Katherine Jones, Viscountess Ranelagh (1614–91) occupied a prominent position in London political and intellectual society from the 1640s to the 1690s. During the 1640s and 50s particularly, she and her friends put forward ideas of scientific advance and social reform, and their endeavours eventually saw the foundation of the Royal Society in the 1660s. Ranelagh occupied a position as patroness and participant in the manifold plans of men like John Dury and Samuel Hartlib for universal knowledge, the development of science, trade, agriculture, and education and, most significantly for the purposes of this essay, the reunification of the Protestant churches. Her circle explored the possibilities of the conversion of the Jews by supporting the mission of Menasseh ben Israel to England, the fall of the Papacy through Dury’s missions to the Continent, and the renewal of England as an educated Protestant paradise.  

The significance of their work lies not solely in their aspirations, which were shared by many and disparate groups, but by the fact that this group had close links to and influence with many of the individuals with the political will to see their aspirations realized. Ranelagh played a prominent, yet still unexplored role in the Hartlib circle’s work, and her personal dedication to their causes derived from her commitment to Protestantism as the true religion. Her unswerving allegiance was to religious toleration for all Protestant sects as part of the essential

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1 The funding for this research came from a Government of Ireland scholarship supported by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Versions of this paper were presented at the “Women and the Divine” conference held at the University of Liverpool, 17–19 June 2006 and at the Perdita-sponsored “Still Kissing the Rod?” conference held at St Hilda’s, Oxford, 2–4 July 2006. I would like to thank all who offered advice and ideas at both conferences.

foundations for a future blossoming of England and eventually Europe as a bastion of godly Christianity. This religious stance also committed her to political ideals, which highlights another underexamined aspect of her career: the development in tandem of her religious and political goals and their co-existence as necessary bedfellows rather than as separate entities. However, political reform was only the first step in her religious vision. Ranelagh insisted on the complete separation of church and state and debated the introduction of a republican form of government as the forerunner for the abandonment altogether of earthly politics in favour of a complete submission to and reliance upon God.

Katherine Boyle was born in 1614, the daughter of Richard Boyle, the first Earl of Cork and his wife Catherine. Cork was a New English planter who came to Ireland in 1588 as part of an Elizabethan plantation policy which sought to conquer, convert, and civilise the Catholic Irish and install a reliable Protestant governing class as a counterweight to the Catholic Old English, Ireland’s traditional rulers. Cork was phenomenally successful in his ventures, his enormous wealth frequently attracting well-grounded innuendo about the legitimacy of his methods. One of his fifteen children, Katherine Boyle was, like her sisters, married in order to further her father’s network of allies. The first match her father arranged for her was to a relative of the duke of Buckingham, Viscount Beaumont of Swords, and Katherine left Ireland at the age of ten in order to be brought up at the home of her future husband. She lived there for six years but, after the death of Buckingham and perceived sharp practice, Cork brought his daughter home and married her, in 1630, to Arthur Jones, the son of Roger, Viscount Ranelagh, a minor Irish aristocrat and his close supporter.

Katherine’s early life in England is intriguing, although little remains to indicate what she studied there. However, some clues remain in the writings of Stephen Jerome, sent by Viscount Beaumont to work as a chaplain for Cork in the 1620s, and who served to educate some of the Boyle children. His published writings indicate a number of motifs which were to recur again and again in Ranelagh’s mature political

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3 See Nicholas Canny, *The Upstart Earl* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
4 See Patrick Little, “The Geraldine Ambitions of the First Earl of Cork”, *Irish Historical Studies* (2002): 151–168. Little argues that Cork’s marriage policy was motivated not by the wish for greater social standing but from a desire to help civilise and convert influential Old English dynasties that also held sway over the native Irish.