CONYERS MIDDLETON: 
THE HISTORICAL CONSEQUENCES OF HETERODOXY

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A Friend of Diagoras the Philosopher, call’d the Atheist, having found him once in a Temple, as the Story is told by Cicero, You, says he, who think the Gods take no notice of human Affairs, do not you see here by this Number of Pictures, how many people for the sake of their Vows have been saved in Storms at Sea, and got safe into Harbour? Yes, says, Diagoras, I see how it is: for those are never painted, who happen to be drowned.

Conyers Middleton, A Letter from Rome

How does heterodoxy, ‘other teaching’, attempt to gain authority in a world dominated, intellectually and religiously, by orthodoxy? This essay offers a perspective on the problem by focusing on Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), a thinker who was more than usually aware of the ambiguities at the core of his own heterodox assault on the status of theological (and historical) orthodoxy in eighteenth-century England. To begin, then, with an observation by one of those who classically enunciated the right to toleration, and whose own religious thinking was widely assumed to be heterodox: ‘For every Church is orthodox to it self; to others Erroneous or Heretical.’ So, of course, declared John Locke in his Letter Concerning Toleration, and it is a phrase that seems unproblematic to modern

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1 Conyers Middleton, A Letter from Rome, shewing an exact conformity between Popery and Paganism: or, the religion of the present Romans to be derived entirely from that of their heathen ancestors (London, 1729), 23, citing (and translating) Cicero de Natura Deorum, 3.89. I am grateful to Noël Sugimura and Mishtooni Bose for reading and commenting on the essay. The insights of a Milton scholar and a student of late-medieval heresy have been especially beneficial in helping me think about heterodoxy.

readers. Problematic, however, it certainly is, not least as orthodoxy, ‘right
teaching’, requires, by definition, an authoritative structure of institutions
and contexts, firmly defining the parameters within which ‘right’ thinking
and debate about such thinking might take place. For clerical critics of
Locke, who were legion, his assertion was paradoxically individualistic,
implying as he had that churches were merely *persona e fictae*: orthodoxy,
for his critics, was a communal *fiat*, and it simply could not be a matter
of self-description.3

Eighteenth-century critics of orthodoxy often, nevertheless, appealed
to Locke’s sentiment in authorising their doubts, but it was not an apo-
getic tactic that their self-consciously orthodox opponents found particu-
larly impressive.4 When Middleton wrote his most scandalously heterodox
work, the *Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, which are supposed to
have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the earliest ages through several
successive centuries* (1749), he sought intellectual authority for his under-
taking by noticing that Locke had adverted to the questionable nature of
the miracles of the early Church in his *Third Letter Concerning Toleration*.5
Initiating his reply to Middleton, John Wesley relished yet another para-
doxx of religious belief and practice at work here: ‘You open the cause art-
fully enough, by a quotation from Mr. Locke. But we are agreed, to build
our Faith on no man’s authority.’6

Wesley had cut to the apologetic quick in criticising Middleton’s enter-
prise by undermining the standing of his would-be legitimating author-
ity. How, therefore, could heterodoxy define its own claims to authority,
particularly when, artfully or otherwise, it did so from within a Christian,
or at least a semi-Christian, framework? Examination of the writings of
Middleton allows one to address this question, observing in the process

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3 On the reasoning of one such critic, see Mark Goldie, ‘John Locke, Jonas Proast and
*The Church of England c. 1689–c. 1833: from Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge, 1993),
143–71. More broadly, see J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Within the margins: the definitions of orthodoxy’
in Roger D. Lund ed., *The Margins of Orthodoxy: heterodox writing and cultural response

4 See B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: theologi-

5 Middleton, *A Free Inquiry Into the Miraculous Powers, which are supposed to have subs-
sisted in the Christian Church, from the Earliest Ages through several successive centuries*
(1749), iii–vi. For the socio-cultural contexts in which his work appeared, see Jane Shaw,

6 John Wesley, *A Letter to the Reverend Doctor Conyers Middleton, Occasion’d by his late
Free Inquiry* (London, 1749), 5.