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Jacqueline Broad (ed.), Mary Astell's *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of  
the Church of England*, Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto Series (Toronto:  
Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and Iter Publishing, 2013).

**Please cite the published version.**

The  
Christian Religion,  
as Professed by a  
Daughter  
of the  
Church of England

Mary Astell

*Edited by*  
Jacqueline Broad

[Bridgeman Art Library Image ID: MOU 162570 (cover art)]

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### *Acknowledgments*

I am extremely grateful for the generous financial assistance of the Australian Research Council, who awarded me a Future Fellowship in 2010 in order to carry out research on Mary Astell, and for the support of my department, the School of Philosophical, Historical, and International Studies at Monash University, Melbourne. Without their help, this volume would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto for providing me with a Visiting Fellowship in September 2012; this fellowship enabled me to complete the research for the introduction to this work. In addition, I wish to extend my gratitude to librarians at the Watkinson Library, Trinity College, Hartford; the British Library, London; the University of Cambridge Library, Cambridge; the Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven; the Jessie Ball duPont Library, University of the South, Sewanee; the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library at the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Pennsylvania Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Philadelphia; the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto; and the Lambeth Palace Library, London. For her invaluable assistance in preparing the original typescript of Astell's *Christian Religion*, I am extremely grateful to Michelle de Stefani. For answering all my bibliographical queries with patience and understanding, I am deeply indebted to Patrick Spedding. For a number of good and sensible suggestions for improvement, I am grateful to the anonymous referee for the press. And for their terrific advice and support, I would like to thank Jeremy Aarons, Peter Anstey, Dirk Baltzly, Sandra Broad, Sally Dickinson, Margaret English-Haskin, Elizabeth H. Hageman, Amyrose McCue Gill, Graham Oppy, Al Rabil, and Paul Salzman.

### *Cover Illustration*

The cover to this volume features an oil painting titled "Portrait of Lady Frances Lady Coningsby (1675-1714/15) and Lady Katherine Jones" (1687), attributed to the Dutch artist Willem Wissing (1656-1687). This image is provided courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library (MOU162570). The two women in the painting are Frances and Catherine Jones, the daughters of Richard Jones, the first earl of Ranelagh, and his wife Elizabeth. Catherine Jones was one of Astell's closest friends and the most likely addressee of her *Christian Religion*, which is written in the style of a letter to a lady with the initials "C. I." The portrait title would appear to suggest that Catherine is the figure standing to the right of the seated woman. In a 1691 mezzotint image of the same painting, however, the title remains the same while the sitters are reversed—the standing figure is to the left of the seated woman (see National Portrait Gallery, D31354).

## INTRODUCTION

*The Other Voice*

At first glance, the title of Mary Astell's longest treatise, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* (first published in 1705), gives the impression of a deeply religious work. This impression is not misleading. True to its title, the *Christian Religion* is a devout, almost evangelical, piece of writing: an impassioned justification for belonging to the Anglican church (and no other) in early eighteenth-century England. The title, however, belies the rich philosophical nature of the text and its deeper feminist message. In one key passage, Astell (1666-1731) announces:

Perhaps I may be thought singular in what I am about to say, but I think I have reason to warrant me, and till I am convinced of the contrary, since it is a truth of great importance, I shall not scruple to declare it, without regarding the singularity. I therefore beg leave to say, that most of, if not all, the follies and vices that women are subject to (for I meddle not with the men) are owing to our paying too great a deference to other people's judgments, and too little to our own, in suffering others to judge for us, when God has not only allowed, but required us to judge for ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

In Astell's view, women should not be treated like either children or fools—they ought to be permitted to form their own judgments about right and wrong. To support these claims, she appeals to her own immediate experience of an internal power of reason, “that light which God Himself has set up in my mind to lead me to Him” (§6), and the belief that her fellow women have the same capacity for rational thought. Undoubtedly, she says, some women are naturally clever and accomplished, while others are inherently slow and dull-witted. Both types of women, however, can benefit from further moral and intellectual improvement: the first because they are most capable of such improvement, the second because they *need* it most (§259). The *Christian Religion* aims to provide all women with the tools they require to judge for themselves and avoid being lead astray by others. To achieve these ends, Astell draws upon the entire edifice of early modern philosophy, including not only epistemology, theology, and metaphysics, but also ethics and politics. In this text, she puts forward Cartesian-Platonist theories about the true source of knowledge, ontological and cosmological arguments for the existence of God, a rationalist argument for the real distinction between mind and body, and a counter-argument to the Lockean view that God might bestow matter with the power of thought. While many of Astell's contemporaries employ similar philosophical theories and arguments, few of them do so in order to raise the consciousness in women that they should exercise their rationality toward noble ends, for “it can never be supposed that God created us, that is our minds, after His own image, for no better purpose than to wait on the body, while it eats, drinks, and sleeps, and saunters away a *useless life*” (§107). The *Christian Religion* thus represents a uniquely female-centered counterpart—an “other voice”—to the works of great male philosophers of the period.

The *Christian Religion* is also the crowning achievement of Astell's career. Today Astell is best known as the author of three popular feminist works, the *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (1694 and 1697) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700). The

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<sup>1</sup> See below, §45. Following Astell's lead, I use section symbols—§ in single form and §§ in plural—to refer to subsections (numbered paragraphs) in her work. All my subsequent in-text references to Astell's *Christian Religion* are to subsections in the present volume, which is based on the 1717 second edition of the text.

first *Proposal* details her plans for an all-female academy or a “religious retirement” for women,<sup>2</sup> the second offers her “method of improvement” for women to practice at home, and the *Reflections* provides her thoughts concerning the common causes of unhappy marriages in early modern society. In all three works, her emphasis is upon the importance of women cultivating a certain strength of mind and a disposition toward happiness, regardless of their material circumstances. The *Christian Religion* provides a further elaboration of the same themes. More than this, the treatise provides the reader with a sophisticated philosophical context in which to place the feminist arguments of the earlier works. We might think of this volume as a rather long “third part” to her famous *Proposal*. The first part of the *Proposal* outlines her view that in order for women to attain purity of mind and acquire truth and virtue, they must (temporarily, at least) withdraw themselves from the business of the wider world and devote their attention to the study of religion and philosophy. The second part gives women a provisional method of thinking to attain this purity, based upon the Cartesian rules of René Descartes (1596-1650) and his followers Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) and Pierre Nicole (1625-1695)—a method whereby women might withdraw their minds from sensory prejudices and regulate their passions in accordance with reason. This final “third part” shows her readers how that method might be applied to the study of God, the self, and other people and material beings. Building on the principles of thinkers such as the French Cartesian Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1714) and his English follower John Norris (1657-1711), Astell offers both theoretical and practical guidelines about how women can attain a Christian tranquility of mind in the midst of outward troubles and disturbances. She proposes to show that living in conformity with the will of God can bring happiness both in this life and the next. She provides moral arguments in favor of treating other people from motives of disinterested benevolence rather than petty self-interest, and she recommends psychotherapeutic techniques for the governance of the passions, those disturbing perceptions that occur in the soul as a result of its close intermingling with the body. Above all, Astell offers advice on how a woman can cultivate a virtuous disposition of character and live up to the dignity and perfection of her nature as a rational, thinking being. The *Christian Religion* thus spells out what Astell’s female students would have come to understand, had they been given the opportunity to attend her academy. It represents the culmination of Astell’s feminist project to teach her fellow women how to lead the good life and attain happiness.

#### *Astell’s Life and Works*

When the *Christian Religion* first appeared in print in February 1705,<sup>3</sup> Astell was at the height of her literary fame in London. She had already published seven works, including both

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 1:73. Hereafter I refer to the first and second parts of this work as *Proposal I* and *Proposal II* respectively. A new modern edition of Astell’s first *Proposal* (1694) and her *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), edited by Sharon L. Jansen, is forthcoming in the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto series.

<sup>3</sup> [Mary Astell], *The Christian Religion, As Professed by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (London: S.H. for R. Wilkin, 1705). The *Term Catalogues* record that Astell’s *Christian Religion* was first published in octavo in Hilary term (February), 1705. See Edward Arber, *The Term Catalogues, 1668-1709 A.D.; with a Number for Easter Term, 1711 A.D.*, 3 vols. (London: Professor Edward Arber, 1903-06), 3:434. “Octavo” refers to the size of the pages of the book, brought about by folding a standard printing sheet three times in order to produce eight leaves.

her *Proposals* and the *Reflections*, to general public acclaim.<sup>4</sup> Although these works were all published anonymously, her authorship seems to have been an open secret.<sup>5</sup> Among her contemporaries, she enjoyed a reputation as a woman of great piety and wisdom. She was admired by leading literary figures such as John Evelyn, Daniel Defoe, and John Dunton, as well as the prominent religious writers John Norris, Francis Atterbury, and George Hicke. Her works were also known to the great philosophers, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and John Locke. And she was an inspiration to other defenders of women in her day, including Mary Chudleigh, Elizabeth Thomas, and the anonymous author known as “Eugenia.” In her private life at this time, Astell was also extremely fortunate: she had a close circle of friends and patrons—a small group of wealthy gentlewomen who provided her with much-needed emotional support and financial assistance.<sup>6</sup>

Only a few decades earlier, Astell had faced a rather lonely and dismal future. Born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on November 12, 1666, she was the eldest child of Mary (*née* Errington) and Peter Astell, both of whom hailed from respectable Northumberland families. Her father was a member of the Company of Hostmen, an elite coal merchants’ guild that held a powerful sway over the flourishing Newcastle coal trade. In her childhood, Mary had enjoyed the privileged lifestyle of a respected gentleman’s daughter. Alongside her younger brother Peter, she was educated by a clergyman uncle, Ralph Astell, the curate of St. Nicholas Church in Newcastle. She was apparently taught “all the accomplishments which

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<sup>4</sup> In order of publication, these works are: (1) [Mary Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, For the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest. By a Lover of her Sex* (London: R. Wilkin, 1694); (2) [Mary Astell] and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris* (London: J. Norris for Samuel Manship and Richard Wilkin, 1695); (3) [Mary Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II: Wherein a Method is Offered for the Improvement of their Minds* (London: Richard Wilkin, 1697); (4) [Mary Astell], *Some Reflections Upon Marriage, Occasioned by the Duke and Duchess of Mazarine’s Case; which is also considered* (London: John Nutt, 1700); (5) [Mary Astell], *Moderation truly Stated: Or, A Review of a Late Pamphlet, Entitled, Moderation a Vertue* (London: R. Wilkin, 1704); (6) [Mary Astell], *An Impartial Enquiry Into The Causes Of Rebellion and Civil War In This Kingdom* (London: E. P. for Richard Wilkin, 1704); and (7) [Mary Astell], *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons* (London: E. P. for Richard Wilkin, 1704). The following Astell works are available in modern editions: Astell, *Proposals I and II*; Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, ed. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage, Impartial Enquiry, and Fair Way with the Dissenters*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Unless otherwise stated, my references are to these modern editions.

<sup>5</sup> Only one year following the publication of the *Christian Religion*, a book catalogue advertised her work as “Mrs. Astyl’s Religion of a Church of England Woman, new 1705.” See *Bibliotheca Selectissima; or, A Catalogue of Curious Books Contained in the Libraries of the Reverend Dr. Thomas Bayley late President of St. Mary Magdalen Coll. and the Reverend Dr. Henry Parkhurst, late Fellow of Corpus Christi Coll. in Oxford* (London: n.p., 1706), 39.

<sup>6</sup> For these biographical details (and those below), I am indebted to Florence M. Smith, *Mary Astell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916); Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1986); and Jacqueline Broad, “Mary Astell (1666-1731),” *British Philosophers, 1500-1799*, ed. Philip B. Dematteis and Peter S. Fosl, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 252 (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2002), 3-10.

are usually learned by young gentlewomen of her station,”<sup>7</sup> and she may also have had some tuition in religion and philosophy. In 1678, however, Mary Astell’s father died and her life prospects were dealt a significant blow. Peter Astell’s untimely death left the family in serious financial trouble, and in the ensuing years her mother was forced to rely on charity and loans to supplement her pension. By 1684, both Astell’s mother and her uncle were dead. In a short period, then, Mary Astell went from being the daughter of a prosperous gentleman to an impoverished orphan with little chance of finding a suitable husband. By her own estimate, she was a rather poor candidate for marriage anyway: not only was she penniless, she was apparently bereft of both beauty and charm.<sup>8</sup> Instead she developed “a certain ambition to be an author,”<sup>9</sup> and shortly after her mother’s death, she moved from Newcastle to London, most likely with the aim of pursuing this ambition. Once there, she received some assistance from the nonjuror William Sancroft (1617-1693), the archbishop of Canterbury, who was kind enough “to receive a poor unknown, who hath no place to fly unto and none that careth for her soul.”<sup>10</sup> One of her earliest written pieces, a manuscript of religious poetry titled “A Collection of Poems” (1689), is dedicated to Sancroft out of esteem and gratitude.

In the 1690s, Astell turned her hand from poetry to philosophy. Her childhood tutor, her uncle Ralph, had been educated at the University of Cambridge at the time of the religio-philosophical movement known as Cambridge Platonism.<sup>11</sup> In her published works, Astell evinces a sympathy for the moral and religious doctrines of the Cambridge thinkers—especially those of Henry More (1614-1688), who was well-known for his reasoned defenses of the immaterial soul and the existence of God. In 1693, Astell initiated a correspondence with a man sometimes now known as “the last of the Cambridge Platonists,” the Oxford theologian-philosopher John Norris. Inspired by Norris’s reputation as a man who was “not so narrow-souled as to confine learning to his own sex,” she wrote to him with a puzzle

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<sup>7</sup> George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain (Who have been Celebrated for their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages, Arts, and Sciences)*, intro. Ruth Perry (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 382.

<sup>8</sup> In an early poem, “In emulation of Mr. Cowley’s Poem called the Motto page I” (1688), Astell’s speaker laments: “What shall I do? not to be Rich or Great,/ Not to be courted and admired, /With Beauty blest, or Wit inspired.” This poem is in “A Collection of Poems humbly presented and Dedicated To the most Reverend Father in God William By Divine Providence Lord Archbishop of Canterbury & c” (1689), Rawlinson MSS Poet. 154:50-97, Bodleian Library, Oxford. For a transcription, see Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 400-54 (402).

<sup>9</sup> [Mary Astell], *Bart’lemy Fair; or, An Enquiry after Wit; In which due Respect is had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, To my LORD \*\*\** (London: Richard Wilkin, 1709): “It will plainly appear to the reader, without an advertisement, that I had a certain ambition to be an author: whether for my own *private* glory, or for public good, or both together, if he be an artist he will discern” (17). There is no modern edition of *Bart’lemy Fair*.

<sup>10</sup> Astell, “A Collection of Poems,” in Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 401. In this context, “nonjurors” refers to those members of the clergy who refused to swear allegiance to William III and Mary II in 1689.

<sup>11</sup> Astell later inherited her uncle’s library, a collection of books that includes a number of religio-historical texts now housed at the Northampton Records Office in the United Kingdom. Among the surviving works bearing her inscriptions are William Cave’s *Antiquitates Christianae* (1675) and his *Apostolici* (1677). See E. Derek Taylor, “Mary Astell’s Work Towards a New Edition of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part II,” *Studies in Bibliography* 57 (2005-06): 197-232 (200n6); and Taylor and New, introduction to Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 8n18.



concerning the love of God.<sup>12</sup> Their ensuing correspondence was a long and lively discussion on Norris's distinction between the love of desire (a love that we owe exclusively to God) and the love of benevolence (the love that we owe to other people), and the Malebranchean metaphysics underlying these views.<sup>13</sup> During this exchange, from 1693 to 1694, Astell published her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, an instant success that ran to four editions in her lifetime. When the correspondence with Norris was eventually published in 1695, the title page announced that the *Letters concerning the Love of God* were "Between the Author of the *Proposal to the Ladies* and Mr. John Norris."

Over the next decade, Astell proceeded to establish herself as a writer. She took lodgings in Chelsea, a respectable suburb of London, where it seems that her clever wit and cheerful disposition won her several friends. Her most intimate and long-lasting relationship was with Lady Catherine Jones (d. 1740), the well-to-do daughter of the first earl of Ranelagh. Astell permitted Norris to publish their letters only on the proviso that he dedicated them to "the truly honorable lady, the Lady Catherine Jones, in due acknowledgement of her merits." Astell describes her friend as someone who, from an early age, shunned the temptations of birth and beauty, and chose instead to remain a virgin and pursue God's work. She adds that she loves Jones "with the greatest tenderness, for all must love her who have any esteem for unfeigned goodness, who value an early piety and eminent virtue."<sup>14</sup> Jones is the most likely addressee of Astell's *Christian Religion*, which is written in the style of a letter to "the Right Honorable, T. L. C. I."<sup>15</sup> In the final years of her life, Astell lived with Jones in her home in Jew's Row, Chelsea.

When Astell's female academy failed to win support, she followed up her *Proposal to the Ladies* with a second part, "Wherein a Method is Offered for the Improvement of their Minds," in 1697. According to Astell's friend Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756), a "good lady" had expressed interest in providing financial backing for the academy, but was dissuaded by Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715), the bishop of Salisbury.<sup>16</sup> Astell's second part is dedicated to Princess Anne of Denmark (later Queen Anne of England), in the hope that she will not "deny encouragement to that which has no other design than the bettering of the world, especially the most neglected part of it."<sup>17</sup> In her later works, Astell's royalist sympathies

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<sup>12</sup> Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 69. In the late seventeenth century, Norris was tremendously popular with female readers. His name is connected, either by personal acquaintance or correspondence, with a number of English women—including Damaris Masham, Mary Chudleigh, Elizabeth Thomas, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, and Sarah Fyge Egerton—many of whom read and commented on his writings. On Norris, see Flora Isabel MacKinnon, *The Philosophy of John Norris*, Philosophical Monographs 1 (Baltimore, MD: Psychological Review Publications, 1910); Richard Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris of Bemerton (1657-1712)* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1979); and W. J. Mander, *The Philosophy of John Norris* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> For details, see Taylor and New, introduction to Astell and Norris, *Letters*.

<sup>14</sup> Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 66.

<sup>15</sup> In this period, the letter "i" was still interchangeable with the letter "j." It is therefore likely that "T. L. C. I." stands for T[he] L[ady], C[atherine] J[ones]. The cover of this present volume features a late seventeenth-century portrait of Jones with her sister Frances (later Lady Coningsby), attributed to the Dutch artist Willem Wissing.

<sup>16</sup> In a letter to George Ballard, dated July 16, 1738, Elstob reports: "I don't remember that I ever heard Mrs. Astell mention the good lady's name, you desire to know, but I very well remember, she told me, it was Bishop Burnet that prevented that good design by dissuading that lady from encouraging it" (Ballard MS 43:53, Bodleian Library, Oxford).

<sup>17</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 117.

come to the fore, not only in her *Reflections upon Marriage* (reprinted with a long preface in 1706), but also in three Tory political pamphlets of 1704: *Moderation truly Stated, An Impartial Enquiry Into The Causes Of Rebellion and Civil War*, and *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons*.<sup>18</sup> Astell's final work, *Bart'lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry after Wit* (1709), is a critique of the Whig thinker Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury's *Letter concerning Enthusiasm* (1708).

Shortly after publishing *Bart'lemy Fair*, Astell partly retired from her writing career in order to devote herself to the organization of a girls' charity school in Chelsea. In her later years, she developed breast cancer and underwent a crude mastectomy. Astell died soon after this operation, on May 9, 1731. One month later, a notice appeared in the *London Evening Post* advertising the 1730 reissue of the *Christian Religion*, this time openly attributed to "the Ingenious Mrs. Astell."<sup>19</sup>

### *Historical-Intellectual Context*

The *Christian Religion* was written in the early years of the reign of Queen Anne (1665-1714), the Stuart monarch who acceded to the throne of England upon the death of William III in 1702. This was an era of fierce political antagonisms between Whigs and Tories, two political parties distinguished at the time by their attitudes toward Protestant dissenters (Quakers, Independents, Baptists, and so on). The majority of Tories stood for the doctrine of passive obedience, the view that subjects ought to submit quietly to any penalties for disobedience to unjust authority. They were also supporters of High-Church Anglicanism, or the strict adherence to those doctrines and rituals distinctive of the Church of England (and not the dissenting churches). Above all, the Tories sought to defend the spiritual monopoly of the Anglican church in the lives of English subjects. By contrast, the majority of Whigs placed a high value on "English liberties," including liberty of conscience or freedom of religious worship for dissenters, and they supported the subject's right to resist unjust or tyrannical political authority. In 1704, hostilities between Whigs and Tories came to a head over an issue known as "occasional conformity." This was the practice of some Protestant dissenters who would occasionally take communion in Anglican churches solely in order to qualify for government posts, such as mayorships and justices of the peace. In 1704, the Tories put forward a second Occasional Conformity Bill in Commons (the first bill of 1702 was defeated), seeking to punish occasional conformists for what they saw as an affront to the Anglican church. In her short pamphlets of 1704, Astell aligns herself with the Tory side of this debate. In the *Christian Religion*, she expresses the same religious and political sympathies—she defends a High-Church Anglican, anti-toleration, and anti-dissenter point of view—but with some important qualifications.

In this treatise, Astell provides a sustained critique of three religio-political works: the anonymous *A Lady's Religion* (1697), another anonymous pamphlet titled *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation Explained* (1704), and John Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).<sup>20</sup> There has been some speculation about the authorship of the first two

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of Astell's political views, see Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For a brief overview, see Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 265-87.

<sup>19</sup> *London Evening Post* no. 553 (June 12-15, 1731).

<sup>20</sup> Astell addresses these specific editions: *A Lady's Religion: In a Letter to the Honorable My Lady Howard. The Second Edition. To which is added, a Second Letter to the same Lady, concerning the Import of Fear in Religion. By a Divine of the Church of England*, 2nd ed.

works. *A Lady's Religion*—the text that inspired Astell to write her *Christian Religion* in the first place (see §1 below)—was supposedly written by “a Divine of the Church of England.” But despite this ascription, Astell seems to have suspected Locke’s involvement.<sup>21</sup> In one part of the text, she drily observes that “the *Lady's Religion* seems to be little else but an abstract of the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, with all those disadvantages that usually attend abridgments” (§368). Years later, upon reading the *Christian Religion*, the antiquarian William Parry (1687-1756) praises Astell for stripping Locke of his disguise “in [im]personating a clergyman, and yet writing like a Socinian.”<sup>22</sup> His attribution of *A Lady's Religion* to Locke is not unreasonable given that a French translation of the work, *La religion des dames*, appeared in the same volume as the French translation of Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* in 1715, 1731, and 1740. The translator of both texts was a young Frenchman named Pierre Coste (1668-1747), a resident in Locke’s home from 1697. Coste was French tutor to the son of Sir Frances and Lady Damaris Masham, Locke’s hosts at the manor house of Oates in the Essex countryside.<sup>23</sup>

Locke, however, was not the author of *A Lady's Religion*. In his prefatory “Discours sur la Religion des Dames,” Coste directly attributes the work to a “Mr. Stephens.”<sup>24</sup> This Stephens is most likely the Whig clergyman William Stephens (1647-1718), also the reputed author of a defense of Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity*, titled *An Account of the Growth of Deism in England* (1696). It seems that Stephens’s colleague, the Irish philosopher John Toland (1670-1722), might have also had a hand in the work. The first edition of *A Lady's Religion* includes a “Prefatory Epistle to the same Lady, By a Lay-Gentleman,” signed “Adeisidaemon” (meaning “the unsuperstitious man”). Toland uses this same pseudonym in another piece, *Clito: A Poem on the Force of Eloquence* (1700). The prefatory epistle to *A Lady's Religion* also contains a number of positive reflections on the intellectual capacities of women and their natural ability to overcome the errors and prejudices of a poor education. Similar sentiments are expressed, in strikingly similar terms, in Toland’s *Letters to Serena* (1704).

There is no evidence that Astell had read Toland’s “Prefatory Epistle” of the first edition (she refers only to the second edition of *A Lady's Religion*). Recently, however, Sarah Apetrei has argued that Toland ought to be numbered among Astell’s interlocutors in the *Christian Religion*.<sup>25</sup> Apetrei bases her case on the grounds that the anonymous *Principle of the Protestant Reformation* has also been attributed to Toland. “It is in the light of this radical foe [i.e., Toland and the deist movement],” she says, “that Astell’s revilement of biblical

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(London: A. and J. Churchill, 1704); *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation Explained In A Letter of Resolution Concerning Church-Communion* (London: n.p., 1704); and [John Locke], *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As delivered in the Scriptures*, 2nd ed. (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1696).

<sup>21</sup> See Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 90-91.

<sup>22</sup> William Parry to George Ballard, February 12, 1743, Ballard MS 40:158, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>23</sup> On Coste, see John Milton, “Pierre Coste, John Locke, and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury,” in *Studies on Locke: Sources, Contemporaries, and Legacy*, eds. Sarah Hutton and Paul Schuurman, International Archives of the History of Ideas/Archives internationales d’histoire des idées 197 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 195-223.

<sup>24</sup> See Jean Yolton, “Authorship of *A Lady's Religion* (1697),” *Notes and Queries* 38, no. 2 (June 1991): 177. The paragraph in which Coste identifies Stephens as the author is omitted in the English preface to the 1704 second edition (the edition to which Astell responds).

<sup>25</sup> See Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism, and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123.

criticism in *The Christian Religion* should be interpreted.”<sup>26</sup> Though Astell never explicitly names Toland in this work, Apetrei is right to suggest that Astell addresses the popular debate about “Christian mysteries” arising from Toland’s deist ideas (see below, §§58-66). But it must be noted that some of the reasons for attributing the *Principle of the Protestant Reformation* to Toland are questionable. Michael Brown, for example, merely observes that the *Principle of the Protestant Reformation* “can be attributed to Toland on the grounds that, as was common practice for him, it puffed another of his works [i.e., it referred with approval to *Christianity not Mysterious*].”<sup>27</sup> To be more circumspect, it might be proposed that the author is “one of Mr Toland’s club,” if not Toland himself, as one of Astell’s contemporaries suggested.<sup>28</sup>

On the whole, however, Astell was right to treat all three works—*A Lady’s Religion*, *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation*, and the *Reasonableness of Christianity*—as thematically on a par. In these tracts, each author represents a certain Whig, pro-toleration, and pro-dissenter point of view, and they each aim to reduce the Christian religion to plain and simple articles of faith, in accordance with so-called Socinian or deist principles. In his *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke proposes to demonstrate that, according to the scriptures, the primary article of faith required to make anyone a Christian is the belief that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. For Locke, the Christian religion is designed by God to be accessible to the “lowest capacities of reasonable creatures,” including those of the uneducated and laboring classes.<sup>29</sup> This is because

The bulk of mankind have not leisure for learning and logic, and superfine distinctions of the schools. Where the hand is used to the plough, and the spade, the head is seldom elevated to sublime notions, or exercised in mysterious reasonings. It is well if men of that rank (to say nothing of the other sex) can comprehend plain propositions, and a short reasoning about things familiar to their minds, and nearly allied to their daily experience. Go beyond this, and you amaze the greatest part of mankind.<sup>30</sup>

The fundamental articles of saving faith must therefore be few and simple, plain and intelligible—or, in short, they must be reasonable. This argument for the “way of fundamentals” in the Christian faith is consistent with Locke’s now well-known Whig stance on the toleration of non-conformists in England. In his *Letter concerning Toleration* (first published in Latin as *Epistola de Tolerantia* in 1689), he points out that God has placed each man’s salvation in his own hands, and that attaining this salvation requires individuals to come to the true religion through their own efforts, and not through the compulsion of others. On this view, the attainment of eternal happiness does not depend on the outward observance of ceremonials but upon an inward persuasion of mind—the individual’s assent, that is, to

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<sup>26</sup> Apetrei, *Women, Feminism, and Religion*, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Brown, *A Political Biography of John Toland* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), 83.

<sup>28</sup> [Edward Stephens], *Necessary Correction for an Insolent Deist: In Answer to an Impious Pamphlet, the Principle of the Protestant Reformation Explained in a Letter of Resolution concerning Church Communion* (London?: n.p., 1705?), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 284. For a modern edition, see John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. and intro. John C. Higgins-Biddle, the Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 159. Henceforth, I provide page references to this modern edition in square brackets following references to the 1696 second edition of *Reasonableness*.

<sup>30</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 305 [169-70].

certain fundamental religious propositions. In keeping with his irenicism, in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke highlights the fact that many points of difference between Protestant sects are simply not fundamental enough to justify separate communion.<sup>31</sup>

In response, one of Locke's earliest and harshest critics, the Cambridge preacher John Edwards (1637-1716), accused the *Reasonableness of Christianity* of being "all over Socinianized."<sup>32</sup> Though the term has variable usage in England during this period, there are certain heterodox ideas that Astell's contemporaries associated with "Socinianism."<sup>33</sup> To begin with, Socinianism is typically characterized by the denial of religious beliefs that are inconsistent with reason—a Socinian refuses to accept any proposition that fails to withstand the test of reason. In this respect, Socinians were seen as natural allies to deists, those theists who reject revelation (revealed religion) altogether in favor of religious rationalism (natural religion). Socinians also support the reduction of the Christian religion to a few fundamental articles of faith: they hold that there are a minimal number of religious beliefs required to make someone a Christian, many of which have nothing to do with traditional church doctrines and practices. In keeping with their extreme reverence for reason, Socinians also deny the mystery of the trinity, the doctrine that three divine persons, the father, son, and holy ghost, are one. They do not explicitly own that the death of Christ is an atonement or satisfaction for the sins of humanity, they do not openly acknowledge the divinity of Christ (his incarnation as God), and they tend to reject the view that God inflicts eternal punishment on sinners. In Astell's day, next to the term "atheist," "Socinian" was one of the most damaging and derogatory labels that could be applied to an author's work.

Like Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity*, the *Lady's Religion* was also labeled Socinian.<sup>34</sup> This short tract was addressed to Lady Howard, a woman who had apparently requested the author's opinions about how to live in accordance with the Christian religion. Despite being an Anglican clergyman, the author elects to promote the "common cause" of Christian piety rather than defend the Church of England against dissenters. He advocates a highly moralistic approach to religion, one that places an emphasis upon practical duties rather than the observation of outward formalities. To lead a virtuous life, he says, we do not need to study obscure and unintelligible doctrines of divinity, but only to understand those moral laws that are intelligible to all reasonable persons. When in doubt, Lady Howard might consult her own reason to inform herself "wherein you are justly dealt with, and wherein you receive wrong." Likewise, when dealing with other people, she might consult the same principle to "know when you deal justly or wrongfully, and when you do kind or ill offices to another."<sup>35</sup> It is fitting that the moral law is so easily intelligible, he says, echoing Locke, because "the greatest part of mankind being necessarily employed in making daily provisions

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<sup>31</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 306 [170].

<sup>32</sup> John Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism, Especially in the Present Age. With some Brief Reflections on Socinianism: And on a Late Book, Entitled The Reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures* (1695), facs. ed. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984), 113.

<sup>33</sup> See Higgins-Biddle, introduction to Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, lx-lxi. The following account of Socinianism is indebted to Higgins-Biddle's analysis in this introduction.

<sup>34</sup> See John Gailhard, *The Epistle and Preface to the Book against the Blasphemous Socinian Heresie Vindicated; And the Charge therein against Socinianism, made Good* (London: J. Hartley, 1698), 82-83.

<sup>35</sup> *Lady's Religion*, 16.

for themselves and families, and discharging the common offices of life, cannot attend to any religious institution which is either difficult or tedious.”<sup>36</sup>

Like the author of *A Lady's Religion*, the author of the *Principle of the Protestant Reformation* also endorses Locke's position on the way of fundamentals. In this work, the author advises an unknown lady that it is not necessary to take public communion in any particular church in order to be a good Christian. In his opinion, all the good lady need do is receive the doctrine of Christ into her heart. To illustrate his point, the author puts forward a rhetorical supposition. Let us suppose, he says, that a “Mahometan” (a Muslim) from Morocco were converted to Christianity in England, and then returned home to the African continent, where no Christian communion could be found. Wouldn't we all agree that it is unnecessary for this African to attend church in order to be considered a good Christian? The outward form of his worship would be irrelevant: the African could save his soul regardless of where he resided, whether that be Morocco, Holland, Geneva, or England. This work was later reissued with the provocative title *Liberty of Conscience, or Religion a la Mode. Fitted for the Use of the Occasional Conformist* (1704). As this new title suggests, the pamphlet had obvious implications for the occasional conformity debate in England: in essence, it explained why occasional conformists should not be persecuted for unorthodox communion practices.

All of the principal targets of the *Christian Religion* were the subject of heated controversy in Astell's lifetime. The *Principle of the Protestant Reformation* was despised among Tories. In *The Necessity of Church-Communion Vindicated* (1705), the nonjuror Robert Nelson (1656-1715) denounced the pamphlet as “one of the vilest this age has seen.”<sup>37</sup> In 1697, in a presentment to the grand jury of Middlesex, both the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and *A Lady's Religion* were charged alongside Toland's *Christianity not Mysteriorious* (1696) with being works of “Socinianism, Atheism, and Deism.”<sup>38</sup> The same document calls for these authors to be punished “according to the utmost severity of the laws,” the death penalty. In his *Christianity not Mysteriorious*, Toland claims that “no Christian doctrine can be properly called a mystery,” in the sense of being above or contrary to reason.<sup>39</sup> Using Lockean terms, he defines reason as the clear perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas, and then points out that we cannot reason about mysteries of faith because we have no clear ideas of them. Yet, if the Christian religion allows such mysteries that are above or contrary to reason, then this opens the floodgates to any number of absurd religious doctrines. Almost immediately upon publishing these ideas, Toland earned for himself an unparalleled infamy: his name became a byword for freethinking atheism in the period, his book was burned by the common hangman in Ireland, and for at least a decade following its publication, *Christianity not Mysteriorious* was the subject of numerous refutations in print. One of Toland's first and most influential critics was Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699), the bishop of Worcester. In the tenth chapter of his *Discourse in Vindication of the*

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<sup>36</sup> *Lady's Religion*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> [Robert Nelson], *The Necessity of Church-Communion Vindicated, From the Scandalous Aspersions of a late Pamphlet, Entitled, the Principle of the Protestant Reformation explained* (London: A. and J. Churchil, 1705), 27.

<sup>38</sup> See Gailhard, *Epistle and Preface*, 82-83.

<sup>39</sup> [John Toland], *Christianity not Mysteriorious: Or, A Treatise Showing, That there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly called a Mystery* (London: n.p., 1696), 6. For a modern edition, see John Toland, *John Toland's Christianity not Mysteriorious: Text, Associated Works, and Critical Essays*, eds. Philip McGuinness, Alan Harrison, and Richard Kearney (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1997), 17.

*Doctrine of the Trinity* (1696), Stillingfleet interprets Toland's rejection of Christian mysteries as a necessary consequence of Lockean empiricism. Stillingfleet impugns Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) with providing the philosophical groundwork for heretical ideas, including not only denial of the trinity, but denial of the soul's immateriality and immortality, and even of the very existence of God. In particular, he highlights the negative implications of Locke's view that neither sensation nor reflection can provide us with a clear idea of substance (the substratum underlying perceived qualities). This attack on the *Essay* drew Locke into what is now regarded as "one of the most memorable controversies in the history of philosophy," the Locke-Stillingfleet debate.<sup>40</sup> In response to Stillingfleet, Locke pointed out that he had never in fact denied the existence of substance, but only affirmed that we have an imperfect and inadequate idea of it. For Stillingfleet, this disclaimer was beside the point. In his subsequent replies, he reiterated his initial charge: in his mind, Locke's epistemology could have nothing but dangerous consequences for the articles of the Christian faith.

Astell can be counted as one of many writers who came out in support of Edwards's and Stillingfleet's cries of heresy against Locke. In the *Christian Religion*, her discussion of Locke addresses the relevant passages in both the *Essay* and the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, as well as Locke's subsequent response to Edwards, the first *Vindication of the Reasonableness* (1695), and Locke's *Reply to the Bishop of Worcester* (1699).<sup>41</sup> She also touches upon topics in his now well-known political work, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). Much of the *Christian Religion* is an attack on supposedly Socinian doctrines in the works of Locke and his fellow Whig authors.

But Astell also focuses on something other critics of her time overlook or downplay: she charges both Locke and his followers (namely, Coste) with harboring unfairly prejudicial attitudes toward women's intellectual abilities. This charge is justified. In his *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke says that the majority of men, "to say nothing of the other sex," have neither the time nor the capacity for demonstration and that they cannot "carry on a train of proofs."<sup>42</sup> He once again includes women among "the bulk of mankind" when he observes "you may as soon hope to have all the day-laborers and tradesmen, the spinsters and dairy maids perfect mathematicians, as to have them perfect in ethics this way."<sup>43</sup> The only sure way to bring women to obedience and practice, he suggests, is for them to hear plain commands. Because they are incapable of understanding difficult concepts, they must be presented with fundamentals: "The greatest part cannot know, and therefore must believe."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> H. O. Christopherson, *A Bibliographical Introduction to the Study of John Locke* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 35.

<sup>41</sup> See [John Locke], *A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity, & c. From Mr Edwards's Reflections* (London: Awnsham and John Churchil, 1695); and John Locke, *Mr. Locke's Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter* (London: H.C. for A. and J. Churchill, and E. Castle, 1699). In subsequent notes, I use a short title for Astell's idiosyncratic title for Locke's reply to Stillingfleet, *Third Letter to the Bishop of Worcester* (i.e., *Third Letter*).

<sup>42</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 282, 305 [157, 169-70].

<sup>43</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 282 [157].

<sup>44</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 282 [158]. In a posthumously published work, the *Paraphrase and Notes on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (1706), Locke's sexism becomes even more apparent. When it comes to public religious worship, he suggests, women must submit to the spiritual authority of men, and never presume to act according to their own knowledge or abilities. This is because the Christian religion does not permit women to break free from their natural subjection to men. See John Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St*

Echoing Locke, in his preface to the French translation of *A Lady's Religion*, Coste observes that the Christian religion has obviously been accommodated to the meanest capacities. It is "easy to be explained, and every way adapted to the capacity of the illiterate, *of women*, and of the meanest sort of people, that is to say, of the greatest part of mankind."<sup>45</sup> Like Locke, Coste implies that the female sex are among those who are "incapable of a long application of mind, and who have neither penetration nor leisure enough to give up themselves to the study of curious and subtle inquiries, not easy to be resolved."<sup>46</sup>

Such negative attitudes toward women's mental abilities are not unusual for the times. At the start of the *Christian Religion*, Astell expresses her admiration for an anonymous work titled *The Ladies Calling* (1673). This advice manual for women was written by the Anglican clergyman, Richard Allestree (1621/2-1681), now thought to be the author of the tremendously popular *Whole Duty of Man* (1657). In his *Ladies Calling*, Allestree argues that, in terms of their souls, women are equal to men and just as capable of attaining eternal happiness. Toward this end, he recommends that women be properly educated so that they might cultivate the feminine virtues of modesty, meekness, compassion, affability, and piety. His work thus forms part of the Anglican reformation of manners movement in this period, a movement committed to educating both men and women in the Christian religion.<sup>47</sup> In the course of expounding his educational program, however, Allestree frequently highlights the "natural imbecility" and "native feebleness" of women.<sup>48</sup> At the start of the work, for the sake of argument, he concedes that in respect of their intellects, women are inferior to men. Later, he refers to women's natural talkativeness ("a kind of incontinence of the mind, that can retain nothing committed to it"), their changeability, and their easy credulity (an "impotency" and "defect" in their nature).<sup>49</sup> On the whole, it must be said, his work is not directed toward women learning to form rational judgments for themselves, for the sake of their own moral and intellectual enlightenment, but rather for the sake of adopting Anglican liturgical and devotional practices. Despite holding progressive views about women's education, Allestree does not challenge the prevailing sexism of the times. By contrast, Astell does.

To appreciate why, we must look to Astell's deeply held philosophical beliefs, and to the influence of Cartesianism on her opinions about the female intellect. Descartes's philosophy had a profound impact on English thought from the 1640s through to the end of the seventeenth century. Every aspect of the Cartesian program—from Descartes's rationalist theory of knowledge, his dualism (his theory of mind-body distinction), his concept of matter, his mechanical science, his cosmology, and his ethical thought—was picked up, analysed,

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*Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians* (1706), ed. Arthur W. Wainwright, the Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). In the preface to her 1706 third edition of *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell takes Locke to task for assuming that women are naturally subordinate to men. For details, see Mark Goldie, "Mary Astell and John Locke," in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 65-85.

<sup>45</sup> *Lady's Religion*, A4v; my italics.

<sup>46</sup> *Lady's Religion*, A5v.

<sup>47</sup> On Astell's part in the Anglican moral reform movement, see Hannah Smith, "Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), and the Anglican Reformation of Manners in Late-Seventeenth-Century England," in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 31-47.

<sup>48</sup> See [Richard Allestree], *The Ladies Calling In Two Parts. By the Author of the Whole Duty of Man, & c. The Seventh Impression* (Oxford: at the Theater, 1700), 36, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 12, 80, 88.



and dissected in print by prominent English intellectuals of this period.<sup>50</sup> In her *Proposal*, Astell implicitly follows the method of thinking promoted by Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), and she explicitly draws on later versions of that method in the works of Norris, Arnauld, and Nicole.<sup>51</sup> Underlying the Cartesian methodology is the assumption that every human being naturally has freedom of the will and a capacity to discern the truth. Descartes's key insight was that by using these natural faculties to the best of their abilities, all human beings could attain clear and certain knowledge. According to his way of thinking, the attainment of knowledge does not require an intensive education in Latin, Greek, or logic; and it does not require rigorous book learning or a strong familiarity with ancient sources. In her writings, Astell follows up the egalitarian implications of this new philosophy. If women can reason about a romantic intrigue or the settlement of an estate, she points out, then they can also reason about religion and morality—despite their lack of higher education. In terms of their capacity for judgment, she suggests, women are on a par with men; both sexes are at liberty to accept or reject, affirm or deny, the ideas of the intellect in accordance with their reason. While there are no named references to Descartes in the *Christian Religion*, this Cartesian background is essential to understanding Astell's positive attitude toward women's reasoning abilities in the text.<sup>52</sup>

### *The Text*

The *Christian Religion* is Astell's most profound and significant scholarly achievement.<sup>53</sup> In its original form, the text amounts to more than four hundred pages, and includes a lengthy table of contents, numbered paragraphs, extensive marginal notes, and an index. The work ostensibly takes the form of a long letter addressed to a female friend (most likely, Catherine Jones). In this choice of genre, Astell follows the lead of her main targets, *A Lady's Religion* and the *Principle of the Protestant Reformation*, both of which were addressed to single female audiences.<sup>54</sup> In the 1717 second edition, however, Astell addresses a number of remarks to the "ladies" in general rather than "her ladyship" alone. These changes bring Astell's work closer to the *Proposal* in terms of overall tone. In that earlier work, Astell highlights the dangers of encouraging an implicit faith in the female sex. Women are taught to repeat their catechism by rote, "to read a chapter and say their prayers," she says, "though perhaps with as little understanding as a parrot."<sup>55</sup> This is a precarious road to salvation, because without a true understanding of the basis of their beliefs, it is only by chance that women are led to the good life: "We are their property into whose hands we fall, and are led

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<sup>50</sup> The classic study on this subject is Sterling P. Lamprecht, "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England," *Studies in the History of Ideas* 3 (1935): 181-240.

<sup>51</sup> See Astell, *Proposal I*, 77-78; *Proposal II*, 166, 184, 189.

<sup>52</sup> For recent studies on Astell and Cartesianism, see Deborah Boyle, "Mary Astell and Cartesian 'Scientia'," in *The New Science and Women's Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein*, ed. Judy Hayden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 99-112; and Alice Sowaal, "Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal*: Mind, Method, and Custom," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007): 227-43.

<sup>53</sup> More than one scholar has referred to the *Christian Religion* as Astell's "*magnum opus*." See Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 215; Springborg, *Mary Astell*, 32; and Christine Mason Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Calgary, AB: The University of Calgary Press, 2005), 93.

<sup>54</sup> On Astell's choice of genre more generally, see Sutherland, *Eloquence of Mary Astell*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 124.

by those who with greatest confidence impose their opinions on us.”<sup>56</sup> Instead, Astell argues in that work, a woman must be permitted the free exercise of her reason, and to inquire deeply into the foundations of her religion, to become “a Christian out of choice, not in conformity to those about her.”<sup>57</sup>

The *Christian Religion* has the same instructive purpose as the *Proposal*. In the opening advertisement to the second edition, Astell declares that her chief design is “to put women upon thinking, upon an examination of their principles, the motives and grounds of their belief and practice, and the frame and temper of their minds.”<sup>58</sup> She proposes to defend their “just and natural rights” of judging for themselves in matters concerning their ultimate happiness (§3). Toward this end, it is important that women recognize that they are free and reasonable agents, with the capacity for understanding and choice. If God had not intended for women to use their reason, she says, then He would not have bestowed it upon them, for an infinitely wise being does nothing without end or purpose (§5). Women are obliged to use their faculty of rational judgment in order to determine their duties toward God, other people, and themselves.

One difficulty for Astell, however, is that she does not want her fellow women to make erroneous judgments or endorse unorthodox religious ideas. She is no friend to Quakerism, for example, a religious philosophy that also urges women to turn to the “candle of the Lord,” or the “light within,” to attain salvation. Astell rejects all forms of enthusiasm, or any extravagant claims to religious inspiration that cannot be defended by the light of reason. For her, then, it is important that women have a properly-trained judgment. They must be educated to use their reason to discern where the “true” and the “good” really lie. This is why, in the second part of her *Proposal*, Astell urges women to familiarize themselves with the methodological principles of Cartesian philosophy. According to the Cartesian method of judgment, women must reason only according to their pure non-sensory perceptions, or those “clear and distinct” ideas of the intellect, if they wish to attain knowledge. They must reason in a logical, orderly manner from simple to complex ideas; they must avoid being drawn into irrelevant considerations; and they must never judge anything to be true that is not clearly known to be so.<sup>59</sup> In the *Christian Religion*, Astell reiterates these points. “If we would judge to purpose,” she says, then “we must free ourselves from prejudice and passion, must examine and prove all things, and not give our assent till forced to do so by the evidence of truth” (§4). But while Astell maintains that the principles of religion are accessible to reason, she does not claim that we should accept *only* those principles of religion that will withstand the test of reason. Her book demonstrates how women can use their reason to take a middle path between enthusiasm and Socinianism, and come to endorse the moral theology of the Anglican religion.

The natural structure of the work falls into two parts. The first (section I) deals with the theoretical underpinnings of religious belief, or Astell’s *theoretical theism*: it explains what “a woman ought to believe” by the light of her reason (§2). The second part (sections II-IV) deals with issues of *practical theism*, or what a woman ought to practice in light of her religious beliefs. In the first, theoretical, part, Astell considers the subject of what a woman can judge for herself, relying on her natural reason alone, and she inquires how far reason can carry her in terms of her religious beliefs and practices. Astell quickly comes to the conclusion that reason can assure her of the existence of an infinitely perfect being. Though her subheading refers to a single “proof for the existence of God” (§8), she provides at least

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<sup>56</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 200.

<sup>57</sup> Astell, *Proposal I*, 70.

<sup>58</sup> See below, page 00.

<sup>59</sup> See Astell, *Proposal II*, 176-78.

two arguments in the relevant paragraphs (§§7-10). The first is an ontological argument, or an argument based on premises that can be known *a priori* or without sensory experience; the second is a cosmological proof, an argument based upon observations about the world or “cosmos.” Following the pattern of Descartes’s ontological proofs in his *Discourse on the Method*, the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), and the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), Astell’s first argument begins with her idea of God as “a being infinite in all perfections” (§7). She then proceeds to identify necessary existence or “self-existence” as a perfection, before concluding that an infinitely perfect being must have the perfection of existence: God must exist. Her second argument relies on a brief hypothetical supposition. Let’s suppose, she says, that I was “shut up in a den from my infancy” and then, once my reason had matured, I asked myself: “from whence had I my being?” (§10). If I ever came into contact with my fellow creatures, my reason would assure me that they could not be the cause of my existence, because their existence is as contingent as my own. Instead, I would be compelled to trace my origins—and the origins of the entire human race—back to “a last resort,” a necessary or self-existent being. “That there is a self-existing being,” she says, “is evident to the meanest understanding, for without it there could have been no men, no world, no being at all; since that which once *was not*, could never make itself; nor can any being communicate that to another which it has not itself” (§8).

Reason leads us not only to the belief that God exists, but also to belief in divine revelation—the Bible. To support this claim, Astell argues that no sober person could reasonably doubt that the Old and New Testaments are the word of God. Our natural intuition tells us, she says, that it is reasonable to accept the testimony of others with respect to matters of fact that we cannot witness in person. We believe that there were once men called Julius Caesar and Marcus Aurelius, and we accept that they were the authors of the works known as the *Commentaries* and *Meditations*, even though we have never met them and never saw them write those works. When it comes to the Bible, we must be consistent in our application of reason. We must acknowledge, she says, that “no objection can be made against the holy scriptures but what are stronger against all other writings and facts” (§22). If we were to reject the scriptures as the word of God, then, to be consistent, we would also have to disbelieve everything that we did not see or hear. But this is a most untenable and unreasonable position.

In addition to this argument, Astell presents a Pascal’s Wager-style argument for the rationality of believing that revelation is the word of God. In one “thought” of his *Pensées* (first published posthumously in 1670), Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) argues that it is in the interests of all individuals to believe in God. To demonstrate this point, Pascal invites his readers to a game of chance. Granted that either God does or does not exist, he asks, what will you wager? “Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is,” he says. “If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.”<sup>60</sup> In his view, the most reasonable course of action is to believe that God exists. Along similar lines, Astell calculates the risks associated with believing or not believing that the Bible is the word of God. For the sake of argument, she grants her atheistic opponents their “most unreasonable demands” (§41). Let us suppose that reason *cannot* assure us beyond reasonable doubt that the Bible is the word of God. She then weighs up the “hazard of receiving” and the risks or “dangers of rejecting” the scriptures as divine revelation. According to Astell, even the infidel must agree that the most reasonable course of action is to receive the Bible as the word of God. This course of action would be most desirable *even if* the Bible turned out to be a forgery, “since nothing could be more for

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<sup>60</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670), trans. W. F. Trotter, online edition (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Library, 2012), <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pascal/blaise/p27pe/index.html> (accessed October 31, 2012), §233.

my present interest, safety, and pleasure” (§41). If I believe in the Bible, and it is a fake, then I am imposed upon, that is true; but this is a small price to pay. By contrast, if I were to take the alternative course of action, and reject the authenticity of the Bible, this risks bringing upon me the worst possible state of affairs: eternal opposition to God. To be prudent, I should not take that risk.

Having established the foundations for belief in both natural and revealed religion, Astell then considers our practical duties to God (section II), to our fellow human beings (section III), and to ourselves (section IV), before providing further detailed refutations of Locke, the author of *A Lady's Religion*, and two further authors, Damaris Masham and John Tillotson (section V, her appendix). In terms of our duties to God, Astell observes that we are clearly obliged to live in conformity with the will of an infinitely perfect being, or, in other words, in accordance with the divine law as revealed through reason and revelation. Conforming ourselves to God's will requires not only a “sincere and constant endeavor after our own perfection” (§94), but also a due regard for God's other creatures: our neighbors. In keeping with the scriptures, Astell advises that women ought to regard all their fellow human beings as members of one body, the Christian community in general, and to recognize that the good of their neighbor is not separate from their own, but rather an integral part of it. Above all, she recommends acting in accordance with a principle of benevolence in our interactions with others, or from motivations of disinterested love and good will toward all. In this respect, the *Christian Religion* provides a further explication of the moral-theological themes of the *Letters concerning the Love of God*.

Though Astell employs the language of deontology (the language of duties and obligations), she also articulates an ethics of virtue in so far as she recommends the cultivation of certain excellent character traits (or virtues) in her readers. In her interactions with others, according to Astell, a wise and virtuous woman always endeavors to keep the true good and eternal interest of all human beings in mind. In her personal interactions with men, she resists adopting the character of a “coquette” (in modern terminology, a flirt) not only because she risks scandal and the ruin of her reputation, but because she tempts a fellow human being to vice and sin (§§196-198). In her close friendships with others, a wise and virtuous woman endeavors to perfect the moral well being of her friend. Toward this end, she does not turn a blind eye to the other person's faults, and encourage the friend's pride through flattery; rather she engages in friendly admonition and offers gentle moral guidance. In turn, the wise and virtuous woman is willing to accept such admonition herself, for the sake of her own moral advancement (§§203-206).<sup>61</sup> In her wider social interactions, this woman strives to live peaceably with her fellow human beings, and is forgiving rather than resentful of other people's shortcomings and faults.

In these passages and in her later appendix, Astell provides a defense of the love of benevolence against the criticisms of a fellow woman writer, Damaris Masham (*née* Cudworth, 1659-1708), the author of the anonymous *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696).<sup>62</sup> Masham was the daughter of the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) and one of Locke's closest friends in the last years of his life. Locke (1632-1704) lived with Masham and her husband from 1691 till his death. In her *Discourse*, Masham dismisses

<sup>61</sup> For a study of Astell's concept of friendship in this work, see Jacqueline Broad, “Mary Astell on Virtuous Friendship,” *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26, no. 2 (2009): 65-86.

<sup>62</sup> [Damaris Masham], *Discourse concerning the Love of God* (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1696). For a modern edition, see Damaris Masham, *The Philosophical Works of Damaris, Lady Masham*, intro. James G. Buickerood (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004).

Norris's theory that we are obliged to love other people with only a disinterested kind of love, and that we ought to reserve our love of desire (a self-interested love) for God alone. Her main point is that Norris's theory of love renders the duties of a moral life impractical. Human beings simply do not have the capacity to withdraw their desires from material things and other people. Her concern is that a religious theory that requires impossible performances, such as complete emotional disengagement from the world, might lead some people to abandon religion altogether. The same religious theory might also drive others to live in "monasteries, and hermitages; with all those sottish and wicked superstitions which have accompanied them wherever they have been in use."<sup>63</sup>

In her *Discourse*, Masham refers in passing to Astell as "a young person ... biased by the affectation of novelty," but most of her sharpest comments are reserved for Norris and Malebranche.<sup>64</sup> In the *Christian Religion*, however, Astell interprets a number of Masham's remarks as criticisms of her own opinions.<sup>65</sup> This is not surprising given that, like Norris, Astell also extols the benefits of a contemplative life, a life of disengagement from the desire of material things and other people. The main gist of Astell's response to Masham is that it is absurd for anyone to think that such a contemplative life is "destructive of all religion, and even of morality" (§378). Norris's theory of love does not necessarily lead to either atheism or enthusiasm. Rather, the contemplative life enables one to avoid a vacuous materialistic lifestyle, in favor of spiritual goods and long-lasting benefits. In Astell's view, this is also one of the chief benefits of a female monastery, or "a reasonable provision for the education of one half of mankind" (§379). An academy for women could be a "generous design for the glory of God and the good of mankind" (§379)—a way of advancing human nature in general. In this work, then, Astell once again revives her plans for a female academy. In one key part of the text, she calls on Queen Anne in the hope that "she will not do less for her own sex than she has already done for the other" and offer her bounty to "the most helpless and neglected part of her subjects," the women (§380).

In the final part of her main text, Astell considers the nature of our duties to our "selves" or our souls. For the moral benefit of her readers, she proposes to show that the soul

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<sup>63</sup> Masham, *Discourse*, 120.

<sup>64</sup> Masham, *Discourse*, 78.

<sup>65</sup> There are a number of articles on Astell's response to Masham. See Patricia Springborg, "Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics," in *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, ed. Hilda L. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105-25; Springborg, *Mary Astell*, 67-80; E. Derek Taylor, "Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke's Theory of Matter," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no. 3 (2001): 505-22; Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 114-40; Jacqueline Broad, "Adversaries or Allies? Occasional Thoughts on the Masham-Astell Exchange," *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 1 (2003): 123-49; Catherine Wilson, "Love of God and Love of Creatures: The Masham-Astell Debate," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2004): 281-98; James G. Buickerood, "What Is It With Damaris, Lady Masham? The Historiography of One Early Modern Woman Philosopher," *Locke Studies* 5 (2005): 179-214; Eileen O'Neill, "Mary Astell on the Causation of Sensation," in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 145-63; and Joanne E. Myers, "Enthusiastic Improvement: Mary Astell and Damaris Masham on Sociability," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 28 (forthcoming). For details on Astell's response to Malebranchian philosophy more generally, see Sarah Ellen Zweig, "The Love of God and the Radical Enlightenment: Mary Astell's Brush with Spinoza," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 3 (2003): 379-97.

is naturally immortal by virtue of its non-material and indivisible nature. Toward this end, she provides an argument for the view that the soul and body are two distinct substances, an argument that closely resembles that of Norris in the second part of his *Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World* (1704).<sup>66</sup> At the conclusion to this argument, Astell dismisses Locke's controversial claim that we cannot know by the mere contemplation of our ideas of *matter* and *thinking* that an omnipotent being "has not given to some systems of matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think."<sup>67</sup> In her view, the ideas of thinking and matter are as repugnant as the idea of a triangle having, say, the property of being equal to a square. In his *Essay*, Locke himself maintains that we can be certain of the repugnancy or incompatibility of certain ideas. To be consistent, Astell says, he ought to maintain that we can be certain that matter cannot think.

Having established that the human subject is a vital union of two distinct substances—an immortal, immaterial soul and a corruptible, material body—Astell proceeds to develop a theory of the passions. The passions are those emotions, such as love, hatred, desire, and so on, that arise involuntarily in the soul as a result of its intimate connection with the human body. The passions are a problem for the attainment of virtue and wisdom because they cloud and obscure our rational judgments. In a lengthy passage (§254), Astell offers recommendations about the best way to remedy the disordering effect of the passions on the soul. Her advice closely resembles that of the final chapter in her *Proposal II*, where Astell explicitly refers her reader to Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* (1649) and Henry More's *Account of Virtue* (1690).<sup>68</sup> In the *Christian Religion*, her position is further articulated in response to the religious writings of an Irish clergyman named Charles Hickman (1648-1713). Though Astell never explicitly names Hickman, her quotations are taken verbatim from the ninth sermon in his 1700 work, *Fourteen Sermons* (§§327, 334-44). Against Hickman's view, she states that human beings are obliged to eradicate their most excessive and destructive passions—pride, anger, hatred, and overwhelming sorrow.

The upshot of Astell's philosophical examination of theoretical and practical theism is, ultimately, the affirmation of complete conformity to the Anglican religion. Against the author of the *Principle of the Protestant Reformation*, she declares that reason evidently requires me to live in Christian communion, or to be a participating member of a local Christian church. She defends the reasonableness of distinctive articles and creeds of the Church of England, including the doctrine of the trinity, belief in Christ's divinity, in Christ's satisfaction for our sins, and in the other articles of the Athanasian and Apostles' Creeds. In her view, reason itself recommends all those beliefs and practices that her target authors—Locke and the authors of *A Lady's Religion* and the *Principle of the Protestant*

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<sup>66</sup> See below, §§226-32.

<sup>67</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, the Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), IV.iii.6. My references to Locke's *Essay* are to book, chapter, and section numbers in this edition. For details on the controversy surrounding Locke's claim about "thinking matter," see John Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). On Astell's critique of Locke's views, see Kathleen M. Squadrito, "Mary Astell's Critique of Locke's View of Thinking Matter," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987): 433-39; Kathleen M. Squadrito, "Mary Astell," in *A History of Women Philosophers*, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 3:87-99; and Taylor, "Mary Astell's Ironic Assault."

<sup>68</sup> Astell, *Proposal II*, 218, 219-20. For details, see Jacqueline Broad, "Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom," in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 165-80.

*Reformation*—had rejected as non-fundamental to the Christian faith. At the very end of the work, Astell briefly addresses a sermon on the divinity of Christ by John Tillotson (1630-1694), archbishop of Canterbury, where she reiterates many of these same points.

Nevertheless, Astell's deference to the Anglican church is qualified. As an Anglican and a Tory royalist, she is strongly committed to the doctrine of passive obedience, the idea that subjects are obliged "to render active obedience to just authority, in all instances that are not contrary to God's commands, and to submit quietly to the penalty where they cannot actually obey" (§149). Importantly, however, this is a position that *allows disobedience* when one's superiors sin against right reason or require something that is "contrary to God's commands" (§§149, 174). In Astell's view, subjects are not required passively to accept any dictates or commands from clerical authorities that might jeopardize their salvation. In the *Christian Religion*, she applies these ideas about the permissible bounds of resistance to the situation of women in subordination to men. Somewhat radically (for the time), she calls on her female readers not to obey those male authorities who would enslave their capacity for rational judgment about moral and religious matters. She emphasizes that a man is not wiser than a woman merely because he is a man (§141), and that no woman is obliged to submit to a man's opinion "on his bare word, nor to swallow his arguments without examining them" (§404). She pointedly asks:

How comes it that we are chained down to the slavery of all the silly customs of the age, to the waste of our time, the expense of our fortunes, nay even to the depraving of our very reason, but because we must do as others do, and are afraid of the singularity of being wiser and better than our neighbors? So that we force ourselves to practice those follies, which while we practice we condemn! What is it that engages women in crimes contrary to their reason, and their very natural temper, but being over-persuaded and over-ruled by the men to whose conduct they commit themselves? (§47).

Keeping within the permissible bounds of Anglican political theology, Astell invokes the moral law—the law of God and reason—against those designing men who would endeavor to make women their "dupes" or their "properties" (§266).<sup>69</sup> In her view, a man's dictates or commands must conform to this moral law before a woman can accept them as principles for her own actions. Strictly speaking, Astell says, a woman must "call no man master on earth" (Matthew 23:9-10), but rather submit only to that "great master" in heaven, God himself (§3). "The more entirely we depend on God," she warns, "we are so much the wiser and happier, but the less we depend on men so much the better" (§267).

### *Afterlife of the Text*

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<sup>69</sup> We might think that Astell's book is an expression of the political theology of the Anglican revolution, c. 1685-88, in so far as she offers the same ideological bulwarks against *men* that Anglican writers offered against the *crown* in the reign of James II. Mark Goldie observes that the Anglican reformists did not invoke their political or legal rights, but rather the moral law. This law gave them a "considered case for resistance," based on the "presumption that there are discernible principles of right which, with the guidance of a sound conscience, may be invoked to overcome a wrongful sovereign." See Mark Goldie, "The Political Thought of the Anglican Revolution," in *The Revolutions of 1688: The Andrew Browning Lectures 1988*, ed. Robert Beddard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 102-36 (esp. 107, 112-13).

In a 1705 correspondence with the nonjuring bishop George Hickes (1642-1715), Astell repeats a number of these same points.<sup>70</sup> Her comments appear in a letter to an unknown woman who had appealed to Hickes for help in a matter of religious concern. This “devout lady” wanted to know if she could, in good conscience, attend services at her local parish church despite the fact that it was “schismatic” (or complying) and she herself was a Jacobite (or noncomplying). The lady, “having read some of Mrs. Astell’s books, and having a great opinion of her,” asked Hickes to request Astell’s advice about the matter.<sup>71</sup> In response, in a letter dated September 21, 1705, Astell counsels the woman to rely principally on her own capacity for reflection and judgment about religious matters. Echoing her advice in the *Christian Religion*, she says:

I pretend not to convince your Ladyship, or to bring you over to my opinion, nor do I desire you should take my word for anything. You know it is my principle, and ought to be everyone’s for it is our Lord’s command, to call no man ‘master upon earth,’ to be concluded by no authority but that of our master who is in heaven. I would have women as well as men to see with their own eyes as far as they will reach, and to judge according to the best of their own understandings.<sup>72</sup>

Upon reading this letter, Hickes was outraged. He accused Astell of espousing “suspicious” and “skeptical” principles concerning clerical authority, and he bluntly informed her that she wrote more like a heretic or a Protestant dissenter than an Anglican.<sup>73</sup> He challenged Astell to spell out the difference between her views and those expressed in the scurrilous *Principle of the Protestant Reformation*.<sup>74</sup> Presumably Hickes was unaware that Astell had written a critique of the work. At the time, her authorship of the *Christian Religion* seems to have been in doubt. In the same year, George Stanhope (1660-1728), the dean of Canterbury, presumed that the *Christian Religion* was the work of Astell’s neighbor, Francis Atterbury (1662-1732), the dean of Carlisle. On December 17, 1705, he writes to Atterbury that “I am informed this day, that you have put out in print a mighty ingenious pamphlet, but that you have been

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<sup>70</sup> “The Controversy betwixt Dr. Hickes & Mrs. Mary Astell,” in “The Genuine Remains of the late Pious and Learned George Hickes D. D. and Suffragen Bishop of Thetford,” ed. Thomas Bedford, Papers of George Hickes, MS 3171, Lambeth Palace Library, London. These letters were recently discovered by Sarah Apetrei. For an in-depth analysis of the correspondence, see Apetrei, “‘Call No Man Master Upon Earth’: Mary Astell’s Tory Feminism and an Unknown Correspondence,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 4 (2008): 507-23; and Apetrei, *Women, Feminism, and Religion*, 135-52.

<sup>71</sup> “Controversy,” 171. I have expanded the seventeenth-century abbreviations and modernized the spelling in these letters.

<sup>72</sup> “Controversy,” 197.

<sup>73</sup> Hickes says: “Madam, say you to the Lady, ‘I pretend not to convince your Ladyship, or to bring you over to my opinion, nor do I desire you should take my word for anything. You know it is my principle and ought to be everyone’s for it is our Lord’s command, to call no man master upon earth, and to be concluded by no authority but that of our master who is in heaven.’ This, Madam, is the very language of the Quakers who are heretics, and had I known it had been your principle as it is theirs, I would have had no dispute with you,” “Controversy,” 204.

<sup>74</sup> Hickes tells Astell to “read the *Letter to a Lady concerning Church Communion* ... and then tell me the difference between your principles and theirs” (“Controversy,” 204).



pleased to father it upon one Mrs. Astell, a female friend and witty companion of your wife.”<sup>75</sup>

On the whole, however, the *Christian Religion* enjoyed a good reception—it was not reviled as skeptical or subversive to all orthodox religion. While Hickes might have disapproved of Astell’s apparent anti-clericalism, a few years later he openly admired her treatise. In the postscript to his translation of François Fénelon’s *Instructions for the Education of a Daughter* (1707), Hickes advises a young lady to read both the *Proposals* and the *Christian Religion*, observing that “these being written by one of her own sex, may probably serve to make a deeper impression upon her.”<sup>76</sup> In his *Orthodoxy in Faith* (1713), the religious writer John Howard observes that Astell’s book provides an admirable answer to the *Lady’s Religion*.<sup>77</sup>

Notwithstanding such commendations, Astell made certain changes to the second edition. In his critical letter of 1705, Hickes tells Astell that,

Madam, comparing of women with men in your emulous manner, is an affectation which your best friends observe runs through most of your excellent writings. The great Hypatia, who I admire as well as you, I am confident was a greater genius of a woman than to reflect and couch such childish reflections in her lectures and writings on the other sex.<sup>78</sup>

While the thematic focus of the second edition of the *Christian Religion* is substantially the same as the first, Astell did tone down the harshness of her words. In §88, “block-heads” becomes “impolite persons,” and in §266, “their dupes” becomes “their properties.” In this same edition, Astell also qualifies some of her invectives against men. When lamenting that men deprive women of all useful learning, she concedes that some men have permitted women to study history. In the first edition, she sharply observes that history can serve only as a trifling amusement for women:

For though it may be of use to the men who govern affairs, to know how their forefathers acted, yet what is this to us, who have nothing to do with such business? Some good examples indeed are to be found in history, though generally the bad are ten for one; but how will this help our conduct, or excite in us a generous emulation? Since the men being the historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good actions of women; and when they take notice of them, it is with this wise remark, that such women ‘acted above their sex.’ By which one must suppose they would have their readers understand, that they were not women who did those great actions, but that they were men in petticoats! (§260).

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<sup>75</sup> Francis Atterbury, *The Miscellaneous Works of Bishop Atterbury*, ed. J. Nichols, 5 vols. (London: J. Nichols, 1799) 1:391.

<sup>76</sup> George Hickes, “The Postscript by the Translator. To Antiope,” in François Fénelon, *Instructions for the Education of a Daughter, By the Author of Telemachus. To which is added A Small Tract of Instructions for the Conduct of Young Ladies of the Highest Rank. With Suitable Devotions Annexed. Done into English, and Revised by Dr. George Hickes* (London: Jonah Bowyer, 1707), 292.

<sup>77</sup> John Howard, *Orthodoxy in Faith, and Uprightness in Life and Conversation* (London: Jonah Bowyer, 1713), xvii.

<sup>78</sup> “Controversy,” 204.

In the second edition, Astell adds that history can be useful to women if “we take a greater compass than they [i.e., the men] allow us language and leisure to reach, that we may trace divine providence, and admire it in the government of the world, and conduct of the church” (§260). Nevertheless, Astell was not completely cowed by Hickes’ criticisms. There are some alterations to wording that emphasize the gender-critical nature of her work. In §46, her reflections on “those who have *made themselves* our governors” is altered to “*men* who have *made themselves* our governors” (my added italics), and in §47 she writes, “What is it that engages women in crimes contrary to their reason ... but being over-persuaded and over-ruled by the *men* to whose conduct they commit themselves?” instead of simply “by *those* to whose conduct they commit themselves” (my italics).

Surprisingly, the only later records of good opinion about the *Christian Religion* come from the men themselves. In his *Miscellany of Ingenious Thoughts and Reflections* (1721), Tamworth Reresby observes that “no person has distinguished herself in a finer and more commendable manner, than she who writ a book some years since, called, *The Principles of a Daughter of the Church of England*, as well as several other ingenious tracts, which show her equally devout, ingenious, and learned.”<sup>79</sup> In a letter to George Ballard, dated February 12, 1743, William Parry expressed these glowing sentiments about “Mrs. Astell’s performance” in her *Christian Religion*:

I cannot but esteem Mrs. Astell’s account of her religion as an excellent treatise; it is written with that strength, perspicuity, and smoothness, with such elegance of diction, such refined judgment, such an uncommon spirit of true Christianity and orthodoxy, and supported with such clear, solid, full, and convincing arguments, that I have scarcely ever read a book with greater delight and satisfaction. In my opinion, the learned authoress has with great dexterity and success retorted Mr. Locke’s metaphysical artillery against himself, confuted his whimsical idea of ‘thinking’ matter, and given him a genteel foil. She has stripped him of his disguise in personating a clergyman, and yet writing like a Socinian; and has fairly shown the imperfections and erroneous tenets contained in those two tracts of his, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *the Ladies’ Religion*: and has convinced me, that he had no honest design in writing either of them, since notwithstanding those specious titles he has given them, instead of promoting Christianity, they tend rather to undermine and subvert the true faith, and are derogatory to the honor of the savior. But in my judgment she has justly and handsomely disclosed and defeated his false and fallacious reasonings, and defended the cause of the primitive faith with a zeal becoming a true professor of it.<sup>80</sup>

Though Astell’s critique of Tillotson appears only as an afterthought in the *Christian Religion*, in later years she was also remembered for her comments on his sermons. In his *Advice to a Young Student* (1730), Daniel Waterland recommends Tillotson’s writings but refers his reader to Astell’s *Christian Religion*, noting that the archbishop’s views concerning Christ’s satisfaction are “modestly and judiciously examined by an ingenious lady, in a very

<sup>79</sup> Tamworth Reresby, *A Miscellany of Ingenious Thoughts and Reflections* (London: H. Meere, 1721), 415.

<sup>80</sup> William Parry to George Ballard, February 12, 1743, Ballard MS 40:158, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Parry’s letter is reproduced in Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies*, 389.

good book entitled, *The Religion of a Church of England-Woman*.<sup>81</sup> In 1753, Thomas Birch also reports that:

Mrs. Astell in one of her works, which do honor to her understanding as well as piety, and give her an eminent rank among the writers of her sex, has made some remarks upon the archbishop's doctrine of the satisfaction in his *Sermons concerning the Divinity and Incarnation of our Blessed Savior*; though she treats him with the highest respect, styling him a 'great author, so deservedly celebrated for his good sense and just expression, the strength and clearness of his reasoning, and his natural and unaffected eloquence.'<sup>82</sup>

A number of the copies of the *Christian Religion* in rare book libraries were once owned by men, including the Anglican clergymen, John Conybeare and (possibly) Laurence Fogg,<sup>83</sup> the historian George Tracy Buckingham,<sup>84</sup> the conservative politician Leonard Brassey,<sup>85</sup> the surgeon and bibliophile Geoffrey Keynes,<sup>86</sup> and Charles Quintard Wiggins III.<sup>87</sup>

On the whole, there is little surviving evidence that Astell's work achieved its stated aim "to put women upon thinking, upon an examination of their principles." But while no woman openly acknowledges the *Christian Religion*, some early modern women do echo Astell's themes in their writings. There are remarkably similar topics, for example, in the works of Astell's friends Ann Coventry (1673-1763) and Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710). In her *Meditations, and Reflections Moral and Divine* (1707), Coventry discusses how short life is, how present things cannot satisfy us, how riches and titles do not bestow happiness, and how true and lasting felicity lies with God alone.<sup>88</sup> In her *Essays upon Several Subjects* (1710), Chudleigh argues that women ought to be recommended the study of virtue and persuaded "to improve their understandings, to prefer wisdom before beauty, good sense before wealth, and the sovereignty of their passions before the empire of the world."<sup>89</sup> There is no conclusive evidence that Chudleigh was indebted to the *Christian Religion*, but her essays do cover the subjects of knowledge, pride, humility, life, death, fear, grief, riches, self-love, anger, calumny, friendship, love, avarice, and solitude—topics that are discussed at

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Waterland, *Advice to a Young Student. With a Method of Study for the Four First Years* (London: John Crownfield, 1730), 24.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Birch, ed., *Additions in the Second Edition of the Life of Archbishop Tillotson* (London: n.p., 1653?), 13.

<sup>83</sup> Call no. BV4500.A8 1717 and BV4500.A8, Watkinson Library, Trinity College, Hartford. The copy of the first edition in the Watkinson library bears the inscription "the gift of D. Fogg to his friend, C. Hutchinson, 1782." On one flyleaf, the words "C. Hutchinson 1770" have been written over the top of a rubbed-out inscription, faintly suggestive of the name "Fogg."

<sup>84</sup> Call no. BV4500.A8, University of Pennsylvania Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Philadelphia.

<sup>85</sup> Call no. B-11 07050, Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, the University of Toronto.

<sup>86</sup> Call no. Keynes c.8.20, Cambridge University Library.

<sup>87</sup> Call no. 248.483 A853c, 1717, Jessie Ball duPont Library, University of the South, Sewanee.

<sup>88</sup> Ann Coventry, *The Right Honourable Ann Countess of Coventry's Meditations, and Reflections Moral and Divine* (London: n.p., 1707).

<sup>89</sup> Mary Chudleigh, *Essays upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse*, in *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, ed. Margaret J. M. Ezell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 247-48.

length in Astell's work. Some surviving copies of the *Christian Religion* in rare book libraries also bear the marks of female ownership. The copy of the second edition at the Watkinson Library was once owned by Jemima Conybeare, wife of the Anglican writer John Conybeare, who then passed it down to her nephew's wife, Mary Conybeare.<sup>90</sup> The 1730 reissue at the Yale Divinity School Library was owned by Elizabeth H. Nichols.<sup>91</sup> A copy held at the Cambridge University Library was once owned by Ann Burrill (1740) and Elizabeth Anne Herbert (1805).<sup>92</sup> There are markings in some of these copies that indicate an attentive reading of the text.

### Note on the Text

There has never been a modern edition of Astell's *Christian Religion*.<sup>93</sup> This present edition contains a complete text of the 1717 second edition, including the author's index.<sup>94</sup> The *Christian Religion* was republished three times in Astell's lifetime: the first edition appeared in 1705, the second in 1717, and the so-called "third" in 1730. All the available bibliographical evidence suggests that the 1730 work is simply a reissue of the second edition with a cancel title leaf (a new leaf in place of the old one)<sup>95</sup> and a sixteen-page bookseller's advertisement at the end. There are no variations between the 1717 and 1730 texts: the errata, the main text, the watermarks in the paper, the setting of type in each gathering, and the press figures are all identical. Accordingly, it is highly improbable that there was ever a third

<sup>90</sup> Call no. BV4500.A8 1717, Watkinson Library, Trinity College, Hartford.

<sup>91</sup> Call no. LS60 As82 Kc46, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven.

<sup>92</sup> Call no. Keynes c.8.20, Cambridge University Library.

<sup>93</sup> There are, however, excerpts in the following works: Mary Astell, *The First English Feminist: 'Reflections Upon Marriage' and Other Writings by Mary Astell*, ed. and intro. Bridget Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 197-202; Lynn MacDonald, ed., *Women Theorists on Society and Politics* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), 19-22; Hilda L. Smith, Mihoko Suzuki, and Susan Wiseman, eds., *Women's Political Writings, 1610-1725*, 4 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 4:36-48, 340-41; and Taylor and New, appendix to Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 221-58. Copies of the original first and second editions of the *Christian Religion* can also be found in the online database, *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*.

<sup>94</sup> [Mary Astell], *The Christian Religion, As Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London: W.B. for R. Wilkin, at the King's-Head in St. Paul's-Church-Yard, 1717). This edition was printed by the well-known Bowyer printing house of London. The work appears in the Bowyer Ledger A7 for February 11, 1717: "Mrs Astells Religion of a Daughter of a Church of England ~~Woman~~." For details, see *The Bowyer Ledgers: The Printing Accounts of William Bowyer Father and Son. Reproduced on Microfiche. With a Checklist of Bowyer Printing 1699-1777, a Commentary, Indexes, and Appendices*, ed. Keith Maslen and John Lancaster (London: Bibliographical Society; New York: Bibliographical Society of America, 1991), entry no. 373.

<sup>95</sup> The title page of the 1730 reissue reads: *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England. Containing Proper Directions for the due Behavior of Women in every Station of Life. With a few cursory Remarks on Archbishop Tillotson's Doctrine of the Satisfaction of Christ, &c. and on Mr. Locke's Reasonableness of Christianity. By the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies; and Reflections on Marriage, &c. The Third Edition* (London: W. Parker, at the King's-Head in St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1730). This reissue was produced by William Parker, the bookseller who took over Richard Wilkin's old stock. For details on Parker, see Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 68, 70, 481, and 532.

edition of the text, and so I regard the second edition as Astell's final and considered opinion on the topics under discussion—this is why I have used it as the basis for my edition.

In my footnotes, I provide definitions of obscure or archaic terms, as well as bibliographical information about Astell's sources, references to similar topics in her other works, and further historical-intellectual details that might assist the reader. I also highlight variations between the first and second editions. I do not note minor variations in spelling and grammar, but I do indicate any alterations that might have come from Astell's hand and that might have bearing on her meaning, such as significant changes in wording and the re-writing or addition of whole sentences. Some of the variations have bearing on the structure or ordering of the work as a whole. In the second edition, Astell's extended critiques of her contemporaries, Locke, Masham, the author of *A Lady's Religion*, and Tillotson (§§75-88, 137-52, 262-69, and 393-407 in the first edition), are gathered together in a new appendix at the end, and the subsections are re-numbered accordingly. In her advertisement to the second edition, she explains that she placed these paragraphs in the appendix to separate "what was matter of controversy" from "the practical part" of her treatise. As a result, the main narrative of the second edition proceeds in a much more natural and easy manner than that of the first. Another noteworthy revision in the second edition is the inclusion of marginal glosses (brief descriptive statements in the form of shoulder notes) at the start of each numbered subsection. In the first edition, these glosses make up a lengthy table of contents at the start of the work. In the second, there is no table of contents and the glosses appear in the margins of the main text instead. In this present volume, I have included the glosses in italics at the start of each individual subsection in the text. I have not turned them into footnotes, as I have for other types of marginalia, because I think that Astell intended these glosses to be headings.

I have modernized the spelling, punctuation, and typography of the text. In doing so, my guiding principle was to provide a text that was accessible to the modern reader but at the same time faithful to the author's original meaning. To preserve the idiosyncrasies of Astell's writing style, and to avoid inadvertently changing her meaning, I have made minimal alterations to punctuation. By comparison with modern works, however, eighteenth-century texts are rife with commas, colons, and semi-colons. Accordingly, I have made some small amendments: occasionally, for the sake of clarity, I have changed some commas, colons, or semi-colons to hyphens or parentheses, and I have deleted some punctuation that may have confused the modern reader. I have used inverted commas instead of italics to indicate quotations, though I have retained Astell's use of italics for emphasis. I have expanded contracted words (I use "would" instead of "wou'd," for example) and spelt out some archaic abbreviations (I use "and so on" instead of "&c."). I have silently incorporated the original *errata*.

I have placed Astell's original marginal comments and citations in the footnotes and preceded them with the phrase "Astell's marginal note" to distinguish them from my own editorial comments. I have modernized Astell's citations following the principles used in the rest of this volume. In accordance with the *Chicago Manual of Style*, I insert the name of an author or a short title in those places where they are omitted. I have retained Astell's references to the King James version of the Bible, but I use Arabic rather than Roman numerals in the citations, such that "Acts xvii.27, 28" is now "Acts 17:27-28," and so on. Where possible, I provide page references to modern editions of cited works in square brackets following Astell's original marginal note. I have retained Astell's use of the section symbol (§) when cross-referencing individual subsections in her work.

My dictionary definitions and synonyms are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), <http://www.oed.com>, hereafter referred to as *OED*. I use biographical information from the *Oxford Dictionary of National*

*Biography*, online edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008),  
<http://www.oxforddnb.com>, hereafter cited as *ODNB*.