

An Anglican ‘Republic of Letters’? George Berkeley and the Early Enlightenment in Colonial New England, 1724–75

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When George Berkeley was seeking funds to establish a college on Bermuda, he expressed the need to train a colonial clergy that he deemed ‘meanly qualified in both learning and morals’ who might yet become instrumental in a ‘reformation of manners’ and ‘the propagation of the Gospel among the American savages’ on Britain’s imperial periphery. When Berkeley arrived in Rhode Island in 1724, however, he encountered instead Anglicans who were well read in the philosophy and theology of the early Enlightenment. Using the correspondence of Berkeley and the New England priest and theologian Samuel Johnson, this article explores how Anglican clergy and their institutions – operating in a religiously plural environment as members of a denominational minority – were actively developing an ‘Anglican republic of letters’ that was advancing early Enlightenment thought in the colonies in the decades prior to the Revolution.

INTRODUCTION

On 24 July 1730, the Connecticut Anglican minister and theologian Samuel Johnson (1696–1772) penned a letter of thanks to the philosopher George Berkeley, whose hospitality he had just enjoyed at his home in Newport, Rhode Island. He wrote of ‘the vast pleasure and advantage I enjoyed in your most engaging conversation. I think myself very unhappy that I am so remote from it: I design, however,

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if I can pay my respects to you again before winter'.¹ He proceeded also to thank Berkeley for the gift of a sizeable number of books to be dispersed 'into these parts', including eight cases of books to the rector of Yale College, Elisha Williams (1694–1755); a copy of Hooker's *Polity* to Johnson's pupil Henry Caner (c.1699–1792); a book by William Chillingworth (1602–44, possibly his *The Religion of the Protestants*) and one of Berkeley's own *Dialogues* to a Mr Wilmore. 'All in these parts', wrote Johnson, 'who have any taste for learning and good sense are mightily enamoured with your philosophy. Twenty at least I know of who entirely fall in with it and many have got the booksellers of Boston to send for several sets of your books.'²

The gratitude expressed by Johnson for the Berkeleys' hospitality and books was, on one level, unremarkable: testimony to a happy meeting of two learned people who had discussed philosophy and theology on a summer's afternoon. On another, the meeting of Berkeley and Johnson was symbolic of a growing network of learning and education – an Anglican republic of letters, perhaps – that was no longer purely defined by correspondence across the Atlantic and written material dispatched from London or Oxford but, unusually, by face-to-face conversation.

The art of propagating the gospel to England's, and then Britain's, imperial peripheries in the early eighteenth century might be imagined as an exercise in the pure transmission of orthodox Christian theological principles: the conveyance of 'a serious Sense of Religion' to both colonists and natives. Indeed, it was evident in the original seal of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG): a preacher aboard a ship, holding a Bible and looking out to a host of people running to the shore, above whom was written the text from Acts 16: 9: 'Transiens adiuva nos' ('Come over and help us').³ Chartered by the Crown on 16 June 1701, the SPG sought to meet this objective, and its work was enthusiastically promoted by both church and Crown, with annual anniversary sermons used, not only to raise funds, but also to underline the Church of England's providential duty to minister to Britain's 'Plantations, Colonies and Factories beyond the Seas'

¹ New Haven, CT, Yale University Archives, Johnson Family Papers, MS 305, folder 175, Samuel Johnson to George Berkeley, 24 July 1730; quoted in *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, ed. Marc A. Hight (Cambridge, 2013), 329–30.

² Ibid.

³ A text also used on the original Massachusetts Bay Colony's seal, struck in 1629.

through the 'better Support and Maintenance of an Orthodox Clergy in Foreign Parts'.⁴

This article explores the way in which the Church of England's life on the imperial peripheries was more than simply the transmission of the gospel, but was also instrumental in the development of the early Enlightenment in New England. The role of missionaries in the 'scientific' study and interpretation of the frontier has already been considered by several scholars, noting the influence, in particular, of Samuel Purchas and White Kennett as English authors who sought 'to bridge intellectually and spiritually the Anglican community across the Atlantic'.⁵ Similarly, those in the colonies could be equally interested in the geographical and ethnographical. The SPG missionary Francis Vernod, for example, wrote home to the SPG in the January of 1723/4 from South Carolina, offering a wealth of information to the Society, not just on the difficulty of converting enslaved peoples on plantations, but also on the rites and custom of the Cherokees, the quality of the harvest that year, the provision of other religious groups, and the condition of buildings.⁶ This was information which clearly assisted the objectives of the SPG, but which could also be an important source of information for the imperial authorities more generally, not least through the secretary of the Society's presence on the Council of Trade and Plantations.⁷

However, Anglican clergy in the colonies were not only increasingly engaged in interpreting the New World to the metropolis, but were also themselves actively propagating and institutionalizing early Enlightenment philosophy and theology. Hitherto, attention has largely focussed on the Boston 'liberalism' of Congregationalists, particularly of Benjamin Colman and John Leverett at Harvard at

⁴ Daniel O'Connor, *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel 1701–2000* (London, 2000), 7.

⁵ Louisiane Ferlier, 'Building Religious Communities with Books: The Quaker and Anglican Transatlantic Libraries, 1650–1710', in Mark Towsey and Robert B. Kyle, eds, *Before the Public Library: Reading, Community and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650–1850* (Leiden, 2018), 31–51. See White Kennett, *Bibliothecae Americanae Primordia* (London, 1713), ii.

⁶ Oxford, Bodl., USPG MSS, A18, fols 69–75, Francis Vernod to the Secretary of the SPG, 13 January 1723/4.

⁷ William Bulman has highlighted the significance of the colonial chaplain as an enlightened interpreter in his book, *Anglican Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2015), illustrating the role of Lancelot Addison in seventeenth-century Tangier in describing Islam and Judaism in north Africa and its contribution to developing concepts of religion per se.

the turn of the eighteenth century. John Corrigan, in particular, has delineated how the ‘catholick Congregationalists’ at Harvard and Brattle Street Church combined their commitment to covenant theology with an enthusiasm for the latitudinarian writings of John Wilkins, Joseph Glanvill, John Locke, Edward Stillingfleet, John Tillotson and Simon Patrick, leading Anglican writers in the late seventeenth century who combined an interest in the new experimental philosophy with a plea for moderation in religion.⁸ Through Berkeley’s encounter with Johnson in Rhode Island, however, it is asserted in this article that local Anglican individuals and institutions were very much part of this transatlantic ‘republic of letters’.

EDUCATION, EMPIRE AND GEORGE BERKELEY

The eighteenth-century Anglican Atlantic networks of the SPG and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (the SPCK, also founded by Thomas Bray just before the SPG in 1698) were marked by their strongly educational instincts. After all, if the Restoration church’s new baptism service for those of riper years were to be employed on English plantations in the Americas and Indies, then schooling and books were requisite preliminaries.⁹ The ambitions of George Berkeley in the mid-1720s were in this vein. As a young Irish Anglican who had been a distinguished fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, Berkeley’s instincts to serve the New World were in large part prompted by his anxieties about the old: ‘We have made a jest of public spirit and cancelled all respect for whatever our laws and religion repute sacred’.¹⁰ When he returned to England in 1720 after a continental tour as private tutor to St George Ashe, he encountered a society that he had come to believe was mired in sin. By the spring of 1724, he had secured preferment to the deanery of Derry, but its handsome income was no

⁸ John Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety: Catholic Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment* (New York, 1991), 9–31. Corrigan builds upon the earlier work of Norman Fiering (‘The First American Enlightenment: Tillotson, Leverett, and Philosophical Anglicanism’, *New England Quarterly* 54 [1981], 307–44) and Theodore Hornberger (‘Benjamin Colman and the Enlightenment’, *New England Quarterly* 12 [1939], 227–40) in elucidating the influence of Anglican writings on the Boston ‘liberals’.

⁹ Roman Catholic missions were generally less committed to educating those enslaved prior to their baptism.

¹⁰ George Berkeley, *Essay towards Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. Thomas E. Jessop, 9 vols (London, 1948–57), 6: 84.

inducement to settle; rather, it spurred him to greater zeal in his desire to effect moral and religious reform. In the summer of 1722, he had already written to his great friend John Percival, an Irish nobleman, of his vision:

I have determined with myself to spend the residue of my days in the island of Bermuda, where I trust in Providence I may be the mean instrument of doing good to mankind. Your Lordship is not to be told that the reformation of manners among the English in our western plantations, and the propagation of the Gospel among the American savages, are two points of high moment. The natural way of doing this is by founding a college or seminary in some convenient part of the West Indies, where the English youth of our plantations may be educated in such sort as to supply the churches with pastors of good morals and good learning, a thing (God knows!) much wanted. In the same seminary a number of young American savages may also be educated till they have taken their degree of Master of Arts. And being by that time well instructed in Christian religion, practical mathematics, and other liberal arts and sciences, and early endued with public spirited principles and inclinations, they may become the fittest missionaries for spreading, religion, morality, and civil life, among their countrymen.¹¹

A few months later, Berkeley published a tract, *A Proposal For the better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage American to Christianity* (1725), which further outlined his reasoning. In common with earlier calls to missionary zeal, Berkeley presented his scheme as a means of renewing the faith at home as much as securing Protestant influence abroad, noting that 'the protestant religion hath of late years considerably lost ground, and America seems the likeliest of place, wherein to make up for what hath been lost in Europe, provided the proper methods are taken'.¹²

¹¹ George Berkeley to John Percival, 4 March 1722/3, in Hight, *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, 185–6. See also the pamphlet, 'Proposals for Propagating the Gospel in All Countries', published in Gordon's *Geographical Grammar* in early 1701, which urged that new seminaries be established to train clergy in 'pagan languages' so that 'in process of time, [they might] extend the knowledge of the English Tongue over that large American Continent on the Western parts of our English Plantations; and together with it the knowledge of our most holy Religion: And so make at once a mighty accession of Members to the Christian Church, and add a vast Tract of Land to the English Empire.' London, LPL, SPG Papers, 7: 4–7, 6 January 1701.

¹² George Berkeley, *A Proposal For the better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage American to Christianity* (London, 1724), in *British Imperialism: Three Documents*, Research Library of Colonial America, ed. Richard C. Robey (New York, 1972), 17–18.

The choice of Bermuda was misguided. Berkeley believed the American mainland to have ‘little sense of religion’, with Anglican clergymen there being ‘very meanly qualified both in learning and morals’. They have, he continued, ‘quit their native country on no other motive, than that they are not able to procure a livelihood in it’.¹³ Drawing on out-of-date travelers’ reports, Berkeley thought Bermuda was a moral, climatic, geographical and economic idyll, the inhabitants having ‘the greatest simplicity of manners, more innocence, honesty, and good nature.’¹⁴ Berkeley’s second edition of the *Proposal*, published several months later (having acquired a royal charter for the proposed college) was moderated only inasmuch as it stressed that ‘gospel liberty’ did not require the emancipation of the enslaved (no doubt to placate commercial and mercantile anxiety); further, it asserted that the needs of the English settlers, ‘themselves degenerated into Heathens’, had not been forgotten.¹⁵

Berkeley paid no attention to the colleges already present on the mainland, having decided that Harvard and Yale ‘subsisted to little or no purpose’ and supplied evidence that ‘where Ignorance or ill Manners once take place in a Seminary, they are sure to be handed down in a Succession of illiterate or worthless Men’.¹⁶ Making no reference to the Codrington bequest or even to the College of William and Mary (a 1693 Church of England foundation in Williamsburg, Virginia), Berkeley pursued his project zealously, gaining funds and parliamentary support.¹⁷ He seemed willfully ignorant of those who questioned it, not least Thomas Bray who published in 1727 a dossier on his societies’ missionary activity across the Atlantic – his *Missionalia* – that was quietly devastating of Berkeley’s casual assumptions about the usefulness of the American clergy (whom Bray robustly defended). Nor was Bray impressed by Berkeley’s suggestion of transporting

¹³ Edwin Gaustad, *George Berkeley in America* (New Haven, CT, 1979), 32.

¹⁴ George Berkeley to John Percival, 4 March 1722/3, in Hight, *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, 186.

¹⁵ Berkeley, *Works*, 7: 360–1; quoted in Gaustad, *George Berkeley in America*, 34. Gaustad suggests that Berkeley had probably been reliant on reports of Bermuda from Lewis Hughes, a clergyman who had written a century earlier in support of commercial investment: Lewis Hughes, *A Letter, Sent Into England from the Summer Islands* (London, 1615); idem, *A Plaine and True Relation of the Goodnes of God towards the Sommer Ilands* (London, 1621).

¹⁶ Berkeley, *Works*, 7: 354.

¹⁷ The principal source of funds for the project was derived from Berkeley’s being named as co-executor and joint residuary legatee of the estate of Esther Van Homrigh in June 1723.

native American children to Bermuda to be educated ('the most *Unchristian*, or rather the most *Anti-Christian* Method, to propagate the Gospel', he wrote).¹⁸ Whether it was Berkeley's unwillingness to engage with those 'who would be more ready and Capable to Assist him' from 'our *Religious Societies*' (the SPG and SPCK, the latter to which Berkeley had been elected in 1725),¹⁹ or just fury at what he considered sheer naivety, Bray was evidently anxious that Berkeley's highly publicized and well-funded scheme would undermine the endeavours of the church societies.

By the summer of 1728, however, considerable sums had been promised by Parliament (£20,000) despite the questions raised by both sceptical merchants and those who argued funds should be preserved for the founding of Georgia. Furthermore, it was unclear whether George II would sustain his father's financial commitment to the college.²⁰ In a bid to keep the project alive and encourage ministers to provide the promised money, Berkeley set out from Gravesend to Rhode Island via Williamsburg, Virginia, with his family and future tutors.

Arriving in January 1729, and expecting to stay for a period, Berkeley bought a farm in Middletown – staffed by enslaved Africans – just outside Newport, which he expanded in the Palladian style and renamed Whitehall. It was an architectural expression of the learned society that Berkeley hoped to bring to both Newport and, in due course, the wider colonies through his plans for St Paul's College.

COLONIAL CLERGY AND THE 'NEW LEARNING'

However, far from discovering a clergy 'very meanly qualified both in learning and morals', Berkeley was soon visited by Samuel Johnson, the rector of Christ Church, Stratford, with whom he established a friendship. Johnson had read Berkeley already and, in him, Berkeley encountered the fruit of what, by the third decade of the eighteenth century, was a growing appetite among the New England clergy for

¹⁸ Thomas Bray, *Missionalia: Or, A Collection of Missionary Pieces Relating to the Conversion of the Heathen; Both the African Negroes and the American Indians* (London, 1727), 73. Italics original.

¹⁹ Ibid. 40.

²⁰ Funding for the college was also promised from the king, who offered £1,000 per annum from the revenues derived from the recently acquired island of St Kitts. The monies promised by Parliament would equate to roughly £2.3 m p.a. today.

what Johnson called the ‘New Learning’. Johnson himself had been something of a prodigy. The son of a Congregationalist Connecticut farmer, able to read and write by the age of four and to understand Hebrew by the age of five, he went to the Collegiate School (the original name of Yale University) in 1714, there composing ‘A Synopsis of Natural Philosophy’, which he duly expanded into ‘An Encyclopedia of Philosophy’. In 1716, he became a tutor at Yale, whereupon he lectured on Locke, Copernican astronomy, medicine and algebra.²¹ Ordained as a Congregationalist pastor for West Haven in 1720, Johnson had been developing doubts about his ministry as he continued to digest the 800 or so books which had been donated to Yale by the American-born colonial agent for Connecticut and Massachusetts, Jeremiah Dummer, in 1714.

Dummer had been the first American to gain a European degree (at Utrecht) having proved himself at Harvard and – through his study of mathematics as a preliminary to his continental theology – he exhibited the growing influence of Newtonian rationality on American theology, much to the unhappiness of some Massachusetts Calvinists. Reflecting on the importance of Dummer’s gift to Yale, Johnson in his *Autobiography* (1771) reflected that, in the early part of the century, ‘there was no such thing as any books of learning to be had in those times under a 100 or 150 years old such as the first settlers ... brought with them’ and the value of lighting upon Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*, in particular, reshaped Johnson’s approach to intellectual endeavour. In his *Autobiography*, Johnson wrote how, aged eighteen:

[He] had then all at once the vast pleasure of reading the works of our best English poets, philosophers and divines, Shakespeare and Milton etc. Locke and Norris etc., Boyle and Newton etc., Patrick and Whitby, Barrow, Tillotson, South, Sharp, Scot and Sherlock etc. All this was like a flood of day to this low state of mind ... he found himself like one at once emerging out of the glimmer of the twilight into the full sunshine of open day.²²

²¹ Joseph J. Ellis, *The New England Mind in Transition: Samuel Johnson of Connecticut, 1696–1772* (New Haven, CT, 1973), 44–6. It is suggested that Johnson had been introduced to Jonathan Edwards as a thirteen-year-old: see Claude M. Newlin, *Philosophy and Religion in Colonial America* (New York, 1962), 25. Newlin offers a helpful overview of the sea-change in American philosophy and the roles of Johnson and Edwards therein.

²² Herbert and Carol Schneider, eds, *Samuel Johnson, President of King’s College: His Career and Writings*, 4 vols (New York, 1929), 1: 7.

Johnson's 'enlightenment' was not limited to his exposure of late Stuart and Williamite logic and mathematics, but was also enabled through his reading of works by Richard Hooker, Thomas Ken, Robert Nelson, William Laud, John Pearson and Jeremy Taylor in Dummer's collection. Reading these in the company of some of his Yale colleagues, a small group that included the rector of Yale, Timothy Cutler, fellow tutors Daniel Browne, George Pigot and another Congregational minister James Wetmore, they became anxious about the validity of their own orders. With them, Johnson renounced his Congregationalist orders in 1722 – an event sometimes referred to in the denominational historiography as the 'great apostasy' – and travelled to England, whereupon they were ordained in the Church of England.²³

While Johnson returned to America with clearly more defined views about the significance of the sacraments and episcopacy, his high churchmanship was nonetheless coupled with a theology shaped by his reading of John Tillotson, Benjamin Hoadly, William Beveridge and John Locke *inter alia* during 1719–22, that was increasingly anti-determinist in its understanding of salvation and practical in its focus on virtue and piety.²⁴ In this sense, he was emblematic of the SPG's mission, as articulated by Bray, to establish 'natural Religion' as the foundation to all theological engagement before proceeding to the necessity of revelation.²⁵

While Anglicans were a religious minority in New England, Johnson's ethical and theological writings – many of which were irenic defences of Anglican doctrine and polity – were emblematic of a post-Newtonian philosophy that was finding a ready audience in Harvard and Yale, as John Corrigan and Norman Fiering have identified.²⁶ Henry Newman (who matriculated at Harvard in 1687) noted how tutors like John Leverett and the college treasurer Thomas Brattle had encouraged such engagement, and that there were twenty times more friends to the Church of England in America 'since these gentlemen governed the College'. Indeed, they recommended 'the reading of

²³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT, 1972), 224. Corrigan considers the 'Yale incident' briefly in his monograph but gives relatively little attention to Johnson.

²⁴ For Johnson's catalogue of reading between 1719 and 1755, see Schneider and Schneider, eds, *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College*, 1: 497–502.

²⁵ Robert Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, PA, 1991), 34.

²⁶ Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety*, 58–64; Fiering, 'First American Enlightenment', 322–3.

episcopal authors as the best books to form our minds in religious matters, and preserve us from those narrow principles that kept us at a distance from the church of England'.²⁷

As Harry Stout has explored in *The New England Soul*, for tutors like Leverett who had hitherto contended with a very restrictive Calvinist mindset, such writers were increasingly revered. The new century, informed by the different tenor of politics and religion that followed the accession of William and Mary, had, Stout asserts, inaugurated a process of 'anglicization' in New England in which ties with the mother country were increasingly valued, and English authors – theological and otherwise – treasured:

No well-read provincial could escape the excitement these luminaries were generating in science, literature, epistemology, and ethics; nor could they resist English influence in dress, speech, literary style, or architecture. For New England elites, England supplied standards of urbanity, sophistication, and broad-mindedness to be emulated for both intellectual and social reasons.²⁸

The transmission of books and missionaries by the Church of England, not least those that Johnson oversaw extending their reach into New England, were symptomatic of what Rusty Roberson (with a view to the Scottish missionary groups, in particular) describes as a broader 'Christian knowledge movement' that was traversing the Atlantic. Like the Society for the Reformation of Manners and other civic groups in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the leading moral reformer Josiah Woodward viewed 'in our Northern plantations in America ... a more remarkable Reformation' than was evident in 'either of Her Majesty's Kingdoms'. Pan-Protestant, valuing moderation and rejecting narrow principle, Woodward identified the efforts of the transatlantic societies as effecting a reformation just as significant for Christianity as that which had transpired in the sixteenth century, not least through its influence upon third-generation Congregationalists like

²⁷ Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society, Newman Papers, Henry Newman to Mr Taylor (of the SPG), 29 March 1714; quoted in Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety*, 19.

²⁸ Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York, 2012), 120–1. See also Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992), 174.

Leverett.²⁹ This was echoed south of the Scottish border among those who supported the work of Bray's societies, with White Kennett writing to Colman of his hopes 'for the Union of all Protestants in some future Age, when Charity and Peace shall prevail above Interest and Passion', underlining to Colman that the SPG missionaries were sent to bring Christian knowledge, rather than 'only contending for Rites and Ceremonies, or for Powers and Privileges.'³⁰

INSTITUTIONALIZING ENLIGHTENED ANGLICANISM

In effecting this 'reformation', the dispatch of books from Oxford or London by Anglicans, both by the missionary societies and by individuals, was a crucial element in the development of the eastern seaboard's intellectual stimulation. In their study of eighteen colonial libraries before 1750, entitled *The Enlightened Reader in America*, David Lundberg and Henry May identified John Locke as being by far the most popular author, whose *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) was the most frequently held item and continued to be throughout the century, even as more radical voices entered the American sphere after 1760. Alongside Locke as popular items in libraries can be identified John Tillotson's *Sermons* (1682), Joseph Addison's *Evidences of the Christian Religion* (1721) and George Berkeley's *Alciphron* (written while he was in America, and published in 1732). As Stout has written,

a new generation of more tolerant Anglican preachers and essayists came to be widely read and admired for their pleasing style. According to the new liberal spirit, these authors could no longer be ignored simply because

²⁹ Josiah Woodward, *An Account of the Progress of the Reformation of Manners, in England, Scotland, and Ireland, And other Parts of Europe and America. With Some Reasons and Plain Directions for our Hearty and Vigorous Prosecution of this Glorious Work*, 12th edn (London, 1704), 7–9; quoted in Rusty Roberson, 'Enlightened Piety during the Age of Benevolence: The Christian Knowledge Movement in the British Atlantic World', *ChH* 85 (2016), 246–74, at 259. Roberson's study of the Scottish SPCK (SSPCK) outlines how the surprisingly ecumenical efforts of Anglicans and Presbyterians through the Society to undermine Jacobite culture was part of its original work in providing educational opportunities in the Highlands: *ibid.* 255–62. See also Stout, *New England Soul*, 124.

³⁰ *Life of the Right Reverend Dr. White Kennett, Late Lord Bishop of Peterborough, with several Original Letters of the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Tennison, the Late Earl of Sunderland, Bishop Kennett, &c. And some curious Original Papers and Records, never before Published* (London, 1730), 122–4. Kennett's letter was dated 28 July 1716.

they endorsed a different polity. Truth and “elegance” (a new value) came from many sources and had to be taken wherever they appeared.³¹

Perhaps most emblematic of the new learning in the realm of epistemology was the reading of Locke. He had been the subject of censure in Oxford in 1703, but by the mid-eighteenth century, Locke and the other latitudinarian pragmatists were required reading at the university as the Aristotelian method and the Laudian curriculum were being questioned.³² As Nathan Guy has observed, Locke was read in continuity with Hooker and the Great Tew circle and, as Brian Young has noted, this ‘Anglophone new logic became the accepted means of intellectual engagement in eighteenth-century England’ and endured in a manner unlike the more radical Newtonian physico-theology of Samuel Clarke.³³ Moreover, the likes of Locke and Tillotson were also influential in shaping institutional expression in the colonies: Locke’s broad and inclusive form of political philosophy was well suited to a religiously plural environment (in which there was constant watchfulness for what was perceived as theocratic tyranny), and Tillotson’s advocacy of practical charity found broad receptivity in those seeking to cultivate public virtue in the colonies as much as in London.³⁴

³¹ Stout, *New England Soul*, 132.

³² Nicholas Amhurst, a fellow of St John’s College until he was expelled in 1719, wrote scornfully of the curriculum in the 1720s, but admitted that there had been improvements in the public examinations, such ‘that *Locke, Clarke and Sir Isaac Newton* begin to find countenance in the schools, and that *Aristotle* seems to totter on his antient throne.’ Italics original; Nicholas Amhurst, *Terrae Filius, or The Secret History of the University of Oxford in Several Essays*, 2 vols (London, 1726), xviii–xix; quoted in Lucy S. Sutherland and Leslie G. Mitchell, *The History of the University of Oxford, 5: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1986), 610. For a good overview of the changing curriculum, see also Laurence W. B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History* (Oxford, 2016), 242–9.

³³ See Nathan Guy, *Finding Locke’s God: The Theological Basis of John Locke’s Political Thought* (London, 2020), 51; Brian M. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1998), 7.

³⁴ Alongside Butler’s *Analogy*, it was arguably Tillotson’s sermons that shaped the Anglophone theological mind more than any other writer between 1690 and 1770 – establishing, as Caroline Winterer has argued, the premium of simple prose that would be so valued by the leading figures of the ‘second Enlightenment’ in America. Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* (1776), for example, wrote that Tillotson offered ‘nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense’, and Benjamin Franklin also commended Tillotson for using ‘the plainest Words’: Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Philadelphia, PA, 1776), 17; Benjamin Franklin, ‘On Literary Style’, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 2 August 1733, online at: <<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-01-02-0102>>, accessed 31 October 2024; both quoted in Caroline Winterer, *American Enlightenments: Pursuing Happiness in the Age*

Gillian Brown argues that, apart from his political treatises, Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) was 'probably the most widely instituted pedagogical theory in eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture', with his notions of consent increasingly shaping conceptions of household authority; in particular, how children consenting to the authority of their parents was the means by which citizens were formed in their relationship to the state.³⁵ All of this was the cultural background that was informing the changing curriculum of America's education – both that which was established and seeking to break free of a rigid Calvinism and those, as with Berkeley's planned institution, that were being fostered in the imagination.

While Stout and Corrigan note the receptivity of Congregationalists and Presbyterians to Anglican learning, what they do not delineate to the same degree is how Anglicans in colonial England were themselves propagators of such theology and homiletics, or the significance of Anglican library deposits in shaping this 'ecumenical' embrace of the 'New Learning'. While Berkeley had been dismissive of Dissenters, he encountered in Johnson (who remained close to Yale) a pre-existing shared conception of education, and an absence of formal Church of England institutions in New England. This allowed for a readier collaboration between Protestants of various stripes in the early to mid-century than would have been encountered in England or Ireland. Not only was there a pan-Protestant commitment to outmanoeuvring 'popery' that shaped the American religious mind, as documented by Carla Gardina Pestana, but there was also a shared dissemination of what Roberson and Stout term a practical 'enlightened piety' which was shaped by a Lockean liberalism and around which a consensus was forming, not only among the younger faculty at Harvard or Yale, but through active propagation by a new generation of colonial Anglicans.³⁶

Such intellectual collaboration was perhaps not surprising: in the context of Whig political dominance in England and anxiety about Roman Catholicism, Locke's epistemic minimalism ('everyone is

of Reason (New Haven, CT, 2016), 175.). Tillotson's upbringing as a nonconformist aided his broad acceptance, of course. See also Stout, *New England Soul*, 125–6.

³⁵ Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 34–6.

³⁶ See David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 32–54; Carla Gardina Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011), 1–15.

orthodox to himself) chimed with the language of liberty in Hanoverian propaganda and a broader resistance to ‘priestcraft’ in a variety of colonies under threat from French and Indian enemies (the latter often equated with Roman Catholics for their ‘superstitions’). In Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), as well as in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), both staples of colonial libraries, the inward persuasion of the mind took precedence over the ‘creeds and profitable inventions’, the ‘lustrations’ and ‘expiations’ of their ‘pompous, fantastical, cumbersome ceremonies’; likewise, against their ‘systems of divinity’, ‘vain philosophy’, ‘foolish metaphysics’, and those ‘speculations and niceties, obscure terms, and abstract notions’ of the ‘holy tribe’ of the priests.³⁷ Building on the pragmatism of Hooker and the epistemic breadth of the latitudinarians, this not only chimed with the tenor of New England politics but, interestingly, also with Johnson’s Anglicanism – episcopal yet learned, sacramental and enlightened – and consequently acted as a catalyst for the Church of England’s cultural and political influence in New England society in a way that few might have expected in the late seventeenth century.³⁸

Despite his initial dismissal of the colonial colleges, it is indicative of a shared philosophy of learning that, through his connection to Johnson, Berkeley decided to endow Yale with both books and property. He had already given books to the college via Johnson in September 1731, writing from Rhode Island of how he prayed ‘God’s blessing on you and your endeavours to promote religion and learning in this uncultivated part of the world’.³⁹ Having returned to London in the autumn of 1731, having accepted no further funds were going to be forthcoming from the metropolis, Berkeley wrote to Johnson in July 1732 offering his Rhode Island estate to Yale:

It is my opinion that as human learning and the improvements of reason are of no small use in religion, so it would very much forward those ends, if some of your students were enabled to subsist longer at their studies, and if by a

³⁷ John Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity* (London, 1695), 6, 147, 159, 169–70; quoted in Mark Goldie, ‘Locke, the Early Lockceans, and Priestcraft’, *Intellectual History Review* 28 (2018), 125–44, at 131.

³⁸ New England politics was also more hospitable to the English Crown and its institutions than it had been, looking to it for stability within its borders and defence from without; the ‘King’s Church’ now found a presence in New England that would have been impossible a century earlier.

³⁹ Schneider and Schneider, eds, *Samuel Johnson, President of King’s College*, 1: 81–2.

public trial and premium an emulation were inspired into all. This method of encouragement hath been found useful in other learned Societies, and I think it cannot fail of being so in one where a person so well qualified as yourself, has such influence, and will bear a share in the elections.⁴⁰

Building upon the legacy of Dummer, it was a remarkable gift to a Dissenting college by the dean of Londonderry. As Johnson reflected to the bishop of London in 1732, while Berkeley's college would:

especially if it had been executed on the Continent ... have been of great advantage to the interest of religion and learning in America, so it has, on the other hand, been happy since in the conversion (besides a number of other good people) of the worthy persons who have all had a public education in the neighboring College [Yale], and two of them have been dissenting teachers.⁴¹

Berkeley's donation did indeed energize Johnson's mission to spread the Church of England's influence in New England, and despite not having its own college, the church proved remarkably agile as a minority institution. Operating outside of a parochial system, without a local episcopate, and engaging in formal education largely in the Congregationalist colleges, greater emphasis was thus laid upon ideas and theological convictions as a means of influence. As has been noted of the SPCK in America by Brent Sirota, who views the Society as emblematic of an 'Anglican revival' that shaped the church after the Glorious Revolution, it was 'improvisational ... with its peculiar status as an unincorporated entity possessed of the favor but not the official mandate of episcopal superiors':

It was the heir to the diversely articulated spirit of revivalism that had informed much of Anglican churchmanship throughout the last two decades of the seventeenth century; but despite its outsized deference to the episcopal hierarchy, the lower clerical initiative and lay collaboration that animated much of its programs were somewhat out of keeping with its Restoration bequest.⁴²

⁴⁰ George Berkeley to Samuel Johnson, 25 July 1732; quoted in *ibid.* 1: 82. A further endowment of books was promised for Yale.

⁴¹ George Berkeley to Edmund Gibson, 5 April 1732; quoted in *ibid.* 1: 81–2.

⁴² Craig Rose, 'The Origins and Ideals of the SPCK, 1699–1716', in John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor, eds, *The Church of England, c.1689–c.1833* (Cambridge, 1993), 172–90, at 179–80; Brent Sirota, *Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680–1730* (New Haven, CT, 2014), 111.

Indeed, when seeking the support of bishops and Parliament, it was perhaps inevitable that these extra-diocesan Anglican societies would soon be aligning themselves with the requisite sources of influence and power, namely the Whig establishment, rather than the agitators for the sacerdotal interest in Convocation. As Sirota has argued, far from being a monolithic instrument of the Crown and hierarchy, the church had its own 'blue-water policy' akin to the entrepreneurial instincts of Britain's maritime and commercial empire; institutions like the SPG or even Berkeley's Bermuda project were 'all manifestations of an established church struggling with its own insularity' and 'might be better understood as efforts at the *de-territorialization* of Anglicanism, a process of rendering the established church less dependent on the political, diocesan, and parochial structures that had proved difficult if not impossible to reproduce abroad.'⁴³

INSTITUTIONALIZING THE NEW LEARNING

However, this is not to suggest that the failure of Berkeley to establish his college in either Bermuda or in New England diminished the appetite of Anglicans to set up their own institutions of learning, even while they bolstered the libraries of Yale and Harvard and catalyzed a pan-continental appetite for Anglican authors. Berkeley's vision of education was 'to ground these young *Americans* thoroughly in Religion and Morality, and to give them a good Tincture of other Learning; particularly of Eloquence, History and practical Mathematics; to which it may not be improper to add some skill in Physics.'⁴⁴ Such aspirations did not dissipate as he sailed back to London from Boston.

Following Francis Bacon, Berkeley would not be alone in rethinking the categories of knowledge and the structure of learning within the colonies, and he could do so with a freedom that was harder to procure through the collegiate structure of Oxford or Cambridge. This 'free and catholick air' was, as David Hall has shown, already being expressed in the organization of college libraries. The donations of Dummer and Berkeley to Yale, for example, indicate how early efforts to endow American libraries produced collections that contained contributions other than biblical commentaries and extensive discourses on

⁴³ Sirota, *Christian Monitors*, 224–5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 225. Italics original.

predestination. Rather than the medieval divisions of the arts into the trivium and quadrivium, libraries now began to arrange their collections around Baconian schemes. Samuel Johnson himself would write *An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy* in 1743, which aimed to give to students 'a General Idea or Scheme of all the Arts and Sciences and the several things which are to be known and learnt', organizing knowledge in such a way as to stress its unity: a scheme that Thomas Clap would use to reorganize the library at Yale in the same year.⁴⁵

Enlightened Anglican ideals would also be influential in the founding of new colleges from the 1740s onwards. When Johnson became instrumental in the foundation of King's College in New York, the first Anglican establishment in the northern colonies, he sought Berkeley's advice and established a college that aimed to embed the 'new learning'. Although Johnson, Berkeley and others referred to King's as a 'seminary', it was not a theological college in any real sense. Divinity was not the predominant discipline, and there was no prospect of there being a professorship in divinity (despite initial promises to the Dutch Reformed that they would have their own theological professorship). George Berkeley, offering Samuel Johnson advice in 1749, suggested that teachers be secured from the seminaries of New England, for 'none can be got in Old England (who are willing to go) worth sending'; that 'Greek and Latin classics be well taught' even if 'the principal care must be good life and morals'; that the terms should be the same as those of Oxford and Cambridge, so as to 'give credit to the College'; and that there was a need to recommend 'this nascent seminary to an English bishop'.⁴⁶

Johnson had mirrored Oxford in insisting upon a four-year course of study, in the preponderance of classics in the education of undergraduates, but with moral philosophy rather than theology being the pinnacle of this liberal education. As David Humphrey has indicated, Johnson's curriculum 'reflected his debt to the ideal of gentlemanly education – 'polite learning' – which the Renaissance had added to the medieval curriculum.'⁴⁷ Humphrey suggested that Johnson's model of making moral philosophy, rather than theology, the final-year

⁴⁵ Hugh Amory and David Hall, eds, *A History of the Book in America*, 1: *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 421.

⁴⁶ George Berkeley to Samuel Johnson, 23 August 1749; quoted in Schneider and Schneider, eds, *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College*, 1: 134–5. Berkeley's own college, Trinity College Dublin, was likewise originally organized according to such a model of provost and two fellows.

⁴⁷ David C. Humphrey, *From King's College to Columbia, 1746–1800* (New York, 1976), 174.

discipline was ‘to synthesize and rationalize for seniors the intellectual experience of the previous three and a half years’ and was emblematic of an educational program with ‘more recent origins’. This was reflective of his own conversion in 1715 at Yale when, after having prepared in Latin the mandatory ‘System of Arts’ or ‘Encyclopedia’, he became ‘wholly changed to the New Learning’.⁴⁸

Young men at King’s were expected to read the New Testament in Greek in their early years, as at Oxford and Cambridge, but Johnson also had the intention of providing courses in husbandry, commerce, surveying and navigation. Largely on account of its small staff and lack of resources, such courses were never offered after the college opened in 1754, with gentlemen largely remaining dedicated to the classics and moral philosophy.⁴⁹

However, even if the college’s aspirations to be a centre of the ‘new learning’ in New York had limited success in its actual teaching, its broadly latitudinarian instincts were to some degree achieved in its openness to those beyond the Church of England. When the terms of the charter of the college were sealed at the end of October 1754, Anglican influence had been carefully circumscribed, in part due to pressure from Presbyterians and others in the city, who were already resistant to the limited Anglican establishment within the colony and resented further encroachment. The bishop of London was denied authority over the college, and the composition of the board was relatively ecumenical. Ex officio membership was granted to only one of New York’s Anglican ‘established’ rectors – the rector of Trinity Church, upon whose land the college was to be built – and his presence was neutralized by ex officio membership being granted also to the senior ministers of the Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, French and Presbyterian churches in the city.⁵⁰ The controversy over the college’s governance had resulted in an institution that was in the end far less denominationally prescriptive than the newly established Presbyterian college in New Jersey (Princeton), Yale or Harvard. Moreover, despite Johnson’s desire that the college should be a source of Anglican influence, he allowed students to worship at the church of their choice

⁴⁸ Schneider and Schneider, eds, *Samuel Johnson, President of King’s College*, 2: 186; 1: 6.

⁴⁹ These practical courses were included in announcements of the beginning of tuition in the college, as outlined in ‘An Advertisement’, *New York Gazette*, 3 June 1754; quoted in Schneider and Schneider, eds, *Samuel Johnson, President of King’s College*, 4: 223.

⁵⁰ Humphreys, *From King’s College to Columbia*, 67–9.

on Sundays. Also, unlike Oxford, Cambridge or Dublin, there were no religious tests for tutors or governors.

Indeed, as the Great Awakening and Whitefield's 'enthusiasm' disturbed many across the northern colonies, Johnson continued to hope that people would be drawn to the Church of England through its reasoned and moderate approach to faith and morals, not least as expressed in his institution. In a letter from 1759 to the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Secker (several years after the charter had been secured), Johnson defended the work of the SPG in the northern colonies against those of other denominations who charged the Society and its missionaries with stealing their own congregants. This, Johnson argued, was the result of the migration of Anglicans to the northern colonies from England, and also those who 'in consequence of Mr. Whitefield's rambling once and again through the country' followed:

a good many strolling teachers who propagated so many wild notions of God and the Gospel that a multitude of people were so bewildered that they could find no rest to the sole of their feet till they retired into the Church [of England] as the only ark of safety.⁵¹

Anglican commitment to such enlightened moderation would also be in evidence in institutions beyond New England. Philadelphia's local Philosophical Society, led by Benjamin Franklin, sought to establish a new college in the 1750s, and had already drafted plans for a college in which classical languages were abandoned and academic exchange was conducted in English; they hoped to employ the Scottish Episcopalian William Smith, who had written *A General Idea of the College of Mirania* in 1753, subtitled 'a sketch of the method of teaching science and religion', in the context of New York debates around collegiate education. Informed by the reform of teaching at Aberdeen, he proposed an institution that wished to move beyond the philological and Aristotelian emphases of the medieval curriculum. In his idealized college, students would learn, alongside classics, mathematics, ethics, oratory, chronology, history, 'the most plain and useful Parts of natural and mechanic Philosophy', husbandry, chemistry and

⁵¹ Samuel Johnson to Thomas Secker, 1 March 1759; quoted in Schneider and Schneider, eds, *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College*, 1: 285. See also Claude M. Newlin, *Philosophy and Religion in Colonial America* (Westport, CT, 1962), 104–5.

agriculture.⁵² As at King's, however, limited resources meant that the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania) under William Smith's aegis was a mixture of both old and new learning.

Even if ambitions for the new colleges in New York and Philadelphia were inevitably restrained by resources, there is strong evidence that it was Anglican clergy and those influenced by its clerical Enlightenment who were instrumental in the pursuit of new institutional schemes that integrated public virtue with public usefulness. Their aspirations for education were far more adventurous than any found in England beyond the Dissenting academies or institutions like the Royal Society (Oxford and Cambridge being largely resistant to any kind of professional education until the later nineteenth century) and would remain lively foundations of enquiry, albeit shorn of royal patronage, after the Revolution.

CONCLUSION

On 18 February 1731, in the church of St Mary-le-Bow, George Berkeley ascended the pulpit to deliver the anniversary sermon for the SPG, preaching on John 13: 3 ('This is Life Eternal, that they may know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent'; AV). Having a decade earlier urged his Bermuda proposal on Londoners on account of an American clergy 'very meanly qualified both in learning and morals', he now adopted, with some degree of experience, a more emollient tone towards the work of the clergy in New England:

The Missionaries employed by this Venerable Society have done, and continue to do, good Service, in bringing those Planters to a serious Sense of Religion, which, it is hoped, will in time extend to others. I speak it knowingly, that the Ministers of the Gospel, in those Provinces which go by the Name of New-England, sent and supported at the Expence of this Society, have, by their Sobriety of Manners, discreet Behaviour, and a competent Degree of useful Knowledge, shewn themselves worthy the Choice of those who sent them; and particularly in living on a more friendly Foot with their Brethren of the Separation; who, on their Part, are also very much come off from that Narrowness of Spirit, which formerly kept them at such an unamicable Distance from

⁵² William Smith, *A General Idea of the College of Mirania* (New York, 1753), 16.

us. And as there is reason to apprehend, that Part of America could not have been thus distinguished, and provided with such a Number of proper Persons, if one half of them had not been supplied out of the dissenting Seminaries of the Country, who, in Proportion as they attain to more liberal Improvements of Learning, are observed to quit their Prejudice towards an Episcopal Church.⁵³

It is not unlikely, of course, that Berkeley had Samuel Johnson in mind when referring to those 'proper Persons ... supplied out of dissenting Seminaries'. Johnson, like many whom he would tutor at Yale, and such as were inspired by the 'more liberal Improvements of Learning', was emblematic of how Anglican clergy had, by the mid-eighteenth century, established a considerable network of learning across the Atlantic. This 'Anglican republic of letters' was the result of considerable benefactions, especially in relation to public and private libraries, and bearing fruit; as Bray had insisted, it was in evidence some time before Berkeley had ventured to the New World.

While the clergy of the northern colonies had a reverence for episcopacy and were eager to see a bishop sent to the American colonies, their emphasis in their writings upon virtue, charity and toleration bears witness to the influence of Locke and Tillotson, in particular. Such priorities were arguably the practical reality of a pluralist Protestant society, but it is also clear that, by the 1740s, there was considerable ambition on the part of Anglicans to establish institutions that were negotiating religious diversity, stressing 'useful' over 'classical' learning, and freely embracing the epistemic modes of Bacon, Locke and Newton. The reach of this 'republic of letters' extended far beyond the church (indeed, despite the establishment of King's, the majority of colonial clergy remained educated at Harvard and Yale), as Stout and Corrigan have noted. This article has sought to explore, however, how the Church of England had become by the mid-century a serious intellectual force in its own right, institutionally as much as philosophically. In conclusion, we might note that Samuel Johnson's King's College would be responsible for the education, among others, of Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, Gouverneur Morris and Robert Livingston, members of the Whig elite and, in due course, five of the 'founding fathers' of the United States.

⁵³ George Berkeley, *A Miscellany, Containing Several Tracts on Various Subjects. By the Bishop of Cloyne* (London, 1752), 215–16.