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“Knowledge of divine things”: a study of Hutchinsonianism

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Abstract

The Hutchinsonian movement exercised considerable influence on thought about various topics of importance in England's Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment debates. Its epistemological stance, derived from a group of Irish writers of the early eighteenth century, places the movement at the centre of these debates and does much to explain its attraction to contemporaries. The article emphasises the persistence of Hutchinsonian thought and the continuing importance of its epistemological underpinnings into the early nineteenth century, drawing attention particularly to the writings of Bishop William Van Mildert. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

William Walker, a Scottish Episcopalian of the latter part of the 19th century, was obliged to say something about Hutchinsonianism, as he had chosen to write the life of John Skinner, an Aberdeenshire clergyman of the previous century, whose commitment to its doctrines could not be ignored. Walker, like any 19th century writer, was bound to acknowledge that the system involved the adoption of “perverse theories and methods” [1]. It was the hostility to Newtonianism, prominent in the mind of the founder of the school, the early 18th-century Yorkshire land steward turned cosmologist, John Hutchinson, which chiefly ensured the curt dismissal of his views and those of his followers. More fundamentally, there was the Hutchinsonian assertion, succinctly stated by George Horne, the future dean of Canterbury and bishop of Norwich, that “[t]he Holy Scriptures ... in all matters of science truly so called, are in possession of the dictatorship”.¹ Hutchinsonianism was a blunt denunciation of the attempt by the practitioners and upholders of the

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¹ A commonplace book of George Horne, p. 20, Horne Papers, Cambridge University Library (Add. MS 8134/B/1).

17th century's new science to declare science's autonomy from revelation [2]. Walker, however, taking advantage of his own century's boundaries between science and religion, largely disregarded these aspects of Hutchinsonianism and located it as "a philosophico-religious system" and "a system of Biblical interpretation" [1, p. 68].

Walker's apologetic location of Hutchinsonianism was not reflected in later writing. Recent writers on the subject have generally elected to perceive Hutchinsonianism as a set of doctrines about the physical sciences, albeit with considerable religious significance, rather than the reverse [3–7].² Indeed, they have continued to concentrate on Hutchinsonianism's anti-Newtonian character.³ This may seriously mislead. Cosmology, for its own sake, was hardly Hutchinson's primary concern. Rather, he was intent on defending the authority of the scriptures, threatened by opinions about natural philosophy, and deriving from them a Trinitarian orthodoxy, threatened by Deist and Arian rationalism. The cosmos he discovered in scripture was a set of truth revealing symbols, of no great interest when they had served their revelatory purpose. The motivation of his followers too was primarily religious. The young Horne might be thought to have had more interest in cosmology than most of his fellow Hutchinsonians: he did at least write on the subject ([11, pp. 140–144]; see also [12]). However, he confessed in correspondence that, while he was satisfied well enough with Hutchinson's cosmological views, his clerical studies did not allow him to examine them in detail. His praise of Hutchinson rested on his success in securing him against "scepticism and infidelity." [13] William Jones of Nayland, Horne's lifelong intimate, rendered himself untypical of the Hutchinsonians by undertaking scientific experiments.⁴ However, he remained an exegete, rather than a physical scientist, convinced, like other Hutchinsonians, that the most authoritative source of knowledge of the natural sciences was the Hebrew language and the sacred text written in it; in which Hutchinson had discovered his cosmos. To the role of the exegete, the Hutchinsonian writers, generally clergymen, often added that of the historian of religion—as appropriate a designation for Hutchinson as that of cosmologist. Hutchinson held that his cosmos had, by means of analogy, disclosed Trinitarian truth to the first recipients of revelation. Sinfully,

²A greater concern with religious history is shown in G. White's Hutchinsonianism in Eighteenth-Century Scotland, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 21 (pt. 2) (1982) 157–169 [8] and, despite the title, in the rather slight but suggestive piece by D.S. Katz, 'Moses's Principia': Hutchinsonianism and Newton's critics, in: J.E. Force, R.H. Popkin (Eds.), *The Books of Nature and Scripture: Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza's Time and the British Isles of Newton's Time*, International Archives of the History of Ideas, Vol. 139, Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht, 1994, pp. 201–211 [9]. See also G. Rowell, 'Church Principles' and 'Protestant Kempism': some theological forerunners of the Tractarians, in: P. Vaiss (Ed.), *From Oxford to the People: Reconsidering Newman and the Oxford Movement*, Fowler Wright Books, Leominster, Heref, 1996, pp. 21–31 [10].

³Hutchinsonianism's relationship to Newtonianism, has, in the wake of Margaret Jacob's exploration of the ideological significance of the latter, occasioned hasty conclusions about the political associations of Hutchinsonianism. See B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 36–37, [11].

⁴In this he was patronised by the earl of Bute. See W. Stevens, a short account of his [i.e. Jones'] life and writings, in: *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. William Jones ...*, 2nd Edition, Vol. 1, F.C. and J. Rivington, London, 1810, pp. vi–vii, [14].

humankind had taken to a worship of the symbolic cosmos itself, instead of the divine reality symbolised. However, with patient Hutchinsonian scholarship this degenerate religion could be traced back to its pure source.⁵ Here was a most appropriate task for a cleric well trained in the ancient classics, who had the satisfaction of combating the Deist who searched in the same field for his natural religion. In brief, as a practice, Hutchinsonianism had all the appearances of scholarly religion, rather than science. Its scholarly character, though, did not entirely preclude a relationship to the more accessible forms of religion of both high churchmen and evangelicals—groups not always clearly distinguishable in the period [15, pp. 170–175].

Assuming that historical methodology, if not historical subject matter, will allow a separation of 18th-century science and religion, the merits of treating Hutchinsonianism primarily as a phenomenon in religious history are numerous. Its chief merit, however, lies in its ability to move Hutchinsonianism from a peripheral position in the history of Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment debate—as an ineffective challenger in the limited field of cosmology—to a much more central one. Regrettably, this assertion of the centrality of religion in this debate cannot be made without some justification. The historiography of more recent years has been most unwilling to present the anti-religious sentiment of the French *philosophes* as a key to the true significance of the Enlightenment. With regard to England in particular, J.G.A. Pocock has depicted an Enlightenment highly flattering to a belief in a perennial English sense of moderation—quite lacking the irreligious zeal of the French [16].⁶ The view can be supported with John Gascoigne's notion of a "holy alliance" between the new science and Anglicanism [19]. On the other hand, the unity of the debate of the period and its character as a conflict over religion, spoken of by John Redwood [20], should not be lost sight of. This in no way oversimplifies it. It remains complex by virtue of the numerous fields of scholarship in which it was conducted and the vast spectrum of accommodation between religious orthodoxy and irreligion. Certainly, there was moderation, but also extreme positions held with zeal. It remains complex too by virtue of the historiographical opportunities offered by the institutional and, more generally, social character of religion [21].

The focus on religion in the study of the Enlightenment appears necessary if the concept of Enlightenment is not to be dissolved into the intellectual history of the 18th century. However, the religious conflict spoken of should be defined. Conventionally, historians of philosophy have held the heart of the Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment debate to lie in convictions about where the sources of certain knowledge were located—in the reasoning process of the individual or in revelation, however delivered. Much of the history of the Counter-Enlightenment may be

⁵For Hutchinsonianism's interest in the history of religion, see C.D.A. Leighton, Hutchinsonianism: a counter-enlightenment reform movement, *Journal of Religious History* 23 (2) (1999) 179–180 [15].

⁶See also his Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: The American and French Cases in British Perspective, *Government and Opposition* 24 (1989) 81–105, [17]. Pocock's contrast can only be sustained by disregarding much recent historiography of the European mainland's Enlightenment. For an investigation of French moderation, see, for example, T. O'Connor, *An Irish Theologian in Enlightenment France: Luke Joseph Hooke, 1714–96* Four Courts Press, Blackrock, Co. Dublin 1995 [18].

perceived as attempts to assert the greater security to be had from one or other form of revelation. The divine illumination of the individual remained attractive to some [22]; but it had tended to become the illumination of reason [23] and, when it had not done so, showed a tendency to be regarded as pathological [24]. Ecclesiastical tradition could be brought to bear against the rationalist use of scripture; but that smacked of Popery [25]. Hutchinsonianism, or, more accurately, the epistemological stance adopted by Hutchinson and his followers, dealt more profoundly with the problem. Adopting the pre-eminently acceptable epistemology of the day, that of Locke, it developed and adapted it in such a way as to construct what appeared to be an effective defence of revelation against rationalist assault. It is with this epistemological stance that the present study is chiefly concerned, since the disclosure of its epistemological foundation enables Hutchinsonianism to be accurately sited at the very centre of Britain's Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment debates.

The epistemology in question has been described by David Berman, and its importance among Irish thinkers, including figures as notable as Berkeley and Burke, made clear. It seems worthwhile, however, to point to its widespread diffusion on the neighbouring island, which came about chiefly through the medium of Hutchinsonianism. The very considerable importance of Hutchinsonianism itself requires little demonstration. This was acknowledged even by Sir Leslie Stephen, an historian hardly given to emphasising the contemporary importance of conservative intellectual movements [9, p. 205]. It remains to illustrate the importance to Hutchinsonianism of its epistemology. In doing so, a partial response is given to Stephen's wish for an explanation of the extent of 18th-century Hutchinsonian influence. In fact, Hutchinsonianism persisted beyond the end of the 18th century and continued to prove attractive even to the occupants of regius chairs in Oxford. This longevity has been inadequately noted and the present study offers some remedy for this. However, the chief reason for directing attention to this final phase of Hutchinsonianism lies in its disclosure that it was the movement's epistemology which was its most enduring feature.

Argument—the prime concern of the Enlightenment historian resolved to go beyond his predecessors' concentration on the canonical corpora—is only likely to be fruitful when common ground has been established. It is therefore not surprising that Berman found, in delineating the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment in Irish philosophy, that the latter's dependence on Locke's epistemology was just as great as the former's. He sketches a group of Irish “right-wing Lockeans,” formed chiefly by the impulse to oppose the tendencies disclosed by the Deism of John Toland and the heterodoxy of the Dublin Dissenting clergyman, Thomas Emlyn. Berman mentions two prelates of the Church of Ireland, William King and Edward Synge, the lay theologian of the Non-Jurors, Henry Dodwell, though without elaborating his place in the school, and others. Perhaps the most important figure among them, however, was Peter Browne, the provost of Trinity College, Dublin, and bishop of Cork and Ross. Browne took Locke's epistemology beyond Locke's own position, rejecting even reflection as a supplement to sensation. He pressed on, theologically, to a doctrine of analogy. We can have no immediate knowledge of spiritual realities; but they are made known to us, mediately, by

analogy with what can be known through the senses. This was intended to assail the positions of such as Toland and Emlyn, whose identification of the act of faith as an act of reason led them to subject all religious claims to the criteria of knowledge embraced by the new science [26,27]. It was now possible to deny that any religious statements could be made on this basis: Deism was vanquished by scepticism. Happily, however, orthodox Christianity was spared its effects by the introduction of the concept of analogy.

Though little explored in recent times, Berman's right-wing Lockceans developed stances that clearly lie on the main highway of the period's thought and they attracted contemporary attention—and beyond the shores of Ireland. Whatever may be said about the reception of Locke in general, his epistemology was fashionable. Further, it was but recently that the protagonists of the new science had rejected the Renaissance's application of analogical modes of thought [28] and analogy remained important throughout the 18th century [29]. Browne should certainly be seen as a forerunner of Joseph Butler, who appears at least to have taken note of Berkeley's criticisms of him in developing his own sceptical and analogical thought [30].⁷ Others in England were less critical. Henry Felton, the principal of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, stuck very closely to Browne's views—presenting them with considerably greater clarity than Browne himself managed to do—when appointed as Lady Moyer's lecturer for 1728–29. Not only was the lecture course structurally moulded on Browne's thought; but it was also clearly intended to be supportive of Browne in his recent counter-criticism of Berkeley. Felton bluntly restated Browne on the divine attributes, though Berkeley had pointed out the danger of his giving comfort to infidelity in professing such a degree of agnosticism in the matter [32]. Again, he clearly shared Browne's misgivings about Berkeley's emphasis on the emotive value of the Christian mysteries. Their interpretation as “metaphor and allusion” in effect denied them, while analogy, which required “a reality in the correspondence,” upheld them [32, pp. 261–263].

The way for the reception of Browne's developed form of the Irish school's teaching in England had been prepared by the considerable influence of the most distinguished Non-Juror theologians, Henry Dodwell and Charles Leslie. Both were themselves Irish and on familiar terms with the divines at Trinity. Neither developed an epistemology; but both, in the practice of apologetic, barred the way into religious discussion of a philosophical discourse which they considered incapable of expressing the realities of Christianity. Its fault lay in speaking univocally of God and creatures.⁸ They advocated the replacement of philosophical with historical arguments in the defence of Christianity,⁹ though it was Leslie, by virtue of his readability, who alone provided the model for such work with his *Short Methods with the Deists*. If Lessing's protest against the use of the contingent truths of history

⁷ For Berkeley's criticism of the views of King and Browne, see D. Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 139–144 [31].

⁸ See Leslie in defence of Dodwell in the *Rehearsal*, 5 July 1707.

⁹ For a concise statement of Dodwell's view, see Dodwell to John Falconer, 27 February 1711, St. Edmund Hall MSS, vol. 14, pp. 47–49, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

as proofs of Christian doctrine was heard in England, through such as the Deist, Thomas Morgan [33], it did not penetrate deeply. Apologetic remained fundamentally historical, focussed on miracle and prophecy. Consequently, Leslie could always find followers—particularly among the Hutchinsonians, since it was among and by means of them that the Irish Counter-Enlightenment churchmen exerted their widest influence. It is worth noting that those who merely shared Leslie's approach to apologetic, such as the mid 18th-century Oxford divine, Thomas Patten, were liable to be numbered, quite inaccurately, among the followers of Hutchinson [34].

John Hutchinson himself was by disposition neither a natural scientist, nor a philosopher, but a religious polemicist with an inclination to philology. One may see the influence of the Irish writers clearly enough; but it is necessary to wade through much intemperate sermonising and much curious and inventive learning to do so.¹⁰ In one work, his Lockean epistemology was set in the context of a biblically based anthropology: true to his own principles, Hutchinson declined to engage in philosophy, declaring "I must resort to the Fountain." In another, he railed against those who adhered to the notion of innate ideas as "free-thinkers." Sensationalist scepticism emerged in Hutchinson as a violent attack on all natural theology, which was described in the title of the work in which the attack was chiefly made as the "religion of Satan, or Antichrist." An unwillingness to rest wholly in the revelation given in analogical form was not so much criticised, as denounced as sin. It was indeed the desire to know spiritual truths directly, as God knew them, that constituted Adam's transgression [35].

Hutchinson's philosophy comes clothed as religious discourse. Alternatively, it is observed in its effects on his thought. The Irish writers played their part in the conflict with the Newtonians. The Newtonian perception of the cosmos, with its immaterial impulses and thus pantheistic tendency, was easily rejected on sensationalist grounds. As one of Hutchinson's disciples, Samuel Pike,¹¹ argued: if the principle of the operations of the cosmos was not, as Hutchinson insisted, material

... it must be spiritual ... This spiritual agency then, must have a spiritual agent to produce the effect: and now we are got beyond our reach, and can no longer be said to philosophize, but to speak of things we can know nothing of [37].

Again, Hutchinson's view of the Hebrew language had sensationalist roots. The analogies of which the Irishmen spoke were between the material world and the spiritual. Hutchinson, by removing the Hebrew vowel points and allowing free range to his imagination, turned Hebrew into a mirror and an explanation of the material world. Hebrew words explained the nature of what they signified. Hebrew thus became, as William Jones put it, a "language of things" rather than of words.¹²

¹⁰For an attempt at a systematic summary of Hutchinson's epistemology, see Cantor, "Revelation and the Cyclical Cosmos," pp. 4–7.

¹¹Pike was a Congregationalist minister, who eventually abandoned his Hutchinsonianism to become a disciple of John Glas and Robert Sandeman. See, in addition to the entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, W. Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches and Meeting Houses in London* ..., vol. 2, (London: for the author, 1808–14), pp. 85–98 [36].

¹²Jones, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 170. See also vol. 6, pp. 173–187.

Hutchinson's own writings were probably not the major channel through which the Hutchinsonians received the teachings of the Irish Counter-Enlightenment writers. In truth, Hutchinsonians seem to have had as little recourse to Hutchinson's own writings as possible—quite understandably, in view of their exceptionally opaque and rambling style. Expositions of the master's teachings by his disciples were preferred, certainly by neophytes.¹³ Equally, a direct approach to the master's sources—whether they were perceived as sources or as supportive opinion—was preferred. Thus the Irish writings exercised an independent influence. The point is well illustrated in John Skinner's writings. Skinner but rarely concerned himself with philosophy. When he did, he displayed the cast of his mind clearly enough. He took up his pen, for example, against James Beattie, a writer who gained considerable applause in the 1770s for his *Essay on Truth*, an attack on Hume. Beattie's fault, in Skinner's eyes, had been to introduce innate ideas under the names of “common sense” and “first principles” [38]. However, the influence of Browne was far more clearly recorded in Skinner's theology and it undoubtedly shaped its most noteworthy feature. Skinner held a singular doctrine, not shared by other Hutchinsonians,¹⁴ but effectively communicated to a whole generation of the Episcopalian clergy of north-eastern Scotland, for whose clerical education he was responsible. He rejected both the Greek and Latin doctrines of the Trinitarian processions by denying the eternal filiation of Christ. The second person of the Trinity, he maintained, had taken the character of the Son only at the incarnation. Skinner displayed a considerable pre-occupation with the matter, which quite overshadowed all others in the instruction he gave to candidates for orders.

Skinner's adoption of this belief is not altogether surprising. An age so preoccupied with Trinitarian heterodoxy, the chief vehicle of the English Enlightenment, was likely to produce extreme reactions to any expression of subordinationism. Charles Hawtrey, an Oxfordshire clergyman, shared Skinner's motives for declaring against eternal filiation: it was “that system by which Arianism hath hitherto been supported” [39,40]. It was also in the context of an attack on Arianism—more precisely, Samuel Clarke's Arianism—that Browne had commented on the matter of the Trinitarian processions. No doubt less than familiar with the patristic and medieval writings required for an effective refutation of Clarke's subordinationism, he resorted to declaring most of his language invalid, as neither intelligible when applied to the divinity nor scriptural. The matter of the processions thus lay, substantially, outside of revelation and consequently was one on which divines might legitimately speculate and disagree. He conceded, though, that the particular doctrine of eternal filiation did have scriptural warrant [41]. This was the view Skinner had held at first, though without allowing Browne's exception. He consequently decided not to agitate a question on which good men might differ. It was the great champion of Trinitarian orthodoxy, Bishop George Bull, who provided the red rag. He had, Skinner discovered, sold the pass to the Arians, by using subordinationist language in

¹³ Horne to Rev. ... Martin, undated, Fairfax Correspondence, British Library (Add. MS 30,306, fol. 197v).

¹⁴ A failure to note this renders White's “Hutchinsonianism” most misleading.

expounding eternal filiation.¹⁵ Skinner's initial response to this was rather weak. Bull was guilty of heresy only by virtue of his assertion that the mere opinion of men was to be received *de fide*. For Skinner's critique came from Browne, whom he quoted at length.¹⁶ He was, however, to go on to raise up an extensive theological edifice against the doctrine of eternal filiation. Hutchinsonian argumentation was important in this construction. However, this was not its origin, which lay simply in Skinner's excessive anti-Arian zeal. Nor was it, in truth, a necessary part of the construction: the non-Hutchinsonian argumentation, from scripture, patristics and modern ecclesiastical history, could have stood well enough by itself.¹⁷

George Horne offers an example of a more moderate form of Hutchinsonianism than Skinner's. His more zealously Hutchinsonian memoirist, Jones of Nayland, explained that while the late bishop owed much to Hutchinson, he had never been his "implicit follower" [42]. However, if he owed much to Hutchinson, he also owed much to the Irish writers. As a young divine in the 1750s, he listed works important enough to be purchased—a list far more revelatory of simple high churchmanship than Hutchinsonian interests. The only philosophical writers included were Bishop Browne and John Ellis.¹⁸ Ellis, though an Englishman and educated at Oxford, spent most of his life as a clergyman in Dublin. His *Knowledge of Divine Things from Revelation, not from Reason or Nature*, first published in London in 1743, showed him a close follower of Browne. His published work did not declare him to be a Hutchinsonian, though he was in contact with the school and he rendered himself particularly attractive to Hutchinsonians by adding to Browne's views an emphasis on the role of the Hebrew language in the giving of revelation.¹⁹

In 1756, Horne set out to explain, in his *Apology for Certain Gentlemen in the University of Oxford*, his adherence to Hutchinsonianism. However, it was a markedly attenuated form of the movement's creed which was defended. Of Hutchinson he said only: "That we have read Mr. Hutchinson's books is certain; ... that we think ourselves obliged to him for some excellent interpretations of scripture is likewise certain."²⁰ The central tenet of the Hutchinsonianism he set out to defend was the rejection of natural religion. However, the credit for having "fairly demolished" natural religion and having brought its votaries to an acknowledgement of its worthlessness was ascribed to Ellis.²¹ Placed beside that of Ellis was the name of Charles Leslie, whose defence of revelation with historical argument replaced the natural theology which had been discarded. Such a reduced version of Hutchinsonianism can be partly accounted for by the circumstances in which the tract was produced. It answered a politically motivated attack. Horne no doubt felt the nece-

¹⁵ Skinner, *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 72–74.

¹⁶ Skinner, *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 84–86.

¹⁷ Distinctively Hutchinsonian views are largely absent from the earlier part of the "Letters Addressed to Candidates for Holy Orders." See Skinner, *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 1–90. They are much more in evidence in the central section of the work. See pp. 91–238.

¹⁸ Commonplace book, Horne Papers, p. 93.

¹⁹ Berman, "Culmination and Causation," pp. 262–264.

²⁰ Horne, *Works*, vol. 6, p. 188.

²¹ Horne, *Works*, vol. 6, p. 202.

ssity of winning over as many of his Oxonian readers as he could [43]. Elsewhere, he showed himself willing to take more from Hutchinson than a few pieces of exegesis. However, as has been noted above, Horne's interest in Hutchinson was a theological one and this piece of writing can be taken to show what it chiefly consisted of.

Hutchinsonianism endured into the 19th century with varying degrees of influence. The master still had some avowed followers [44]. However, there were others whom we may justly name as Hutchinsonians; and others again whom we may not, though Hutchinsonian influence on them is clear. Alexander Nicoll was Pusey's predecessor in the regius chair of Hebrew at Oxford. In his youth, he was a parishioner of Skinner, whose son, the bishop of Aberdeen, patronised his university education. He obtained the regius chair from the earl of Liverpool, whose father knew and highly regarded Jones of Nayland [45].²² His father-in-law and memoirist, James Parsons, emphasised that he was not a Hutchinsonian. This was true; but it should be noted that it was thought necessary to make the point. What Parsons pointed to particularly was his enthusiasm for the study of Arabic and of Hebrew on a comparative basis.²³ Such a reduction of the first language of mankind to a mere member of the Semitic family had indeed brought the wrath of the Hutchinsonians down, many years before, on Thomas Hunt, the celebrated Oxford orientalist. If revelation was given by means of a language that had not been common to all mankind, then the justice of revelation was impugned to the benefit of reason—and the Hutchinsonian diffusionist understanding of the history of religion collapsed [46]. However, despite this basic divergence from Hutchinsonianism, Nicoll showed considerable interest in Hutchinsonian themes. He was, like the Hutchinsonians, preoccupied with asserting the unity of the two testaments or, in other words, the presence of the Christian revelation in the Hebrew scriptures. This, on the one hand, led him to parallel the unity of content with a Semitic linguistic unity and thence into *Quellengeschichte*, speaking of a common Aramaic source of the synoptics.²⁴ On the other hand, he was also much concerned with demonstrating that animal sacrifice

... was of divine origin, and likewise that it was intended in the mysterious counsels of God to typify from the very beginning of things that sacrifice of Christ, which should atone for the sins of all mankind.²⁵

The typology of sacrifice, together with Trinitarian typology, held the pre-eminent place in Hutchinsonian exegesis. Indeed, among such as were of evangelical inclination, the former tended to displace the latter and served as the core of their presentation of Hutchinsonianism [47].

Like his contemporary, Nicoll, William Van Mildert had an association with Hutchinsonians from his earliest days, through the circle gathered around William Stevens, a highly influential layman, a cousin of Horne and a close friend of Jones of Nayland. Like Nicoll he enjoyed the patronage of the earl of Liverpool and became a

²² Walker, *Skinner*, pp. 165–167; Stevens, “Short Account,” pp. ii–iii.

²³ Parsons, “Some Particulars,” pp. xxviii–xxix and xli.

²⁴ Nicoll, *Sermons*, pp. 92–93 and 99–140.

²⁵ Nicoll, *Sermons*, p. 334. See also pp. 199–334.

regius professor, of divinity, at Oxford, but went on to obtain the see of Llandaff and become the last palatine bishop of Durham. It may well be said that he was the most distinguished high churchman of the pre-Tractarian era. His biographer, Elizabeth Varley, has noted the Hutchinsonianism of Van Mildert's early work, a series of Boyle Sermons, entitled *An Historical View of the Rise and Progress of Infidelity*. She also makes it clear that this Hutchinsonianism had wholly abandoned Hutchinson's natural philosophy [48]. However, the extent and character of Van Mildert's Hutchinsonianism will bear further comment. If, indeed, he may be rightly described as a Hutchinsonian, this late expression of the movement's thought represents both its highest degree of theological sophistication and the best illustration of the importance of its epistemological underpinnings.

If Hutchinsonianism had declined in theological respectability from its mid 18th-century peak, yet at the end of the century and the beginning of the new one there were circumstances favourable to a revival. The increasing inclination of churchmen to supernaturalism and orthodoxy, clearly visible by the 1790s, was much aided by external circumstances. Whether it was perceived as a conspiracy of the *philosophies* or merely as a manifestation of the terrible consequences of their thought, the Revolution helped to convince many of the need to purge religion of those strains of thought which the Counter-Enlightenment had abhorred. For some, the Enlightenment conspiracy was directed by a supernatural evil and possessed eschatological significance. *The Rise and Progress of Infidelity* contained the most intellectually effective and sophisticated expression of this view [49]. The work's establishment of Van Mildert's theological reputation and the lavish praise bestowed on it by distinguished churchmen speak clearly of the changed theological climate of the period [50].

The first half of Van Mildert's book was historical. It was intended to reveal the supernatural evil which lay beneath the events of human history. The design to turn man from revealed truth and, since the establishment of Christianity, "to represent human reason as alone competent to guide him into all truth, and his own natural virtue as sufficient to ensure him perfect happiness" was laid bare [51]. The devotee of John Hutchinson's own writings, taking up this historical study, would have found the outlines of the historical argument familiar²⁶ and little in this elaboration to give him offence. He would have found the theological purposes of the master's learning answered in this castigation of Enlightenment rationalism, but little of that learning itself. Themes dear to the Hutchinsonians were taken up and, indeed, their positions adopted; but the more singular ones were avoided. Thus, for example, Van Mildert echoed Hutchinson's hostility to Judaism, as the wilful concealment of the Christian message of the Old Testament. However, this was an old and respectable view, which could stand without Hutchinson's support. Van Mildert preferred to cite, among others, the Huguenot biblicist, Pierre Allix. He was also obliged to John Whitaker, a contemporary writer of some ability as a historian, who had devoted the greater part of his bulky study, *The Origin of Arianism Disclosed*, to the same topic.²⁷

²⁶ See, for example, Jones, *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 99–100.

²⁷ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 1, pp. 69–108; 130–131, 180 and 200–202. See especially pp. 100–101.

It was when Van Mildert turned from history to refute, in the second half of his lecture series, the “principles and reasonings” of infidelity in a systematic fashion that his commitment to Hutchinsonianism became most apparent. It turned out to be precisely that Hutchinsonianism defended by the young Horne in his *Apology*—a Hutchinsonianism sans Hutchinson and made to rest on the Irish writers. Like Horne, Van Mildert was also keen on Charles Leslie, whom he described as “an incomparable writer” [52] and by whose *Short Methods with the Deists* he set great store, even in his pastoral ministrations [50, p. 33]. He stated concisely the apologetic principle which Leslie had made popular by this book:

Our faith is founded upon the basis of fact, not of opinions; and it is to be proved, like all other matters of fact, by historical testimony. By testimony, divine as well as human, it is firmly supported: by testimony, which none of its opponents have yet been able to invalidate. It is, therefore, hardly to be expected, that we should go forth and engage the adversary in a wide and open field of controversy, to the neglect of this impregnable fortress of our faith.²⁸

It is thus not surprising that Van Mildert devoted a considerable part of his second volume to offering testimony to “matters of fact.”²⁹

With the increasing threat from historical criticism, such rationalism would not remain useful to orthodoxy in the 19th century. However, for Van Mildert, those who purveyed mere human opinion in place of divine truth were still the enthusiasts for natural religion. Consequently, before advancing his rationalist defence of revelation, he devoted as much effort to closing off the “wide and open field” of natural theology.³⁰ He was resolved to show “the inability of man to frame a religion for himself, or to attain a knowledge of spiritual and divine truths” from any branch of philosophy.³¹ Here his stated obligations were to Ellis, praised for his “perspicuity and force,”³² and Felton. In the 22 endnotes to the lecture in which he set forth his epistemology, Ellis was cited 16 times and Felton 9 times.³³ In the following lecture, in which he dealt with “the pretensions of moral philosophy,”³⁴ it was Ellis’s Nominalist view which was adopted. Van Mildert declared that moral obligation could “be neither antecedent to nor independent of the divine will: so neither is it, strictly speaking, immutable, since God may change it whenever he sees fit.”³⁵

Van Mildert’s *Rise and Progress of Infidelity* may be taken as showing the endurance of the Irish epistemological assault on natural religion and of the use of the apologetic approach commended by Leslie and Dodwell, which complemented it.

²⁸ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, p. 13.

²⁹ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, pp. 227–388.

³⁰ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, pp. 35–188.

³¹ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, p. 121.

³² Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, p. 477.

³³ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, pp. 471–478.

³⁴ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, p. 101.

³⁵ Van Mildert, *Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, vol. 2, pp. 112–113. Cf. J. Ellis, *The Knowledge of Divine Things from Revelation, not from Reason or Nature*, 2nd Edition, B. Dod, London, vol. 1747, pp. 133–395 [53].

The other complementary element, the use of analogy, is to be sought for in a later work, a series of Bampton Lectures, entitled *An Inquiry into the General Principles of Scripture Interpretation*. Varley's emphasis on the discussion of the relationship between scripture and tradition in the work rather obscures its Hutchinsonian character.³⁶ Van Mildert was firm enough, in the third and fourth lectures of the series, on the *sola scriptura* position which the Hutchinsonian tradition was able to embrace, in the belief that Hutchinson had rendered scripture a sufficient bulwark against heterodoxy. In any case, he regarded this as merely clearing the ground "of preliminary difficulties."³⁷ Another such difficulty was the contemporary failure to understand that faith and virtue were prerequisites for the interpretation of scripture.³⁸ This venerable patristic theme was dear to the Hutchinsonians, because of its relationship to their constant insistence on the culpability of religious error.³⁹ Their history of religion was, after all, a demonstration that mankind stumbled in the dark only because it wilfully rejected the light of the primitive revelation. When Van Mildert moved beyond preliminaries to the central matter of the work, he offered a broad, if cautious, commendation of the Hutchinsonian school's approach to exegesis. There was, of course, no commendation of Hutchinson's own manipulations of the Hebrew text, and the possibility of the discovery of a cosmology in it was explicitly rejected. Scripture was not to be used to deal with "matters incidentally connected to it which may be capable of physical demonstration."⁴⁰ However, an inability to make use of Hutchinson did not inhibit an emphasis on analogical interpretation.

The possibility of preserving the practice of analogical interpretation, while setting aside the products of Hutchinson's own practice of it, had already been made clear by a previous generation of Hutchinsonians. When, in 1786, Jones came to set out his views on the exegesis of scripture, he displayed no interest in Hutchinson's Hebrew roots or the cosmology he derived from them. Not that he had abandoned his discipleship of the Yorkshire hebræist: he was to emphasise the value Hutchinsonians ascribed to Hebrew almost a decade later in his *Letter on the Use of the Hebrew Language*. In 1786, however, he was content to offer justification for what he called the "figurative" interpretation of scripture simply on sensationalist principles, rather than the accomplishments of Hutchinson.

Of all the objects of sense we have ideas, and our own minds and memories are stored with them. But of invisible things we have no ideas till they are pointed out to us by revelation: and as we cannot know them immediately, such as they are in themselves, after the manner in which we know sensible objects, they must be communicated to us by the mediation of such things as we already comprehend.

³⁶ Varley, *Last of the Prince Bishops*, pp. 57–62.

³⁷ Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, p. 19.

³⁸ Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, pp. 23–46.

³⁹ See, for example, Jones, *Works*, vol. 3, pp. 9–13.

⁴⁰ Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, p. 69.

For this reason, the scripture is found to have a language of its own, which does not consist of words, but of signs or figures taken from visible things.⁴¹

The use of analogical interpretation, Jones pointed out later, did not necessarily indicate Hutchinsonianism, but merely adherence to patristic practices.⁴² Skinner, too, when he stated his exegetical principles in the introduction to his analogical exposition of the Song of Songs, saw no need to mention his Hutchinsonianism. His “leading idea” was simply acceptance of the doctrine of inspiration—a constant awareness of all the scriptures possessing a common author.⁴³ All therefore spoke, by analogy, of Christ.⁴⁴ Jones too insisted on the need to use the analogy of faith, the interpretation of parts of scripture by the whole—“the rule of making scripture its own interpreter”, as he put it.⁴⁵

Neither Jones nor Skinner had abandoned their adherence to Hutchinson; but they perceived a need to retain analogical interpretation to sustain a belief in the presence of the Christian revelation in the Old Testament against rising historical criticism.⁴⁶ If Hutchinson’s views were not likely to appeal to their audience, analogical interpretation was still quite defensible. Van Mildert, still, one might say, a Hutchinsonian, though sans Hutchinson, easily adopted their stance. When he reached the heart of his subject matter, in the fifth and following lectures of the *Inquiry*, he articulated it clearly. In the sixth, he propounded the notion of the analogy of faith. He took as his scriptural text the phrase which Jones had been so fond of to express the notion—“comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Cor. 2: 13).⁴⁷ It was this method of interpretation which was to possess the ascendancy. Knowledge of scripture gained from non-scriptural sources was “subordinate, in point of authority”.⁴⁸ He also made clear the results of the application of this method. He emphasised that the Patriarchs possessed the Gospel, that Mosaic religion was Christianity “in type and prophecy” and zealously denounced the “Marcionite” tendencies which had emerged in Enlightenment thought.⁴⁹ The following lecture was, not surprisingly, devoted to the figurative—in the sense that Jones had used the term—interpretation of scripture.⁵⁰ Yet, for all the sympathy with the Hutchinsonian approach which they displayed, these were the lectures of a new regius professor and judgements were balanced. The literal meaning of the text, he emphasised, was to remain primary. It was important that “before a figurative or mystical interpretation be admitted, some urgent reason, even something like

⁴¹ Jones, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 5.

⁴² Jones, *Works*, p. 194.

⁴³ Skinner, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 135.

⁴⁴ Skinner, *Works*, pp. 145–146.

⁴⁵ Jones, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 18.

⁴⁶ Skinner poured scorn on the historical approach, pointing out, quite justly, that the history was often very poor. See Skinner, *Works*, vol. 2, pp. 127–132 and 142–143.

⁴⁷ Cf. Jones, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 107.

⁴⁸ Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, p. 147.

⁴⁹ Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, p. 130 and pp. 172–173. For background to this, see F.E. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods*, University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, 1983 (Chapter 5) [54].

⁵⁰ Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, pp. 181–214.

necessity, be produced”.⁵¹ Although he was anxious to show the errors that arose from the neglect of figurative interpretation, he also warned against “the errors arising from carrying it to excess.”⁵²

It is tempting to suggest that the analogical mode of thought, with its related “recognition of the sacramental character of the world”⁵³ was Hutchinsonianism’s most enduring feature, by virtue of a transmission to the new kind of high churchmen of the Oxford Movement. It was certainly held with an intensity of religious sentiment, which other patterns of Hutchinsonian thought could not generate. Jones found his ultimate justification for his long pursuit of figurative interpretations of scripture in the conviction

... that the spirit of those figures under which the bible delivers to us the things of God, has a power of raising and glorifying, even in this life, the spirit of man; producing an effect upon it, the same in kind with what it shall hereafter experience when admitted into the presence of God.⁵⁴

It has habitually been assumed that no explanation need be offered for the demise of Hutchinsonianism: the manifest falsity of Hutchinson’s teachings has been taken as explanation enough. The untenability of Hutchinson’s own positions did indeed assure that, by the end of the 18th century, Hutchinsonianism had almost died of ridicule. However, as the writings of Van Mildert testify, Hutchinsonianism was still regarded as capable of resuscitation almost a century after its founder wrote. That this was so, was not due to any original contribution of Hutchinson himself, but rather, as has been argued here, to the epistemological stance and attendant theological thought which he adopted. By virtue of this adoption, the Hutchinsonians, though not their master, were still capable of providing a framework for a theology and mode of exegesis which were acceptable to the early 19th century. Yet Van Mildert, if we leave aside the elderly Scottish Episcopalian clergymen who had been instructed by Skinner,⁵⁵ was the last of the Hutchinsonians. In retrospect, the weakness of his position is apparent. His destructive epistemology had been intended to drive the reader to the safe harbour of scriptural revelation. Unfortunately, historical criticism had rendered this much less attractive as a refuge to others than it was to him. To the problems raised by historical criticism, he was blind. Since the 1750s, Hutchinsonianism had lived within high churchmanship. Now high churchmen were to find the retreat of the Oxford Movement of the 1830s from *sola scriptura* Protestantism far more attractive than an attempt to defend it with the inspiration of that other Oxford movement, which had been so attractive to Horne and Jones in the 1750s. In a eulogy preached after Van Mildert’s death in 1836, the well-known clerical author, George Townsend, found the late bishop’s pre-eminent achievement in his writings, which had combated “the great error ... of the day”. This lay, he

⁵¹ Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, p. 192. See also pp. 135–145.

⁵² Van Mildert, *Inquiry*, p. 184.

⁵³ Rowell, ‘Church Principles’ and ‘Protestant Kempism’, p. 22.

⁵⁴ Jones, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 175.

⁵⁵ Walker, *Skinner*, p. 173.

said, in “declaring... the opinions of men... to be of equal value with the truths of God” [55]. Many would indeed have praised Van Mildert for his struggle for revelation against the Enlightenment’s rationalism; but there were none to take up his own intellectual weapons.

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