I am grateful to be allowed to make some brief – and friendly – comments on Peter Harrison’s response (1995) to my article on religion and religions in the age of William and Mary (1994a). On the whole I endorse his remarks. They seem to me to offer further insight into the period and to support my basic thesis that at that time, to use his words, “Christianity ... was taken to be the paradigmatic ‘religion’, and empirical facts about other so-called ‘religions’ were ordered according to structural features of Christian religion” (Harrison 1995: 279). One or two comments on his response may, however, be in order to develop understanding of the situation a little further.

1. The narrow ridge between particularity and generality in historical methodology

First, I accept that there are no strong boundary reasons for choosing to examine what was being written about religion and religions in works published in England in the age of William and Mary. While, however, initially my interest in the final decade of the seventeenth century (and, to be precise, a couple of years either side of it) was the accidental result of a request to contribute something to a celebration of the “Glorious Revolution”, subsequent reflection suggested that it would be interesting to indicate the kinds of material that were appearing in those days. Investigations of periods when important changes are occurring may lead to somewhat distorted pictures because of the tensions that provoked the changes, because of the excitement these tensions produce, and because of the problems that contemporaries had in discerning what may and may not be appropriate ways to resolve them. Examining the state of play when no radical shifts in understanding were taking place may not produce as lively a story as a review of revolutionary changes but it does allow one to try to discover how people at one particular, somewhat brief and relatively homogenous, period (in this case my English forebears three centuries ago) may have seen things. What is needed is similar studies
of other sample periods and groups. The danger of studies covering longer spans of time and wider groups is that it is too easy for readers to forget the realities of the human awareness in the period being considered.

A study of faith and reason controversies in Britain from Herbert of Cherbury to William Paley might seem a coherent project (I hope so, for one day I hope to produce such a study – "one day", that is, when universities again become places for scholarship as well as for teaching and administration, or, more likely, when I retire), but presentation and discussion of such a spread of materials may obscure the fact that the authors being studied cover several generations. The "debate" from Herbert to Paley covers a time span equivalent to that from the victory at Waterloo to the present. When, however, I reflect on the possible coherence of such a span of years, I have to recognize that I now find that even the 1960s (let alone the 1860s) are history to my students and increasingly to me dimming memories of what in several important respects was another world. Accordingly, those who study history have to make their way along a narrow ridge between the chasms of reporting particularities that are too restricted to give much insight and generalities that invent realities that people at the time would not have recognized. This is a basic problem in historical methodology but one worth pondering when, in discussing a particular faith, we are tempted to link together material from different ages and places. Not only doctrines develop; faiths, attitudes, practices, and ways of self-understanding also develop, sometimes radically. I am therefore not unhappy occasionally, as in my article, to concentrate on a relatively short period – and am aware that an article can only indicate the richness and variety of the materials even in such a restricted area.

2. "That much perverted and abused Word Reason"

Secondly, Harrison seems to me to be correct in drawing attention to the wide range of uses for the term "reason" in the theological debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While few (although there were a few) wished to challenge the "canon of reason" as such, what was meant by the "reason" to which many appealed as the final court of judgment varied enormously. Those who study this period quickly come to appreciate the justification of John Hildrop's complaint at the start of his Reflections Upon Reason (1729). He writes that while "many laudable Attempts" have been made to rescue us from the confusion, misunderstanding, perplexity, and obscurity that arise from failures to use terms in the same way,

I have often wish'd it, that some judicious Hand would endeavour to explain and set in a right Light that much perverted and abused Word Reason, the Abuse of which has been, and continues to be, as fatal to the Interests of Religion, the Cause of Truth,