CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BEGINNINGS OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LATITUDINARIANISM

The temper of the age sustained seventeenth-century Latitudinarianism for about a generation and a half. But toward the end of the century, times began to change. We have seen that the apologists for Latitudinarianism, S.P., Fowler, Glanvill, and Burnet, all insisted upon its orthodoxy in speculative theology. The Latitudinarians' detractors accused them of paying too much attention to reason and not enough to grace; of making the certainty of Christianity lower than that of some forms of natural knowledge; of stressing natural religion to the derogation of revealed religion. All these charges had some elements of truth. When they were accused of heresy, however, in the sense of deviating from the essentials of historical orthodoxy as contained in the ancient and traditional Creeds, the charge was, on the whole, completely false. But during the last decade of the century, the integrity of Latitudinarianism as a system of rational theology which could and did support orthodoxy began to crumble at the edges. It began to take on the characteristics of what we have called eighteenth-century Latitudinarianism, and to fulfill the long-standing accusation that it sheltered heterodoxy.

The manifestations of this change appeared in the guise of Trinitarian heresies, for speculative heterodoxy either begins with one's notion of the Trinity, or else quickly displays itself there. The 1690s were marked by an intense agitation about the Trinity, culminating in the great Trinitarian Controversy of the turn of the century. In the larger sense the Trinitarian Controversy was a symptom of the disturbing effect on traditional Christianity of accumulated pressures from all the rational tendencies of a rational age. For the Trinity has always been a potential stumbling-block for advocates of reason in religion, since no belief defies rational analysis so stubbornly as that of three co-equal and co-eternal Persons in one God. The prominence of Trinitarian disputes at the end of the century can thus be viewed as pointing to the end of one phase of the English Enlightenment and the beginning of a new one. The seventeenth-century Latitudinarians were important representatives of the earlier stage, which was characterized by confident assertions of the harmonious interrelationship between reason and orthodoxy. Eighteenth-century Latitudinarianism sometimes partook of the nature
of the later stage, wherein actual conflict between the two was more the rule than the exception.

The specific Trinitarian heresy with which the seventeenth-century Latitudinarians were regularly charged was that of Socinianism. The accusation had a superficial verisimilitude. Socinianism was par excellence a rational religion, and had many similarities to Latitudinarianism. Whereas Arianism rejected the deity of Christ but not his divinity, Socinianism rejected both, and by the end of the century was indistinguishable from Unitarianism. Since the Christology of Socinianism thus dispensed with the traditional orthodox scheme of salvation, it consequently tended to place emphatic stress on morality and good works. Because the Latitudinarians were both “rational” and “moral” preachers, it was perhaps inevitable that their enemies should declare that “the orthodox Latitudinarians were concealed Socinians; and that they acquiesced in Trinitarian formulas for the sake of lucre or reputation.”

After Tillotson became Archbishop of Canterbury and therefore the most prominent Latitudinarian in England, he bore the brunt of denunciations which previously had been bestowed on the group as a whole. A typical diatribe announced that “his religion is Latitudinarian, which is none. . . . He is owned by the atheistical wits of all England as their true primate and apostle. . . . He leads them not only the length of Socinianism . . . but to call in question all revelation.” To rebut such attacks, Tillotson felt himself obliged in 1693 to republish sermons he had preached on the Trinity in 1679-80, which showed his Christology to be unexceptionably Athanasian. Yet it is true that he, like the other Latitudinarians, had little affection for the Athanasian Creed: he once told Burnet that “I wish we were well rid of it.” But what they objected to was its anathemas, not its doctrine. Tillotson, for example, did not despair of the salvation of his Socinian friend Thomas Firmin, a noted philanthropist; but he thought that Firmin was wrong, and (as he assured Queen Mary) often tried to “set him right.”

But when all is said and done, the Latitudinarians’ rational theology had no built-in guarantees of orthodoxy. More than they suspected, they were victims of the Idols of the Tribe. They thought that they had proved Christianity by a thoroughly rational process and with no preconceived notions; actually they were so rooted in the Christian tradition that they could not realize that their conclusions were also postulates and that their whole system was an intricate and elaborate begging of the question. The main cause of the change from seventeenth-century Latitudi-

* [The Socinians were banished from Poland in 1658, and refugees appeared in Holland, Germany, and England, “permeating diverse churches and fellowships” throughout the rest of that century as well as the following one.57—RHP]