CHAPTER 4

Theological Activism (II): 1780s to 1800s

From the late 1780s through to the early years of the nineteenth century, the political event that consumed High Churchmen was the French Revolution (1789–1799). It was an ideological and political threat Stevens and his circle of friends would take a prominent role in opposing. The 1790s would also see Stevens and his High Church associates become increasingly involved in another dispute relating to Hutchinsonianism, though unlike the 1770s, the late 1790s would witness divisions amongst High Churchmen over the issue. Much of what is known about this period comes from the pen of Stevens himself who, in 1801, composed a biography of his close friend and co-activist in High Church concerns, William Jones of Nayland. Much more than simply being a life of a friend, the biography represented a broad overview and interpretation of their High Church engagement with the intellectual battles of the 1790s. By the early nineteenth century, when Stevens reflected on this period of ideological and political turmoil that he had been a part of opposing, he had become the last of a generation of Hutchinsonian High Churchmen who had taken a leading part in some of the main intellectual confrontations of the late eighteenth century. Not only taking an active role himself, towards the end of his life Stevens had also become an historian and interpreter of this tumultuous period in modern British history.

Following Stevens’ burst of publications during the 1770s, it would be more than two decades before he published again. Indeed, during the last years of the 1770s and all of 1780s, the period was subdued for Stevens in terms of actively engaging in intellectual debate. Of course, ecclesiastical issues concerning the Church of England and, from the late 1780s, the Scottish Episcopal Church, continued to involve him greatly, but these were of a more practical nature and were related to his growing involvement in the institutional welfare of the Church, especially where High Church concerns and philanthropic affairs required his attention—themes that are examined in the following chapter.

The 1780s and the Rise of Theological Heterodoxy

Yet if, following the 1770s, Stevens had been quieter where ideological debate was concerned, the 1780s saw his clerical friends continue to engage in a
battle of ideas with their ideological opponents. With the events of the 1770s still fresh in High Church minds, the threat of the Enlightenment’s more liberal theorists remained the target of High Church refutation.\(^1\) In reality, the ideological principles threatening the Church were in essence the same as they had been in the 1770s: namely, the rise of theological heterodoxy coupled with what they perceived to be an aggressive, anti-dogmatic, rationalism emanating from some of Britain’s most prominent (and more radical) Enlightenment figures. Among the critics of orthodoxy, the Dissenting minister, Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), stood out. By the 1780s Priestley had been openly advocating theological heterodoxy for over a decade, even taking the step of founding—with Richard Price and Feathers Tavern petitioner, Theophilus Lindsey—England’s first Unitarian congregation at Essex Street, London, in 1778.\(^2\) In 1782 Priestley had published a work entitled, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, which he followed-up with *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ* (1786).\(^3\) Both works promoted the Unitarian position and prompted a High Church response from men such as Samuel Horsley, the future Bishop of St David’s, whose refutations of Priestley during the early 1780s would do much to make him “a national figure,” as his recent biographer has claimed.\(^4\) However, as Nigel Aston has recently shown, another future bishop, George Horne, was also raised to a wider popularity during this decade through publishing stringent refutations of Priestley and his Unitarianism.\(^5\) Other prominent intellectuals, notably the philosopher, David Hume (1711–1776), and the notorious French *philosophe*, Voltaire (1694–1778), also came under Horne’s critique.\(^6\) In 1784 Horne published his *Letters on Infidelity*, a work that mostly attacked

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