

Society untranslated publication. It successfully uses data to illuminate a period of English history when legal and social restrictions shaped the births, marriages and deaths of the Catholic population.

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Atheists and atheism before the Enlightenment. The English and Scottish experience. By Michael Hunter. Pp. viii + 223. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. £30. 978 1 00 926877 6

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The threat of atheism provoked significant concern among early modern clerics and theistic intellectuals, particularly in Britain, where atheists were at the top of the list of ‘notorious infidels’ against whom the Boyle lecturers preached. However, fully documented cases of openly expressed atheistic opinions were surprisingly rare in England and Scotland from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, as Michael Hunter observes in this book, which is an important contribution to the ongoing historiographical debate on the origins and spread of atheistic ideas in the early modern period. This volume, which consists of nine chapters, can be divided into two thematic sections. The introductory chapter i and the following three chapters present a thorough analysis of the problem of atheism in early modern Britain, thereby leading to thought-provoking conclusions which Hunter further clarifies in the concluding chapter ix, while chapters v to viii concentrate on three well-documented cases. These are the cases of the Edinburgh student Thomas Aikenhead, executed for blasphemy in 1697; the Scottish physician and poet Archibald Pitcairne, who expressed overtly atheistic ideas in a manuscript discovered only in 2014; and the Church of England clergyman Tinkler Duckett, who was found guilty of atheism at Cambridge in 1738.

Hunter explains that, in the early modern period, the word ‘atheism’ was used to describe a broad range of phenomena, such as hostility to the Christian religion or even only to the Church of England; evil living; a critical attitude towards the Scriptures; the questioning of miracles; the denial of immortality; a notion of religion as merely an *instrumentum regni*; and ‘free-thought ... associated with education and with verbal agility in the form of “wit”’ (p. 40). However, according to Hunter, an analysis of the many combined uses of the term ‘atheism’ enables us ‘to discover how contemporaries experienced and responded to the threat of irreligion in the society of their day’, thereby helping us ‘to draw broader conclusions about early modern thought’ (p. 33). In this regard, Hunter maintains that, ‘though different degrees of infidelity were distinguished, there was a constant tendency to conflate them and to argue that in fact they inevitably led to one another’, and ‘a kind of circular connection was presumed between theoretical irreligion and bad behavior’ (p. 41). In early modern Britain, anti-Christian belief was indeed commonly associated with anti-Christian behaviour and, whereas the attack on godlessness often overlapped with the portrayal of ‘philosophical atheism’, it was ‘practical atheism’ that caused the deepest anxiety among believers. Despite the lack of consensus among contemporaries about the nature and even the very existence of philosophical atheism, the threat of practical atheism was widely perceived as real and unsettling. This commonly-felt threat led to exaggerations in

the depiction of atheistic ideas and their spread. But, as Hunter has aptly noted, there was ‘a kind of symbiotic relationship between “atheism” as imagined and irreligion as it existed’ (p. 48). In fact, many of the views said to have been expressed by Christopher Marlowe and other British ‘atheists’, particularly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, can be paralleled in contemporary writings against atheism. Such views include the rejection, or at least the questioning, of God’s providential intervention in the world; the denial of the immortality of the soul; and cynicism about institutional religion and the clergy’s motives.

Cynicism about worldly affairs, challenging the providentialist and moralistic worldview of the day, contributed to the spread of a secular attitude to politics and of naturalistic views of the physical world, thereby facilitating the development of atheistic ideas in seventeenth-century England and, on the other hand, providing new stimuli to intellectuals who opposed atheism – from the heresiographers of the Civil War and Interregnum to the Cambridge Platonists and the Boyle lecturers. In this regard, Hunter pays special attention to the role of ‘Hobbism’, which he defines as ‘a convenient shorthand used by contemporaries to describe the relativist and implicitly irreligious outlook that Hobbes was thought to have spawned’ (p. 77). He also considers the concerns about irreligion provoked by such controversial figures as the ‘deist’ Charles Blount, the libertine John Wilmot, earl of Rochester, and ‘Burridge the Blasphemer’, who recanted his atheism in 1712 and subsequently met with various prominent churchmen to discuss theological subjects.

Hunter’s analysis of three other cases, in chapters v to viii, is very helpful in explaining how atheism was expressed and perceived in early modern Britain. Chapter v is devoted to Thomas Aikenhead, who was tried and sentenced for blasphemy in Edinburgh in December 1696, after having repeatedly expressed anti-Christian opinions in public. His execution by hanging on 8 January 1697, when he was only twenty years old, provoked a heated debate in Scotland (where some ministers and Privy Councillors even pleaded on his behalf) and England (where such a famous philosopher as John Locke gathered numerous documents concerning this case). Chapters vi and vii deal with Archibald Pitcairne’s manuscript *Pitcairneana*, a philosophical dialogue discovered by Hunter at the Houghton Library at Harvard in 2014, first published in 2016 and now republished in this volume. This manuscript, by such a respected physician and poet as Pitcairne, is interesting in that it presents overtly atheistic views about God’s existence and nature, the soul and the concept of eternity. Moreover, its author alludes to Hobbes and Spinoza and refers to John Toland’s notion of motion as intrinsic to matter. As Hunter notes, it is impossible to determine whether Pitcairne endorsed these atheistic opinions or was actually a rational theist. However, this manuscript sheds light on ‘the most fundamental philosophical issues that were exercising thinkers in the first decade of the eighteenth century’ (p. 143). The last case examined by Hunter is that of the Cambridge don Tinkler Ducket, which is the subject of chapter viii. In 1739, the vice-chancellor’s court at the University of Cambridge found Ducket guilty of the ‘crime’ of atheism and expelled him from the university. Ducket had also been accused of having illicitly proposed extra-marital sex to a widow – an accusation strengthening the then widespread conviction that atheistic ideas went hand-in-hand with immoral behaviour. However, Ducket was still able to pursue a diplomatic career that led him to various European countries, until

he was dismissed for a breach of confidence in 1773. According to Hunter, the fact the Duckett was still allowed to enter public service after his trial indicates that ‘presumably ... anticlerical Whigs in government were not averse to cocking a snook at university clerics’ (p. 172). What is sure is that, in England in the late 1730s, the accusation of atheism did not lead to consequences comparable to those that Aikenhead had suffered in Edinburgh only around four decades earlier.

Hunter’s analysis of the nature, perceptions and development of atheism in early modern England and Scotland – an analysis supported by his excellent knowledge of the primary sources and critical literature on this subject – leads him to several convincing conclusions. One of Hunter’s most persuasive findings is that early modern atheists frequently dared to express their irreligious ideas in public, even though some of them, such as Aikenhead, Burridge and Duckett, eventually faced legal consequences for their presumption. Atheists’ outspokenness is one of the features that distinguished their bold assurance from the excruciating doubts of believers, including even such prominent figures as Robert Boyle, Richard Baxter and John Bunyan, who entertained their doubts about their faith only in private. In Hunter’s words, ‘whatever doubts the godly experienced in their private lucubrations, the open, public expression of atheistic sentiment by such figures was simply unthinkable’ (p. 72). Another convincing point made by Hunter is that a symbiotic relationship existed between public expressions of atheism and the widespread perception of atheistic views and behaviours in early modern Britain – a perception that, although conflating different sorts of irreligion, had an impact on the actual manifestations of irreligious convictions. Moreover, Hunter is definitely right in highlighting the significant role that a secular attitude to politics and naturalistic views of the physical world played in the development of early modern atheism. Last but not least, Hunter’s detailed investigation of the cases of Aikenhead, Pitcairne and Duckett provides many useful elements to reconsider the expression of atheistic views, as well as public and legal reactions to ‘atheism’ in early modern times, thereby enabling us to better appreciate these interconnected phenomena. In conclusion, Michael Hunter’s meticulous analysis of atheism in early modern Britain, which he reassesses thoroughly in its different manifestations and implications, make this volume an important and original contribution to the study of this complex subject. For these reasons, this book is highly recommended to all those interested in reaching a better understanding of atheistic ideas, their development and manifestations, and the reactions they elicited in the early modern period.

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