usual, on d'Holbach's account, the success (or failure) of Jesus' claims to religious authority can be measured by the sophistication of the audience he was confronted with. D'Holbach finds the Jewish High Priest an honourable servant of the office to which he was committed, who rightly convicts Jesus of blasphemy as a procedurally correct application of Jewish law.[153] The onus was on Jesus to explain his actions, and this he singularly failed to do this. D'Holbach treats Pilate's role in Jesus' downfall with some bafflement: he acknowledges with approval Pilate's instinctive knowledge that the charges of insurrection were 'ridiculous',[154] and finds it difficult to conceive why he would agree to Jewish demands in this case.[155]

*The Legacy of d'Holbach: Moral Critiques of Jesus and Christianity*

In terms of distinctive features of d'Holbach's eighteenth-century reconstruction, the unusual extent of Egyptian influence he proposes in the life of Jesus is certainly worthy of note: the alleged use of magic, and his devotion to the principles of the Therapeutae. D'Holbach also utilises certain methods which would become standard tools of the trade for many historical Jesus scholars: methodological naturalism, multiple attestation, and the criterion of embarrassment.[156] But it is in the sphere of ethics that d'Holbach's analysis is perhaps most distinctive. The moral teachings of Jesus have been granted an elevated status by writers of very different religious (and non-religious) orientations since the Enlightenment: this follows in a tradition which includes such figures as Rousseau and Kant,[157] and the aforementioned Priestley and Jefferson. D'Holbach represents a different Enlightenment tradition. For him atheism was not simply an intellectual conclusion he had been brought to by the erosion of

[150] See d'Holbach, Ecce *Homo!*, p. 209.
[151] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 209.
[152] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and his Teaching', p, 146.
[153] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 217 – 218.
[154] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 219.
[155] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 222.
[156] Although the usefulness of some of the most utilised criteria have been called into question in recent scholarship: see eds. Chris Keith and Le Donne, *Jesus, Criteria and the Demise of Authenticity*, New York: T&T Clark, 2012.
[157] See Vincent A McCarthy, *Quest for a Philosophical Jesus: Christianity and Philosophy in Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Schelling* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), especially chaps. 1 – 2.

evidence supporting the truth of Christianity (or any other religion). D'Holbach's atheism was elevated to the level of a moral necessity, and, as such, has much in common with more recent popular expressions.[158] On this view, atheism banishes the supernatural court of appeal enjoyed by those who history has placed, arbitrarily, in positions of power, and frustrated the natural pursuit of happiness among humanity at large.[159] D'Holbach's *Histoire critique* belongs to a minority literary tradition of self-styled enlightened anti-Christs, producing a cluster of moral arguments against the values of Jesus and the movement he inspired. The theme of 'slave morality', so prominent in Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844 – 1900) subversive genealogical analysis of Christian ethics,[160] is more than hinted at in d'Holbach's treatise where 'meekness', 'toleration' and 'patience ' are said to have been promoted by Jesus as the best way of ensuring the 'thriving' of people who were 'devoid of education' and in possession of 'repulsive manners'.[161] And whereas Reimarus associated Jesus' crucifixion with sedition, d'Holbach associated it with a punishment befitting slaves.[162] This moral argument is developed fully by d'Holbach when he considers the appeal of Christianity to slaves throughout the Greco-Roman, since those 'miserable persons must have felt strongly attached to a system which taught that all people are equal in the eyes of Divinity, and that the wretched have first right to the favours of a suffering and contemned God than those who are temporally happy.'[163]

The contemporary French philosopher Michel Onfray cites d'Holbach in his *Traité d'athéologie* (2005), including him in his Unholy Trinity of writers who have opposed Moses, Jesus and Mohammed on moral grounds.[164] One of the most celebrated English essayists of

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[158] One thinks of Christopher Hitchens's lecture on 'The Moral Necessity of Atheism', delivered at Sewanee University, 23 February 2004; and the international best seller *God is Not Great: Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007).

[159] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo*, chap. xviii on 'Christianity Since Constantine'.

[160] The moral standing of Christianity has been compromised in the eyes of many modern observers by virtue of the atrocities committed in its name, but there has been a tendency among intellectuals to characterise episodes of Christian barbarism as a betrayal of the religion's highest values, and certainly a betrayal of the teachings of Jesus. Friedrich Nietzsche represents perhaps the most powerful reaction against this tendency by a modern writer in such works as *Götzen-Dämmerung* (1889), *Der Antichrist* (1895) and *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887); ignoring the misdeeds of the faithful, he attacked the moral substance of the whole Christian value system, including the values espoused by Jesus: see *Twilight of the idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale , intro. Michael Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990); and *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[161] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 148.

[162] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 233

[163] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 257 – 258.

[164] See Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008). Here the d'Holbachian and Nietzschean complaint about the 'weakling's revenge' in Christianity's devious power play is developed in relation to Paul (pp. 134 – 136). Onfray cites d'Holbach specifically in his trio of revered opponents of 'Moses, Jesus, Mohamed, and their religions of the book' (p. 39); the other two are Nietzsche and Ludwig Feuerbach.

his generation, the late Christopher Hitchens (1949 – 2011), railed against the Gospels supposed hostility to 'thrift, innovation and family life'.[165] This coheres perfectly with d'Holbach's complaint that the teachings of Jesus 'possess nothing' of merit, and that thinking 'nothing of tomorrow' is prejudicial to families and the sensible ordering of one's affairs as citizens with social responsibilities.[166] These criticisms could of course stand regardless of historical questions: Jesus as a literary and theological construct could be subjected to this kind of negative scrutiny.[167] But d'Holbach did frame his judgements as historical ones as well as moral, and, as such, he stands as one of the few who have sought to argue that the Jesus of history was as disreputable as any of the ideas in any of the documents that preserve him for posterity: '[T]he gospel is merely an eastern romance, repellent to any person of common sense, and apparently addressed only to the ignorant, the stupid and the dregs of society, the only persons whom it can attract.'[168]

D'Holbach's judgements of Jesus and Christianity are hyperbolically tendentious, but for the consistency and belligerency of the assault, the attempt to give a comprehensively natural account of the early development of Christianity, and as a testimony to the image that he (and others) held of the Church in the eighteenth century, it is worthy of greater recognition. When it comes to the substance of some of the critical claims that he (along with Priestley and Reimarus) made concerning Jesus, however, these were already being raised in the previous century, and it is to this earlier chapter in the history of the quest that we now turn.

**From Regicide to the Jesus of History: A World Turned Upside Down[169]**

Like the French Revolution over a century later, the execution of Charles I on the 30th January 1649 was seen by many, at home and abroad, as an abomination. Within the context of the dominant political theology of day, the authority of an earthly ruler was contingent on the sovereign will of God alone and the duty of subjects was to obey their divinely appointed rulers

[165] Hitchens, *Religion Poisons Everything,* p. 118.
[166] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 152 – 156.
[167] This is indicative of the approach taken by Hector Avalos in *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics,* Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015.
[168] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 45.
[169] This phrase is the Apostle Paul's from Acts 17:6, and it featured in the writings of many of the religious radicals in the seventeenth century, from Henry Denne in 1645 to Gerard Winstanley in 1649: see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), pp. 13, 107.

(Romans 13:1-3).[170] But for those supportive of the regicide, there was sufficient biblical precedent and moral sentiment for retributive action against unjust and ungodly rulers (Psalm 149:4-9): from the point of view of his (mostly) Puritan accusers, Charles I fell below the standards of both justice and godliness.[171] The eventual victory of the Parliamentarians—after a series of military conflicts between supporters of Charles I and opponents in England, Ireland and Scotland—shook the hierarchical theological metaphysics which, from an intellectual point of view, helped to structure power: power which proceeded from Christ the Eternal King, down to the temporal monarch and the Church, and down once more to the people who were loyal to both Church and monarch.[172] Those who were outside this framework were presumed to be outside the visible Kingdom of God and outside the invisible economy of salvation. But when the guardian of the visible Kingdom has been disgraced and deposed, to whom do God's subjects defer in the temporal realm?

Although Oliver Cromwell's rule as Lord Protector (1653 – 1658) was seen by some as the transfer of divine right from a monarchical to a republican ruler, the question of the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Protestant people of Britain was blown wide open. Into the uncertainty generated by religious, political and social disruption, radical and creative ideas were forged for the reimagining of what it meant to be the people of God.[173] The relationship between the dynamism of living faith and the security of the history that underpinned that faith were part of this experimental intellectual and religious context. Those experiments were aided by the collapse of censorship laws,[174] the disestablishment of the Church of England, and an increased toleration for religious freedom under Cromwell.[175] The latter needs qualification: the only acceptable face of religious liberty was to be found *within* Protestant Christianity, but the Protestant faith had been a moveable feast from the very beginning, such that a shared commitment to the *solas* and a repudiation of 'popery' were no longer sufficient indicators of religious purity. It is in this context, outside canonical figures in

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[170] For a study of the persistence of religious ideas underpinning political authority in seventeenth-century England, no less than absolutist France, see Ronald D Asch, *Sacral Kingship between Disenchantment and Re-enchantment*: *The French and English Monarchies c.1585 - 1688* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

[171] The offences of Charles I are well documented, from prosecuting unpopular wars to trying to impose Anglican forms of worship on Presbyterian Scotland; for a recent study see Richard Cust, *Charles I: A Political Life* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2005).

[172] To encounter this hierarchical political theology defended and repudiated in primary sources, see ed. David Wootton, *Divine Right and Democracy: an Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England* (Harnmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

[173] See Andrew Bradstock, *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England: A Concise History from the English Civil War to the End of the Commonwealth* (London: I B Tauris), 2011.

[174] See Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 34.

[175] See Bradstock, *Radical Religion.*

New Testament criticism, that we find some of the most visceral examples of writers invoking Jesus 'as he actually was' and with serious social and political intent: among them were such radical sects as the Levellers and Diggers (or true Levellers), who were part of the revolutionary religious and political landscape of the civil war and interregnum period in of the 1640s and 1650s. Gerrard Winstanley (1609 – 1676) was associated with the latter as a public writer and activist, and ended his days in another radical sect to emerge in the seventeenth century, the Quakers (discussed below).[176] There is a treasure-trove of radical literature in seventeenth-century Britain which requires more attention when we consider the emergence of, at the very least, rhetorical appeals to the 'historical Jesus' and the various moral, social and political causes he was associated with in the early-modern period.

*From Historical Performance to Analysis*

As we saw earlier in our discussion, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was treated to subtly differently analyses by Reimarus and d'Holbach in the eighteenth century. For Reimarus, Jesus was working towards the establishment of a new political order for the people of Israel in a much more calculated way, with Jesus himself to serve as its messianic king, and for whom violent action may play a part. For d'Holbach, Jesus only 'insinuated' insurrection when challenged by Pharisees, while his real aim was shoring up his base among simple fanatics through apocalyptic exhortation. For most biblical commentators in the British Isles of the seventeenth-century, the question was not what Jesus' personal motivation may have been, still less whether this was the first or one of many times he had sought controversy in Jerusalem. A more pertinent question was: How should the reality of Jesus' Kingship be witnessed? In the Autumn of 1656 this Kingship was witnessed not in a historical treatise but in a physical re-enactment in South-West England which alluded to a presumed historical event in the life of Jesus and symbolised the continuation of his presence amongst the faithful.

In October 1656 the Quaker preacher and writer James Nayler (1616 – 1660), from Wakefield in West Yorkshire, rode into Bristol with a group of mainly female followers waving palm leaves in exaltation.[177] The precise reasons for staging this enactment of Jesus' entry to

[176] See Richard T Vann, 'From Radicalism to Quakerism: Gerald Winstanley', *Journal of the Friend's Historical Society* (vol. 49, 1959 – 1961), pp. 41 – 46; Hill, *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1978; J. D. Alsop, 'Gerrard Winstanley: Religion and Respectability', *The Historical Journal* (vol. 28.3), 1985, pp. 705 – 709.

[177] A contemporary account based on official documents is attributed to Robert Rich and Willian Tomlinson in *A True Narrative of the Examination, Trial and Sufferings of James Nayler* [1657], in ed. Licia Kuennin, *The Works of James Nayler (1618 – 1660),* vol. 3 of 4 (Pennsylvania: Heritage Quaker Press, 2003), pp. 692 – 746.

Jerusalem—a provocation which alienated other Quakers as well as their zealous enemies—have never been settled by historians.[178] But in general theological terms the performance witnessed the conviction that the 'Light of Christ', the Christ who rode into Jerusalem in the first century, was within the faithful in their own time and place, and that sin could be overcome through a perfect union with God's eternal Son.[179] The erasure of sin and perfectibility found no place within the dominant versions of the Reformed faith in England of the 1650s, and Nayler's actions confirmed the pre-existing impression among many that the Quakers were burning with religious pride, negligent of grace, and a danger to a fragile social order scarred by civil war and sectarian persecution. Nayler was (most unusually) tried directly by Parliament, where he was convicted of 'horrid blasphemy', for which he was beaten, branded, mutilated, and imprisoned until 1659.[180]

The Nayler controversy dogged the Friends for decades, and for those who thought Nayler actually believed himself to be the second coming of Christ, it is hardly surprising that even his co-religionists considered him beyond the pale and felt obliged to distance themselves from this turbulent advocate for the children of the light.[181] But in some respects Nayler was extravagantly orthodox from the standpoint of Reformed theology rooted in biblical narrative. Nayler lived on the eve of what Hans Frie (1922 – 1988) called 'the eclipse of biblical narrative',[182] situating himself squarely within the narrative framework of the Bible, just as many of his contemporaries were happy to situate powerful opponents in that narrative when it provided biblical precedent for righteous fury against them.[183] It is true that in his most considered theological writings, such as *Love to the Lost*, Nayler did not directly confront the charge that the Quakers 'devalued the human Christ'.[184] As Rosemary Moore points out, 'Love to the Lost has three pages on Christ, and they entirely concern the eternal pre-existent Christ,

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[178] Two of the best recent accounts of Nayler's tumultuous life are David Neelon's *James Nayler: Revolutionary Prophet* (Becket, MA: Leadings Press, 2009); and Leo Damrosch's *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus: James Nayler and the Puritan Crackdown of the Free Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[179] See Damrosch, *Quaker Jesus,* chaps. 2 – 3, where theological and social-psychological theories are discussed.

[180] On his punishment see Rich and Tomlinson, *True Narrative*, pp. 714 – 715; and Damrosch, *Quaker Jesus*, pp. 265 – 266. Nayler died the following year having been attacked by robbers on route to his native Yorkshire: see William Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress, of the Christian People called Quakers*, 2nd edn. (London, 1722), p. 155.

[181] See Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain 1646–1666* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press. 2000).

[182] See Hans W Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[183] On the biblical origins of some of the pejoratives directed at Charles I, see Patricia Crawford, 'Charles Stuart, That Man of Blood', *Journal of British Studies* (vol. 16.2, 1977), pp. 41 – 61.

[184] Moore, *Light*, p. 105.

"He by whom all things were made, who is the life of all creatures, the beginning of all creatures who was before all creatures."'[185] But the whole body of evidence we have of Nayler's life suggests that he was acutely self-conscious of a personal relationship to the historical Jesus, and in such a way that no one with even rudimentary knowledge of the Gospels could mistake: most obviously in his dramatic entry into Bristol, but also his earlier written account of his 'conversion' while ploughing the fields, which has unmistakable echoes of Jesus' call of the disciples while they were working at sea.[186] It is nevertheless true that the ambiguous Quaker theology of the 'light within' (identified in some sense with Christ)[187] was capable of being interpreted as pointing to a model of salvation which has the capacity to operate without any knowledge of the historic narrative, as if 'Christ according to the flesh' had never been. Even the Quakers' most influential early activist, George Fox (1624 – 1691), could give that impression in his writings that 'the drama of salvation…was internalised…to the point that the historical Jesus was almost an irrelevance.'[188] And it is this scandal of the perceived flight from 'Christ according to the flesh' that brought the question of history into view as something which had to be defended not simply presupposed.

## Loading the Cannon of Criticism: Henry More Against Enthusiasm and Materialism

Although he is now surpassed in reputation by Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Henry More (1614 – 1687) was among the outstanding British philosophers of the seventeenth century. He was recognised internationally as a constructive metaphysician in his own right, and a formidable critic of some of the most divisive philosophical and theological trends of the age.[189] More is best remembered today as one of the leading 'Cambridge Platonists':[190] a loosely connected group of scholars and philosophers who were steeped in Christian Platonism and associated, in one way or another, with the University of Cambridge. More himself was a

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[185] Moore, *Light*, p. 105.
[186] See Nayler, in George Fox and Nayler et al, *Saul's Errand to Damascus with his Packet of Letters from the High Priests Against the Disciples of the Lord*, in *Works of James Nayler*, vol. 1, pp. 1 – 40: 30.
[187] Moore, *Light*, pp. 80 – 82, 105, 109.
[188] Moore, *Light*, p. 107.
[189] For a wide appreciation of More's work see Sarah Hutton (ed.), *Henry More (1614–1687): Tercentenary Studies* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990).
[190] Like so many historiographical categories this term was coined in the nineteenth century. It obviously obscures the differences between these figures, one of whom (Ann Conway) could not attended university because she was a woman. Nevertheless, the Platonist orientation of all these figures is not in doubt. Benjamin Whitecoat (1609 – 1683) is usually taken to be the catalyst for this tradition, such was his influence as a teacher and preacher at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. See G. A. J. Rogers, J. M. Vienne, and Y. C. Zarka (eds.), *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context: Politics, Metaphysics and Religion* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997).

student and then fellow of Christ Church College, and in keeping with other Cambridge Platonists he rebelled against the Calvinist theological tradition that was so influential in British churches and universities in the seventeenth century.[191] Like Calvin he sought a rational, systematic Christian theology, but as a Platonist he was committed to the sovereignty of divine goodness: God's power, liberty, and immutability were understood within that context. From this Christian Platonist standpoint More emerged as a trenchant critic of what he regarded as two of the greatest threats to Christianity in his own time: the materialism of Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679), and the enthusiasm of Christian writers and activists such as the aforementioned Quakers.

Although More is noted for his clever adaption of the Episcopal Motto of James I: from 'No Bishop, No King'; to' No Spirit, No God' (in response to Hobbes's materialism),[192] he thought the principal threats to Christendom lay elsewhere. Like most Protestant divines in seventeenth-century Britain, More was haunted by the prospect of the return of 'popery' and the absolutist power politics that had developed in France. Despite this, however, More dared to 'pronounce with a loud voice aforehand, That if ever Christianity be exterminated, it will be by Enthusiasme.'[193] More feared that many of the charismatics of his day were so disreputable that their fervent claims to be channelling the spirit of Jesus may reflect gravely on perceptions of Jesus himself. This direct association, or subtle insinuation, of parallels between the historical Jesus and religious fanatics and charismatics would be resisted by many throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[194]And in Schweitzer's famous analysis, it is the embarrassment caused by an apocalyptic Jesus that explains the widespread resistance to the eschatological paradigm which, for Schweitzer, best explains the outlook of Jesus and the trajectory of his public career.[195] Although More shows little interest in the temporal status of Jesus' apocalyptic discourses, he shows no desire to modernise Jesus either. More openly embraced some of the popular and (sometimes) pernicious religious ideas and superstitions of his time: ghosts, demonic spirits, and witches were all part of his mental universe.[196] What he does do, however, is launch a multifaceted assault on the history

[191] For an account of the diffusion and radicalisation of that rebellion, see Michael B Gill, 'From Cambridge Platonism to Scottish Sentimentalism', *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* (vol. 8.1, 2010), pp. 13 – 31.
[192] Henry More, *An Antidote Against Atheism, Or an Appeal to the Natural Faculties of the Mind of Man, whether there be not a God* (London, 1653), bk. 3, sect. 17.
[193] More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness; Or a True and Faithful Representation of the Everlasting Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ…* (London: W. Morden, 1660), preface 'To the Reader', sect. 6.
[194] The tradition is famously chronicled, rather tendentiously, in Schweitzer, *Quest*, chap. 14.
[195] See Schweitzer, *Quest*, chaps. 14 – 15.
[196] See A. P. Coudert, 'Henry More and Witchcraft', in *Henry More (1614–1687)*, pp. 115 – 136.

of enthusiasm which could serve as a template for future polemics *against* Christianity more generally and revealed religion per se.

Over a century before David Hume penned his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), More published his *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* in 1656: the same year as Nayler's 'blasphemous' imitation of Jesus in Bristol, who he explicitly targets as one of the more extreme expressions of popular charismatic movements.[197] More's methods in *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* are the very ones that would be directed against all forms of Christianity in the eighteenth century by writers like d'Holbach: deflationary historical analysis which proposes natural causes to account for the immergence of a religious movement, including psychological conjectures concerning political and economic motives. And in his later work, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1660) More raises, in order to defuse, a range of historical issues and criticisms concerning the Gospels' presentation of Jesus, issues and criticisms which would either constitute genuine areas of future historical inquiry, or at least have been used in historical polemics by enemies of the Church ever since. It is to these issues we now turn.

*Jesus on Trial: His Existence and Essence*

Unlike his more philosophical works directed against atheism and materialism, *Grand Mystery* is a full-blooded defence of Christianity within the boundaries of theological orthodoxy for England circa 1660.[198] The first six books in the *Grand Mystery* deal with philosophical challenges to the logical coherence of the Christian faith as a theological system,[199] along with some moral and philosophical critique of rival systems, ancient and modern.[200] Some of the parallels which d'Holbach would draw between Jesus and the stories of other divine beings from ancient mythical traditions are already present in More, including story of the Virgin birth.[201] But instead of seeing this as a problem, More turns this on its ahead and argues that this pre-existing belief in Greco-Roman society paved the way for its favourable reception: these popular religions of antiquity, with their demi-gods, were no less providential than the union between Christian thought and Platonic philosophy (a union despised by d'Holbach).[202] In the remainder of the work More defends the truth of the Christian system, a truth realised in

[197] See *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus, Or, A Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Kinds, and Cure, of Enthusiasm* (London: W. Morden 1656).
[198] See J. G. A. Pocock, 'Within the Margins: The Definitions of Orthodoxy', in ed. Roger D Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660 – 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[199] See More, *Grand Mystery*, especially bks. i – ii.
[200] See More, *Grand Mystery*, especially bks. 3 - 5.
[201] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. iv, chap. i, sect. 2
[202] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bks. 3 - 4.

the historical revelation of Christ and the creation of the Church that bears his name. And it is mainly in the last four books than More makes incursions into territory that would be contested by historical sceptics and apologists throughout the eighteenth century and beyond.

The religious context for the life of Jesus was, according to More, that of messianic Judaism: like so many seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers interested in the origins of Christianity, More takes his lead from the now under studied, though frequently referenced, scholarship of Hugo Grotius (1583 – 1645).[203] The ancient authorities he seeks confirmation from include Flavius Josephus (37 – 100 CE),[204] Tacitus (54 – 120 CE),[205] and Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (69 – 130 CE).[206] Whereas the messianic expectations associated with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God were understood by Reimarus as a political notion reminiscent on the united Kingdom of Israel under David, More defends a concept of messiahship based on the very suffering servant and sacrificial model that Reimarus would claim to be an invention of the early Church. The key biblical text for him is Isaiah 53, but More also refers to 'a special Tradition set down in an ancient Book amongst the *Jews*, which is called the *Pesikta*, which further confirms our assertion of their interpreting of it concerning the *Sufferings* of the *Messiah*.'[207] More is referring either to the medieval *Pesikta Rabbati* or,[208] more likely, the earlier *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, [209]where the theme of the suffering servant is dealt with most extensively.[210] But establishing the messianic context of first-century Palestine (to More's own satisfaction) is one thing; it remains a separate question whether a historical figure ever existed who fulfilled those messianic expectations, and it is to this historical-theological task that More turns next.

The question of Jesus' historicity has returned in recent years and, as ever, on the very

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[203] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. vi, sect. 1.
[204] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. vi, sect. 3.
[205] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. vi, sect. 4.
[206] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. vi, sect. 5.
[207] The non-standardised spelling in seventeenth-century English does not make the business of tracing sources easy, but More's references to 'Hulsius' and 'Hornbeck' as his sources for the *Pesikta* almost certainly refer to Antonius Hulsius's *Pars Prima De Messia* (Breda, 1653), and Johannes Hoornbeek's *Pro Convincendis, et Convertendis Judaeis* (Petri Leffen, 1655): see *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. vii, sect. 6.
[208] *Pesikta Rabbati* is a medieval midrash on Jewish festivals: see trans. William G Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati: Homiletic Discourses for Festal Day and Special Sabbaths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
[209] *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* is an earlier homiletic work, which includes material dating back to late antiquity, probably fifth century: see ed. B. Mandelbaum, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (New York: Jewish Theological Ceremony, 1962).
[210] The two texts are compared for the different emphasis they place on the 'suffering servant' as a messianic motif in Michael Fishbane, 'Midrash and Messianism: Some Theologies of Suffering and Salvation', in ed. Peter Schäfer and Mark R. Cohen, *Towards the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 57 – 72.

fringes of intellectual respectability.[211] In the early twentieth century these doubts tended to be identified with a hyper-sceptical rationalism in the wake of the Enlightenment,[212] but a preoccupation with shoring up Jesus' historicity was already apparent in the seventeenth century. Under pressure on one flank from those espousing the eternal Son of God who it is not necessary to know according to the flesh, and on the other historical Pyrrhonists casting doubt on all text-based knowledge of the past,[213] historicity had to be addressed head on and not simply assumed. But it is largely to the latter tendency that More addresses his comments on this most basic historical commitment of the Christian faith. He begins with a concession to critics of the Church:

> For indeed it is too true, and every good man could wish it were not so, that the latter Ages of the Church have not dealt faithfully with the World, but beyond the bounds of all modesty and conscience obtruded on the people fond Legends and forged Miracles, as if they were given up into their hands only to be opposed upon and abused. Which consideration does cast some men into an unchangeable misbelief of the whole business of Christianity, and makes them look upon it all as mere Fiction and Fable.[214]

So how can we be sure that Jesus was anything other than a fictitious invention by those deceptive 'priests' who wrote with the sole aim of persuading potential converts that such a man had lived, died and rose in accordance with Jewish prophecies? For this we need independent witnesses.

More takes no historical comfort from the brief but laudatory references to Jesus by Josephus.[215] The witness of the Jewish historian would be of high value indeed,

> if we could be assured that what he seemed to write of Christ was not foisted in, by some thankless fraud of unconscionable *Superstitionists*, or short sighted *Politicians,* who could not see that the solidity of the Christian Religion needed not their lies and forgeries to sustain it…I shall be content to acknowledge that what is found in his *Antiquities* concerning the crucified Jesus is suppositions, and none of his own.[216]

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[211] If it was not part of wider atheistic currents in contemporary culture it is unlikely it would have received the attention it has. The most scholarly recent example is Richard Carrier's *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2017). For a considered appraisal and refutation of a number of Carrier's arguments, see Daniel N. Gullota, 'On Richard Carrier's Doubts: A Response to Richard Carrier's On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (vol. 15:2–3, 2017), pp. 310 – 346.

[212] Of the completely new material in the later editions of Schweitzer's classic, the chapters on the historicity of Jesus take up most space (*Quest*, chaps. 22 – 23).

[213] More does not name his target in this case (as he does with 'enthusiasts'), taking aim instead at a hyper-sceptical climate of opinion he discerned in his time.

[214] More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. ix. sect. 1.

[215] See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.3.3 and 20.9.1.

[216] More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. ix. sect. 9.

D'Holbach would echo that same judgement over a century later, though he was actually less comprehensively sceptical than More.[217] But it is not to Josephus that we should look, then where? To the testimony of the pagans—the scoffers, mockers, and persecutors of the faith:

> For if thou would be so prodigiously melancholick and suspicious as to doubt whether there ever was such a man as Christ, the very History of the Heathens may assure thee therefor; they mentioning these things so timely, as that there could be no errour about the existence of the Person they speak of whether he ever was in the World or no. For *Plinie, Tacitus, Lucian and Suetonius,* all of them flourished so near the time of the taking of the city of *Jerusalem*…that they could not but have certain information whether he was a fictitious person or real, from the captive Jews, who would not have failed to strike a religion they hated so, if had been but a Figment at the bottome.[218]

Having sought independent verification of the bare existence of the figure at the historical 'bottome' of Christianity, the focus shifts to the different dimensions of Jesus, the man and his work. As in many works of apologetics before and since, much weight is placed on the fulfilment of prophecies and the performance of miracles.[219] What makes More's analysis of greater interest is his willingness to entertain alternative assessments of Jesus and his motivations: assessments which do not so much question the integrity of the sources as the interpretation of the figure at the centre of the history they purport to document.

In his *Grand Mystery* More considers no less than twelve criticisms that could be made of Jesus, all of which he thinks can be extracted from the perceptions of the Pharisees as recounted in the Gospels,[220] and which would prove damaging to the Church if they were true. He acknowledges that this 'may seem needless, if not ridiculous, amongst Christians who cannot entertain any evil thoughts of that Person who they deservedly worship', but given the discord that exists in Christian commonwealths on all manner of issues, More holds 'it not improper to recite to you a Charge or Bill of Indictment'.[221] These indictments include 1) blasphemy; 2) the practice of the magical arts and commerce with the devil; 3) disrespect of the Sabbath; 4) indifference over matters of political significance; 5) partiality in religious matters ; 6) bitter and abusive speech; 7) physical aggression and zealotry; 8) impatience and

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[217] For d'Holbach's take on the 'Testimonium Flavianum', see *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 309 – 311.
[218] More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. ix. sect. 5.
[219] Prophecy is the main subject of More's *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii; and miracles in bks. iv – v.
[220] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. viii, chap. xiii.
[221] More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. vii, chap. xiii. sect. 1.

despair at his own fate; 9) madness; 10) debauchery and 11) extravagance (which More formally separates but actually discusses together); and 12) worldly ambition.[222] It will come as little surprise that More either finds Jesus not guilty of these charges, or else he rationalises Jesus' conduct within the context of the higher Christology he professes.[223] What is significant about these twelve points of disputed historical interpretation is how many of them have featured directly or indirectly in historical arguments about Jesus ever since, including within canonical figures in the history of scholarship.

*The Afterlives of More's 'Indictments'*

In d'Holbach's thoroughly hostile analysis, we encounter at least eight of these points of attack. Jesus was (rightly) condemned to death for [1] blasphemy by Jewish religious authorities,[224] while using [2] trickery to deceive fellow Jews that he was the prophesised messiah which he could not reproduce when challenged (Jesus was, at best, a conjurer).[225] On the change of [9] madness, the repeated references to Jesus' 'melancholy' (from μελαγχολικός) is clearly intended to imply some kind of psychological flaw:[226] d'Holbach leaves the door open to the possibility that Jesus might have been a malevolent religious imposture and/or living under a thoroughgoing messianic delusion. But there is no doubting [12] Jesus' own worldly ambition: d'Holbach acknowledges that Jesus may have been raised from childhood with a misguided sense of entitlement to public office.[227] Jesus' [6] bitterness and anger is pointed out time and again,[228] as is his [7 and 8] aggression and zealous ranting. Finally, there is plentiful innuendo throughout about Jesus' relationships with women, especially Mary Magdalene,[229] some of whom d'Holbach maintains were [10] 'debauched',[230] implying guilt by association. Not all More's 'indictments' find echoes in the French radical's polemic: d'Holbach work had no skin in the game on the question of Sabbath observance, and in fact suspects Jesus' supposed dispute about permissible undertakings on the 'Lord's day' to have been an evangelical contrivance, 'unless we suppose the Jews a hundred times more stupid than they really were'.[231]

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[222] All these charges are detailed and rejected in More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. viii, chap. viii.
[223] This is especially apparent when More is dealing with the charge of blasphemy in *Grand Mystery*, bk. viii, chap. xiii., sect 1; and political indifference, sect. 4.
[224] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 217 – 218.
[225] And, in fact, a 'malicious' one when we take into account Jesus' casting out of the 'Legion' that possessed a man and transferring the demons to a herd of pigs (Mark 5:1-20): see d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 221– 223.
[226] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 44,127 (n. 22), 192, 210 – 211.
[227] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 243 – 244.
[228] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 105, 107, 116, 188, 209.
[229] See d'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, pp. 127 – 128.
[230] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 127 (especially n. 22).
[231] D'Holbach, *Ecce Homo!*, p. 143.

Reimarus does not prosecute as many of More's confected 'indictments' as d'Holbach, but it is interesting to note how the issues raised by More intersect with Reimarus's analysis. Reimarus is silent on whether Jesus should be considered 'mad' or 'debauched', a 'conjurer' or in league with Satan, but there is no evidence in the *Apologie* that he would accept any of these claims. And as for 'blasphemy', according to Reimarus Jesus did not abrogate any Jewish laws but corrected the overzealous interpretation of them by the Pharisees,[232] which would include disputes over the Sabbath. Indeed, Reimarus takes this challenging of the Pharisees to be central to Jesus' contribution as a *Jewish* teacher, and the discourses that might be thought 'bitter' or intemperate on this topic, are cited with approval by Reimarus.[233] But Reimarus's Jesus was certainly not politically indifferent [4]; he was extremely partial in this and religious matters [5]. More accepted at face value the fourth of his 'indictments', but he considered Jesus' 'neutrality' a virtue in a universal saviour who must rise above sectarian politics.[234] Reimarus's Jesus was a partisan activist for the restoration of Israel,[235] and he had extravagant [11] notions of his own role in this process and the rewards that his disciples could expect.[236] The latter would constitute the [12] worldly ambition that More emphatically denied in his apologetics but d'Holbach assumed throughout his polemic. And for Reimarus it was Jesus' spectacular failure to realise this ambition that accounts for his famous dying and [9] despairing words:

> When Jesus cried on the cross 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt 27:46), this lament shows that 'It was clearly not the intention or the object of Jesus to suffer and die, but to build up a worldly kingdom, and to deliver the Israelites from bondage. It was in this that God had forsaken him, it was in this that his hopes had been forsaken.[237]

For both Reimarus and d'Holbach Jesus was a failed messianic claimant. He was not a calculating fraud, certainly not on Reimarus's account. But Jesus was a man immersed in the mythos of his highly politicised religious culture, and in terms of constructive modern theology, his historical aims cannot should not be adopted as our own. In short, they reversed the judgement of More on almost all the questions he had raised about Jesus in the previous century, and 'indictments' which once seemed like the apologetically necessary but ultimately idle musings of the devil's advocate had become intellectually and morally attractive to a small yet influential trend in European thought. A full inquiry into any relationships between More,

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[232] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', p. 162.
[233] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', pp. 68 – 69.
[234] See More, *Grand Mystery*, bk. viii, chap. xiii, sect. 4.
[235] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', pp. 135 – 150.
[236] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', p. 241.
[237] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', pp. 240 – 242.

Reimarus and D'Holbach at the level of textual dependency or engagement is beyond the scope of the current study, but the hypothesis is by no means implausible.[238]

**Conclusion**

Henry More was not the first, and nor would he be the last, Christian apologist to set up and rebut certain notions about the historical Jesus only for those same notions to resurface (via whatever channels) to become controlling interpretive components in sceptical reconstructions.[239] And this is true more generally in the critical study of religion in modernity. In his studies of the history of religious disbelief in France,[240] Alan Charles Kors argues for the orthodox origins of atheism, noting how many of the arguments used by French sceptics were originally formulated by Christians thinkers in apologetic discourse.[241] The same is true of many sceptical historical presentations of Jesus: apologetic concerns of the orthodox often staked out the lines of inquiry for historical-critical scholars who would reach diametrically opposed conclusions.

As we have seen, More raised a dozen objections against Jesus, theological and moral, rooted in different interpretations of the data. But More was a respected figure of the English intellectual establishment, whereas the truly radical figures of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were figures like Gerrard Winstanley and James Nayler, who challenged monarchy, episcopacy, Church tithing, social deference, and economic equality. They assumed the historicity of the Gospels, whether even hypothetical objections, but what was vital and transformative in the Gospels for them was the call to action from the eternal Son of God within a theology of divine immanence. The 'historical Jesus' was perhaps most important in the seventeenth century for securing the most basic foundation for orthodox Christian doctrine (e.g. More's treatment of Jesus' historicity in the *Grand Mystery*), even if the

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[238] Reimarus was certainly in possession of some of More's writings: see ed. Johann Andreas Gottfried Schetelig, *Auktionskatalog der Bibliothek von Hermann Samuel Reimarus*, vol. 1 of 2 (Hamburg / Wolfenbüttel: Reimarus-Kommission der Joachim-JungiusGesellschaft der WissenschJaften in Hamburg and the LessingAkademie in Wolfenbüttel, 1978), p. 168; and d'Holbach was certainly aware of the work of at least one of the Cambridge Platonists, Cudworth, who he alludes to in his discussion of spiritual metaphysical systems in pt. i, chap. vii of *Système de la Nature.*

[239] On Pietro Pomponazzi's (1462 – 1525) apologetics and their naturalistic tendency, see Pesce, 'Research on Jesus', p. 80.

[240]Most recently Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in Early-Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and *Epicureans and Atheists in Early-Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, August, 2016).

[241] This argument is most fully developed in Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

apologetics built upon this minimalist historical base contained the seeds of their own undoing.

In the eighteenth century there were certainly detailed historical inquiries conducted into Jesus and Christian origins by writers who were sympathetic both to the historical Jesus and to radical politics. Joseph Priestley is a very good example. But this is not sufficient to constitute a dominant trend. Baron d'Holbach and his collaborators championed secular education, free inquiry, freedom of religious thought, freedom of expression and lifestyle: radical Enlightenment causes and popular polices just before, during, and beyond the French Revolution.[242] Yet the Jesus of history offered to the world by d'Holbach's coterie was that of an insular religious fanatic and baleful model for all subsequent priest craft. This Jesus was an enemy of Enlightenment. By contrast, d'Holbach's contemporary revolutionary, Abbé Grégoire, championed secular republicanism, freedom of religion, the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of Jews, and full racial equality. He never showed any interest in a historical reconstruction of Jesus, but drew time and again from the emancipatory fragments of the Gospels.[243]

Hermann Reimarus did present Jesus as a revolutionary figure, but this was no indication of his own politics. The part of Jesus' legacy that Reimarus considered to be of enduring value was his universal moral gospel, the 'natural morality' which Charles Davis has claimed was so as important for revolutionary politics. But for Reimarus, this morality went hand in hand with his commitment to the immortality of the soul and post-mortem divine judgment:[244] typical Christian teachings. This should not surprise us. Reimarus was never just a historian: his trailblazing work was produced within the context of a massive work of rationalist theological apologetics, pointedly focussed on a critique of the Protestant orthodoxy of his time.[245]

The complex combination of disciplinary and ideological interests in the early modern period are such that to understand all the pathways to the modern quest, we should be prepared to go 'grubbing in the archive', [246] or at the very least examine more of the kind of

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[242] See Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, chap. 30; *Revolutionary Ideas*, chap. 14.
[243] See Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, 'Exporting the Revolution: Grégoire, Haiti and the Colonial Laboratory, 1815 – 1827', in *Abbé Grégoire*, pp. 41 – 70.
[244] See Reimarus, 'Jesus and His Teaching', p. 61.
[245] Reimarus sets out to dismantle the scriptural basis of the doctrine of the Incarnation ('Jesus and His Teaching', pp. 76 – 88), Trinity (pp. 88 – 98), Atonement and Salvation (pp. 129 – 153).
[246] The phrase is Robert Darnton's from 'The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France', *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* (vol. 5.1, May 1971), 81–115: 81. His challenge in this landmark article was to probe beyond and beneath the 'great works' of intellectual history,

works of apologetic, polemic, harmony, satire and propaganda discussed (or alluded to) in this article, to trace the provenance of ideas that would come (eventually) to be taken seriously in the academy through the professionalisation of biblical studies.[247] This will involve an analysis of the dialectic relationship between academic and non-academic theology; between rationalist and charismatic religion; and between morally committed atheism and the Christian thought with which it did battle.

The stories told in this particular article concern a Cambridge academic (More) railing against by the rise of enthusiastic spirituality on the one hand (especially Quakerism), and the rise of radical scepticism on the other; a polymathic Yorkshireman (Priestley) with a taste for historical and religious revisionism who ignited a city (Birmingham); and an aristocratic propagandist for atheism in Paris (d'Holbach). These stories played out in periods of intense intellectual, religious, and socio-political discontent, and in some cases violence. Other stories remain to be told which are relevant to a broader understanding of the historical roots of the quest: contributing to a historiography which is not simply focussed on 'formal' historical treatises on Jesus, but on the history of human thought about the historical Jesus and the ends to which that thought is directed and redirected. These alternative stories will be furnished by material discovered in ruder discourses than those typically found in the canonical writings of the discipline. It is through the continued examination of those discourses, and the contexts in which they were produced, that the historiography of the quest will continue to advance.

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which had been analysed (brilliantly) umpteen times by scholars, the repetition of which perpetuates an unduly rarefied view of the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment.

[247] On the development of this phenomenon see Stephen D Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011; and Michael L Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.