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Thomas Clarkson's Heterodox Anglican Christianity and Anti-Slavery

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This article argues that Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), the founder of the British campaign to abolish the slave trade, was a heterodox Anglican. Suspected of 'Unitarian opinions' in his youth, his religious writings in old age, including neglected notes on his copy of the New Testament, display a deep commitment to critical study of the Bible and a broadly Arian view of Christ. Knowing that Clarkson was a life-long but heterodox member of the Church of England challenges the conventional focus on Quakers and Evangelicals in the study of religion and abolitionism.

At the end of the eighteenth century an innovative popular campaign arose to abolish Britain's large and profitable Atlantic slave trade. While its relative importance as a cause of parliament's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 has been hotly debated, religion has always been recognised as a key element of anti-slavery thought and activism.[1] Studies of the religious aspect of abolitionism have traditionally highlighted the pioneering role of the Quakers, and have linked its rapid

The author is very thankful for the helpful comments provided by Martin Fitzpatrick and this Journal's peer reviewers, and also to the staff at the Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library, where Clarkson's annotated New Testament is archived.

[1] The scholarship on the relative roles of religion, social change, colonial revolts and economic interests in causing the abolition of the British slave trade is vast. For an introduction to the subject see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman bondage: the rise and fall of slavery in the new world*, Oxford 2006, 231–49, and William Palmer, 'How ideology works: historians and the case of British abolitionism', *HJ* lii (2009), 1039–51.

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spread in the 1780s to the rise of Evangelical Protestantism.[2] Emphasis on the Evangelicals has, however, tended to overshadow the important role played by varieties of heterodox 'rational' Christianity in eighteenth-century anti-slavery.[3] This is reflected in, and reinforced by, confusion about the religion of the leading abolitionist agitator.

Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) attended Cambridge University with an eye to becoming a Church of England priest. A university competition in 1785 led him to research the nature of the Atlantic slave trade and then publish his prize-winning *Essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species* (1786). With a pamphlet war raging between critics and defenders of slavery, in the summer of 1786 Clarkson resolved to 'devote myself to the cause' of anti-slavery and proceeded to help found the London Society for Abolition of the Slave Trade in May 1787.[4] Unclear about his religious views, scholars have understandably settled for this simple explanation as to why Clarkson did not pursue his intended career as an Anglican priest.

This article analyses Clarkson's religious views as a Latitudinarian Anglican who appears to have rejected the central orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Scholars no longer see the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as an essentially anti-religious project but rather a period of increased confidence in the use of reason to achieve progress across all domains of knowledge – including religion. As John Robertson has observed, the Enlightenment saw a growing 'realization that several of the more complex Christian doctrines, such as immortality of the soul, or the Trinity, had borrowed their metaphysics' from Greek and Roman philosophies.[5] This led to widespread theological debate and efforts to improve translations of Scripture.[6] It was particularly the case that, as Roy Porter observed, 'Enlightenment goals … throve in England within piety', where Protestant Dissent was tolerated, and members of the Church of England actively contributed to the expansion of print culture.[7]

With Clarkson's surviving correspondence overwhelmingly focused on anti-slavery agitation, this article discusses his Christianity through an

[2] See, for example, the influential Reginald Coupland, *The British anti-slavery movement*, London 1933, 42, 60–85.

[3] David Turley, *The culture of English anti-slavery, 1780–1860*, London 1991; Anthony Page, 'Rational Dissent, Enlightenment and abolition of the British slave trade', *HJ* liv (2011), 741–77.

[4] Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British parliament*, London 1808, i. 224–5.

[5] John Robertson, *The Enlightenment: a very short introduction*, Oxford 2015, 19.

[6] Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: translation, scholarship, culture*, Princeton 2005.

[7] Roy Porter, 'Enlightenment in England', in Roy S. Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in national context*, Cambridge 1981, 6.

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examination of his context, career and writings on religion in old age, including the marginal notes in his hitherto neglected copy of the New Testament.[8] While he remained a member of the Church of England, theological heterodoxy may help explain why Clarkson did not pursue his intended career as a priest. That the founder of the campaign against the slave trade was an Anglican, and privately heterodox, both reinforces the role of Protestant Christianity in explaining anti-slavery and broadens our understanding beyond the conventional focus on Quakers and Evangelicals.

Historians on Clarkson's religion

Clarkson was not an Evangelical, but is sometimes labelled as one owing to his friendship with leading Evangelical abolitionists such as William Wilberforce.[9] In his volume of the *New Oxford History of England*, Boyd Hilton wrote that the 'sudden nationwide explosion of moral indignation' against the slave trade 'was largely due to Thomas Clarkson, an Anglican evangelical and itinerant campaigner'.[10] While conceding that 'it is difficult to identify him with certainty as an evangelical', Clarkson was none the less included in the *Blackwell dictionary of Evangelical biography* based on some doubtful evidence.[11] In addition, scholars who do not clearly label Clarkson an Evangelical can leave an impression that he was

[8] Clarkson's personal copy of the New Testament, published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, for the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1826, is archived in the Thomas Clarkson Papers, Box 2, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Archives and Special Collections. It appears that no scholar has examined this valuable source, including his most recent and best biographer: Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: a biography*, Basingstoke 1989.

[9] 'Thomas Clarkson': C. Paine, 'Clarkson and the slave trade', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2007/03/05/clarkson_abolition_slave_trade_feature.shtml>, accessed 25 July 2018.

[10] Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people? England, 1783–1846*, Oxford 2006, 184. In a later publication, however, his assessment changed and he argued that Clarkson had 'humanitarian' religious beliefs like the Quakers and was 'instinctively unsympathetic … to Wilberforce's Anglican Evangelical otherworldly emphasis on sin, salvation, judgement, heaven, and hell': Boyd Hilton, '1807 and all that: why Britain outlawed her slave trade', in Derek R. Peterson (ed.), *Abolitionism and imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, Athens, OH 2010, 63–83 at p. 75.

[11] Donald M. Lewis, *The Blackwell dictionary of Evangelical biography: 1730–1860*, Oxford 1995, i. 228–9. This work of reference notes that 'it is difficult to identify him with certainty as an evangelical', although his deathbed confession clearly fit the evangelical stereotype: 'All my works and righteousness are as filthy as rags, I trust only in the Atonement, the sacrifice, the blood shed on the cross for washing away my sins and entrance to Heaven.' This is possibly a mistake: I have not been able to locate the original source of this quotation, and the author of the article is now deceased.

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one.[12] When Christopher Brown discusses the formation of a group of 'devout Anglicans' at Teston in 1786, he points to the presence of James Ramsay and visits by Clarkson and Wilberforce before declaring: 'Teston, not Clapham became the first headquarters for Evangelical abolitionism.'[13] Brown is usually careful to refer to Clarkson as a 'devout' or 'pious' Anglican, rather than an Evangelical. Yet it was understandably easy for a leading scholar of slavery, when reviewing his book, to be left with the impression that Clarkson was one of the Evangelical Anglicans.[14]

The common association of Clarkson with Evangelicalism owes something to the five-volume *Life of Wilberforce*, written by his Anglican High-Church sons.[15] Reacting against Clarkson's own personal account of the abolition movement, this work deliberately diminished his role in the campaign. With the help of his Unitarian friend, Henry Crabb Robinson, Clarkson published a critical response to the biography of Wilberforce, but the damage had been done.[16] As a key primary source for the study of abolitionism, the *Life of Wilberforce* ensured that the Evangelical politician long occupied centre stage in the story of abolition – something reflected in the 2006 film *Amazing Grace*.[17]

Some scholars stress Clarkson's affinity with the Quakers. This is understandable given that he worked closely with them in founding the campaign for abolition, and proceeded to write a three-volume study of Quakerism and an influential biography of William Penn.[18] Dee Andrews and Emma Jones Lapsansky-Werner have argued that Clarkson's association with the Quakers was 'essential to his development'

[12] See, for example, John Coffey, 'Evangelicals, slavery & the slave trade: from Whitfield to Wilberforce', *ANVIL* xxiv (2007), 105n, 107. Anyone who reads this article without checking the footnotes would assume that Clarkson was an Evangelical. In a footnote, Coffey observes that his 'religious identity is a matter of some debate' and he 'was not strictly aligned with' either the Evangelicals or Quakers, but notes his inclusion in the *Blackwell dictionary of Evangelical biography: 1730–1860*. In a later publication he correctly notes that Clarkson was 'theologically liberal': J. Coffey, '"Tremble, Britannia!": fear, providence and the abolition of the slave trade, 1758–1807', *EHR* cxxvii (2012), 844–81 at p. 858.

[13] Christopher L. Brown, *Moral capital: foundations of British abolitionism*, Chapel Hill, NC 2006, 342.

[14] David Richardson, 'Agency, ideology, and violence in the history of transatlantic slavery', *HJ* l (2007), 971–89 at p. 983.

[15] Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, London 1838.

[16] Thomas Clarkson, *Strictures on a life of William Wilberforce, by the Rev. W. Wilberforce and the Rev. S. Wilberforce*, London 1838.

[17] For example, Ernest Marshall Howse does not discuss Clarkson's religious opinions, but describes him as one of the Clapham Sect for whom he was an 'admirable henchman' with a 'dull but voluminous pen': *Saints in politics*, London 1953, 15–28 at p. 21.

[18] Thomas Clarkson, *A portraiture of Quakerism*, London 1806, and *Memoirs of the private and public life of William Penn*, London 1813.

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both as an abolitionist and as a writer of 'a new kind of history … that sought to combine the empirical drive of social science with the passion of social reform'. In the Quakers, they claim, Clarkson 'found his chief moral argument – that the slave trade was not a political cause so much as a moral one'.[19] This is questionable, as Clarkson had come to see slavery as a great moral evil before he met the Quakers.[20] That said, having made a good case for the various ways the Quakers influenced his activist and literary careers, Andrews and Lapsansky-Werner note that Clarkson 'left us few clues' as to why he 'never joined the Religious Society of Friends'. They speculate that the Quakers 'may have been too theologically reticent to compete with the evangelical fervour of many of Clarkson's other allies. Or the abolitionist's political compass may have steered him more toward the well-connected Anglicans than toward the politically powerless Quakers'.[21] Here again we see the conventional focus on Clarkson's connections to both Quakers and Evangelicals. When Tsar Alexander I asked if he was a Quaker, Clarkson famously replied 'not in Name, but I hoped in Spirit; I was nine parts out of ten of their way of thinking. They had been Fellow Labourers with me in our Great Cause, the more I had known them, the more I had loved them'.[22] The context is important. The Tsar had expressed an enthusiasm for Quakerism and Clarkson was trying to cultivate his support for anti-slavery. Back when Clarkson was writing his *Portraiture of Quakerism*, a friend noted that 'he greatly admired them without adopting their opinions'.[23]

While Clarkson was undoubtedly attracted by many aspects of Quakerism, it distracts attention from the fact that he remained an Anglican throughout his life. Observing that most historians 'have got the religious labelling wrong', Ellen Gibson Wilson noted in her biography that 'we know that he was a committed Christian but he defies categorisation. Most previous writers have either put him in the Clapham Sect with Wilberforce or labelled him a Quaker. The latter has more substance'.[24] Like many scholars, however, she displayed a limited interest in religion – tending to pass over Clarkson's writings on religion with a mere sentence

[19] Dee E. Andrews and Emma Jones Lapsansky-Werner, 'Thomas Clarkson's Quaker trilogy: Abolitionist narrative as transformative history', in Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank (eds), *Quakers and abolition*, Urbana, IL 2014, 195–6.

[20] Clarkson became 'almost wholly engrossed' in researching and writing his prize-winning Latin thesis on slavery in 1785, and in November made the decision to translate and publish it. It was early in 1786 that he was introduced to the Quaker bookseller, James Phillips: J. R. Oldfield, *Popular politics and British anti-slavery: the mobilisation of public opinion against the slave trade, 1787–1807*, London 1998, 71–2.

[21] Andrews and Lapsansky-Werner, 'Thomas Clarkson's Quaker trilogy', 205.

[22] Cited in Wilson, *Clarkson*, 145.

[23] Katherine Plymley diary, entry for 23 July 1805, Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury, 1066/65, fos 5–7.

[24] Wilson, *Clarkson*, 230n, 134.

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or two.[25] While noting that Clarkson 'remained in the Church of England, yet rejected ordination as a priest, clerical clothes and the title "reverend"', Wilson inferred that he was put off by the 'notoriously lax' nature of the Church in 'the age of the fox-hunting parson, the hard drinker and high liver who abandoned his parish (or parishes) to a curate and enjoyed rank and fortune in society'.[26] This caricature of a worldly, intellectually arid and neglectful eighteenth-century Church has, however, been overturned by revisionist historians – it reflects nineteenth-century Evangelical and secular polemics more than the eighteenth-century reality.[27]

In a revisionist approach, Nicholas Hudson has argued that abolitionism was largely a product of conservative Anglican ideology, highlighting figures such as Samuel Johnson and stressing the orthodoxy of Granville Sharp. Avoiding any discussion of Clarkson, Hudson simply stated that he 'was an Anglican clergyman' who supported his interpretation:

> Anglican divines who unequivocally denounced the slave-trade later in the century – including Thomas Clarkson, James Ramsay, Beilby Porteus, and William Paley – were by no means importing some exterior or 'dissenting' element into the midst of their church. They were affirming an antagonism to slavery that had been heard in the highest levels of the episcopacy and among supporters of the Anglican establishment.[28]

This is an odd grouping of 'Anglican divines'. Ramsay was an Evangelical, while William Paley and Thomas Clarkson were Latitudinarians.

There are three main reasons for this confusion about Clarkson's religion. First, he was of an irenic disposition, with friends of various denominations and dispositions, and focused on building a popular abolitionist campaign that attracted supporters from a variety of religious, political and social backgrounds.[29] Second, there is a problem of evidence. As Earl Griggs noted, Clarkson was 'always reticent about his personal affairs', he 'seems to have mentioned nothing of his youth' and in old age destroyed nearly all of his voluminous manuscripts and correspondence.[30]

[25] Ibid. 167–8.

[26] Ibid. 134.

[27] Revisionist scholarship began with Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the XVIIIth century*, Cambridge 1934. More recently see John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (eds), *The Church of England,* c. *1689*–c. *1833: from toleration to Tractarianism*, Cambridge 1993, and Jeremy Gregory (ed.), *The Oxford history of Anglicanism,* II: *Establishment and empire, 1662–1829*, Oxford 2017.

[28] Nicholas Hudson, '"Britons never will be slaves": national myth, conservatism, and the beginnings of British anti-slavery', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* xxiv (2001), 559–76 at pp. 560–1.

[29] Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and anti-slavery: British mobilization in comparative perspective*, Oxford 1987.

[30] E. L. Griggs, *Thomas Clarkson: the friend of slaves*, Westport, CT 1936, 24. Clarkson told his executor that 'I have destroyed *almost* all my Papers', except his writings on

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As a result, there is a lack of manuscript sources for his formative years as a student at Cambridge and his surviving correspondence is overwhelmingly devoted to anti-slavery activity. Third, as R. K. Webb has observed, 'the structural foundations of religion in the British Isles are sunk in a terminological swamp'.[31] It is easy to make mistakes or miss nuances when studying eighteenth-century religious opinions.

Anglican Latitudinarianism

Despite these difficulties, analysis of the surviving evidence suggests that Clarkson developed anti-Trinitarian theological views within the tradition of Anglican Latitudinarianism. Latitudinarianism originated in the seventeenth century, and was a term applied to those who sought to harmonise Anglican Protestantism and the Scientific Revolution.[32] Latitudinarians questioned traditional practices and doctrines that had evolved in previous centuries, and argued that rational critical study of the Bible would promote an enlightened Christianity based on the core truths originally taught by Jesus Christ. They combined a faith in the Bible as containing God's word and the power of reason to detect the essential doctrines of 'primitive Christianity'. The philosopher John Locke, for example, aimed to show 'the doctrine of our Saviour and his apostles, as delivered in the Scriptures, and not as taught by the several sects of Christians' in his *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).[33] Latitudinarians believed in the social and political value of an established national Protestant Church of England, but wanted to tolerate a latitude of views on debatable, non-essential theological points.

While united in their commitment to toleration and critical study of the Bible, Latitudinarians developed diverse theological views. In the context of the Enlightenment, by the late eighteenth century a number of Latitudinarians linked to Cambridge University had become Unitarians and were pushing 'the boundaries of enlightened Christianity beyond even the elastic limits tolerated by the Church'.[34] As a result, some left

religious matters and some letters from 'great Men': T. Clarkson to A. Haldane, [1845], cited in Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson*, 4.

[31] R. K. Webb, 'Religion', in Iain McCalman (ed.), *An Oxford companion to the Romantic Age: British culture, 1776–1832*, Oxford 1999, 93.

[32] W. M. Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660–1700*, Athens, Ga 1993.

[33] The quotation is from John Locke's *Second vindication of the reasonableness of Christianity*, London 1697, cited in J. R. Milton, 'Locke, John (1632–1704)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography*.

[34] John Gascoigne, 'Anglican Latitudinarianism, Rational Dissent and political radicalism in the late eighteenth century', in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and religion: rational Dissent in eighteenth century Britain*, Cambridge 2006, 223.

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the Church of England while others continued to practice a Latitudinarian form of Anglicanism that came to be called 'Broad Church' in the late nineteenth century.[35] Following his conversion experience in the 1780s, according to his sons, the Cambridge-educated William Wilberforce set out to counter the 'deadly leaven' of 'Latitudinarian views [that] had spread to an alarming extent among the clergy; and whilst numbers confessedly agreed with his Socinian tenets, few were sufficiently honest to resign with Mr. Lindsey the endowments of the Church'.[36] It is in this context that Clarkson was educated and turned his back on a clerical career, while remaining a member of the Church of England.

Clarkson was a student at Cambridge University during a time of fierce debate over theology and the requirement that students and clergy subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. These articles articulated orthodox theology centred on the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost (or Spirit) – understood to mysteriously form three 'persons' of a unified monotheistic God. According to this orthodox doctrine Jesus Christ, the Son, was God incarnate and died on the cross as a sacrifice to atone for human sinfulness. By the late eighteenth century, however, a number of liberal-minded Latitudinarian Anglican clergy had adopted anti-Trinitarian views. Some became Arians, believing that Jesus was divine and had pre-existed his life on earth, but was a subordinate being to God – effectively a super-angel.[37] Others adopted Socinianism, in which Jesus was a human being given a special commission by God, and then resurrected to an exalted status following his crucifixion. Both varieties of anti-Trinitarianism were at times called 'Unitarianism', as they both made Christ a 'creature' who was subordinate to God rather than part of the incomprehensible Holy Trinity. As Arianism became less fashionable in the late eighteenth-century, Unitarianism was increasingly equated with Socinianism.[38] While Unitarianism spread among the liberal minded during the Enlightenment, it was technically illegal until the extension of toleration by the 1813 Doctrine of the Trinity Act. Given the centrality of the Trinity to orthodox belief, anti-Trinitarians often had heterodox views on other doctrines such as original sin, atonement and eternal punishment.

In the early 1770s some Anglican clergy, meeting at the Feathers Tavern in London, had petitioned parliament for relief from the requirement that

[35] Martin Fitzpatrick, 'Latitudinarianism at the parting of the ways: a suggestion', in Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *Church of England*, 209–27.

[36] Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, i. 129.

[37] Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal heresy: Arianism through the centuries*, Oxford 2004, 146; J. Hay Colligan, *The Arian movement in England*, Manchester 1913.

[38] Valerie Smith, *Rational Dissenters in late eighteenth century England: 'An ardent desire of truth'*, Woodbridge 2021, 15–16.

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they subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles.[39] The subscription controversy generated a pamphlet war over theology and religious liberty. After parliament rejected two petitions in 1772 and 1774, heterodox clergy faced a difficult choice. A small number resigned. Most notably, Theophilus Lindsey proceeded to establish a non-conformist Unitarian chapel. His close friend, John Jebb, left Cambridge and re-trained as a physician in London, where he became a leading Unitarian and radical political activist. Others continued their careers in the Church – William Paley allegedly quipped that he 'could not afford to keep a conscience'.[40] Yet as support for the established constitution in Church and State hardened in the polarising revolutionary era, heterodox Latitudinarian clergy like Paley found themselves passed over for promotion, or unwilling to be promoted because it would require them to again declare belief in the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Unitarianism spread in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, with the nonconformist Rational Dissenter, Joseph Priestley, publishing many combative pamphlets and books, such as *A history of the corruptions of Christianity* (1782), which caused a storm of controversy while Clarkson was a student at Cambridge.[41] In the late 1780s Dissenters launched a failed campaign urging parliament to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, which barred non-conformists from many civil offices. In essence, they wanted to replace religious toleration with full religious liberty. A leading parliamentary supporter of this campaign was William Smith, a Unitarian who also played a leading role in the campaign to abolish the slave trade – developing a close friendship with both William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson.[42]

In contrast to the more conservative Oxford, Cambridge was noted for producing many heterodox Latitudinarian clergymen and students.[43] A particularly relevant example is the Revd Peter Peckard, Master of

[39] J. C. D. Clark, *English society, 1660–1832: religion, ideology, and politics during the ancien regime*, Cambridge 2000, 371–4; G. M. Ditchfield, 'The subscription issue in British parliamentary politics, 1772–79', *Parliamentary History* vii (2008), 45–80.

[40] Cited in Anthony Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment origins of British radicalism*, Westport, CT 2003, 33.

[41] Robert E. Schofield, *The enlightened Joseph Priestley: a study of his life and work from 1773 to 1804*, University Park, PA 2004, 216–34. For his main opponent see F. C. Mather, *High Church prophet: Bishop Samuel Horsley (1733–1806) and the Caroline tradition in the later Georgian Church*, Oxford 1992.

[42] Richard W. Davis, *Dissent in politics: the political life of William Smith MP*, London, 1971, 56–7; G. M. Ditchfield, 'Repeal, abolition, and reform: a study in the interactions of reforming movements in the parliament of 1790–6', in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds), *Anti-slavery, religion, and reform: essays in memory of Roger Anstey*, Folkestone 1980, 101–18.

[43] John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: science, religion, and politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution*, Cambridge 1989.

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Magdalen College. He preached against slavery in 1784 and then, when serving as vice-chancellor of Cambridge in 1785, set the essay question that started Clarkson's anti-slavery career: 'Is it right to make slaves of others against their will?'[44] Clarkson observed that Peckard 'had distinguished himself' with 'publications on the intermediate state of the soul, and by others in favour of civil and religious liberty' – not a compliment that would have been paid by an orthodox Anglican.[45] 'Liberal to the point of heterodoxy', in a sermon preached to the University of Cambridge on 5 November 1783 Peckard declared that God 'gave to All equally a natural Right to Liberty' and argued that forcing clergy to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles was 'an impediment only to those who are honest'.[46] We do not know whether Clarkson attended this particular sermon, but it is a good example of the liberal attitudes espoused by some academics at Cambridge.[47] Clarkson dedicated the second edition of his *Essay on slavery* to Peckard, and the Fellows and students of Cambridge, as 'guardians of humanity and religion' and advocates of the 'unalienable rights of men'.[48]

Clarkson's later writings on religious topics reflect the view, common among liberal Latitudinarian Anglicans and Rational Dissenters, that the simple religion taught by Jesus had been corrupted by theological developments in the centuries following his crucifixion. When advocating pacifism in 1817, for example, Clarkson argued that early Christians considered war to be unlawful, and that this notion 'continued while Christianity was pure and unmixed with the interpretation of political men'. While 'Christianity was the purest' in its first two centuries, 'the corruption of Christianity was fixed as it were by law' following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, whose Council of Nicaea established 'certain innovations' as orthodox Christianity in 325.[49] It is notable that Clarkson here echoes

[44] Michael E. Jirik, 'Beyond Clarkson: Cambridge, black abolitionists, and the British antislave trade campaign', *Slavery and Abolition* xli (2020), 448–71.

[45] Clarkson, *History of abolition*, i. 204–5.

[46] Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment*, 224; Peter Peckard, *The nature and extent of civil and religious liberty: a sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, November 5th 1783*, Cambridge 1783, 11, 20. Peckard also made some passing criticism of slavery in this sermon, and then more extensively two months later in a sermon preached on the anniversary of the execution of Charles I: *Piety, benevolence, and loyalty, recommended: a sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, January the 30th, 1784*, Cambridge 1784.

[47] Michael Jirik claims that Clarkson attended the sermon, but the only evidence for this is ambiguous: 'I knew that Dr. Peckard, in a sermon which I have mentioned, had pronounced warmly against' slavery: Clarkson, *History of abolition*, i. 204–7; Jirik, 'Beyond Clarkson', 749.

[48] Thomas Clarkson, *Essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species*, 2nd edn, London 1788, pp. v–vi.

[49] Idem, *Essay on the doctrines and practice of the early Christians as they relate to war*, London 1817, 4, 10, 20.

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the title of Priestley's influential *History of the corruptions of Christianity*, which had been the subject of controversy during his time as a student at Cambridge. In the final years of his life, while criticising the Oxford Movement's High Church views on infant baptism, Clarkson noted that Christianity had been '*so much deformed*' by the 'Nicene church in the fourth century', and asked 'In what endless contradiction to the Scriptures do the doctrines of the corrupt Nicene church involve us?'[50]

The young Clarkson and Unitarianism

Clarkson was reticent about not pursuing his intended career as an Anglican priest, but circumstantial and surviving evidence suggest three reasons: his commitment to anti-slavery agitation, a desire to be independent and theological heterodoxy. Clarkson travelled extensively while campaigning for abolition of the slave trade, and when visiting Shropshire in 1791 he stayed with the Evangelical Revd Joseph Plymley whose sister, Katherine, kept diary notes. When queried about his religious stance, Clarkson responded that 'I have left the Church, after due examination, I mean as a Clergyman only … my reasons concern myself alone.' Given his public role as an abolitionist, it would have been easy to simply explain that he needed to devote himself full-time to the cause. Instead, however, he kept the reasons private, only noting that they were based on 'due examination' and that he trusted his friends would not 'blame me for doing what I verily believe to be right'.[51]

A decade and a half later, in his *History of the abolition of the African slave trade* (1808), Clarkson implied that he had not become an Anglican priest because the enormous task of abolition would have no hope of success unless it was 'taken up by some one, who would make it an object or business of his life'.[52] According to his *History*, Clarkson thought there were many arguments against his adopting that role. The most weighty were that 'I had been designed for the church; that I had already advanced as far as deacon's orders in it; that my prospects on account of my connections were then brilliant; that, by appearing to desert my profession, my family would be dissatisfied.' Clarkson nevertheless decided in the summer of 1786 to become a full-time abolitionist 'in obedience, I believe, to a higher Power'.[53] This account is generally accepted as providing the reason why Clarkson turned his back on the priesthood. Yet there appear to have been additional reasons.

[50] Idem, *Essay on baptism, with some remarks on the doctrines of the Nicene Church, on which Puseyism is built*, London 1843, pp. vi, 51.
[51] Cited in Wilson, *Clarkson*, 94.
[52] Clarkson, *History of abolition*, i. 228.
[53] Ibid. i. 229–30.

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Clarkson's early career milestones hint at a reluctance to become a priest that pre-dated his involvement in abolition. Clarkson graduated BA and was ordained a deacon in the Church of England in June 1783. The common course was to be ordained a priest in the following year, yet while Clarkson won the Latin essay prize for 'middle bachelors' in 1784, he was not ordained a priest. In 1785 he won the Latin prize for 'senior bachelors' with his essay on slavery, but he was still not ordained a priest. Clarkson confessed he was 'wholly ignorant' of the slave trade until he started researching it for his 1785 essay.[54] Thus, at the very least, a commitment to abolitionism cannot explain why he did not become a priest in 1784. Perhaps he was just taking his time? While that may have been the case, it appears there were other factors that contributed to his decision to turn away from a clerical career.

In 1805 Clarkson's wife Catherine accompanied him on a visit to the Plymleys in Shropshire. She told them that

> had Mr Clarkson possessed an independent fortune she did not think he would have left the church, but he carried his ideas of disinterestedness and delicacy to what may be termed a romantic length perhaps – when he was first in orders he did duty for a friend several times; his friend said to him 'you have now done duty for me several times, you ought to receive some recompense' and so offered him a sum. Mr Clarkson took it from timid shyness, but was so struck at the idea of being paid for what he had done that he resolved he would never receive anything in the church again. He has very rarely done any duties since.[55]

In 1785 Clarkson had served briefly as 'Domestic Chaplain to the Earl of Portmore'.[56] But Clarkson was worried that 'as a man of small fortune' it would be necessary for him 'to do many things that he did not think would suit the character of a clergyman'. According to Katherine Plymley, Catherine Clarkson regretted 'that he has left the church; Mr Whitbread and others were anxious to give him a living and she thinks he might have done much good by the excellent example he would have set in a country parish'.[57] In light of these comments, made by his nonconformist wife two decades after Clarkson became an abolitionist, and as reported by the Evangelical Anglican, Katherine Plymley, there were at least two reasons Clarkson did not become a priest.

Theological heterodoxy appears to have been a third reason: as Plymley's diary records, he was suspected of having 'Unitarian opinions'.[58] We lack clear proof of this for his early years, and Katherine Plymley herself

[54] Ibid. i. 207. [55] Katherine Plymley diary, entry for 23 July 1805, fos 11–12.

[56] J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses: a biographical list of all known students, graduates and holders of office at the University of Cambridge, from the earliest times to 1900*, Cambridge 1922–54, ii/2, 58.

[57] Katherine Plymley diary, entry for 23 July 1805, fos 11–12.

[58] Ibid. fos 5–6.

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doubted he was Unitarian when she observed him during a church service in 1805. However, the contextual evidence of his political views and marriage suggests he may have adopted some form of anti-Trinitarianism during the last decades of the eighteenth century.

In 1791 a 'Unitarian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge' had been established that deliberately excluded anti-Trinitarian Arians who believed in the pre-existence of Christ, and also those Socinians who were happy to worship Christ.[59] Its narrow and uncompromising manifesto declared that:

> There is but ONE GOD, the SOLE Former, Supporter, and Governor of the universe, the ONLY proper object of religious worship, and there is one mediator between God and man, the MAN Christ Jesus, who was commissioned by God to instruct men in their duty, and to reveal the doctrine of a future life … and that Jesus Christ, the most distinguished of the prophets, is the CREATURE and MESSANGER of God, and not his EQUAL, nor his VICE-REGENT, nor CO-PARTNER with him in divine honours, as some have strangely supposed.[60]

Edward Garnham, who had been educated at Cambridge, became an enthusiastic founding member of the Unitarian Society; and five years later he conducted Thomas Clarkson's marriage service.

While not listed as a member of the society, it is possible that Clarkson considered himself a form of 'Unitarian' in the 1790s. The many anti-Trinitarian members of Cambridge University were conspicuous by their absence owing to its narrow manifesto.[61] The radical William Frend had resigned his two clerical livings in 1788 and published a Unitarian *Address to the inhabitants of Cambridge* and *Thoughts on subscription to religious tests* in the same year, for which he was dismissed from his tutorship. He remained a Fellow of Jesus College and joined the Unitarian Society, but soon withdrew 'on account of some things said of Christ'.[62]

Clarkson openly supported the French Revolution and the 'Rights of Man', and as Jonathan Clark has argued, there was a strong link between religious heterodoxy and radical politics in eighteenth-century England.[63] In the early 1790s the orthodox Plymleys had great admiration for Clarkson's tireless commitment to the anti-slavery cause, but they

[59] G. M. Ditchfield, 'Antitrinitarianism and toleration in late eighteenth century British politics: the Unitarian petition of 1792', this JOURNAL xlii (1991), 46–8.

[60] *Unitarian Society* (1791), 1–2.

[61] Ditchfield, 'Antitrinitarianism and toleration', 48.

[62] Theophilus Lindsey to John Rowe, 6 Mar. 1792, in *The letters of Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808)*, ed. G. M. Ditchfield, Woodbridge 2012, ii. 172.

[63] Clark, *English society, 1660–1832*. Clark's causal connection between heterodoxy and political radicalism applies best to Anglicans, while both heterodox and orthodox Dissenters tended to support reform: James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English radicalism: Nonconformity in eighteenth-century politics and society*, Cambridge 1990.

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worried about his political radicalism. Katherine observed that Clarkson was in favour of 'liberty in every respect', and shared Thomas Paine's view of the French Revolution. Like William Wilberforce, the Plymleys urged Clarkson to stop openly championing the French Revolution, as it could turn loyalists into opponents of abolition.[64] A bill to gradually abolish the slave trade passed the House of Commons in 1792, but it stalled in the House of Lords, and became side-lined as war started between Britain and republican France. By 1796 Wilberforce confessed that he could no longer host Clarkson in his home because 'his conversation was so very unguarded in politics'.[65] A commitment to religious liberty was part of Clarkson's enthusiasm for the French Revolution. Travelling to Paris on abolition business in late 1789, he saw 'superstitious' peasants kneeling at roadside Catholic shrines and crucifixes, and hoped the Revolution would see the 'dawning of the Day when religion would be kept open to free Enquiry'.[66]

In 1792 Clarkson met a young freethinking radical, Catherine Buck (1775–1856), who was from a prosperous Dissenting family that attended the Whiting Street Independent Chapel in Bury St Edmonds. Her close Unitarian friend, Henry Crabb Robinson, considered her 'the most eloquent woman I have ever known, with the exception of Madame de Staël'.[67] Catherine and Clarkson were married by licence in 1796 in St Mary's Church in Bury St Edmonds, with the service being read by the Revd Robert Edward Garnham, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and one of Catherine's closest friends.[68] Garnham had become a Unitarian, resigned his curacies in 1789, and established a public library containing the works of leading Unitarians.[69] The influential Rational Dissenter, Joseph Priestley, referred to him as 'a valuable part of our corps' for assisting in the composition of a Unitarian translation of the Bible.[70]

[64] Wilson, *Clarkson*, 70–1.

[65] Katherine Plymley diary, cited in Kathryn Gleadle, '"Opinions deliver'd in conversation": conversation, politics, and gender in the late eighteenth century', in J. Harris (ed.), *Civil society in British history: ideas, identities, institutions*, Oxford 2003, 72.

[66] Cited in Wilson, *Clarkson*, 55.

[67] Catherine Buck had a profound influence on Crabb Robinson, in part by introducing him to William Godwin's radical *Enquiry concerning political justice and its influence on morals and happiness*, London 1793. Godwin was a Rational Dissenter turned atheist, and future husband of Mary Wollstonecraft: *Diary, reminiscences, and correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler, Boston 1869, i. 19–20.

[68] Wilson, *Clarkson*, 95.

[69] Ordained a priest in 1776, after long study of the Bible Garnham decided never again to subscribe to the orthodox articles of the Church, and resigned his curacies in 1789: John Disney, *A short memoir of the Rev. Robert Edward Garnham*, London 1814, 4.

[70] Cited in Frida Knight, *University rebel: the life of William Frend, 1757–1841*, London 1971, 98–101.

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Catherine's uncle, the philanthropic Evangelical Dissenter, Joseph Hardcastle (1752–1819), worried about Clarkson's religious opinions. Clarkson often visited his home in Surrey, Hatcham House. Upon the marriage, Hardcastle penned a heartfelt letter to Catherine's father, reflecting at length on his evangelical sense of God's grace and mercy, and noting that 'I willingly encounter the derision of the wise, while my heart embraces the inestimable truth.' He hoped that if Thomas and Catherine

> incline at present to a different view of these important things – if they see no beauty or comeliness in the Man of Sorrows [Jesus Christ], I hope the time will come when they will possess a judgement more friendly to their happiness … Let us importune Him on behalf of our friends who are not yet brought nigh to Him, and hope that … he will rescue them from the paths of the destroyer … Let us daily commit our friends to the faithful care of the Good Shepherd. He alone can restore the lost sheep to the fold of His love.[71]

While Evangelicals could worry about the souls of conventional Christians, Hardcastle's letter needs to be considered in the light of the reputation Catherine had gained as a radical 'free thinker'. In the case of Thomas, we can probably rule out deism at this stage as he was a life-long member of the Church of England.[72] This anxious letter by an Evangelical friend suggests, however, that he may have embraced some form of anti-Trinitarian heterodoxy in the 1790s.

With the cause of abolition waning in the context of war with France and government repression of radicalism, the Clarksons moved to Ullswater in the Lake District, where it was noted that they read on Sundays rather than attend church.[73] They tried farming, and Clarkson wrote his *Portraiture of Quakerism*, while becoming close friends of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge had been radicals in the early 1790s, and were developing into the foremost Romantic poets of the age.[74] Wordsworth wrote a sonnet celebrating his friend's campaign for abolition, and his poetry was influenced by Clarkson's *Portraiture of Quakerism*.[75] Catherine

[71] Joseph Hardcastle to William Buck, 23 Jan. 1796, cited in Emma Corsbie Hardcastle, *Memoir of Joseph Hardcastle*, London 1860, 47–8.

[72] Near the end of his life, Clarkson wrote that 'I was introduced myself into the church by Baptism, and have continued in it to this hour': *Essay on baptism*, p. viii.

[73] Wilson, *Clarkson*, 97.

[74] As a young man Coleridge for some time espoused Unitarianism, but returned to orthodoxy in later life: Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: the radical years*, Oxford 1988, 85.

[75] W. Wordsworth, 'Clarkson! it was an obstinate hill to climb' (1807): Jessica Fay, *Wordsworth's monastic inheritance: poetry, place, and the sense of community*, Oxford 2018, 63–70.

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developed a close sisterly relationship with Dorothy Wordsworth; and Coleridge wrote 'I never saw a Woman yet, whom I could so imagine to have been of one parent with me at one Birth, as Catherine Clarkson & she has all, all, that is good in me.'[76] While both Coleridge and Wordsworth became conservative as they aged, it is notable that Jesus is not mentioned in the latter's poetry until 1810.[77]

When the Clarksons visited the Plymleys in 1805, Thomas and Catherine were watched closely for indications of their religious views. Katherine Plymley noted in her diary:

> Mr Clarkson, as I have before mentioned has left the church, as a clergyman at least, and has dressed as a layman, he never was in priest's orders. It was supposed he was inclined to Unitarian opinions. This I greatly doubt; he attended church the Sunday he passed here morning and evening, and appeared to join in the parts of the service that a Unitarian could not. My sister observed him in the Creed and Mr Iremonger in the Gloria Patria. Whatever his private opinions may be, he is very pious and possesses true Christian charity … Mrs Clarkson's health prevented her going to church but she attended family prayers.[78]

It was possible, however, for Arian anti-Trinitarians to participate via subtly modified versions of the Apostles' Creed and the Gloria Patria.[79] Being a member of a congregation was less demanding than officiating as a priest. While many Anglican clergy lived with a tension between their personal beliefs and the orthodox articles of the Church, some resigned in the late eighteenth century; and this was probably another reason Clarkson did not pursue his intended career as an Anglican priest.

[76] Cited in Wilson, *Clarkson*, 102.

[77] Jonathan Roberts, 'Religion', in Andrew Bennett (ed.), *William Wordsworth in context*, Cambridge 2015, 259.

[78] Katherine Plymley diary, entry for 23 July 1805, fos 5–6.

[79] Clarkson was probably participating in the Apostles' Creed, which was less problematic for anti-Trinitarians than the Nicene or Athanasian Creeds. While Clarkson 'appeared' to participate in the parts of a service to which a Unitarian would have objected, it is possible that he participated as an Arian voicing some hardly noticeable modifications. In their modified liturgies, the Unitarian Theophilus Lindsey followed the influential early eighteenth-century Arian, Samuel Clarke, in placing a comma after 'God', to read 'I believe in God, the Father almighty' in the Apostles' Creed. Similarly, Arians modified the orthodox Gloria Patri, 'To the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost', to read '*by/through* the Son' with reference to 1 Corinthians viii.6: Bryan D. Spinks, *Liturgy in the age of reason: worship and sacraments in England and Scotland, 1662–c.1800*, Farnham 2008; James Yates, *A vindication of Unitarianism*, 4th edn, London 1850, 379. The early eighteenth-century defender of orthodoxy, Charles Leslie, observed that anti-Trinitarians could be 'the most subtle and hardest to be detected, of any of the Christian heretics': cited in Roald N. Stromberg, *Religious liberalism in eighteenth-century England*, Oxford 1952, 36.

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Clarkson's Christianity in old age

Religious views often change over a lifetime, and this appears to have been the case with the Clarksons. Joseph Hardcastle's anxious letter in 1796 was passed on to Catherine Clarkson. Near the end of her life she gave it to one of Hardcastle's Evangelical daughters, and noted that her youthful free-thinking sentiments had altered, with the 'light of revelation' shining 'brighter above the light of reason', and that her husband had also devoted himself to 'prayerful study of the Word of God' in his later years.[80] This is reflected in the annotations Clarkson made in old age on his copy of the New Testament.

Enlightened liberal Protestants championed the right of private judgement, and the need to study Scripture as the sole authority in religious matters. In his 1843 *Essay on baptism*, Clarkson lamented that some of the clergy 'are not reading men' and often adopt beliefs 'without examining the originals as searchingly as they ought, and *without thinking for themselves*'. Of those who do read, some unfortunately rely on the early '*fathers of the church* … and, forgetting that most of these divines lived after Christianity had been exceedingly corrupted, are led to receive the traditions of men instead of the word of God'.[81] Drawing on his Latitudinarian education, knowledge of the Quakers, association with Romantic poets and a lifetime of reading, Clarkson's marginal notes on the New Testament were an exercise in determining his own understanding of Christianity. They show him grappling with texts in an effort to discern the nature of Jesus Christ. His annotation is fragmentary and often difficult to read, and Clarkson wrote at the start: 'I have long had a desire to make a few notes on different verses of the New Testament, and have gone over it for that purpose, but I find I have not done the work to my mind, as far as neatness is concerned. Being now in the eighty first year of my age, and being nearly blind.' He had made many blots 'in a very slovenly manner. I have never been able to see whether my pen is overloaded with ink'.[82]

Clarkson's New Testament notes depict Christ as subordinate to God. Christ was pre-existent, having been 'with God in the Beginning', and he 'had Glory with the Father and his angels', but he did not desire to be 'equal to God' or 'worshipped as God'.[83] He interpreted Jesus in Luke xviii as saying of God that 'there is one that is good (or he who is good is

[80] The quotations are the Evangelical Emma Corsbie Hardcastle's paraphrase of a letter by Catherine Clarkson in *Memoir of Joseph Hardcastle*, 49.

[81] Clarkson, *Essay on baptism*, p. v.

[82] Note dated 10 Oct. 1839 on page facing the first page of the Gospel of Matthew: Clarkson's New Testament.

[83] Comments on John i.15, and Philippians ii.6–11: ibid.

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one)'.[84] He noted on the first chapter of Hebrews that Jesus 'being above the Angels themselves in Dignity and Glory, claims to be heard above every other Teacher'.[85]

Some comments in the elderly Clarkson's writings can sound orthodox. His *Essay on baptism* contains a passing comment that Jesus was 'the most proper mediator, being God and man at the same time', and discusses 'the work which God had assigned Jesus Christ'.[86] And while noting that Acts vii.59 contained 'the only prayer that has the least semblance of being addressed to Jesus Christ in the whole of the New Testament', he added that when Stephen 'said "Lord Jesus receive my Spirit", it is evident that "he called upon God" … from whence it is clear that Stephen considered God and Christ to be one'.[87] In these instances Clarkson arguably used the word God as a reference to Christ's divinity. It is notable that some Arians were comfortable in referring to Christ as 'God', in the sense that it reflected his pre-existence and appointment as 'Lord, King and Governor of all' by 'the Father'.[88] Arians fundamentally rejected, however, the Trinitarian doctrine that Christ was equal and consubstantial with God the Father.[89]

Clarkson's opposition to the worship of Jesus suggests that, in old age at least, he held a broadly Arian Christology. In Latin Western Christianity there had traditionally been some reticence about addressing prayer directly to Jesus.[90] In the eighteenth century, however, with anti-Trinitarians increasingly rejecting prayer to Christ, and excluding it from their alternative liturgies, orthodox Trinitarian polemicists defended the practice.[91] In 1780 a Dissenting clergyman defined the essential issue as whether Jesus

[84] Comment on Luke xviii.18–19: ibid.

[85] Comment on Hebrews i: ibid.

[86] Clarkson, *Essay on baptism*, 50.

[87] Clarkson's New Testament, 211. He made a similar statement in *Essay on baptism* at p. 50.

[88] Wiles, *Archetypal heresy*, 143–6, with John Taylor's *A paraphrase with notes on the Epistle to the Romans* cited at 143. See also Alan P. F. Sell, *Christ and controversy: the person of Christ in nonconformist thought and ecclesial experience, 1600–2000*, Eugene, OR 2011, 30, and Smith, *Rational Dissenters in late eighteenth-century England*, 88.

[89] Arius himself had declared that Jesus was 'God, but not true God'; the original controversy centred on whether Christ and God were of the same 'essence' or 'substance': Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus became God: the struggle to define Christianity during the last days of Rome*, New York 1999, 79.

[90] Bryan D. Spinks (ed.), *The place of Christ in liturgical prayer: Trinity, Christology, and liturgical theology*, Collegeville, MN 2008, 14.

[91] See, for example, George Horne, *Christ the object of religious adoration: and therefore, very God: a sermon preached before the University of Oxford, at St. Mary's, on Sunday, May 14, 1775*, Oxford 1775. On the 'High Church' Horne, and the broader promotion of orthodox clergy under George III, see Nigel Aston, 'Horne and hetrodoxy: the defence of Anglican beliefs in the late Enlightenment', *EHR* cviii (1993), 895–919.

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Christ should be addressed 'as the *most high God*, or as *Mediator*? Trinitarians in general say the former: Anti-Trinitarians the latter'.[92]

Clarkson's comments on the worship of Jesus are similar to those of the Arian Rational Dissenter Richard Price, who wrote in 1787:

> Amidst all the speculations and controversies about the person and offices of Christ, I wish you would never forget that the only object of religious worship is the one Supreme Deity. This, I think, a point of great consequence … there is, therefore, no other being to whom our prayers ought to be directed … we are to pray to God in the name of Christ; that is, as his disciples, and with a regard to him as the Mediator between God and man.[93]

In support of this Price cited John xvi.23. In his notes on this same text, Clarkson likewise interpreted Jesus as saying: 'consider me in the character of Mediator or Advocate, and if you want anything, you must ask it of God the Father in my Name'. Like Price, Clarkson concluded this was 'a direct notice to pray to God the Father for all our wants, and never to the Son, but in his name, or through his sufferings or for his sake. There is not a command in the whole New Testament to pray to the Son'.

Another example was John v.23, which declares 'that all *men* should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him'. Clarkson noted in response to this text:

> This does not extend to the Worship of Jesus Christ … Jesus Christ is represented only in the character of the Son. But God is represented in the character of the Father, a superior Dignity, and is therefore the only one of the two to be worshipped. We honour Jesus Christ when we honour him as God's Envoy upon Earth – as his Son – as our Mediator, as our Saviour – as the only one, through whom we have access to God – as our atonement.[94]

While the mention of atonement sounds orthodox, it was open to differing interpretations. Near the start of the Gospel of Luke, Clarkson noted that 'we may say without any fear of contradiction that Belief in Christ … is Salvation of itself'.[95] In his study of the Quakers, Clarkson noted that he had,

> in the course of my life, known some bigots in religion … who have considered baptism and the sacrament of the supper as such essentials in Christianity, as to

[92] David James, *A short view of the tenets of Tritheists, Sabellians, Trinitarians, Arians, and Socinians; intended to assist plain Christians in forming a general idea of the principal opinions held on the Trinity, and of the difficulties attending them, and to promote candour and charity among those who differ in their apprehensions on that subject: the second edition, with improvements, and an appendix on the worship of Jesus Christ*, London 1780, 86.

[93] Richard Price, *Sermons on the Christian doctrine as received by the different denominations of Christians*, London 1787, 97–8.

[94] Clarkson's New Testament, 161.

[95] Comment facing p. 94 (near the start of the Gospel of Luke), ibid.

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deny that those who scrupled to admit them, were Christians. I have known others pronouncing an anathema against persons, because they did not believe the atonement in their own way.[96]

Clarkson's notes reflect a fundamental commitment to developing his personal understanding of Christianity based on scrutiny of the Bible rather than adherence to the orthodox doctrine of the Church of England.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John is a key text for orthodox Trinitarian Christianity, and Clarkson read it in a manner that reflected the influence of both Quaker notions of an 'inner light' and Romanticism on his heterodox Anglicanism. On John i.4 Clarkson noted that as 'no interpretation of this verse, which I have yet seen, pleases me', he would 'therefore give my own view of it' on two blank pages at the end of his copy of the New Testament. While Christ was on earth he had both 'animal life in him as a man' and 'Spiritual Life' which he communicated to others, providing them with 'Light and Knowledge to discern and to comprehend spiritual things'. Those in 'whose soul the Spiritual Life of Christ dwells must be on the Road to eternal Life'. Clarkson drew a sharp distinction between 'natural man' and 'spiritual man'. The 'natural man' does not comprehend 'the Beauties of Nature', and reads the Bible only 'historically, or as containing events, circumstances and sayings', but does not comprehend their spiritual meaning. In contrast, when the 'spiritual man' observes nature and reads Scripture he has greater comprehension of God's goodness and 'Government of the world'. As a result, 'the life of Christ, when communicated to the soul of man, gives him Light and knowledge, not only to understand the texts of Scripture spiritually, but to see things through a different medium, or a different way from others'.[97] Clarkson's distinction between the natural and spiritual man echoes a passage in his *Portraiture of Quakerism* in which he observed that by tending to live in towns rather than the countryside the Quakers deprived themselves of the moral and spiritual benefits of engaging with the rhythms of nature: 'The natural man is pleased with these … but the spiritual man experiences a sublimer joy.'[98] His comments on the first chapter of John also reflect the influence of Romanticism, which he encountered directly through his friendship with Coleridge and Wordsworth when they were neighbours in the Lake District: 'When Spiritual Life is given to a man, it does not give him Doctrine, but a new and enlarged and feeling knowledge of divine things, so as to affect the Heart, and new and sanctified notions also of the Creation, of human

[96] Clarkson, *Quakerism*, ii.148.
[97] Comment on the blank page facing p. 429: Clarkson's New Testament.
[98] Clarkson, *Portraiture of Quakerism*, ii. 49–50.

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Nature, and of objects, things and occurrences in the world.'[99] While this reflects the influence of Romanticism, it also echoes Anglican Latitudinarian tradition that began in the seventeenth century with toleration of theological diversity, and which distinguished between 'reason' and 'right reason'. For example, Robert Boyle, the pioneering chemist and founding member of the Royal Society, argued that the 'mere natural man' was an inferior scientist to those who exercised 'right reason' informed by Christian revelation.[100]

Having devoted his life to the cause of anti-slavery, much of Clarkson's old age was spent in reading and interpreting the Bible. He drafted a 'summary of religious doctrines from the lips of Jesus Christ' for his daughter-in-law and showed it to his Unitarian friend, Henry Crabb Robinson, who noted:

> The chapter on future punishments particularly interested me. But I found that Mr Clarkson had, contrary to his intention, written so as to imply his belief in the eternity of future punishments, which he does not believe. He was anxious to alter this in his own hand, and with great difficulty made the necessary alteration in one place.[101]

Clarkson studied the early chapters of the Old Testament and concluded that the Jews had first gained their doctrines through 'an oral revelation, from God himself' as such knowledge could not be gained through the 'light of reason' alone; after which Moses acted as a 'mediator between God and man'. Jesus later restored 'the knowledge of God to all the nations of the earth, whose ancestors had lost it through unbelief', and added the 'message of salvation to all who should receive him'.[102] Clarkson followed this with an *Essay on baptism, with some remarks on the doctrines of the Nicene Church, on which Puseyism is built* (1843), which sought to oppose one of the 'monstrous doctrines' of the High Church 'Oxford-Tracts'. When the American abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe visited his grave, Catherine Clarkson showed some of her husband's belongings, which included a manuscript commentary on the Gospels that 'he had written with great care, for the use of his grandson'.[103] Henry Crabb Robinson had visited Clarkson when he was 'busily employed writing' these notes, and told Wordsworth that 'though these are not annotations

99 Comment on John i.5 facing p. 153: Clarkson's New Testament.

100 Lotte Mulligan, 'Robert Boyle, "right reason", and the meaning of metaphor', *Journal of the History of Ideas* lv (1994), 235–57 at p. 243 for Boyle.

101 Robinson, *Diary, reminiscences, and correspondence*, ii. 119.

102 Thomas Clarkson, *Researches antediluvian patriarchal and historical: concerning the way in which men first acquired their knowledge of God and religion*, London 1836, 103–5, p. xiii.

103 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny memories of foreign lands*, Boston 1854, i. 80.

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by which Biblical criticism will be advanced, yet they show a most enviable state of mind'.[104]

Christianity and anti-slavery

As denominational identities hardened in the early nineteenth century, the Church of England was a broad tent in which the heterodox Clarkson was happy to remain a member, but not officiate as a priest. His funeral was notable for its simplicity and its multi-denominational attendees, and he was buried in St Mary's Anglican church near his home at Playford, Suffolk. In 1856 Catherine, who had been raised a Dissenter, was buried alongside him. Their graves lack tombstones and lie under grass surrounded by iron rails on which hang simple marble plaques.[105]

Some who became theologically heterodox in the 'Age of Reason' felt compelled to champion their views publicly, while others thought it best to exercise their Protestant right of private judgement quietly, avoid dispute over doctrines and focus on living a Christian life. The latter approach is understandable as, in the words of one historian, England experienced 'a pugilistic clerical Enlightenment, and the intellectual contretemps often took on the character of a back-alley brawl with few, if any, holds barred'.[106] While Clarkson expressed general support for religious and political liberty, he kept his theological thoughts private, and publicly focused on being a 'humble instrument' of 'Providence' in building a multi-denominational campaign to end the slave trade.[107] When he published on religious topics in later life, it was to argue that the early Christians were pacifists, and in opposition to the rise of the Oxford High Church 'Tractarians' in the 1830s, who argued for a return to some traditional Catholic doctrines and practices.[108]

Clarkson was educated at predominantly Latitudinarian Cambridge in the 1780s, at a time of heated debate over Unitarianism, and turned his back on a career in the priesthood. The radical-minded Clarkson was suspected of holding 'Unitarian opinions', but the circumstantial evidence does not allow us to be certain as to the nature of his youthful theological views. Assuming he became an anti-Trinitarian, he may have become an Arian and stopped there, or he may have had a fashionable Socinian Unitarian phase. Whatever the case, Clarkson remained a lay member of

[104] Henry Crabb Robinson to William Wordsworth, 22 Apr. 1842 in *Diary, reminiscences, and correspondence*, ii. 230.

[105] Wilson, *Clarkson*, 190.

[106] Robert G. Ingram, *Reformation without end: religion, politics and the past in postrevolutionary England*, Manchester 2018, 76.

[107] Clarkson, *History of abolition*, i. 216.

[108] See Clarkson's *Essay on the doctrines and practice of the early Christians as they relate to war* (1817); *Researches antediluvian patriarchal and historical* (1836); and *Essay on baptism* (1843).

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the Church of England, and his writings in old age display a deep Protestant commitment to personal critical study of the Scriptures as the sole authority in religion, and a broadly Arian view of Christ.

This study of Clarkson's heterodox Anglicanism provides evidence for both the general importance of Christianity in the rise of abolitionist agitation during the late Enlightenment, and the role played by varieties of heterodox Protestantism. Evangelicalism's increasing weight of numbers and leadership of anti-slavery in the nineteenth century, along with the influence of the *Life of Wilberforce*, has long overshadowed the role of the quieter 'rational piety' that motivated heterodox Protestants like Clarkson to act as agents of Providence.[109] Alongside Clarkson were William Smith MP and Josiah Wedgwood, to name just two prominent and avowedly Unitarian abolitionists. In the year before he died, Clarkson described an anti-slavery protest published by American Unitarians as 'the most beautiful and Christian address' he had ever seen.[110] With his heterodox theology, and commitment to religious liberty, Clarkson argued that his *History of the abolition of the slave trade* demonstrated the importance of acting with 'brotherly affection' toward those who 'may differ from us in speculative opinions' and 'articles of faith', and that being motivated by the 'spirit of Christianity' was 'infinitely more important than a mere agreement in creeds'.[111]

[109] R. K. Webb, 'Rational piety', in Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and religion*, 287–311; John R. Oldfield, *'Chords of freedom': commemoration, ritual and British transatlantic slavery*, Manchester 2007, 33–55.

[110] Douglas C. Stange, *British Unitarians against American slavery, 1833–65*, Rutherford, NJ 1984, 66.

[111] Clarkson, *History of abolition*, i. 262–3.

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