LOCKE AS SECRET 'SPINOZIST': THE PERSPECTIVE OF WILLIAM CARROLL

Stuart Brown

It is perhaps symbolic that 1689 was when the first English translation of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was published. For England was then undergoing something of a revolution which would result in much greater toleration and freedom of religious expression. At the time a Spinoza publication was in flagrant breach of the Licensing Laws. But the Laws themselves lapsed a few years later (in 1695) and the censorship of books was never re-introduced. Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* was published in 1695 and John Toland’s *Christianity not Mysterious* the following year. Both books, like Spinoza’s, shocked conservative Churchmen. Toland’s book was burned in Ireland. But, although there were certainly those who would have liked to see Locke’s and Toland’s books suppressed in England, they were not. Heterodox books could still be burned and indeed this misfortune befell a book by another of Locke’s followers.¹ The Blasphemy Act of 1698 also posed a threat to the outspoken. Nonetheless the formal constraints on the publication of heterodox works were in large measure lifted.

Between 1695 and 1715 there was a large output of heterodox writing and controversies between the Church parties reached a peak. The ‘Latitudinarians’ were free to express opinions which would generally be regarded as heretical. A well-known example was Samuel Clarke,² who challenged the biblical basis of the doc-

¹ *M. Le Clerc’s Extract and Judgment of the Rights of the Christian Church asserted, etc. Trans from his Bibliothèque choisie...* (London, 1708). William Carroll may have been instrumental in persuading the House of Commons to order the book to be burned, together with two by Matthew Tindal. At all events he defended the action of Parliament in his controversy with Le Clerc. For some account of these events and this controversy, see my “Theological Politics’ and the Reception of Spinoza in Early Enlightenment England”, *Studia Spinozana* 9 (1994) (forthcoming).

² Samuel Clarke is now remembered particularly for his defence of Newton against Leibniz. But he was an important philosophical figure for at least the first half of the eighteenth century. Voltaire circulated the joke about him that he was the best
trine of the Trinity but nonetheless held on to his fashionable pulpit in Westminster. More extreme were the ‘deists’ such as Toland and Anthony Collins, both professed disciples of Locke.3 The Latitudinarians generally sought to distance themselves from the deists, though in this the ailing Locke was less successful. The High Church party, which lost power under William and Mary, blamed the Latitudinarians and the ‘abused Toleration’ for what they perceived as the decline of religion in England. They not merely blamed them for encouraging the deists but even accused some of being deists themselves.

Spinoza’s name was often linked to deism4 and indeed he was taken to be the inspiration for its more extreme forms.5 Though deism might be little more than a demand for rational religion, in its more extreme forms it was mechanist and materialist in metaphysics, republican in politics and indeed subversive of Church and State authority alike.6 High Churchmen, who were strongly com-

3 Toland linked a Lockean empiricism with an explicit materialism and so helped to give currency to the materialist interpretation of Locke. He was partially responsible for Leibniz understanding Locke in this way. See Leibniz’s letter to the Queen of Prussia on whether there is anything in our minds not derived from the senses and whether there is anything in nature that is not merely material. Leibniz, Die philosophischen Schriften, ed. C.I. Gerhardt (Berlin, 1875-1890; Hildesheim, 1978), 7 vols., VI, p. 449-508. Locke did not encourage Toland but favoured the more respectable Collins.

4 See for instance, Matthias Earbury, Deism examin’d and confuted. In an answer to a book intitled Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (London, 1697). Earbury may have been influential in establishing a usage of ‘deism’ and ‘Spinozism’ in which they became virtually interchangeable. The term ‘deism’ is, however, a very confusing one during this period. See Robert R. Sullivan, John Toland and the Deist Controversy. A Study in Adaptations (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

5 A likely prototype for such extreme deism is Charles Blount (1654-1693), author of The Oracles of Reason (London, 1693). Blount was probably responsible for the first (illicit) publication in English of extracts from the chapter on miracles from Spinoza’s Tractatus which he interlarded in a curious way with quotations from Hobbes and from Thomas Burnet’s heterodox Sacred Theory of the Earth (whom he interlarded elsewhere). Blount’s conflation of Hobbes and Spinoza may have influenced the High Church opponents of deism, including William Carroll.