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**An examination of the life and career of William McGill (1732-1807),  
Controversial Ayr Theologian**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements of the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**By Robert Richard**

**University of Glasgow**

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**The idea for this thesis was initially suggested to me by Prof Ian Hazlett.**

**It has been a privilege to have had Prof Hazlett as my supervisor at Glasgow from Honours through Masters, and now Doctoral levels. At all times he has been assiduous, patient, and inspiring in guiding me through the various processes involved. I will always be very grateful for all the help and support he has offered, without which this work would never have been possible.**

**As a native of Ayrshire, the career of the Rev William McGill was a natural source of interest. During the lengthy period of research involved I received a variety of helpful leads and suggestions from a number of employees based in different local libraries.**

**This thesis is dedicated to my family.**

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## INTRODUCTION

### I) McGill's Life

William McGill was the fifth and youngest child of William McGill (senior), and Jean Heron. Following his early education at Monigaff and Penninghame he attended the University of Glasgow, graduating with an MA in 1753. Initially licensed by the Presbytery of Wigtown in 1759, he moved to Kilwinning in Ayrshire as assistant minister (1760), and was then ordained to the Old Kirk of Ayr the following year, as associate minister to William Dalrymple (1723-1814). McGill was later awarded a DD by the University of Glasgow in 1785, following the publication of his *Five Single Sermons* (1773 1<sup>st</sup> edition).<sup>1</sup>

From his marriage to Elizabeth Dunlop, daughter of an Ayr merchant (and niece of Dalrymple), McGill gained a substantial sum of money of around £700. Unfortunately this money, having been deposited in the Bank of Ayr (established 1769), was lost following the bank's failure in 1772. However, McGill did secure some further (though limited) income through his welcoming of boarders into the manse.<sup>2</sup> Prior to his death from asthma in 1807, McGill appears to have been beset by tragedy. Of his family of eight children only three survived, one of whom it had been found necessary to place in a lunatic asylum.<sup>3</sup>

In the *Autobiography of C.D.Gairdner* (1861) McGill was described as:

Universally beloved by his people on account of his piety and dutiful attention to the parish and his affectionate interest in the young people

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<sup>1</sup> Hew Scott. *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation*, Vol 3 (Edinburgh, 1868), pp.12-13. Also John McIntosh 'William McGill' in Oxford National Dictionary of Biography (online) (afterwards referred to as 'DNB') [accessed 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008]

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Murray, *The Literary History of Galloway* (Edinburgh, 1832), p.203.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, *History of Galloway*, p.211.

connected with the church...with a wonderful simplicity of character which made him a friend to everyone, his company was attractive to persons of every grade of society, and his conversations and repartee were so racy and amusing as to cause universal mirth.<sup>4</sup>

A man of some stature (around six feet tall),<sup>5</sup> McGill was also described as an ‘eccentric’ by a local historian, Rev Kirkwood Hewat. Although studious, he was a keen year round golfer, playing: “without the omission of a single weekday except the three in which there are religious services at the time of communion”.<sup>6</sup> In an interesting letter written by McGill (although unfortunately it does not state to whom it was addressed) he outlined his admiration for the work of Rev. Archibald Alison, entitled: *Essays On the Nature and Principles of Taste* (which was first published around 1790) and which concerned psychology and natural theology. Here McGill attributes to the work: “a great elegance and purity of style which disclose in their author an uncommon share of sensibility which I consider a valuable addition to the philosophy of the human mind”. Moreover it “illustrates several important principles in the science of human nature”.<sup>7</sup> Alison was a well respected preacher and writer, who was acquainted with leading Moderates such as Adam Ferguson (1723-1816), William Robertson (1721-93), and Hugh Blair (1718-1800), as well as Adam Smith. That McGill was reading a work of psychology and natural theology is illustrative of his literary habits, in addition to the variety of works to which the Ayr Library Society afforded him access.

Although the *Practical Essay* was ‘allowed’ to circulate for some two years without any action being taken by the church courts, the matter which instigated an

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<sup>4</sup> *The Autobiography of C.D.Gairdner. Auchans. Written at the suggestion of and revised by the Earl of Eglinton, June 1861* (Kilmarnock, 1902), p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, *History of Galloway*, p.213.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Annie I.Dunlop, *The Royal Burgh of Ayr: Seven Hundred and Fifty Years of History*, (Edinburgh, 1953 ) p.120.

<sup>7</sup> William McGill, *A Letter on the Plays of Archibald Alison* (Ayr, 1790)

examination of its doctrine was the sermon<sup>8</sup> preached by McGill against William Peebles (1753-1826), minister of Newton-on-Ayr, in which he openly challenged subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

As will be discussed in the course of this thesis, McGill did expound clearly framed Socinian opinions in his work, particularly with regard to the nature of the Atonement, which were, of course, a serious breach of the accepted standards of the day.

Following a rather protracted case through the various courts of the church from Presbytery, Synod and finally General Assembly level, McGill offered an ‘apology’ for his *Essay*. However, as evidenced by the later ‘Declaration of Doctrine’<sup>9</sup> offered by the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, it was apparent that, despite the lack of censure, the local courts were not prepared to go along with McGill’s teachings. In addition the response from the Burgher and Anti-Burgher factions of the Secession churches, and the anger felt at the outcome of the McGill case, would be instrumental in their move towards Voluntaryism<sup>10</sup> in the early nineteenth century.

McGill has been well known to aficionados of the Ayrshire poet Robert Burns due to his work entitled *The Kirk’s Alarm* (1786):

Orthodox, Orthodox, who believe in John Knox,  
Let me sound an alarm to your conscience,  
There’s a heretic blast been blawn I’ the west,  
That what is not sense must be nonsense,  
Orthodox!, that what is not sense must be nonsense.

Doctor Mac, Doctor Mac, ye should stretch on a rack,  
To strike evil-doers wi’ terror;

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<sup>8</sup> William McGill, *The Benefits of the Revolution: A Sermon Preached at Ayr on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1788, to which are added Remarks on a Sermon, Preached on the same day at Newton Upon Ayr; very necessary for all the Readers of the said sermon* (Kilmarnock, 1788)

<sup>9</sup> and printed in the *Scots Magazine* 53 pp. 592-3.

<sup>10</sup> Voluntaryism was an opposition to the establishment of the National church by the state. Rather, it believed that congregations of the church should provide funds for the ministry from ‘voluntary’ financial contributions. See for instance G.F.C.Jenkins ‘Voluntaryism’ in Nigel Cameron (ed) *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, (Edinburgh, 1993) (afterwards referred to as ‘DSCH’), p.847.

To join Faith and Sense, upon any pretence,  
 Was heretic, damnable error,  
 Doctor Mac! Twas heretic, damnable error<sup>11</sup>

It is indeed difficult for the modern day reader to access *The Kirk's Alarm* without being au fait with the main protagonists in the McGill case, as David Daiches suggests.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the work of Burns, the McGill case was well covered in the pages of the *Scots Magazine*, *The Glasgow Mercury*, *The Caledonian Mercury*, and *The Glasgow and Edinburgh Advertisers*. Mention was also made of McGill in the 66<sup>th</sup> *English Review*.

## II) Socinian Theology

Socinian theology regarded Christ as being a mortal (although brought into existence by the work of the Holy Spirit, and born to the Virgin Mary). His glorification, by which manner he became a high priest, occurred only after his resurrection and ascension. The satisfaction for sin involved in the Atonement, which was an accepted belief of Calvinism, was denied by Socinians. Rather, Christ willingly accepted his death on the cross due to his sincere obedience to the will of God. From this Socinians stressed not only the humanity of Jesus, but also his example, as a framework for the Christian life. Reconciliation to God would come by way of repentance for sin, which again denied the work of substitutionary Atonement involving the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Burns, *The Kirk's Alarm*, in *Selected Poems: Robert Burns* (London, 1996), p. 142.

<sup>12</sup> David Daiches, *Robert Burns: the Poet* (Edinburgh, 1950) p.263.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Socinianism' in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* 11, pp. 650-4. Also Richard Gamble 'Socinianism' in Donald K. McKim, David F. Wright (eds) *Encyclopedia of the Reformed faith* (Edinburgh, 1992), p.355.

### III) A problem of definition

As Daniella Bianchi has suggested the terms ‘Unitarian’ and ‘Socinian’ are often used interchangeably. Indeed within the Polish church followers of Socinus’ opinions were known as ‘Brethren’ or members of the Minor Church. Rather it was in a more international or European context that ‘Socinianism’ was used (often as a term of abuse) to apply to those holding such doctrines.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as E.M.Wilbur suggests, those holding Socinian views in Holland rejected the term, and adopted the name Unitarian instead.<sup>15</sup> The word ‘Unitarian’ first appeared in Transylvania in the mid-sixteenth century in an attempt to define those who held anti-Trinitarian views. However, it was not utilised in print until around 1600, when it appeared in a decree of the Diet of Leczfalva in southeastern Transylvania, to describe the churches in that area.<sup>16</sup>

In the latter part of the seventeenth-century English Socinians were also keen to provide a demarcation from the controversy invoked by using the name, and therefore again referred to themselves as Unitarian Christians. Furthermore in his *Antitrinitarian Biography*, Robert Wallace chooses to include the English ‘Unitarians’ within the ranks of ‘Dissenters’ (in a political as well as theological sense),<sup>17</sup> which takes them even further away from the original terminology.

In addition, David Snobelen has suggested, that there were:

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<sup>14</sup> Daniella Bianchi ‘Some Sources for a History of English Socinianism: A Bibliography of 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Socinian Writings’. *Topoi Journal*, Vol 4, Number 1, (Springer, 1985)

<sup>15</sup> Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England and America* (Harvard, 1952), p.48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.47.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wallace, *Antitrinitarian Biography: Or, Sketches of the Lives and Writings of Distinguished Antitrinitarians; Exhibiting a View of the State of the Unitarian Doctrine and Worship in the Principal Nations of Europe, from the Reformation to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* Vol 1 (London, 1850), p.12.

at least seven senses in which the word “Socinian” is used in the relevant literature: it can refer to the Polish Brethren, the complete Socinian theological system, anti-Trinitarianism in general or of the Socinian variety, the rejection of dogmatism, the avowal of religious toleration, the application of reason to Scripture, or simply be used as an epithet for heresy, much like “Arian” or “atheist”. What is more, to add to the confusion, the terms ‘Arian’ and ‘Socinian’ were frequently used interchangeably.<sup>18</sup>

However, within this thesis I will use the term ‘Socinian’, as understood to be applicable in the context of those who propounded the views and theology of Faustus Socinus, when applying it to the life of William McGill, as it was the main term of opposition raised against him. The Socinian system offered a theory of ‘adoptionism’<sup>19</sup> (ie the idea that although eternal, Christ was “adopted” as the Son of God at a later time). Socinianism differed from Arianism, the heresy based on the teachings of Arius (250–336), in several respects. Although Arianism also focussed on the ‘oneness’ of God it did accept Christ as the incarnate Logos. However this meant that he was neither fully God nor fully man. As he was not fully God he could not offer redemption, and as he was not fully man he could not provide a pattern of a perfect human life.<sup>20</sup> By contrast Socinians denied any form of pre-existent Christ, and also asserted that it was by his example and obedience that he gained favour with God.

Within Scotland there were two notable cases of ‘anti-Trinitarian’ thought in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, those of Thomas Aitkenhead (1678-97) and John Simson (1667-1740). It is therefore worth pausing to briefly consider both these examples.

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<sup>18</sup> David Snobelen, *Issac Newton and Socinianism : associations with a greater heresy* (Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2003), p.3.

<sup>19</sup> See Justo L. Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville, 2005), p.2. Gonzalez points out that although some fourth and fifth century theologians such as Antichene faction held this view, the term can only properly be applied in a meaningful sense with reference to the Spanish theologians of the eighth century, such as Felix of Urgel. (d.818)

<sup>20</sup> John N.D.Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London, 1958), p.228.

#### IV) Thomas Aitkenhead

In 1696, the Edinburgh student Thomas Aitkenhead was found guilty of having:

rallied against the first person, and also cursed and rallied our blessed Lord the second person of the holy Trinity...The denying of the incarnation of our Saviour, the holy Trinity, and scoffing at the holy Scriptures.<sup>21</sup>

Aitkenhead appears to have been a rather tragic figure, as despite his somewhat confused opinions on the nature of God, he pled guilty to the charges brought against him, and indeed repented of his 'errors'. Despite this he was hanged at Gallowlee at the beginning of 1697.<sup>22</sup> The Aitkenhead case is certainly illustrative of the attitudes towards anti-Trinitarian thought, and its response from the Scottish church at the end of the seventeenth century, with the lack of toleration clearly apparent. Interestingly the Calvinist theologian Thomas Halyburton (1674-1712) later considered Aitkenhead to be a 'Deist' in his *Natural Religion Insufficient*.<sup>23</sup>

#### V) John Simson

John Simson was Professor of Divinity at Glasgow University, who gained infamy by being the subject of two heresy trials. Having studied at Edinburgh and Glasgow he was initially ordained to Traquair parish in 1705 and appointed to the chair of Divinity at Glasgow in 1708.

The initial charges of 'Arminianism' and 'Socinianism' were brought against him by James Webster (1659-1720) in 1714. However, the Presbytery of Glasgow

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Bayly Howell, *A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and Misdemeanors from the Earliest Period to the Year 1783, with Notes and Other Illustrations Vol XIII* (London, 1816), p.928.

<sup>22</sup> D.F.Wright, 'Thomas Aitkenhead' in DSCH, p.7.

<sup>23</sup> M.A.Stewart, 'Religion and rational theology' in Alexander Broadie (ed) *The Cambridge companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2003), p.34. Deism was a philosophical system which believed that although God exists and brought the physical universe into being, he then takes a non

dismissed these at the first hearing. In 1717 the Assembly then found him guilty of expressing: “some opinions not necessary to be taught in divinity” (eg sin would not continue in hell following the Last Judgement, the moon may be populated).

Following another appearance before the bar of the Assembly in 1726 Simson was suspended from teaching for one year, a decision which was ratified in 1729, although he was retained by the faculty at Glasgow University in a non-teaching capacity. Although it may be said that there were traces of Socinian views in **Simson’s work - the idea that Christ was the Son of God could be taken with a pinch of salt, he claimed** – he appeared untainted by the influence of deism and rationalism, which was to the fore at this juncture.

For Anne Skoczylas, the significance of Simson lies in the changes which were made to church law, following the case.<sup>24</sup> The precedent had been set for a “presumption of innocence”,<sup>25</sup> in the event of ‘heresy’ trials. In an age of greater toleration, espoused by John Locke and the Whig ideology which he held, legal inquisition was losing its grip on society. Moreover, Simson had utilised civil lawyers to press his case in an ecclesiastical court setting.<sup>26</sup> This again set the tone for future cases. The patronage which Simson received from the Earl of Islay, would later be conferred upon leading Moderates, as Islay felt that their more ‘enlightened’ attitude resonated with his own political ambitions and power base.<sup>27</sup> From the example of Simson the later Moderates had an illustration of the fact that diversity of opinion could be held within the established church, without necessarily denigrating Calvinism. A more Arminian doctrine of the Atonement, prevalent in Simson’s work,

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interventionist role, and that religious insight can be gained from the application of reason and examination of the natural world.

<sup>24</sup> Anne Skoczylas. *Mr Simson’s Knotty Case: Divinity, Politics, and Due Process in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (London, 2001), p.348.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.349.

the stress on a God of love, and the morality of Shaftesbury<sup>28</sup> must also have been influential in the later Glasgow careers of Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) and William Leechman (1706-85).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Ian Hazlett has styled Simson as “one of the triumvirate who were midwives of the new theology in Scotland” (the others being Hutcheson and Leechman).<sup>30</sup>

## VI) Previous Commentaries on McGill

Some nineteenth century historians dismissed McGill as an inconsequential ‘heretic’. For instance in Robert Story’s *The Church of Scotland Past and Present*, McGill is described as being “not worthy of such an advocate” as (Robert) Burns,<sup>31</sup> such was his “insignificance.” Additionally, in the opinion of the Free Church historian William Maxwell Hetherington: “the condemned book [the *Practical Essay*] sunk into oblivion,” following McGill’s explanation and apology.<sup>32</sup> Andrew Thomson, who considered Moderatism as a ‘Dark Age’ for the Scottish church, found McGill to be have been given a “censure so gentle as to have all the effect of an acquital”.<sup>33</sup> For William McGavin, writing in 1833, it was evident:

to the whole world, that, in the eighteenth century, the church of Scotland did not approve the doctrine of Socinus, but had the Socinian doctor, [McGill] and his adherents, been suffered to pass unnoticed, while they published their sentiments to the world, those who should live two hundred years after, would be justified in fixing the charge of Socinianism on the church of Scotland, at

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.347.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) and patron of John Locke was a prominent politician and philosopher whose works including an *Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit* would resonate throughout the eighteenth-century.

<sup>29</sup> Skoczylas. *Mr Simson’s Knotty Case*, p.345.

<sup>30</sup> Ian W.P.Hazlett, ‘Religious Subversive or Model Christian?’ In *Francis Hutcheson: A Special Symposium on the Thought, Career and Influence in Ireland, Scotland, and America of the Ulster – Scots Philosopher and Dissenter*, Supplement to *Fortnight* 308 (1992), p.19.

<sup>31</sup> Robert. Story, *The Church of Scotland Past and Present: its history, its relation to the law and the state, its doctrine, ritual, discipline, and patrimony* (London, nd), p.282.

<sup>32</sup> William Maxwell Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland: From the Introduction of Christianity to the Period of the Disruption in 1843* (New Yrk, 1860), p.378.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Historical Sketch of the Origin of the Secession Church* (Edinburgh, 1848), p.146.

the period referred to; and they might challenge the whole world to prove the contrary.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, as found in Alexander Haldane's *Memoirs*:

Dr. M'Gill, of Ayr, had published a Socinian work, of which the Rev. John Newton declared that it alarmed him "more than all the volumes of Priestly;" yet even he was absolved by the Assembly.<sup>35</sup>

For David Thom, McGill had made a: "decidedly blasphemous attack upon the Supreme Deity of the Lord Jesus, and some other precious truths of Revelation".<sup>36</sup>

John McKerrow, the historian of the Secession church is however an exception in his coverage of McGill,<sup>37</sup> although also critical of the Ayr minister he did devote some ten pages of his work to the case.

## VII) McGill - Context and Influences

In searching for direct influences upon McGill's thought and theology I feel that there is a raft of different strands, all of which will aim to explore in the course of this thesis.

During his formative years at the University of Glasgow, McGill was the contemporary of a significant number of Irish students, at a time when Confessional orthodoxy was being challenged, with the expulsion of the Presbytery of Antrim from communion with the church as a result of their more radical position. Consequently McGill would have been informed of such developments. Of further importance is the teaching of William Leechman who sought to inculcate his students with the spirit of free enquiry in matters of doctrine.

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<sup>34</sup> William McGavin, *The Protestant: Essays on the Principal Points of Controversy Between the Church of Rome and the Reformed* (Hartford, 1833), p.223.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Haldane, *Memoirs of the lives of Robert Haldane of Airthrey, and of his brother, James Alexander Haldane* (Edinburgh, 1852), p.128.

<sup>36</sup> David Thom, *Divine Inversion: Or a View of the Character of God as in All Respects Opposed to the Character of Man* (London, 1842), p.286.

<sup>37</sup> John McKerrow *History of the Secession Church*, (Edinburgh, 1848), pp.359-69.

In his home county of Ayrshire the case of Alexander Fergusson of Kilwinning (1689-1770) with regard to Confessional subscription was also important. Fergusson had cited the Protestant right of private judgement as being superior to a need to subscribe wholeheartedly to the Confession, with his views being attacked and defended by different protagonists over a two year period in the *Scots Magazine*.

Within the field of Socinian theology it seems certain that McGill admired, for instance, the work of Nathaniel Lardner (1684-1768), the Presbyterian minister (and Socinian) of Crutched Friars in London. This is based on two different sources. The first of these is a statement made by the Unitarian radical Thomas Fyshe Palmer (1747-1802): “Dr McGill has erected a seat in his garden with this inscription: “To the memory of Dr (Nathaniel) Lardner, an Israelite indeed”.<sup>38</sup> The second, and most significant strand however, comes from McGill’s role as a founder member of the Ayr Library Society<sup>39</sup> (established 1762). Within the minutes of this organisation we find that:

A written motion was produced to the meeting under the hands of Dr McGill, moving the authority of the meeting to get into this Library the late publication of Dr.Lardner’s works by Dr.Kippis, and the motion being seconded by the Rev James Taylor, the Society by a great majority order these works.<sup>40</sup>

In addition the Library held a copy of *Mordecai’s apology to his friends for embracing Christianity* (1784). This was the work of Henry Taylor (1711–1785), a contentious Church of England vicar who was an avowed Arian. McGill cited his admiration for Taylor whom he esteemed as a “learned and ingenious author, to whom I do with pleasure confess myself much indebted”.<sup>41</sup> Taylor appears to have

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Spears, *Record of Unitarian Worthies* (London, 1876), pp. 232-3.

<sup>39</sup> *List of the Society’s Members, in July, 1802, in the order of their admission* (Ayr, 1802)

<sup>40</sup> *Minutes of the Ayr Library Society*, 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1791, p.65.

<sup>41</sup> William McGill, *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh, 1786), p.244.

accepted the heretical views of Apollinaris of Laodicea (died 390) that although Jesus possessed a human body yet he had a divine mind by way of the Logos.<sup>42</sup> Taylor was also described as “in all points an Anti-trinitarian”.<sup>43</sup> Other notable anti-Trinitarian volumes were Joseph Priestley’s (1733-1804) *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), which was the final part of his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772-74), **and his** .The lives of John Biddle (published 1789) and Faustus Socinus (published 1777) (both by Joshua Toulmin (1740-1815)). A copy of the Arian Richard Price’s (1723-1791) *On Providence and Prayer*. (1777) had also been obtained. It must also be said that the Moderate church background of McGill and Dalrymple was apparent in the Ayr Library possessing various works of William Robertson, Hugh Blair, and David Hume (1711-76).

As McGill was part of the Moderate party in the church he was influenced by the movement to build a more educated, more ‘polite’ society. This has been highlighted by Dane Love. Love notes that during a demolition of houses on Ayr High Street in the 1930s a copy of the *Practical Essay* was found, along with a letter to McGill from William Robertson, asking for his support in the appointment of his son to a church position.<sup>44</sup> This could therefore suggest a connection of some sort between McGill and the Moderate leadership.

The Enlightenment in its quest for a more humanitarian Christ, with a stress on the harnessing of reason and rationality is another source of influence. As Alister McGrath suggests, in the eighteenth century there was a move towards a greater emphasis on a moral understanding of the Atonement. From this the example of

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<sup>42</sup> Nigel Ashton ‘Henry Taylor’ in DNB [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> December 2008] Also Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms* p.13.

<sup>43</sup> *The Christian Reformer, Or, Unitarian Magazine and Review vol V* (London, 1849), p.67.

<sup>44</sup> Dane Love, *Ayr: The Way We Were* (Ayr, 2007), pp. 62-3.

Christ's life was essential to an ethical framework of redemption, which relied upon repentance. This was also evident in the work of John Locke in England.<sup>45</sup>

### VIII) Previous Works

While the most substantial work on McGill to date is Alexander McNair's 1928 *Scots Theology in the Eighteenth Century*, despite offering an admirable as well as comprehensive account of the process and controversy initiated by the McGill case, I feel that McNair in some respects overlooked the context in which McGill was working. In his *The Religious Controversies of Scotland* (1905), Henry Henderson devoted a chapter to McGill, entitled 'An Ayrshire New Light'. For Henderson, McGill's *Practical Essay* was "partly an anticipation of the teaching of F. D. Maurice,<sup>46</sup> partly Socinianism, pure and simple".<sup>47</sup> However, it may be making too much of McGill's later influence to suggest that he 'anticipated' Maurice.

In more recent times Walter McGinty's PhD dissertation<sup>48</sup> while again giving a good coverage of the case, does not perhaps fully consider the overall effects and impact of McGill within the wider ecclesiastical picture in Scotland. L.B Short in the *Pioneers of Scottish Unitarianism* (1963), widens the picture of McGill's influence outside Scotland to helpfully consider the response to the case of English Socinians, such as Priestley himself.

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<sup>45</sup> Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, Vol II, (Cambridge, 1986) pp. 136-142.

<sup>46</sup> Henry F. Henderson, *The Religious Controversies of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1905), p.90.

<sup>47</sup> Frederick. Dension Maurice (1805-72) was the founder of Christian Socialism. Although suspected of holding heterodox theological opinions, due to the Unitarian influences surrounding him as well as his own family background, it seems doubtful if the Socinianism of the late eighteenth century, as expounded so clearly by McGill, could feed into the mid-nineteenth century picture, as Henderson suggests. A good source for discussion of Maurice's connections with Unitarianism is David Young's *F. D. Maurice and Unitarianism* (Oxford, 1992) especially pp. 11-39.

<sup>48</sup> J. Walter McGinty, *Literary, Philosophical and Theological Influences on Robert Burns*, 2 vols (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1995)

Additional treatments of McGill have been offered by John McIntosh in his dictionary articles in both the *Oxford National Dictionary of Biography* (in which he suggests that McGill was influenced by Joseph Priestley's *Theological Repository*) and the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*. In addition he covers the McGill case in some detail in his *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party 1740-1800*. Liam McIlvanney also offers a good account of McGill (in connection with Robert Burns) in *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth – Century Scotland* (2002). Although McIlvanney offers a sound grasp of the nature of the McGill controversy, from his own reading of the *Practical Essay*, he does apply the terms 'Old' and 'New' Light to the case. These would rather concern the divisions in the Secession churches, following their splits in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century and are therefore not applicable in the Ayrshire setting of the McGill case.

McGill was of course writing his most contentious work in an era which was politically charged, with the American and French Revolutions in the background. Although perhaps more pertinent in the English context, the links between anti-Trinitarian thought and pro-Republican sentiment, made by J.C.D Clark, J.J.Sack and Robert Hole<sup>49</sup>, were also of relevance in Scotland. For instance, the organised Unitarians such as Thomas Fyshe Palmer and William Skirving (d. 1795), as political radicals were charged with sedition and transported to Australia in the 1790s. It would therefore have been dangerous for McGill to be associated with such men. To this end I feel that McGill's final published work *On the Fear of God and the King, on Occasion of the Public Fast*, (1795) is of importance, as he states his allegiance to the crown.

As S.J.Barnett has proved in his recent work,<sup>50</sup> the size and scope of the Deist ‘movement’ was greatly exaggerated by the established Church of England, in order to buttress their own position with the general population. Although Barnett does not apply his well argued case to the Socinian situation, it would seem that the notion of an inflated ‘heterodox’ form of theology was of significance in the writings of McGill’s opponents as well. For instance, although most of them claimed that a failure to remove McGill from his ministry would lead to a wide diffusion of Socinian ideas in Scottish society, this was not backed up by the evidence that there were no similar publications to the *Practical Essay* by Scottish authors in the late eighteenth century, and also that the size and scope of the Unitarian church in Scotland in the era was in fact very limited. For example, the Montrose congregation, founded by William Christie, by the early 1790s numbered only 10 people, from a potential 6000 registered worshippers in the district.<sup>51</sup>

As Barnett finds it difficult to properly identify outright ‘Deists’ in England, so I would argue that it was equally difficult to find such thinking in the Scottish context, within any significant numbers. However, McGill must of course be considered not only within the Scottish context, but also the wider scene of England and Ireland, where Socinianism/Unitarianism enjoyed a much greater establishment.

## **IX) Background Literature**

Within chapter one, ‘The emergence of “Socinianism”’, I will discuss the development the movement, from the post Reformation churches, through its ‘high’

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<sup>49</sup> J.C.D.Clark *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, social structure and political practise during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, 2000), J.J.Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative* (Cambridge, 1993) and Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England 1760-1832* (Cambridge, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> S.J.Barnett, *The Enlightenment and religion: The myths of modernity* (Manchester, 2003)

<sup>51</sup> Stewart Andrews, *Transatlantic Theology: How Scottish Unitarianism was Transplanted to America*. (2004)

period in Poland and Transylvania, to the diaspora in Holland and elsewhere.

Consideration will also of course be given to Socinian theology.

Chapter two will then focus upon the nature of divisions within Scottish Presbyterianism, the structure and process of the ecclesiastical courts, and the maintenance of discipline, as well as the state of the parties within the established church. Then the movements of theological thought, and finally the Unitarian movement in Scotland.

As the various branches of the Secession church (formed in 1733) provided some of McGill's most persistent opponents, it is useful to trace the process by which they came into being. In assessing the established Church, it is important to bear in mind that despite the recognised divisions of the Evangelical/Popular and Moderate factions, there were also cross-currents of thought between the two 'wings'. I will therefore consider the distinctions and similarities between the two main parties, in addition to various theological developments.

Before turning to examine McGill's main works, it is essential to place him within the context of his time. In chapter 3 'Scotland in the mid-to-late eighteenth century', I will therefore assess the social and political scene, the nature and role of the universities, and a sketch of the leading personalities of the day will also be important.

In chapter four I will offer a survey of the Arian/Socinian movement in England, and more briefly at this stage, Ireland. The fact that the movement was of far greater establishment and longevity in both countries than in Scotland is traced through the early impact of John Biddle, Isaac Newton, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, William Whiston, Thomas Chubb, and Nathaniel Lardner through to the "second wave" of radicalism, which established the Unitarians as a denomination from

Theophilus Lindsay's chapel in London, to the work of Joseph Priestley and Richard Price.

Chapter five will examine the local scene in Ayrshire, in a social and ecclesiastical sense. Within this section such themes as radical politics, travel and transport, industry, the rise and fall of the Bank of Ayr, the influence of the Ayr Library Society, and denominational affiliation will be discussed.

In chapter six I will assess some of McGill's other works, (aside from the Practical Essay) most notably his *Humble Remonstrance against some prevailing Vices of the Present Age, A Fast Sermon* (1773), and *The Benefits of the Revolution* (1787), in order to consider the background in which the controversy over the *Practical Essay* came to light.

Having built up a background picture of McGill's career and influence, chapters seven and eight will form the core part of the thesis, where a comprehensive review of *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* and why it proved to be so contentious will be given. Within this chapter I will also offer a comparison between the works of John Taylor, Joseph Priestley, and Nathaniel Lardner, in order to ascertain where they may have influenced McGill's theology.

## **X) McGill's Theological Opponents**

In tracing the process of the McGill case, it is necessary to consider the theological viewpoints of his opponents. Due to the trend of the day for publishing ministers' sermons, it has been possible to examine a range of primary sources which helpfully outline the main arguments presented by McGill's fiercest protagonists, as well as *The Decision of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr respecting Dr. McGill's Process* (1790), which offers an insight into the machinations of the church's case

against McGill's "problematical" theological stance in its entirety. I will also look at the Session Records of the Old Parish Church of Ayr, as well as contemporary articles from the *Glasgow* and *Caledonian Mercury* newspapers, as well as the *Edinburgh Advertiser* and the *Scots Magazine*.

In the final chapter 'The Impact, Resonance and Parallels of McGill's Thought', another central document is the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr's 'Declaration of Doctrine' (December 1791), printed in the *Scots Magazine*, which presented the 'official' position of those ministers and elders, who dissented from the outcome of the case. Another area which demands attention is the argument, initially advanced by George Grubb, that it was the anger in the Secession churches over the Assembly's refusal to deal with McGill that caused them to turn to Voluntaryism in the later 1790s, and that subsequently led to the New Light schisms in both the Burgher and Anti-Burgher churches. This interpretation is based on the Burgher Synod Committee of Falkirk's, *A Warning against Socinianism* (1788) and the later Anti-Burgher *Overture Concerning Dr. McGill's Errors and Process containing a warning against the said errors, and their sinful proceedings of the Courts in that Process*.

In addition to this I will look at the attempt made by laymen to re-ignite the case against McGill. A rather lengthy title covers the work, namely: *The Procedure of our Church Courts in the case of Dr. McGill of Ayr with a complaint lately exhibited against him and a narrative of the prosecution and termination of a prosecution carried against him* (1791). The authors of the document are the "Friends of Truth" from within the surrounding presbyteries, who clearly still harboured considerable resentment against McGill.

Others considerations will be given to the question of why the Moderates failed to address properly their own attitudes towards the Confession in the course of the eighteenth-century. It is also worth examining the response of Unitarians in Scotland and England to the McGill case.

A short postscript prefaces the conclusion and considers the final published work of McGill's career, *On the fear of God and the king, a sermon, preached at Ayr, on occasion of the public fast*, (Ayr, 1795). This is of key importance as it places McGill firmly as a political 'conservative'. Given that accusations of Republicanism had been launched at theological dissenters in England, including the Unitarians, this is an interesting insight into McGill's possible attempts to distance himself from any such suspicions. In addition I will offer a survey of the later development of Unitarianism in England.

Finally, the Conclusion will draw all the different strands and arguments of the thesis together, encompassing the full range of social and theological factors in the life and career of William McGill.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE EMERGENCE OF “SOCINIANISM”

In order to properly place McGill’s later theology within the Socinian milieu, it is necessary to establish what Socinianism was. As has been discussed in the Introduction, the very term offers a problem of definition, given that its application was often utilised as a term of abuse by opponents, in order to smear those whose general ideas were compatible with the anti-Trinitarian sentiment of the Polish or Transylvanian Brethren from the 1600s onwards, or those who were direct followers of the teachings of Faustus Socinus himself. Adherents within the movement would rather attempt to classify themselves as ‘Unitarian’ in later times in an effort to dissociate from suspicions of heresy.

Within this chapter I will briefly consider the case of Michael Servetus (1511-53) in the Reformation period, due to his clear form of anti-Trinitarian doctrine. From there it will be possible to trace the followers of Servetus’ thought to Italy, and later Poland, where the Minor Church would achieve a time of relative success in building a movement. Consideration will also be given to events in Transylvania and later Holland, both areas where Socinianism/Unitarianism put down roots to some extent. Additionally, assessment of the theology propounded at different times by the anti-Trinitarians and the lasting impact the early movement had in the Age of Enlightenment in which McGill was working will be offered.

#### **I) Michael Servetus**

In the Reformation period, anti-Trinitarianism emerged in the person of Michael Servetus. While at Basel Servetus had published *Seven Books on the Errors*

*of the Trinity* (1531), which was refuted by the Strasbourg Refomer Martin Bucer, (1491-1551) followed by *Two Dialogues on the Trinity*, the next year.

After a period spent in Paris as a student of medicine, Servetus returned to his polemical activity by commencing an (anonymous) correspondence with John Calvin. (1509-64).

Upon sending Calvin a copy of his *Restitution of Christianity* (1533), Servetus then returned an edition of Calvin's *Institutes* in which he had made comments in the margins. This being too much for Calvin, the Reformer of Geneva passed information regarding Servetus to the Inquisition in Lyon. Forced to flee to Italy, Servetus then stopped off at Geneva en route to Naples, and attended Calvin's church. Being easily recognised he was seized and brought to trial for his views which included a repudiation of infant baptism and a denial of original sin, as well as a dismissal of the Trinity, and the assertion that rather than being the eternal Son of God, Christ was instead a human who later became divine.<sup>52</sup>

Inevitably, Servetus was found guilty of heresy. Having previously been burned in effigy by the Catholic church in his absence, he was now burned alive outside Geneva in 1553.

## **II) Socinian Background**

In Northern Italy, the views of Servetus were propounded in secret in the *collegia Vicentina* (Vicenze colloquia), by way of discussing the nature of the Trinity and Redemption, where, in 1546, Laelius Socinus (1525-62 and uncle of Faustus) assumed the role of leader of those expressing anti-Trinitarian views in this context.

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<sup>52</sup> See Carter Lindberg *The European Reformations* (London, 1996), p.268ff. Also Bernard Cottret *Calvin: A Biography* (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 213-25 and Geoffrey Rudolph Elton, Andrew Pettegree *Reformation Europe, 1517-1559* (London, 1999), p.162.

Laelius Socinus (or Sozzini), a law student, who came from a well known Sienese family, had initially held Evangelical opinions. Indeed, during a period in Wittenburg, he had been welcomed by the Reformer Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560). He was also cordially received in Geneva and Zurich. Brought to Trinitarian speculation by the case and execution of Servetus, Socinus was careful not to publicise his views during his lifetime, despite his ‘leadership’ of this early grouping.<sup>53</sup> Upon moving to Basel in 1547, he befriended the French Humanist Sebastian Cantellio (1515-63) as well as the by then prominent Italian anti-Trinitarians Coelius Secundus Curio de Curione (1503-69) and the Capuchin Bernardino Ochino (1487-1563). As a result of this grouping “anti-Trinitarianism gradually rose to maturity”.<sup>54</sup>

George Williams has posited the common ground between the Italian anti-Trinitarians and the German Anabaptists. This encompassed their attachment to the early church position of pacifism, in addition to a separation of church and state. Moreover, both movements were keen to stress the importance of the New Testament and the apostolic community. Also, the Italian group arrived at an opposition to re-baptism.<sup>55</sup> Angered as they were by Calvin’s treatment of Servetus, as well as his suggestion that where God the Father was cited in the Bible, this was also a reference to the (con-substantial) Son, the Italians searched for a restatement of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>56</sup> This in turn led them to oppose the nature of God’s wrath and satisfaction in the Atonement as stated by the Calvinists. Rather, they viewed the Atonement as a loving act on the part of both God and Christ, in order to redeem fallen humanity. From this, within their continued attachment to predestination, the

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<sup>53</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, (Edinburgh, 1953), p.452.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Knijff, in Knijff, Sibbe Jan Visser et al, *Bibliographia Sociniana: A Bibliographical Reference Tool for the Study of Dutch Socinianism and Antitrinitarianism* (Uitgeverij Verloren, 2004), p.12.

<sup>55</sup> George Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, (London, 1962) pp.618-20.

Italian anti-Trinitarians subordinated the position of Christ in relation to God. In their quest to find a new formulation of the Atonement and salvation, Williams avers that, in common with Anabaptism and Evangelical Rationalism, the anti-Trinitarian group were searching for a path which led them away from the Anselmic doctrine.<sup>57</sup>

### III) Peter of Goniadz and early Anti-Trinitarianism in Poland

It would appear that Poland was a natural home for anti-Trinitarians in this era, as there was a generally peaceful co-existence in place between Catholics and Protestants, which was promoted by the nobility. As a result, for some three decades Poland became the centre of the anti-Trinitarian movement.<sup>58</sup> Marian Hillar has identified three key periods and developments involving the Polish church, which are useful to examine. These are:

- The early period from the establishment of the Minor Church in Poland from 1562 - 1565 to the end of the sixteenth century.
- Late Unitarianism or ‘Socinianism’, from the ratification of Socinian theology to the expulsion from Poland around 1660
- The diaspora, (particularly in Holland and England) following expulsion and resonance of Socinian ideas as a background to the later development of the Enlightenment period.<sup>59</sup>

Peter of Goniadz (or Peter Gonesius), (1530-73) a Lithuanian Calvinist minister is regarded as the instigator of the anti-Trinitarian movement in that country. Having studied in Wittenburg (where he abandoned Catholicism) and Padua where he

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.619.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.620.

<sup>58</sup> Perez Zagorin *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton, 2003), p.146.

<sup>59</sup> Marian Hillar, ‘The Philosophical Legacy of the XVI and XVII Century, Socinians: Their Rationality’ in *Philosophy of Humanism and the Issues of Today*, (M.Hillar and F. Prah. eds) American Humanist Association, (Houston, 1995), p.118.

was introduced to the work of Michael Servetus, Gonesius accepted the earlier doctrines of the Italian anti-Trinitarians.

Following his arrival in Poland he joined the Helvetian Church. However at the Helvetian synod in Secemin in 1556, he outlined his theological position as being a denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, which he regarded as of human composition by the early church. Additionally at a further Calvinist synod at Brest two years later he reasserted his 'heterodox' views of the Trinity, in addition to opposition to infant baptism. As the synod threatened him with excommunication, Peter set up an anti-Trinitarian church at Wegrow in eastern Poland, with its own printing facilities. His social opinions were influenced by the Anabaptists and Moravian Brethren, from whom he gained the idea of pacifism, and the rejection of holding arms, or political office. Indeed the Anabaptists had previously based their non-violence and pacifism on an imitation of the life of Christ, which of course involved a renunciation of aggression.<sup>60</sup>

Opposition to the anti-Trinitarians was formulated at the Calvinist synods of 1561 (at Pinczow) and 1562 (Cracow), where they condemned the views espoused by Giorgio Biandrata (1515-88 a later leader of the Transylvanian faction) and Stancaro. As a result each side appealed to Bernrdino Ochino. However, in a decision which angered the Calvinists, Ochino rejected the idea of the wrath of God being present in the process of Atonement, as this did not fit with the concept of a God of love. Rather, suggested Ochino, if the sacrifice of Christ involved an expiatory element, it

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<sup>60</sup> Michael L.Minch, in Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez (ed) *Encyclopedia of Religion and War* (London, 2004), p.16.

was only due to God's consent to allow it as such an expiation.<sup>61</sup> These views would find a later echo in the Racovian Catechism (1605) of the Polish Brethren.

During a later Calvinist synod at Piotrkow in 1565 a division in the anti-Trinitarian movement, which led to the formation of the Minor church occurred. Of importance in the growth of the movement at this time was the patronage of different nobles.<sup>62</sup> Although there was no united religious system (which would later be promoted by Jacob Palaeologus (d.1585) –who will be discussed below), all groups agreed to a union which had its basis in anti-Trinitarian theology.

#### **IV) Faustus Socinus**

Faustus Socinus had arrived in Poland in 1580 and promoted his influence by way of the anti-Trinitarian synods of 1584 and 1588. During this period he was instrumental in acting as a mediator between different factions of the movement, although the main (Racovian) catechism of the Socinians would be chiefly composed by Valentinus Smalcius (1572-1622), and Hieronymus Moskorzowski (d.1625), rather than Socinus. However, due to Socinus' dismissal of baptism by immersion, too great a stress on the place of Christ as the Son of God, and his more radical social views, it was some twenty years from his arrival in Rakow before he was accepted by the Polish community. From that point in 1600, he was a prolific author of pamphlets, which led to the movement being termed 'Socinianism', in the western sphere, in which his published works were read.<sup>63</sup>

By the beginning of the seventeenth century then Polish anti-Trinitarianism had attained a more mature status, and came under the further leadership of such men

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<sup>61</sup> Marian Hillar, 'From the Polish Socinians to the American Constitution' Published in *A Journal from the Radical Reformation. A Testimony to Biblical Unitarianism*, Vol. 4, No. 3,(1994) p.30.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

as Jan Crell (1590-1633), Jonasz Szlichtyng (1592-1661), Samuel Przykowski (1592-1670), Martin Ruarus (1588-1657) and Vaeltinus Smalcus.(1572-1622).<sup>64</sup>

Revelation was accepted by the movement in the sense that human reason alone could not comprehend the nature of God. Christ only became the God following his resurrection, and was due honour and worship on this basis (a view held by Socinus), though he was considered to be a mortal man during his time on earth. ‘Socinians’ also rejected the idea of a pre-existent Christ, (a doctrine on which McGill would later express an inconsistent view) rather asserting that he established a new religion following his mission, and by way of his death and resurrection initiated a new world in which humans could attain salvation. Also, from an early position of rejection concerning social passivity, the anti-Trinitarian synods of 1596, 97, and 98 rather accepted an active role in society. From this flowed a commitment to social equality and an end to serfdom.

#### **V) Socinus’ view of the Atonement**

Leonard Smith has argued that Socinus’ ethical, or ‘example theory’, view of the Atonement echoed that of Peter Abelard (1079-1142), whereby humans are saved by an ethical response to the sufferings and death of Christ, and his absolute obedience to the Father’s will.<sup>65</sup> Primarily Socinus believed that the nature of satisfaction for justice involved in concepts of the Atonement was in contradiction to the nature of reason, as well as against the concept of a God of love. To punish the innocent (in the case of Christ) in place of the wicked was therefore ‘unjust’. This was contrary to Reformed doctrine which regarded the justice of God as satisfied by the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Rather, by his obedience on earth and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.32.

<sup>65</sup> Leonard Smith, ‘Truth in a Heresy? - Socinianism’ in *The Expository Times* (London, 2001), p.221.

later glorification in heaven, Christ was able to hear prayer and expiate sins, in his 'new' state. The Christian life was therefore to be lived by following the example of Christ, accepting a path of humility and endurance, and offering penitence (or repentance) for sins, which would lead in turn to salvation.<sup>66</sup> In the respect that Christ, post resurrection, was able to offer the assurance of eternal life, based on an obedience to his teachings, then he may be classified as a 'Saviour'. Additionally by the power with which he was invested by God, following the resurrection, he could, and indeed then should, be called 'God'.<sup>67</sup> This opinion then suggested that the death of Christ was not essential as an Atonement for sin, as sin did not require punishment. There was therefore no direct link between the redemption of sinners and the death of Christ. Rather, Christ, as the ultimate example of obedience even to his acceptance of death, would encourage humans to 'reform' their lives.

The doctrines of the Polish Brethren therefore constituted a more humanistic response to the theology of their time. Although they considered the place of Scripture as being above reason, they also applied rationality to its interpretation and averred that doctrinal opinions should not be contrary to reason.

Indeed, one of the key tenets of Unitarianism/Socinianism from their early stages was the stress on applying reason to interpret Scripture, Revelation, and theological discourse. Indeed in establishing a denominational form of anti-Trinitarian churches, they had accepted a rationalistic account of Scripture in its treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity. This early form of "rationalism" was, however, for Marian Hillar, "very particular and limited",<sup>68</sup> as debate ensued on whether to place God or reason at the forefront of the movement. Reason stood in

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<sup>66</sup> Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, pp. 452-3.

<sup>67</sup> Zbigniew Ogonowski, 'Faustus Socinus' in Jill Raitt, *Shapers of Religious Traditions in Germany, Switzerland and Poland, 1560-1600*. (New Haven, 1981) p.199.

<sup>68</sup> Hillar, 'The Philosophical Legacy' pp. 120.

contrast to a reading of the Scriptures which, assisted by the Holy Spirit, was in itself self-explanatory. The link and interface between reason and revelation was also one which had to be explored by the early anti-Trinitarians. Clearly this stood in stark contrast to the teaching for instance of the Roman Catholic church, whereby the church councils had the final say in interpretation of Scripture. As Jaroslav Pelikan notes, in tandem with the Reformers the Socinians did insist on “Sola Scriptura...but rejected “essence” and “homoousios”<sup>69</sup> as mere human fabrication”.<sup>70</sup>

Socinus answered this potential problem by suggesting that whatever in Revelation appeared to be contrary to reason must be rejected, and that only ‘true’ religion was in tune with reason. However, as humans were unable to comprehend God by way of their own reasoning, only what was revealed by the creator and by his choosing, could be understood. Despite such an early rejection of natural religion, by the seventeenth century post-Racovian theologians reasserted the importance of studying the work of God within nature.

During their initial synod the Polish anti-Trinitarians had also set out their position on freedom of conscience viz: “Everyone has the right not to do things which he feels to be contrary to the word of God. Moreover, all may write according to their conscience, if they do not offend anybody by it”.<sup>71</sup>

## **VI) Theology**

Fired by the promotion of reason, the Socinians followed a reductionist path with regard to doctrine, in tandem with their belief that by the application of reason

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<sup>69</sup> Homoousios. The doctrine of the full divinity of Christ accepted by the Council of Nicea in 325. See Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms*, p.79.

<sup>70</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol 4 ‘Reformation of Church and Dogma: 1300-1700’ (Chicago, 1984), p.323.

and rationality the Scriptures would become self-evident to humans. The place of Christ having been ‘adopted’ as the Son of God post his Virgin birth was later reasserted in the Racovian Catechism (1605): “We do not find in the whole body of the sacred writings any cause antecedent to this of Jesus Christ's being the Son of God”.<sup>72</sup> The Catechism also clarified the position of Christ as subordinate to God thus:

First, because the Scriptures propose to us but one only God; whom I have already proved to be the Father of Christ. And this reason is rendered the more evident from Christ's being in several passages of Scripture not only distinguished from God absolutely so called, but often also expressly from the one or only God. Thus 1 Cor.8:6, “There is but one, God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him”.<sup>73</sup>

## **VII) Jacob Palaeologus**

Jacob Palaeologus (d.1585) was a Greek Dominican, whose views were to make a decided impact on Socinian/Unitarian thought. Upon his arrival in Poland, Palaeologus debated the place and role of Christ with Grzegorz Pawel, the leader of the Rakow congregation.

Palaeologus taught that as Christ had not fulfilled his intended mission of ushering in the Kingdom of God during his time on earth (which had been the chief aim of his life) and that this would rather be fulfilled at the time of his second coming. In the gap between the early ministry and the second millennium, Christ sat in heaven at the right hand of God. Prayers to Jesus were therefore of no merit, during this

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<sup>71</sup> Stanislas.Kot, *Socinianism in Poland, the Social and Political Ideals of the Polish anti-Trinitarians in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, translated from the Polish edition (1932) by Earl Morse Wilbur, (Boston, 1957) p.XXII.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Rees *The Racovian Catechism: With Notes and Illustrations, Translated from the Latin* (London, 1818), p.53.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

‘passive’ state of Christ.<sup>74</sup> This led to a ‘non-adorationist’ interpretation of Christ, which suggested that instead of being divine, he was a man, from the line of David, and could not be the focus of prayer or worship as a result. As the mission of Christ had been political this however held implications for a Christian involvement in the social sphere, giving a legitimisation to such an activity. Additionally, as for Palaeologus Christ had not established any new law, his teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount were instead of a moral and ethical nature. Following such ethical precepts (as well as the example set by Christ’s virtuous life) was therefore sufficient for salvation. Non-adorationist theology was also an attempt to reach out in an ecumenical sense to Jews, Muslims as well as more radical Protestants and Roman Catholics,<sup>75</sup> as well as combating sectarianism within the anti-Trinitarian movement itself. Although clearly radical, the theology of Palaeologus would create a rift in Transylvania between the more ‘moderate’ Giorgio Biandrata, (1515-88) and Ferenc David, (1510-79) who was influenced by the ideas of the German deacon, Matthias Vehe-Glirius (1545-90).

In addition to Palaeologus, the thought of Simon Budny (1530-1593) created a division over both the adoration of Christ and the holding of public office or arms by Anti-Trinitarians.<sup>76</sup> Budny while working in Lithuania had been influenced by a Judaising movement within Calvinism in that country. As a result he published an edition of the New Testament in 1574 which excluded verses he felt were inserted in order to buttress a Trinitarian doctrine. From this Budny dismissed a pre-existent or divine Christ. In order to counter charges of Judaism he then composed *De*

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<sup>74</sup> Howard Hotson, ‘Arianism and Millenarianism: the Link Between the Two Heresies from Servetus to Socinus’ in Matt Goldish, Richard Henry Popkin, et al. *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture*, (Kluwer ,2001) p.21.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, p.738.

*principalibus fidei christianae articulus* designed to restate his allegiance to Unitarian convictions.<sup>77</sup>

### **VIII) Establishment at Rakow and the Counter-Reformation Impact**

Following the repudiation of their doctrines by the Calvinist synods it was important for the anti-Trinitarians to regroup in a more peaceful setting. The town of Rakow, which sat on the river Czarna appeared to offer such a possibility. Jan Sieninski, who was a more liberal minded Calvinist magnate, agreed to appease his wife, described as a “zealous Arian”<sup>78</sup>, by establishing a new town which would allow for greater freedom and religious toleration. In 1567 a charter was drawn up to this end by Sieninski and Castellan of Zarnow, which acted as a beacon for social and theological radicals who were sympathetic to the beliefs of the Brethren.

As a result the settlement at Rakow, under the leadership of Gregory Paulus<sup>79</sup> (d.1591) rapidly increased in number, manufacturing cloth, paper and pottery, in addition to the printing press which was set up in order to disseminate documents around Europe.

From this position of relative security however the anti-Trinitarians had been undermined by the Counter Reformation in Poland with the arrival of Jesuits, at the behest of Stanislas Hosius (1504-1579) in 1564. In addition to their assault on Protestantism in general, the anti-Trinitarians were particularly vulnerable to the Catholic priests. Accusations were concocted that they were in an alliance with the Turks, who had attempted to invade Poland in 1595.<sup>80</sup> The Jesuits were also keen to

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, pp.741-2

<sup>78</sup> Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents* (Harvard, 1947),p.356.

<sup>79</sup> Earl Morse Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage* (Boston, 1925), pp. 103-4

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.37.

engage the Socinians in debate from the 1590s onwards.<sup>81</sup> It seemed that Rakow could not hold out indefinitely in the face of such opposition and it was finally overcome in 1638, with the agreement of the Polish parliament (the Sejm) that the Socinians were not actually Christians, due to their denial of the Trinity, and as such should not be protected by legislation. In light of this, on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1638 the church at Rakow was ordered to be dismantled, along with its printing press.

Of greater significance however was the dedication of King John Casimir (1609-72) to the protection of the Holy Virgin, as he believed, by way of persuasion by the Jesuits, that heretics had been responsible for the country's recent defeat in its wars with Sweden. As he had promised to protect the Virgin from 'insults' against her name, he agreed to expel the Socinians from Poland by a decree issued on July 20<sup>th</sup> 1658. Those who attempted to remain, did so under penalty of death, if they failed to convert to Catholicism within the next two years.<sup>82</sup> As a result the Polish Socinians were forced to seek refuge in Holland, Germany and England.

It is interesting to reflect on the 'protection' which the anti-Trinitarian movement appeared to have received from nobles at different stages of their development, prior to the final expulsion in 1660. Janusz Tazbir for instance, has argued that the utopian ideals of the Brethren, which of course included a commitment to pacifism and social equality, did not sit well with those who wished to exert their wider control in society by way of military power.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, in order to maintain the existing class divisions, which suited their own ends in controlling land and peasantry, the nobles were less than likely to offer protection to the Brethren.

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<sup>81</sup> Barbara Sher Tinsley *Pierre Bayle's Reformation: Conscience and Criticism on the Eve of the Enlightenment* (Susquehanna, 2001), p.308.

<sup>82</sup> Hillar, 'The Philosophical Legacy' p.39

<sup>83</sup> Janusz Tazbir, 'The fate of the Polish Protestants in the Sixteenth Century' in Henryk Samsonowicz, Maria Bogucka (eds) *A Republic of Nobles: Studies in Polish History to 1864* (CUP Archive 1982), p.198.

Therefore, following the Jesuits arrival, it is clear that the previous patronage which had been enjoyed to some extent was less than secure, to say the least, which must be a major factor in the vulnerability of the Socinians in this later period.

## **IX) Transylvania**

In Transylvania between 1569-70, contemporary with the Rakow establishment and the printing of the first Socinian works, Gyorgy Karacsony attempted to establish a 'Kingdom of God' at Debrecen. Conveniently, the anti-Trinitarians in Transylvania had found favour with the local prince, the voivode. Giorgio Biandrata, the political leader of the Transylvanian anti-Trinitarians was keen to maintain this support of the prince and nobility, and as a result he promoted the radical theology of Palaeologus, in order to counterbalance social radicalism, and present a bulwark against sectarianism. By the late 1570s Palaeologus' theological influence over the Transylvanian church was akin in scope to that enjoyed by Faustus Socinus himself in Poland, some ten years later.

When Ferenc David, the theological leader of the Transylvanian brethren invited Matthias Vehe-Glirius (1545-90) to the country, a split was engendered within the church. This was as a result of Vehe-Glirius stress on the failure of Christ to overturn the necessity of the Mosaic law. As this had not been achieved, Christians were still under the law, and as a result had to maintain its precepts, (although circumcision was removed), until the second advent of Christ. This more radical reading of the New Testament, which appears to have been accepted by David, horrified Biandrata. Although to some extent prepared to accept the Millenariast conclusions of Palaeologus, he could not absorb the more radical views espoused by

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Vehe-Gliurus. With his political concerns, Biandrata could understandably not foresee a rigorous, Jewish style religion being accepted by the princes of Transylvania, who had been content to extend toleration to the Unitarian church. Indeed, with the approaching advent of a Roman Catholic voivode, this seemed even more unlikely.

The support of King John Sigismund II (1540 - 1571) (the only ‘Unitarian’ king in history)<sup>84</sup> was however clearly pivotal in the development of the movement in Transylvania. Sigismund, who was influenced by Giorgio Biandrata, was keen to resolve the differences between Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians within his Kingdom.<sup>85</sup> As a result he called synods between the Transylvanian and Hungarian churches (1566 and 1568) in order to settle disputes over the doctrine of the Trinity. The outcome of this was the king’s backing for the anti-Trinitarian factions over those who wished to continue holding the traditional view, with Sigismund issuing an Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience.<sup>86</sup> This marked the “golden age”<sup>87</sup> of Unitarianism in Transylvania as, following the King’s lead, other nobles now lent their support to the cause. David and Blandrata were thus able to dedicate their *De regno Christi and De regno Antichristi* to Sigismund, in which they stressed the prominence of ‘one’ God.<sup>88</sup> Despite their formal state recognition, which was on a par with Lutheran Saxons and Calvinist Hungarians, the Transylvanian Unitarians were dealt a decided blow by the death of Sigismund in 1571.

Indeed, due to the two distinct factions opposing each other on the place of Christ, with Ferenc David on one side stressing the humanity of Jesus, and the other

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<sup>84</sup> Raymond Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* (Woking, 1938), p.17.

<sup>85</sup> David Parke *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston, 1985 edition), p.18.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Williams, *Radical Reformation*, p.721.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.719-22.

(comprising Biandrata, György and Hunyadi Demeter) advocating his worship, a mediation was called for. In 1578 Faustus Socinus arrived for some four months in an attempt to persuade David and his followers of the merits of worshipping Christ (with David evidently being impressed by Socinus though not fully accepting of his views in this regard). However a stalemate ensued without any full compromise being reached.<sup>89</sup>

Consequently in 1572 David was brought to trial, charged with contravening the Innovation Law, and detained under house-arrest at Gyulafehérvár. Upon the insistence of Biandrata, György and Demeter, the local prince found in their favour that David's theology was in fact contrary to the Christian faith, and sentenced David to life imprisonment at Deva fortress,<sup>90</sup> with David dying in prison in 1579. However the nature of his treatment caused the publication of his writings by Palaeologus, Vehe-Glirius and Dávid Hertel, the works enjoying some three editions in the sixteenth century.

Meanwhile in 1579, resolutions accepting the worship of Christ were passed at the Unitarian synod of Kolozsvár, again under the influence of Biandrata, György and Demeter. However, David's theology still retained a number of followers within the ministry of the Unitarian church in Transylvania.<sup>91</sup>

Having built up a considerable fortune, Biandrata eventually returned to the Roman Catholic church. Jacob Palaeologus however was captured in Moravia in 1582, and later burned at the stake as a heretic in 1585.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Hillar, 'From the Polish Socinians,' p.31.

## **X) Calvinist Opposition**

In the early seventeenth century, an opening was presented for Reformed Hungarian clergy to attack the Unitarians, who by now had a stronghold in the south-eastern corner of the country, particularly in the cities of Kolozsvár and Torda. This was brought about by the military defeat of the Unitarian sympathiser, Mozes Székely by the Hapsburg general Giorgio Basta. As a result the pro-anti-Trinitarian nobles were greatly reduced.<sup>93</sup> Hungary at the time was an important strategic area in the eyes of foreign Calvinists, as it stood between the Catholic Hapsburg's on one side and the Muslim Turks on the other.

Indeed this period had witnessed a less tolerant stance from Reformed clergy, due to their contact with foreign and domestic Calvinist academies, with the Dutch influence particularly prevalent, due to its clear anti-Unitarian ideology. Then, in 1638 the Diet of Des insisted on a new Unitarian catechism being drawn up, which allowed for the worship of Christ as God, infant baptism, and regular communion, as well as the restriction of Unitarian publications, which could only appear with the permission of local princes.<sup>94</sup> In addition the Diet acted as a subsequent court for the prosecution of those Unitarians who refused to accept its findings - with one death penalty handed out, to Janos Toroczkai.

Clearly the anti-Trinitarian movement was weakened by the co-ordinated attacks of Calvinists. Members of the Dutch Reformed church were also concerned by the Transylvanian diplomats' contacts with western Europe during the Thirty-Years war (1618–1648), fearing that anti-Trinitarian ideas could be spread with a combination of this factor, as well as the arrival of Polish Socinian refugees in Holland.

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<sup>93</sup> Graeme Murdock, *Calvinism on the Frontier, 1600-1660: International Calvinism and the Reformed Church in Hungary and Transylvania* (Oxford, 2000), p.120.

Meanwhile, fired by their foreign support, the Hungarian Calvinists launched an attack on the Unitarian city of Kolozsvár. Despite not being able to take the church of St. Michael's as they had intended, they were subsequently able to secure half of the seats on the local council by 1655. However despite this incursion, as well as the seizure of other Unitarian churches, the anti-Trinitarians continued to hold a majority in Kolozsvár until 1716, when St. Michael's finally fell to the Catholics.<sup>95</sup>

A key blow for Unitarians in Transylvania had arrived earlier in 1690, with the advent of Austrian rule. With the Catholic position thus strengthened, only small areas of the country, which were under Turkish protection, remained Unitarian - due to their suspicion of the Catholic Hapsburgs.<sup>96</sup> Subsequently, like their brethren in Poland, the Transylvanian Unitarians were forced into exile, in Holland and England, where they would offer some influence over both Arminianism, and promotion of rational theology.

## **XI) Holland**

### **Suspensions of Socinianism-Jacob Arminius, Conrad Vorstius and Hugo Grotius**

With the movement towards an 'Arminian' position it seemed somewhat inevitable that the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) would be tarred with the brush of 'Socinianism'. Arminius, who was Professor of theology at Leiden from 1603, had developed a system of doctrine regarding salvation which relied upon a free-will response to the Christian message, rather than an acceptance of the Calvinist view of predestination<sup>97</sup> However, as Roger Olson contends, despite having a free-will view of human response to God in common, there was little else to connect

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<sup>94</sup> See Andrew Pettegree *The Reformation World* (London, 2000), p.310.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> J. P. Cooper *The New Cambridge Modern History: The Decline of Spain* (Cambridge, 1979), p.197.

<sup>97</sup> Carl Bangs, *Arminius A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (New York,1971), pp. 340-41

the two movements. Indeed Arminius strenuously denied the charge of Socinianism.<sup>98</sup>

Following the death of Arminius his followers would become known as the Remonstrants as a result of their issuing five points of *Remonstrance* in 1610 against the Calvinist doctrine of predestination in particular. This led to a split in the Dutch Reformed Church, with the stricter Calvinists issuing a *Counter-Remonstrance* of some seven articles, which reasserted the perseverance of the elect in their faith towards salvation.<sup>99</sup> Subsequently some of the key Remonstrant figures were tarred with the brush not only of Arminianism, but also Socinianism. Indeed, some later Dutch Remonstrants did join Unitarian congregations.<sup>100</sup> It is therefore worth briefly considering the cases of Conrad Vorstius (1569–1622) and Hugo Grotius (1583–1645).

## **XII) Conrad Vorstius**

Upon the appointment of Conrad Vorstius as the successor of Arminius at the University of Leiden controversy ensued, as the Calvinist Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) declined to work alongside a professed Remonstrant.

Suspensions of Socinianism surrounded Vorstius not because of his denial of predestination, but rather the dismissal of the doctrine of God's satisfaction involved in the Atonement. In this he was certainly in tune with the position of Socinus, as he believed that penitent sinners, who followed the example of Christ's life would attain salvation. By emphasising the role of humanity, which by a free-will choice could accept or reject God, and then subsequently downgrading the nature of grace, Vorstius

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<sup>98</sup> Roger E. Olson *Arminian theology: myths and realities* (Intervarsity, 2006), p.80.

<sup>99</sup> Jan Rohls, 'Calvinism, Arminianism and Socinianism in the Netherlands' in Martin Muslow and Jan Rohls (eds), *Antitrinitarians, Calvinists and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth Century Europe* (London, 2005), pp.17-21.

left himself open to such accusations. However, despite holding such views, Vorstius was initially keen to distance himself from the charge of Socinianism. Indeed, after being called to Heidelberg to explain his position he apologised and reaffirmed his faith in the Heidelberg Catechism (of 1563), being afterwards considered orthodox by the Heidelberg theologians.<sup>101</sup>

### **XIII) Hugo Grotius**

As the jurist Grotius had proclaimed his support for the Remonstrant party it was inevitable that the charge of Socinianism would also be brought to bear against him.

As a result, he attempted to deflect such suspicions by publishing his *Defensio fidei catholicae de satisfactione Christi* (1617), which answered the denial of satisfaction in the Atonement put forward by Socinus in his *De Iesu Christo servatore* (1594). In Grotius' opinion Christ had died in order to absolve humanity from the penalty of sin. Socinus had of course rejected substitutionary Atonement, instead focusing on the absolute obedience of Christ to the Father's will, in order to provide the true and highest example for living. Grotius on the other hand, in his effort to accommodate the free-will choice of humans with the Atonement, suggested that God had used the sacrifice and death of Jesus as an example of divine justice, though driven by love, which offered salvation to all who would have faith. This was known as a 'governmental' theory of the Atonement as it stressed the view of God as moral governor (ruler) of the universe. However Grotius did concur with Vorstius that Christ had not suffered an *eternal* death, in the same sense that non-believers would, although he had provided by his death a form of substitution in the place of sinners.

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<sup>100</sup> Olson *Arminian theology: myths and realities*, p.80.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p.24.

By aligning himself with Vorstius in this manner Grotius had failed to fully extricate himself from the suspicion of holding similar views on the Atonement to those of Socinus himself. As a result, in 1617 Hermannus Ravensperger published *Judicium de libro H.Grotii adversus F.Socinus*.<sup>102</sup>

Following the Synod of Dort in 1618 the Remonstrant cause was significantly weakened by the victory of the Contra-Remonstrants in having the five key points of Calvinist doctrine<sup>103</sup> accepted as the confessional basis of the Reformed Church in Holland. Subsequently Remonstrant preachers were removed from their posts, and any who would not agree to refrain from promoting their ideas in future were exiled. Furthermore, in 1619 Remonstrant gatherings were declared illegal. However, despite this considerable setback the group were later able to continue publishing their works, in spite of continuing opposition from provincial Synods and the pen of Calvinist writers such as Johannes Hoornbeeck of Utrecht and Johannes Cloppenburg of Franeker.<sup>104</sup>

#### **XIV) Samuel Przypkowski**

Samuel Przypkowski is illustrative of a movement in thought from the earlier Socinian emphasis upon the lack of Christian involvement in civil society. Educated at Rakow, Przypkowski arrived in Holland as a student at Leiden between 1616 and 19.

During this period he wrote his most significant work (under a pseudonym) *Dissertatio de pace et concordia Ecclesiae*, which was finally published in 1628.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, pp.28-32.

<sup>103</sup> The famous 'TULIP'-ie Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistable Grace, Perseverance of the Saints, all of which reaffirmed the doctrine of predestination by which the 'elect' were saved. It must be noted however that this did not truly represent the teachings of Calvin himself.

<sup>104</sup> Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, pp.555-57.

As Luisa Simonutti notes, in adhering to a reductionist approach to doctrine Przypkowski, as well as being within the Socinian camp, was also at home in the Erasmus(1466-1536)-inspired *philosophia Christi*, which was popular in early seventeenth-century Holland.<sup>105</sup>

With regard to church–state relations Przypkowski moved away from Socinus by stressing that the holding of state office did not preclude anyone from also being a Christian. Indeed, the previous concept of non-resistance, which had been outlined by Socinus in his writings against Paleologus, was refuted by Przypkowski as being “contrary to Scripture and reason”.<sup>106</sup> In his *De jure Christiani Magistratus* then Przypkowski was willing to work with the state in order to accomplish shared objectives. In doing so he had broadened the Socinian stress upon toleration from the religious to the civil and social setting.<sup>107</sup>

By sponsoring the publication of Przypkowski’s works in the 1690s the Arminian faction in Holland demonstrated their shared objectives with the Socinians in the field of religious and civil toleration, a belief which they did hold in common.<sup>108</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From this survey of anti-Trinitarianism in the post-Reformation period it is clear that as a movement it changed and adapted to meet the demands of the day. From an initial flowering in Italy, through establishment and then banishment in Poland, and opposition in Transylvania, it moved with some success to Holland, and later of course, to England.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.196.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p.200.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p.200.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p.204.

Its adaptability was witnessed by the revisions made to the Racovian Catechism. However, if a legacy of Socinian thought is to be found it surely lies in its consistent application of the final rule of reason in matters of scriptural interpretation, in its attempt to offer a true model of New Testament living for Christians.

The emphasis upon freedom from manmade creeds and confessions, rather leaning upon a reductionist approach to doctrine (which would find echoes in English Latitudinarianism) stressed a more humanitarian view of the role and authority of Christ. Perhaps most significantly of all, however was the defence and promotion of toleration in regard to expressions of faith. Such an attitude resonated in the work of John Locke and the later dissenting movement in England, under the auspices of Joseph Priestley and Richard Price. Much of the system of beliefs, with particular regard to the Atonement, would find expression in the publications of Priestley and McGill himself in the eighteenth century.

Marian Hillar has suggested that the ‘positive’ outcomes of the Socinian movement were their insistence upon the considered ‘moral’ aspects of religion, which reduced the dependence on dogma as well as creeds and confessions.<sup>109</sup>

However in assessing the weaknesses of Socinianism Hillar accepts that their attempts to merge the “cruel” Yahweh of the Old Testament narrative, constrained as they were by asserting that Jesus was the Messiah of the same period, were lost. In attempting to reconcile Yahweh with the moralistic model of religion which they were trying to promote, the Socinians appeared to have been caught in a trap by their own twin pillars of stressing the place of scripture and reason. Rather, the later Deists argued that Socinianism should have disregarded the Old Testament, and with it their focus on a Messianic Christ, leaving him to rather be an admirable moral teacher.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Hillar, ‘The Philosophical Legacy, p.122.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p.125.

Despite the replacement of metaphysical considerations with the more ethical concerns which Socinianism stressed, it did somehow overlook spiritual matters, as Sydney Cave for instance suggested.<sup>111</sup> Rather than focus on issues of the heart then, proper conduct and behaviour lay at the centre of Socinian theology.

Having offered an outline of the post-Reformation and European background to Socinianism as a movement, it is now essential to assess the Scottish ecclesiastical and social picture of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, in order to construct a picture of the context in which McGill was working.

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<sup>111</sup> Sydney Cave, *The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (London, 1956 edition), p.156.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**TENSIONS IN THE SCOTTISH CHURCH IN**  
**THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

In order to place McGill within the context of the mid- to-late eighteenth century it is necessary to establish the background within the Scotland of his times. To this end I will use 1730 as a starting point, as it is contemporary with the beginning of McGill's life, and offer a survey to around 1800.

In the chapter I will consider and depict the divisions within Scottish Presbyterianism, the nature and process of the ecclesiastical courts and the maintenance of discipline, as well as the state of the parties in the established church. The movements of theological thought, and a sketch of the leading personalities of the day will also be important. Chapter three will then cover the social and cultural framework, as well as the political scene, the nature and role of the universities, contractarian political thought, Enlightenment 'realism' and the impact of the American and French Revolutions in the latter part of the century.

The Enlightenment, which in Anand Chitnis' opinion lasted from roughly 1750 until the 1820s,<sup>112</sup> and which Hugh Trevor-Roper described as "that efflorescence of intellectual vitality that became obvious after the defeat of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, and continued for four or five succeeding decades",<sup>113</sup> had a major impact upon religious life in Scotland, and this too will be traced from the development of ideas on the continent, as well as the broader British scene. Indeed Anne Skoczylas has contended that the Scottish Enlightenment had a "religious

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<sup>112</sup> Anand Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History* (London, 1976), p.238.

foundation”,<sup>114</sup> which she attributes to the philosophy of John Simson in the early part of the century.

### I) Enlightenment Theology

In his *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, Alister McGrath identifies four areas where Protestant denominations were more open to the new ideas engendered in the Enlightenment, as opposed to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. These were:

- The comparative weakness of Protestant ecclesiastical establishments. Without a centralised “authority” akin to the papacy, Reformed churches were able to forge their own theologies, in line with local demands and openings.
- One of the key tenets of Protestantism to be “constantly reforming”. This led to a desire for freedom of enquiry among more radical Protestants, and would have clear repercussions for the anti-subscriptionist movements in England and Ireland in particular, as well as McGill himself.
- The connection between Protestant clergy and the universities. With a stress on higher learning (particularly pertinent to the Moderates in Scotland), clergy and theologians were able to influence, and be influenced by, key thinkers in a variety of fields such as science, law, politics, history, and philosophy.
- The varied and localised influence of Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment mostly pervaded Western European nations, such as Britain, France, and Holland. Where Roman Catholics were in a majority (aside from the French example) in

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<sup>113</sup> Hugh Trevor Roper, “The Scottish Enlightenment”, *SVEC* (Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century) 58 (1967) ; 1635-58, cited in Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1985), p.4.

<sup>114</sup> Skoczylas, *Mr Simson’s Knotty Case*, p.22.

southern countries like Spain and Italy, ideas took rather longer to put down roots.<sup>115</sup>

This offers a helpful background perspective from which to consider the clear delineation of Reformed and Roman Catholic/Orthodox thought.

Enlightenment theology developed then against a background of reason and rationality being considered widely competent. This allowed reason to replace the more traditional mode of revelation. Indeed reason would stand as something of a judge over and against revelation, for those who adopted the “new” critique offered by the age of Enlightenment.<sup>116</sup>

McGrath goes on to offer a compelling argument for tempering a homogenous approach to the Enlightenment with an illustration of key local variations.<sup>117</sup> For instance, whilst Pietism was influential in Germany in the seventeenth century, it was not until the eighteenth that such a movement had any credence in England, with John Wesley’s (1703-91) Methodists, upon whom the German scene had made a decided impression.<sup>118</sup> Ironically at the same time that Pietism reached England, Deism (which had an albeit limited reach in Anglican circles in the early eighteenth century), arrived in Germany. Meanwhile in France the *philosophes* such as Voltaire presented a hostile front towards organised religion in general, and the Catholic church in particular.

It is somewhat significant to note that as Pietism had taken root in Germany *prior* to the Enlightenment, it was able in turn to exert influence over Enlightened thought and theology, whilst in England, many of the key ideas and movements had already been shaped by the time Pietist outlook in the shape of Methodism arrived on

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<sup>115</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, (Oxford, 2001) p.90.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p.91.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p.92.

<sup>118</sup> See for instance Jonathan Hill, *Faith in the age of reason* (London, 2004), p.90.

the scene. John Kent has also helpfully suggested that the impact of a greater awareness of cultures outside Europe, the influence of scientific advancement under such men as Issac Newton, and a disillusionment with wars fought in the name of religion over the past few centuries all led to a greater sense of toleration in eighteenth century theology.<sup>119</sup>

In a wider sense Deism and the German Enlightenment (with Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) to the fore), elevated Jesus to the status of a significant moral teacher. Attempts were therefore made to uncover the historical Jesus, in a format which would be more in keeping with the age of rationality and enquiry.

Consequently a more “human” Christ was sought, whose authority would be derived from his example of living a life in obedience to God, rather than being thought of in terms of God incarnate. This had clear implications for the significance of the Atonement. Again, rather than viewing this through the lens of the resurrection, and its connection with soteriology, now the death of Jesus was regarded as being an example of supreme obedience and self-giving, in order to inspire such a moral life amongst his followers. Such ideas would find an echo in McGill’s *Practical Essay*.

Bernhard Lohse has also pointed out the German influence in the field of a more historically orientated theology in this era, via the work of Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791 and professor of theology at Halle) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781).<sup>120</sup> Semler was able to downplay the verbal inspiration of Scripture, positing instead that the Bible had gradually evolved in a historical fashion. This had implications for dogmatic theology. However, although Semler had questioned the validity of the verbal inspiration, he did suggest that the Word of God was rather

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<sup>119</sup> John S.Kent in Hubert Cunliffe Jones, (ed). *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1978), p.462.

<sup>120</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine From the First Century to the Present* (Philadelphia, 1985 edition), pp 227-28.

Christ himself. Lessing went even further in asserting that instead of the New Testament canon providing the norm for the church, it was instead the “rule of faith”<sup>121</sup> of the early church, again due to historical research. Additionally, Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out the sense of autonomy experienced in the eighteenth century, which helped to ‘free’ theology from its previous attachments to, for instance, church doctrine and the plain authority which was vested in Scripture. From this autonomy on the part of humans flowed a more stringent application of reason to the search for validity of ‘divine experiences’. In turn this would naturally encourage a greater freedom of enquiry, which was indeed prevalent in the age of Enlightenment.<sup>122</sup>

Indeed, as Grell and Porter assert, religion did not only play a part on the fringes of this era, rather it was central to the Enlightenment movement.<sup>123</sup>

## II) Four Types of Calvinists?

In 1967 Stewart Mechie identified four theological outlooks which were prevalent in the Scottish church in the early eighteenth century, in addition to the Moderates and Evangelicals.<sup>124</sup>

- First, were the ‘scholastic Calvinists’ who were opposed to any movement away from the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, as well as being firm believers in the doctrine of predestination.
- Second were the larger section of ‘Evangelical Calvinists’, which counted men such as John Willison (1680-1750), Ralph (1685-1782) and Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754), and John Maclaurin (1693-1754) within their fold. While still

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p.228.

<sup>122</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 5: Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)* (Chicago, 1989), pp.60-61.

<sup>123</sup> Ole Peter Grell, Roy Porter, *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, (Cambridge, 2000), p.1.

<sup>124</sup> Stewart Mechie, “The Theological Climate in Early Eighteenth Century Scotland”, in *Reformation and Revolution*, ed. D. Shaw (Edinburgh, 1967), p. 268.

holding to the standards of the *Westminster Confession*, they felt that the gospel should be widely offered to all men, who could in turn be saved by accepting a personal faith in Christ, on repentance of their sins. It is recognised that most of the Popular party would have aligned themselves with this group, as John McIntosh suggests.<sup>125</sup>

- A third grouping were the ‘liberal’ Calvinists. These men included William Leechman, Robert Wallace (1696-1771), George (1703-85) and William Wishart (1660-1729), and William Hamilton (1669-1732). They argued that the basis and grounding of the Christian faith could be derived from the obvious benefits which it offered human beings.
- Finally, the fourth group were the followers of John Simson, who can be described as ‘Arians’, influenced by Samuel Clarke’s 1712 *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity*, as well as the Deists. Simson’s students disregarded subscription to the *Westminster Confession*.

However, a more updated version of these divisions with regard to the established church is offered by John McIntosh in his compelling argument that rather than sharp theological differences between Moderates and Evangelicals, there was rather convergence in the later part of the century, into what can be termed “three” parties within the church.

These groupings then comprised: Traditionalists. The more orthodox Calvinists, who were concerned with traditional forms of church politics and doctrinal outlook. Second: Liberals. They had moved from more traditional Calvinism towards a greater reliance upon Stoicism and ethical thinking, which has been identified as Moderatism. However, as within the Popular party there were Moderates

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<sup>125</sup> John McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland* (East Linton, 1998), p. 21.

and almost-Moderates, this group was not a unified body. Third: Evangelicals. They were somewhere in the middle between the first two groups, being “orthodox” and traditional in keeping with the first, and also informed by the age of Enlightenment, like the latter. The Popular party encompassed clergy from all three groupings, and most certainly can therefore not be thought of as homogenous.<sup>126</sup>

In addition to these definitions, Steven Fratt has also offered a description of the evolving Scottish church response to the English Enlightenment as being threefold. For Fratt, the key groupings comprised: “The Creedalists, the empirical apologists, and the pietists.”<sup>127</sup> Of those the Creedalists worried about the acceptance of empiricism as a philosophical tool in the quest for knowledge. Rather they would have wished to hold fast to the Confession of Faith and more ‘traditional’ doctrine. Certainly such men would be found within the ranks of the Secession churches in the eighteenth century.

The Empirical apologists meanwhile emerged from the universities of the era fired by new advances in epistemology, aiming to utilise its findings in order to apply new principles to Christian theology. Coupled with this was their keen interest in natural religion. They were regarded as little better than ‘Deists’ by the Creedalists. This is the group, from such definitions, that McGill would fit into. Finally, the Pietists desired to promote a revival of the Christian faith, whilst upholding their own religious background. Concerning doctrine the pietists were also keen to place considerations of the ‘heart’ over those of the ‘head’. Regarding church-state relations the pietists were concerned by a potential loss of church freedom, if too strong an attachment to the civil authorities was pursued.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, pp.238-9.

<sup>127</sup> Steven Fratt, *Scottish theological trends in the eighteenth century: Tensions between 'Head' and 'Heart'* (Santa Barbara, 1987), p.38.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, pp.38-42.

### **III) The Presbyterian System**

At the base of the Presbyterian system was the Kirk session. Presided over by a Moderator (normally the minister), and administered by ruling elders. The session then had jurisdiction over parish morality, admittance to church membership, the arrangement of worship and communion seasons, and the maintenance of poor relief.

Upkeep of the church as well as the ministers salary were under the remit of the local heritor, who was also responsible for ensuring that poor relief was adequate, in the event of a shortfall from church collections. Under the system of patronage the heritor (or local landowner) also had the role of selecting the minister.

Several parish Kirk sessions were then under the oversight of the presbytery, which were attended by the minister from each session, as well as one elected elder. The presbytery was responsible for maintaining order and discipline within the sessions in the first instance (and also moving overtures to the next level of Synod, and ultimately, if required, Assembly). In addition they had oversight for vacancies within the area, and the appointment of interim-moderators (ministers who would temporarily fill a vacancy).

The synods (of which there were sixteen in the eighteenth century) met twice a year, and received 'referrals' from the presbyteries. The synods had no authority to legislate however, and were therefore required to pass any cases which could not be amicably resolved at their level onto the Assembly (which was the regular course of action). Appeal against decisions made by presbytery and any overtures, submitted by presbytery to the General Assembly, would pass through the synod first of all. Synods could certainly encompass quite a wide ranging geographical area (for instance the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr).

The supreme and final court of appeal in the Church of Scotland was the General Assembly. Constituted on an annual basis (normally in May), it held judicial authority over the Kirk sessions, presbyteries and synods, although by way of the 1697 Barrier Act, any decisions affecting the constitution of the church had to first of all be passed down to local presbyteries for discussion, although in practise this appeared to be a superficial process of “consultation”. In addition to ministers and ruling elders representing each presbytery, the Assembly also had an input from the universities (one delegate each – a system which the Moderates would use to their advantage), and the royal burghs, again with one representative. Attendance at each Assembly was however hampered by transport restrictions, whereby it could prove difficult for more outlying presbyteries to send their delegates. As a result, the numbers present were less than half of the annual entitlement on a regular basis.<sup>129</sup> It will therefore be useful to consider transport in Ayrshire in the chapter on the ‘Local Scene’.

Between 1729 and 52 the Assembly was also able to appoint Riding Committees, which were established in order to ensure that the patrons nominated minister was inducted in cases of dispute, as a way of enforcing the Assembly’s discipline. Indeed between 1740 and 52 over fifty clerics were appointed by Riding Committees (giving an indication of the number of “disputed” inductions). However from 1752 and following the Inverkeithing Case, the Assembly switched the responsibility for the imposition of patrons presentations onto the local presbytery.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> This discussion has drawn on material from J.L. Weatherhead, ‘General Assembly’, DSCH, p.353, McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, pp.12-13, and A.Herron, ‘Courts of the Church’ DSCH, p.214, as well as Stewart J. Brown *Providence and Empire: Religion, Politics and Society in the United Kingdom, 1815-1914* (Pearson, 2008), pp.19-20.

<sup>130</sup> I Hamilton, ‘Riding Committees’ in DSCH, pp.719-720.

#### IV) Church Divisions-Secession and Relief

Although there was an early move to Voluntaryism in the movement initiated by John Glas of Tealing (1695-1773) in the 1730s,<sup>131</sup> of greater impact and wider significance (in the sense of schism) was that of the Secession and Relief divisions from the Church of Scotland.

As the Secession church with its various branches was to provide some of McGill's staunchest opponents later in the century, it is worth offering a narrative of the process whereby they came into being in the 1730s, as well as a consideration of some of the theological issues which concerned them.

In October 1732 Ebenezer Erskine preached a sermon at the Synod of Perth and Stirling, with the text "The stone which the builders rejected is made the head-stone of the corner" (Psalm 118:22). In this he criticised the Toleration (1689) and Patronage (1711) Acts, and the role of the Assembly in their formation.<sup>132</sup> As members of the Synod were opposed to Erskine's views they set up a Committee to compose a report outlining the most contentious parts of the sermon, with the intention and hope that Erskine would be persuaded of his errors. Following a failed attempt to get Erskine to offer an apology, the Synod agreed to censure him, with a minority protesting this decision to the Assembly the next year. However the Assembly upheld the Synod's ruling and called Erskine to the bar.<sup>133</sup>

Erskine had no intention of recanting his views and was joined by three other members of the Perth and Stirling Synod, namely William Wilson (1690-1741) of

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<sup>131</sup> Glas supported the right of congregations to support their own minister by way of voluntary contributions, as well as denying the lawfulness of the Covenants. As a result he was censured by the Assembly in 1730, and subsequently established an independent congregation in Dundee. Additional congregations followed at Perth (1733) and Edinburgh (1734). However, by 1790 the membership of these churches was only around 1,000, although his son in law Robert Sandeman did take the movement further afield to England. D.B. Murray, 'John Glas' in DSCH, p.364.

<sup>132</sup> Thomson, *Historical Sketch of the Secession Church*, pp. 37-42.

<sup>133</sup> See McKerrow, *History of the Secession Church* pp.31-41. Also George Grubb, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland, vol. iv* (Edinburgh, 1860), p.58.

Perth, Alexander Moncrieff (1695-1761) of Abernethy, and James Fisher (1697-1775) of Kinclaven. Annoyed by the failure of the four ministers to appear before the bar, the Assembly then issued a resolution to suspend them from their ministry and, if necessary, to proceed with further censure, if agreement was not reached by the following August.<sup>134</sup>

In November the Assembly faced the choice of deposing the four men *simpliciter* (in a summary manner), or to declare them no longer ministers of the established church, despite a call for leniency from some seven synods.<sup>135</sup> The latter sentence was applied, which met inevitably with further protest from the Seceders on the grounds that it was they who were adhering to the true Reformed and Covenanting principles of the Church of Scotland, and standing against the backsliding of the establishment in recent times, with regard to patronage and abandonment of the faith of the Covenanting era.

In December 1733 the Secessionists met at Gairney Bridge outside Kinross, to set up a Presbytery which would be called the Associate Presbytery, with Erskine as Moderator, and Fisher as clerk. In addition they authorised a paper entitled *A Testimony to the Doctrine, Worship, Government, and Discipline of the Church of Scotland*.<sup>136</sup>

The Testimony outlined the main view of the Seceders and voiced their reasons for leaving the establishment. These included the failure to censure Arminian and Arian opinions in the universities (in a reference to John Simson), the Toleration and Patronage Acts, especially the backing of patronage which had been reiterated by the Assembly in 1732, and an opposition to the outcome of the Union with England,

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<sup>134</sup> McKerrow, *Ibid*, pp.31-41 and Grubb, *Ibid*, p.59.

<sup>135</sup> McKerrow, *Ibid*, pp.31-41 and Grubb, *Ibid*, p.59.

<sup>136</sup> McKerrow, *Ibid*, pp.31-41 and Grubb, *Ibid*, p.61.

whereby the terms of treaty differed from the Covenant Union of the seventeenth century. Additionally they cited their adherence to the:

Doctrine, polity, and discipline of the established church, as contained in the Scriptures, the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, and the directory; and testified their belief in the perpetual obligations of the National League and Covenant, and of the Solemn League and Covenant.<sup>137</sup>

Although the Seceders continued to occupy the pulpits of the established church, in addition to forming themselves into a separate Presbytery, they appointed a professor of divinity, in order to train their ministerial candidates. The initial three were joined by Ralph Erskine (1685-1752) of Dunfermline, Thomas Mair (1701-68) of Orwell, Thomas Nairn (1680-1764) of Abbotshall, and James Thomson of Burntisland, so that in 1737 they constituted eight ministers, with a congregation apiece, and were able to reiterate their position as the Associate Presbytery.<sup>138</sup>

Clearly something had to be done by the established church in response. In 1738 the Synod of Perth and Stirling set a complaint before the Assembly of “the disorderly practises of certain Seceding ministers from this church”.<sup>139</sup> Subsequently the Assembly attempted to regain the Seceders by means of persuasion, and established a Commission to call the Secessionists before the bar of the Assembly, if required.

In May 1739 the Assembly met to discuss the libel against the Associate Presbytery. Those who favoured a conciliatory approach did so because they feared that to censure the Seceders would only enable their movement to grow in strength. On the other side were those who had grown tired of the past seven years negotiations. They cited the example of Cromwellian era groups which became

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<sup>137</sup> Cited in Grubb, p.62.

<sup>138</sup> John Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland from the Commencement of the Christian Era to the Present*, (Edinburgh, 1859), p.305.

sufficiently powerful to “overturn the Establishment”.<sup>140</sup> This point of view carried by a slim majority, and it was therefore agreed to proceed with the libel.

Despite this stance, following the appearance of the Seceders at the bar, as a constituted Presbytery, the Moderator offered them another opportunity to return to the established church. Upon refusing this, the Seceders then outlined their objections and reasoning in the form of a *declinature* (refusal of acceptance).

## V) The Marrow Controversy

In 1717 General Assembly passed an act condemning the Auchterarder creed. This was a series of propositions which the Presbytery of Auchterarder (Perthshire) required all candidates to sign. These were in addition to the prescribed questions and were intended by the Presbytery as a defence against what it believed were contemporary doctrinal errors. One of the propositions was intended as a defence against the preaching of the necessity of a preparation for grace: “I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach, that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ, and instating us in a covenant with God”. William Craig, a divinity student, complained of this requirement and the assembly found in his favour.<sup>141</sup> In this setting, Thomas Boston (1713-1767) recommended the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* to a colleague. As a result, the *Marrow* was republished in 1718 with a recommendatory preface by James Hog (1658-1734). Written by Edward Fisher (1627-1665), an English Presbyterian barber-surgeon, the *Marrow* (1645) was a work of popular divinity. That it became the focus of a theological controversy in early eighteenth-

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid,p.306.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid,p.307.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

century Scotland is illustrative of the extent to which changes had occurred in Reformed thought in the seventeenth century.

For the more Evangelical minded, they also faced the problem of promoting free grace, while at the same time having to work within the Confession's concept of double predestination and limited Atonement. In rejecting this and stressing the offer of grace they could have laid themselves open to charges of Arminianism. This is a good example of the concern with the saving personality of Christ, as opposed to more formulaic doctrinal considerations.<sup>142</sup>

## **VI) Ecclesiology**

Another matter of importance in considering the Secessionists' (as well as other groups, such as the Popular party's) attitudes towards patronage was their doctrine of the church.

In this regard Christ was considered to be the absolute monarch, or only king and head of the church both visible (on earth), and invisible (in heaven). Only those who were members of God's chosen elect could comprise both instruments of the church, by which God conveyed his methods of salvation, both present and future. It followed from this that Erastianism, or state interference in church matters was anathema to those who held such a doctrine to be of key importance.

Moreover, the "regulative authority of Scripture"<sup>143</sup>, meant that the church, under the control of Christ's headship alone, was required to implement and follow God's word in all matters, in both the church and society as a whole. The final basis of authority then rested on Scriptural foundations, which again had major implications for a consideration of the role and influence of magistrates, landowners, and officers

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<sup>142</sup> Thomas Torrance, *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh, 1996), p.227-8.

of the state, in relation to church affairs. The concept of the liberty of the individual Christian flowed from such a view of the place of Scripture, as it was in this instance that the believer had the opportunity to live their life in accordance with Christ's commands, under the authority of Scripture, and his headship of the church. Within the Scriptures there was no precedent for a "vice-official", under Christ (such as the Pope, or an earthly ruler), as Christ was the king alone.<sup>144</sup> The Secession church, at its formation then was "free" from government patronage or privilege.<sup>145</sup>

The Secession church continued to grow in the following decades. By 1742 they had some twenty congregations. Indeed two years later, expansion led to the formation of an Associate Synod, in addition to three presbyteries. However, as David Lachman notes, this situation only lasted until 1747 when a further division over the Burgess Oath caused the establishment of the General Associate (Anti-Burgher) Synod, and the Associate (Burgher) Synod.<sup>146</sup>

The Burgess Oath which professed adherence to the 'true religion', as constituted within the realm of Scotland, was upheld by the law of the land. Ebenezer Erskine had no problems with continuing this, as he felt that the said true religion, was found in the Secesion body. Opponents of this view however considered that true religion must be that upheld by law, and therefore required a more limited application, as this encompassed the established church.

In April 1746 the Associate Synod decided that the Oath could not be upheld by their members, and called them before Kirk sessions in order to recognise the sense of injustice present within it and their commitment to renewing the Covenants.

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<sup>143</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.35.

<sup>144</sup> James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland: 1560-1750*, (Reprint, Edinburgh, 1982)

<sup>145</sup> G.D.Henderson, *The Claims of the Church of Scotland*, (Aberdeen, 1951), p.152.

<sup>146</sup> David Lachman 'The Associate Presbytery' in DSCH p.36.

Around half of the synod protested against this.<sup>147</sup> At the next Synod meeting, following publications from both sides of the debate, a split occurred between those now calling themselves the Burghers and the others the Anti-Burghers, with each laying claim to be the true Associate Synod. The Anti-Burghers however composed a libel against the other party and cited them to appear before the bar. As a result of their non-compliance with this, they censured and then excommunicated the Burghers from the Synod.<sup>148</sup>

With regard to the Westminster Confession, the Seceders framed a Formula of Questions for those they would license to preach. As Ian Hamilton observes the Formula suggests that the Associate Presbytery regarded themselves as standing firm in line with the Act of Assembly 1711, which had qualified the Confessional requirements.<sup>149</sup> Indeed the only alterations of note were the revision of Question 2 to “own and believe...the whole doctrine contained in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms...”<sup>150</sup>, and the omission of the 1711 clause “ratified by law in the year 1690”.<sup>151</sup> At this stage the Secession church was of course attempting to attract members away from the establishment, and in so doing pursued a policy of continuity, in order to present themselves as the “true” church of Reform in Scotland.

The main issue for the Seceders was the place and person of Jesus Christ as head of the church and Saviour of the world, with the Gospel of grace being of key import in the message of good news for sinners: “the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, without regard to any of our doings as a foundation of our claim or title

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<sup>147</sup> See S. Isbell, ‘Burgess Oath’ in DSCH, pp.109-110.

<sup>148</sup> Lachman in DSCH, p.36.

<sup>149</sup> Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy : Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh, 1990), p.10.

<sup>150</sup> The Formula of Questions originally framed and settled by the Associate Presbytery. Cited in Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy*, p.10.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, cited again by Hamilton, p.10.

thereunto”.<sup>152</sup> On the one hand there was the position that the doctrine of God and his enduring love was central. From this resulted a Gospel offer, free from election, but rather open to all humanity on the basis of their being lost sinners. As Ralph Erskine, (a later member of the Burgher Synod), stated “The question is not, are you elect or not?, but are you a sinner that needs a Saviour”?<sup>153</sup> However, the branches of Secession would later run into problems concerning the nature of elect and reprobate. Ebenezer Erskine was a figure who drew admiration for his preaching style, in which he emphasised the importance of God’s grace in the divinity’s relationship with humans. In a wider sense it is notable that both Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine had some three volumes of their sermons published in London between 1738 and 1750, which offers some indication of the reach of their views.<sup>154</sup>

## VII) James Fraser of Brea

Another issue which created division in the Secession camp was the theology of James Fraser of Brea (or Brae) (1638-98). His main work of a contentious nature, *A Treatise Concerning Justifying or Saving Faith*, with the ‘Appendix Concerning the Object of Christ’s Death’, which dealt with the extent of the Atonement, was republished in 1722, and then again in 1749.

Within this manuscript, Fraser contended that it was not merely faith which justified the individual believer, but rather Christ, the primary object of faith, and that Christ had died for the whole of humanity, and not only for the elect.<sup>155</sup> In addition

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<sup>152</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p.241.

<sup>153</sup> John Brown of Whitburn, *Gospel Truth Accurately Stated and Illustrated by the Rev. Messrs James Hog, Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, and Others, Occasioned by the Republication of the Marrow of Modern Divinity*, (Edinburgh, 1817), p.391.

<sup>154</sup> David Lachman, ‘Ebenezer Erskine’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition). Hereafter cited as DNB. [accessed December 18<sup>th</sup> 2008]

<sup>155</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p.184-5.

he repudiated the differentiation made between the covenant of grace, and that of redemption – with the element of grace being absolute and universal in “its extent”.<sup>156</sup>

With regard to the question of whether all were ‘chosen’ by God, following Christ’s dying for the whole of humanity, Fraser argued that God had only meant to save those who were elect.<sup>157</sup> However, this opened the path for the Gospel to be universally offered to all, both elect and reprobate. When the reprobate rejected this offer they would then be under the gospel wrath, as the “same blood which magnifies God’s grace exceedingly, magnifies essentially his justice”.<sup>158</sup>

By placing the crucified Christ at the centre of the reconciliation which God had made manifest for humans as a result of his unconditional love, as well as the idea of Christ by his saving work being the “freely given donation of God and the objective ground of his faith”,<sup>159</sup> Fraser was castigating the hyper-Calvinist belief that the end point of faith was found in the electing intentions of God. By suggesting that Christ’s sacrifice was the ground of redeeming faith, he had steered the main focus of faith away from the issue of election. In addition, the notion that Christ had died for all led to a re-examination of the differences between elect and reprobate, as contained in the Westminster Confession.<sup>160</sup>

Thomas Mair (1701-68) of the Anti-Burgher faction was in agreement with Fraser’s theology. As a result in 1753 the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh called for an enquiry. The following April the enquiry submitted an overture to the Associate Synod, which condemned the spread of ‘Arminian’ teaching (due to

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<sup>156</sup> James Fraser of Brea, *A Treatise on Justifying Faith, Wherein is opened the ground of believing, or the Sinners sufficient Warrant to take hold of what is offered in the everlasting Gospel., Together with an Appendix concerning, the Object of Christ’s Death, unfolding dangerous and various pernicious Errors that have been vented about it* (Edinburgh, 1749), p.170. Cited by Torrance in *Scottish Theology*, p.185.

<sup>157</sup> Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland*, p.81.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, p.82.

<sup>159</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p.193.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, p.193.

Fraser's stress on the universal *offer* of the Gospel), and accepted an *Act in opposition to the Arminian errors upon the head of Universal Redemption*, which restated Christ's dying for the elect alone.

As the only one of some forty eight clergy present at the Synod who was against the Act, Mair was duly suspended, as a result of his continuous opposition, in 1755 and then deposed from his ministry in 1757.<sup>161</sup>

During the controversy over Brea's *Justifying Faith*, Adam Gib (1714-88), the leading figure in the Anti-Burgher Synod, republished John Owen's *Death of Death* (Edinburgh, 1755), in order to uphold the belief that Christ had obtained the removal of sin only for the elect.

In addition to Secession concerns over the issues of patronage, the failure of the Assembly to deal with Simpson and Campbell, and the repudiation of the *Marrow*, there were clear divisions over the nature of "doctrine and churchmanship",<sup>162</sup> as well as two diverse understandings of faith as a set of doctrines, or a way and method of obtaining salvation. Also prevalent was the discrepancy between the earlier Scottish Reformation and the hyper-Calvinist traditions, the latter of which had inculcated a firm outlook of imposing a federal theology onto the teaching of the church.<sup>163</sup> Following the rejection of George Whitfield's<sup>164</sup> (1714-70) ministry by the Seceders, Erskine and others moved towards a more stringent emphasis upon the role and place of Christ as Saviour, which affected their modes of preaching, pushing it in a more evangelical direction, although this was to be limited by the Catechism of James Fisher.

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<sup>161</sup> Donald Macleod, 'The Atonement', in DSCH, p.41.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p.243.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p.243.

<sup>164</sup> George Whitfield was an itinerant Anglican preacher who was a key figure in religious revivals in both Britain and America in the mid-eighteenth century. He undertook some fifteen preaching tours of Scotland, and in all is reckoned to have preached around eighteen thousand sermons to hundreds of

### VIII) James Fisher and the Shorter Catechism

Of the founder members of the Secession church, James Fisher (who later joined the Burgher Synod) is worthy of note, due to the theology he expounded in his *The Assembly's Shorter Catechism Explained, By Way of Question and Answer* (Glasgow, 1753 and 1760). Indeed John Macleod has suggested that this was the most influential form of the Catechism in Scottish homes used in the mid-to-late eighteenth century.<sup>165</sup>

Within Fisher's work a renewed stress was placed on the doctrine of the Trinity, as being a key component in human understanding of God. Additionally, the sacrifice of Christ was evident from the initial stage of his incarnation. A restated version of the nature of election follows from Christ's sacrifice, which has offered satisfaction for divine justice, in regard to the salvation of the elect alone. Indeed although Christ had died for all people, the effects of his Atonement remained efficient only for those preordained to redemption. However, contrary to Calvin's thought, Fisher posits Christ as "not being the cause of election", though his mission was initiated by the free love of God.<sup>166</sup>

As Torrance avers, the rejection of anything like "universal redemption as to purchase' left the Secessionists with the difficulty of understanding and presenting the Gospel offer".<sup>167</sup> This problem was addressed by Fisher's ordering of Christ's office into prophet, priest and king, thus enabling him to differentiate the office and role of prophet from priest (which was a departure from Calvin's tripartate order of priest and

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thousands of people. Frank Lambert, *'Pedlar in divinity': George Whitefield and the transatlantic revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton, 2002), p.7.

<sup>165</sup> John Macleod, *Scottish Theology in relation to Church History since the Reformation*, (Reprint, Edinburgh, 1974), p.179.

<sup>166</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p.245.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, p.246.

then prophet as subsidiary). Thus was Fisher able to contend that Christ as a *prophet* was open to all people to be instructed by him “in the outward dispensation of the Gospel, for he casts open the door for every man and woman, saying, Come unto me and learn of me”.<sup>168</sup> However, this did not extricate the priestly office of Christ from its effect in the Atonement. With this background, as well as their renewal of the National and Solemn League and Covenants and their rejection of the mission of George Whitefield, the Seceders had moved away from the views of the earlier Marrow theologians, and were constrained as a result in a legalistic, traditional model of Calvinistic thought, which would serve to restrict their efforts in the field of evangelical preaching,<sup>169</sup> hampered also by the apparent contradictions between the likes of Ralph Erskine and James Fisher.

John Brown of Haddington (1727-87), who served the Associate (Burgher) Synod as Professor of Theology is also worthy of attention in Secession thought. Brown’s fame rested on his *Self-Interpreting Bible* (1778), and a *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (1769), his former publication being extensively reissued in both Britain and America.<sup>170</sup> Of the federal Calvinist school, Brown addressed the notion of how far the Righteousness of Christ was imputed to humans, with regard to their justification. In his opinion the individual Christian did not receive the whole of such righteousness, but rather, only a sufficient amount to satisfy his or her requirements.<sup>171</sup> By contrast the Anti-Burghers chose the opposite position. For them, the full extent of Christ’s sacrifice was added to each believer’s life, and not just a “portion” of it.

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<sup>168</sup> James Fisher, *Shorter Catechism Explained*, (1849 edition), p.124. Cited by Torrance in *Scottish Theology*, p.246.

<sup>169</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p.247.

<sup>170</sup> D.F. Wright, ‘John Brown of Haddington’ in DSCH, p.99.

## IX)The Relief Church

The Relief church meanwhile was initiated as a further reaction to the hold of the Moderates over the established church.<sup>172</sup> Of those involved in its formation, Thomas Gillespie (1708-74) had been deposed in 1752, following his support of the people's choice in a disputed presentation to Inverkeithing. The Assembly had reached the decision to depose Gillespie (on account of his continuing the "case" by the publication of a paper) by a vote of some fifty-two to four (with 102 abstentions).

Despite a further attempt to uphold Gillespie's stance being defeated at Assembly yet again the following year, he managed to secure public support, and as a result was able to continue his ministry via a public meeting house in Dunfermline.<sup>173</sup>

Following this, in 1759 the Earl of Balcarras attempted to install Dr Chalmers of Elie to the parish church of Kilconquhar. As the majority of the congregation opposed this, the Presbytery of St.Andrews and the Synod of Fife chose to delay the appointment. However the Assembly enforced the settlement, which resulted in the people building their own church in the village of Colinsburgh, and asking Mr Colier, an English dissenting minister, to be their pastor.

When Gillespie was refused support from the established church in order to administer communion, he continued to work on his own. He was then invited by Thomas Boston (1713-67) in Jedburgh to join him. As Colier was then minister at Kilconquhar following the patronage dispute there, it seemed time for all three men to constitute themselves into a Presbytery. As a result on October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1761 Gillespie,

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<sup>171</sup> Macleod, *Scottish Theology* p.184.

<sup>172</sup> N.R.Needham, 'The Relief Church', in DSCB, p.702.

<sup>173</sup> Gavin Struthers, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Principles of the Relief Church*, (Edinburgh, 1848 edition), pp 223-248.

Boston and Colier, each accompanied by an elder, met at Colinsburgh to form the Presbytery of Relief, as a home for those who opposed patronage.<sup>174</sup>

The main intention of the newly formed church centred on the license for local bodies to select their own ministers, which they held in common with the Associate Presbytery. Indeed a strong attachment to the doctrine of Christ as the only Head of the church was affirmed in the minute which constituted the Relief presbytery's formation.<sup>175</sup> However, differences were apparent in the Relief attitude to the National Covenant (1638), and Solemn League and Covenant (1643), with their implications for the entitlement to accept communion. Rather the principle of "free communion" was offered,<sup>176</sup> (although Arminians were excluded), which enabled the Relief church to try and hold services with clergy from other bodies. Clearly then, the tone of the Relief was less aggressive towards the establishment than the Seceders.<sup>177</sup> However, this failed as other dissenting Presbyterian communions, such as the Secession repudiated the Relief ministers for their "latitudinarian" approaches to the sacrament.<sup>178</sup>

Another important element of the Relief effort was its early adherence to Voluntary principles in regard to church-state relations, as well as the order of church courts, which conducted themselves more as "consultative meetings" as opposed to "legislative judicatories",<sup>179</sup> thus enabling a greater degree of flexibility and liberality for the (Presbyterian) Relief ministers and congregations.

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<sup>174</sup> Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, p.358ff. Also, Struthers, *The History of the Rise*, pp.284-287.

<sup>175</sup> Struthers, *The History of the Rise*, p.288

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, pp.316-17

<sup>177</sup> Henry Grey Graham, *The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, (London, 1937), p.380

<sup>178</sup> Struthers, *The History of the Rise*, pp.308-10.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, p.123.

## X) Denominational Affiliation

In his work on religious adherence in Scotland in the late eighteenth century Callum Brown notes that it is difficult to accurately trace membership due to the fact that there was a limited collation of statistics before the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>180</sup> Indeed, even when such information was available there were discrepancies between “actual” members and potential communicants.<sup>181</sup>

With regard to the Secession churches, Brown posits that the figure of some 100,000 members by the 1760s was “exaggerated”.<sup>182</sup> At the beginning of the eighteenth century the established church accounted for 95% of all churchgoers, while by the 1790s, even if the figure of around 100,000 dissenters is accepted, the figure was still at the 89-90% mark. This illustrates the dominance of the Church of Scotland over religious life in the eighteenth century, with numbers of - for instance - Roman Catholics and Episcopalians being very low indeed.

It is also important to note the fact that many church attenders would move easily between denominations in this period, going to the Established (or parish) church one week, and then attending perhaps a Secession or Relief church the next. Therefore denominational loyalty was **tenuous** at best. This is illustrated by the fact that disciplinary cases for “sermon promiscuity” reached into the nineteenth century.<sup>183</sup> As the parish minister at Stonehouse in Ayrshire suggested in 1790, “it is not easy to ascertain the precise number of dissenters from the Established church, principally, because many scarcely know to what particular sect they belong”<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Callum G Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707*, (Edinburgh, 1997), p.42.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, p.43.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, p.46.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, p.44.

<sup>184</sup> *Old Statistical Account*, vol 2, p.228, cited in Brown, *Religion and Society*, p.44.

Why then was Presbyterianism so divisive in nature? There was certainly a contrast with the previous century in the sense of the relative ease by which secessions occurred, compared to the lengthy soul searching of the 1700s. For Gordon Donaldson, it is the Presbyterian system in its essence which aided the ease of secession, as any grouping of disaffected clergy were able to head off and form their own separate presbyteries.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, the issues involved in the splits e.g. patronage resonated with a good proportion of the population, rather than being restricted to a limited number of ministers.<sup>186</sup>

However, as Jeffrey Stephen points out, despite the splits the eighteenth century was still to be a time of establishment and expansion for Scottish Presbyterianism.<sup>187</sup>

## **XI) Issues surrounding the Westminster Confession**

An early influence of relevance here is that represented by William Dunlop (1692-1720).<sup>188</sup> Dunlop's main work was his *Collection of Confessions of Faith* (1719-22). While aware of the necessity to uphold the Westminster Confession against the attacks being made in broader Presbyterian circles (such as Ireland and England) which questioned such credal dependence, Dunlop was an "enlightened and slippery, proponent of ecclesiastical conservatism whose stand was firmly grounded on natural rights theory rather than explicitly theological claims".<sup>189</sup> Therefore, as Colin Kidd notes, although general in its scope, Dunlop's defence of the creed was

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<sup>185</sup> Gordon Donaldson, *The Faith of the Scots* (London, 1990), p.109.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>187</sup> Jeffrey Stephen, *Scottish Presbyterians and the Act of Union 1707* (Edinburgh, 2007), p.232.

<sup>188</sup> Colin Kidd, 'Scotland's invisible Enlightenment: subscription and heterodoxy in the eighteenth-century Kirk', in *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol.XXX (Edinburgh, 2000), p. 37.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

almost “nonchalant in tone”,<sup>190</sup> and relativist in its approach to the demands of other creeds. His primary view encouraged the churches to establish standards, and not simply rest on the doctrinal rightness of the Kirk’s own confession.<sup>191</sup>

Rather than being a tool of oppression then, confessional subscription for Dunlop did not have to include an intervention into the natural rights of man, as he perceived them. Indeed confessions were not there to promote schism within the Presbyterian churches, rather they could, when properly managed, provide an opening for the laity (those not able to spend time pouring over theological tomes) to imbibe a succinct account of the foundations of their own faith.

Despite the influences of non-conformity which were circulating significantly close to Scotland, this form of clerical enlightenment seemed to be less apparent within the ranks of the Moderates and their early eighteenth-century predecessors. Indeed, as Kidd asserts, the mainstream Scottish Enlightenment was “at least superficially – a Calvinist affair”,<sup>192</sup> in Confessional matters. From 1690 law had established the Confession as the official standard of the church. Additional laws then confirmed the subscriptional demands made of the clergy. As Kidd notes: “By an act of assembly in 1711 probationers were required to acknowledge the Westminster Confession as “the truths of God, contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments” and to own the “whole doctrine therein””.<sup>193</sup>

Indeed, Henry Sefton contends that in spite of the Moderates’ promotion of free enquiry in religion, “none of them...attempted to have altered the terms of

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid..

<sup>191</sup> Wm. Ian P. Hazlett, “The Scots Confession”, in *Archive for Reformation History* Vol. 78 (1987), pp. 292-5.

<sup>192</sup> Kidd, p. 33.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith”.<sup>194</sup> This position was to be continued consistently in the second half of the century, initiated as it was in the early 1750s, as a rebuff against various patronage disputes of the time. Richard Sher was clear about the public position of the Moderates: “None of the Moderates in the William Robertson circle had any scruples about subscribing to the church’s rigorously Calvinist creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and none of them overtly denied its fundamental tenets.”<sup>195</sup>

There was also the suggestion, made by Stewart J Brown, that William Robertson’s retirement from the Moderate leadership in 1780 may have been brought about by a concern over the potential of his opponents to tackle the whole question and nature of subscription.<sup>196</sup>

A notable opponent of the Moderates was John Witherspoon (1712-1790)<sup>197</sup>, the Evangelical cleric and later president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). In his 1753 work *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753), Witherspoon ridiculed the various means by which the Moderates had dismissed the more “orthodox” views of the church. Indeed he made allusions to the said Moderates as being very liberal in their attitudes towards the church’s traditional doctrinal standards: “It is a necessary part of the character of a Moderate man”, proclaimed Witherspoon, “never to speak of the Confession of Faith but with a sneer: To give sly hints that he does not thoroughly

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<sup>194</sup> Henry Sefton, “‘Neu-lights and Preachers Legall’: some observations on the beginning of Moderatism in the Church of Scotland”, in Norman MacDougall (ed) *Church, Politics and Society: Scotland 1408-1929*, (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 194. Cited in Kidd, in ‘*Invisible Enlightenment*’ p.33.

<sup>195</sup> Richard Sher, *Church and University*, p. 35. Also cited by Kidd, p.33.

<sup>196</sup> Stewart J. Brown, “William Robertson (1721-1793) and the Scottish Enlightenment”, in *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, ed. S.J. Brown (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 31-2. Also cited in Kidd, p.33.

<sup>197</sup> Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, Vol. 8, (Edinburgh, 1950), p. 104.

believe it; and to make the word orthodoxy a term of contempt and reproach".<sup>198</sup>

According to Witherspoon, the Moderates regarded the Confession as a left over of the church's more contentious history, but in an enlightened age could, only reluctantly, subscribe to its doctrines. However Witherspoon would present a more 'liberal and tolerant' front in his later work in America.<sup>199</sup>

Another problem posed by the Confession was its relegation of the Trinity behind the doctrine of God. If this element had been reversed, then in talking of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would have enabled the central nature of God to be expressed in this way. Rather, beginning with the assertion of God as a sovereign lawmaker, the sense of his Fatherhood was only apparent in its relationship to the elect.<sup>200</sup>

In its treatment of the doctrine of God, the Westminster Confession presented the divinity as "as a primarily omnipotent creator and judge of all the earth, who can only be Father to his creatures if the requirements of his Law are rigorously satisfied".<sup>201</sup> From this the Confession deals with the nature of providence in the work of God, the fall of humanity and the covenantal relationship with mankind. Only following this, did the question of Christ's Mediatorial office and the nature of the Atonement arise. Therefore, the sense of God as creator and lawgiver imposed a federalised model of Calvinism upon the Scottish church. As a result such eternal decrees on the part of God, which underpinned the later Incarnation, in a predestinarian way, would open the door for a Nestorian<sup>202</sup> "dualism" between the

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<sup>198</sup> John Witherspoon, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753), in *Collected Works* (9 vols., Edinburgh, 1804-5), Vol. VI, "Maxim III", pp. 162-3; cited in Kidd, p. 34.

<sup>199</sup> Ned Landsman, 'John Witherspoon' in DNB [accessed December 10<sup>th</sup> 2008].

<sup>200</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p.131.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, p.133.

<sup>202</sup> Nestorianism. Based on the teachings of Nestorius of Constantinople (386-451) who wished to stress the full humanity of Christ by offering a deliniation between it and his divine status. See Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms*, p.120.

scope and role of the human and divine within Christ, as well as making a Socinian interpretation possible. In this manner the atoning sacrifice of Christ could be separated from the doctrine of God as a loving creator.<sup>203</sup>

Although it is of course relevant to mention Confessional attitudes in Scotland at this juncture, in my later assessment of the wider effects of the McGill case, I will give greater attention to the question of why the Moderates failed to deal with the Confession in the late eighteenth century.

## **XII) The State of the Parties - Moderates and the ‘Popular Party’**

### **The Moderates**

Despite the work of scholars such as Henry Sefton in identifying the forerunners to Moderatism,<sup>204</sup> Richard Sher contends that the ‘Moderates’ only existed as a party within the church from 1752 onwards. From this time forward their organisation and objectives were identifiable in a party format,<sup>205</sup> although he does attribute previous misunderstandings in this area to nineteenth century historians.<sup>206</sup> It must be stressed that despite the titles ‘Moderates’ and ‘Evangelicals/Popular’ parties these did not necessarily represent a homogenous grouping on issues of church policy, doctrine etc. Rather, subdivisions within each area must also be examined, as was touched upon earlier. Within the Moderate camp, McGill himself must for instance be considered as being on the fringes of the party, with his Socinian views.

Geographically, the Moderates have regularly been viewed through the element of their consorting with literati, with a particular focus on Edinburgh. Although, as will be discussed, their influence outside the Assembly was also more pronounced, with

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid, p.133.

<sup>204</sup> Sefton, “‘Neu-lights and Preachers Legall’

<sup>205</sup> For instance, Richard Sher and Alexander Murdoch ‘Patronage and Party in the Church of Scotland, 1750-1800’ in MacDougall (ed), *Church, Politics and Society:Scotland*, p.209.

particular regard to the University scene. In the opinion of Gerald Cragg:

“Moderatism was primarily an intellectual, not an ecclesiastical movement”<sup>207</sup>

However, this does not fit with the attention which the party gave to control of the church courts in the post 1750 period.

Indeed with their stress upon good order in society as a whole, with the church influencing such a movement, the Moderates aimed for order within the church as well. By restating the importance of the functions of local synods and presbyteries through to the General Assembly, the Moderates imagined that they were being true to the original, democratic, and organisational intentions of Presbyterianism. As Ian Clark has suggested, even patronage was a “side issue” for the Moderates compared with the need to establish order, discipline and proper leadership in the church.<sup>208</sup> Nonetheless their support for patronage did also advance the overall aims of the latter objective.

Anand Chitnis notes that the “Robertsonian Moderates were enlightened, rational, and utterly in tune with the intellectual movement and the society in which the intellectual movement operated”.<sup>209</sup> In order for the church to be relevant to wider society then, the Moderates saw that they would have to engage with the changing society of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, by opening themselves to disciplines outwith theology: sociology, history, philosophy, the sciences, medicine, law etc. Clearly the universities (and for many of the leading Moderates, Edinburgh University in particular), allowed them to shape and restate policy which fed into their control of the General Assembly.

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid, p.209.

<sup>207</sup> Gerald Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648-1789*, (Bristol, 1961), p.89.

<sup>208</sup> See Ian D L Clark, *From Protest to Reaction: the Moderate Regime in the Church of Scotland 1752-1805 in Scotland in the Age of Improvement* eds N.T.Phillipson and R.Mitchison (Edinburgh, 1970), pp. 200-24

<sup>209</sup> Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p.61.

### **XIII) Moderates Social circles.**

Arthur Herman has averred that “only London and Paris could compete with Edinburgh as an intellectual centre” in the age of Enlightenment.<sup>210</sup> The literati of the city met in its multiplicity of clubs. These included the Rankenian Club, the Oyster Club, the Mirror Club, Tuesday Club, and Poker Club. However, as Herman also suggests, the most important of these was the Select Society, (established in 1754).<sup>211</sup> Of the founding members clergy abounded, with men such as William Robertson, Hugh Blair, Alexander Carlyle (1722-1805), and John Jardine (d.1766) making regular contributions to the engaging debates with high profile lawyers, magistrates, architects, and representatives of the military. The Select Society would in time lead to the establishment of the *Edinburgh Review*. By moving in such circles the Moderates were able to merge their view of the moral teachings of Christianity with social refinement which, for them, would combine church life and polity with the ideals of the Enlightenment.

### **XIV) Reasons for the Moderates’ control of the Assembly**

In their early days, prior to achieving prominence, the Moderates were defeated in the Assembly over the Torphichen Case (1749-1750). When the Presbytery of Linlithgow failed to induct James Watson to the church of Torphichen, they were censured, with the addendum that the (last) riding committee be appointed. William Robertson and John Home (1722-1808) had argued in their initial speeches to the Assembly for the suspension of the recalcitrant members of Presbytery, which was

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<sup>210</sup> Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots’ Invention of the Modern World* (London, 2003), p. 182

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, p.182. The Select Society was established to debate literary and philosophical themes of the day. See for instance, Charles Jones *The Edinburgh history of the Scots language* (Edinburgh, 1997), p.271.

an illustration of their stance not only on patronage, but also on the wider question of a commitment to order and discipline within the church courts.<sup>212</sup>

In order to exert control over the church, the Moderates needed to ensure a majority of their party members in the General Assembly, which they achieved in the 1760s, 70s and 80s, as Richard Sher points out.<sup>213</sup> Clearly this would involve skilful manoeuvring on their part considering the potential hindrance of the size of the Assembly, and the fact that representatives attended the annual event on a basis of rotation from local Presbyteries.

Significantly the actual numbers who attended the Assembly during key debates from the Moderate perspective such as the 1766 Schism overture (which will be discussed below), were relatively low. Despite a potential membership of some 360 each year indeed, attendance often fell below 150.<sup>214</sup>

In addition to ministerial representation was that accorded to lay or “ruling” elders. Unlike the clergy they were able to be elected from local Presbyteries on an annual basis, which allowed scope for returning to the Assembly with regularity, in contrast to the ministers who were constrained by the rotation system. The Moderates then were able to outgun their opponents in the Popular party in the field of returning ‘friendly’ elders by way of their networking and connections with lawyers, professors and eligible professionals, who made up the eldership in this era.<sup>215</sup> Indeed men from such a background were also in a better position to be able to attend the Assembly for its ten day duration each year.

In addition to securing a majority of ‘pro-party’ elders, the Moderates were also able to exploit the system whereby the five Scottish universities were entitled to

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<sup>212</sup> D.F.Wright, ‘Torphichen Case’, in DSCH, p.823. See also Sher, *Church and University* p.50ff.

<sup>213</sup> Sher, *Church and University*, p.121.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, p.124.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, p.125.

elect a delegate to the Assembly on an annual basis. Indeed Robertson as Principal of Edinburgh University was able to attend each year from 1762 onwards in this capacity, which obviously enhanced his position of influence within the highest church court. Outside Edinburgh, the Moderates also obtained the backing of George Campbell, Alexander Gerard of Aberdeen, Thomas Tullidolph, James Murison and George Hill (1750-1819) from St.Andrews.<sup>216</sup>

Like the Popular party the Moderates were also able to turn the rotation of clergy to their advantage. For instance, Alexander Carlyle was returned by Dalkeith Presbytery on two of every three years from 1760 until 1805.<sup>217</sup>

After securing a firm foothold within the court, the Moderates were then “nearly always better organised, better managed, and more firmly united behind a clear and consistent policy than their clerical opponents”.<sup>218</sup> This was evident in their convivial relations with a succession of lord high commissioners, who attended as representatives of the state, and were able to secure the office of Moderator for Moderate minded ministers. As Anand Chitnis states, between 1752 and 1805, 39 out of 54 Moderators of the General Assembly were Moderates,<sup>219</sup> a clear illustration of the scope of their power and influence. In addition, they managed to control the posts of principal clerk and church procurator.<sup>220</sup> Debating skills and oratory were another facet of Moderate management of discipline within the courts of the church, with William Robertson cited as particularly adept in this regard. Thus they were able to win a majority in key issues such as patronage.

There can be little doubt then that the leading Moderates were skilful political operators. From the early 1760s onwards they were able to secure the appointments

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid, p.126.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p.126.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, p.127.

<sup>219</sup> Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p.66.

not only of Robertson to Principal of Edinburgh University, but also John Jardine as Dean of the Thistle, and Alexander Carlyle as Almoner Royal for Scotland.<sup>221</sup>

However, it must be borne in mind that despite such dominance within the higher courts of the church, as well as prominent social positions, the majority of ministers and laity in the mid-to-late eighteenth century remained evangelical in outlook.

Indeed, geographically the Moderates' strong holds lay in Fife, the Lowlands (from the Lothians to Galloway), and, significantly for the McGill case, Ayrshire.<sup>222</sup>

Although patronage has been cited as a "side issue" for the Moderate regime, William Robertson was able to continue to practise, and by so doing be seen to offer a conciliatory approach towards the law of the land, in return for freedom in external affairs. This later objective was clearly essential if the Moderates were to realise their aim of imposing order and discipline on the Kirk, by way of its court system.<sup>223</sup>

Indeed Richard Sher and Alexander Murdoch illustrate this point by reference to the Moderates' 1752 'Reasons of Dissent', in which they accused the opponents of the Inverkeithing settlement of acting contrary to the fundamentals of Presbyterianism. In this case the main issue was the promotion of discipline by way of adhering to the decisions of the Assembly.<sup>224</sup> Jeffrey Smitten also highlighted the significance of the leading Moderates promotion of "the order and coherence of the Presbyterian system which depended on a hierarchical subordination of decision-making bodies within the church, culminating in the General Assembly."<sup>225</sup> Ian Clark concurs by stressing the

<sup>220</sup> Sher, *Church and University*, p.129.

<sup>221</sup> Both of these offices were attached to the Royal Household in Scotland. The office of Dean of Thistle was usually held by a church minister.

<sup>222</sup> Ian Clark, *Moderatism and the Moderate Party in the Church of Scotland: 1752-1805*, PhD dissertation, (University of Cambridge, 1964), pp.164 and 167. Cited in Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p.67.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, see Chitnis, pp.62-3.

<sup>224</sup> Sher and Murdoch 'Patronage and Party in the Church of Scotland', p.212.

<sup>225</sup> Jeffrey Smitten (ed) *The Works of William Robertson Vol II: Miscellaneous Works and Commentaries* (London, 1996), p.xix.

Moderates concern with order, by their reiteration of the 1712 patronage Act.<sup>226</sup> In addition, patronage gave the Moderates a significant input into the selection and appointment of ministerial candidates. Thus they were also able to shape their intentions of a more “liberal” and tolerant, and more educated clergy in Scotland. Moreover, the Moderates were keen to demonstrate that patronage was not un-Presbyterian in nature. This did this by stressing that the Act of 1592, which had formulated Presbyterian church administration in Scotland, had not overthrown patronage.<sup>227</sup> Additionally they suggested that patronage was “good in itself, or rather a necessary means to a desirable end”.<sup>228</sup> For instance, during the course of the 1766 ‘Schism Overture’, William Robertson utilised this argument, availing that the standard and quality of ministers had been heightened by the background of enlightened representatives of the gentry and the government, implementing the system. Clearly patronage was “good” for the Moderates who were able to use it to make appointments which they considered to be “appropriate” to their own ends of constructing a well disciplined, ordered system of church government, with a compliant ministry (of those who were members of the Moderate party that is) on most issues. It also served to strengthen a convivial relationship with the secular authorities, which the Moderates deemed as essential to their holistic vision of Scottish society.

When political authority rested with men such as the Duke of Argyll and the Earl of Bute, in the eras of 1751-3 and 1762-4, who were sympathetic to the Moderate cause, the defence of patronage were strengthened. Conversely, in the mid 1760s and early 1780s with the Marquis of Rockingham, Charles James Fox (1749-1806) and

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<sup>226</sup> Clark, ‘From Protest to Reaction’, pp.200-224.

<sup>227</sup> Sher and Murdoch ‘Patronage and Party’, p.212.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, p.213.

the earl of Shelburne to the fore, friendlier to popular issues, there were increases in attacks upon the system .

In 1755 and 56 David Hume and Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696-1782) were accused of leading members of the church (ie the Moderates), astray. Of particular concern was Hume's *Treatise of Nature* with its tone of scepticism, and Kames's *Essays on Morality and Natural Religion*. Evangelical ministers considered both works to be heretical, and duly called for possible excommunication, either by way of the Assembly, or the local church courts.<sup>229</sup>

George Anderson and John Bonar led the assault from the Evangelical camp, issuing pamphlets outlining the nature of heresy inherent in the work of Hume and Kames, with infidelity a key issue.

Headed by William Robertson a Committee of Overture was established in 1755, from which Robertson was able to issue a vague resolution which expressed concern over principles contrary to natural and revealed religion, as well as "inifel" principles found in "several" books, lately published in Scotland. This decision only delayed the case for a further twelve months, as inevitably the Evangelicals were unsatisfied with the overall outcome.

Prior to the second case against both men Kames had chosen to partially recant some of his views, though this in way represented a reversal of his position. Rather the Evangelical anger was more directly targeted at Hume this time around. From the Committee of Overture came a call to set up a committee, tasked with examining Hume's writings.<sup>230</sup>

Under the auspices of William Robertson and Alexander Wedderburn the Moderates were however able to win the vote not to translate the overture to

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<sup>229</sup> Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p.55.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, p.56.

Assembly by some 50 votes to 17.<sup>231</sup> In particular Wedderburn asserted that it was pointless censuring Hume, as he was exceptionally unlikely to recant or retract his views.

### **XV) The Douglas**

Moderate and Evangelical/Popular division was further demonstrated in their treatment of the play *The Douglas*, composed by the Moderate clergyman John Home (1722-1801).<sup>232</sup> When the play opened in Edinburgh in 1756, it was censured by Evangelicals within the Glasgow and Edinburgh Presbyteries. The differences in opinion on the appropriateness of ministerial involvement in the work were heightened by the fact that William Robertson, Hugh Blair, Adam Ferguson, Alexander Carlyle and David Hume all took stage roles. While Home was criticised for his role in writing the play, others were attacked not only for their participation, but also for attending it. A pamphlet war ensued between Home and his Evangelical opponents. Following this Home decided to remove himself from church life in order to pursue a career as a professional author of plays. Meanwhile Carlyle successfully defended himself against a summons from the Presbytery of Dalkeith, believing that to have met defeat “would have set the church back some fifty years”.<sup>233</sup> It is indicative of the age then that social divisions were enacted over a theatrical outlet, rather than matters of theology at this juncture.

Following these Moderate “victories”, in 1765 an overture was brought before the Assembly on the grounds of concern over the matter of schism, initiated by the increasing strength of the Secession (which by then had some 120 meeting houses), and Relief churches. A committee was then appointed to consider the issue.

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p.54.

At the following year's Assembly the committee duly reported that an inquiry should be launched in order to counter the schisms, and attempt to find an acceptable solution to the issue of patronage, by way of establishing a further committee to consult with presbyteries and gentry (who had an input into the patronage system). The debate surrounding this lasted for some eleven hours.<sup>234</sup>

This was clearly a major test for the Moderates' control of the Assembly, and their maintenance of discipline within the church. On their part they contended that divisions were inevitable, due to differing views and educational background. Patronage therefore could not be held accountable. Rather, the problems incurred in the presentation of ministers was due to people being misled on their rights to choose their own clergy. If the people did have such a choice then men of sound educational and doctrinal backgrounds would potentially be overlooked. Instead the prevailing system of enabling local landowners was far better suited to the salient needs of parishes in this regard. Additionally, they argued that it would set a dangerous precedent to defy the law of the land, rather obedience to the state and the establishment should be the settled will of the people.

Robertson outlined the benefits of patronage in his address to the Assembly. In the past before the Act was re-established men of inferior quality had secured parish appointments. Post 1712 and 1730 however this situation had been remedied, with a more enlightened and appropriate class of candidate, who were more in touch with the developments in and needs of the society around them.

In opposition to this view was the argument that unless schism was addressed and halted, it would result in the ruination of the church.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, p.55.

<sup>234</sup> Cunningham, *Church History* p.370.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, p.371.

Following the debate, the Moderates emerged victorious in the vote by ninety-nine to eighty-five.<sup>236</sup>

In addition to charges of damaging the church by continuing with the patronage system, the Moderates were also accused of failing to address the issue of increasing immorality. Several cases were cited whereby Robertson and his colleagues had not deposed ministers who were clearly in violation of the standards expected of clergymen. Rather they had restored formerly deposed men after their penitence had been proven, as well as not calling others to censure in the first place. Indeed this would be a theme of some of McGill's later opponents – that the system of patronage had led to ministers with heterodox opinions being allowed to exercise their office within the church.

In reply Robertson claimed to have improved the judicial administration of the church courts. He wished the Assembly to be a model of proper procedure, as the Court of Session was, rather than allowing its delegates to simply act on their own prejudices and instincts. To gain respectability within wider society and civil establishments, the church must be seen to have a serious, well ordered system for dealing with cases presented to it. If this meant that some men were acquitted due to a lack of evidence on the part of their accusers, then so be it.<sup>237</sup> Such ideals gradually found support, with the result that Robertson was able to increase the scope of his control of the church courts. Indeed, J.H.S. Burleigh has suggested that Robertson perhaps “saved Presbyterianism in Scotland by making it an orderly and workable system of church government on a national scale”.<sup>238</sup>

Ian Clark meanwhile averred that Moderate theology could be grouped under three main areas.

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid, p.373.

<sup>237</sup> The *Scots Magazine* also covered these debates of the Assembly in vol xxix. p.125 ff.

- The intertwining of natural and revealed religion, the character and ministry of Christ, and the link between faith and practical works.
- From this followed the stress on ethical concerns, evident for instance in the pastoral preaching of Hugh Blair, a reconsideration of the doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin.
- the utilisation of Natural Religion to maintain the relevance of Scripture, and the shortened version of previous models of Christology.<sup>239</sup>

Indeed a stress on ethical concerns as well as a concern for the promotion of Natural Religion would surface in McGill's own theology, which again places him within the Moderate camp, although the Socinian element of his thought would lead to him being regarded as on its edges.

Within this background it was therefore more difficult to clearly identify 'Moderate' or 'Evangelical' preaching. Rather, both parties were more concerned with the necessity to maintain order and unity within the church, which the outcome of this being a deviation from a straightjacket of doctrinal orthodoxy.

## **XVI) Homiletics-The Sermons of Hugh Blair**

Hugh Blair's sermons, although not devoid of theological motives, for Alexander Broadie "do not contain any very heavy metaphysics about God".<sup>240</sup> Rather, their main focus of concern was with a practical application of Christian stoicism, reliant upon adherence to belief in a future state of happiness, in which God

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<sup>238</sup> J.H.S.Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1988 edition), p.307.

<sup>239</sup> I.D.L.Clark, 'Moderatism and the Moderate Party in the Church of Scotland, 1752-1805' (Cambridge University PhD thesis, 1963), p.vii and p.204. Cited in McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.22.

<sup>240</sup> Alexander Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2007), p.146.

will confer reward on those who have lived a moral life, seeking the happiness and contentment of others.

### **XVII) The Moderates and the Militia Issue**

As highlighted by the work of John Robertson, another interesting facet, which appears to have concerned the Moderates rather than other groups within the church, was that of the agitation in the 1750s and 60s for the establishment of either a standing army, or “militia” for Scotland, in view of the war with France.<sup>241</sup>

Due to their close personal links with the gentry, it was easy for the Moderates to exercise an encouragement of mutual affairs, which included the landed party’s concern about the defence of Scotland. By way of contact through the Select Society the two groups were able to form a shared outlook in relation to a standing army.

The Militia issue then was another arm of the Moderates concern with cultivating a more enlightened, polite and moral society, considering as they did that the defence of the country from external enemies was of a moral nature, as an antidote to corruption and depravity.<sup>242</sup> As was the case with patronage, as well as the later American and French Revolutions, the Moderates were prepared to uphold the establishment of the state, which indicates their “conservative” political values, driven by an attachment to the Whig Commonwealthmen.

### **XVIII) The Popular Party**

For Drummond and Bulloch, the “Popular” party within the established church were so called as they “claimed to express popular rights and not because they spoke

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<sup>241</sup> John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh, 1985), p.80ff

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid*, p.82.

for a majority of the population”<sup>243</sup>, in relation to the question of patronage. However as John McIntosh asserts “the term ‘Popular party’ must be used with a high degree of qualification”.<sup>244</sup> For instance it was not concerned to the same degree as the Moderates with securing ecclesiastical preferment’s by way of controlling discipline via the Assembly. Indeed, as McIntosh also highlights this was regarded as being contrary to Scriptural practise, and led to the Evangelicals being unable to hold a majority at the Assembly.<sup>245</sup> Indeed, it is also worth noting that the Evangelicals were not a homogenous group, with some of their ‘members’ being in theological agreement with the Moderates.

Ned Landsman has identified the key figures in the Evangelical/Popular party who were contemporaries of the leading Moderates at university. For those born between 1710 and 1725, the generation included John Erskine (1721-1803), John Witherspoon, John Gilles (1712-96), Robert Walker, and Thomas Randall, who were to imbibe their theological education in an era of Enlightened thought.<sup>246</sup> As a result, while the Moderates under Robertson were strengthening their hold on the church over the patronage debates of the 1750s, an opening was created for Witherspoon to rise to prominence in the opposite camp.

Like the Moderates, the Evangelicals had also enjoyed a broad education. Those who had attended Glasgow were familiar with the work of Gershon Carmichael and Francis Hutcheson, at Edinburgh with John Stevenson and the mathematician Colin Maclaurin, while Thomas Gillespie (who was of course to be one of the founders of the Relief church), had attended the dissenting academy of Philip

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<sup>243</sup> Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688-1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 64.

<sup>244</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.20

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

Doderidge at Northampton.<sup>247</sup> On the curriculum would have been a range of subjects encompassing mathematics, natural and moral philosophy and rhetoric, in addition to theology. Such a background would shape the later career of Witherspoon, following his arrival in America, where he would lecture on moral philosophy and rhetoric as well as politics at New Jersey. Erskine would attempt to merge an evangelical style of preaching with intellectual rigour.

What differentiated the Evangelicals from the Moderates in relation to the effects of the Enlightenment was not an aversion to works in the fields of literature or philosophy, but rather, their emphasis that these were of less importance than works of piety and doctrine.<sup>248</sup> Indeed John McIntosh has traced the prevailing differences in literary output, where “experiential or devotional and evangelical works, formed the largest group of Popular publications”,<sup>249</sup> whereas the Moderates concentrated more on, for instance, works of literature and agriculture

As previously noted John McIntosh has posited that the Popular party were far from being a unified body on questions of doctrine or ideology, or indeed on the challenges posed by the secular issues of the day.<sup>250</sup>

Additionally there were cross currents and flexibility within these groups, over questions relating to sin and salvation, and how to present a Christian response and bulwark against infidelity. There were also times when either agreement was largely reached within Popular circles, or when there was practically no agreement at all, but rather division. The latter may be illustrated by responses to the impact and scope of natural religion, and whether or not it offered an avenue to express adequate proofs

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<sup>246</sup> Ned Landsman, ‘Presbyterians and Provincial Society: The Evangelical Enlightenment in the West of Scotland, 1740-1775’ in John Dwyer and Richard Sher *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth – Century Scotland*, (Aberdeen, 1991), p.196

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid*, p.196.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid*, p.197.

<sup>249</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology* .p. 24.

for the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul. On the nature of man, beyond agreement on the consequences of original sin, Popular clergy were divided on the value of the testimony of conscience in this field.<sup>251</sup>

Clearly then the Popular party are illustrative of the impact of Enlightenment thought and in particular the arguments advanced for the extension of reason, in their attempts to retain doctrinal orthodoxy, while also offering flexibility in line with the contemporary developments in society.

Despite these divergences of opinion in theological areas however McIntosh has also stressed the areas of unity within the party. Concerning the nature of faith, agreement was largely reached on the fact of faith as a concern of belief and knowledge, as well as the key role it played in the Christian's relationship with God, although John McLaurin and John Erksine presented differing views on the subject.<sup>252</sup>

On the nature of preaching it was agreed that an evangelical style output was required in order to restrict infidelity. With regard to heresy further conciliation was evident in the stress upon a proper monitoring of ministerial training, following correct procedure when heresy had to come under censure, and striving for a united stance on the confessional orthodoxy of the church, rather than automatically pursuing a censorial position in the church courts.<sup>253</sup>

Concerning secular affairs, the Popular party were unified on their belief that religion was essential in underpinning society and leading to stability, as well as stressing the Calvinist notion that proper government was required as a result of humankind's fallen state.<sup>254</sup> This generally conservative political outlook was in keeping with the Moderates, whilst the Popular emphasis on a more libertarian

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, p.233.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p.234.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p.234.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, p.234.

concept of civil and religious rights led to a split over the American war, as will be discussed in a later section.

### **XIX) The Atonement**

With regard to the nature and scope of the Atonement John McIntosh cites Thomas Somerville, John Russel (a later key opponent of McGill's), and Robert Walker, as most illustrative of an again varied outlook.<sup>255</sup>

For Russel, God's intention for the salvation of sinners was apparent in his free, sovereign pleasure in giving Christ as a priestly sacrifice to die on humanity's behalf, which highlights the love of God towards fallen creatures.<sup>256</sup>

Walker meanwhile also affirmed the love of God, as being the key component in his wishing to reconcile sinners to himself.<sup>257</sup> However, further to notions of divine love in the work of Russel and Walker, was the concept of the Atonement as being a satisfaction of God's justice. God as judge was to impute the divine wrath upon Christ (an idea which McGill was to completely disavow). Indeed, the very nature of sin cried out for a sense of eternal punishment in order to appease the divinity. Christ offered himself as a substitute for man, who deserved nothing less than hell for his unrepented sin. In order for the satisfaction of God to be met, it fell to Christ to suffer under the divine wrath and judgement. For Russel substitutionary Atonement was also an essential bulwark in the fight against the notion that good works could in some sense lead to salvation. Without the Atonement as outlined in this way, there was no redemption.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid, p.234.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, p.183.

<sup>256</sup> John Russel, *Reasons of our Lord's agony in the Garden*, (Kilmarnock, 1787), pp.64-5.

<sup>257</sup> Robert Walker, *Sermons on Practical Subjects*, ii, p.207. Cited in McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.184.

<sup>258</sup> Russel, *Reasons of our Lord's agony*, pp.34, 37, 41.

For both Walker and Somerville however, the key issue of the Atonement was centred around Christ's role as *mediator*. By his work as mediator Walker averred that Jesus had satisfied the requirements of God's justice. From this it followed that Christ's ministry was concerned with bringing humans back into a proper relationship with God, which was conveyed by the Spirit of Christ's ministry. This then confirmed the notion of God as "love", and was clearly different from the tone of Russel.<sup>259</sup>

For Somerville, Christ was given the central role of mediator due to his perfect obedience to the Father<sup>260</sup> (which sounds closer to McGill's own thinking). Also Christ, in addition to being a "propitiation for humanity's sins",<sup>261</sup> was the ultimate role model for human behaviour. Somerville's views were however a departure from other Popular writers, in their unconventional sense.<sup>262</sup>

## **XX) Liberty of Conscience**

Ned Landsman has noted three areas in which the Popular party upheld the right of liberty of conscience.<sup>263</sup>

- In the first sense they were against the potential repeal of the penal laws relating to Roman Catholics. "Popery", for men such as John Erskine, William Porteous and John McFarlane was a threat to the very notion of liberty. Therefore by opposing penal reform they were in effect upholding and protecting liberty.<sup>264</sup>
- Secondly, the Popular party clergy moved in a sphere which was more widely British, rather than Scottish in its outlook and tenor. The Jacobite Rebellion of

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<sup>259</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.186.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, p.187.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, p.187.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, p.187.

<sup>263</sup> Ned C Landsman in Andrew Hook and Richard Sher (eds) *The Glasgow Enlightenment* (East Lothian, 1995), pp.218 ff.

1745 had instilled in them the idea of a threat to the very establishment and continuation of Protestantism in the British Isles, which threatened liberty of conscience by its Catholic overtones.

- Thirdly, liberty in a religious sense was crucial for its moral input into the advancement of national prosperity. Where impiety was able to take hold, not only spiritual but financial poverty would follow as a result. As Charles Nisbet observed, in a land of liberty:

Opulent trade bustles in every city, and cheerful commerce spreads her sails through every quarter of the globe; there the elegant arts are cherished...peace and harmony reign in every family, and render every society flourishing.<sup>265</sup>

Clearly then the concepts of liberty, piety and prosperity were linked together in Popular party ideology. Indeed this encompassed the field of moral preaching, as Ned Landsman illustrates in the sermons of Thomas Randall, *Christian Benevolence* (1763), and John Erskine, *The Education of Poor Children Recommended* (1774).<sup>266</sup>

Thus, they did not oppose moral preaching as a useful tool, but rather expressed concerns about how the Moderates had treated this area of church life and policy, with their stress on reason and rationality as its basis. For the Popular party spiritual values should be the key motive in underpinning not only preaching, but the appointment of ministers in the first place. Instead of selecting candidates for parishes simply on the grounds of educational merit, pulpits should be filled by men who were able to convey the spirit of morals and piety to the whole of their respective congregations, encompassing the ordinary people and not just the ‘socially acceptable’ landowners and financially well off. In this way the Evangelicals of the

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid, p.218.

<sup>265</sup> Charles Nisbet, *A Seasonable Address to the Citizens of Glasgow upon the Present Important Question, Whether the Churches of that City Shall Continue Free, or Be Enslaved to Patronage?* (Glasgow, 1762), pp 12-13. Cited by Landsman in *The Glasgow Enlightenment* p.219.

<sup>266</sup> Landsman, *The Glasgow Enlightenment*, p.219.

Popular party framed their opposition to patronage. This does not mean that they were popularly democratic in the modern conception of the term, although in the context of the eighteenth century they did uphold the right of elders and heritors to be involved in the process of selecting their ministers, rather than having them foisted upon them by local patrons.

This sense of participation again fits with the Popular party conception of liberty. In the 1770s John Gilles of Glasgow and John Snodgrass (Paisley) initiated an organised campaign to establish a Popular party majority of numbers within the General Assembly, in order to overturn the Moderate advantage, and in so doing eliminate patronage.<sup>267</sup> Patronage was regarded as a threat to the values and interests of the trading classes. Rather than encourage and reward personal endeavour, it advanced the nature and scope of social networking. In place of independence it led to a reliance upon the higher social orders. Instead of a spiritually led and enhanced system of ethics, a moral compass built upon reason and rationality prevailed.

Patrick Bannerman offered a summary of such concerns in his *Address to the People of Scotland, on Ecclesiastical and Civil Liberty* (1782), by extolling the rights of the middle groups of society, such as the traders, as opposed to the advancement of the landed aristocracy. Popular calls by the congregation, as opposed to patronage, would then lead to “good sense, and piety” within the church.<sup>268</sup>

In a social sense, such merging of religion and the interests of the middle ranks as illustrated by tradesmen, offers an interesting diversion from the Moderate dominance of the Assembly, with its stress upon the acceptance of patronage, the application of reason and rationality to the field of moral and ethical preaching and concern, and its involvement and links with the literati of Edinburgh, as witnessed in

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p.220.

the leading Moderates' attendance and contribution to the clubs and societies, and their grip upon university life in Edinburgh. Many of the Evangelicals were based around Glasgow, where they had a working majority of clergy and parishoners. Indeed, it serves to illustrate the social divisions between Glasgow and Edinburgh in the mid-to late eighteenth century.

It must also be pointed out however that leaders of the Popular party such as Erskine and Sir Henry Moncrieff Wellwood (1750-1827) were themselves from "privileged" backgrounds. Rather than being "popular" in the sense of empathy with the common people, the clergy of this grouping were instead representative of the "commonwealthman" background, which was centred on a Whig tradition, borne of the late seventeenth century.<sup>269</sup> Indeed this could provide an explanation, as Sher and Murdoch suggest, for why the two parties (Moderate and Popular) were both of a conservative nature in the 1790s, also why the patronage debates of the thirty-five year period between 1751 and 86 failed to lead to a schism within the established church, and the fact that the Popular party couldn't secure any victories in the patronage dispute. Indeed they were out-manoeuvred by not only the Moderates who supported the system, but also those within the established Kirk who agreed with genuinely "popular" presentations, in line with the procedures of local church courts, as well as the Secession position on patronage. The Popular clergy then failed to chart a course through these particular obstacles.<sup>270</sup>

However, similarities between the Popular and Moderate parties, despite the disputes, were illustrated in the fact that in the Kirk of Greyfriars in Edinburgh, William Robertson and John Erskine were able to work side by side for a period of

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<sup>268</sup> Patrick Bannerman, *Address to the People of Scotland, on Ecclesiastical and Civil Liberty* (Edinburgh, 1782), p.20. Cited by Landsman in *The Glasgow Enlightenment*, p.221.

<sup>269</sup> Sher and Murdoch 'Patronage and Party', p.211.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, p.211.

around forty years. In addition to their maintenance of the Westminster Confession, they were both interested in the development of liturgy, and parish provision for the poor of the area, as well as an openness on the importance of foreign missions of the late eighteenth century.<sup>271</sup> Indeed, for A.J.Campbell, “Evangelicalism and Moderatism were often little more than slightly different versions of the same thing”.<sup>272</sup> Rather than concerns over the Confession then the main areas of contention between the two parties centred around patronage and the maintenance and process of church discipline through the different courts.

### **XXI) Anti-Trinitarianism in Scotland**

With regard to the Arian/Socinian movement in Scotland, mention has already been made of the cases of Thomas Aitkenhead and John Simson, in which the issue of Trinitarian heterodoxy was of course raised. However there was no move towards any organised form of Unitarianism as existed in England until late in the century. In this section I will discuss the initial flowerings of Arianism and then Unitarianism as they existed (albeit in a very limited sense) from the 1770s onwards, as they were contemporary with McGill’s work. I will also examine the later scope of the movement within the ‘Postscript’.

The initial congregation which eventually became Unitarian by the end of the century was that established at Edinburgh under the leadership of James Purves (1734-95) around 1776. Purves, who grew up in Berwickshire, was influenced by the legacy of Fraser of Brea’s more open offer of the gospel.<sup>273</sup> Indeed both he and his

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<sup>271</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, (Edinburgh, 1996), p.248.

<sup>272</sup> Andrew .J.Campbell, *Two Centuries of the Church of Scotland 1707-1929*, (Edinburgh,1930), p.100ff

<sup>273</sup> Leonard.B.Short, *The Pionners of Scottish Unitarianism*, (Swansea, 1963), pp. 36-7.

family joined the ‘Reformed Presbytery of Edinburgh’,<sup>274</sup> following its formation in defence of Brea’s theology in 1753. The covenanting societies which were established in the light of this movement considered themselves to be “true Calvinists”. However a mere two years later a further split was engendered within this already small group, with those (including Purves) who stood against the imposition of creeds, desiring instead a “free enquiry into religion, without the restraints of human creeds and confessions”.<sup>275</sup> Subsequent to this Purves was invited to become pastor of a Universalist group which met in Edinburgh in 1769, following the biblical practise of drawing ‘lots’ in order to ascertain who the leader of the group should be. Purves agreed to their overtures, leaving Duns in Berwickshire to move to the city, and was then sent to study at Glasgow University. In the early 1770s, as Leonard Short points out, Purves’ theology would have been considered as ‘Arian’ in nature, as he believed that the place of Jesus lay somewhere between God and man.<sup>276</sup> However, from the fact that Purves refused to countenance the later Unitarian group set up by Thomas Fyshe Palmer<sup>277</sup> in Dundee, despite friendly overtures from the latter (discussed below), it would suggest that at the outset the Edinburgh ‘Universalist Dissenters’ as they were styled<sup>278</sup> were not Unitarian in belief. Indeed as E.M. Wilbur, in common with Short, also suggested the group were rather Arian in

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<sup>274</sup> The ‘Reformed Presbytery of Edinburgh’ had been caused by a split in the Reformed Presbyterian Church over those who agreed with Brea’s view of the Atonement (that ‘gospel wrath’ was imputed to unbelievers, in addition to the salvation of the elect). As a result the ministers James Hall and Hugh Innes who supported this view left to constitute their own Presbytery. In later times the societies which adhered to Hall and Innes were eventually formed into a Synod (1811) and six Presbyteries (1863). However, at the time of Purves those who followed Brae’s doctrines were limited in number. See G.J.Keddie, ‘Reformed Presbyterian Church’ in DSCH, pp.698-9.

<sup>275</sup> Short, *Pioneers*, p.37.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid*, p.39.

<sup>277</sup> Palmer, who had spent a year as Anglican curate at Leatherhead, Surrey, was converted to Unitarianism by the writings of Joseph Priestley. Writing from Cambridge in July 1783 to William Christie at Montrose, Palmer complained of the established church: “I consider her liturgy corrupt, and her articles to be not only an injurious violation of the liberty wherewith God and Christ have made us free, but a jumble of absurdity”. William Turner, *Lives of Eminent Unitarians; with a Notice of Dissenting Academies*, Vol. II (Unitarian Association, 1840), pp. 218-19.

their outlook from the early stage, with Unitarianism only becoming prevalent following the visitation of English missionaries in the early nineteenth century, after which they also received financial support from the Unitarian Fund of London.<sup>279</sup> As late as 1823 the church had constructed a small building for worship and was more settled thereafter.

Of greater significance for the anti-Trinitarian movement in Scotland however was the Unitarian society (the first in Scotland), established at Montrose – on the suggestion and prompting of Joseph Priestley by William Christie (1749-1823) in 1782 (and which lasted for around ten years).<sup>280</sup> From a family background of some social standing in Montrose (his father was a merchant and provost of the town),<sup>281</sup> Christie attributed his early views to the influence of Priestley's *Free Address to Protestant Dissenters* (1769)<sup>282</sup>, as well as Samuel Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity*. During this time Christie maintained a regular correspondence with Priestley and Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808). Indeed, fearing that the local Church of Scotland would refuse such an approach Christie asked for Priestley's assistance in having his children baptised. This task was resultantly carried out by Rev Caleb Rotheram (Jnr) (d.1796), who was minister of the Dissenting congregation at Kendall in England (the closest geographical 'Unitarian' church at the time to Montrose).<sup>283</sup> The work at Montrose was then augmented by the arrival of Thomas Fyshe Palmer in 1783 for two years until the latter moved to Dundee to set up a Unitarian congregation there (interestingly one Ninian Alexander, a former Baptist, was already preaching a

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<sup>278</sup> The name 'Universalist', a reference to their view of salvation being open to all, and 'Dissenters' due to their opposition to the theology of the Church of Scotland. Short, *Pioneers*, p.39.

<sup>279</sup> Wilbur, *History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England*, p.196.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Short, *Pioneers*, p.42.

<sup>282</sup> In Robert E. Schofield *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of his Life and Work from 1733 to 1804* (Penn State, 1997), p.215.

<sup>283</sup> Short, *Pioneers*, p.44.

Unitarian doctrine at Dundee when Fyshe Palmer arrived).<sup>284</sup> In addition to the city, Fyshe Palmer also moved around some of the other smaller towns of the surrounding Angus area, such as Arbroath and Forfar. He also travelled in order to spread the Unitarian message to Glasgow and Edinburgh.<sup>285</sup> From Dundee Fyshe Palmer then moved south to a post in Newcastle in 1789.

Meanwhile Christie, had composed the first Unitarian book, to be published in Scotland, entitled *Discourses on the Divine Unity*, in which he suggested that:

The doctrine of a co-equal and consubstantial Trinity, grew up only by degrees; and it was the work of ages to bring it to its present pitch of absurdity... Unitarianism is an undeniable proof of what the sentiments of Christians originally were, concerning God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In this form of sound words, the Father Almighty alone has the title of God. Jesus Christ is styled his only Son, but no characters of divinity whatever are applied to him.<sup>286</sup>

However, he had become discouraged by the lack of success of the Montrose congregation. Indeed in a census of 1791 there were only 10 members.<sup>287</sup> As a result he temporarily withdrew from the town, in order to live in seclusion some six miles outside it. However he would return to become embroiled in a dispute which had arisen in Montrose over the attempted circulation of one of Priestley's writings, which was opposed by the local Kirk Session.<sup>288</sup> Perhaps as a result of this opposition, in addition to his disappointment at the lack of numbers, Christie moved south to Glasgow in 1794.

At Glasgow in 1793 the Rev Spencer, a medical student, had already been preaching Unitarian views. However, "so great was the sensation produced, and so

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid, p.51.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> William Christie, *Discourses on the Divine Unity: Or, A Scriptural Proof and Demonstration of the One Supreme Deity, of the God and Father of All; and of the Subordinate Character and Inferior Nature of Our Lord Jesus Christ: with a Confutation of the Doctrine of a Co-equal and Consubstantial Trinity in Unity* (London, 1810 edition), pp.iii.-iv.

<sup>287</sup> Short, *Pioneers*, p.47.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p.46.

violent the opposition excited, that his very life was in danger, with several fanatics threatening to lay violent hands on him” (Spencer).<sup>289</sup>

Despite Christie’s appearance, in an attempt to further the movement in the city, the Montrose Unitarian then left to go to America (1794), in order to follow his mentor Priestley. As a result the church was relatively inactive in Glasgow until around 1808, with the arrival of James Lyons (an English missionary), followed in turn by the more influential Richard Wright (1764-1836). Indeed the first Unitarian chapel was not built until in the city 1812, with James Yates (1789-1871) the first minister of the congregation. Supported by the London based Fund, a Scottish Unitarian Association was then set up in 1813.<sup>290</sup>

Following the disappointing outcomes of the attempts to establish Unitarianism in Scotland at Montrose, Glasgow and Edinburgh, a further pivotal blow was delivered with the transportation of Fyshe Palmer to Australia for political sedition. Having returned from Newcastle to Dundee, he became involved with the ‘Friends of the People’ in that city, at a time of great danger for radical views in the 1790s.

As William Turner suggested, Palmer’s part in the Unitarian campaign made him “as much an object of jealousy to the ruling powers and prevailing parties as if he had been most deeply engaged in political agitation”.<sup>291</sup> Palmer’s indictment for “seditious practices” would make a point of referring to him as: “Clergyman, sometime residing in Dundee, and commonly designated Unitarian minister”.<sup>292</sup> After attending a meeting of “Friends of the People” in Dundee, where he was shown a

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<sup>289</sup> *The Monthly repository (and review)* (London, 1822) p.767.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>291</sup> *Theological Repository* Vol. V (London, 1770), p. 180.

<sup>292</sup> Turner, *Eminent Unitarians* Vol. II, p. 226.

draft of a political document drawn up by an uneducated weaver, Palmer redrafted it thus:

Is not every new day adding a new link to our chains? Is not the executive ranch daily seizing new, unprecedented and unwarrantable powers? Has not the House of Commons (your own security from the evils of tyranny and aristocracy) joined the coalition against you? Is the election of its members either fair, free or frequent? Is not its independence gone, while it is made up of pensions and placemen?<sup>293</sup>

Clearly, Palmer was calling for universal suffrage, objecting to having been plunged into war (against France in 1793) “by a wicked Ministry and compliant Parliament” and blaming the war for the loss of people’s “invaluable rights and privileges”. The redrafted address ends with a call to “join us in our exertions for the preservation of our perishing liberty, and the recovery of our long lost rights”.<sup>294</sup>

Palmer was accused of not only drafting and printing the Address (which he could not dispute) but also of distributing it. He certainly considered doing this, saying in a letter to his fellow radical William Skirving, (d.1796) that: “We want a copy sent to all the Societies of the Friends of the People”.<sup>295</sup> While his defence counsel went so far as to plead that Palmer’s exotic religious views precluded him from consideration as altogether level headed in other matters, Palmer’s own defence (never made accessible to the jury) contrasted his opposition to “the constitution of the country itself and his rather attacking merely the administration of it”.<sup>296</sup>

When the sentence of seven years transportation to Australia was passed, Palmer informed the court that his life for many years had been “employed in the

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<sup>293</sup> *Trial of the Rev Thomas Fyshe Palmer before the Circuit Court of Justiciary held at Perth on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> September 1793* (Edinburgh, 1793), p. 5.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>296</sup> J. Graham, ‘Revolutionary Philosopher: the Political Ideals of Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)’, in *Enlightenment and Dissent* 8 (London, 1989)

<sup>296</sup> Turner, *Eminent Unitarians* Vol. II, p. 228.

dissemination of what I conceived to be the religious and moral truths; truths which I supposed to be of the greatest importance to mankind”.<sup>297</sup> However during the “late great political discussions”, it had been impossible for a man of his “sanguine disposition” to remain an “unconscious bystander”.<sup>298</sup>

Clearly then the association of Fyshe Palmer with Republican sentiment must have delivered a crushing defeat to the prospects for organised Unitarianism north of the border in the late eighteenth-century. From this survey which covers the period of McGill’s main work until the Ayr minister’s death in 1807, it is apparent that from the earlier Arianism of Purves and his Universalist Society, through the more Socinian driven Unitarians such as Christie and Fyshe Palmer, that the movement was of very limited scope. Therefore there was no sufficiently organised outlet for those holding such views to join at this stage. In stark contrast to the ‘success’ in England (prior to the French Revolution), Scotland was not a fertile ground for anti-Trinitarian sentiment. Indeed it is interesting that despite the admiration McGill drew from Fyshe Palmer, the former would completely distance himself from any radical political suspicions with his 1795 *On the fear of God and the king*. However the situation would improve to some extent for the Unitarians in the early nineteenth century, which will be discussed within the ‘Postscript’.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### SCOTLAND - SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND THE POLITICAL SCENE

#### I) Social Background and the Political Scene

Between 1730 and 1800 Scotland stood at the crossroads of change. Economics, intellectual pursuits and living conditions, as well as religion, were all subject to this period of transition. However it must also be noted that political life was less affected in the earlier period. John McIntosh surmises that this has led to the eighteenth century being generally linked with the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745-6, “with little else of interest, besides the later Radical unrest in the 1790s”.<sup>299</sup>

However, following the union of parliaments in 1707, Scotland also maintained a good portion of its own distinctive character. Forty-five ‘new’ members were sent to the House of Commons in London, with some sixteen peers joining the House of Lords. The county electorate in Scotland were comprised of “freeholders of the old extent”,<sup>300</sup> as well as owners of land worth £400 Scots (£35 sterling). As Richard Brown notes, this level of value led to greater electoral corruption than south of the border.<sup>301</sup> Meanwhile the representatives of the various Burgh Councils chose the MP for the area.

A key area of development in Scotland in this era was that of agricultural improvement, which led to the commercialisation of what was essentially a rural society. Such improvement lowered mortality levels, in addition to improving food

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology* p. 3.

supplies in line with the urban regeneration. Farming practices were modified through an increase in productivity and production, brought about by improved fallowing and crop rotations. It must be pointed out, however, that despite such advances, life for the rural working classes remained harsh. Indeed W.H.Marwick tempers the idea of advancement by stating that: “the backwardness and impoverishment of this period and the rapid growth of the latter half of the century has perhaps been over-emphasised”.<sup>302</sup>

In the field of domestic industry, linen manufacture was dominant in the 1740s-50s. In addition to this, there was a rise in tobacco import and export of malt products, and papermaking. The importance of linen underpinned the creation of the new industrial planned villages of the mid-century. Its influence, as Rosalind Mitchison has pointed out, was also felt in the 1750s when many unemployed weavers from the east coast were forced into army service.<sup>303</sup> Conditions for mine workers in this era were alarming as, according to Witt Bowden, they were treated as little better than “serfs”, until the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>304</sup>

Industrialisation included the iron industry, with the Carron Company near Falkirk set up in 1759. However, by the turn of the century only twelve ironworks, managed by a limited number of families, had been instituted, mostly on the west coast. Indeed, the full scale emergence of Scotland’s economic progress was not

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<sup>300</sup> Richard Brown, *Church and State in Modern Britain 1700-1850: A Political and Religious History, 1700-1850* (London, 1991), p.16.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> W H Marwick, *Scotland in Modern Times: An Outline of Economic and Social Development Since the Union of 1707* (London, 1964), p.1.

<sup>303</sup> Rosalind Mitchison, ‘Scotland 1750-1850’ in Francis Michael Longstreth Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950: Regions and Communities* (Cambridge, 1993), p.159.

<sup>304</sup> Witt Bowden, *Industrial Society in England Towards the End of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1965), p.246.

realised until the expansion of communications and transport in the nineteenth century.<sup>305</sup>

Following the political union with England in 1707, the central figure of Scottish politics in the mid-eighteenth century was Henry Dundas (1742-1811). Dubbed “the uncrowned King of Scotland”, Dundas became a member of Parliament firstly for Midlothian, and then Edinburgh. Later, he was appointed Lord Advocate in 1777 and, under William Pitt (1759-1806) was Secretary of State for the Home Department in 1791. In addition to this he held the post of Treasurer to the Navy (1782-1800).<sup>306</sup>

His power revolved around his control of patronage and political appointments. By 1780 Dundas held sway in 12 of the 41 Scottish constituencies; by 1784 this had increased to 22, and by 1790, 34.<sup>307</sup> As Thomas Devine suggests, Dundas’ electoral success was derived from corruption in the burghs and carefully managed elections in the country.<sup>308</sup> A mere 0.2% of the Scottish population were eligible to vote in the late-eighteenth century. This stood in stark contrast to England and Ireland, where political activism at a local level was vibrant. As a result of Dundas’ tight control, the scope of Scottish government and political activity was largely unchanged in the mid-to-late decades of the century. Apathy abounded, with government legislation generally going unrecognised by the vast majority of the common people. However, as will be covered later in this chapter, attempts to introduce Roman Catholic relief bills north of the border would meet with popular resistance, and impact upon church attitudes towards the American and French

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<sup>305</sup> Roy H. Campbell, *Scotland since 1707: The Rise of an Industrial Society* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 14.

<sup>306</sup> *Gazetteer for Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2006) [accessed March 27<sup>th</sup> 2005]

<sup>307</sup> Thomas M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (London, 1999), p. 198.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, p. 198.

revolutions, as a result of growing hostility towards the government. Indeed, it is interesting to note that political matters in Scotland, such as the Jacobite Rebellion and the Seven Years War with France, (1756-63) made little impact on the Scottish churches.<sup>309</sup> Although the Militia campaign which followed the French war provoked a response from some of the Moderate leaders, it was again overlooked by most of the church, particularly the Popular contingent.<sup>310</sup> There had been the beginnings of links between some key church figures and the civil establishment in the earlier part of the century however. For instance, Patrick Cuming (1695-1775) was regarded as an agent of the Earl of Ilay in the periods 1736-42 and 1746-61. Although Cuming was opposed to patronage, he recognised the advantages (as William Robertson would also later do) of maintaining a cordial relationship with the state. Robert Wallace (1697-1771) was another who represented the political interests of the Squadrone party<sup>311</sup> in the Assembly between 1742-6.<sup>312</sup>

A friendly outlook from Scots towards their English neighbours in this period was however reversed to some extent by grievances over the political treatment of Scotland within the British state, as Colin Kidd asserts. Events such as the collapse of the Ayr Bank in 1772, with the drawbacks inherent in a paper currency, the scaling back of judges able to serve in the Court of Session, and proposed reconstruction of the country franchise, led some Scots to yearn for a return to the more stable (political) period of the 1750s.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.8.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid*, p.8.

<sup>311</sup> The Squadrone Party were a group of Hanoverian Whigs who wished to cement the Union with England. See for instance Alex Murdoch, 'Management or Semi-Independence? The government of Scotland from 1707-1832 Association for Scottish Historical Studies 1996 conference on the theme of the 'Government and Mis-government of Scotland'. [online version-accessed January 21<sup>st</sup> 2009]

<sup>312</sup> Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity 1689-1830* (Cambridge, 2003), p.186.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid*, p.345.

## II) The impact of the Universities

Amongst the literati of Scottish universities were men who were well acquainted with the social establishments of the country. As a result many students imbibed not only developments in the traditional subjects of theology and law, but also more widely were in touch with advances in science, medicine and philosophy: all components of the Enlightenment era.<sup>314</sup>

As Anand Chitnis suggests, post 1720, Scottish Presbyterians and English Dissenters held academic aims in common. As they were both Calvinistic in outlook, catechising was a key component of both the Dissenting academies and universities north of the border. From the decade of the 1730s both sets of institutions were influenced by the liberal arts, and as a result, in Chitnis' opinion, the hold of Calvinism was loosened.<sup>315</sup>

Moreover, opposition in the 1730s from Anglican High Churchmen to the more Calvinistic elements in Scotland would produce a sensitivity in those who had imbued the greater freedom of liberalising thought.

The crossover between the two academies may be illustrated by the fact that a significant number of English dissenting scholars were awarded doctor's degrees from Scottish universities: thirty-nine DD's, ten doctors of civil law and seven MD's.<sup>316</sup> Such awards also point to the fact that both the Scottish universities and English dissenting academies were dependent on "the talents, interests and abilities of individuals".<sup>317</sup> In Scotland for instance, the professors were financially backed by Town Councils, monitored by Presbyterians, and were supplied with successors as a

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<sup>314</sup> Anand Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment and Early Victorian English Society*, (London, 1986). p.35.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, p.42.

<sup>316</sup> Nichoals Hans, *New trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) p.247, Cited in Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment and Early Victorian English Society*, p.42.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, Chitnis, p.42.

result. In England meanwhile, as the academies were privately run, they were able to escape the shackles of Calvinism by the 1750s, and embrace more liberal thought as a result.<sup>318</sup>

### III) Glasgow Enlightenment

Richard Sher notes that in contrast to Aberdeen which was “the most Episcopalian and least Calvinist of Scottish towns, Glasgow was the opposite”.<sup>319</sup> In this setting, as something of a Calvinist ‘stronghold’ (with the Popular party having a majority of ministers in the city), the Enlightenment was played out. The Foulis brothers Robert and Andrew, were the “publishing arm” of the Glasgow Enlightenment,<sup>320</sup> with Francis Hutcheson funding their endeavours to print Latin and Greek publications, as well as significant English authors like John Milton (1608-74) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744). However, as Richard Sher suggests, with regard to publishing the new books of the Enlightenment the Foulis business was less to the fore.<sup>321</sup> Indeed, although Glasgow (and Aberdeen) made weighty contributions to Enlightenment thought, neither city could compete with Edinburgh in the sheer volume of new works of the period being published.

As Richard Sher has also noted, Francis Hutcheson's contribution to the Glasgow Enlightenment was varied.<sup>322</sup> He did, however, “secure a greater degree of international renown for Glasgow than any other academic since the sixteenth century”.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment and Early Victorian*,. p.42-3.

<sup>319</sup> Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors & Their Publishers in Eighteenth-century Britain, Ireland, & America* (Chicago, 2006), p.116.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid*, p.268.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid*, p.269.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid*, p.321.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid*.

In his inaugural lecture at Glasgow, entitled *Two Texts on Human Nature*, Hutcheson drew the basis for his moral philosophy from the natural German jurisprudence of Samuel Pufendorf (1632-94). As a result he opposed the Epicurean notion that men were joined together in society as a result of weakness. Rather, despite human nature being in an essentially fallen state, God granted men reason in order to appreciate the advantages apparent in friendship and society as a whole. Instead of weakness, it was a recognition of the benevolence of friendship which brought humans together,<sup>324</sup> and enabled them to move from freedom into civil society. Hutcheson was certainly different from previous teachers, as illustrated by his informal classes, which were held in English, as opposed to Latin. Also, he offered free tutorials on religion and theology for the benefit of the wider public in Glasgow.<sup>325</sup>

As James Moore posits, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, (1755) which dealt with the question of evil, found Hutcheson suggesting that God would overcome the trials of this world by rewarding humans in a future state of happiness. Upon being challenged as to whether a society of Atheists was possible, he replied that it was unnecessary to debate this, and asked in turn, if such a society would be better or worse than one which was dominated by superstition.<sup>326</sup>

Within the scope of his initiatives Hutcheson's main goal was perhaps to "change the face of theology in Scotland",<sup>327</sup> This was managed by placing a stress on practical moral questions, which affected people's everyday lives in their pursuit of happiness. In doing so he hoped to present a more "humane" face of the church.

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<sup>324</sup> John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005). p.286f.

<sup>325</sup> Ian Hazlett, 'Ebbs and Flows of Theology' Wm Ian P Hazlett (ed), *Traditions of Theology in Glasgow: 1450-1990: A Miscellany* (Edinburgh, 1993), p.19.

The pulpit should resonate with such aims for Hutcheson, in order to foster a renewed sense of concern and affection for other people. Indeed Michael Stewart has contended that for Hutcheson, moral conduct was as much a matter of the heart as the intellect, with the moral sense present in human affections being derived from a God of love.<sup>328</sup> Hutcheson's views in this regard were a clear forerunner of later Utilitarian thought, in the attempt to achieve the highest state of happiness through striving to promote happiness in others. Having the image of God implanted within them meant humans were able (in Hutcheson's opinion by way of reason and relying on their conscience) to find the right choices when making moral decisions. Love for others, rather than being contrary to human nature was instead an integral part of it. As Lisa Hill notes, other background influences on Hutcheson included the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Shaftesbury, Cicero (106-43BC) and the brand of Roman Stoicism which the latter entailed.<sup>329</sup>

On the question of extension of liberty Hutcheson concurred with Lockean notions of freedom, which he imagined should be as far reaching as possible, encompassing not only religious toleration, but also civil liberty in the form of gender equality and an opposition to slavery.<sup>330</sup>

It does however appear to be the case, as John Roberston has suggested, that Hutcheson scaled back some of his views, due to being wary and conscious of the recent Simson trial.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> See James Moore, *Hutcheson's theodicy: the arguments and the context of A System of Moral Philosophy* in Paul Wood (ed) *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2000), pp.239-66.

<sup>327</sup> Cited in Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p.78.

<sup>328</sup> Michael.A. Stewart, 'The Scottish Enlightenment' in Stuart Brown (ed) *British philosophy and the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 2003)

<sup>329</sup> Lisa Hill, *The Passionate Society: The Social, Political and Moral Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Springer, 2006), p.38.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, pp 77ff.

<sup>331</sup> Robertson, *Case for the Enlightenment*, p.287. Also, Hazlett, 'Ebbs and Flows of Theology', p.18.

Opposition to Hutcheson emerged in the 1730s in the form of *Shaftesbury's Ghost Conjur'd or a letter to Mr Francis Hutcheson, Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow* published by Hugh Heugh, which accused Hutcheson as “being in a Confederacy with Infidels and Deists”.<sup>332</sup> This followed two failed attempts by the local Presbytery to censure the Ulsterman for his liberal views.

In the mid-eighteenth century Irish Presbyterians (who were prevented from entering Trinity college Dublin), composed around a third of the student body at Glasgow, while others attended Edinburgh.<sup>333</sup> Indeed, by 1780 some 65% of ministerial candidates in the Irish Presbyterian church had attended Glasgow University.<sup>334</sup> As Ian Hazlett has pointed out, this meant that these Irishmen would have been exposed to the teaching and views of men such as Francis Hutcheson, William Leechman, Adam Smith (in Glasgow 1751-64), Thomas Reid (1766ff) and John Anderson.<sup>335</sup> This is significant for the McGill case, as being a contemporary at university with the Irish students he would have been informed of the Arian and subscriptionist controversies which were taking place there. These will be discussed in the later section on ‘Ireland’.

#### **IV) William Leechman**

As Thomas Kennedy avers, in constructing an assessment of Hutcheson’s protégé and successor, William Leechman, we are left with little material to go on with regard to his theological and religious opinions.<sup>336</sup> Aside from James Wodrow’s

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<sup>332</sup> Hugh Heugh, *Shaftesbury's Ghost Conjur'd or a letter to Mr Francis Hutcheson, Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1738), p.4.

<sup>333</sup> Nigel Yates, *The Religious Condition of Ireland, 1770-1850* (Oxford, 2006), p.126.

<sup>334</sup> Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, C.1650-c.1850*, (Cambridge, 1998), p.222.

<sup>335</sup> Ian Hazlett, ‘Students at Glasgow University from 1747 to 1768 connected with Ireland: an analytical probe.’ In W.Donald Patton (ed) *Ebb and Flow: Essays in Honour of R.Finlay G. Holmes* (Belfast, 2002), p.20.

<sup>336</sup> Thomas D Kennedy in Hook and Sher (eds) *The Glasgow Enlightenment*, p.58.

publication of his *Sermons* there are only two student notebooks of his ‘Lectures on Pictet’s System of Theology’ (1747 and 48), and one of his lectures on composition. In addition to this we have access to Leechman’s ‘Treatise of Rhetoric, especially as it regards the pulpit’. Indeed there is a greater wealth of sources available for Leechman’s competitor for the chair of divinity, John MacLaurin (1693-1754).<sup>337</sup>

James Wodrow stated that Leechman “never offered a dictatorial opinion, an infallible or decisive judgement”,<sup>338</sup> allowing his students to consider both sides of an issue or argument before drawing their own conclusions. This side of Leechman was confirmed by William McGill himself in attributing his teachers success to:

stating different opinions with fairness and perspicuity in encouraging literature and free enquiry, exciting his pupils to the love of Christian truth and piety, and directing them to form right arguments for themselves.<sup>339</sup>

Indeed McGill had also paid tribute to the memory of Leechman “which will ever be dear and venerable to me and many others who attended his Lectures”.<sup>340</sup>

It would appear that his lectures on Homiletics focused on the “perfect character and moral teaching of Christ<sup>341</sup> (a theme later evident in McGills’ work), as well as Miracles and Prophecy. Such a stress on the moral aspects of Christ’s ministry would lead the more Evangelical elements of the church to suspect Leechman of being influenced by Samuel Clarke and Shaftesbury. Interestingly he also met Nathaniel Lardner on a visit to London in 1744, a man who “was the object of Leechman’s steadfast admiration”.<sup>342</sup> The suspicions surrounding his orthodoxy were also concerned with the diminution of Christ’s place within the Godhead, as the

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid, p.58.

<sup>338</sup> Cited in Thomas D Kennedy in Hook and Sher (eds), p.58.

<sup>339</sup> William McGill, *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh, 1786) p.185.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid,p.184.

<sup>341</sup> H.M.B.Reid, *The Divinity Professors in the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1923), p.255.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid, p.257.

admiration for his ‘moral’ qualities would appear to have detracted from divine status. Such concerns were attached to Leechman throughout his career.<sup>343</sup>

When Leechman published *The Nature, Reasonableness, and Advantages of Prayer: With an Attempt to Answer the Objections Against It* (1744, and printed by the aforementioned Robert Foulis) in response to a pamphlet which had been in circulation around the west coast of the country, opposition surfaced at local and then national level.

The objections were based on the grounds not of what Leechman had said, but rather what he had left out. He had for instance omitted to say that a Christian’s petitions to God should be made via Christ, as the sole mediator for acceptance between the divinity and human beings. It was therefore assumed by his opponents that he was suspect in this area.<sup>344</sup>

In his defence Leechman referred his readers to his other sermons on the matter, which posited that he was sound on such issues, and that they were apparent in his teachings. Having been brought by the local synod to the Assembly in 1744, Leechman was acquitted by a majority vote.

In tandem with Simson and Hutcheson however, Leechman was generally cautious in his work, trying to avoid the composition of anything controversial in the area of doctrinal output. This was heightened by the background of the Marrow controversy, the trial of Simson, and the Secessions. Indeed, as Ian Hazlett pointed out, this is indicative of the “limitation of the influence of Moderatism on the Scottish Church and theology in the eighteenth century”.<sup>345</sup>

Following his time as Professor of Divinity, Leechman would go on to become the Principal of Glasgow University (1761-95), which was attributed to his

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid, p.256.

<sup>344</sup> Story, *The Church of Scotland Past and Present*, p.281.

influence in local society, as well his adeptness in conducting administrative matters.<sup>346</sup>

#### V) John Anderson and William Thom

John Anderson (1726-1796) was appointed to the chair of natural philosophy in 1757. As a Calvinist, Anderson opposed Hutcheson's liberal approach to religion. In 1768 he became involved in the patronage disputes, delivering a lecture on the subject at the Glasgow Literary Society. A staunch opponent of Roman Catholic toleration, Anderson represents the continuing presence of a more conservative, Calvinist voice within academia at Glasgow. Interestingly he appeared to be popular with the ordinary people of the city, as evidenced by his petition to gain a royal visitation in the 1780s, the signatories of which amounted to some two-thirds of the residents of the town.<sup>347</sup> Indeed, following his appointment in 1761, Anderson continued to hound William Leechman, bogging him down in legal challenges.

Anderson later bequeathed an "Anderson University", which was to be based on "sound religion". His trustees included John Gilles, the Popular Party Clergyman, who also supported Presbyterian establishments from outside the Church of Scotland.<sup>348</sup> Despite the fact that Anderson was unable to leave sufficient funds for this venture, his views, when combined with those of William Thom (1751-1811), offer an interesting snapshot of the non-homogenous nature of religion at Glasgow University in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. On the one hand, the dominant figures such as Hutcheson, Leechman, Thomas Reid (1710-96), Richardson and Foulis, with their more moderate, tolerant views, were counterbalanced by men like Anderson and Thom.

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<sup>345</sup> Hazlett, 'Ebbs and Flows of Theology', p.20

<sup>346</sup> Reid, *The Divinity Professors* p.258

<sup>347</sup> Richard Sher, *Commerce, religion and the enlightenment in eighteenth-century Glasgow* in Thomas Martin Devine, Gordon Jackson, *Glasgow: Beginnings to 1830* (Manchester, 1995), pp.346-348

William Thom would publish *The Defects of an University Education and its Unsuitableness to a Commercial People* (1761) which was aimed at the teaching of Hutcheson, Smith and others. The main thrust of Thom's polemic was that the University had lost touch with the people of Glasgow, and had become instead a remote institution, far removed from the spiritual requirements of the general population.<sup>349</sup> Thom also accused the University of failing to inculcate an appreciation of religion in those students who had not studied Divinity. In doing so Thom was in fact expressing a concern that academic philosophy constituted a threat to religion.

Meanwhile the atmosphere at Marischal College, Aberdeen was different to that of Edinburgh, as a result of around half the students being drawn from a working class or agrarian background.<sup>350</sup>

As Terrance Irwin has posited, Scottish Presbyterianism had greater contact and interaction of ideas with the continent than English Anglicans. With the study of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Dutch jurist and philosopher and Samuel von Pufendorf established at Glasgow within moral philosophy (a subject which was not as entrenched in English universities), the idea of a single, unified British nation within educational circles was only gradually forged in the eighteenth century.<sup>351</sup>

## **VI) The Edinburgh and St.Andrews Scene**

At Edinburgh University the Moderates were able to exert significant influence, following the appointment of William Robertson as principal in 1762, as

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid

<sup>349</sup> On William Thom, see Ned Landsman in Hook and Sher, *the Glasgow Enlightenment*.

<sup>350</sup> Michael G. Moran, *Eighteenth-century British and American Rhetorics and Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources* (London, 1994), p.53.

<sup>351</sup> Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study - From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford, 2008), p.205.

has been noted. The improvements made under his tenure included the more regular meeting of the senatus adademicus in an administrative capacity; an enhanced library, classroom provision, and natural history museum; and the encouragement through groups like the Speculative Society for student debate and the Royal Society of Edinburgh for formal scholarly inquiry to take an active role in university life.<sup>352</sup>

Such achievements secured appropriate recognition for Robertson from men such as the philosopher Dugald Stewart, (1753-1828) a university lecturer in the latter part of Robertson's stint as principal. Stewart remarked that "if, as a seat of learning, Edinburgh has, of late more than formerly, attracted the notice of the world, much must be ascribed to the influence of his example, and the lustre of his name".<sup>353</sup>

In order to pursue his vision of a more enlightened, better educated clergy (and indeed society), Robertson was able to use his position to appoint men of similar minds and party background. Adam Ferguson and Hugh Blair (1711-1800) (chair of rhetoric) for instance became influential figures in the senetus academicus. Other appointments included Joseph Black (1728-99) (cousin of Ferguson's), to professor of chemistry, Andrew Dalzel (a relation of Robertson's by marriage), to the chair of Greek, John Robinson to natural philosophy, and Robert Blair (Hugh Blair's second cousin) to astronomy.<sup>354</sup> In addition to their patronage of family members and individuals who shared their outlook, the Moderates' influence in University affairs was also evident in the Town Council's deference to them in the matter of appointments, such as that occasioned by the approval of John Bruce to the chair of logic.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Sher, *Church and University*, p.136.

<sup>353</sup> Stewart, xlvi, cited in Sher, *Church and University*, p.137.

<sup>354</sup> Sher, *Church and University*, p.140.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid, p.140.

Their control of the University was not of course entirely complete, as in some cases (such as the contest for chair of divinity in 1779, civil history (1780) and Robertson's failure to secure the Scots law chair for his son), the choice of the Moderates was overturned. However, as Sher notes, such cases were exceptions on their overall record.<sup>356</sup> Indeed, Jeffrey Smitten contends that Robertson's influence at Edinburgh University, as well as his overall ministry which aimed (within Moderate thought) to improve wider society, have been rather overlooked, with his role as a historian dominating.<sup>357</sup> This he attributes to Dugald Stewart's biography of Robertson, which it would appear relied upon a later summary of the Moderates' patronage policies under George Hill (1750-1819) (and later 'leader' of the Moderates), rather than focusing on his university and church activities as well. Smitten does however concede that this has been greatly redressed in the work of Richard Sher.<sup>358</sup>

At St.Andrews, the Moderates were able to extend their reach still further by the influence of Thomas Tullidelph (d.1777) and the Rev James Murison, (both supporters of the Party), who were able to manage the various colleges of the University.<sup>359</sup>

Influential in the Moderate regime in their hold over the church (as will be discussed later in this chapter), and universities lay the patronage which they themselves had been afforded in the 1750s and 60s; whereby Argyll, Bute, Stuart Mackenzie and Milton,<sup>360</sup> had bestowed considerable advantage upon them. However by the late 1760s they had, by way of their extensive and effective networking system,

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid, p.141.

<sup>357</sup> Jeffrey Smitten, 'William Robertson' in DNB (online). [accessed December 10<sup>th</sup> 2008]

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Sher, *Church and University*, p.141.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid, p.147.

obtained sufficient leverage to have become men of power and standing in their own right.

## VII) Contractarian Political Thought

As with Samuel Pufendorf and Jakob Thomasius (1622–1684), the French philosopher Pierre Bayle's (1647-1706) scepticism in the fields of moral and political knowledge led him to suggest that freedom of conscience and religious toleration were a sovereign gift. This was more likely to occur in countries such as the British Isles, which had a constitutional monarchy, as they were less likely to be swayed by changes of opinion and thought.<sup>361</sup>

As Mark Goldie has suggested, the French jurist Jean Barbeyrac (1674-1744) had argued that each individual had a quantified, inalienable right to make personal judgements with regard to moral and political matters. Nevertheless, for Barbeyrac such a right, and its consequential conventional contract between a sovereign government and the people, was also a moral obligation by the direct will and command of God.<sup>362</sup>

Barbeyrac is a relevant figure here as he was cited in the lectures of Gerson Carmichael (1672-1729) at Glasgow in the 1690s, and his influence lived on in eighteenth century Scottish jurisprudence, as Mark Goldie has again illustrated.<sup>363</sup> Moral judgement was truthful in Barbeyrac's eyes, enabling people to chose between right and wrong, by way of their own conscience. As a result the idea of resistance, of placing checks and balances upon civil authorities was fused with faith. As Christopher Berry observes, contractarian theory had certainly not faded in eighteenth

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<sup>361</sup> Mark Goldie, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2006) p.255.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid*, p.350.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid*, p.255.

century Scotland.<sup>364</sup> Liam McIlvanney has also traced the origins of contractarian ideology back to George Buchanan (1506-82), with its clear civic message providing a “point of continuity between Reformation Scotland and the age of the Enlightenment.”<sup>365</sup> Also in the background was the influence of Calvinism, with its stress upon the active Christian, accessing the Bible for themselves, repudiating priestly control, forming relationships with other Christians on an equal footing, all of “which flowed into a strong sense of citizenship within the field of politics”.<sup>366</sup>

As Christopher Berry contends, the context of university appointments in this age was “another arm of the patronage system”.<sup>367</sup> This is illustrated by the fact that William Robertson and Hugh Blair were installed to the positions of Principalship and Professorship at Edinburgh in 1762 and 1760 at the behest of Lord Bute. Indeed, by 1764 some seven of nineteen Edinburgh posts, and five of thirteen at Glasgow had been appointed by Bute.

### **VIII) Enlightenment and Realism**

During the era of the Scottish Enlightenment several ministers began to familiarise themselves with the new contemporary scientific discoveries of the age, as proposed by Isaac Newton (1643-1727).<sup>368</sup> Of particular significance was the career of Colin McLaurin (1698-1746), brother of John McLaurin (1693-1754), the evangelical Calvinist minister. Supported by Isaac Newton, McLaurin was appointed as Professor of Mathematics at Edinburgh University, a position from which he offered important contributions in the fields of mathematics and physics, for which he

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<sup>364</sup> Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1997), p.37.

<sup>365</sup> Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth Century Scotland* (East Lothian, 1997), p.30.

<sup>366</sup> Stephen Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (London, 1993), p.20.

<sup>367</sup> Berry, *Social Theory*, p.15.

<sup>368</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p.236.

received recognition from the Royal Society in London and the French Academy. Although he was not a theologian by profession, McLaurin accepted the tenets of the Westminster Confession and offered an opening to accept a more realistic epistemology in the fields of philosophy and theology, as well as within the science of human nature.

A contemporary of McLaurin was Thomas Reid (1710-96), Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University (1764-96), who initiated a school of thought which came to be known as ‘Scottish common-sense philosophy’, as a response to the scepticism outlook of David Hume.<sup>369</sup> Indeed, Reid was a figure of such standing as to be termed the “Scottish Kant”, as John Haldane notes, due to his attempts to promote human understanding and knowledge beyond ideas.<sup>370</sup> Reid had been introduced to the ideas of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Issac Newton, John Locke and Shaftesbury by George Turnbull, his tutor at Marschial College.<sup>371</sup> Reid’s own ideas were then centred on an intuitive reading of religion.

Reid argued against the idea that true knowledge was found in human sensations, which led to an outside and “other” reality. Instead “realism” was built on the premise that essential matters could be understood in a more direct fashion. “Common-sense” philosophy was not only a way of determining what truth *was*, but being able to cite “those particular matters which are known”.<sup>372</sup> In other words common-sense was “innate” to human understanding, allowing us to analyse the workings of our own minds as well as others. Moreover, external realities could be quantified by such “innate” readings of the mind. Reasoning was therefore

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<sup>369</sup> Paul Helm, “Scottish Realism”, DSCH ,p.759.

<sup>370</sup> John Haldane in John Haldane, Stephen Read (eds) *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid: A Collection of Essays* (Blackwell, 2003), p.1.

<sup>371</sup> Paul Wood, ‘Thomas Reid’ in DNB. [accessed December 11<sup>th</sup> 2008]

<sup>372</sup> Helm, in DSCH.

superseded by such common-sense, as the findings and convictions of the mind were apparent in themselves.<sup>373</sup> Indeed, by offering this conclusion Reid was addressing the philosophical problem of how external realities of the past, present or future could find manifestations in the human mind at all.<sup>374</sup>

For Thomas Torrance, it is “difficult to estimate the full impact of the critical attack on rationalism (of Hume) and the return to a realist way of thinking, which had a better reception from the Moderate than the Evangelical wing of the Kirk.”<sup>375</sup> However, it did enable and hasten the movement of rehabilitating the Gospel message from its rationalist Calvinism, prevalent in the Scottish Church in the early eighteenth century, as well as from the debates surrounding double predestination and the sufficiency and nature of the Atonement. From this time the Gospel could be offered in a more encompassing manner to those who had previously been imagined to be outwith its scope and influence, which had obvious significance for the later work of foreign missions, as well as an impact on how the Atonement was viewed.

## **IX) The Impact of the American and French Revolutions**

Liam McIvanney has suggested that “the association of Presbyterianism with political radicalism reflects the pattern of development of the Calvinist Reformation”.<sup>376</sup> Against such a background of resistance to “oppressive” governments, a precedent was set for radical political thought, emanating from the Scottish churches in the late eighteenth century. This also helps, for McIvanney, to explain the attachment of Presbyterianism with Whiggery.

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<sup>373</sup> Keith Lehrer *Thomas Reid* (London, 1989), p.8.

<sup>374</sup> Derek R. Brookes *Inquiry Into the Human Mind: On the Principles of Common Sense* (Edinburgh, 2000), p.xiii.

<sup>375</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p. 238.

<sup>376</sup> Liam McIvanney, *Presbyterian Radicalism and the Politics of Robert Burns in Love and Liberty: Robert Burns: A Bicentenary Celebration* (East Lothian,1997), p.170.

In his comparative study of England, Scotland and Ireland, James Bradley makes a strong case for the social dislocation experienced by the Popular Party, and more especially the Seceders, as shaping their political attitudes in this era. As a result of their entanglements with patronage, the Moderates, and the Roman Catholic church they were able to form an attitude of antagonism towards the government in London.<sup>377</sup>

Bradley goes on to cite the examples of three Secession ministers during the American and French revolutions as an illustration of this, namely John Baillie, William Graham (1737-1801), and Archibald Bruce (1746-1816).<sup>378</sup> These men regarded patronage as an usurpation of Christ's headship of the church, by which all men had a divinely ordained right of private judgement and freedom from the imposition of religious views. Equality, under Christ, was then a key principle. Anti-Catholic rhetoric was subsequently marshalled to express opposition to the established order within both the church and the government. Indeed the landed gentry (who also wore the hat of patrons), and financially secure clerics were accused of wielding oppression through the offices of the state.

It followed from this that such men would automatically support American independence, with both Baillie and Graham signing the petition calling for peace, initiated by local radicals in Newcastle in 1775.<sup>379</sup>

As Colin Kidd points out, at the opposite end of the spectrum the Moderates appealed from the pulpit for acquiescence with both Crown and government, which caused them to stand against the rights of Americans to self-government.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> James E. Bradley, *The Religious Origins of Radical Politics in Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe* James E. Bradley and Dale K. Van Kley (eds), (Notre Dame, 2001), p. 213.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p.213.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

<sup>380</sup> Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past* p.193ff.

In his 1787 work *The History of Scotland: During the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI*, Robertson stressed English involvement in the Scottish Reformation, in order to disassociate Scottish Presbyterianism from charges of being radical and uncivil. He was also keen to distance the eighteenth century church from such men as John Knox (1510-72) and George Buchanan (1506-82), in order to illustrate how far the church had come from such a turbulent age.<sup>381</sup> In doing this he was able to present a church which was continuing to reform, and was at the same time loyal to the establishment.

As Jeffrey Smitten has outlined, the traditional approaches to William Robertson's position on America were twofold.<sup>382</sup> Firstly, it seemed that he formed a conservative opinion between the Stamp Act (1765) and the Declaration of Independence (1776). Secondly, there is the issue of his uncompleted history of British America. Smitten contends that rather than alter his views between 1765 and 76, Robertson maintained a consistently conservative stance, which was also connected to his unfinished history.<sup>383</sup> Hugh Blair was also particularly conservative in his position on the American war, believing that it was driven by "a fear of oppression, rather than actual oppression".<sup>384</sup>

In common with the Seceders, some members of the Popular party within the Church of Scotland also favoured American independence, as Andrew Hook notes: "at the General Assembly of the church in the critical year of 1776 there certainly existed, among members of the Popular or Evangelical party considerable opposition

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Jeffrey Smitten, 'Moderatism and History: William Robertson's Unfinished History of British America', in Richard Sher and Jeffrey Smitten (eds), *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1990), p.163.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid, p.164.

<sup>384</sup> Richard Sher, 'Hugh Blair' in DNB.[accessed December 11<sup>th</sup> 2008]

to the American policies of the government of George III".<sup>385</sup> Again this was closely related to their hostility towards Catholic relief in England, and the prospect of its future implementation in Scotland. "Slavery" was employed as a metaphor for patronage, with a class based element of opposition to the wealthy patrons, who were seen as usurping any rights to impose ministers upon the people. In common with Baillie and Graham in England, some thirteen ministers of the Popular party openly upheld the American cause by way of sermons or publications.<sup>386</sup> Clearly anti-Catholic sentiment was still a force in Scotland in the 1780s and 90s. In 1779 for instance attempts at Roman Catholic relief by the government were met with protests in various towns and cities across the country.

The Popular party regarded their views on America as being within traditional Whig politics, ie an opposition to absolutism in church or state. John Erskine for instance said that he could countenance civil rights for Arians and Deists, whom he saw as posing no political threat.<sup>387</sup> Thus they were demonstrating their willingness to enter political debate. This was in contrast to the Seceding denominations which attacked Roman Catholic doctrine and ritual head-on, insisting that "heresy" had no rights.

With the advent of the French Revolution in 1789 the battle lines, already drawn over America, followed a similar format at first. The Moderates fought to uphold the established order of government, crown and ecclesiastical rights, whilst some within the Secession camp, buoyed perhaps by their previous campaign, chose an even more charged language.

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<sup>385</sup> Andrew Hook, *Scotland and America: A Study of Cultural Relations 1750-1835* (Glasgow, 2008 edition), p.67.

<sup>386</sup> The thirteen were named as - Charles Nisbet, William Porteous, William Peterkin, Colin Campbell, John Warden, Ralph Bowie, David Grant, James Blinshall, Thomas Walker, James Morrison, John Snodgrass, William Thom, and John Erskine. See Thomas Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism: Opposition to Roman Catholic Relief in Scotland, 1778-1782* (New York, 1987)

John Baillie supported the French Revolutionaries, continued his adherence to American freedom, and cited his admiration for Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. It is an interesting facet of this age of radical political thought that all the ministers of the Secession and the Popular party were orthodox Trinitarians - despite being willing to "work" alongside Unitarians such as Thomas Fyshe Palmer via the Reformers Conventions. Bradley again attributes this to their sense of wishing to maintain theological "orthodoxy", in spite of the Unitarian presence, while venting their frustrations and powerlessness over the Moderates' grip of the General Assembly, patronage and Catholic relief against the government and its colonial policies.<sup>388</sup>

In his study of the nature, influence and scope of the Secession church and radical politics in the 1790s John Brims identified ten ministers in particular who were to the fore of dissent. Of those, three clergymen of the Anti-Burgher church attended the Scottish radical reformers conventions 1792-3. In the Burgher church a further four ministers, the most significant of whom was Ebenezer Hislop, were delegates of the national convention.

Both Burghers and Anti-Burghers were however caught between loyalism on the one hand, which contained the threat of repudiating their traditional background and principles, and radicalism on the other, which could have drawn a state response. By 1798, the Burghers, despite the earlier divisions within their ranks were able to make a loyal address to the King.<sup>389</sup>

The polemic caused by their response to the French Revolution was one of the points along the road to Voluntaryism, starting with the 'New Light' controversy of the 1790s. The New 'Lichters' were attempting to reshape and frame anew the manner of their allegiance to earlier traditions. In 1791 when the civil magistrate was

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<sup>387</sup> Sher and Smitten, *Scotland and America*, p.90.

<sup>388</sup> Bradley, *The Religious Origins* p.220.

able to exert significant authority regarding the subscription to the Westminster Confession on the part of two licentiates, the foundations of the Anti-Burgher testimony were also called into question, which encompassed the Solemn League and Covenant.<sup>390</sup> By 1795 the Rev John Fraser of Auchtermuchty (1745-1818) had created similar issues for the Burghers.<sup>391</sup> Would the Seceders then maintain a connection to a state church or go down the Voluntary road? In 1799 the Burgher Synod attempted to outline their position:

The controversy among us, indeed, respects the power of the civil magistrate. It is not however, a political, but an ecclesiastical dispute. It respects not the power by which the civil magistrate actually possesses by the constitution of Britain; but the power which is supposed by some to be ascribed to him doctrinally in our standard-books; and it respects even this, only in reference to matters of religion.<sup>392</sup>

Although their response to the Revolution was clearly a major issue for the Seceders in creating the 'New Light' divisions, I will also examine the impact of the McGill case as another background strand to their position in the later chapter *The Impact of McGill's Thought*.

Parliamentary Acts which enabled a greater degree of freedom and toleration for Episcopalians (1792 Act repudiating the earlier penal limitations caused by the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745) and Roman Catholics (Relief Act, though limited in scope) in Scotland were also brought about as a result of the impact made by the French Revolution.<sup>393</sup>

However, the Whiggish Presbyterianism of the Moderates gave way in the 1790s, following the French Revolution to a more identifiable sense of British

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<sup>389</sup> H.W.Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow, 1912), p.199.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid*, p.232.

<sup>391</sup> McKerrow, *Secession*, chas xiii and xvii.

<sup>392</sup> Cited in McKerrow, *Secession*, p.598.

<sup>393</sup> S.J.Brown, 'French Revolution', in DSCH, p.341.

loyalism.<sup>394</sup> As a result they adopted a more inward looking ideology. Even the family of William Robertson himself was forced to suppress an unpublished sermon, composed in 1788, in which he celebrated the links between the Glorious Revolution and the possibilities for a restating of liberties in Europe in the late 1780s.

Furthermore, the Assembly reiterated its part in helping to counteract radicalism, following the British war with France, which started in 1792.<sup>395</sup> Adam Ferguson meanwhile had, in common with many others, initially welcomed the French Revolution, viewing its Republican egalitarianism as taking a positive step in its overthrow of a corrupt monarchy, which could lead to a transition towards democracy. However, following the later Terror of 1793, Ferguson was dismayed at the tyranny of the Jacobins, now viewing them as dangerous anarchists and Atheists, who would threaten the very security of not only British, but wider European society.

### **X) The Failure of Radicalism**

Certainly the course of the French Revolution enabled the government (and indeed the church), to class any with radical notions in this period as “traitors” against the state, which also helped to legitimise the use of law against them. Following the Reign of Terror in France, the idea that popular rights and suffrage would lead to anarchy in Scotland took hold, as illustrated in the recantation by Robert Burns of his earlier support for the Revolutionaries, and crushing victory of the government party in the elections of 1796.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Colin Kidd, *The Kirk, the French Revolution and the burden of Scottish whigger*, in Nigel Ashton (ed) *Religious Change in Europe: 1650-1914* (Oxford, 1997) p.224.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid*, pp.224ff.

<sup>396</sup> William Ferguson, *Scotland 1689 to the Present*, (Edinburgh, 1968), p.257.

John Brims has also argued that loyalism north of the border was more dependent on the clergy than in England.<sup>397</sup> For example George Hill's sermon, *The Present Happiness of Great Britain* was widely circulated under the patronage of Henry Dundas.<sup>398</sup> Clearly ministers were moving in the same circles as the merchant class, magistrates and influential county administrators, in order to uphold and defend the interests of the government and the crown.

### **Conclusion**

Within the context of McGill's career his early development at university under the tutelage of William Leechman certainly appears to be significant. With Leechman's stress upon enabling students to develop their own opinions of doctrinal questions, as well as the concentration on the example and moral character of Christ, it would certainly seem that McGill's later work was influenced by such considerations, given his admiration for Leechman. Additionally McGill's contact with Ulster students who had experienced an attempted loosening of Confessional subscription in the 1720s would also appear to have made an impression on McGill's own later opinions in this regard. Contractarian political thought, which encouraged the right of private conscience and judgement as well as the promotion of greater toleration, was a movement which enabled ministers such as McGill to eventually publicise their own opinions, even when they were contrary to the accepted doctrines of the day.

The French Revolution in particular made the 1790s a dangerous decade in which to promote radical thought in the field of either politics or theology. As the establishment tightened its control over both civil society and the church those who

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<sup>397</sup> John Brims, *Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Edinburgh University Ph.D. thesis, 1983), p.352. cited in Bob Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London, 2008), p.124.

<sup>398</sup> Harris, *The Scottish People*, p.125.

wished to dissent from loyalty to the state were classified with the Jacobins.

Therefore, as will be discussed in the later section on McGill's *Ode to the King Sermon* of 1795, he appeared to be very much expounding an 'acceptable' view in this regard. There can be little doubt that the Ayr minister would have been well aware of the potential ramifications of continuing to be regarded as a maverick at best, and radical at worst, in such an atmosphere.

The gradual decline in influence of the Scottish Enlightenment was felt from the 1780s onwards to its eventual end point in 1830. Anand Chitnis has highlighted two areas which were particular causes of this. The first of these was the enhanced party politicisation of nascent and more long-standing institutions, with the second being the growth of industrialisation.<sup>399</sup>

As far as the church was concerned the Moderates had pursued a policy under William Robertson of acquiescence with patronage, as a political tool, which saw his successor George Hill defend the system on the grounds of it being the settled law of the country. Whereas Robertson had identified the church and government as mutual beneficiaries of each other, and aligned himself with the Whigs, Hill chose to forge a closer relationship with the Tory Henry Dundas.<sup>400</sup>

The more 'radical' side of the Moderates had been demonstrated by their campaign in favour of a Scottish Militia in the 1760s, their movement for burgh reform, and their opposition to slavery from 1755 onwards.<sup>401</sup> However, by way of this alliance with a figure as powerful as Dundas they had selected a different route. Rather than operate as "partners" with government, they were now in the position of being at the mercy of the state.

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<sup>399</sup> Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p.238.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid*, p.241.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid*, p.241.

The mid-to-late eighteenth century then was a time of much significance for the Scottish churches. From the original secession of 1733 and the breakaway of the Relief church in 1761, the established church no longer held sole claim to denominational affiliation.

Within the establishment there were of course further divisions between Moderates (post 1752) and the Evangelical/Popular clergy. It is a testament to the skill and indeed stealth of the Moderate party that they were able to effectively control the highest court of the church, the General Assembly, despite holding the minority of numbers during this period. However, by the end of the century there was a far greater cross-current of theological opinion between both parties. Indeed it now appears to be the case that rather than a two “party” situation, the three strands of traditionalists, liberals, and Evangelicals, seems to be more appropriate.

The issue of patronage loomed large throughout the century, with numerous disputes over parish presentations. However this was largely played out in a local setting where Moderates and Popular clergy were vying for power, as opposed to a wider national sense at Assembly level.

The Universities had a clear and marked influence on the churches. From the civic humanism of men such as Francis Hutcheson and William Leechman at Glasgow to the Moderate control exerted at Edinburgh, contractarian political thought, and the Common Sense Philosophy of Thomas Reid, Scottish clerics had received a training which was focused on a broad based, wide ranging form of education, with dialogue and interdisciplinary movement between theology, philosophy, history, politics, psychology and science.

In the later decades the American and French Revolutions would again move the church towards a more loyalist, entrenched stance with regard to state adherence.

Although the Seceders by way of their feelings of social dislocation did display some radical sentiment in the early stages of the revolutions, they were again divided over the question of how the church should approach its relations with the state.

The issue of Confessional subscription was one with which the Moderates failed to deal, during their control of the Assembly. Although seemingly lax in their attitudes towards it, they made no moves during the tenure of William Robertson to modify the requirements of conformity.

Within the field of theology, issues such as ecclesiology (particularly with the concerns over Christ's headship, as opposed to Erastianism), the nature and scope of the Atonement and the different emphasis on preaching styles were all important considerations for Scottish churchmen in the age of Enlightenment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE WIDER SCENE: ENGLAND AND IRELAND

During the course of the eighteenth century anti-Trinitarianism in England moved through different stages. In essence it can be traced from the frustrations inherent in the failure of the 1689 Toleration Act to accord freedom to anti-Trinitarian thought. As a result early ‘Socinians’ such as John Biddle (1615-1662), then Arians (in the early part of the eighteenth century), and later Socinians (in a more organised form), sought to put a far more widely encompassing mode of toleration at the top of their agenda. Essentially there were “two waves” of ‘freethinking’ or dissent.<sup>402</sup> From men like Steven Nye (1648-1719), John Locke (1632-1704), Issac Newton (1642-1727) and John Milton (1608-74), it eventually became focussed on the work of John Taylor, Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) and Nathaniel Lardner. With the established Church of England having successfully dismissed the earlier Arianism of Clarke in particular, the re-emergence of heterodoxy from around 1760 onwards saw the establishment of Unitarian congregations with “later” Socinians such as Theophilis Lindsay (1723-1808), Richard Price (1723-91) and Joseph Priestley to the fore. Indeed, as G.M.Ditchfield has contended, prior to the second half of the eighteenth-century Arianism was the most prominent form of anti-Trinitarian sentiment in England. The key movement towards Socinianism, as a “militant anti-Trinitarianism, was not significant, until championed by Priestley and Lindsey”.<sup>403</sup> This view was shared by the earlier work of A.H.Drysdale who suggested that

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<sup>402</sup> J.C.D.Clark prefers to apply the term “freethinkers” to the earlier Arian movement, with “dissent” being more appropriate in a political context in the latter part of the century. Clark, *English Society 1660-1832*.

<sup>403</sup> G.M.Ditchfield, ‘Anti-Trinitarianism and Toleration in Late eighteenth Century British Politics: The Unitarian Petition of 1792’, *JEH (Journal of Ecclesiastical History)*, 42 (1991), p.46. Cited in Isabel

“Socinianism did not come into vogue, [as opposed to Arianism], as a militant or fighting creed, till the later days of Dr. Priestley”.<sup>404</sup> Indeed Drysdale has also highlighted the significant difference in tone between the “sleepier” Arians and the far more radical political components of Priestley’s Socinianism.<sup>405</sup>

Against this backdrop was the spectre of Deism, which, as I shall discuss in the course of the chapter, was a grossly inflated threat, utilised as a political tool by High Church Anglicans in order to bolster their own position, rather than matching the reality on the ground. Latitudinarianism was another prevalent influence on English thought and theology which requires attention. As in Scotland subscription to the creeds and confessions of the established church remained a source of contention for “Dissenters” such as Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, Unitarians, and later Methodists. In the latter part of the century the American and French revolutions would have a marked effect on the political role played by the Dissenters. However, their agitation for greater political emancipation was played out against the background of a restated sense of English nationalism, which sought to castigate external enemies of the nation. As a result it was possible for the Church of England and the government to successfully equate anti-Trinitarianism with radical republicanism. Another relevant factor in the age of Enlightenment is that some of the key Socinians/Dissenters such as Issac Newton and Joseph Priestley were also prominent scientists who attempted to use the opportunities presented by reason and rationalism to harness science for the advancement of human and religious study.

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Rivers and David L. Wykes, *Joseph Priestley, scientist, philosopher, and theologian* (Oxford, 2008), p.36.

<sup>404</sup> A.H.Drysdale, *History of the Presbyterians in England: Their Rise, Decline, and Revival* (London, 1889), p.534.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

Within this chapter I shall offer a fairly brief overview at this stage of the situation in Ireland. Indeed more scope is devoted to England as the area from which it would appear that McGill's theology was chiefly drawn.

## **The English Situation**

### **I) Biddlians**

One of the most prominent figures in the early development of English Socinianism in Stuart England was John Biddle, who is often referred to as the father of English Unitarianism, and would become the first "openly Unitarian minister"<sup>406</sup> in England. Indeed, as Roland Stromberg asserts, "the Unitarians of the 1680s and 1690s were chiefly Socinians"<sup>407</sup> as a result of Biddle's work. Biddle's *XII Arguments drawn out of the Scriptures*, in addition to a later publication, "A confession of faith touching the Holy Trinity" (1648), were brought to the attention not only of the local magistrates, but also the conservative sections of parliament.

In 1652, Biddle set up a small Socinian/Unitarian congregation in London. However in addition to the criticism of local ministers, his services were also disrupted by outside agitators. It was around this time that the name "Biddlians" came into vogue"<sup>408</sup> Further written opposition was evident in the 1653 work of Matthew Poole, entitled *The Blasphemer Slain*, where he wrote: "all heresies lead to hell, and none are more dangerous nor infectious than such as assault the Sacred Trinity..Socinianism was that Hydra of Blasphemy"<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> J. D. Bowers, *Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America* (Penn State, 2007), p.19.

<sup>407</sup> Roland Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1954), p.34.

<sup>408</sup> Herbert J McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford, 1951), p.27.

<sup>409</sup> Matthew Poole, *The Blasphemer Slain* (1653), cited in John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture: Religious Intolerance and Arguments for Religious Toleration in Early Modern and 'early Enlightenment' Europe* (Cambridge, 2006), p.290.

A follower of Biddle, the Philanthropist Thomas Firmin (1632-1697), reissued an extensive range of Unitarian/Socinian tracts between 1690 and 1699.<sup>410</sup> Indeed it would appear that the works of Faustus Socinus, particularly the 1656 edition of his *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum quos Unitarios Vocant*, were “fairly widely known in England”.<sup>411</sup> Firmin later attempted to form Unitarian societies inside the Church of England, although the first minister to openly style himself as “Unitarian” was the Presbyterian Thomas Emlyn (1663-1741), who established a small congregation in London (1708). However the formation of Unitarianism as a distinct denomination would not emerge until Theophilus Lindsey’s (1723- 1808) break from the established church in 1773, following his frustration at the failure of the Feathers Tavern petition the previous year to remove the requirement to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles.<sup>412</sup> Those who would promote a purely more humanitarian version of christology emerged from such later Independents as Nathaniel Lardner, Caleb Fleming (1689-1779), Joseph Priestley, and Thomas Bebbam (1750-1829), as Isabel Rivers has suggested.<sup>413</sup>

The early influence of Socinian publications in England is illustrated by a remark made by Charles Leslie in 1708:

I have seen a very long catalogue of the many volumes of Socinian trials printed since this brief history we are now upon. And they have been dispersed with great diligence all over London, without caution or secrecy, and are still to be bought openly in the book-sellers shops. Yet no inquiry or prosecution! I have heard Socinianism by name openly defended in public coffee-houses, and the persons own themselves to be Socinians, and no notice

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<sup>410</sup> McLachlan, *Socinianism*, p. 28.

<sup>411</sup> Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1600-1780* (Cambridge, 2000), p.23.

<sup>412</sup> The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion were initiated by the Church in 1563, following on from the earlier Forty-two Articles of 1553. Subscription to them by the clergy was then established by an Act of Parliament (1571). Intended to exclude Roman Catholics and Anabaptists – the background influences on the articles included the confessions of Augsburg (1530) and Wurttemberg (1552).

<sup>413</sup> Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*, p.23.

taken. What liberty would they have? Or what perfection do they fear? They all pass under the name of good Protestants.<sup>414</sup>

“Socinianism” then had been utilised as a wide ranging heretical term of abuse in seventeenth-century England “for those who emphasised free-will, reason, moralism and the search for a working faith”,<sup>415</sup> as opposed to Calvinist interpretations of the nature of man and the Atonement.

## II) John Locke

Although Locke's Unitarianism or Socinianism in the 1690s had been traditionally cited, it had never, for John Marshall, been proven,<sup>416</sup> prior to his 1994 work which places Locke as a Unitarian by the mid 1690s at the latest. Significantly, Locke had an extensive collection of Sociniana in his library,<sup>417</sup> which included copies of the works of Faustus Socinus, as well as the Polish Brethren Jan Ludwik Wolzogen (1599-1661), Andreas Wiszowaty (1608-78), and Sclichtyng, in addition to the Racovian Catechism.<sup>418</sup> However, as Colin Brown points out, Locke refused to accept the label of ‘Socinian’,<sup>419</sup> due to the controversy surrounding it.

Locke initially set out his stall on the issue of religious freedom in his 1667 *Essay on Toleration*, which was published posthumously. In this work, he differentiated the scope of influence enjoyed by religion and civil government, drawing a line between them. As a result he thought that it would be wrong to try and

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<sup>414</sup> Charles Leslie *The Socinian Controversy Discuss'd: Wherein the Chief of the Socinian Tracts (publish'd of Late Years Here) are Consider'd* (London, 1708), p.40.

<sup>415</sup> John Marshall, ‘Locke, “Socinianism”, and “Unitarianism”’ in Michael Alexander Stewart, *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford, 2000), p.113.

<sup>416</sup> John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge, 1994), p.xx.

<sup>417</sup> David Snobelen in Martin Muslow and Jan Rohls (eds), *Socinianism and Arminianism* p.255.

<sup>418</sup> McLachlan, *Socinianism*, p.327ff.

<sup>419</sup> Colin Brown, Steve Wilkens, Alan G. Padgett, *Christianity & Western Thought: a History of Philosophers, Ideas & Movements* (Intervarsity, 1990), p.400.

force any particular religion, or religious views upon any individual. None had the authority to obtrude their particular interpretations and initiatives on the grounds that they are "from" a divine command. Moreover, Locke could find no New Testament precedent for the subjugation of others by the Church. Consequently, state power could not be handed over to any one particular church, but should instead make provision for the toleration of all. Clerical power and authority could only be wielded within the confines of their churches.

The imposition of any religion by force was therefore anathema to Locke. Even where a country or state had been subjugated by another, a prince had no right to enforce their own views on the general population. Persecution on the grounds of doctrinal difference could not be established either. In his opinion there should be no punishment or penalties incurred for idolatry. If churches and religious organisations were able to enjoy the same freedoms across the board, Locke believed that wars and strife between competing religious factions would simply wither away.

Alister McGrath suggests that the theology postulated by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) had significant consequences for English religious thought in the eighteenth century.<sup>420</sup> This is due to two particular stresses employed by Locke in his work.

- An increase in the study of natural theology as opposed to a concentration on revelation was contemporary with Locke's notion of the requirement to concretely prove "positive knowledge"<sup>421</sup> from experience.
- The heightened influence of rationalism which was displayed in the Lockean concept of morality and ethical conduct as being central to the character of God.

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<sup>420</sup> McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* p.138-9.

It is indeed interesting to find an example of the admiration with which McGill himself viewed Locke, as he made a positive citation and reference to the Englishman and his views on rationalism in the *Practical Essay*.<sup>422</sup>

### III) Issac Newton

David Snobelen argues that Newton is the most significant “early” figure to be associated with Socinianism.<sup>423</sup> Locke granted him access to his literary collection of Sociniana.<sup>424</sup> He was also a neighbour of the Arian Samuel Clarke. As he strongly dismissed the doctrine of the Trinity, Newton was considered by contemporaries to be a Socinian. As Snobelen contends however this may have more due to the fact that the Socinians were “the most intellectually-sophisticated and vibrant anti-Trinitarian movement of his time”.<sup>425</sup> However, as Snobelen continues to posit, some of Newton’s opponents based their concerns on a rather limited appraisal of what Socinianism actually was.

Newton held a voluntarist ideal of God in common with the Socinians. Indeed, his belief that Christ is God by means of his role and later office, rather than his nature, is very close to the Socinian concept. In suggesting that the unity between the Father and the Son was comprised of a moral nature, instead of a “metaphysical quality of essence”,<sup>426</sup> Newton also agrees with the Socinians.

But, as David Snobelen also suggests, there is need for caution. While it is true that most of what Newton says about God and Christ, is compatible with Socinianism, most of Newton’s Christology apart from the pre-existence is also compatible with

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> McGill, *Practical Essay*, p.370.

<sup>423</sup> Snobelen in Martin Mulsow, Jan Rohls (eds), *Socinianism* p.288.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Snobelen, *Issac Newton and Socinianism: associations with a greater heresy* p.5.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid, p.15.

fourth-century Arianism.<sup>427</sup> Furthermore Snoblen argues that Newton's anti-Trinitarian opinions were driven by his concern to promote natural philosophy, a theme which would also be championed by later theological radicals in the eighteenth century.<sup>428</sup>

#### **IV) The Trinitarian Controversy**

Although there was not a generally organised form of Socinianism/Unitarianism in the later seventeenth/early eighteenth centuries, their influence was felt in the attempts to introduce a wider toleration of doctrinal differences, as well as a reductionist approach to the fundamental tenets of Christianity, which in turn would lead to Latitudinarianism.

In particular the Athanasian Creed, with its emphasis upon Trinitarian orthodoxy, came under attack, with attempts made to reduce credal reliance within the Church of England to include only the Apostles Creed. Following the Toleration Act of 1689, (which legitimised the place of Dissenters) the Book of Common Prayer was revised, although the move to reject the Athanasian Creed was overturned by more conservative opponents. For Brian Young, this sense of freedom of enquiry (held dear by the Protestants of the era) was under threat, thus they continued to oppose subscription to the Athanasian Creed, as well as the Thirty-Nine Articles.<sup>429</sup>

The 'Trinitarian Controversy' was initiated in 1687 with the appearance of the *Brief History of the Unitarians or Socinians*, written by the Rev Stephen Nye. This work argued for a more tolerant attitude towards Unitarian views of the Trinity, with a full scale acceptance of their beliefs within the Church of England following as a

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>428</sup> Stephen Snobelen, 'To Discourse of God: Isaac Newton's heterodox theology and his natural philosophy', [www.isaac-newton.org](http://www.isaac-newton.org) [accessed May 4<sup>th</sup> 2009].

result. Phillip Dixon cites Stephen Nye's work as pivotal, which he regards as an apologetic in defence of Unitarianism, and purporting that Trinitarian doctrine is simply tritheism which would appear to restrict attempts to gain converts from, for instance, Judaism and Islam.<sup>430</sup> Nye's *Brief Notes on the Creed of St. Athanasius* then surfaced, with a restated call for its repudiation from official church liturgy, on the grounds of its non-Biblical beliefs.

Both works were widely disseminated and caused controversy for both laity and ministers. As a result sermons and tracts were published on both sides of the Trinitarian debate, with the Unitarians contending that the doctrine implied a belief in three separate gods. Indeed the Unitarian contributions continued for a full decade. In this atmosphere Dr Arthur Bury (1623-1713), Rector of Exeter College Oxford published (anonymously), *The Naked Gospel* in 1690 which argued that Trinitarian speculations were redundant and indeed detrimental to church life. For Bury, the definition of Christianity was as straightforward as having a faith in Christ.<sup>431</sup>

Dr William Sherlock (1641-1707) attempted to repudiate Bury and others in the same year, with his publication of *A Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*. Dr Robert South (1634-1716) then replied to Sherlock three years later with *Animadversions of Dr. Sherlock's Book*, in which he restated the accusation of tritheism.

Finally, Oxford University disassociated itself from Sherlock's views, citing them as being tantamount to heresy. Following this the King (at the behest of the

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<sup>429</sup> Brian.W.Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, 1988), p.21.

<sup>430</sup> Phillip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Dispute, the doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 2005) pp.108ff.

<sup>431</sup> E.M.Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage*, p.199.

Church), produced a directive for clergymen to refrain from further speculations regarding the nature of Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>432</sup>

Reinvigorated by what they considered a victory, the Unitarians within the Church attempted to steer a more conciliatory course. Thomas Firmin composed *The Agreement of the Unitarians with the Catholic Church and the Church of England* (1697), whereby he outlined what was held in common, rather than continuing to focus upon differences. Firmin did however wish to see Unitarian congregations established within the Church, in order to reaffirm their belief in the unity of God in worship.<sup>433</sup>

## **VI) Samuel Clarke**

As James Dybikowski has demonstrated, Clarke believed that the basis of Christianity should rest on scripture alone, not the oral traditions favoured by the Roman Catholic Church - although he did admittedly countenance use of the early church fathers as an additional source. Revelation then had to be viewed through the lens of human reason, in order to propagate scientific enquiry, as Dybikowski again proposes.<sup>434</sup>

Clarke suggested that the only external enemy of Christianity was found in the Atheist camp. However, as he then argued that atheism had been discredited by reason and natural philosophy, the enemies of the church were reduced to those who created division, by refusing to accept the tool of reason in evaluating scripture and revelation.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid, p.200.

<sup>434</sup> James Dybikowski in Martin Fitzpatrick (ed), *The Enlightenment World* (Oxford, 2004), p.44.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

As Ernest Rupp suggests, Clarke was actually very keen to distance himself from accusations of Arianism.<sup>436</sup> Indeed he initially agreed to stand by the Thirty–nine Articles under oath, although he later overturned this, in order to publish his works on the Trinity.<sup>437</sup>

Thomas Pfizenmaier argues that Clarke's *Scriptural Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) must be fixed within the context of the time he was working in. The influence of modern science, led by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and the continuing resonance of the Protestant Reformation both came to bear on Clarke's thought. This was an age, for instance, in which human rationality and reason had come to replace accepted revelation and authority in the search for truth.<sup>438</sup>

In a similar vein the earlier Cambridge Platonists<sup>439</sup> had emphasised the importance of placing reason alongside scripture. Virtue and morality, as well as an extension of religious tolerance, were key beliefs upon which the Platonists' outlook rested. This was to be a key influence in the later Latitudinarian movement.

Indeed, Richard Brown argues that “the prevailing spirit of the age was Latitudinarianism, the prevailing tone was that of reason”.<sup>440</sup>

Like Locke then, Clarke stressed toleration in order to broaden the scope of Christian "truth" beyond the confines of any particular sect or denomination.

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<sup>436</sup> Ernest Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791* (Oxford, 1986), p.253.

<sup>437</sup> John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion, The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660-1750* (London, 1996), p.168.

<sup>438</sup> Thomas C. Pfizenmaier, *The Trinitarian Theology of Dr. Samuel Clarke (1675-1729): Context, Sources, and Controversy* (Leiden, 1997), p.13.

<sup>439</sup> The Cambridge Platonists were a group of philosophers based at the University in the middle of the mid-seventeenth century (from around 1633-88). A key component of their thought was an argument for moderation. They believed that reason was the final arbiter of disagreement, and so they attempted to steer a course between the Puritans and High Churchmen. Termed “Latitudinarian” due to their reductionist approach to doctrine, they included such men as Henry More (1614–1687) and John Smith (1618–1652).

<sup>440</sup> Brown, *Church and state in modern Britain*, p.99.

## VII) Thomas Chubb

Thomas Chubb (1679-1747) would appear to have been significantly influenced by the work of Issac Newton, as John Redwood suggests.<sup>441</sup> In his *Supremacy of the Father Asserted* (1718), he outlined a prayer which was addressed to the Father as the First Cause.<sup>442</sup> Additionally, he argued that Christ was not equal with God, as God was the prime mover or sufficient sole cause of every worldly effect. The Son acknowledged this, according to Chubb, and by “debasing” himself through taking on human form, he had relinquished his sense and place of glory which he previously possessed.<sup>443</sup>

Despite being condemned by Clagett for holding this position, Chubb returned by citing some eight arguments for the inferiority of the Son to the Father. By stressing the superiority of God as the First Cause (in a Newtonian sense) over the role of Christ as Mediator, and appealing to reason, and natural religion as well as scriptural enquiry, Chubb was clearly on a collision course with the authorities of his day. Yet rather than stepping back and renouncing his position, he again restated it in his later works.

## VIII) Deism—Myth or reality?

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<sup>441</sup> Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule*, p.168.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

“The number of Deists is said to be daily increasing” said Ephraim Chambers, writing in 1728.<sup>444</sup>

Deists varied in belief, although those accused of being Deists generally accepted that although God had been active in the creation, he had then withdrawn from involvement in the human sphere. Clearly this had major ramifications for Christian faith, and the role of revelation in religion.

In his recent work S.J.Barnett has made a compelling case for the greatly exaggerated place of Deists and Deism as a movement in eighteenth century England.<sup>445</sup> He argues, based on more recent research, that it suited the ends of the Anglican church in particular to construct a Deist “threat” in society, to try to maintain orthodoxy and stability (for instance both William Whiston (1667-1752) and Chubb were suspected of being “Deists” rather than the Arians which they were). Deism indeed was used as a “catch all” term of abuse and by-word for heterodoxy, which has probably led to the previously over-inflated notion of the scope and influence of this “movement”. Barnett’s opinion is a departure from other historians on the question of Deist influence in England. J.C.D Clark for instance suggested that “deism was launched as a self-conscious movement in the mid 1690s, with its chief spokesperson being John Toland.” (1670-1722)<sup>446</sup> J.Walsh and S.Taylor also cited a deist movement that in the 1730s became “dangerously fashionable”.<sup>447</sup>

Although Barnett accepts John Tolland, Matthew Tindal (1657-1733), Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Anthony Collins (1676-1729), Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751), and Thomas Morgan (d.1743), (in addition to Voltaire (1694-1778),

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<sup>444</sup> Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed (London, 1741). Cited in Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, 2005), p.32.

<sup>445</sup> S.J.Barnett, *The Enlightenment and religion: The myths of modernity* (Manchester, 2003).

<sup>446</sup> Clark, *English Society 1688-1832*. p.280.

Montesquieu (1689-1755), and Diderot (1713-84), in France, and Herman Reimarus (in Germany) as quantified “Deists”, from his research of other lists, it is difficult to add to this number.<sup>448</sup> Indeed, in total there would appear to be no more than ten English, five French, one Italian and three German Deists, which can hardly constitute a “movement” of any form across Europe, as Barnett suggests.<sup>449</sup> In addition to this, the men involved were of course operating in different geographical locations, as well as across varied time frames.

Barnett does however acknowledge the difficulties inherent in compiling such a list, as there was no clear, comprehensive programme of Deist beliefs.<sup>450</sup> Indeed, Samuel Clarke had identified such a problem in his *Boyle Lectures* (1705), in which he stated: “there is no such thing as a consistent Scheme of Deism”.<sup>451</sup> However, this does not the fact that it remains practically impossible to talk of any unified Deist movement or structure in the eighteenth century.

Why then did the church chose to focus on this particular threat? As Barnett continues to aver, the Anglican hierarchy had a background of inflating perceived threats to their own establishment. Prior to the Deist “period” they had cited firstly popery, (in the form of Charles II (1630-85) and James II (1633-1701)) and then Atheism as indicative of the evils of the age, again out of proportion to the numbers actually involved.<sup>452</sup>

The printing press, as well as the pulpit, was crucial in shaping public opinion along the lines desired by the church in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth

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<sup>447</sup> J. Walsh and S. Taylor, *The Church and Anglicanism in the “Long” Eighteenth Century*, in J. Walsh, S. Taylor and C. Haydon (eds), *The Church in England 1689-1833* (Cambridge, 1993), p.21.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>451</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*, Boyle Lectures, 1705, cited in John Martin Creed, *Religious Thought in the Eighteenth Century: Illustrated from writers of the period*, (Cambridge, 1934), p.26.

centuries and beyond. Pamphlet wars ensued in which radical dissent was attacked for political gain. Significantly the two party system of Whig and Tory, with the Tories the party of High Church Anglicanism, and the Whigs of a more dissenting nature, had been established by the early decades of the 1700s. Just as the Church of England was able to tar its opponents with a broad brush of Deist sentiment, (which served to confuse Deism and Dissent) so too the “Dissenters” (or “freethinkers”) used anti-clericalism and anti-Catholicism to undermine the establishment. For example Robert Howard’s 1694 *History of Religion* demonstrates how he believed that the Church was under the illicit influence of priestcraft from its early days, although he also acknowledged that the state acceptance of Christianity under Constantine (272-337) was a positive step forward in extricating the hold of priestcraft upon the church. However, this was to be overturned by the Catholic church, extending the reach of the Roman pagan priests in later times:

This same method of priestcraft (Roman pagans) is continued in the Church of Rome: the Romish Saints and Angels answer to the Demons and Heroes, Deify’d by the Heathen Priests; and their Idol of Bread, Divinity infus’d into crosses Images, Agnus Dei’s and Relicks, correspond to the Pillars, Statues and Images consecrated by Roman Priests.<sup>453</sup>

This treatment of the hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic Church was a thinly veiled swipe at the similar construct of Anglicanism as well. Because his polemic involved the notion of priesthood, it has been suggested by Justin Champion that Howard was a Deist, as he was considered to be by High Church Anglicans of the time.<sup>454</sup> However, as Barnett points out, merely attacking the clerical pattern of the established church did not necessarily equate with Deism (hence one of the reasons

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<sup>452</sup> See Barnett pp.81-87.

<sup>453</sup> Robert Howard, *History of Religion, As it has been manag’d by Priestcraft* (London, 1709) pp.321-2. Cited in Barnett, p.90.

<sup>454</sup> Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* (Cambridge, 1992 reprint) pp.137-8.

for the difficulty in defining Deism as a movement or set of beliefs). Rather it seems more likely that Howard was an “anti-Trinitarian Dissenter, possibly a Unitarian”.<sup>455</sup>

Further evidence for this is drawn from the fact that he published the *History of Religion* anonymously, as anti-Trinitarian thought was proscribed under the 1689 Toleration Act. In his work, the Whig MP Howard had also suggested that reason was the best guide for spiritual development, which, coupled with his anti-clerical sentiment caused the High Church Anglican Francis Atterbury (1663-1732) to class him as a “scorner”.<sup>456</sup>

The case of Robert Howard then is a good illustration of the tactics of the Church of England on the one hand, dismissing him as a Deist, and in so doing buttressing their own standing with the faithful, and the Dissenters on the other. Also, utilising anti-Catholic rhetoric, by way of publication (and leaning on the recently held form of such sentiment in England) to suit their own ends.

John Redwood contends that men such as Newton, Clarke, Chubb and Whiston arrived at their conclusions by decidedly different avenues. For Newton it was his belief that he could find evidence for an omnipotent God, going back in time to find a single cause, and moving towards a soon-to-come millennium. Clarke drew his ideas from Newton (particularly Newton’s notion of the cosmos), Whiston, and his Arian contemporaries. Chubb derived his thought from scriptural exegesis and the influence of Deism. Likewise, Whiston was inspired by his own reading of the Bible but believed in the Apostolic Constitutions rather than Deism.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Barnett, p.91.

<sup>456</sup> Eveline Cruickshanks et al, *The House of Commons, 1690-1715* (Cambridge, 2002), p.407.

<sup>457</sup> Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule* p.170.

## IX) Anti-Subscription Campaigns

However, in the course of the eighteenth century, the main body of English Presbyterianism - and the dissenting academies which trained its ministers - drifted steadily from Arianism towards organised Unitarianism. Illustrative of the anti-subscriptionist movement was the 1753 decision by the Exeter Assembly, which had rejected earlier recommendations of the Salters Hall meeting,<sup>458</sup> to omit its Trinitarian test on ordination candidates.<sup>459</sup> Inevitably, in this atmosphere the place of Calvinism as a system of doctrine was also called into question. In 1740 the Dissenter, John Taylor (1694–1761), published an influential anti-Calvinist work, *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin*, the title of which bears obvious parallels to Samuel Clarke's earlier Arian work, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712). In 1757 Taylor was to become the first head of the new Warrington Academy, a liberal institution which, by accepting Joseph Priestley in 1761, illustrated the further diminution of English Presbyterianism during the later part of the eighteenth century into an undogmatic rational dissent.<sup>460</sup>

Furthermore Taylor emphasised the efficacy of Christ's death as being derived from his perfect *obedience* to the will of God, rather than by way of suffering under the Divine wrath, as a punishment for the sins of humanity<sup>461</sup> (a key theme of McGill's, which I will address in greater detail in the chapter on his main work).

George Benson (1691-1762) held a position similar to Taylor's. Benson had studied at Glasgow University, and in 1740 he was appointed by the congregation of

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<sup>458</sup> The general effect of the Salters' Hall conference (1719), which was convened by James Peirce (1673–1726) of Exeter, was to allow dissenting congregations to shape and define their own orthodoxy.

<sup>459</sup> Gascoigne, in Lawrence Stone, *The First Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 30.

<sup>460</sup> Michael Watts, *The Dissenters, Volume 1* (Oxford, 1978) p. 370.

<sup>461</sup> G.T.Eddy, *Dr Taylor of Norwich : Wesley's Arch Heretic* (Peterborough, 2003), p.55.

Crutched Friars, contemporary with Dr Nathaniel Lardner, whom he replaced in 1749. Christ's pre-existence with God was also central to Benson's thought.<sup>462</sup>

The anti-subscriptionist movement gained further momentum in July 1771 with the advent of the Feathers Tavern petition, with its aim to petition parliament to relax clerical subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, as Hugh Trevor-Roper has observed. The petition was signed by some 250 adherents, encompassing the entire fellowship of Peterhouse College. Although securing the support of significant allies from the political establishment, the petition was rejected in the House of Commons in February 1772 by 217 votes to 71. Despite this parliamentary setback and a subsequent rejection by the Commons in May 1774 - which this time did not even reach a decision - the controversy continued, though mostly outside the established church, with some Cantabrigian ministers leaving the church on grounds of conscience to join the Unitarian rational Dissenters.<sup>463</sup>

## **X) Latitudinarians**

A slightly earlier, but also prevalent strand came from the Latitudinarians, who included prominent churchmen trying to steer a course between the Puritan Calvinists and the High Church group. For Latitudinarians this "moral certainty was the lynchpin of their rational theology".<sup>464</sup> They approached Christian living in a practical, non-mystical way, valuing reason, and attempting to make things simple. This led to a strong emphasis on ethics and "moral theology"<sup>465</sup> although theological

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<sup>462</sup> Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford, 1996). Wiles notes that Taylor was awarded a D.D. by Glasgow University; Benson was not as he was suspected of Socinianism. p.144.

<sup>463</sup> Hugh Trevor Roper, *From Counter-Reformation to Glorious Revolution* (London, 1992), p. 281.

<sup>464</sup> Martin Ignatius, *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-century Church of England* (London, 1992), p.64.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid*, p.124.

views were fairly minimal and not too deep.<sup>466</sup> As Gordon J Schochet has suggested, to aim for pluralism and a more egalitarian participation in society and politics was Presbyterian or Latitudinarian in outlook.<sup>467</sup>

### **XI) Dissent in an Age of Revolution and the “Second Wave” - 1760 onwards**

‘Dissenters’ according to Carole Fungaroli may be defined as Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Unitarians, and (post 1795), Methodists. Their shared opposition to the establishment then lay in subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles of faith of the Church of England (1563), and the Act of Uniformity (1662).<sup>468</sup>

Fungaroli has also provided statistics for these denominations in 1714, which were as follows: Presbyterians – 180,000; Baptists and Congregationalists – 60,000 each; Quakers – less than 40,000. In 1715 around 8% of the population were Dissenters, by 1815 that figure had risen to some 20%, following the advent of Methodism.<sup>469</sup>

Methodists such as John Fletcher (1729-85) argued that the antinomian<sup>470</sup> nature of Calvinism fed naturally into political subversion.

The transition from the ecclesiastical to civil antinomianism is easy and obvious, for as he that reverences the law of God will naturally revere the just commands of the king, so that he thinks himself free from the laws of the Lord will hardly think himself bound by the laws of the Sovereign.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Knud Haakonssen (ed), *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain*, (Cambridge, 2006), p.93.

<sup>467</sup> Gordon J Schochet in John Greville Agard Pocock, *The Varieties of British Political Thought, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1996), p.342.

<sup>468</sup> Carole Fungaroli in Gerald Newman, Leslie Ellen Brown, *Britain in the Hanoverian Age, 1714-1837: An Encyclopedia* (London, 1997), p.193.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Antinomianism meaning “against law”. A term applying to those who stood opposed to the place and scope of the law in the Christian life. See Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms*, p.10

<sup>471</sup> John Fletcher, *Vindication in Works Vol 5*, p.43, cited in Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760-1832*, p.32.

However, Augustus Toplady (1740-78), a Calvinist within the Church of England, offered a defence of his theological position by reiterating his opposition to republicanism, his defence of the constitutional monarchy and his coalescence with episcopal political thinking.<sup>472</sup>

Derek Murray made a useful distinction between the terms “Dissenters” and “nonconformists” in England and Scotland. Although “Dissenter” was applied to those who left the established church in the eighteenth century, such as the Seceders and the Relief churches, it did not adopt the same outlook towards the Church of Scotland, as the Dissenters and nonconformists in England did towards the established church. Indeed, Baptists, Methodists, Independents and Unitarians (bearing the same titles as those in England), never had the strength of numbers in Scotland as they did south of the border in order to challenge the establishment. Nor were they hampered by the same legal barriers as the English Dissenters were.<sup>473</sup> James E Bradley has successfully sketched a:

coherent, alternative political nation, whose marginalized self-identity required no such theory of heterodoxy as a trigger to explain radical disaffection in the age of the American and French revolutions. as existing in England between 1720 and the 1770s.<sup>474</sup>

He argues this case as against previous scholars who believed that the appearance of dissent in the 1770s emerged from a previously subdued (since 50 years beforehand) section of radicals within English society. Rather, for Bradley there are clear pointers of later dissent in the treatises composed in the intervening period.<sup>475</sup>

Outside their displays of “loyalty” on days set aside for the commemoration of events with national significance, the Dissenters exhibited a high Christology in their

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<sup>472</sup> Hole, *Pulpits, Politics*, p.32.

<sup>473</sup> Derek Murray, ‘Nonconformity’ in DSCH, p.629.

<sup>474</sup> Bradley, *The Religious Origins*, p.206.

other works between 1720 and 70. Interestingly there is an overlap in thought, whether produced by “orthodox” Trinitarians, like Charles Owen, Samuel Chandler (1693-1766) and Samuel Palmer, or Socinians/anti-Trinitarians such as Samuel Bourn (1689–1754), Micaiah Towgood (1700-92) and Nathaniel Lardner on the other.<sup>476</sup>

This convergence was centred on the view that Christ was the head and therefore only lawmaker for the church. It followed from this that private judgement, with Christ the sole arbiter of conscience, must be upheld. Additionally, the spiritual and voluntary nature of the church meant that the common people must have the right to select and appoint their own ministers.<sup>477</sup> Clearly there was a form of united outlook across the British Isles, with regard to these issues, from the English Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists and low-church Anglicans on the one hand, to the Secession and Relief churches in Scotland on the other.

In opposition to the voluntary nature of the Dissenters, Anglicans posited the authority of Christ as being inside the established church. Therefore the divisions of the mid-to-late eighteenth century in England were based not on whether Christ was the head of the church, but rather, what the practical and spiritual consequences of this doctrine entailed.

It is easy to see why such a background led the Dissenting groups to form opposition to the government, but also led them into anticlericalism as well. With an

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid, p.197.

<sup>476</sup> In the 1750's Micaiah Towgood published *A Dissent from the Church of England, Fully Justified: and Proved the Genuine and Just Consequence of the Allegiance Due to Christ, the Only Lawgiver in the Church*. Nathaniel Lardner issued *Two Schemes of a Trinity Considered, and the Divine Unity Asserted* (1784). On the trinitarian side Charles Owen's *Plain Reasons for Dissenting* (1715), Samuel Chandler *The Old Whig: or Consistent Protestant* (1738) and Samuel Palmer's *The Protestant - Dissenters Catechism* (1774), all serve to illustrate this point. See Bradley, *The Religious Origins* pp.240 ff. Lardner who had studied for the Presbyterian ministry in London, and also at Utrecht and Leiden, took licence as a preacher in 1709, but was unsuccessful at this stage. Following a period as a domestic chaplain (1713-21), he was appointed to deliver the Tuesday evening lecture in the Presbyterian chapel, Old Jewry, London, (1724) and then in 1729 was appointed assistant minister to the Presbyterian congregation in Crutched Friars. He was also awarded a D.D. by Marischal College, Aberdeen, in 1743. See Andrew Kippis,

<sup>477</sup> Ibid, p.198.

egalitarian spirit prevalent, there could be little countenance of the hierarchical ecclesiastical structures present within the Anglican church. In his 1762 *The Palladium of Great Britain and Ireland, Or Historical Strictures of Liberty*, Caleb Fleming (1698-1779) stated: “In the province of religion, verily, every man is upon a level; the prince has no superiority to the peasant, nor the most learned cleric to the unlettered laic”.<sup>478</sup> Indeed, J.C.D Clark has claimed that the age of ‘radicalism’ in late eighteenth century England was one of “paranoia”,<sup>479</sup> in the sense that Dissenters became rather obsessed with persecution, not only of themselves, but also encompassing slavery, and turned it against the corruptions which they perceived in the state and religious establishments. God was now invoked in the fight against monarchical and ecclesiastical authority. As Clark also states, in this period, it would be wrong to imagine a ‘secularisation’ of politics beginning to emerge, without properly considering the doctrinal and theological background of dissent.<sup>480</sup>

Furthermore anticlericalism was directed at both the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, where the Dissenters detected a usurpation of power, be it from the church, or government, local or national, they opposed it on the grounds of its lack of transparency and democracy.<sup>481</sup> As in Scotland, with some Seceders willing to support American Independence, the French Revolution, and attempt to prevent Catholic Relief, so in England the Dissenters were driven, not only by their high Christology, but also by their social dislocation from the establishment. Again, in common with the Scottish scene, and the contentious political issues of the 1790s we

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<sup>478</sup> Caleb Fleming, *The Palladium of Great Britain and Ireland. Or Historical Strictures of Liberty, from Before the Reformation Down to the Present Times. Which Prove, to Whom and to what it Has Chiefly Owed Its Origin and Preservation, in These Islands* (London, 1762), p.4.

<sup>479</sup> J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge, 1994), p.38.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid*, p.39.

<sup>481</sup> Bradley, *The Religious Origins*, p.200.

find orthodox and heterodox agents in England working together in the fields of theology and politics.

James Sack has outlined the establishment case, made via the press which sought to equate Dissenting theology with Republican sentiment.<sup>482</sup> For instance, the *General Evening Post*, which enjoyed the patronage of prime minister Frederick North (Lord North) (1732-92) “denounced the Dissenters, both of England and America, as dangerous radicals bent upon the overthrow of the constitution, as well as...Vipers in the bosom of the Christian church, who sucked in that poison of asps in the seminaries”.<sup>483</sup> Therefore, prior to the French Revolution the connection between ‘radical’ theology, as displayed by the Unitarians and others, and anti-establishment politics had been made. Indeed, Sack makes the convincing case that the loyalist approach of William Pitt (1759–1806) in the 1790s towards the Dissenters was akin to that utilised by North some fifteen to twenty years beforehand.<sup>484</sup>

Interestingly, following the links between Dissent and the French Jacobins which focused upon political considerations (with the Jacobins being associated with atheism and infidelity),<sup>485</sup> with the passing of the threat of revolution in the early nineteenth century, attacks on Dissenters switched to highlight religious and theological concerns.<sup>486</sup>

Despite the attempts to smear them with Republican ideas, Robert Hole has highlighted that rather than chiefly political grievances, it was the right to religious freedom which drove men such as Joseph Priestley (notwithstanding his being termed

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<sup>482</sup> Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative*, pp 200-201.

<sup>483</sup> *The General Evening Post*, June 11<sup>th</sup> 1776 and March 18th 1779. Cited in Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative*, p.200.

<sup>484</sup> Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative*, p.201.

<sup>485</sup> Hole, *Pulpits, politics and public order*, p.151.

<sup>486</sup> Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative*, p.202.

‘Gunpowder Joe’<sup>487</sup>) as their main aim, instead of any serious attempt to achieve constitutional reform at this stage.<sup>488</sup>

Although this discussion focuses on the English scene I would propose that one of McGill’s key opponents, John Jamieson, who was well connected in establishment circles in London and therefore informed of the connections between radical, heterodox theology and anti-establishment overtones, could well have attacked McGill’s theology with this wider picture in mind. This will be examined in the later chapter on McGill’s opponents.

In addition to their disaffection over the failure to repeal the Test and Corporations Acts, Dissenters were vociferous at a local level in English politics as well. At borough level there were clashes between Anglican corporations and anti-corporation parties of the Dissenters (including low church Anglicans), as Bradley confirms.<sup>489</sup> Indeed, where Dissenting clergy displayed a pro-American stance in the 1770s in places like Norwich, Bristol, Cambridge, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Taunton, there had been a previous record of disputes between corporation and non-corporation parties in these boroughs.<sup>490</sup>

Whereas the Anglican Church was comfortable with eighteenth century political stability, the Dissenters protested. “Their philosophy was”, according to Anthony Lincoln, “an active preparation for a new age. The Dissenters had hardened their hearts against a state that had rejected them. Deeply and firmly established in

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<sup>487</sup> Schofield *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley*, p.273.

<sup>488</sup> Hole, *Pulpits, politics and public order*, p.120.

<sup>489</sup> Bradley, *The Religious Origins*, p.202.

<sup>490</sup> James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-Conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 2002) p.257. Also, William Turner, *A Short Sketch of the History of Protestant Nonconformity and of the Society Assembly in Hanover Square Newcastle* (Newcastle, 1811) cited in Bradley.

the society of England, they formed a great, permanent undercurrent of dissatisfied criticism of the state of England.”<sup>491</sup>

Herbert Aptheker contends that English radicals believed George III’s (1738-1820) aim in fighting the war in America was to establish a military force in England, in league with the landed aristocracy, capable of administering a treasury which would be independent of parliament. In addition to this, by citing domestic opposition to the war as treasonous he would be able to secure a stronger grip on parliament.<sup>492</sup>

Pamphlets were extensively produced, such as Catherine Sawbridge Maccaulay’s *Address to the People of England, Scotland and Ireland on the Present Importance Crises of Affairs*, and John Cartwright’s *American Independence, the Interest and Glory of Britain* (both 1775).<sup>493</sup>

In John Taylor’s opinion, “revolution made the British monarchy and the English church into conservative institutions. After the American Revolution, both became agents of reaction”.<sup>494</sup>

Of key significance in the late eighteenth century, as J.C.D.Clark outlines, was the fact that leaders of church and state believed that there was a connection between anti-Trinitarian thought and revolutionary republicanism.<sup>495</sup>

Indeed the whole concept of monarchy was an essential link with the nature of English identity, redefined and restated as it was against the external enemies of the nation, in particular France. The fact that England was able to secure a high level of unity by 1789 was due in the most part to the processes of law and established

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<sup>491</sup> Anthony Lincoln, *Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent, 1763-1800* (1938, reprint New York), p.272.

<sup>492</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *The American Revolution, 1763-1783: A History of the American People: an Interpretation* (New York,1960), p.144.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid*, p.145.

religion, which enabled the position of the King to be strengthened.<sup>496</sup> As a result the more radical politics displayed by leading Unitarians such as Richard Price (1723-91)<sup>497</sup> and Joseph Priestley were much less likely to be tolerated. The clamour for greater parliamentary reform was overtaken by the events in America and France, giving way to a heightened loyalty to king and country in the 1770s and 80s.<sup>498</sup> In his *Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1789), Price had rejected the notions of classical English identity, bound up with the crown, welcoming instead the ‘religion of humanity’, which was finding its expression in France. This new emancipation from the concept of particular nation states would, for Price, lead to a move by people everywhere to recognise their “true” human nature, and as a result act in a more benevolent manner.<sup>499</sup> Furthermore Price was opposed to a stress on the superiority of one country over another, which again did not fit with the nationalistic aims of English society in this period. In Priestley’s *Letters to Edmund Burke* (1791), he compared the civil establishment of religion to a “fungus, or parasitical plant”,<sup>500</sup> By comparison he believed that the National Assembly in France had to their “immortal honour... restored to all the churches in that country, their original right of appointing

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<sup>494</sup> John A. Taylor, *British Monarchy, English Church Establishment and Civil Liberty* (Westport, 1996), p.107.

<sup>495</sup> Clark, *English Society: 1660-1832* pp 232-317 and 358-422.

<sup>496</sup> G.M.Ditchfield, ‘Ecclesiastical Policy under Lord North’ in John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (eds), *The Church of England 1689-1833*, pp.228-46.

<sup>497</sup> Richard Price (1723-1791) was a member of the Club of Honest Whigs, who preached and issued publications in support of American Independence and the French Revolution. As Paul Wood notes, Price had contact with a number of reforming politicians, such as John Horne Tooke (1736-1812) and Benjamin Vaughan. See Paul Wood, *Science and Dissent in England, 1688-1945* (London, 2004), p.120-121. Tooke’s political views were continued by Dr Thomas Beddoes (1760-1808), who, in common with Priestley, argued that scientific rationalism could provide a useful counterbalance to the oppressive nature of heterodoxy.

<sup>498</sup> Clark, *English Society: 1660-1832*, p.238.

<sup>499</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London, 1789). Cited in Clark, *English Society* p.233.

<sup>500</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France, etc.*, Letter VIII, ‘Of a civil Establishment being essential to Christianity’. Cited in Creed (ed), *Religious Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, p.297.

their own pastors, both the ordinary clergy and the bishops.”<sup>501</sup> As Clark points out however, the new unity of the 1770s and 80s stood in stark contrast to the schisms of the past, such as the Revolution of 1688.<sup>502</sup> Therefore, it would appear that the jingoism of the age towards external enemies was created by war and revolution, as a flexible response.

## **XII) The John Wilkes case**

In seeking to find an appropriate political vehicle for dissent, it appeared that neither the Tory nor Whig parties were in tune with the demands of the age. With regard to the Whigs in particular, a critique of the government which retained something of the earlier Commonwealthmen brand of republicanism (but which was also anti-Jacobite in tone) was required. Caroline Robbins suggests that for the Commonwealthman Whigs the significance of the Revolution Settlement of 1688 had lain in its “natural rights and contractual obligations”.<sup>503</sup>

An earlier response to this problem was that provided by James Burgh (1714-75) and John Brown (1715-66), who viewed the Jacobite rebellions, (1715,19 and 45) as well as the Lisbon earthquake (1755) through the lens of divine providence, punishing humans for their laxity in the realm of morals. Of particular focus was the excess of “luxuries and irreligion” of the age,<sup>504</sup> which led in turn to an absence of proper manners and morality.

John Wilkes (1727-97) on the other hand utilised ridicule to attack the establishment, particularly via the pages of the *North Briton* weekly. From a Dissenting family background and education, Wilkes had accepted Arianism at an

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid, in Creed, p.296.

<sup>502</sup> Clark, *English Society*, p.235.

<sup>503</sup> Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-century Commonwealthman* (Harvard, 1959), pp.62-3.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid, p.363.

early stage.<sup>505</sup> In writing his *An Essay on Women* and *Veni Creator* (1763), he attacked the Earl of Bute, as well as accusing George Stone, Archbishop of Armagh, of sodomy. The response from the House of Lords in turn accused him of:

A most scandalous, obscene, and impious Libel; a gross Profanation of many parts of the Holy Scriptures; and a most wicked and blasphemous attempt to ridicule and vilify the person of our Blessed Saviour.<sup>506</sup>

The controversy forced Wilkes to live in exile in Paris for four years, and he was imprisoned for just under two years on his return.<sup>507</sup>

However, despite Wilkes being a rallying point for Dissenters, and in particular Arians/Socinians, in the opinion of J.C.D. Clark his impact was limited. Clark describes him as an: “unusually populist symptom of a Freethinking, anti-clerical, anti-establishment tradition...[who] founded no tradition of mass action..and left no intellectual legacy”.<sup>508</sup>

Wilkes is however a good example of the switch to a renewed and specifically political agenda for English Unitarians, post 1760. Preoccupied in the middle of the century by defeating Jacobitism and promoting anti-Catholicism, they now turned to aim their fire at the “priestcraft and oppression” of the established church.<sup>509</sup> Moreover, whilst Dissenters in the earlier decades had been quite happy with the state of the monarchy under George I (1660-1727) and II (1683-1760), they now viewed the institution, with George III as its head, as “tyrannical”.<sup>510</sup>

As a result, the political arm of Unitarian dissent was focused not only on the Church of England, but also the wider state. From this they derived a doctrinal

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<sup>505</sup> G.Nobbe, *The North Briton: A Study in Political Propaganda* (New York, 1939), pp.4-9.

<sup>506</sup> *Lords Journals*, XXX. p.415. Cited in Clark, *English Society*, p.366.

<sup>507</sup> Clark, *English Society*, p.367.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid*, p.368.

<sup>509</sup> In the work of Caleb Fleming for instance. Richard Barlow, *Citizenship and Conscience* (Philadelphia, 1962), p.134.

<sup>510</sup> Clark, *English Society*, p.379.

position that asserted the liberty of the people had to be invested from below. As the dissenting schoolmaster James Burgh wrote for instance: “All lawful authority, legislative, and executive, originates from the people. Power in the people is like light in the sun,.. unlimited by anything human”.<sup>511</sup>

Fuelled by the London Club of Honest Whigs,<sup>512</sup> where men such as Burgh, Priestley, Price, Andrew Kippis (1725-95) (Lardner’s biographer), as well as the Americans Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) and Josiah Qunicy Jr (1744-75)<sup>513</sup> met, the Dissenters now had an identifiable set of aims, as Clark suggests. These were: an extension of the franchise, and a natural support for American independence, as well as repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts, all of which involved a “destruction of the church-state alliance”,<sup>514</sup> in what was again a shift away from the earlier defence of gains made following the Restoration Settlement.

Nigel Ashton notes that Socinian groups exercised an influence over the Church of England which was however disproportionate to their number. Despite this, the opposition exhibited by the Established Church to amending subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles (1772-3) and repealing the Test and Corporations Act (1788-90) was framed in order to prevent a victory of sorts for Priestley and his colleges.<sup>515</sup>

### **XIII) Theophilus Lindsay**

Lindsay resigned his Anglican post at Catterick in 1773, and the following year established the Essex Street Chapel in London. However, although he hoped that the new organised form of Unitarianism would grow, he would appear to have been

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<sup>511</sup> James Burgh, *Political Disquisitions; or a An Enquiry into public Errors, Defects, and Abuses* (3 vols, London, 1774-5).pp.v,xii. Cited in Clark, *English Society*, p.384.

<sup>512</sup> Interestingly, a devotional outlet for the club was provided by Theophilus Lindsay’s Unitarian Chapel, with the Service Book composed by Samuel Clarke also in use. Clark, *English Society*, p.380.

<sup>513</sup> Clark, *English Society*, p.380.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid*, p.376.

reluctant to join the political ranks of dissent. Indeed in his sermons he was keen to avoid matters of overt controversy, preferring instead to cover ‘practical’ subjects and discourses in his pulpit output, as Walter Lloyd suggests.<sup>516</sup>

#### **XIV) The theology and influence of Joseph Priestley.**

Priestley moved from an Arian to Socinian position after “reading with care Dr. Lardner’s *Letter on the Logos*”.<sup>517</sup> Indeed he had also met Lardner in 1767.<sup>518</sup> Due to his later commitment to the Unitarian movement, Boyd Hilton contends that Priestley’s earlier pre-millenarian views with a focus upon “special providences and the apocalypse”<sup>519</sup> have been rather sidelined. Priestley followed a number of Socinian themes from around 1769 onwards.<sup>520</sup> Although he denied the Virgin birth, he believed, for instance, in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the general resurrection at Christ’s second coming, the Christian millennium and the Last Judgement, and the important role of reason and revelation. As he wrote in his *Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* (1770):

Be not backward, or afraid, my brethren, to make use of your reason in matters of religion, or where the Scriptures are concerned. They both of them proceed from the same God and father of us all, who is the giver of every good and perfect gift...do not think that, by recommending the use of reason, I am about to decry the Scriptures.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Nigel Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1830* (Cambridge, 2006), p.98.

<sup>516</sup> Walter Lloyd, *The Story of Protestant Dissent and English Unitarianism* (London, 1899, republished, 2008), p.175.

<sup>517</sup> Rivers and Wykes, *Joseph Priestley, scientist, philosopher, and theologian*, p.36.

<sup>518</sup> Rivers and Wykes, *Ibid.* Also Stromberg *Religious Liberalism*, p.45.

<sup>519</sup> Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford, 1991), p.304.

<sup>520</sup> Rivers and Wykes, *Joseph Priestley*, p.36.

<sup>521</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* (London, 1771), p.14.

In this approach he was echoing the Arian Samuel Clarke, who insisted that clear Scriptural evidence was required for the establishment of any doctrine, with belief in the Trinity being a form of Scholastic metaphysics.<sup>522</sup>

During an age of Enlightenment, reason was a useful tool in the interpretation of Scripture. In clear opposition to the deists, Priestley also considered revelation, as well as reason, to be critical. Interestingly, as Alan Tapper asserts, Priestley, while drawing upon Newtonian ideas of the mechanical universe as well as Lockean notions of scientific realism, reacted against the Common-Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid. Rather Priestley was considered a ‘materialist’ in philosophical terms.<sup>523</sup>

Priestley wrote his *Appeal* while minister at Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds (1767-73). During this time he also published 28 non-scientific works. It was while at Leeds that he continued what he termed his “application to speculative theology”.<sup>524</sup>

For Priestley in the seventeenth century, Arianism had displaced the Socinian version of anti-Trinitarianism, until (Priestley records) “of late years Dr. Lardner and others have written in favour of the simple humanity of Christ”.<sup>525</sup> The emphasis upon this “humanity” of Christ was to be one of the main themes of McGill’s *Practical Essay*.

In the very same year that McGill’s *Practical Essay* was published, Priestley also produced his *History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*. Beginning with the Scriptures, Priestley firstly appealed to the Old Testament, quoting Exodus 20:3, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”; Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

<sup>523</sup> Alan Tapper, ‘Reid and Priestley on Method and the Mind’ in John Haldane and Stephen Read (eds), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, p.98.

<sup>524</sup> Stromberg, *Religious Liberalism*, p.45.

<sup>525</sup> John T. Rutt, ed, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, Vol.1 (London, 1871) p.69.

God is one Lord”; and Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the Messiah’s suffering and death (which McGill had also leaned upon).

Such emphasis on the humanity of Christ challenged the Church’s doctrine of the Atonement. If Jesus were mere man, his sacrifice on the cross would imply an angry and vengeful God, who had to be appeased by sin-offerings.

As Priestley suggested:

how must the genuine spirit of mercy and forgiveness, which so eminently distinguish the gospel of Christ, be debased, when God himself (whose conduct in this very respect is particularly proposed to our intimation) is considered as never forgiving sin without some previous Atonement, satisfaction or intercession.<sup>526</sup>

(McGill would also appear to deny substitutionary Atonement in his *Practical Essay*).

In an earlier essay on the Atonement in his *Theological Repository* (established and edited during his years at Leeds), Priestley argued that biblical texts which speak of Christ “bearing our sins” ought to be interpreted as “bearing our sins away”:

The phrase “bearing sin” is never applied under the law but to the scapegoat on the day of expiation, which was not sacrificed, but as the name expresses, was turned into the wilderness, a place not inhabited.<sup>527</sup>

In his *History of the Christian Church* (1790), Priestley considered the connection between crucifixion and resurrection:

The manner in which Jesus died was peculiarly favourable to the design of Providence, which as to make the most distinguished preacher of the doctrine of the resurrection himself a proof of the fact.<sup>528</sup>

Priestley proved himself as both experiential scientist and rational theologian, with all the biblical literalism of the orthodox Dissenting tradition. He also believed

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<sup>526</sup> Rutt, ed, *Works of Priestley*, Vol. 2, pp. 392-94.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid*, p. 402.

<sup>528</sup> Rutt, ed, *Works of Priestley*, Vol. 7, pp. 241-42.

that, at Christ's second coming, the general resurrection would be in bodily form, as the Apostles' Creed proclaimed. He wrote in 1777:

As a materialist and a Christian, I believe the resurrection of the body, that is of the man; and that upon foundation only, in opposition to the opinion which places it on the natural immortality of the soul, I rest my belief of a future life.<sup>529</sup>

## Conclusion

It would appear then that the main Enlightenment influences in England centred around a "Lockean–Latitudinarian or even Newtonian–Dissenting format than it ever was Deist".<sup>530</sup> Indeed it is worth remembering that both Locke and Newton considered themselves to be devout Christians.

As S.J. Barnett has observed, the overall co-existence of Christianity and science in the Enlightenment age was a relatively peaceful one. Newton and his contemporaries argued that because God had created the world for the advancement and benefit of humans, therefore it was only right that scientific enquiry should be harnessed to extend the understanding and expropriation of the natural world. For men like Newton both reason and revelation were in tune with the scientific method. With the advancement of scientific discovery went the idea that divine favour and providence were on their side, as well as their alliance with the concept and application of reason.<sup>531</sup>

As Patronage was a significant factor in Scotland, so in England divisions over subscription and toleration were clearly key issues in the eighteenth century. There is a definite link between politics and religion in this era, with the High Church of England clerics keen to protect both the ecclesiastical and political establishments.

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<sup>529</sup> Rutt, ed, *Works of Priestley*, Vol. 8, pp. 22-24.

<sup>530</sup> Barnett, p.90.

As has been discussed, various catch-all terms of heterodoxy were applied to perceived opponents in order to win public favour and approval. From Atheism through Arianism and perhaps most significant of all in the English context, Deism, the influence and scope of Dissenters was somewhat exaggerated in each case.

The anti-Trinitarian movement as such certainly had a longer, more established history in England than north of the border. From early proponents such as John Biddle, though the toleration arguments of John Locke, Issac Newton, Samuel Clarke, John Taylor, and Nathaniel Lardner, to the emergence of organised Unitarian congregations in the latter part of the century with men like Theophilus Lindsay, Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, a move from Arianism to Socinianism was evident.

As in Scotland the social alienation of the leading Dissenters fed into their political radicalism. Frustration over the limited Toleration Act of 1689, the failure to repeal the Test and Corporations Acts and subscription to the Thirty Nine Articles, led almost inevitably to their clashes with the state over the course of the American and French revolutions. Anti-Catholicism (an interesting position for those who advocated toleration) and anti-clericalism were also key components of the anti-Trinitarian/Dissenting tradition.

Despite the aforementioned greater influence exerted by the English Socinians, it must be borne in mind, that their threat was out of proportion to their number, and that personal issues could also have driven the Church of England to attempt to limit the influence of Joseph Priestley and his cohorts.

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<sup>531</sup> Ibid, p.123.

## The Irish Situation

Early in the eighteenth-century, in the north of Ireland the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster was split over the terms of clerical subscription to the Westminster Confession, with the requirement which had been introduced in 1705 being disputed by the Belfast Society group of ministers. This in turn led to the Synod passing a ‘Pacific Act’ in 1720, re-confirming the act of 1705, under whose terms ministerial candidates qualified the terms of their subscription to passages in the Confession about which they entertained doubts. However in 1721, as Ian McBride notes, a further debate broke out, when ministers were urged to make a voluntary statement of belief in the eternal Sonship of Christ.<sup>532</sup> The subscribers in the Synod had no authority to impose this “additional” requirement, an infringement of the Protestant liberty of conscience: though they themselves did not take an Arian position on the Son's emanation from the Father. The controversy rumbled on, and in 1725 the non-subscribers were grouped separately into the Presbytery of Antrim, which in 1726 was expelled from “juridicial communion” with the rest of the Synod, as McBride notes.<sup>533</sup>

Into this debate appeared John Abernethy (1680-1740), who would come to be called “the father of non-subscription”. Abernethy was educated, like many Irish ministers, at Glasgow University, and was there at the same time as John Simson. When he returned to Ireland he became involved in the Thomas Emlyn (1663-1741) case. Emlyn had been tried for blasphemy and was later fined and imprisoned for his unorthodox views of the Trinity. Abernethy was called at first to a charge in Antrim

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<sup>532</sup> Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998); see ch.2.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*

and then Dublin, where he went (reluctantly) for some three months in 1717, before returning to Antrim.<sup>534</sup>

Influenced by the Belfast society group of ministers, and their Arminian views with regard to free-will, Abernethy preached a sermon in December 1719 entitled *Religious Obedience founded on Personal Persuasion*,<sup>535</sup> based on Romans 16:5, “Let every man be truly persuaded in his own mind.” Persuasion, for Abernethy, was based upon attentive reasoning, as he stated:

That it be deliberate, for sudden rash conclusions without duly weighing the reasons upon which they were founded, and what evidence there may be on the opposite side, are the reproach of intelligent natures such as ours.... Our persuasion ought to be unprejudiced, free from passion or the influence of any consideration except that which should rationally determine us; that is, in the present case, anything but the pure evidence of the mind and will of God.<sup>536</sup>

Thus he sought to apply a rational, enquiring mind into understanding the will of God, with the stress on a positive anthropology. Abernethy, and those who followed him, certainly appeared to be breaking away from a more rigid traditional form of Calvinism, as Finlay Holmes suggests.<sup>537</sup> The most prominent non-subscribers, in addition to Abernethy - Samuel Haliday, Thomas Nevin and James Kirkpatrick for instance - have all been proven to be orthodox in their views of the Trinity. Although Arminianism was certainly a feature, Arianism it would seem, was not.<sup>538</sup> Of those men, Nevin was also a proponent of greater freedom by way of his arguing in favour

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<sup>534</sup> James S. Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, Vol. 3 (Belfast, 1867), p. 234.

<sup>535</sup> Finlay Holmes, ‘The Reverend John Abernethy: The Challenge of New Light Theology to Traditional Irish Presbyterian Calvinism’, in *The Religion of Irish Dissent 1650-1800*, ed. K. Herlihy (Dublin, 1996), p. 105.

<sup>536</sup> John Abernethy, *Religious Obedience Founded on Personal Persuasion* (Belfast, 1720), pp. 12-13.

<sup>537</sup> Finlay Holmes, *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland: A Popular History* (Dublin, 2000), p.58.

<sup>538</sup> For instance, McBride, *Scripture Politics*, p.45. Also M.A.Stewart, ‘Rational Dissent in early Eighteenth-Century Ireland’ in Knud Haakonssen (ed), *Enlightenment and Religion* also confirms this view of the non-subscribers.

of an extended religious toleration encompassing Jews, as well as his opposition to the Blasphemy Laws.<sup>539</sup>

Rather, factors such as a strong attachment to the headship and authority of Christ over the church, the Protestant right of private judgement, and a “soft” and geographically<sup>540</sup> orientated anti-Catholicism, led to a common frontier in the battle to throw off the shackles of Confessional subscription. Anti-Catholicism in Ireland indeed could be equated with the ‘popery’ of the Church of England. Wherever there was an attempted enforcement of subscription to the Westminster standards, with the authority to “usurp” Christ’s spiritual headship, so the tyrannical nature of hierarchical churches was invoked. This was an important factor in uniting Dissenters in Ireland and England, in joint campaigns against the Test and Corporations Act. Furthermore, with the large Catholic population of Ireland also subject to the whims of the English establishment, common cause could be made with dissenting Presbyterians, as would come to the fore in the later United Irishmen movement of the late 1790s.

This was of course the era when Irish Presbyterian students made up around a third of the student population of Glasgow University,<sup>541</sup> contemporary with Francis Hutcheson, and William Leechman, who must have influenced the views of these students of philosophy and theology. Indeed A.T.Q. Stewart has advanced the case

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<sup>539</sup> James E. Bradley, Toleration and movements of Christian reunion 1660-1789 in Stewart Jay Brown, Timothy Tackett (eds), *Enlightenment, reawakening and revolution 1660-1815* (Cambridge, 2006), p.361.

<sup>540</sup> The areas in which Presbyterians had suffered more greatly at the hands of Catholics in the seventeenth century, were more unlikely to accept greater rapprochement in the late eighteenth. Also in the United Irishmen movement which brought both groups together against a common foe, it could be argued that a temporary setting aside of differences was observed. Significantly, unlike in Scotland, Irish Catholics had not lent support to the Jacobite Rebellions. See Bradley, ‘The Religious Origins of Radical Politics’, p.233. Also McBride, *Scripture Politics*, p.194.

<sup>541</sup> Ian McBride, ‘The School of Virtue: Francis Hutcheson, Irish Presbyterians and the Scottish Enlightenment’, in *Political Thought in Ireland Since the Seventeenth Century*, eds. G. Boyce, R. Eccleshall and V. Geoghegan (London, 1993).

for the Ulster intellectual contribution to the Scottish Enlightenment in his work on the United Irishmen movement.<sup>542</sup>

However, it is worth noting that by 1751 the excluded members of Antrim were able to rejoin the Synod of Ulster. For Bradley, this illustrates the reduced influence of hardline Calvinism within the bounds of the Synod, as subscription had clearly become less of an issue by then.<sup>543</sup>

### **I) The American Revolution and the United Irishmen**

During the course of the American Revolution significant support was accorded to the colonists by Presbyterian clergy. This would appear to have been a result of a high number of Presbyterians in Ulster having relations in America by the mid 1770s.<sup>544</sup>

Furthermore, the Volunteer movement was instrumental in the initial reform of the Irish House of Commons, helping to repeal the Irish Test Act (1780), and the more liberal stance towards Presbyterian marriages.<sup>545</sup> In his 1781 sermon *Scripture Politics*, William Steel Dickson (1744–1824) reasserted the headship of Christ in the church, which also meant that any interference in church affairs had to be repudiated, as it was an independent organisation under the authority of Christ alone. This spirit and theology lay behind the successful political work of the Ulster Presbyterians, who, following the American Revolution were keen to continue the movement towards greater parliamentary representation.

The Society of United Irishmen, established in Belfast in 1791, would bring both Protestants and Catholics together, in a unified fight against England. This was a

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<sup>542</sup> Anthony. T.Q. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence: the Hidden Roots of the United Irish Movement* (London, 1993).

<sup>543</sup> Bradley, 'The Origins of Radical Politics', p. 230.

significant revision of the anti-Catholicism of earlier decades. Indeed all of the founder members of the United Irishmen were Presbyterians.<sup>546</sup> Moreover, as Ian McBride has demonstrated, of the forty-nine Presbyterian ministers who would take part in the 1798 Rebellion, the majority were “orthodox” in their theology.<sup>547</sup>

As in England then the dissenting or non-subscribing elements of the Irish church were able to tie their theological concerns to political action. Common elements across the spectrum - the spiritual headship of Christ and the resultant opposition to Erastianism, the right of conscience and toleration, and indeed anti-Catholicism (in the earlier part of the century for most Irish Presbyterians) - were to be found in Scotland (the Seceders), England (Arians/Unitarians and Presbyterians) and Ireland (Presbyterians). There is no doubt that the Confessional controversies were more deeply rooted in Ireland and England than Scotland, where the Moderates singularly failed to properly address the issue. However, it is of course an important factor that in Scotland, as the established and largest church, Presbyterians were not seeking to fight off Confessions imposed upon them from an “external” or alien denomination, as was the case for the Irish (Test and Corporations Act) and dissenting bodies in England.

The whole issue of wider deviation from accepted Confessional standards is however significant for the McGill case, as he was to be at clear variance with the requirements of his own church. Clearly, set in the context of his contact with Irish students at Glasgow, as well as his knowledge of events south of the border (as evidenced by the books obtained by the Ayr Library Society), McGill must have been well informed of such developments, in addition to the case of Alexander Fergusson

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> McBride, *Scripture Politics*, pp 124-31.

<sup>546</sup> John M Barclay, ‘The Presbyterian Minister in Eighteenth Century Ireland’, in J.L.M.Haire (ed), *Challenge and Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine* (Antrim, 1981), p.64.

in his own native Ayrshire, prior to launching his clearest attack on the Confession in his *Benefits of the Revolution* sermon.

Having considered the wider British scene, it is now possible to assess the social and ecclesiastical situation in McGill's own locale of Ayrshire.

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<sup>547</sup> McBride, *Scripture Politics*, pp.203-4.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE LOCAL SCENE: AYRSHIRE, 1760-1820

Having considered the background and setting for McGill's career in the wider British context, it is also important to examine the local picture in Ayrshire. Within this chapter I will therefore look at the social background of the county from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. This will encompass employment patterns, the nature of the landowners, transport and travel, education, the Bank of Ayr, and radical politics in the era of the American and French Revolutions. With regard to theology, the case of Alexander Fergusson of Kilwinning (with his questioning of subscription to the Westminster Confession), denominational affiliation, the thought of Robert Burns, and the career of McGill's colleague William Dalrymple will also be assessed.

#### **D) Social Background**

In keeping with the spirit of improvement, the landowners of Ayrshire utilised the mineral reserves of their estates leading to the establishment of coal mining, with deeper pits, reliant on steam engines.<sup>548</sup> Turnpike Acts were secured by the gentry in 1767 and 1774 in order to boost transport, one of whom was John Loudon McAdam (1756-1836), who would later achieve fame by renovating roads south of the border as well.

In the field of manufacturing, the Muirkirk Iron Works were established in 1787, in addition to the Catrine Cotton Spinning Works. There were also tar works at Muirkirk (led by McAdam), the Cumnock pottery, a paper mill at Doonfoot, and a

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<sup>548</sup> John Strawhorn, 'Ayrshire in the Enlightenment' in Graeme Cruickshank (ed), *A Sense of Place: Studies in Scottish Local History* (Edinburgh, 1988), p.189.

woollen mill.<sup>549</sup> With regard to employment, from a later account of 1820 we find that weavers were in the majority with some 5881 people engaged in this job. Shoemakers, with 762 and, given the coastal demographic of the county, seamen (some 794) were also of significant number. Finally, coaliers (632), made up the bulk of Ayrshire occupations<sup>550</sup>

Although, as John Strawhorn asserts, the cultural outlook of the landed gentry of Ayrshire was in some respects restricted in this period, he cites some illustrative examples of their interests.<sup>551</sup> In the course of the eighteenth century they took leave of their Edinburgh town houses, in order to reside for spells in London and Bath. A good number had gone on the Grand Tour of Europe,<sup>552</sup> with four of them also travelling to live for a time in America.

## II) Transport and Travel

Given the potential difficulties for outlying Presbyteries in attending the General Assembly in Edinburgh, it is worth considering how well developed transport actually was in Ayrshire in the mid-to-late eighteenth century.

In his 1811 account of the county, Aiton suggested that: “there are probably few districts in Scotland, where so many excellent roads have been made, within so short a period, and at so much expense”.<sup>553</sup> As a result of this, the level of traffic increased. In addition to farmers utilising single horse drawn carts, which were capable of carrying in excess of a ton, the movement of coal and lime was also

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> George Robertson, *Topographical description of Ayrshire; more particularly of Cunninghame* (Irvine, 1820), p.426.

<sup>551</sup> Strawhorn, ‘Ayrshire in the Enlightenment’, p. 191.

<sup>552</sup> The Grand Tour was undertaken by wealthy nobility from the 1660s onwards. It would normally take in France and Italy in order to broaden their cultural, artistic and industrial horizons. See for instance Elizabeth A. Bohls, Ian Duncan (eds), *Travel writing, 1700-1830: an anthology* (Oxford, 2005), p.xx.

<sup>553</sup> Cited in John Strawhorn, *The Scotland of Robert Burns* (Darvel, 1995), p.78.

advancing. By the early nineteenth-century Carriers established businesses which could transport goods, by way of cart, to Edinburgh.

Passenger transit consisted of the public coaches, which saw a three times a week service from Glasgow to Ayr, via Kilwinning and Irvine. There was also a daily mail coach travelling from Glasgow to Kilmarnock and Ayr.<sup>554</sup> Additionally, a coach regularly made trips to Carlisle from Glasgow via Kilmarnock and Mauchline. This was all in place by the 1790s. However, it was only at a later stage that more regular routes which would take in Edinburgh were established.

### III) The Bank of Ayr

When the banking company of Douglas, Heron & Co was set up as the Bank of Ayr on November 6<sup>th</sup> 1769, its intention was to underpin commerce, trade and agricultural investment, and “relieve the distress of the country”.<sup>555</sup> Early subscribers included the Dukes of Buccleuch and Queensberry, Archibald Douglas, the Earl of Dumfries, as well as landowners from the counties of Dumfries, Ayr, Galloway and Kirkcudbright. The initial capital investment of £160,000 was divided into £500 shares (four for each subscriber), with some £96,000 of this amount paid up to November 1769.<sup>556</sup> Offices were then set up at Dumfries, Ayr and Edinburgh, with agencies in Glasgow, Inverary, Kelso, Montrose and Campeltown.<sup>557</sup>

However, speculation by investors, who were keen to profit from ventures in America, Ireland and the West Indies, the latter in the field of tobacco and sugar exports, led to a liberalisation in advancing credit and the printing of notes. The bank was however unable to maintain this practise, and as a result of not receiving aid from

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<sup>554</sup> A. Fullarton, *The Topographical, Statistical, and Historical Gazetteer of Scotland*, (Glasgow,1842), p.342.

<sup>555</sup> John Lord, *Capital and Steam-power: 1750-1800* (London,2006 edition), p.83.

<sup>556</sup> Richard Saville, *Bank of Scotland: A History, 1695-1995* (Edinburgh, 1996), pp.156-7.

London, it collapsed under pressure to maintain its debts.<sup>558</sup> As a result of the subscribers placing their entire estates as liable for the payment of any debts the bank might incur,<sup>559</sup> fortunes were clearly lost (including of course McGill's own family finances). In addition to the speculation in foreign investments, the bank had also loaned some £57,000 to a public company, which again appeared to be overreaching their assets.

In the opinion of Henry Nicholas Sealy the Bank had failed as a result of its "improvident loans and expensive mode of raising money, and not from the over-issue",<sup>560</sup> (of notes) which led in turn to a subsequent demand for gold.

#### **IV) The Ayr Library Society and Education**

Turning to the field of publication, the royal burghs of Ayr and Irvine as well as the industrialised town of Kilmarnock had established booksellers in this period. Ayr was served by Alexander Law from 1772, Irvine by William Templeton prior to 1781, and Kilmarnock by John Wilson, who had succeeded Peter McArthur in this regard in 1782. Wilson's work in Kilmarnock is illustrative of local interest. Some three volumes of sermons, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, George Anson's *Voyage Around the World*, Robert Burns *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), further religious works, a Latin grammar, two Latin texts, and a copy of Allan Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany*, were also published in the town by the aforementioned booksellers.

Of particular significance however was the 'Ayr Library Society', established in 1762 for the benefit of those "anxious to obtain access to books, the source of all

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>558</sup> John Lord, *Capital and Steam-power*, p.83.

<sup>559</sup> R. Baldwin, *The London Magazine, Or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer Vol XLIV* (London, 1775), p.222.

knowledge and true pleasure". The founding members of this group included William McGill and William Dalrymple. Indeed McGill was to serve on the committee, appointed to draw up a list of books for storage and lending. Such libraries were comparatively rare in Scotland in the period prior to the 1790s, with only some fifteen in place, although this changed quite dramatically in later times with thirty-seven established by the early part of the nineteenth century.<sup>561</sup>

The volume of books held by the Society numbered some 47 in 1777, and the turn of the century comprised around 700. Supplied by William Creech, the Edinburgh bookseller, copies held included the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the *Scots Magazine*, Lord Kames' *The Gentleman Farmer*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Acquisitions of the 1780s included works by Joseph Priestley, Nathaniel Lardner and Henry Taylor.<sup>562</sup>

As John Strawhorn observes, in terms of educational provision Ayrshire was well served, with 44 of the 46 parishes having a local school.<sup>563</sup> Of these, Latin, Greek, French, book keeping, reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as (at Ayr), natural philosophy, geography and navigation, were on the curriculum. Indeed, enthusiasm for education can be demonstrated by the arrangement of schools by local parents, such as at Alloway, when no teachers were available.<sup>564</sup>

From this social survey it may be suggested that the Enlightenment in Scotland was not restricted to the cities. Rather, with its agricultural, manufacturing, movement of the gentry as well as literary and educational provision, Ayrshire also

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<sup>560</sup> Henry Nicholas Sealy, *A Treatise on Coins, Currency, and Banking: With Observations on the Bank Act of 1844 and on the Reports of the Committees on the House of Lords and of the House of Commons on the Bank Acts* (London, 1858), p.189.

<sup>561</sup> See Mark R.M.Towsey, 'Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Libraries, Readers and Intellectual Culture in Provincial Scotland, c 1750-c1820' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of St.Andrews, 2007), information supplied by Bob Harris in *The Scottish People*, p.306.

<sup>562</sup> *Catalogue of Books in the Air (or Ayr) Library*, (Ayr, 1802 edition)

<sup>563</sup> Strawhorn, 'Ayrshire in the Enlightenment' p.198.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*

infused the concepts of the age to some extent. Improvements in travel were also apparent with the modes of post, carriage and pony, allowing easier access to more populous centres.

## V) Radical Politics

In response to the American Revolution the Town Council of Ayr submitted a “loyal address regretting the ‘alarming situation’ caused by these ‘unhappy and deluded people’.”<sup>565</sup> In addition, the Council encouraged local men to enlist in the armed forces in order to support the British cause. This was perhaps aided by a fear in 1777 that “American Privateers”<sup>566</sup> were threatening the Ayrshire coast. As a result a night guard was set up in Ayr, with the Town’s Militia also to the fore of manning the ‘defence’ of the coast. Such events would suggest a firm commitment, during these events in America, by the local political class to the British establishment, as well as presumably (due to the fears of invasion and propaganda of the Council) a majority of the people of Ayr.

With regard to the later French Revolution the picture is slightly different. For instance, as John Strawhorn notes, between 1790 and 92 the Library Society obtained copies of James Mackintosh's (1765-1832) *Vindiciae Gallicae* (1791)<sup>567</sup>, Thomas Paines’s *The Rights of Man*, Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Present Revolution*, and Joseph Priestley’s *Letters in Answer to Burke and Paine*.<sup>568</sup> However, following the outbreak of war with France in 1792 *The Rights of Man* was ordered to be burned, which the Town Council duly carried out, as well as issuing a loyal address (which

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<sup>565</sup> Strawhorn, *The History of Ayr*, p.91.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

<sup>567</sup> *Vindiciae Gallicae* was a reply to Burke’s *Reflections*. Charles James Fox considered it as an excellent defence of the Revolution.

<sup>568</sup> Strawhorn, *The History of Ayr* p.91.

supported the government, and condemned the execution of King Louis XVI (1754-93)), as they had done in the midst of the American Revolution.

Following the high point of radicalism between 1790 and 92, new Friends of the People societies were established in Ayrshire (Saltcoats for instance had some 60 members, despite its short tenure).<sup>569</sup> However, after the defeat of Charles Gray's reform bill of May 1793, and the repression wrought by the government against men such as Fyshe Palmer, Thomas Muir (1765-99), Christie and William Skirving (d.1796), support and activity appears to have dissipated in the face of these setbacks.<sup>570</sup> Bob Harris also attributes this tailing off of support as being due to the lack of a comprehensive, thought-out political strategy, in the wake of the reform petition.<sup>571</sup> Additionally, the economic depression which affected the west coast of Scotland, including Ayrshire in 1793 was a further factor in demoralising radical sentiment. In the face of unemployment caused by this downturn, Dundas was quick to offer government support to buttress commercial confidence in the area, particularly in Glasgow, where poor relief efforts helped to alleviate the worst effects of the loss of subsistence suffered by thousands of people. Indeed, rather than opt for further radicalism, many chose to either join the armed forces or emigrate.<sup>572</sup>

However, James Wodrow, writing in 1794, was concerned by the 'sullen discontent' of the 'tradesmen and manufacturers' of Ayrshire, as being of greater danger than the 'open petulance about reform' (from 1792). In a letter to Kenrick he wrote:

The meer Mob have certainly imbibed levelling principles.. I know before and by any thing I can learn from their attachment to the French still continues and what is surprising in those who had a considerable sense of religion and the French cruelty and open

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<sup>569</sup> W.H.Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* p.241.

<sup>570</sup> Bob Harris, *The Scottish People*, p.88.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid*, p.89.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid*, p.91.

impiety makes little impression to their prejudice chiefly for this reason their friends are not resolved to believe this or anything at all to their disadvantage.<sup>573</sup>

With the threat of French invasion in 1798 volunteer companies were formed at Kilmarnock, Irvine, Saltcoats and Newton of Ayr. Indeed the county meeting called at Ayr to offer loyalist support was well attended, with local farmers to the fore of those willing to enlist in this endeavour.<sup>574</sup> Interestingly, Fenwick and Stewarton were the exceptions (as they had been in the early 1790s), with more reluctance to commit to the national defence.

## VI) The Ecclesiastical Picture and Theology

### The Fergusson Affair

The Alexander Fergusson affair was ‘initiated’ by a letter from Fergusson to a local opponent, the Reverend John Adam (d. 1763)<sup>575</sup> of West Kilbride, which was published (anonymously) in the *Scots Magazine*. Within his letter Fergusson countered Adam’s assertion that he “would pronounce them villains who had signed the Confession of Faith, and did not believe every proposition in it to be truth, and adhere to it as such”.<sup>576</sup> Fergusson in turn dismissed this opinion as “an unworthy censure of a Christian” and suggested that Adam would “deprive us of our natural right of private judgement, and the invaluable privilege of inquiring after truth”.<sup>577</sup>

Additionally, in an appendix to his letter Fergusson outlined his stance on confessional subscription. Firstly, he argued that: “no human government has a right

<sup>573</sup> Wodrow to Kenrick, 31 March 1794, W-KC, 24.157 (189), cited in Bob Harris, *The Scottish People*, p.103.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid*, p.153.

<sup>575</sup> *Fasti*, Vol. 3, p. 129.

<sup>576</sup> *Scots Magazine*, 29 (April, 1767), pp. 171-5; also printed as “Copy of a Letter from the Reverend Mr. Alexander Fergusson, minister at Kilwinning, to the Reverend Mr. John Adam, minister at West-Kilbride”; in Graham, *Fasti* Vol. 3, p. 129.

to impose a subscription in matters of faith and morals, as a composition of fallible men, but in so far as it is agreeable to scripture".<sup>578</sup> Any such imposition was inconsistent with the Protestant right of private judgement. Furthermore Fergusson claimed that even the Westminster Assembly acknowledged that councils and synods may err.<sup>579</sup> Therefore, he argued, when the Scots parliament of 1690 had "enacted the subscription of the Confession" that it "meant it as an uniformity in principle", but only "as a test of conformity to the Presbyterian establishment".<sup>580</sup>

This then was a radical departure from anything which had preceded it, with Fergusson citing not only the Westminster Assembly but also the Scots parliament itself. Although Robert Wallace and others had insisted on Scripture as the ultimate source of church doctrine, Ferguson had gone even further, with the inference being that the Confession would have to be superseded, if it acted as a barrier to the development of doctrine.<sup>581</sup> As expected Fergusson's letter provoked outrage in the pages of the *Scots Magazine*, with the matter then referred to the Presbytery of Irvine for investigation. When James MacConnel, the town drummer of Beith,<sup>582</sup> appealed to the synod against the lower court's aversion to carry on the prosecution, this appeal was sustained. However the Presbytery counter-appealed to the General Assembly against the synod's decision. The resolution which had been adopted by the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr was designed to "express their disapprobation and detestation of all disingenuity or equivocation in subscribing the Confession of Faith and the disavowal by Mr Fergusson, at a subsequent stage, of having recommended this, and of denying

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

the satisfaction of Christ”.<sup>583</sup> The synod, under the influence of its lay members and at odds with the wishes of most of its ministers, decided to take the matter into their own hands. Meanwhile the Fergusson case had become something of a test case in the wider press. The pseudonymous ‘Philorthodoxus’ published his subscriptionist contributions to the *Glasgow Journal* as a pamphlet which made allusions both to the Moderate dissimulation and to the strong Masonic associations of Fergusson’s parish in *Kilwinning Divinity Weighed and Found Wanting* or *The Grand Secret of the New Kilwinning Lodge, concerning Subscription to the Confession of Faith* (1768). In 1771 the opinions of the faction opposed to the Confession were outlined and commended, in John Graham’s *The Religious Establishment in Scotland examined upon Protestant Principles: a Tract occasioned by the late Prosecution against the late Reverend Mr Alexander Fergusson, Minister in Kilwinning*, “which had been: at one time ascribed to Mr Dalrymple of Ayr, and seems to have passed through his hands”.<sup>584</sup> Further support was subsequently offered by the Rev Thomas Walker (b.1700) of Dundonald in his *Vindication of the Discipline and Constitutions of the Church of Scotland for Preserving Purity of Doctrine* (1774). Walker had previously contributed to the controversy via the pages of the *Scots Magazine* under the pseudonym, Philalethes. From an account of the case it is stated that:

Mr Walker, professed a desire to widen the door of admission to the ministerial office in favour of those who believe the most important articles of our common Christianity, though they may doubt the truth of some less important determinations in the Confession of Faith.<sup>585</sup>

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<sup>582</sup> McConnell would also write his *Some Remarks on a Book Lately come abroad into this Nation entitled, The Religious Establishment of Scotland examined on Protestant Principles*, (Ayr, 1772) in opposition to the anti-subscriptionists.

<sup>583</sup> *Scots Magazine*, 29 pp. 533, 553.

<sup>584</sup> Alexander Taylor Innes, *The Law of Creeds in Scotland: A Treatise on the Legal Relation of Churches in Scotland Established and Not Established, to Their Doctrinal Confessions* (Edinburgh, 1867), p.108.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*

Walker also went on to defend the position previously taken by William Dunlop, whereby the right of private judgement in matters of doctrinal opinion is upheld.

In April 1769 the Synod reached its verdict. In doing so it denounced the letter for its tendency to “promote and encourage prevarication and disingenuity” in signing the Confession, but “in respect of Mr.Fergusson’s great age and infirmities, and other difficulties attending his peculiar situation”, it remitted the Fergusson case back to the Presbytery of Irvine. Fergusson was eventually acquitted of these charges.

It may be suggested therefore that the “anti-subscriptionist” movement in Ayrshire and indeed more widely Scotland, could not be satisfactorily compared with similar tendencies in England or abroad. It was generally more ‘diplomatic’ in nature with Fergusson advancing a clearly more hard-line stance than that of, say, Dunlop or Wallace. What does emerge from this survey is that any dissension was opposed fervently by the laity with their clerical counterparts displaying a “softer” tone in their pronouncements on such polemic. It is certainly very interesting to note the opposition to the Westminster Confession, as well as the reaction to this which was emanating from Ayrshire, prior to the heightening of McGill’s profile, as presumably he must have been well aware of the writings of men such as Fergusson, Graham and Walker.

The role of the press is also an interesting one in an age when ministers’ very sermons, let alone treatises on such key issues, were keenly published and widely read. It was in such an atmosphere that the McGill case would be scrutinised on the basis of his own “anti-establishment” overtones, as they were perceived by his opponents.

## VII) Burns and Religion

As Liam McIlvanney has pointed out, as a young man Robert Burns made a study of local religious phenomena and read with interest such liberal theological works as *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination* (1740) by the English proto-Unitarian John Taylor. In addition, he was later familiar with Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* which espoused a practical divinity, with moral authority belonging to anyone pursuing a virtuous life.<sup>586</sup> He certainly admired both William McGill and William Dalrymple, with the latter, who had baptised the poet, making a lasting impression on him. Burns, known as "Rab the Ranter," inflicted his 'heretical' religious views on his neighbours, some of whom shunned him as a result.<sup>587</sup>

In 1788 on his application for a post as an exciseman, Burns had listed his religious affiliation as Church of Scotland. However, he generally rejected traditional Calvinist theology, piety, and social attitudes. That same year he wrote concerning religion that "it becomes a man of sense to think for himself." He thought it would be good to believe in a God of "Infinite Wisdom and Goodness," but was not certain that he did. He had doubts about Jesus as well:

Jesus Christ, thou amiablest of characters, I trust thou art no imposter, and that thy revelation of blissful scenes of existence beyond death and the grave, is not one of **the many impositions which time after time have been palmed off on a credulous mankind.**

For Liam McIlvanney the Enlightenment, with its stress on a more benevolent creator was central to Burns' outlook and achievement.<sup>588</sup> This view is shared by Walter McGinty in his thesis on *The Literary, Philosophical and Theological*

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<sup>586</sup> McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical* p.140.

<sup>587</sup> Cited in *The United Presbyterian Church in Ayrshire* (Ayr, 1830), p.3.

<sup>588</sup> McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, p.127.

*Influences on Burns*, in which he cites three main themes which “dominate the poet’s religious reflections:

- A belief in a benevolent God,
- A speculation on an existence beyond the grave,
- An acknowledgement of his own accountability before God”<sup>589</sup>

Having rejected the idea of a vengeful God appeased only by the satisfaction of Christ’s Atonement, Burns certainly maintained his picture of a loving, supportive creator, who presided over the ethical concerns and ‘common sense’<sup>590</sup> which should drive the Christian life,<sup>591</sup> in a similar tone to Dalrymple and McGill.

In some of his poems Burns mocked traditional Calvinists, both clerical and lay. In *The Ordination* he pictured more traditional churchmen driving away the enemies of orthodoxy: learning, common-sense, and morality. In the satirical *Epistle to John Goldie*, he portrays the bigoted and superstitious as sick unto death, with Goldie, a religiously liberal merchant, and John Taylor most responsible for this “black mischief.” *The Holy Fair* is a burlesque based on rural, outdoor communion festivals. Perhaps Burns’s most famous parody of Calvinism though is *Holy Willie’s Prayer*:

O Thou, that in the heavens does dwell,  
 Wha, as it pleases best Thysel’,  
 Sends ane to heaven an’ ten to hell,  
 A’ for Thy glory,  
 And no for onie guid or ill  
 They’ve done afore Thee!<sup>592</sup>

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<sup>589</sup> Walter McGinty, *Literary, Philosophical and Theological*, p.434.

<sup>590</sup> Walter McGinty, *Robert Burns and Religion*, (Ashgate, 2003), p.230.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid*, p.236.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

### VIII) William Dalrymple

Dalrymple was a native of Ayr, who served the Old Kirk parish for around forty years. He was clearly a man of some standing as he was appointed Moderator of the General Assembly in 1781, remarkable in itself, as most Moderators were at the time drawn from the area surrounding Edinburgh, for ease of transport. In addition he was awarded a D.D by St.Andrews University.<sup>593</sup>

In his recent work on the bard, Robert Crawford suggests that Dalrymple's "influence on Burns, direct and indirect, was lifelong".<sup>594</sup> Indeed in the *Kirk of Scotland's Garland* (or 'Kirk's Alarm') he is described by the poet as "Dalrymple mild, Dalrymple mild, Though your heart is like a child and your life like the new driven snaw."<sup>595</sup>

In keeping with Burns' own thoughts, Dalrymple preached against divisions within the church, in a concern for unity: "when shall the narrow, separating hedges of each party-contrivance be set aside, by the pure, healing spirit of Christian moderation?"<sup>596</sup> As an antidote, Dalrymple instead insisted upon a "great simplicity of language, and freedom from wrath...it is the affixing of names to people, with a design to stigmatise and render them suspected, that has sadly molested the peace of the church".<sup>597</sup> Ethical concerns, in keeping with the spirit of the age were also a mainstay of Dalrymple's thought, as he emphasised the need for "love and charity"<sup>598</sup> towards others as essential to the Christian life. Such a stress upon unity and indeed the pursuit of ethics would also concern McGill, and it would certainly appear that the relationship between the two ministers of the Old Kirk was a close one.

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<sup>593</sup> Carol McQuirk, 'William Dalrymple', DNB [accessed May 4<sup>th</sup> 2009]

<sup>594</sup> Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography* (London, 2009), p.34.

<sup>595</sup> Lindsay, *Burns Encyclopedia*, p. 30

<sup>596</sup> William Dalrymple, *Christian Unity Illustrated and Recommended, from the Example of the Primitive Church* (Glasgow, 1766), p.5. Also cited in Crawford, *The Bard*, p.31.

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid*, Dalrymple, p.16.and in Crawford, p.31.

Dalrymple's theology appears to have been influenced by the Common Sense Philosophy of Thomas Reid, as well as his having a keen concern for the poor of the parish. Indeed, in his *Legacy of Dying Thoughts* (1796), he stressed that the apostles themselves had been chosen from "men of low rank".<sup>599</sup>

Dalrymple additionally had a keen interest in Natural theology, and the theory of a mechanistic universe, developed by Issac Newton:

Having from very early years had a strong predisposition to the study of nature, this led me to read a variety of authors, and to make extracts from them, and to enlarge. To name them all would not be easy, nor can it be material, after acknowledging that, without such helps, it is probable that even this brief imperfect work would not have been made out.<sup>600</sup>

His influences in this field, in addition to Newton, appear to have been William Derham (1657-1735) and John Ray (1627-1705). As Dalrymple stated:

To such writers as Derham and Ray, and Newton, special regard is due. When people grow up, the works of these great good men may be read with high pleasure and profit; but, preparatory to such employment the young may be stimulated by a composition of this sort.<sup>601</sup>

Concrete evidence of Dalrymple's association and contact with English Socinians is found in a letter from Caleb Fleming, a man described by Priestley as a "zealous Socinian",<sup>602</sup> and dated 1769:

By a letter I received from my *dear friend*, the Rev. Dr. W. Dalrymple, of Ayr, in North Britain, dated March 22, 1769, I was surprised with the account of the University of St. Andrews having conferred on me the academical degree of Doctor in Divinity.<sup>603</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> Ibid, Dalrymple, p.27 and in Crawford, p.31.

<sup>599</sup> William Dalrymple, *A Legacy of Dying Thoughts from an Affectionate Old Pastor to his Flock* (Ayr, 1796), p.139 Cited in Crawford, *The Bard*, p.33.

<sup>600</sup> William Dalrymple, *The Mosaic account of Creation ... illustrated; or, A humble walk with God* (Ayr, 1794) p.vii.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid, p.viii. John Ray (or Wray) was an English naturalist, sometimes referred to as the father of English natural history. His publications concerned plants and animals, as well as natural theology. William Derham was a friend of Ray's who developed Ray's views of natural theology in two of his own publications, *The Physico-Theology*, published (1713), and the *Astro-Theology* (1714). It is thought that Derham exercised an influence on William Paley (1743-1805).

<sup>602</sup> Cited in Rivers and Wykes, *Joseph Priestley*, p.36.

<sup>603</sup> Cited in Turner, *Lives of eminent Unitarians*, p.295.

It is interesting to find such a link as it is suggestive of correspondence between the Ayr ministers and those in England within the Socinian camp, at a fairly early stage. Therefore it is an extra component, in addition to the access gained via the ‘Library Society’ of direct contact with the thought and theology of those south of the border. Indeed, Burns himself expressed the opinion (although clearly somewhat exaggerated) that: “the Moderate clergy of Ayrshire were all Socinian”<sup>604</sup> This was also in line with Burns declaring himself to be “a Jacobite, an Arminian, and a Socinian”.<sup>605</sup>

Dalrymple’s orthodoxy was directly suspected, particularly on the question of Christ’s nature. One of his main works was his monumental 519 page *A History of Christ: For the Use of the Unlearned with Short Explanatory Notes and Practical Reflections* (1787), published the year after McGill’s *Practical Essay*, the intention of which was to educate children, both in school and at home.

In the introduction to the *History*, Dalrymple made a positive citation of his colleague McGill:

I will not withhold the pleasure I likewise find from my worthy colleague, Dr William McGill, his having carried on at the same time, and without either our designs being made known to one another, a similar good work, founded upon the most important branch of our sacred gospel – history, the Sufferings and Death of Christ, considered, by way of practical essay; which there is little doubt, from its piously condescending manner, the simple elegance of its composition, exactness of method, and whole tendency to excite and cherish the best affections, will prove universally acceptable.<sup>606</sup>

He continued:

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<sup>604</sup> Cited by Henry Grey Graham in *The Social Life of Scotland*, p.364.

<sup>605</sup> Cited in John Ramsay, Alexander Allardyce, *Scotland and Scotsmen in the eighteenth century* (Edinburgh, 1888), p.554. However Liam McIlvanney contends that the poets use of the term ‘Socinian’ as a label is of little *practical* consequence. McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, p.127.

<sup>606</sup> William Dalrymple, *A History of Christ for the Use of the Unlearned with Short Explanatory notes and Practical Reflections* (Edinburgh, 1787), p.vii.

If in any particular we may seem to differ, they will not be such as affect either Love or Duty; and upon lesser points, all have right to judge for themselves. With that free spirit of inquisition we have hitherto drawn, my trust and hope in the Divine mercy is that you may yet continue to enjoy and value his sacred ministrations, and to set a special sense of regard as you now do upon the unremitting accuracy with which the truths of Scripture are explained and applied by lectures.<sup>607</sup>

Indeed Dalrymple's orthodoxy would be called into question by the Anti-Burgher James Ramsay, who believed Dalrymple to be a Socinian in common with McGill. In his 1790 work *A Clear, Scriptural Detection of Satan Transformed Into an Angel of Light: Or the Socinian Creed, as Held by Drs. M'Gill and Dalrymple*, Ramsay highlighted several areas from Dalrymple's *History of Christ* which were distinctly heterodox, particularly with regard to the Trinity and predestination. For instance on the matter of the Union of God and Christ, Dalrymple had stated that:

The Father and Son cannot be, as is generally supposed, one in nature and essence. They are one only in mutual love and harmony of design.<sup>608</sup>

Moreover, on p.109 of the *History*: "He [Christ] is the Son of God only in degree superior to others.. The designation only begotten signifies no more than that is the well-beloved, the chief of God's sons".

This position was made even clearer by Dalrymple's assessment that:

The only creation competent to Jesus Christ, and in Scripture ascribed to him, is a new creation; whereby men are renewed in knowledge... and even of this creation he is not the all-sufficient and independent author; as if of himself he gave it existence, but merely the mean or instrument employed by God...he is by no means equal with God.<sup>609</sup>

And again, concerning the miracles:

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid, p.viii.

<sup>608</sup> Dalrymple Ibid, p.295. Also cited in James Ramsay, *A Clear, Scriptural Detection of Satan Transformed Into an Angel of Light: Or the Socinian Creed, as Held by Drs. M'Gill and Dalrymple, ... Contrasted with the Holy Scriptures, and with the Subordinate Standards of the Church of Scotland. For the Use of the Unlearned.* (Glasgow, 1790), p.39.

<sup>609</sup> Dalrymple, p.514. Ramsay, p.51.

“Jesus Christ did not perform his miraculous works by his own power, but by the power of God his Father..In them therefore he acted not as almighty God, but as a person commissioned by him”<sup>610</sup>

Indeed he also suggested that the worship of Christ was not due until *after* his resurrection<sup>611</sup> (a firmly Socinian view).

On the question of predestination and election, Dalrymple exhibited an Arminian stance with regard to God’s foreknowledge of human destination, and also asserted that it was by good works and example of living (presumably flowing from penitence) which would rather attain salvation:

God has some men distinguished from others, by their integrity and love of the truth, or by their faith and ingenious obedience, but he has made no distinction among them by a peculiar choice, or purpose of destination while yet in their sins. His elect are not a certain number separated from the rest of mankind. Rather...those who being full of good works are approved of him.<sup>612</sup>

In keeping with his apparently Socinian theology, Dalrymple also openly denied the pre-existence of Christ viz.:

“In particular he had not eternal existence. But when he is said to have been before all things. It only means that he was before the New Testament dispensation, begun in his resurrection”<sup>613</sup>.

Clearly then Dalrymple was displaying a similar tone to that of McGill himself, hardly surprising given that close relationship between the two men, and also Dalrymple’s contact with English Socinians. It is however interesting that aside from Ramsay’s work, Dalrymple’s views were not called to account in a similar fashion to McGill’s. This despite the fact that he had seemingly published a document which was anti-Trinitarian in nature. Perhaps this was due to Dalrymple’s position not only

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<sup>610</sup> Ibid, p.105. Ramsay p.53

<sup>611</sup> Ibid, p.110. Ramsay, p.65.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid, p.441, Ramsay, p.79.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid, p.50. Ramsay, p.45.

in the church (having been a previous Moderator of the Assembly), but also his standing in the local community, as a man of some wealth (he at one time owned the estate of Mount Charles near Ayr).<sup>614</sup> Additionally he did not openly attack the Confession of Faith, (despite having been suspected of colluding with Fergusson some years beforehand) as McGill would do in his *Benefits of the Revolution* sermon. Also the fact that Ramsay had only ‘recently’ encountered Dalrymple’s *History* (in 1790) may suggest that it had a much lower circulation, perhaps at a more local level than the *Practical Essay*. Whatever the reason, it can be surmised from this evidence that both ministers of the Old Kirk of Ayr were anti-Trinitarian in nature. Therefore in considering the influences which shaped McGill’s own thought his colleague is another significant figure. This also poses the question of why Ayrshire appeared to be a home of sorts for establishment ministers who were Socinian in nature, with for example, Fergusson, Dalrymple, McGill, and James Wodrow of Stevenson. Clearly the Ayr Library Society was the source of their knowledge about events and views in England and further afield with regard to Socinian theology. However the fact that they were also well connected with local dignitaries could have perhaps offered a sense of ‘protection’.

Although Dalrymple in 1787 spoke of himself as having reached “a time of life when an approach of dissolution might be soon expected”,<sup>615</sup> he lived for twenty-seven years after that date and died at the age of ninety in 1814.

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<sup>614</sup> McGuiirk in DNB [accessed May 4<sup>th</sup> 2009]

<sup>615</sup> Andrew Edgar, *Old Church Life in Scotland: Lectures on Kirk Seession and Presbytery Records* (Paisley, 1885), p. 357.

## IX) Denominational Affiliation

Illustrative of patronage disputes in Ayrshire was the attempted presentation in 1764 of the Rev William Lindsay by the Earl of Glencairn to the second charge in Kilmarnock. This provoked a significant opposition from local people, leading to access to the church being denied, and the induction having to take place in a public house instead.<sup>616</sup> Similarly, the 1782 ordination of the Rev William Boyd to Fenwick was disrupted by a mob, causing the ceremony to be moved to Irvine. There were also cases of bands members setting up their own churches in some disputed cases, as at Mauchline in 1790, with controversy ensuing over the replacement of Rev William Auld.<sup>617</sup>

As we can see then, a pattern of “dissent” was certainly prevalent in Ayrshire in this period, although of course such breakaways from the established church were also occurring elsewhere in Scotland at this time. Maisie Steven’s recent examination of the *Old Statistical Account* of the eighteenth-century offers a helpful picture of church numbers in Kilmarnock in the late 1790s which were:

Established Church	5,716.
Burghers	540
Anti-Burghers	480
Cameronians	40 <sup>618</sup>

## Conclusion

The Ayrshire with which McGill was familiar does not appear to have been a ‘backwater’ in mid-to-late eighteenth century Scotland. For the time transport was

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid.

<sup>617</sup> Drummond and Bulloch, *Scottish Church*, p. 64.

fairly well established, which at least enabled contact with Glasgow. Indeed as a port town Ayr was well situated to deal with some measure of trade. Those desiring links to the thought of the outside were well catered for from 1762 onwards with the establishment of the Library Society, whereby McGill and Dalrymple were able to acquaint themselves with a variety of literature, which significantly included the works of some leading English Socinians, such as Priestley, Price and Lardner. Moreover, Dalrymple's contact with Caleb Fleming suggests some form of correspondence between the Ayr ministers and those who were Socinian in their outlook. It is also interesting to note that the Library Society held publications which were amenable towards the French Revolution, prior to a change of heart on the part of those in the Scottish church who had also welcomed the Jacobins movement. It is unfortunate that no written record of McGill's early views of either the American or French revolutions exists. This would of course have allowed a comparison with his later conservative treatment of events in France.

Although Burns certainly appears to have overstated the influence of Socinianism in Ayrshire, it is understandable from his close contact with Dalrymple (and indeed McGill himself), that he would have viewed the theology of the clergymen around him in this way.

The Fergusson case, around twenty years before McGill's, certainly seems to be pertinent, as it involves a public questioning of allegiance to the Confession from the bounds of Ayrshire. As McGill was to express similar sentiment in his *Benefits of the Revolution* sermon, it could be suggested that he was carrying on the cause initiated by Fergusson and Thomas Walker. Certainly an appeal to the Protestant right of private judgement in matters of doctrine, which drove Fergusson and Walker

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<sup>618</sup> Maisie Steven, *Parish Life in Eighteenth-Century Scotland: A Review of the Old Statistical Account* (Dalkeith, 2002), p.187.

would also seem to have been pertinent to McGill's own work in later times. It may even be posited that by attempting to expound a Socinian interpretation of the Atonement, McGill was making a further appeal to the principle of 'freedom of enquiry and thought' which this entailed.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### THE EMERGERENCE OF MCGILL'S PROFILE AND REACTION

#### **D) A Humble Remonstrance Against Some Prevailing Vices of this Present Age**

In 1773 McGill had a sermon entitled *A Humble Remonstrance Against Some Prevailing Vices of this Present Age* published, which offers an interesting insight into some of his theology.

The work is divided into three sections according to those things which McGill regards as “vices” of the time: i) impiety, ii) luxury and dissipation and iii) Sabbath breaking. On each of these social issues McGill appears to represent a very orthodox line. I will consider each theme in turn.

Impiety is regarded by McGill to be the “withdrawing” of the heart from God, and “placing it in other objects, in refusing to pay him that homage and worship which is due unto his name; or briefly, in thinking, speaking, and acting irreverently with regard to him”.<sup>619</sup> Many in the age were castigated as lovers of pleasure, comparable to the Jews who worshipped false gods in the past. Protestants, for McGill, were at least not guilty of idolatry (in a thinly veiled attack on Catholicism). Rather, “many of us, serve no god at all, perform no acts of devotion of any kind, make no acknowledgements to any power above, real or imaginary”.<sup>620</sup> It was not only the lower, poorer classes who were caught in this trap of deceit; indeed “men of superior rank and fortune”<sup>621</sup> were some of the worst offenders.

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<sup>619</sup> William McGill, *A Humble Remonstrance Against some prevailing Vices of the Present Age: a Fast Sermon*. (Edinburgh, 1773), p.9.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid, p.11.

Upon considering luxury McGill made it clear that he “was not speaking of: the splendour and magnificence so universally, so eagerly sought after, in dress, lodging, the entertainments of the table, and a variety of other costly pleasures”.<sup>622</sup>

This then was a reference to the acquisition of money, the pursuit of wealth, “not by what they have, not by their real income, but by the measure of credit - financial - they are able to procure”.<sup>623</sup> Rather ironic words from a man who was himself a shareholder in the local Bank of Ayr!<sup>624</sup>

A spirit of “such voluptuousness”<sup>625</sup> was a dangerous thing for McGill, as it led to “criminal excesses of intemperance, unseemliness, and an unbridled dissolution of manners”.<sup>626</sup> He went on to attack the avarice of land owners who:

In almost every corner of the three kingdoms, by racking the rents, have driven so many of the old inhabitants out of their estates, and although their incomes have doubled, and trebled in many instances in the last forty years, still they are nothing the richer, but more needy than before. Hence so many rush into unlawful ways of making gain, into gaming, smuggling, stock jobbing, and other desperate adventures in trade, the success of which may enrich them suddenly, but whose failure more often brings irretrievable ruin on themselves, and all that have had the misfortune to put trust in them.<sup>627</sup>

Here then, we have a political statement from McGill. With regard to Sabbath observance, McGill considered that there were:

Very frequent forsaking of God’s house, and the public solemnities of his worship on that holy day; and by consecrating the day to worldly business in private, or to mere idleness and sauntering, to unnecessary visits and feasting, and still more to unnecessary travelling.<sup>628</sup>

Indeed, with regard to travelling he continued:

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<sup>622</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>624</sup> Strawhorn, *The History of Ayr* p.58.

<sup>625</sup> McGill, *A Humble Remonstrance*, p.13.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid, p.16.

If there is a journey to take, the Sabbath is generally chosen for it rather than another day... and what respect is to be paid to the Sabbath, or to the most important services of public religion, when a party of pleasure, or a good dinner comes in competition with them?  
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Profanation of the Sabbath was in McGill's opinion nothing less than a public display of complete and utter disregard for religion, in doing so there was little commemoration of the Saviour of the world. Such a failure to attend church and treat the Sabbath with respect was to risk the wrath of God being brought to bear on the nation. By holding such a traditional viewpoint McGill appeared to place himself firmly within a Calvinistic camp as far as the Sabbath was concerned.

### III) William Peebles' Response to McGill

William Peebles, minister of Newton upon Ayr, preached two sermons on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1787 in which he made a thinly-veiled attack on McGill's *Practical Essay*. In the first sermon, which was designed to celebrate the occasion of the "Glorious Revolution" of William of Orange's (1650-1702) succession to the throne of Britain, Peebles compares the deliverance of the kingdom from Catholic rule as comparable to the "return of the Jews from their Babylonian captivity".<sup>630</sup> In pointing out the evils from which the nation, in divine providence, was delivered by the Revolution, Peebles declares that the actions of King William had protected the "civil rights of a free people...instead of enjoying the sweets of liberty, we would have been enthralled in miserable bondages".<sup>631</sup> Indeed "foreigners who have tasted

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<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

<sup>630</sup> William Peebles, *The Great Things which the Lord has done for this nation*, (Kilmarnock, 1788), p.10.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid, p.14.

the sweets of liberty in visiting this island, have regarded our civil constitution, secured and established in the Revolution as the boast of the world”.<sup>632</sup>

If Catholic rule had continued, “we should have been deprived of the Word of God in our native language”.<sup>633</sup> Another threat that had been removed was that of “bowing down to the mass, to images of saints, to relics of men departed like ourselves...taught to believe in the infallibility of the supreme Head of the Romish church”.<sup>634</sup>

In addition to the Revolution, Peebles also celebrated the destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the overthrow of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, both in themselves further acts of Divine providence in his opinion.

He concludes the first sermon by pointing to the other benefits enjoyed by acting and behaving as:

The proper subjects of a free Government, we can smile at the impotent rage of a tyrant, and brave with safety the insults of every oppressor. By the famous Bill of Rights subscribed and sworn by the Sovereign at the Revolution, and subscribed and sworn to by every succeeding Prince who has occupied the throne of these kingdoms, our happy constitution is established on the firmest basis, not to be shaken but by our sins and wickedness.<sup>635</sup>

In the Second sermon, Peebles sets out to consider some of the ‘great things that God had done for the nation’ from a religious point of view. Most importantly (in addition to having the Scriptures in the vernacular) was the establishment of the Westminster Confession as an essential part of the national establishment. This, he deemed necessary, so that the church could: “guard against errors in the public

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<sup>632</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid, p.26.

teaching and instruction of her ministers; so that, none denying these doctrines can, confidently, be a member of this church.”<sup>636</sup>

Any who contravened this should be cast out by either the General Assembly or by a lower church court, with the agreement of the civil authority. However he comes to the crux regarding McGill when he added:

In publications the doctrines of our Confession have been attacked, they are not open separatists from this church – they dwell in her bosom, and without a blush at the dishonesty of their conduct they have the audacity and impertinence to tell you to your face that while with the one hand they are receiving the privileges of the church, with the other they are endeavouring to plunge the keenest poniard into her heart. Let us be warmed into holy fervent prayer that the Lord would open their blind eyes, that he would purge away the iniquity of our Zion.<sup>637</sup>

Of any commentaries on McGill this is probably the most famous citation against him by any opponent. Although he is not directly named by Peebles in the sermon, it is very clear both who and what he is referring to. Interestingly, Peebles concludes the sermon by castigating patronage, as a cause of allowing such ministers as McGill to be appointed. However the damage was done and McGill’s response would set the whole case and process against him in motion.

#### **IV) McGill – The Benefits of the Revolution**

In the Appendix to his *Benefits of the Revolution* sermon McGill outlines the differences between Peebles and himself, namely:

It appears that there are certain men in this church, and ministers of the same, who have incurred the high displeasure of the Rev. Mr. Peebles, and against whom he endeavours to stir up in the breaths of his hearers the utmost indignation. For some crime surely? Yes, for presuming to differ from him, in some points of theological controversy.<sup>638</sup>

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<sup>636</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid, p.36.

<sup>638</sup> McGill, *The Benefits of the Revolution*, p.23.

He continues:

We should hardly have suspected that in these descriptions, he was speaking of some, or perhaps a large division of his brethren in the ministry of the gospel, if he had not singled out one of them, who beside his share of the common guilt, is further obnoxious on particular accounts.<sup>639</sup>

It is interesting to find McGill speaking of himself in the “second” person, as Peebles was of course referring to him. Peebles had compared McGill to the historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), English scholar and the supreme historian of the Enlightenment, best known as the author of the monumental *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and thought (by McGill) to have “exerted the utmost force of uncommon abilities and learning to subvert the Christian religion”.<sup>640</sup> McGill also took offence at the fact that despite having had the opportunity to converse with him in private over their theological differences, Peebles had not chosen this route before going public with his remonstrations.

Turning to Peebles’ attack on his thoughts on the Confession of Faith, McGill contended:

In what private conversations, Mr Peebles has heard the Confession of Faith treated with contempt, he himself best knows. We can only judge of the public attack alleged to have been made upon it... Now if there is any ridicule in the case, it is from Mr Peebles it comes, and not from the author he censures, who only related an historical fact, equally grave and curious, and then left his reader to form his own judgement on it; with a caution of charity, not to be angry, if others should judge differently from him; a caution, by which it appears that Mr Peebles has not profited.<sup>641</sup>

In McGill’s view, the Confession was attributable to the “commandments of men”.<sup>642</sup> By way of launching another attack upon Peebles’ assumption that he was

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<sup>639</sup> Ibid, p.24.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

not fully *au fait* with the doctrines contained therein he cites the two sources of his opponents “information”, namely private conversation and public writings (the *Practical Essay*) and from which the readers of it could surely judge for themselves: “If therefore they (including himself) do vent any thing of that kind, in these circumstances, a candid spirit might impute it to their sincerity and courage, or if he will, to their being fools for Christ’s sake.”<sup>643</sup>

In calling his chastisement of the Confession “unparalleled”, McGill points to the instances of men such as John Wycliffe (1300-1384), William Tyndale (1494-1536), Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Nicholas Ridley (1503-1555), and Hugh Latimer (1485-1555) saying that “they may have been reproached by the Peebles of their days as violating their engagements to the church”.<sup>644</sup>

Interestingly he adds, “was not the same baseness committed by the founders of the Secession in Scotland, and the Father of the Relief people?”<sup>645</sup> However, McGill is rather charitable towards the ministers of the Secession (some of whom were to become his fiercest opponents), stating that despite being “furious and fanatical”, yet there are “some among them fit to be pastors to Mr Peebles, in point of candour, liberality, peaceableness, humility and charity”.<sup>646</sup> The Secession church did of course adhere to the Confession.

Peebles is furthermore guilty of picking and choosing the parts of the Confession which clearly suit his own cause:

This is probable from his calling the doctrine of Christ’s substitution, formerly mentioned, “an important and fundamental one; for in dignifying it with these titles, he has plainly gone beyond, not only the

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<sup>643</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid, p.32.

<sup>645</sup> Ibid, p.33.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid.

word of God, but what seems to be with him, a more sacred rule, at least a better security against error.<sup>647</sup>

With the Practical Essay having not initiated an open response of its own accord, McGill's refutation of the Confession in this sermon was a moment of importance in finally bringing a case against him. I will therefore now consider the Essay, and the possible influence of leading English Socinians on its thought.

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid, p.36.

**CHAPTER SEVEN:**  
**MCGILL'S PRACTICAL ESSAY AND THE INFLUENCE OF**  
**PRIESTLEY, LARDNER AND TAYLOR**

Within this chapter I will offer an assessment of McGill's *Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* with a summary of its most contentious points and a consideration of where his theology appears to have been Socinian in tone. As it is known that he certainly had access to Joseph Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, in addition to the *prima facie* evidence for his acquaintance with John Taylor's *Scriptural Doctrine of Original Sin* and his admiration for the works of Nathaniel Lardner, I will also make citations from these works to try and ascertain the possible parallels of thought between the various authors. Indeed, in addition to the Ayr Library Society material McGill himself makes reference in the *Essay* to having read Priestley's *Theological Repository* Vol II (1771). In this work there is a sound defence of Lardner's *Letter on the Logos*, which, although composed by an anonymous author, would appear to be akin to Priestley's own views. From this source McGill may well have drawn his initial contact and thoughts on Lardner's theology, which led to his later open admiration of the English Socinian. Although, as discussed in the 'Introduction', McGill made positive citations concerning the English Arian Henry Taylor, it is also worth examining the work of Priestley, Lardner and Taylor in the search for key influences. Indeed McGill's 'style' of constructing a Gospel history in the first instance is also reminiscent of that of Priestley and Lardner. However, during the course of the *Essay* McGill does appear to drift at times between an Arian position (concerning for instance the pre-existence of Christ) and more

clearly Socinian views. This could have been an attempt on the Ayr ministers part to “merge” the two systems in some sense. It is also believed that McGill was assisted in the publication of the *Essay* by the Socinian James Wodrow of nearby Stevenson, (1730-1810)<sup>648</sup> who was a longstanding friend.<sup>649</sup>

The introduction to the *Practical Essay*<sup>650</sup> is addressed to the Rev. William Dalrymple. In his opening remarks McGill exhorts Dalrymple to find the *Essay* as a “monument of the happy union and friendship” (iv) which existed between them. As has already been noted, Dalrymple was a close colleague and supporter of McGill’s who was seen to “share” his views. This introduction was of course partly literary conversation between the two men.

The treatise is split into two main parts: Part 1 contains the “History” of Jesus Christ, from his agony in the garden to his ascension into heaven, in fourteen sections; Part 2 focuses more upon the theology of Christ’s death, with this part divided into two lengthy chapters. Overall, the text comprises some 535 pages, with a summary of McGill’s main points and arguments at the end. I will attempt to offer a concise summary and interpretation of McGill’s line of thought and theological intentions throughout the rest of this chapter.

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<sup>648</sup> Martin Fitzpatrick in Knud Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion*, p.90.

<sup>649</sup> Wodrow, minister at Stevenson in Ayrshire, had also studied under William Leechman, and appears to have become convinced by Unitarian/Socinian views at a fairly early stage, converting the Calvinist Samuel Kenrick (1728-1811), with whom he maintained a regular correspondence about such opinions. See Robert Tudur.Jones, Alan P. F. Sell (et al), *Protestant Nonconformist Texts: The Eighteenth Century* (London, 2006), p.295.

<sup>650</sup> McGill, *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh, 1786), p.iv. As this work is central to the discussion that follows, page numbers will be cited in-text in brackets.

### **I) Part I: Introduction and the “History”**

McGill begins by placing the death of Christ at the very forefront of his christology, indeed it is, for him, unquestionably the very centrepiece: “It behoves us to meditate with humble and devout attention, all the days of our lives, concerning this subject” (3).

Furthermore he expresses his gratitude for Christ's role as the suffering servant of God, “who for a time made himself a little lower than the angels” (5). It is thus essential that humankind should attempt to wrestle with the fundamental effects of Christ's sacrifice and atoning death on the cross. Indeed the crucifixion is the very purpose and end-point of Christ's coming into the world (although McGill was later to be accused by his various opponents of deviating from this line). A true examination of the Scriptures is required to ascertain the very nature of humanity's redemption, although as he sets out to pursue this McGill admits that:

I do not pretend to make new discoveries relating to our Saviour's death. It would be strange if any thing of great importance, and altogether new, could be advanced upon a subject too deeply canvassed in the meditations, discourses, and writings of so many wise and learned men, and during so long a series of ages. (7)

In other words it was not the author's intention to offer an “original” interpretation of Christ's death at this stage. Rather he aimed to:

with the help of God, collect together (which I have not seen yet done) with as much clearness and precision as possible, the most edifying views and useful instructions held forth in Scripture concerning the death of Christ, and the method of reconciliation through him. And as these observations, written for my own improvement in the first place, are now sent abroad; it is the benefit of the plain and well-disposed Christians, though unlearned, which is chiefly aimed at them. (7)

In other words, he wishes to make “theology” or dogma more accessible to the laity.

Here we are offered an insight into McGill's hopes for the purpose of the *Essay*: to clarify his own thoughts and then subsequently instruct the people, as his audience, for the furtherance of their Christian education.

Indeed he states that he had no desire to "give offence to any man, far less a sincere and humble follower of the Lord Jesus" (8). "Rather would I call the attention of Christians to what we are all agreed in" (8), (in an echo of his earlier thought in *A Prayer of our Saviour*) suggesting an initially uncontroversial stance. Certainly, McGill's intentions at this juncture would appear to be evangelical.

## II) Sections 1-14

Focusing on the gospel accounts in order to give a history of the death of Christ and the redemption of humanity offered by it, McGill used the "agony in the garden" of Gethsemene as his starting point.

Here he outlined the anthropological and subjective starting point of Jesus in this account, of a man greatly troubled by the fate about to befall him, but at the same time choosing to include his friends the disciples, in his hour of need and despondency.

The prayer in the garden "O my Father!, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" [Matt. 25:39], betrays no distrust of God's love or sense of his displeasure. On the contrary, it expresses, in the very address of it, a full persuasion of his friendship and a perfect confidence in him. (36)

This then is an early deviation from the notion of Christ suffering under the wrath of God, rather it places the focus on a 'human' Jesus, not bearing the full weight of sin as necessary to appease and satisfy the Deity: a Socinian belief.

Again he emphasises, in a discourse regarding Jesus' praying to God as the "authentic proof of our Saviour's real humanity [a theme which he perhaps over

emphasises in the *Essay*] and of the inviolable truth and impartiality of his historians” (37). Jesus then, having been tested in the most excruciating manner imaginable to the mind, overcomes the infirmities of human nature with “complete victory” (35). However the Presbytery of Ayr was later to focus on a specific passage from Section 1 of the *Essay*:

Thus we have mentioned diverse probable causes of our Saviour’s agony in the garden, but have said nothing of God’s withdrawing his countenance from him, or inflicting secret torments on his soul, because that seems injurious to the ethical criterion of God and not agreeable to the truth of historical evidence....he did not, in the depth of his agony, consider himself as suffering under the divine indignation, nor was there any reason why he should. (35)

This tone of more anthropomorphic theology is continued in the second section, entitled “Jesus made a prisoner”, where we are informed that McGill regards Jesus’ transformation from a “man of sorrow” in the garden, to one of great fortitude and courage in the face of his enemies. He chooses to focus on Christ’s absolute obedience to the will of God, a recurring theme throughout the *Essay*. McGill continues: “the Blessed Jesus as having lost nothing of his usual presence of mind”, in the “alarming situation” (53) into which he had been placed by his betrayal, capture and arrest. However here was a man, in McGill’s eyes, whose concerns rested on the fate of his band of followers, attempting to sustain them for the trials which lay ahead, a man who remained calm in the face of provocation at the hands of the chief priests. In other words he acted as a good example of fortitude to his followers. This was a theme very close to the views of Priestley, in his *History of Corruptions* where the English scientist had stated that Christ:

Went through the scene of his trial and crucifixion with wonderful composure, and without the least appearance of any thing like agony of mind. His saying, My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me, was probably nothing more than his reciting the first verse of the 22d Psalm, to which he might wish to direct the attention of those who were present, as it contained many things peculiarly

applicable to his case. There is nothing in this scene, any more than in his agony in the garden, but what is easily explicable, on the supposition of Christ being a man; and to suppose that he was then under an agony of mind, impressed upon him, in any inexplicable manner, by the immediate hand of God, in order to aggravate what he would naturally suffer, and thereby make his sufferings an adequate expiation for the sins of the world, is a mere arbitrary supposition, not countenanced by any one circumstance in the narration.<sup>651</sup>

After outlining the trial of Jesus and Peter's subsequent three denials at some length (from Matt. 26), McGill continues to assert the whole trend of divine providence throughout the arrest and trial, which would of course lead up to the crucifixion. By doing so he follows the traditional path of emphasising Pilate's reluctance to become embroiled in the matter, torn between Roman justice and appeasement of the Jews. Pilate is however considered to be a politician of his time, who had "no great desire to be informed of what that "Truth" that seemed so important to Jesus, and for which he willingly exposed himself to such sufferings, was" (134). The real accusers rather remained the Chief Priests, and delegates of the Sanhedrin. Pilate, on the other hand, was astounded by Jesus' calm stance throughout, which he appeared to find "singular and astonishing", and for McGill must "have now concluded that Jesus was no ordinary person" (134). The almost exonerated Pilate stands as a sharp contrast to the Jews who "affect a concern for the honour of God, while they show themselves void of all sentiments of candour and equity towards men" (136). Here McGill displays a reflection of the Renaissance and Enlightenment concerns with natural justice.

In Section 9 McGill places the servanthood of Christ at the centre of his nature, that he "should lay aside all appearance of his divinity" (130). If he had not done this, then his enemies would not have been able to seize his person or make any

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<sup>651</sup> Joseph Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, (Originally published 1782, 1838

attempt on his life. Here again then is the key emphasis on the full humanity of Christ in the midst of his earthly mission. This sentiment was, of course, open to the charge that by over emphasising the humanity of Christ, McGill was in some respects underplaying his divinity, at best, which gave rise to quasi-Arian or Socinian suspicions.

McGill then turned his attention to Jesus' "words from the cross"<sup>652</sup> (having described the intricacies of Roman crucifixion) to demonstrate both the nature and full extent of his afflictions and sacrifice.

At this stage McGill adheres to the standard biblical exegesis of typological allusions to the death of Christ, citing the Psalmist. From his final exhortations Jesus is again portrayed as remaining absolutely true to God, unflinching in his need to fulfil the Father's mission and plan for him. "Here is no appearance of distrust in God, or of a mind unhinged by the weight of affliction" (again echoing Priestley's earlier sentiments) (145). Furthermore he is unequivocally the "*only* (unique) Son of God" (171). A fully forgiving Christ is envisioned, with his scope extending not only to the Roman soldiers, the two criminals crucified along with him, but also the Chief Priests, Elders and Scribes, the false witnesses, Pilate and the Jewish people who turned against him. Thus Christ is fulfilling his own precept to "love our enemies" (171). If even sinners of such magnitude as these can receive God's loving mercy, as McGill sees it, any who are truly repentant of heart and mind can enjoy the same measure of release in the future. Here we find an early example on McGill's later stress upon the centrality of repentance of the heart, as the true route to salvation. This of course underplays the role of regenerating grace involved in the Atonement

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edition, J and J.W. Prentiss) p.121.

<sup>652</sup> For instance Luke 23, John 19, Matt 27 and Mark 15.

and subsequent release from the penalty of sin. Indeed, McGill is clearly following a more traditional ‘Socinian’ line by expressing such sentiments.

McGill then concludes his historical and scriptural narrative of Christ’s passion with an orthodox rendering of the resurrection, by outlining (in Sections 13 and 14) **the true proofs of a bodily rising from the dead, a view which again was held by Priestley.**

This incorporates the traditional viewpoint of the guards at the tomb who afforded “the Rulers who employed them, a proof of Christ's resurrection which they could not fairly deny” (172).

The prevailing view of the Atonement in Scottish theology for Donald Macleod had been Anselmic in tone.<sup>653</sup> This was based on the views of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). As Anselm believed that the sin of human beings was offensive to the nature and being of God, a ‘debt’ had arisen which could only be truly fulfilled by the death of Christ, as humans were not worthy of making such a sacrifice. The sacrifice of Christ was then a propitiation for the debt incurred by sin, which compensated for the “offended honour”<sup>654</sup> of God. In addition to the Atonement for individual people, Anselm also regarded the sacrifice of Jesus as a means of satisfaction for the justice of God.<sup>655</sup> There can be no doubt from this survey of the first part of the Essay that McGill was in clear contravention of the accepted standards with regard to the Atonement, not only from within the established church, but also the more rigidly Calvinist Secession and Relief denominations.

We can now turn to examine the most contentious sections of the *Practical Essay*, contained within the second section entitled “The Doctrine of Christ's Death”.

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<sup>653</sup> D.Macleod, ‘The Atonement’ in DSCH, p. 39.

<sup>654</sup> J. Deny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Cambridge, 2001), p.16.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

### III) Part II: The Doctrine of Christ's Death

McGill began this section by stating that the:

salvation of sinners by Christ refers directly to two things, which are very distinguishable in themselves, though they have an essential connection with one another, namely, the original sin and guilt of it, or what is often called its reigning and condemning power. (229)

In doing so he moves from the passive to the active nature of the Atonement.

The second part of the *Essay* consisted of two chapters: firstly, a consideration of the effect of Christ's death as it relates to the expiation of guilt, and secondly to consider the same event as it tends to remove the depravity, corruption or moral defilement of sin.

McGill was quite clear at this stage that "Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecy relating to the Messiah" (60) by persuading sinners to come to repentance and lead a new life of sanctification. Interestingly, and indeed crucially, McGill stated that the "death or blood of Christ, is represented in Scripture as having a great willingness to save us, both from the practise of our sins and from the punishment due to them, I shall not stop to prove, it will be abundantly manifest of itself" (324).

Here, however, McGill appears to be demonstrating his own conviction that the shedding of the Saviour's blood is indeed in some sense a propitiation for the sins of humankind. This is a theme, as will be discussed at a later stage, which McGill certainly does not take. Therefore it is an example of a rather confused and inconsistent train of thought within his work. Due to such discrepancies a suggestion of theological incompetence on the part of McGill can be argued. Indeed, having not stressed the work of grace at an earlier stage, McGill goes on in Section II to suggest that it is the imputation of God's redeeming grace which "instigates the need of

wretched humanity to seek salvation through the cross and blood of Christ”,<sup>656</sup> again displaying a lack of consistency in his theological opinions.

#### IV) Four Key Observations

In Chapter 1 of Section 2, McGill propounds four observations on Christ’s death with the aim of being instructive in Christian piety. For the sake of clarity I will quote these observations which are:

- Firstly, that the death of Christ derived all its merit and efficacy from its being subservient to the plan of Divine wisdom and goodness for promoting the true happiness of man. [This stress on human ‘happiness’ would seem to echo the teachings of, for instance, Francis Hutcheson and William Leechman]
- Secondly, that the perfect obedience of Christ in his death, was made for one reason for offering mercy to everyone not otherwise entitled to it.
- Thirdly, that in reward of Christ’s righteousness and obedience unto death, God did further invest him with the glorious power of calling sinners to repentance, of forgiving their sins when penitent, and of raising them from the dead to eternal life, as well as of punishing the obstinately disobedient.
- Lastly that in Christ’s death, we have the strongest security given us for the vouchsafement of pardon to penitent failure and the full accomplishment of all Gospel promises and threatenings, even the whole Covenant on God’s part thus sealed with the blood of his own Son. (241)

He then split these “considerations” into longer Sections in order to give more scope to each one, regarding them as he does as the cornerstones of his *Essay*.

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<sup>656</sup> François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (London, 1963) p. 27.

## V) Section I

McGill regarded the Divine creator as being primarily a God of love, whose chief aim in his relationship with humanity is the pursuit of man's salvation, which can come into being through man's own free will and choice - not autonomously, but by way of grace. This is again an echo of traditional Socinian thought, which found the concept of a loving creator to be inconsistent with one who would impute wrath upon the person of Christ, and condemn the non-elect to damnation. Additionally, McGill is contravening a Calvinist stress upon the sovereignty of God, by emphasising the part played by the free-will of humans, in their choice to accept or reject the offer of salvation. This of course fits with an Arminian and indeed Socinian theological outlook.

Despite the clear pre-ordering of God's purpose through the intervention of his Son and his subsequent sacrifice then, there is no sense of a "Calvinistic" predestination of his earthly creatures' destinies. Each is rather given a unique opportunity by Christ's death to enter a new and abiding relationship with their creator. Man's capacity for rational thought is that which allows him to make such a choice, by pursuing perfect obedience to God, through his Son, a notion which fits with the Enlightenment stress on reason and rationality. Under the Law, man was required to submit to each and every direction of God to secure his happiness and avoid risking his displeasure. By denying predestination McGill is not only travelling down an Arminian path, but also drawing upon the Socinian emphasis upon the place of reason, which enables each human to potentially find God by way of making the correct choice, involved in their state of free-will.

Crucially, at this stage McGill chooses to focus on key Scriptural passages which emphasise a *pre-existing (eternal) Christ*, foreordained by God, prior to the

earth's creation, although he was not manifested as the Saviour of the world until the last times. In particular he cites 1 Peter 1:20, Titus 1:2, Eph 1:4, as well as Eph 3:9-11. He continues "from these, and other like passages, it appears that the gracious purpose of our salvation by Christ, was formed by God before any of our race received a being" (258). This was a view which was accepted by the Arian Henry Taylor, but denied by the Socinian Joseph Priestley. This could then be an example of McGill attempting to somehow "merge" both anti-Trinitarian views within his own work, which again leads in a sense to questioning his own certainties (or rather lack of them) at times.

The Ayrshireman then suggests that Christ was intended not to save the whole of humanity, (and so exempts himself from a charge of Universalism) but rather "at least a great number of them, in the way of piety and righteousness, none being excluded from the benefit but such as should by their obstinacy in sin exclude themselves" (275).

## **VI) Section II**

With regard to the offer of mercy to humans who are undeserving of it by Christ's perfect obedience to his Father, McGill outlines God's chief purposes of always doing what is in the best interests of humankind.

Indeed he does not confer punishments or benefits unless there is "a proper reason for it" (275). Here we see a truly compassionate God who has consistently dispensed mercy, with McGill citing several examples of such actions on the Father's part from Old Testament cases.

This line of thought would appear to echo that of John Taylor's earlier *Scriptural Doctrine of Original Sin*, where he asserts in his chapter on 'Mistakes about the Efficacy of Christ's Death' that:

The design of it could not be to make God merciful; or to dispose him to spare and pardon us, when, as some suppose, so great was his wrath, that had not Christ interposed, he would have destroyed us. This is directly contrary to the most plain and certain notions of Divine Goodness, and to the whole current of Revelation.<sup>657</sup>

Crucially this conduct of divine providence serves to connect human society more closely, and increases among men the sense of mutual obligation and dependence upon God. The benefits of Christ and the need for man's seeking him, "flow chiefly from the righteousness and good example of his life, and particularly from the eminent patience, submission and benevolence displayed at the close of it" (McGill 302). Again, John Taylor had emphasised that the value of Christ's death lay in his *obedience and goodness*, rather than *pain, suffering or punishment*.<sup>658</sup> This serves to secure the favour of God with sinners, in the same manner as do the piety and virtue of good men in general. This also echoes Erasmian humanism, which re-emerged in Enlightenment and moralist/ethical theology (again typically found in the views of Frances Hutcheson and William Leechman). Indeed here we find the influence of Enlightenment thought being brought to bear on McGill's theology. A society in which virtue, proper ethical concern, and good manners were pursued was one in which Christianity would flourish. This was also of course a key theme of various Moderate preachers of the age.

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<sup>657</sup> John Taylor, *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination*, cited in G.T.Eddy, *Dr Taylor of Norwich*, p.55.

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid*, p.55.

### VII) Section III

In Section III of his observations, the Ayr minister promotes the idea of Christ being able to call sinners to repentance on account of his “perfect” obedience, as we have already observed. Priestley indeed had considered Christ to be: “the most perfect example of voluntary obedience to the will of God.”<sup>659</sup> Here, McGill offers us a “survey” of the powers which Jesus has been invested with by God (334).

At the great commission of Matthew 28 Christ instructed his apostles to “go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature: Go, and convert all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” McGill advances the claim that it is at this very point that he is given, according to prophecy, “dominion and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him” (Dan 7:14). This suggests a Christ who is furnished with such authority *after* his resurrection and ascension, able to bestow upon his followers the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit (although McGill was certainly inconsistent on the role of the Holy Spirit in his theology).

The unique nature and role of Jesus is then fulfilled by his choosing not to “take vengeance”<sup>660</sup> on those who had crucified him, but rather to offer a free and full pardon upon the most equitable terms, thus providing a “new order” for mankind. As we shall later discover, McGill regarded Christ as taking on a mediatorial office in heaven after his resurrection. This was to prove controversial as traditional Reformed theology decreed that he held such a post *during* his earthly ministry and was not

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<sup>659</sup> Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions*, p.105.

<sup>660</sup> *A Narrative of the Whole Process respecting some publications of the Rev Dr. William McGill, ed by the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr* (Glasgow, 1790)

therefore offering a “new” sacrifice in the heavenly courts afterwards.<sup>661</sup> It did however sit firmly within a Socinian framework.

### VIII) Section IV

This was to prove the most controversial of McGill’s “key observations” as far as the later Presbytery Committee of Ayr was concerned. Focusing on his assertion that “we now come to a figurative and metaphorical description of the efficacy of Christ’s blood in taking away the guilt of sin” (343).

In this Section he outlined at length the sacrificial processes of the Israelites within the bounds of the covenantal relationship between themselves and God, whereby human as well as animal sacrifices were required in order to appease the Lord. McGill does present a picture of such sacrifices as being for a certain time and place and therefore not binding with the advent of Christ’s ultimate giving on the cross. Later Christ’s sacrifice is compared to:

the Paschal Lamb and to the mercy seat...this being a sacrifice for sin; as a sin offering: a burnt offering: a peace offering: a meat offering: a propitiation...more than one of these, or rather none of them, he could be, in a literal sense: but something there was in his history and character, which made him resemble them all, though vastly superior to whatever was meant by the noblest of them. (347)

Whether or not these were to be understood merely as “figurative”, McGill regarded Christ as now in heaven, able to expiate perfectly all sins, past, present and to come, provided they be truly repented of. Again there is a possible line of influence or similar thought from Priestley, who also traced the sacrificial process of the Israelites and concluded that:

It is something similar to this view of the death of Christ, as a sacrifice, that he is also called a priest, and a high priest, especially by the author

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<sup>661</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, II: 15-16 John T. McNeill (ed) trans by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, 1960) and Book IV.

of the epistle to the Hebrews. But this very circumstance might have given us to understand, that both the representations are merely figurative, because both taken together are hardly consistent, at least they make a very harsh figure, and introduce confusion into our ideas..... Though the death of Christ is frequently mentioned, or alluded to, by the ancient prophets, it is never spoken of as a sin offering. For the propriety of our translation of Isaiah 53:10 may be doubted; or if it be retained, it cannot be proved to exhibit any thing more than a *figurative allusion*.<sup>662</sup> [italics mine]

With regard to a sinner's reconciliation to God by repentance McGill delivered the following sentiments: "in granting pardon to penitent sinners, God had always from the beginning of the world exercised his essential mercy and compassion. There was nothing but sin unrepented of that stood between men and the richest tokens of God's favour." (360) Again, Priestley offered a firm view of the nature and essential role of the reconciliation to God being achieved by way of repentance:

Is it not surprising, then, that, in all the books of scripture, we no where find the principle on which the [satisfaction] doctrine of Atonement is founded. Nay, the contrary sentiment occurs every where, viz: that repentance and a good life are, of themselves, sufficient to recommend us to the divine favour<sup>663</sup>..... We have seen in the Old Testament that the Jews had never any other idea than that God was placable on repentance.<sup>664</sup>

Additionally, Priestley cited the example of Job, the Ninevites, the later Jews, and the Apocraphal books, Philo, Josephus and other subsequent Christian writings, as well as finding common ground with Hindus and other "oriental nations" with regard to the importance of repentance for salvation. Such views were a restatement of his earlier work, *The Scripture Doctrine of Remission. Which sheweth that the Death of Christ is no proper Sacrifice nor Satisfaction for Sin, but that pardon is dispensed soley on account of Repentance, or a personal reformation of the Sinner*

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<sup>662</sup> Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions*, p.107.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid, p.92.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid, p.97.

(1761). This had been published as an anonymous pamphlet by Caleb Fleming and Nathaniel Lardner.<sup>665</sup> As Robert Schofield has pointed out Priestley drew many of his ideas on this issue of repentance, not only from Nathaniel Lardner, but also from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and Samuel Clarke's Boyle Lectures.<sup>666</sup>

With his clear stress upon repentance, McGill exhibited a questionable stance towards Christ's sacrifice yet again, with a suggestion that he has overlooked the need for a combination both of repentance *and* Christ's sacrifice through his blood, in order to appease God.

However, McGill adds in a note in his *Essay*:

Under the gospel dispensation, God, for our comfort, hath graciously obliged himself to extend mercy to the penitent by an express and perpetual covenant... according to this covenant all sins, however numerous, and great soever, provided they do not exclude that repentance which the gospel requires, shall be no obstacle to their enjoying eternal life in heaven.<sup>667</sup>

He continues to clarify this point:

As the abrogation of the old covenant is an effect justly ascribed to the death of Christ, because his blood shed was the solemn ratification of the new; so all the blessings and privileges of the new covenant, may in like manner, and for the same reason, be ascribed to the great fact or event whereby it was ratified. Thus if we have redemption or expiation of sins, it is through the blood of Christ that we have it: if we are reconciled or brought nigh to God instead of being, as before, at a distance and deplorably alienated from him, it is by the death of his Son, by the blood of Christ.<sup>668</sup>

This would appear to be a further contradiction on the part of McGill. On the one hand he is suggesting, as did Priestley, that the shedding of Christ's blood was a

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<sup>665</sup> Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley* p.70. As Schofield points out, although clearly influential, this is one of the most difficult of Priestley's writings to obtain.

<sup>666</sup> *Ibid*, p.72.

<sup>667</sup> James Moir, *The Scripture Doctrine of Redemption by the Death of our Lord Jesus Christ Stated and Defended, being an answer to a Practical Essay On the Death of Jesus Christ by William McGill, D.D., one of the Ministers Of Ayr* (Glasgow, 1787), p. 8.

metaphorical sacrifice, but then he attributes a key importance to its role in the forgiveness of sin. Here, McGill also makes reference to the idea of a ‘covenant of love’, offered by God to human beings. The covenant has however been broken by the barrier of sin, which therefore requires restitution on the part of man, in order to restore them to the proper state, by which they can conduct a relationship with God.<sup>669</sup>

In a later apology to the Committee, McGill gave further vent to this dual form of reconciliation to God. “I only meant that though our reconciliation to God is solely by the blood of Christ, it is never effected without the sinner being brought to *repentance*...This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he has sent: and except ye repent, ye likewise shall perish” (364). Here again McGill sounds Socinian, tending to “subjective” views of the Atonement.

Another key aspect which McGill attributed to Jesus’ role was that of his resurrection. Indeed without the resurrection then the prior shedding of his blood would not have been encompassing enough:

By a familiar way of speaking, we find everywhere in the New Testament, effects ascribed to the death or blood of Christ, which were by no means owing to it simply and separately considered, but to it as connected with the purity of his life before, and with the glorious power of his resurrection following it, and which, without this power following his death could never have existed. (366)

McGill compares this to a patriot saving his country not by the shedding of his blood alone, but by the conquering action of overcoming the “enemy” afterwards. In other words it is Christ’s victory over death which has opened the door for man to be secure in the knowledge of his redemption. Priestley had offered a similar stance, while again stressing the ‘humanity’ of Christ:

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<sup>668</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>669</sup> See for instance Harold O.J. Brown in Amitai Etzioni, and David Carney (eds), *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective* (Maryland, 1997), p.33.

As Christ was intended to be our example, and pattern, in his life, death, and resurrection from the dead, his sufferings were absolutely necessary to qualify him for the work on which he was sent.<sup>670</sup>

God therefore has granted his Son this unique power whereby he is truly the “firstborn” of those risen from the dead, thus completing his Father’s divine plan. Thus the allusion of the Saviour as a scapegoat was not sufficient or indeed worthy of his divine nature and role in God’s intentions.

### **IX) Chapter II**

Following the “Four Key Observations”, McGill moves onto Chapter II of Part II of his *Essay*. This Chapter is split into five “subsections”, focusing on the effect of Christ’s death as it tends to remove the depravity of sin. Broadly these sections are centred on the following motifs as the following citations illustrate (413):

- Christ’s humiliations confirm our faith because they for one thing fulfil the ancient prophecies respecting the Messiah.
- Christ’s death is motivated by love: love to God, to Christ, to one another and to all men.
- Christ’s death as an essential element of repentance, showing the certainty of obtaining pardon upon repentance and the certainty of our final destruction if we do not repent.
- Christ’s death as an incitement to proficiency in virtue as it animates us to a benefactor who has saved us; as it gives us a proper sense of the dignity of our nature (redeemed, not fallen) and the worth of our souls, and sets before us a pattern of goodness (a virtuous model).

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<sup>670</sup> Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions* p.104.

- Christ's death as ground of consolation to good Christians; showing that affliction renders us conformable to our Saviour; that no degree of this life is inconsistent with the favour of God; that after enduring it with patience we shall be gloriously rewarded; and finally that we may safely rely on the sympathy and succour of our Divine Saviour (Christ as supportive).

For the purposes of interpretation then it is possible to examine certain strands of thought which McGill details in Chapter II. Indeed they are the very strands from which the Committee of Inquiry would later extrapolate their various arguments against the Ayr minister. These are: the person and character of Christ, the priesthood and intercession of Christ and the method of reconciliation to God by way of repentance.

### **X) Assessment**

Having surveyed McGill's "History of Christ's life" as well as the doctrine of Christ's death, we can now turn to consider the basis of his "Socinian" views within the *Essay*, those which concerned the person and character of Jesus.

As he had done in the first section, McGill set great store by the humanity of Jesus, a Christ who was fully acquainted with grief and willing to lay down his life for his friends. In order to accomplish this he had to become a servant or slave in order to truly represent God on earth: "Made in the likeness of men Jesus thus exchanged the form of God and descended to earth becoming like those humans who have no extraordinary endowments or dignity above others, despite the fact that he was, of course, far superior to the highest of them all".(145)

To achieve this it was necessary for him to be “fashioned as a man, to enable him to seem as such in appearance, humbled to the point of humility, retaining no mark of his real greatness, except that of human charity and patience by his obedience to God”. (145)

It has to be said that McGill still stressed the uniqueness of Christ’s role - his reward (as attested by the apostle Paul) was the gift of God’s grace, granting him a name above all others. While on earth he had the power to forgive sins within that sphere (which mere mortals did not), whilst after his rising he had the additional remit to forgive sins from heaven by granting release to the truly contrite of heart and penitent of spirit.

Again, Jesus’ resolve to surrender to his Father’s will and intentions are present in the *Essay*. In order to fully fulfil the requirements of his death, it was essential for McGill that Christ “lay aside all appearance of his divinity, and take the form of a servant” (345), an example of self-limitation. Although others were to follow Jesus’ martyrdom in giving up their lives for the faith, none did so with such a complete sincerity and sense of suffering: “Rather, his was the most bitter, his behaviour under it more noble, and perfect”. (345) Though some might have been mistaken in their sense of mission, Christ had the undeniable assurance of his purpose.

## **XI) On Socinianism.**

It seems inevitable from this reading of McGill’s portrayal of Christ’s human character that he would lay himself open to an attack on his diminution of the Saviour’s divine nature, “separating” it from such status in order to humble himself (Christ) to the state of being a servant or slave.

In this regard, his opponents in the Presbytery of Ayr were able to latch onto this apparent lack of “sound” and orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. In relation to a cornerstone of the Confession, McGill was on somewhat shaky ground. McGill stressed the *subjective* side of Christ’s person and mission, whilst the Committee focused on the *objective* side.

There can be little doubt then that McGill stressed other than the credal theology of his church. Here we can observe in this section of the *Essay* a clear sense of Christ “becoming man” for the time of his tribulations, in perhaps a Nestorian sense (the separation of natures).

Although not abandoned by God by becoming the suffering servant he takes on the full sense of human contemplation. It appears that for McGill, the rewards and powers given to Christ come somehow after the resurrection.

This fits in with a Socinian or Unitarian line of separation from the one Godhead, three persons in a single substance. Again McGill is open to accusations in his work of not emphasising the eternal nature of Christ, present even before the creation of the world, but rather coming into the world at a later time, and adopting the form of a man as a prerequisite to understanding the nature of man, and so acting as the saviour of all. Though the role of Christ is obviously central (as without it the penitent sinner cannot access God), with the shedding of his blood and subsequent resurrection, there is not a sufficiently apparent strand of the divine nature in Christ at this juncture of the *Essay* to fend off the accusations which the local Presbytery would later level at him. Indeed, it may be imagined that he was conditioned by biblical evidence while reading it in a dogma-free way.

Of course it must be remembered that in Section I of his four key observations, McGill did clarify his line on a pre-existing Christ. It is thus open to

later interpretation to suggest whether or not the musings of Section IV do indeed circumvent this, placing him firmly in a Socinian or pseudo-Arian camp, or rather were his earlier assertions sufficient to counteract such accusations. In some senses, we can regard McGill as somewhat inconsistent in his views. On the one hand, his advancement of a pre-existing Christ, at one with the Father in creation is assured while on the other he may be suspected of denying it, due perhaps to his drawing upon both Arian (Taylor) and Socinian (Lardner, Priestley etc) views.

It is now appropriate to consider another motif of McGill's, that of Christ's priesthood and intercessory role.

## **XII) On the Priesthood and Intercession of Christ**

Here, McGill expands the mission of Jesus beyond the cross, stating:

Moreover, what Jesus did for us as a priest was not completed by his sufferings on the cross, when he was not yet properly consecrated to his priestly office; but having become obedient unto death, and being afterwards raised from the dead, and invested with all power in heaven and in earth, he officiates as the High Priest over the House of God, and expiates perfectly all sins whatever, past, present and to come, provided they be truly repented of. And as his sufferings were the necessary means of preparing him for the great office of expiating, or making Atonement for the sins of men, it is evident that he could not effectively and completely execute that office, *until he ascended into heaven* and sat on the right hand of God. (346) (italics mine)

Again, he places the mediatory office of Christ as being *after* his earthly tasks were completed, calling into question the authority to forgive sins whilst in the world. Certainly it is his death which delivers the final Atonement for humanity's sins, but this would seem to contravene the Gospels assertions of a Christ granted the ability by his Father to expiate sins throughout his life. Here we find the idea of an evolutionary, developing Christ, who is eventually elevated by the Father. Priestley

had concurred with this notion that Christ was raised to “power after death”.<sup>671</sup> Also, from the pen of Nathaniel Lardner: “For the scriptures do plainly represent our blessed Saviour, exalted to power and glory, as a *reward* of his sufferings here on earth”<sup>672</sup> [italics mine]. Lardner continues:

Also, That our Lord had not, before his nativity, the glory, which he here prays for, is apparent from the whole tenor of the gospel, and from clear and manifest expressions in the context. For the glory, which he now prays for, is the reward of his *obedience*. Ver. 4. “I have finished the work, which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me.” And St. Paul says, Philip, ii: 9- “Wherefore God also has highly exalted him,” Heb.ii: 9. “for the suffering of death he was crowned”<sup>673</sup> [italics mine]

demonstrating his view that the glory of the Messiah was subsequent to his obedience and sufferings on this earth. Furthermore: “Jesus is the Son of God, upon account of his resurrection from the dead”<sup>674</sup> and on the same page:

interpreters have understood it of our Lord's entering into his glory, and taking possession of his kingdom after his resurrection. . . . Jesus is the Son of God, on account of his exaltation to God's right hand, and being invested with authority and dominion over all flesh, and constituted judge of the world, by whom God will pass sentence upon all mankind.<sup>675</sup>

The last section of Lardner’s quote would appear to be firmly Socinian in nature, and indeed in keeping with McGill’s own thought.

There is no mention in traditional Reformed theology at this stage of any notion of Christ offering himself up as a sacrifice *in heaven* in order to expiate sins. Rather, this is a key element of his time on earth, combined with his “once and for all” atoning sacrifice. With regard to Christ as intercessor before God on man’s behalf, McGill then appears to be somewhat unclear on the unique nature of his office in this sensitive issue.

<sup>671</sup> Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions*, p.101.

<sup>672</sup> Nathaniel Lardner, Andrew Kippis, *The Works of Nathaniel Lardner* (London, 1815 edition), p.373.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid*, p.377.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid*, p.382.

### XIII) The Method of Reconciliation to God by Repentance

True repentance of sin, as we have already noted, was a central feature of McGill's concept. Again he emphasises the loving, merciful nature of God in his dealings with sinners:

In granting pardon to penitent sinners, God has always, from the beginning of the world, exercised his essential mercy and compassion. For the name by which he chose to be known of old was, the Lord, the Lord God merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. There was nothing but sin unrepented of that stood between men and the richest tokens of his favour. [which was an echo of John Taylor] (542)

Again there were parallels with Priestley's work whereby he stressed that:

In the Deity, justice can be nothing more than a modification of goodness or benevolence, which is his sole governing principle, the object and end of which is the happiness of his creatures and subjects.<sup>676</sup>

Of further interest is the argument advanced by Henry Taylor in his *Apology of Benjamin Ben Mordecai* that:

It was the original design of God, from the beginning, to bring all good men to eternal life and happiness by his Son Jesus Christ; and the first cause and mover of this gracious design was the free grace and love of God. The salvation by Christ was decreed prior to any intercession or sacrifice made to God the Father. Christ came not of himself. God sent him. Can any one be said to be justified or forgiven freely when a recompence or compensation is paid for the justification? How can that be a free gift that is paid for? There would be no appearance of any free gift, or any sign of mercy at all.<sup>677</sup>

Lardner was also citing a doctrine of repentance when he stated his admiration for Lactantius (240– 320),<sup>678</sup> who:

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<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

<sup>676</sup> Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions*, p.98.

<sup>677</sup> [Henry Taylor] *The Apology of Benjamin Ben Mordecai to His Friends: For Embracing Christianity*; (London, 1771, Letter vi). Cited in *The Christian Reformer*, vol V, p.72.

<sup>678</sup> Lactantius who was termed the "Christian Cicero", was an early Christian apologist intent on defending the religion from paganism.

often asserts the great value of repentance, indeed, “He maintains, that whenever sinners are repentant, they are pardoned. . . . Sincere piety, repentance, humility, and confession of sins, he says, are appropriate sacrifices, with which God is well pleased.”<sup>679</sup> I think, we should not omit to take some notice of what Lactantius says.<sup>680</sup>

Therefore, there was no unconditional forgiveness apart from repentance. Does this point to a “backdoor” theology of works, leading to conditional salvation?

Repentance would perhaps then only follow an acknowledgement of Christ’s sacrifice, again suggesting that it is only after the resurrection that Jesus is able to offer the full fruits of his redemption, dispensing them from heaven.

Certainly there is little mention of the work of God’s imputed grace, by way of the Holy Spirit *enabling* sinners to come to repentance within the *Essay*, an aspect which McGill could have surely set more store by.

#### **XIV) McGill’s Concluding Remarks**

McGill then closes the *Essay* with a “summary” of his thoughts in five short sections, which are paraphrased below:

- Firstly, he focuses on the well founded doctrine of the apostles who spoke of the “redemption granted us through the blood of Christ” (536). Indeed, for McGill, this is the act of God which destroys idolatry and vice, and creates the world anew unto good works, surpassing all the shallow conceptions of human wisdom (540).
- Secondly, he propounds Paul’s statement in Gal. 6:14: “God forbid, that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”. The Atonement and freedom from sin was a gift given to all Christians: “for unto you it is given, in behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for

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<sup>679</sup> Lardner *Credibility* p.114.

his sake” (Phil. 3:10). Thus should each and every Christian gladly suffer rebuke as Christ has paid the ultimate price for them.

- Thirdly, McGill asks “why is the remembrance of Christ’s death provided for by a solemn and perpetual ordinance [i.e. a sacrament]?” (540) Upon answering his own enquiry he states:

This event is, as we have seen, of the first importance in the Christian scheme, and all the rest stand in close connection with it. This is the grand link in that wonderful chain of facts which are recorded in the Gospel History: this is the cornerstone of our salvation (542).

- Fourthly, with regard to the doctrine of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, McGill suggests:

We cannot omit to observe what a rich fund of practical instruction the death of Christ opens up to us, both in its History and in its Doctrine. It affords no encouragement to sloth and remissness, or to presumption and security on our part, or to the vain salacious hope of being saved in our sins; nor is it barely consistent with our moral obligations. (546)

Therefore it contains the most forcible motives to repentance and good works and assures the unpenitent of their inevitable destruction.

- Fifthly, the minister advocates that whatever power there is in the Gospel which is properly the doctrine of the Cross, for promoting the reformation of men, this power is entirely of a spiritual and moral kind, consisting of such arguments and motives as are proper to determine the minds of rational creatures, and make them yield a willing obedience to it, from a conviction of its Divine truth and excellence:

Crucially, though it be attended with all the power of God, it uses no violence or coercive grace to bring men under subjection to it, against their wills. Indeed God puts no value on a constrained and unwilling obedience. It is rather his glory to make people willing in the day of his power, to subdue their hearts by force of the truth, and to reign there by a sincere reason and love (547).

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<sup>680</sup> Ibid, p.117.

Again, it would seem that we can observe the influence of Enlightenment theology and thought upon McGill, with its optimistic anthropology. Indeed there is an echo of John Locke from McGill in the stress upon not subjecting or coercing anyone to accept the Christian message:

It would have proven easy for God to quell all opposition against the Gospel of his Son and cause it be received immediately throughout the whole world, with the most prompt submission. It was enough for him to exert his power in favour of this heavenly doctrine, since everyone who has honestly attended to it, might be fully satisfied that it came from him. But after that, he left every one free to reject or embrace it as he pleased, only reserving to himself the right of calling all men to account for their conduct and giving them the suitable rewards in another world (7).

## **XV) Conclusion**

With McGill's initial intention having been to "offer useful instructions in Scripture concerning the death of Christ, and the method of reconciliation through him" (7), we can now offer an opinion of whether or not he accomplishes this in his *Essay*, and to what extent Socinian thought influences his theological tendency.

There can be little doubt that he adheres to a pre-existing Christ, co-equal therefore with the Father in the initial act of creation. Where he appears to stray into "Socinian" territory however is in his later assertions that for a time it was necessary for Jesus to take on the appearance of a servant in order to fulfil his sacrificial role. There is certainly an element of "detachment" from his divinity, to become fully human, in the process understanding mankind's infirmities. In this sense McGill suggests a Jesus who became the Christ by a process of 'adoptionism' (despite his earlier views of the pre-existence). At the same time, however, Christ does this in total submission and obedience to his heavenly Father's will and intentions for salvation. Regarding the cross, with the mention of the shedding of Jesus' blood as a

“figurative allusion” the minister lays himself open to the accusation of clearly straying from an orthodox line of thought. He does, however, trace the sacrificial element of appeasement of God's wrath from the history of Israel, to the ultimate propitiation of Christ on the cross, therefore placing Jesus' giving of his life as the fundamental act of salvation, which supersedes all others. This is an example of inconsistency in McGill's thought - on the one hand applying the terms 'figurative' and 'metaphorical' to the shedding of Christ's blood as sacrifice as Priestley had also done, while on the other suggesting that the shedding of his blood was required in the final Atonement in order to secure salvation.

Another area where McGill seems to deviate from orthodox theology is when he offers the theory that Christ was only “fully” invested with his powers *after* the resurrection, subsequently expiating sins from heaven, which seems to be firmly Socinian in tone, with its restatement of the earlier heresy of adoptionism. In this regard the church would of course assert that he held such authority *throughout* his earthly mission, having been co-eternal and co-equal with the Father. One wonders if this is one of accusations of Socinianism against McGill, as a full partner in the Godhead would surely have attained such power and dominion from the outset, not dependent upon his obedient sacrifice. Certainly McGill displays a rationalistic approach throughout the *Practical Essay*, submitting his findings to “reason”, or what can be known for certain in an Enlightened sense.

Certainly there is no mention of Christ's sacrifice offering a satisfaction to God for sin in the *Practical Essay*. Indeed, in keeping with a Socinian stress upon a God of love and the inconsistency which this would mean for his imputed wrath being brought to bear on Christ, McGill denies such a characteristic of the deity, and as such also downgrades the mode of substitutionary Atonement on the part of Christ. Instead

it is the example of his life, lived in obedience to the will and intentions of God which is offered as a template for the Christian life. Additionally it must be said that despite the Ayr minister's assertion of true repentance of heart as the key to salvation, there is little discussion of the regenerating grace wrought by the Holy Spirit. As the scope for repentance is regarded as a free-will choice for humans to either accept or reject, McGill strays into an Arminian (though not Universalist) interpretation of the extent of the Atonement. It is therefore understandable that traditional Calvinists within the established church, as well as the bodies of Secession and Relief would find a diminution of the doctrine of predestination and election difficult to stomach.

Within the pages of the *Essay* then there does appear to be some parallels with the thought of English Socinians such as Taylor (both Henry and John), Priestley and Lardner. These include a stress on aiming for human happiness, as well as applying a reductionist theology to the Christian message, with the number of doctrines required as essential for salvation greatly reduced, which was a theme not only of Socinian thought, but also the Latitudinarians of England. The influence of the Protestant right of private judgement on matters of faith is also apparent in McGill's work, with his attempt to 'rationalise' the Atonement from a perspective at odds with his own church.

As we shall discover McGill was later to attempt a vindication of these views to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr. However, another area where he was on particularly unstable ground was in his opinions concerning the Westminster Confession, outlined in his sermon *The Benefits of the Revolution*, as we have seen.

It is now appropriate to consider the responses which the *Practical Essay* drew from a variety of sources, as well as tracing the process of the case against McGill.

**CHAPTER EIGHT:  
A SURVEY OF MCGILL'S OPPONENTS AND  
THE PROCESS OF THE CASE**

In order to present as comprehensive a picture as possible of contemporary responses both to McGill himself and Socinianism in Scotland, it is necessary to consider the various pamphlets which were published in response to his work. This will encompass the following primary sources:

- John Jamieson, *Socinianism Unmasked: In Four Letters to the Lay-members of the Church of Scotland*
- John Russel, *The Reasons of our Lord's Agony in the Garden* (1787)
- James Moir, *The Scripture Doctrine of Redemption by the Death of our Lord Jesus Christ Stated and Defended, being an answer to a Practical Essay On the Death of Jesus Christ by William McGill, D.D., one of the Ministers Of Ayr* (Glasgow, 1787)
- Peter Allinga, *The Satisfaction of Christ, Stated and Defended against the Socinians* (1790), republished by Thomas Bell Relief minister in Glasgow
- James Ramsay, *A Clear, Scriptural Detection of Satan Transformed Into an Angel of Light: Or the Socinian Creed, as Held by Drs. M'Gill and Dalrymple, ... Contrasted with the Holy Scriptures, and with the Subordinate Standards of the Church of Scotland. For the Use of the Unlearned.* (Glasgow, 1790)

In addition to these main pamphlets, a satirical work entitled *Socinianism Triumphant: Or A Copy of a Letter from the Socinians in Scotland to Their Brethren in Poland* (Edinburgh, 1790) and signed by 'John Knox' castigated the established church for harboring such as heretic as McGill. Of further note was the 1789 work entitled *Dr McGill: Vindicated from the charge of heresy and the Erroneous Assertions of his Adversaries Briefly Refuted*, a short document which was published by an unnamed author who self-styled himself "A Friend of Truth".

It may be thought that the writer was Dr James Wodrow of Stevenson in Ayrshire, obviously a contemporary, and friend of McGill himself. The evidence for this is found in an apparently original signature [of Wodrow's] from the time which is adjoined to the copy of the document I read.<sup>681</sup> As would be expected this was supportive of McGill, and indeed is the only 'positive' defence of his theology.

In the next chapter, on the 'Impact and Resonance of McGill's Thought' I will consider the Synod Committee of Falkirk's *A Warning against Socinianism*, as (despite being published in 1788) it is also of importance in the response from the Secession churches in their later move towards a Voluntaryist position. Within this chapter the course of the case as it moved through the various church courts, as well as some suggestions for what lay behind McGill's 'apology,' will also be offered.

With regard to the background of his opponents, the most vehement and consistent responses certainly emerged from the Secession branches of Burgher and Anti-Burgher churches. Clergy within these organisations were clearly concerned with presenting themselves as defenders of 'pure' doctrine, by way of comparison to the apostacy, as they saw it, of the established church, with the Moderate faction particularly suspect. The anger which the Seceders felt over McGill's theology is clear from the tone and scope of their work. Although they did not perhaps exaggerate the Socinian nature of McGill's theology, which the minister had left himself open to, it could be suggested that they did overplay the potential effects of the spread of Socinian doctrine in Scotland. This was of course a tactic which had been employed in England in the eighteenth-century with regard to the perceived 'Deist' threat, as previously highlighted in the work of S.J. Barnett. By stressing the dangers of Deism the Church of England had been able to reassert their own

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<sup>681</sup> It was, in fact, adjoined to the copy of McGill's *Practical Essay*.

orthodoxy and indeed ties to the social establishment. It could well have been the case then that McGill's opponents had a similar objective in mind. By constructing a Socinian threat to the laity of Scotland, they highlighted their own sound and indeed traditional Calvinism. The Secession bodies have been referred to by D.W. Bebbington as "maintaining terminological exactitude in doctrine".<sup>682</sup> The fact that McGill was in clear contravention of the accepted standards of his own church in regard to Confessional subscription also serves to illustrate the attachment which the Secession and indeed Relief bodies still held to creeds. Part of their anger was driven by the fact that McGill had subscribed to the Confession at his ordination, and was now able to openly flout the doctrines contained therein in a very public manner. Indeed, the publication of the *Practical Essay* and its relatively wide circulation throughout Scotland was a greater crime than McGill's simply preaching such views from his own pulpit in Ayr, as of course his theology could then reach a wider audience.

Another factor which is worthy of consideration was the links which had been made in England between anti-Trinitarian theology and republicanism. As John Jamieson in particular was closely connected to the establishment in London he may well have had such considerations in mind. The impact of the American and then French Revolutions was therefore a key component in the McGill case. Although of course by 1789/90 the full extent of opposition to the situation in France had not yet materialised, the political connotations of anti-Trinitarian sentiment had been established in England by the Dissenters in their various campaigns for reform. Thus McGill also faced the further possibility of being labelled as a political radical in an era in which to hold such opinions would have been dangerous.

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<sup>682</sup> D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), p.55.

The fact that the *Practical Essay* did not receive much pamphlet attention from within the bounds of the established church is also of interest. Although it was to be expected that the Moderates would not be overly critical of McGill (despite their concerns with maintaining order and discipline within the church, which may have prompted some to be critical of McGill's work), it might have been imagined that there would have been a greater response from the Popular party. That this failed to emerge, outside the work of John Russel, is attributed by John McIntosh to the clergy of that faction being generally more concerned in the 1780s with the connections between faith and the well being of broader society, rather than disputes over points of theology.<sup>683</sup>

**D) John Jamieson *Socinianism Unmasked: In Four Letters to the Lay-members of the Church of Scotland*, (1787)**

John Jamieson (1759-1838) was minister of the Associate (Burgher) church at Forfar (1780-97), later moving to be pastor of Adam Gibs's Anti-Burgher church in Edinburgh (1797-1829). As a linguist he also published *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (Edinburgh, 1808). For this, and his other linguistic work, he was awarded a DD by the College of New Jersey.<sup>684</sup>

It is interesting to consider that Jamieson was geographically positioned close to William Christie's Unitarian congregation in Montrose; Forfar only being some nineteen miles away. Indeed, with the initial Unitarian establishment in Scotland (albeit in a fairly limited sense) being in the Angus area, with the Dundee church also prevalent, it may be suggested that Jamieson was concerned about the potential spread of Socinian doctrine on this basis. Certainly he must have been aware of the

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<sup>683</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.153.

<sup>684</sup> John McIntosh, 'John Jamieson' in DSCH, p.442.

admiration which Fyshe Palmer and Christie had for McGill. It could then be imagined that Jamieson was exaggerating the Socinian ‘threat’ to some extent, fearing that if the established church failed to deal with McGill, his views could spread Unitarian opinions. This suggestion of an exaggerated threat may be advanced from the fact that the congregation at Montrose by the early 1790s numbered only 10 people, from a potential 6000 registered worshippers in the district.<sup>685</sup>

Another facet of Jamieson was that he was accorded a reward from the state as a result of his later 1788 work against Priestley,<sup>686</sup> *A Vindication of the Doctrine of Scripture: And of the Primitive Faith; Concerning the Deity of Christ: in Reply to Dr Priestley's History*. From this the suggestion could also be offered that Jamieson was keen to procure recognition of this work from the authorities. Indeed, he appears to be a man who had high level connections in London. At one stage he was even invited to leave the Burgher church and join the Church of England. Moving in literary circles in the capital, he was indeed an ‘establishment’ figure in social terms. Though vehemently opposed to Socinianism, he was at the same time on friendly terms with Episcopalians and Roman Catholics.<sup>687</sup>

Another factor, as in the earlier Burgher work, is the possibility of a sense of social dislocation from the establishment (although this admittedly applies less in the case of Jamieson), as has been previously highlighted in the work of James Bradley.

The four letters are addressed to ‘the Lay Members of the Church of Scotland, and especially to those of the Collegiate Church of Ayr’, while other compositions are aimed at the General Assembly, and McGill himself (whom Jamieson addresses in a short letter). In this survey of Jamieson’s work I will examine his views of the

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<sup>685</sup> Stewart Andrews, *Transatlantic Theology*

<sup>686</sup> William Ferguson, *The Identity of the Scottish Nation: An Historic Quest* (Edinburgh, 1998 Reprint), p.258. Also T. W. Bayne, ‘John Jamieson’ in DNB [accessed May 4<sup>th</sup> 2009]

Arminian nature of McGill's *Essay*, the application and error of 'reason', the nature and consequence of sin, the effects of Christ's Death, and finally, the potential effects on the Church of Scotland and Secession branches.

In his introduction Jamieson contends that the *Practical Essay*: "contains not only an undisguised system of Arminian and Pelagian errors, but a system of the most refined and specious Socinianism, that was ever offered to the world".<sup>688</sup>

He then goes on to briefly outline the nature of the Socinian system which involves the denial of the Deity of Christ, a rejection of the satisfaction for sin involved in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the promotion of reason as being the only standard of truth for interpreting Scripture, the limitation of God to one place, and the uncertainty of prophecy. However he then adds that: "I am far from saying that our author holds all these dreadful tenets. But sorry am I to add, that it appears plainly from his *Essay*, that he holds too many of them".<sup>689</sup> Indeed, Jamieson had to concede that: "there are many native and excellent observations in this *Essay*, especially in the historical part; observations which would do honour to any author".<sup>690</sup>

## II) Arminianism

In his assessment of McGill's Arminian views of the nature of salvation, Jamieson was restating a suspicion which connected the two systems (Arminianism and Socinianism) together. This was a theme which would also be followed by James Ramsay. As Jamieson asserted:

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<sup>687</sup> Ibid.

<sup>688</sup> John Jamieson, *Socinianism Unmasked: In Four Letters to the Lay-members of the Church of Scotland, and Especially to Those of the Collegiate Church of Ayr: Occasioned by Dr. McGill's Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ. ... By a Friend to Truth* (London, 1790 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p.2.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>690</sup> Ibid, p.5.

It is not meant particularly to take notice of the writer's Arminian tenets, because he does not once attempt to disguise them, and because they have been, alas! too openly vented by ministers of the church, without any judicial evidence of the church's disapprobation. From the whole structure of this Essay, indeed, it undeniably appears that Arminians just erect a platform for Socinians.<sup>691</sup>

Furthermore:

By maintaining Universal Redemption, as preparing a possibility of salvation for all men, upon the conditions of faith and repentance, as in their own power, the sluices are opened for the denial of the Atonement for sin.<sup>692</sup>

The idea that humans have the ability to chose or reject God by their own free-will, thus making faith and obedience the basis of their acceptance, appeared for Jamieson to contradict the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of saints. Indeed, if Christ was considered to have died for all humanity, with the free choice which followed from this, then there could be no condemnation due for the sins of the world.

### **III) The Application and error of Reason**

Reason, in Jamieson's view, was the "foundation of the whole Socinian scheme".<sup>693</sup> By embracing this system Socinians had therefore denigrated the place of revelation in the Christian tradition. Again, this suggests that Jamieson was well aquatinted with the background to Socinian theology, as he identified the prominence of reason over revelation, and indeed the mode of applying reason to any interpretations of Scripture.

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<sup>691</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>692</sup> Ibid.

<sup>693</sup> Ibid, p.35.

#### **IV) The Nature and Consequence of Sin**

On this question McGill had refuted the consequences of ‘original sin’. Indeed, by proposing an example theory of the Atonement, whereby humans were saved as a result of their ethical response to the life of Christ, it appeared that the weight and ramifications of sin had been removed for those who were penitent, on the grounds of their own free-will response to the obedience of Jesus. This was of course in conflict with the Calvinist notion of sin, which consisted of crimes committed against a Holy God, and its deadly outcomes for humanity. It was to be expected then that Jamieson would focus on this aspect of McGill’s thought viz:

This writer destroys the very nature of Sin. We cannot omit the unjust definition which he gives of the evil of sin. In his second chapter, he proposes to show "how" the death of Christ tends to remove the corruption or "depravity of sin." This he explains "of its reigning power". It is a pity "that divines should be so ill acquainted with the terms of their own science."<sup>694</sup>

Furthermore:

The denial of the Necessity of an Atonement for sin necessarily follows from his denial of punitive justice as essential to God. The punishment of sin is not represented in scripture as the necessary effect of the justice of God, but rather of his severity, wrath, vengeance.<sup>695</sup>

#### **V) The Effects of Christ’s Death**

Within this field Jamieson attacks McGill’s apparently Arminian theology with regard to the nature and effect of Christ’s Atonement, whereby sincere repentance would appear to be sufficient for salvation.

Where McGill stressed the humanity and example of Christ, with his perfect obedience to the Father’s will, he was always open to the accusation of downplaying

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<sup>694</sup> Ibid, p.47.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid, p.64.

the importance of the death of Christ. So too for Jamieson: “For, if God could accept our repentance and imperfect obedience, then there was no occasion for so “unspeakable a gift [as the Atonement].” Rather, God might well have “spared his own Son.”<sup>696</sup>

As McGill had stated: “Upon the whole, to suffer many indignities in the world, and to die on a cross, were not the chief and ultimate ends of our Saviour’s mission, nor any direct ends of it at all, but only incidental calamities”(244), he quite clearly clarifies his position on the example of Christ’s life, and his later attainment of glory following the resurrection, whereby he can expiate sins, on condition of repentance, from heaven. The whole design of this section of the *Essay* in Jamieson’s eyes, was to show that even the obedience of Christ, was not the foundation of pardon, but a reason for extending mercy to those who would merit such pardon by the proper life by the means of repentance.

Moreover the work of the Holy Spirit as a regenerating power in the process of Atonement was denied by McGill. Christians are rather: “sanctified by the Spirit... that they may be made obedient to his command,..and so have their guilt washed away, according to the terms of that new covenant.”<sup>697</sup> Deliverance from the “guilt of sin then flows in reality” from our own repentance, (McGill), though in scripture it is ascribed to the blood of Christ. (Jamieson).<sup>698</sup>

Understandably Jamieson addresses the question of what happens, if the sinner obstinately refuse to repent, claiming that:

Fear of everlasting misery is certainly one of the most powerful restraints of sin. But Socinians kindly inform men, that they need not trouble themselves with any anxiety of this kind; for it would be unjust

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<sup>696</sup> Ibid, p.62.

<sup>697</sup> Ibid, p.353.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid, p.95.

in God, and inconsistent with his clemency, to punish temporal offences by eternal pains.<sup>699</sup>

He goes on to make an allusion to the effects in wider society of lawbreakers merely needing to repent of their crimes, in order to receive mercy from the authorities who could: “Throw open the prison-gates to every one who is sorry for his transgression of the law, or even for his subjection to the penalty”<sup>700</sup>

This is of course another example of tensions between the more traditional Calvinist and ‘Arminian’ positions. Although Arminian theology did accept divine election, it was believed to be conditional. In regard to limited Atonement, Arminians certainly rejected, as McGill appears to do, that Christ died for only a portion of humanity. However, the limited nature of the Atonement was based not on God’s intention, but rather humanity’s ‘free-will’ response. For those who repented, by accepting the grace offered by the cross, they were saved, whilst those who rejected the offer were still lost. Although Arminians accepted an action of supernatural grace in the process of salvation, the concept of God shaping human wills and intentions, rather than their own free response was again dismissed.<sup>701</sup>

## **VI) Potential Effects on the Church of Scotland and Secession branches**

Jamieson concluded his letters with a warning to members of the Assembly, as well as the local church in Ayr, of the potential consequences of not taking firm action in the McGill case, suggesting that a failure to remove him would lead to further schism.

He begins this section by addressing the congregation of McGill’s own church:

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<sup>699</sup> Ibid, p.164.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid, p.167.

<sup>701</sup> See for instance Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, p.63.

Do you believe these impious doctrines, and yet continue under the ministry of one, who proclaims them to the world as his faith ? Have you fought redress from the judicatories of the church ? against one, who is an "enemy of the cross of Christ," who "denies the only Lord God,...But whether you believe these doctrines or not, if you continue listless and unconcerned, your guilt is unspeakably great.... has he not said; " Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven? (Matt,10:33).<sup>702</sup>

Moreover, the whole 'case' was of a common concern to every member of the Church of Scotland, as "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump (Gal 5:9). When the error of an individual is known and patiently endured, it becomes the error of the whole church with which he is connected."<sup>703</sup> Indeed the general interests of Christianity, for Jamieson, were threatened if no action was taken against McGill especially if a "famous" Protestant church, such as the Kirk of Scotland, should endure a denial of the divinity of Christ. Indeed, he levels the charge of corruption and falsehood against the Church of Scotland, (which had begun with the teaching of John Simson) suggesting that it could no longer be considered 'Christian' in its tenets. Mere silence, rather than a clear line of censure against McGill would allow the author of the *Practical Essay* to "trample under foot your Confession of Faith as a mass of errors."<sup>704</sup>

In a wider sense Jamieson felt: "the eyes of all the different religious parties in Scotland will be upon you. It is the silent language of their anxious expectation"<sup>705</sup> Here he is of course alluding to the anger already stirred up in his own denomination, as well as the Anti-Burgher faction, over the established church's treatment of McGill. From this Jamieson contends that further schism and division will be realised, as members of the Kirk will choose to leave, when they become fully aware

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<sup>702</sup> Ibid, p.122.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid, p.123.

<sup>704</sup> Ibid, p.139.

of the nature of McGill's teachings. The blame for such division will ultimately be laid at the door of the Assembly, as the final court of appeal, as it had the judicial authority to follow the 'correct' course. Patronage, which had "already rankled many of them"<sup>706</sup> is also reiterated as an earlier cause of disaffection. However, the McGill case appears to be the final straw at this stage for the Secession party.

## VII) John Russel: The Reasons of Lord's Agony in the Garden (1787)

John Russel (1740-1817), as was discussed in Chapter 1, was a member of the Evangelical/Popular party in the established church. Minister at Kilmarnock (High) (1774-99) and later Stirling (Second Charge) (1799-1817), he gained some notoriety by being described as 'Black Russell' in Burns' the 'Twa Herds' and the 'Holy Fair'.<sup>707</sup>

Although McGill is not mentioned by name in John Russell's sermon (preached at Kilmarnock), it is clear that the attack on Socinian views is aimed firmly at the Ayr minister, quoting as he does passages from the *Essay*.

Russel takes as his text for the sermon Matthew 26:38, "Then faith be unto them, my soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death." The sermon is then divided into four main sections, which Russel deals with in turn. These are:

- To rebut the unacceptable interpretation which McGill had attached to the Gethsemene narrative.
- To propose the 'true' reasons of Christ's agony.
- To assert the role of this key doctrine and its effect on the holiness of Christians.

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<sup>705</sup> Ibid, p.142.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid.

<sup>707</sup> John McIntosh 'John Russell' in DSCHT, p.734.

- To offer a conclusion based on Russel's own orthodox position.<sup>708</sup>

An obvious reference to McGill is made in the opening few lines of Russell's delivery when he stated that "the controversy [concerning Christ's agony in the Garden] about this truth has lately been received in our neighbourhood".<sup>709</sup>

For Russel, McGill had denied the Deity of Christ as, if he was a equal with God, his human nature, from the first moment of its union with the divine, would have been exempt from the effects of sin. Christ therefore could not be subject as humans are to external sufferings in body or mind . These "attributes" were instead caused by the nature of mankind's sin, and could not therefore be transmuted to Christ.

Russel also points out that Jesus had predicted his betrayal and death on previous occasions and asks the question as to why he was not subject to such anxieties then? The Socinian viewpoint (of McGill) rather portrays Christ as only being subject to such distress in the Garden and not before. Why then?, Russel questions.

### **VIII) The true reasons for the agony in the Garden**

It is clear that by his theology of the Atonement Russel sought to stress the *divine* nature of Christ, with its emphasis on the spiritual aspect as against the physical one. This was of course in contrast to McGill's assessment of the *human* Jesus, a man tortured by the stress of what was to come.

Clearly the *wrath* of God as causing Christ's torment of his soul was a key issue for Russel. Indeed, he went on to say that Christ *as man* could not possibly have known the wrath of God, as a finite being. As the Son of God though he would have

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<sup>708</sup> John Russell, *The Reasons of our Lord's Agony*, p.3

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

had full knowledge of the whole punishment due to the sins of an elect world, and “therefore he reconciled his holy human nature, which might well shrink and shudder at the idea of divine wrath, to the appointment of God in this great design.”<sup>710</sup>

Neither was Christ’s bearing this wrath “injurious” in any way to the character of God, as McGill supposed. Rather as Russell continued to point out, he was the object of the Father’s highest love, under his most overwhelming sufferings.

Russel viewed the love as dispensed by God towards his Son as consistent with the infliction of punishment upon him in order to take away the sins of the unredeemed world. He cites the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah to back this up, with God deriving no *pleasure* from Christ’s sacrifice, but rather deeming it as necessary, there had to be a distinguishing difference between sin itself, and the punishment of a person such as Christ. The wrath of God then is kindled not against Jesus as mediator but rather against the sin he is taking on (though without blemish himself) to save mankind.

Having outlined the “true” reasons for the agony in the Garden and its influence upon universal holiness, Russel turns to attack the Socinian stance (although again not mentioning McGill by name). In contrast to ‘true’ Christian teaching, the Socinian doctrine represents:

Jesus Christ as a mere man, and subject only to external sufferings for the good of men, cannot, in its own nature be calculated to produce holiness. For instead of giving men just and affecting ideas of the justice and holiness of God, it is really suited to mislead them. For the Socinians deny at least the exercise of punitive justice in God.<sup>711</sup>

In other words, for the Socinian, the atoning sacrifice of Christ was not essential to save humanity, it could have been effected by other means. Russell going on to say:

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<sup>710</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

Are these the views of the justice and holiness of God, which are calculated to make men Christians? If suitable views of the divine perfections lay a deep foundation for genuine Christianity in the soul, partial and erroneous views of them must be favourable to false religion...The Saviour of real Christians is the Son of God, in human nature, suffering the punishment due to their offences; but the Saviour of Socinians is a mere man, who only endured external sufferings...How then can the religion of the Socinians be the same as that of real Christians? Indeed one is as darkness is to the light.<sup>712</sup>

By contending that the sacrifice of Christ did not constitute the sole foundation of a sinner's justification before God, Socinianism appeared to suggest that salvation depended upon sincere repentance, obedience and good works. Certainly in McGill's *Essay* there were clear suggestions of good works following repentance. However in a later clarification of his views he had stated: "our reconciliation to God is *solely* by the blood of Christ, it is never effected without the sinner being brought to repentance".(44)

From the more traditional Calvinist stance of Russel, however, irresistible grace (which McGill had omitted from his work) must follow the elect sinners' recognition of Christ's atoning work for them. "The copious effusion of the Spirit, in his illuminating and saving influences, produces that faith in the heart of a sinner...a sense of the love of God melts the heart into reciprocal returns of love towards him".<sup>713</sup> McGill, on the other hand, seems to inject an element of free-will (as opposed to the doctrine of predestination) into his view of the dispensation of divine grace.

Russel goes on to clarify this point:

The Socinian doctrine which represents Jesus Christ as a mere man, suffering only in his body, has not the most distant tendency to

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<sup>711</sup> Ibid.

<sup>712</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid, p. 125.

produce godly sorrow in the heart of a sinner; and therefore can have no influence at all upon his repentance. And indeed, those Socinians who have any grain of holiness left are so far consistent within themselves, that in the representation they give of the sufferings of Christ their great object seems to be, not to affect the sinner's heart with a sense of transgression, but on the other hand to rouse his sensibilities at the idea of injured innocence, and to inspire him with sympathy for the worthy sufferer.<sup>714</sup>

There is little doubt that Russel skilfully weaves a picture of Christ's humanity and divinity throughout his work. Only a divine being could sense the abject horror of temporary separation from God's love, which so afflicted his soul in the Garden, yet still be able to die for humanity. Throughout his sermon he stresses the holiness of Jesus, his perfect obedience *and* work of unique Atonement on the cross.

## **IX) Conclusion**

The wrath of God, brought to bear in its separation of divine love from Christ, is a key element in Russel's theology. He stresses the spiritual aspect of his anguish as opposed to the physical nature of crucifixion (which McGill had focused upon in his *Essay*). Only a divine being for Russel could truly understand the nature of sin and the requirement for an ultimate sacrifice to offer satisfaction for it. If Jesus had been a "mere man" (as the Socinians were accused of suggesting), he could not have taken on such a role, both as sacrificial lamb and mediator. God took no pleasure in having to dispense his wrath upon his own Son, but as part of the divine plan for mankind it had to be done.

It is certain that Russel's passionate sermon against Socinianism as an apologetic tool for upholding orthodoxy would have made an impact upon his own parishioners. However to devote so much time and energy to his subject is an interesting indication of the impact the McGill case was having on the local area.

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<sup>714</sup> Russell, *Reasons*, p. 59.

### **X) James Moir - The Scripture Doctrine of Redemption (1787)**

Another early response from a fellow clergyman outside and prior to the Presbytery's Committee which McGill faced was from James Moir<sup>715</sup>, who was minister of the Ayrshire (Anti-Burgher) church at Tarbolton.<sup>716</sup>

In October 1787, Moir published in Glasgow *The Scripture Doctrine of Redemption by the Death of our Lord Jesus Christ Stated and Defended, being an answer to a Practical Essay On the Death of Jesus Christ by William McGill, D.D., one of the Ministers Of Ayr*. This text comprised some 269 pages with appendices. It is split into eighteen sections of which the first seven concentrate on the author's outline of his own orthodox Trinitarian stance, while sections eight to fifteen directly address the various points raised by McGill in his *Practical Essay*, where Moir aims to refute the Socinian "heresies" as he sees them.

He felt however that a later Committee would have limited scope for bringing McGill to task: "Very likely they will have little success in a process against him, before those courts, to which he and they are equally subject".<sup>717</sup>

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<sup>715</sup> See McKerrow, *History of the Secession*, p.570.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid.

<sup>717</sup> James Moir, *Scripture Doctrine*, p. 4. This text will be quoted extensively in the discussion that follows; therefore, references to Moir's work will be heretofore cited in-text as *DR* ("Doctrine of Redemption") with page number, in brackets.

Before Moir lay the undertaking of “vindicating the supreme and proper Deity of our Redeemer; the honour of the divine law; the dignity of the divine government; and the proper and complete Atonement made for our sin, by the obedience of Christ to the death” (*DR*, 5).

Interestingly, Moir alludes to McGill’s work as also containing “prayers”, scattered throughout, which favour “Socinus, the great patriarch of the Unitarian Fraternity” (*DR*, 8).<sup>718</sup> In his introduction, Moir also makes note of the important earlier responses made to McGill by citing *Socinianism Unmasked* by John Jamieson and John Russel’s sermon on *Christ’s Agony in the Garden*.

In his first seven sections then, Moir outlines the mode of salvation achieved by Christ’s mission and death, whereby he satisfies the justice of God for penitent sinners. A strand running through these opening sections is of course the central concept of Jesus’ divinity. The most significant chapters directly regarding McGill’s work fall between sections eight to fifteen, to which we can now turn to examine in detail.

## **XI) Moir’s Direct Defense**

In section eight, Moir concentrates on McGill’s considerations of Christ’s agony in the garden and his desertion on the Cross.

Here he suggests that the agony of Gethsemane must have been of key significance, feeling that McGill affords it a very diminished view. Rather Moir expounds the “pangs and throws of his holy soul, that melted his body into a bloody sweat” as a sign of “supernatural anguish” (*DR*, 91). Furthermore the angel, sent

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<sup>718</sup> Indeed, a copy of *Medatations and Prayers extracted from Dr William McGill’s Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* had been published ‘for the benefit of the poor of Ayr’ in 1789 at Kilmarnock, possibly by James Wodrow. However on the title page it states that the publication was made without the “Author’s [McGill] knowledge”.

from heaven to strengthen him, is regarded as another piece of evidence in support of Jesus' divinely-ordained mission. McGill, in Moir's opinion, downsizes the significance of these events in his work:

The causes and reasons of Christ's agony, grief, and sorrow of soul, assigned by Socinians, are, many of them so absurd and ridiculous, that it is hard to think them in earnest, when they produce them; and they are all injurious, in the highest degree, to the character of our blessed Lord. (*DR*, 93)

Moir regards McGill as asserting that all the sufferings of Christ are of an "outward" nature, rather than the internal mental anguish which he must have endured as he accepted his coming torture and death. Indeed the author sees this as even downgrading the Redeemer below many of the Christian martyrs.

Throughout his essay, Moir leans on such passages as "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), "God was made manifest in the flesh" and "he was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26) to affirm his certainty of the divinity of Christ in opposition to the Socinian views of his opponent.

With regard to the temporary separation of Christ's divine and human natures for the time of his sufferings, Moir counters: "The union between our Lord's divine and human natures remained inviolably firm during this desertion [by God], nor could it possibly be dissolved, otherwise he would have ceased to be the mediator between God and man" (*DR*, 99). He continues: "he was not deserted with respect to divine support, so neither with reference to divine love; for though the wrath of God was just now venting against sin imputed to him, as the Surety; yet he was himself still the object of Heaven's love" (*DR*, 100).

Moir then begins section nine (on the sufferings and death of Christ as unconditional) with the statement: "all the sufferings, and death of our blessed Lord

were fore-ordained and determined by God, and not merely permitted. This [McGill] denies and ascribes to God their simple permission only” (*DR*, 106).

Here we see the Socinian element of historicist biblical interpretation from McGill when he ascribes the death of Christ as being due to “his low condition and poverty and the source of all his sufferings on earth”. This Moir of course attacks from a very traditional perspective of regarding sin as being the prime mover in the death of Christ. He also sees the sufferings and death of Christ as deriving all their virtue and efficacy from his person. This McGill appears to deny, attributing them rather to the appointment and will of God, and Christ’s own unblemished obedience.

This section then, turns on the *outcome* of Jesus death. From a traditional viewpoint of course, Christ is divinely appointed to wipe out the sins of humankind, by a substitutionary Atonement whereby he takes the place of the sinner. In line with this is the absolute conviction of his divine status: “*God purchased the church with his blood*” (Acts 20:28) [italics mine].

Conversely, Socinians would view God’s selection of Christ for this task as being due to his total obedience to the divine will, as well as his “unblemished holiness”. Furthermore as McGill himself states: “No doubt Almighty God could have found *other methods* of saving us without the bloody passion of his dear and only son” (316). [italics mine] This was of course anathema to the orthodox wing of the church and men such as Moir.

Moir also responded to McGill’s ‘Arminianism’ in a predictable manner: “It is no Scripture doctrine that Christ died for all and every individual of mankind. He died only for the Father’s elect, John 27:2 “*That he should give eternal life to as many as thou has given him*” which is plainly limited to the elect, whom the Father gave to Christ to be saved by his death” (*DR*, 112). Moir toes the party line on the issue of

limited grace and Atonement, whereas his “opponent” has obviously by his words opened this up to a much greater and wider scope (i.e. the whole of humanity).

In Section 11 Moir deals with the Priesthood of Christ. The key to this turns on the fact that Jesus was consecrated to his priestly office before his resurrection and ascension. This McGill clearly denies, as we have seen by his argument that he only received these powers *after* his ascension. For Moir:

Christ officiated as a priest on earth as well as he now officiates in the capacity of the high priest over the house of God. None ever affirmed that Christ’s priestly office was completed by his sufferings on the cross...He is not a metaphorical or figurative priest, in allusion to the Mosaical priests, but the real and proper high priest of the church of the living God. Every priest bespeaks a relation onto an altar, an altar to a sacrifice; a sacrifice to sin and sin to God, against whom it is committed. (*DR*, 147).

All these, for Moir, apply to Christ in a much clearer sense than to any of the Aaronical priests.

Moir then continues: “It is a strange Socinian delirium in our author to carry Christ’s work of expiating sins from heaven, as he does on page 345: ‘Being invested with all power in heaven and earth, he perfectly expiates all sins past, present and to come, provided they be truly repented of.’” (*DR*, 148)

However Moir argues that as it is plain that Christ had already offered himself up as an expiatory sacrifice before he went to heaven; that he did not go there to sacrifice himself over again, but to execute the other part of his office, in virtue of the sacrifice he had made on earth. (*DR*, 148) By contrast, for McGill, “if he were on earth, he could not be a priest”.

Turning to McGill’s account of Christ’s exaltation in heaven, Moir cites page 303 of the *Essay*: “The glorified Jesus appears in the divine character of a Creator, or the author of a new creation, which extends to all things in heaven and earth”. By

this, Moir accuses McGill of having “undeified the Son of God” (*DR*, 160). He then goes on to refute McGill’s “argument” as he sees it, of the ascription of Christ’s creation being only the new creation or reformation of the world, in five sections. Indeed Moir appears to view the placing of Christ within the work of creation (whether before the establishment of the universe, or, in the Socinian view after his resurrection and ascension whereby a new covenant is formed between God and mankind) as vital in the bulwark against anti-Trinitarian heresy.

Moir again goes on the attack with regard to McGill’s views about the role of Christ’s death on the nature of evangelical holiness. Indeed McGill affords this the comment that “this is the branch of the subject with which we are most concerned” (367). Moir responded thus:

What! have we not as great a concern with Atonement made by the death of Christ for our justification as we have with its influence on our reformation? If this death has not appeased the divine anger, if it has not redeemed us from the curse of the law, how can it have the least influence to promote or cherish sanctification in any of his followers? (*DR*, 168)

Here Moir is stressing the traditional Anselmic or ‘satisfaction’ theory of the Atonement, in contrast to McGill.

This McGill attempted to answer by observing that God’s laying our iniquities on Christ, his inflicting the punishment due to our sin on him “are high and abstruse points, and speculative truths which conduce little piety at best” (402), which again removed the need for satisfaction and substitutionary Atonement, and followed a Socinian path.

McGill had also described the main issue of Christian living as: “believing that Jesus is the Son of God” (370) to be sufficient for the faith requirements of Christianity, which is again a clear example of the Socinian reductionist theology with regard to doctrine, with perhaps a hint of Latitudinarian thought as well.

Moir however goes on to say:

This is not faith, but the exercise of it, for faith is the belief of a testimony; and divine faith is the belief of God's testimony in the word concerning Christ. What is it to believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Is it not to believe that he is the great God, our Saviour, that the promised Messiah is come. (*DR*, 182)

He continues to argue that Socinianism leaves Christ as seeming of little more importance than the Old Testament prophets as the object of faith.

Moir also points out that “we can never believe that Jesus is just a Saviour, we believe that he is the Son of God, very God, equal with the Father” (*DR*, 184), by doing so reiterating his own Trinitarian credentials.

Moir then concludes his treatise with a survey of the “history” of Socinianism, in a broad sweep which encompasses Socinus, Biddle and Priestley.

Clearly he is concerned that it is an affliction which he hopes will not take root in the Kirk by the writings of men such as McGill. Overall Moir does make a compelling case against the views of his opponent with regard to his straying from orthodoxy. There appears to be little doubt that McGill does flout doctrines such as election and predestination in his work, as well as also being unclear, at best, on areas such as asserting Christ's place within the Godhead. It is interesting to note that Moir's work did not of course bring an immediate response from either the General Assembly of the established church or indeed local presbytery in Ayr, so perhaps then he overstated the overall dangers of McGill's Socinianism in the wider ecclesiastical scene in Scotland of the time.

## **XII) Synod, General Assembly, Presbytery/Church Courts (1788)**

The occasion which brought McGill's *Practical Essay* to the attention of the local Synod occurred in late 1788. On November 5<sup>th</sup> of that year, William Peebles

preached a sermon which, in a few words at the end, criticised the sentiments set out in the *Practical Essay*. In the appendix to his own sermon McGill had of course openly criticised subscription to the Confession. Many of McGill's best friends expressed their deep regret that he should have published the said appendix, not only on account of the sentiments expressed in it, but chiefly because it appears to have been written in a "paroxysm of anger".<sup>719</sup>

Rather than injuring the personal and ministerial character of Peebles (as McGill may have hoped), it hastened the case against him by the local synod to which it had been heading for the two preceding years. When the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr (which had a Popular/Evangelical majority) met in April 1789, an overture was laid before them which stated:

That whereas the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr are the proper and appointed guardians of the Protestant religion as by law established within their bounds, and whereas there is a *fama clamosa* [meaning 'current scandal'] that certain books, which have been published by Dr. McGill, one of the ministers of the establishment at Ayr, contain doctrines contrary to the Word of God, the Confession of Faith and his Ordination Vows - it is overtured that the Reverend Synod take this matter into their serious consideration and make such enquiry into the grounds thereof, as to them shall seem proper.<sup>720</sup>

It was not to be expected that this overture would meet with no opposition. It is worth noting that the *Scots Magazine* also carried a coverage of the case<sup>721</sup> and its outcome, and therefore brought the machinations against McGill to a national audience.

Accordingly in the course of the debate, though it could not be denied that a "*fama*" existed, it was contended that this overture was inexpedient and incompetent, in as much as in the first instance, it should have been moved in the "radical" Court

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<sup>719</sup> "Friends of the Truth", *The Procedure of our Church Courts in the case of Dr. William McGill of Ayr with a complaint lately exhibited against him and a narrative of the rise and progress and termination of a prosecution carried against him before our church judicatories by the laity of Scotland to which is added a conclusion containing reflections on the defection of our church courts* (Glasgow, 1791), p. 25.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

(Presbytery). It was asserted that the Synod had nothing to do with the business, that persecutions for heresy were now fallen into disuse, and that the idea of prosecution was generally annexed to them. On the other side however it was argued that the overture was perfectly competent, that the Synod had the full power to take under their cognisance cases of this nature, according to the 12th Act of Assembly of 1710, wherein the General Assembly had instructed Synods and Presbyteries to follow this Act.

At this stage local support was also forthcoming.<sup>722</sup> The Town Council and Kirk Session of McGill's church inserted advertisements in newspapers, declaring their strong attachments to him, asserting that the *fama clamosa* was never heard of in that corner before the meeting of the Synod in April, and affirmed that "all the inhabitants in the town of Ayr, who were sensible and intelligent steadfastly adhered to their minister".<sup>723</sup>

The Synod's case subsequently appeared before the Assembly in 1789, with McGill's supporters condemning the proceedings as "encroachments on free enquiry, and the rights of private judgement, and as a species of persecution for conscience sake".<sup>724</sup>

They also drew upon the evidence of the newspaper adverts as pointing to the exemplary nature of McGill's character (this was supported by the theology of the Moderates, which suggested that a good man is guiltless: here we see the priority of humanity over doctrine), and generally backed as it seemed by his parishioners. It was further observed at this stage by the complainers that the Synod had assumed powers which it did not have, with the Act of 1710 only respecting Catechisms, and

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<sup>721</sup> For instance, *Scots Magazine*, 51 (July 1789) p.359. and 53 (Dec 1791), pp.592-3.

<sup>722</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid*.

not more voluminous publications. They also believed that if the Assembly did not reverse the decisions of the Synod that “all the advances of literature in the eighteenth century would be obliterated.”<sup>725</sup>

Against these objections the Synod argued that the rumours of McGill’s views were widespread in Scotland, as well as being known in England. Dissemination had been considered as a “crime” since the Middle Ages. As a proof of this, one of the members of the Synod read several paragraphs of an *English Review*, published in 1787<sup>726</sup> in which McGill was directly accused of Socinianism - or publishing tenets in opposition to those of the church to which he belonged. As the writers of this *Review* could have no personal knowledge of McGill it was argued that they were impartial in this matter.

After “long reasoning”<sup>727</sup> the Assembly decided to reverse the sentence of the Synod, but recommend to the Presbytery of Ayr to “take such steps in this matter, as they shall find necessary for preserving the purity of the doctrines of this church, and the authority of her standards”.<sup>728</sup> This motion was seconded, and unanimously agreed.

It would indeed appear at this juncture that the Assembly was keen to avoid a “heresy hunt”, uncommon of course in Scotland at this time.<sup>729</sup> It was also felt by McGill’s opponents in the Synod that the Presbytery would not be impartial as they were well acquainted with McGill and therefore sympathetic towards him.

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<sup>724</sup> Ibid.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>726</sup> Ibid.

<sup>727</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>729</sup> Ibid, p. 78.

It is clear that the Presbytery hoped for a swift conclusion, after consultation with McGill by way of a Committee.<sup>730</sup> It was then moved by the Presbytery to form a large Committee, including McGill himself, to allow him an opportunity to explain his remarks, so that the Committee might have it in their power to report favourably to the Presbytery at their next meeting.

Following this McGill himself spoke at considerable length, justifying his publications, and “lamenting the peculiar hardship of his case.”<sup>731</sup> He said that he could consider this matter in no other light than “persecuting a man for his religious principles: that at the last Assembly some parts of his publications had been represented in a very unfair and unjust point of view; particularly some expressions he had used in his Appendix (to the *Benefits of the Revolution*) and that the account of the proceedings of the Assembly in his cause published in the newspapers (presumably the *Scots Magazine*) breathed a spirit of malice and ill will against him”.<sup>732</sup> His speech was received with “uncommon applause by a numerous audience”,<sup>733</sup> which mostly comprised the parishioners of Ayr.

### **XIII) The Presbytery Committee’s Report, September 1789**

The Substance of the report was based upon five Articles and a comment on *Acts of the Assembly since the Revolution* (1689) concerning the purity of “Doctrine and the Authority of the Standards of this Church”.<sup>734</sup>

The five “Articles” were:

- On the Doctrine and Atonement by the Sufferings and Death of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>730</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>731</sup> Ibid, p.102.

<sup>732</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>734</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

- On the Person and Character of Christ.
- On the Priesthood and Intercession of Christ.
- On the Method of Reconciliation to God in the way of Repentance.
- On Subscription to the Confession of Faith.

It is obvious from his attack on subscription to the Confession that McGill had not abided by the rules of his church and its method of ordination, and indeed coupled with his expressly Socinian views of the Atonement, he had gone further than Alexander Fergusson in castigating the Confession.

McGill's answers to the report were read at a meeting on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February. and he was then called upon to provide particular answers.<sup>735</sup>

At this point a few members signified their wish that the Presbytery should now make a decision, but it appeared to be the almost unanimous feeling of the court that it should now be referred to the Synod; and it was generally supposed that it would go in turn back to the Assembly.

When the Synod next met on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of April they agreed that all the papers relating to the case should be read. McGill then suggested that instead of defending his protest and appeal he rather hoped that the whole affair might somehow now be ended. He also agreed at this stage to withdraw his general answers to the report of the Committee. After retiring with six other ministers from the Committee, they returned in less than two hours and expressed their full and entire satisfaction with the explanations and apology which McGill had given them.

Within his apology McGill concentrated individually on each section of his *Essay* which the Committee had questioned. He began by saying:

I am extremely sorry that what was honestly intended by me to serve the interests of piety, charity, and peace, [this was typical Erasmian-humanism and non-dogmatic Christianity] should have given ground of offence to my Christian brethren. My *Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* was designed to be wholly practical (i.e. for pastoral

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<sup>735</sup> "Friends of the Truth", *Procedure*, p. 37.

edification). My sole object was to promote practical Godliness, founded on the facts and circumstances of the gospel history [an echo of Lardner's style] and upon this design I was so intent that I may in some instances have omitted things which I hold to be true, when the practical use of them did not immediately occur to me. In every work of man, more especially a work of some length and variety, it is not to be expected that there will be failures and blemishes which may have crept into it; at which however men of judgement and candour will not be offended, when they are convinced that the design, upon the whole is good.<sup>736</sup>

These sentiments are a useful indication of the substance of McGill's overall "apology" for his work, where it had caused offence to the Committee. Whether or not it really offered a full and frank refutation of his comments is another matter. It is therefore worth considering the possible reasons for McGill's apology. I believe that there may be four components in the search for what lay behind his 'retraction', these being:

- The question of McGill's 'competence' as a theologian.

Although clearly influenced by Priestley and Lardner on the issues of repentance, there are some inconsistencies in the *Practical Essay* which, it could be argued, lead to the summation that the Ayr minister was less than certain of his views. For instance, while he appears to accept a pre-existent Christ, at other times he is less clear on this matter. Additionally the question of the role of Christ's blood as a sacrifice in the Atonement is inconsistent. Indeed, as McGill appears to have been influenced by men from within both the Arian (such as Henry Taylor) and Socinian camps this could have led to his somewhat confused theology at times (Taylor for example accepted the pre-existence of Christ, which Priestley did not). At some points he agrees with Priestley's 'metaphorical allusions', while at other times McGill appears to suggest that repentance could not be effective *without* the element of blood. In these areas then McGill appears to attempt a promotion of the Socinian line, while at

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<sup>736</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

others he is less than clear, due again perhaps to his attempt to fuse Arian and Socinian positions.

- The collapse of the Ayr Bank, and with it a sizeable portion of McGill's finances.

Although, as pointed out by Leonard Short, finance was one of the possible motivations behind the publication of his work, for McGill to have lost his livelihood by being removed from the church, could surely only have added to his domestic burden. To this end he had to be aware of the ramifications of standing his ground. At least if he escaped censure and removal by his apology he would, despite the notoriety which followed, have been able to at least retain his post, having re-subscribed to the Confession of Faith.

- The nature and scope of the opposition which the case against him aroused.

I believe that McGill, despite his stubbornness at times during the case must still have been shocked by the scale of opposition ranged against him. Although he would perhaps have expected a polemical response from men such as Peebles and Russel, as they were close contemporaries in Ayrshire, to draw fire from both the Secession and Relief churches was an additional element which must have been difficult to withstand. Indeed he may also have been aware of the political and establishment connections enjoyed by John Jamieson, which could in time have equated McGill's own anti-Trinitarian theology with suspicions of Republicanism. It was of course a very dangerous time to be either a theological or more especially political radical in the Scotland of the late 1780s/early 90s. However, had McGill remained utterly convinced that his own views were the correct ones, and of which he was sure, then it seems that he might have tried to ride out the storm, perhaps even by way of a rejoinder against his opponents in published form, which never appeared.

- The fact that there was no organised 'Unitarian' movement of note in Scotland.

Despite the attempts of William Christie and Thomas Fyshe Palmer to make inroads, in a denominational sense McGill had nowhere else to go, unlike those in England who shared his theological views. He therefore faced the prospect of remaining within the established church, but in order to do so, he clearly had to retract his views.

## XX) Contemporary Press

On April 21<sup>st</sup>, the *Glasgow Mercury* had reported on the possibility of a *fama clamosa* existing in regard to some of the doctrines contained in McGill's *Essay* which were "contrary to the word of God, the Confession of Faith, and his ordination vows".<sup>737</sup> It also stated that the Synod had approved this overture, in turn referring it to the local Presbytery in Ayr to report back to them.

This public account of the 'potentially' heretical nature of McGill's theology in turn provoked a response from the local Magistrates and town council of Ayr, with an example of their support drawn from a minute of their next meeting on April 29<sup>th</sup>:

That so far as consists within our knowledge all the respectable and well informed inhabitants of this town and parish consider themselves highly indebted to Dr.McGill's publications for the clear and useful lights therein thrown on many of the doctrines of our holy religion.<sup>738</sup>

Although conceding that they were 'unqualified' to fully judge theological controversies, they averred that the long and successful ministry of McGill at the Old Kirk "has impressed our hearts with sentiments of esteem and reverence for his character",<sup>739</sup> allowing them to afford McGill their "most liberal encouragement and

<sup>737</sup> *The Glasgow Mercury*, April 21<sup>st</sup> 1789, p.125.

<sup>738</sup> Minute of the Magistrates and Council meeting of Ayr, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1798, p.398.

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*

support”.<sup>740</sup> Subsequently a copy of the council minute appeared in the *Glasgow and Edinburgh Advertiser*<sup>741</sup> the following week.

At a Kirk Session meeting of April 29<sup>th</sup> 1789, with William Dalrymple presiding as moderator, it was considered that the account of the case appearing in the Glasgow and Edinburgh newspapers was “injurious to Dr.McGill’s character”.<sup>742</sup> In order then to “obviate an insinuation which so manifestly tends to hurt so respectable and useful a character”<sup>743</sup> the Kirk Session joined with the town council in defending their colleague, a man who was cited as being “a minister of so great piety and literature and diligence”.<sup>744</sup>

#### **XXIV) Thomas Bell’s Republication of Peter Allinga: *The Satisfaction of Christ* (1790)**

Peter Allinga (1658-1692) was a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church who had composed this treatise against Socinianism at Utrecht in 1675. The essay is divided into two parts (six chapters in Part 1 concerning the points of difference between the Orthodox and Socinian points of view) and some 27 chapters (relating to the Satisfaction of Christ’s Atonement) in Part 2. Of these, Chapters 13, and 21-24 (of Section 2) appear to be most pertinent to the McGill case. The essay was brought to Scotland by Thomas Bell (1733-1802)<sup>745</sup>, a Relief minister in Glasgow. Bell translated the document from the original Dutch himself and provided an interesting preface to it. Educated at Edinburgh, Bell joined the Relief church during his student days, and was ordained to the parish of Jedburgh in 1768. Subsequently, he was

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<sup>740</sup> Ibid.

<sup>741</sup> *Edinburgh Advertiser*, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1789.

<sup>742</sup> Records of the Old Kirk of Ayr, Kirk Session Minutes, April 29<sup>th</sup> 1789, p.290.

<sup>743</sup> Ibid.

<sup>744</sup> Ibid.

<sup>745</sup> D.C.Lachman, ‘Thomas Bell’ in DSCHT, p. 69.

translated to Dovehill in Glasgow (1780), after being initially blocked by the Presbytery from following this call, as they were keen to have him remain at Jedburgh. In addition to his translation of Allinga, Bell also converted the work of Professor Dionysius Van de Wynpersse, *A Proof of the True and Eternal Godhead of our Lord Jesus Christ against Modern Attacks* (Edinburgh, 1795).<sup>746</sup>

### **XXV) Bell's Preface**

Bell begins his preface by informing us that “[McGill’s] *Essay* was known from one end of the island (of Britain) to the other, and everywhere considered as stuffed with Socinian tenets; except by the Town-Council and Kirk Session of Ayr”<sup>747</sup> (again the crime of dissemination is cited).

Having read Allinga with avidity and finding a richness of sentiment and solidity of reasoning which “cut the sinews of Socinianism”, Bell felt the need to translate the original document into English, for although:

Several had written to excellent purpose against Dr. McGill’s *Essay*, I still thought there was room to add something more and particularly, that it might serve in the interests of Christianity, to contrast a number of the passages in that *Essay* with express Scripture texts.<sup>748</sup>

Bell then provides a summary of the McGill case, expressing his concern that the decision of the Synod to let the matter rest set:

a bad precedent for the future. For according to it, a minister may preach and publish all the errors of a McGill, and when brought before his superiors, has only to adopt a McGill Explanation and Apology and the matter is at an end”.<sup>749</sup>

Clearly then the Relief church was also concerned about the future direction of the established church, with such apostacy being potentially allowed to continue.

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<sup>746</sup> Ibid.

<sup>747</sup> Peter Allinga, *The Satisfaction of Christ, Defended against the Socinians*, trans. by T. Bell (Glasgow, 1790), p.iii.

<sup>748</sup> Ibid, p. iv.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid, p. viii.

## XXVI) The Atoning Virtue of Christ's Sacrifice

For Allinga, in suffering upon earth, Christ offered himself up as a sacrifice to God. He shows this by quoting Heb.7:22.<sup>750</sup> Paul attributed to the blood of Christ a priestly reconciliation and purification. This could not have taken place if he had not first suffered on earth, offering himself as a sacrifice, as this reconciliation and purification is the proper effect of such a sacrifice. Furthermore, Christ's blood reconciled sinners to God in an immediate manner. The propitiatory sacrifices also ceased at the death of Christ. "How could they vanish away at his death", asks Allinga, "if his sacrifice did not consist in his suffering and death?"<sup>751</sup> This view of Allinga's clearly stands in contrast to McGill's "figurative allusions" stance on the shedding of Christ's blood.

The reconciliation of humans to God was achieved by Jesus *before* his ascension, for Allinga: "The reconciliation is the fruit and effect of his offering. Therefore it was offered on earth for us".<sup>752</sup> Again, there is a disparity with McGill's notion of Jesus' only being invested with atoning powers *after* his resurrection and ascension, not before.

The views of the Relief church on the nature of the Atonement had been influenced by the work of Patrick Hutchison (d.1802), minister of St.Ninians in Stirling and later Paisley. In his *Compendium View of the Religious System maintained by the Presbytery of Relief* (1779) Hutchison asserted that Christ's priestly office was initiated while on earth, and later *confirmed* by his sacrifice and resurrection.<sup>753</sup> Humanity required the atoning sacrifice of Christ due to the original

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<sup>750</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid, p. 148.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>753</sup> Struthers, *A History of the Relief Church*, p.300.

sin, inherent in Adam's fall, and therefore the covenant of grace was extended to the elect, by way of Christ's propitiation.<sup>754</sup> In considering the extent of the Atonement Hutchison had followed the traditional Calvinist line of "for the elect only he dies and for them only he intercedes".<sup>755</sup> Therefore, by publishing the views of Allinga, Thomas Bell was clearly offering a further vindication of the doctrines which were held by his own denomination of Relief.

### **XXVII) Reflecting on those persons whose sins are expiated by Christ's Sacrifice**

From Heb 2:16-18, Allinga adduces that Christ's sufferings made reconciliation for the sins of the fathers, who lived before his appearance in the flesh, including Abraham's inheritance: "He is therefore a propitiation for the whole world, 1 John 2:2."<sup>756</sup> It was thus impossible that Christ's sufferings and bodily sacrifice could expiate those old sins, if they did not satisfy sinners.

### **XVIII) The Forgiveness of sins by the shedding of Christ's blood**

"By his stripes healing is come to us, and we are healed" (Is. 13); for Allinga this meant the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is attributed to the blood of Christ, not because he obtained it, but because his blood assures us of the forgiveness of sins, which God promised in the new covenant.<sup>757</sup>

"The power to be able to forgive sins is no actual forgiveness. According to the doctrine of our opponents [ie Socinians], Christ also received that power by his birth, doctrine, miracles and the cruelties of the Jews",<sup>758</sup> not by the shedding of his blood. The forgiveness of sins is not only an act of grace but also of justice (Rom.

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<sup>754</sup> Ibid, p.296.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid, cited by Struthers, p.301.

<sup>756</sup> Allinga, p. 157.

<sup>757</sup> Ibid, p. 175.

3:24-25).<sup>759</sup> Regarding the redemption and the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Christ (for Allinga) the righteousness of God was made apparent through the satisfaction of his justice.

As we have seen, much of Allinga's thought was echoed by other opponents of McGill. Again the wrath of God is present in Christ's sufferings, with the propitiatory effect of the shedding of his blood being an immediate one.

This stands in clear contrast with McGill's view of Christ only being invested with divine powers of forgiveness etc. after his resurrection and ascension. One can imagine therefore why Bell would have wanted to add this work to the growing list of "proofs" against the Socinian McGill.

**XXIX) James Ramsay, *A Clear, Scriptural Detection of Satan Transformed Into an Angel of Light* (1790)**

James Ramsay who was an Anti-Burgher minister in Glasgow had preached the sermon at the ordination of the man who would compose the Overture against McGill, James Robertson.<sup>760</sup> Therefore an 'early' connection between the two men was apparent. In his introductory remarks to *A Clear, Scriptural Detection of Satan Transformed Into an Angel of Light*, Ramsay outlined the reasons for his delay in responding the Practical Essay, until some three years after its publication:

It is fully three years since the writer formed a design of laying before the public the substance of Dr. McGill's system on the present plan. The work was laid aside, without any intention of ever resuming it; partly, because he was unwilling to be the first in drawing attention to so artful and dangerous a production, and thereby promoting its

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<sup>758</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

<sup>759</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>760</sup> James Ramsay, *The character of the true minister of Christ delineated. A sermon, preached at the Ordination of Mr James Robertson, Sept. 9<sup>th</sup> 1777* (Glasgow, 1777)

circulation and perusal; partly because writers of different denominations soon appeared in several forms of attack.<sup>761</sup>

In addition then to the works of previous authors, it is interesting to note that Ramsay considered the *Essay* to have attracted significant public interest, which led to the danger (for Ramsay) that Socinian beliefs and doctrines could become more widespread.<sup>762</sup> Moreover, he hoped that by way of a counter measure, the defences against McGill already composed by Jamieson, Moir, Russel, and Burgher Synod of Falkirk, would enjoy a wide circulation to rebut the Socinian “enemy coming in like a flood”.<sup>763</sup> However, as he feared that many members of the public were either not able to afford books, have the leisure to read them or a capacity for following theological arguments,<sup>764</sup> he hoped to make his own work plain and simple, and affordable.

Although quite open in their Arminian doctrines, McGill and Dalrymple (for Ramsay) had attempted to mislead the public as to the nature of Socinianism, rather attempting to promote their ‘heretical’ system of doctrine by stealth.<sup>765</sup> This despite the fact that they had clearly: “hated catechisms and Confessions of Reformed churches no less than the Queen regent of Scotland did the prayers and preachings of the famous Knox”<sup>766</sup>

Ramsay did allow some hope for the established church, while at the same time fearing the intentions towards McGill of the local Presbytery in Ayr:

Nor is the General Assembly to be forgotten. They did more and better than was generally expected. May we take it as a comfortable sign, that they were now roused from their long and deep lethargy... in future to stand up for defence of truth. Or is their injunction to the

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<sup>761</sup> Ramsay, *A Clear, Scriptural Detection of Satan Transformed Into an Angel of Light*, p.12.

<sup>762</sup> Ibid.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid, p.7.

Presbytery of Ayr to be considered only as a political manoeuvre.<sup>767</sup> We would gladly hope that this last is not the case; and yet, from the complexion of the times, the continued progression of Socinian and Arminian leaven among the ministers of the establishment, the character and uniform management of some of those who have grasped, and the long held the helm of ecclesiastical affairs, there is much ground to fear.<sup>768</sup>

By acquitting McGill, Ramsay feared that: “they will solemnise the seal of the sepulchre of the Church of Scotland.”<sup>769</sup>

In order to ‘simplify’ his message Ramsay by his own admission selected only a “few passages” from the *Essay* on which to focus. This was however, in his opinion much broader in scope than the Committee of Ayr which had “restricted their inquiry to four or five particulars”,<sup>770</sup> despite the Assembly requesting that they adduce and address all the errors contained in the *Essay*.

Ramsay had little, if any, hope that his publication would make any impression on either McGill or Dalrymple, but rather hoped that those who had already “drunk deep into the bewitching spirit of the [Socinian] scheme”<sup>771</sup> would have an opportunity to realise the heretical nature of it.

Some of the main themes covered by Ramsay in his work were:

- The Punitive Justice of God
- The Nature of the Holy Ghost
- The Divinity of Christ
- The Sonship of Christ
- Christ’s Omnipresence.
- The Person of Christ

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>769</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid, p.14.

- The Worship of Christ
- The doctrine election and predestination.
- Christ's Priesthood
- Christ's not bearing the wrath of God.
- The death of Christ not being an Atonement for sin.<sup>772</sup>

The method used by Ramsay was to make extensive citations from the works of Dalrymple and McGill (though far more so from McGill), and then list Scriptural passages, as well as quotations from the Confession of Faith. As many of the arguments offered by Ramsay were similar in tone to those of McGill's earlier opponents, I will at this stage cite two or three examples of Ramsay's publication in order to illustrate his methodology.

With regard to the punitive justice of God McGill had said that: "the punishment of sin is not represented in Scripture as the necessary effect of the justice of God, but rather of his severity wrath and vengeance,"<sup>773</sup> and:

Punishment has in it the notion of a remedy and has the place of a mean, not of an end. Now as no more of a mean is to be designed, than what is necessary to the end, and a mean is considerable only as it has a relation to the end; therefore if the sinner repent, there can be no necessity for punishment.<sup>774</sup>

In reply Ramsay cited (Ex 34:7) "Forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin will by no means clear the guilty", in addition to "Every sin, even the least...deserves the wrath and curse of God, and cannot be expiated but by the blood of Christ" (Larger Catechism questions 152).<sup>775</sup>

Concerning Christ's Atoning Sacrifice, where McGill had suggested that: "Jesus Christ therefore became a willing sacrifice for the truth, and laid down his life

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<sup>772</sup> Ibid, pp.25-117.

<sup>773</sup> McGill, *Practical Essay*, p.401.

<sup>774</sup> Ibid, p.263. Also cited in Ramsay, p.26.

<sup>775</sup> Ramsay, p.27.

in confirmation of his doctrine which is the new covenant”,<sup>776</sup> Ramsay responded with a citation from the Confession (8:3-4) “Christ by his obedience and death did fully discharge the debt of all those that are justified and did make a proper and real and full satisfaction to his Fathers justice on their behalf”.<sup>777</sup>

On the wrath of God being imputed to Christ, McGill had stated that “He was not now (in the garden) any more than at any times, the object of his Fathers wrath”,<sup>778</sup> While Ramsay by way of contrast quoted from Isaiah 53:10 “It pleased the Lord to bruise him”, and “He spared not his own Son” (Romans 8:32).

## **Conclusion**

From this survey of McGill’s opponents, in addition to the process of the case, it may be concluded that most of the anger directed against the Ayr minister was drawn from the Secession and Relief churches. Clearly this raises the question of why these denominations in particular found McGill’s Socinian views so difficult to accept. On the one hand, it can be said that both denominations, in their various branches, were keen to retain a ‘pure’ form of Calvinist orthodoxy, which enabled them to claim the title of the real Reformed Christians in Scottish society. Having been angered by the failure of the established church to address issues such as patronage, or the ‘heresy’ of previous figures such as John Simson, in addition to the apostasy of the Moderate faction, it is understandable that they were so disappointed by the lack of firm action against McGill in the sense of deposing him from his post.

At the same time the limited nature of responses from within the Church of Scotland to McGill suggests that there was little desire to see heresy trials revived by the tail end of the eighteenth century. Aside from the protestations of William

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<sup>776</sup> McGill, *Practical Essay*, p.350.

<sup>777</sup> Ramsay, p.117.

Peebles and John Russel, on the surface McGill was afforded a relatively easy passage by the establishment with regard to the pamphlet 'war' which ensued following the publication of his *Essay*. However, at the same time the local Synod of Glasgow and Ayr were most certainly not prepared to go along with his views, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>778</sup> Ibid, p.17.

**CHAPTER NINE:  
THE IMPACT, RESONANCE AND  
PARALLELS OF MCGILL'S THOUGHT**

With regard to the impact of the McGill case on the wider ecclesiastical scene in Scotland there are several areas which require attention. Firstly, in his *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland*, John McIntosh identifies some thirteen works and sermons which were published in the late eighteenth century by Popular clergy on the nature of the Atonement. This would appear on the surface to indicate something of a response to the McGill case, although as McIntosh accepts, some of the sermons could have been preached at an earlier date.<sup>779</sup> This is however clearly an important potential by-product of McGill's own work.

In this chapter I will consider the response within the established Church of Scotland in the first part. The actions of four laymen, who attempted to bring a libel against the Ayr minister in order to revive the case against him, is of key significance, as is the dismissal of their attempts, which I feel highlights the divisions between clerical and lay 'authority' in the period. Another central document is the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr's 'Declaration of Doctrine' (December 1791), printed in the *Scots Magazine*, which presented the 'official' position of those ministers and elders, who dissented from the outcome of the case.

This would appear to offer a flavour of local church politics between Evangelicals/Popular clergy in the Glasgow area on the one hand, and the Moderates, who had greater numerical superiority in Ayrshire (with their support of McGill), on the other. Indeed the fact that the Moderates in particular feared a further Secession

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<sup>779</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.184.

or split in the church, following the developments in the early-to-mid eighteenth century, does seem to be relevant to their failure to censure or depose McGill, as they may have believed that he could have acted as a beacon to call others with similar opinions.

As McGill was clearly in contravention, prior to his retraction and apology, of the Confessional standards of the church, it is worth considering the Moderates wider attitude in this area. Although they appeared on the surface to continue the practice of Confessional subscription under Robertson, scholars have been divided on the question of how far the Moderates retained a Calvinist position, or rather how much they had drifted towards Arminianism.

Another area worthy of attention is the argument, initially advanced by George Grubb,<sup>780</sup> that it was the anger in the Secession churches over the Assembly's refusal to deal with McGill that caused them to turn to voluntaryism in the later 1790s, and that subsequently led to the New Light schisms in both the Burgher and Anti-Burgher churches. This interpretation is based on the Burgher Synod Committee of Falkirk's, *A Warning against Socinianism* (1788), and the later Anti-Burgher *Overture Concerning Dr. McGill's Errors and Process containing a warning against the said errors, and their sinful proceedings of the Courts in that Process* (Paisley, 1792), prepared by James Robertson (1750-1811), minister in Kilmarnock. I will therefore examine the *Overture*, and trace the later developments within the Secession churches, discussing the nature of their divisions.

In a slightly later context the scope given to Socinianism in George Hill's *Lectures in Divinity*<sup>781</sup> would also seem to be of importance.

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<sup>780</sup> Grubb, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, pp.145-6.

<sup>781</sup> For instance in his *Lectures Hill* devoted a section on the Atonement to a treatment of differences between traditional Calvinist and Socinian positions. Alexander Hill, *Lectures in Divinity by the Late George Hill* (fourth edition Vol 1, Edinburgh, pp.29-62.

Finally, the response to the McGill case from Unitarians in Scotland will be considered.

#### **I) Negative Reactions within the Established church**

There are two documents, the first of which *The Procedure of our Church Courts in the case of Dr McGill of Ayr with a complaint lately exhibited against him and a narrative of the prosecution and termination of a prosecution carried against him*, offers a more detailed account of the libel and complaint brought against McGill, while the second *A Memorial and Remonstrance By some members of the Church of Scotland who took an active part in that prosecution*,<sup>782</sup> is a more compact summary of the various points at which the complainants felt McGill was in contravention of the doctrinal and Confessionals standards of the church. Those who appended their names to the “new” complaint (all of them interestingly enough laymen) were: “William Morton, farmer in Garroch in the parish of Craigie (Ayrshire), John Adam, Shoemaker in Kilmarnock, Robert Robertson, Merchant in Paisley, and James Gardner, Linen Printer in the Barony Parish of Glasgow”.<sup>783</sup>

A clear dissatisfaction with the nature and tone of McGill’s apology following the case is made by reference to: “his explanation and apology in which there is not even a retraction, or even a modification of one single sentiment in all the Dr’s publications” (10), although from my earlier review of the said apology, this does appear to be somewhat harsh.

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<sup>782</sup> *A Memorial and Remonstrance Concerning the Proceedings of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, and of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in the Cause of Dr. William McGill, one of the ministers of Ayr. By some members of the Church of Scotland who took an active part in that prosecution* (Glasgow, 1792). Afterwards cited as page numbers within the text.

<sup>783</sup> “Friends of Truth”, *Procedure*, p. 60.

## II) Synod of Glasgow and Ayr: A Declaration of Doctrine

The complainants in their Remonstrance go on to make reference to the *Declaration of Doctrine* of the local synod, which had been published in all the Glasgow Newspapers, as well as the *Scots Magazine*<sup>784</sup> in April 1791.

This document laments the “spirit of the present age, which...seems to be too favourable to the reception of such publications (which are subvertive of the whole scheme of salvation, which the Gospel reveals)”.<sup>785</sup> In their defence of traditional doctrine the declaration reiterates ‘sound’ Trinitarian views, the external and internal sufferings of Christ, the “proper, real and full satisfaction” of God’s justice in the Atonement of Christ, and the effectual calling of the elect, who are sanctified through the virtue of Christ’s death.<sup>786</sup>

Moreover, they attempt to re-establish the place of the Bible and the Confession in the life of the church, over and against the “danger of its being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine”,<sup>787</sup> the dangers of which (in McGill’s teaching) leads to the destruction of “virtue and morality”.<sup>788</sup>

Interestingly the Declaration was approved “unanimously” by the Synod, with the instruction that a copy be sent to every minister (who would then read it from their pulpit), and synod elder, as well as its publication in the local and national press. This is an important illustration of the impact and response to McGill as it suggests the clear divisions present within the synod on the matter, and the uncertainty of quite how to deal with him. There would appear to be little doubt that an Evangelical/Moderate split was in evidence, with the former of course having a significant influence within the Glasgow area, whilst the Moderates seemed to hold a

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<sup>784</sup> *Scots Magazine*, 53, December 1791, pp.592-3.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid.

<sup>787</sup> Ibid.

majority in Ayrshire, as Ian Clark suggested.<sup>789</sup> Those who opposed McGill were therefore caught in a trap of on the one hand censuring or even removing him from the church, with the danger that he could become a beacon for others with similar sentiments, and on the other of being accused of “accepting” his opinions. The Declaration then was a useful method of exonerating themselves from the outcome of the case, by making their stance clear to the wider public, and reiterating their own frustrations.

However, for the Complainants (as would be the case for James Robertson), the Declaration did not go far enough. Rather they suggest that “many of the errors taught by Dr.McGill are quite unnoticed”.<sup>790</sup> Indeed they would appear to have preferred that an explicit list of the names of those who opposed McGill be appended to the document, in order to illustrate the scope of dissent. In addition they felt that their own Remonstrance was subsequently required to offer a more detailed account of the points at which McGill was in contravention of Scriptural and Confessional standards.(39) Without such a survey there was the danger of the Declaration not having the desired impact on public opinion.

### **III) The Complaint or Libel presented to the Presbytery of Ayr**

In a further attempt to call McGill to account, the authors of the *Remonstrance* prepared a libel, presented on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1791, to the local Presbytery in Ayr. This encompassed some eleven points which they hoped would re-ignite the case. It is therefore worth briefly outlining the general tone of these complaints which were:

- McGill’s contravention of his ordination vows with regard to the

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<sup>788</sup> Ibid.

<sup>789</sup> Ian D.L.Clark, *Moderatism and the Moderate Party in the Church of Scotland 1752-1805*, PhD dissertation (University of Cambridge) 1964. pp 164 and 167. Cited in Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p.67.

## Confession.

- The Arminian nature of the *Practical Essay*, whereby sinners can be brought to salvation by way of repentance in the sense of a free-will choice.
- The diminution of the place and role of Christ within the Godhead, relegating him in a Socinian manner.
- The denial of Christ's intercessory priesthood, exercised while on earth, and not only subsequently in heaven.
- The misrepresentation of the sufferings of Christ as being "incidental calamities", and his not being subject to the divine wrath in the Garden of Gethsemene.
- The metaphorical allusions in the shedding of Christ's blood, which was not in itself a propitiation for sin.
- McGill's extolling human merit, rather than the blood of Christ as a route to salvation.
- Moving justification from this world (for the elect), to the next, and making man's personal righteousness and obedience the only proper ground of it.
- The key role of repentance in the reconciliation of God and sinners.
- A denial of the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.
- McGill's refutation of subscription, which he regarded as being in violation of the Christians right of liberty of conscience.<sup>791</sup>

However, much to the complainants' displeasure, by a casting vote of the Moderator of Presbytery, it was decided not to hear the libel. A protest was then

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<sup>790</sup> *Memorial and Remonstrance*, pp.37-38.

made to the Synod, at which point the authors received “abuse, that had begun to flow upon us at Ayr..and was now much more abundantly poured out on us...we were represented as a rabble, a mob, and so on, as creatures to be spurned and detested”.<sup>792</sup>

They were, however, given the opportunity to meet with McGill and his supporters to outline their objections, although this was only conformable to “points of form” (on the Synod’s instruction).<sup>793</sup> Finally, the Presbytery relented, and agreed to read the complaint on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1791, before submitting it to the Assembly of 1792. Unsurprisingly given their previous decisions the Assembly dismissed the libel.

Indeed, only three ministers (including McGill’s old adversary William Peebles) and three elders joined the dissent against dismissing the complaint. Against this sentence, not surprisingly, the complainers, by their counsel protested, but to no avail. In an appendix to the process of the case, the Friends of the Truth are highly critical of the clergy and elders sitting in the Assembly at that time.

There can be little doubt that the attempted ‘second case’ against McGill had appeared to be doomed from the outset. This was due to the lack of respect displayed by the ministers of the Presbytery, Synod and latterly Assembly towards laymen whom they considered to be “unqualified” to comment on theological matters. The initial procedure against McGill had been instigated by their own and was therefore treated with all seriousness from the beginning. It is undoubtedly an interesting snapshot of the kirk at this time where such clericalism abounded. There is little doubt that, after McGill’s apology the previous year with the dismissal of the case which followed, some of the local (Moderate) ministers in Ayr were very reluctant to raise the issue again through the church courts.

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<sup>791</sup> Ibid, p.41-67.

<sup>792</sup> Ibid, p.68.

<sup>793</sup> Ibid.

The process of this ‘case’ was carried in the pages of the *Glasgow Mercury* newspaper, with the first mention on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January, outlining the fact that the complainants had not “taken the advice of any minister or elder of the Presbytery before giving in their complaint”.<sup>794</sup> On this basis the Presbytery felt themselves justified in not hearing the matter. However, several members of Presbytery did register their dissent from not reading the complaint on the basis that it was the “form of process that every church judiciary is obliged to read every paper on their table before they can judge of it..such is the usage of every court in this church”.<sup>795</sup>

Further *Glasgow Mercury* coverage appeared on April 19<sup>th</sup>, (Proceedings of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr), May 10<sup>th</sup> (Presbytery), and finally May 30<sup>th</sup> (Assembly).<sup>796</sup> Additional information may be gleaned from these accounts with the “very great majority”, which dismissed the complaint at Assembly level, from which the only named dissenters were a Mr McLaughlan of Auchinbroig and the Rev William Peebles of Ayr.<sup>797</sup> Clearly then, in the more “impartial” rendering of the *Mercury* a picture of clerical over lay authority is again illustrated by the dismissal on the grounds of the complainants’ lack of theological qualification to judge McGill’s writings. Of further note is the vote of the Assembly, by such a majority, to reject any further proceedings against McGill, on the grounds that the case had already been heard and dealt with, in addition to the lack of ‘authority’ of the complainants.

The fear of a divided church was still uppermost in the minds of many within Presbyterian circles at this juncture in its history, with the spectre of a heresy trial causing widespread alarm. The complainants, who clearly had a conservative theological background, also castigated the Moderate party within the church as

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<sup>794</sup> *The Glasgow Mercury, January 18<sup>th</sup> 1791*, p.21.

<sup>795</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>796</sup> *The Glasgow Mercury, April 19<sup>th</sup> 1791*, p.125. *May 10<sup>th</sup> 1791*, p.149. *May 30<sup>th</sup> 1791*, p.173.

<sup>797</sup> *The Glasgow Mercury, May 30<sup>th</sup> 1791*.

“those who joined with the enemies of our happy constitution, and did what was in their power to distress the people, by following violent measures in settlements”.<sup>798</sup>

They continued to vent their anger towards patronage. Indeed in their summarising remarks of their proceedings against McGill they attempted to call for a change in its legislation by means of a campaign. This call went so far as to blame the “heresies” expounded by McGill on patronage itself: “Why are so many unskilful in the word of life, and publish errors from the pulpit and press...the reason is patronage”.<sup>799</sup> In this respect, we can observe an interesting forerunner of the Ten Years Conflict of the mid-nineteenth century over the issue of patronage.

Certainly, having had access to significant financial backing in order to bring their case against McGill in the first place, one is left wondering both who their “backers” were, and also what influence they could wield.

## **VI) Moderate Attitudes towards the Confession.**

The lack of theological innovation from the Moderate Party in the eighteenth century would appear to call into question their commitment to the traditional standards of the church, and seem at odds with their work in the fields of literature, in particular history and agriculture. This has led to a division amongst scholars who have perceived the party under Robertson to be either Arminian in sentiment or, as evidenced by their retention of the Confession in an age of Enlightenment, as remaining true to the Calvinism of the past. From different sides of this argument for instance, John Pocock regards Moderatism as constituting:

A regional and late variant of the ‘Arminian Enlightenment’, in which criticism of the Calvinist absolute decrees developed into an erastian politics, a pursuit of polite culture, and a reputation, not always

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<sup>798</sup> Ibid, p. 161.

<sup>799</sup> Ibid.

undeserved for anti-Trinitarian theology.<sup>800</sup>

Alternately, Richard Sher rather contends that:

None of the Moderates in the William Robertson circle had any scruples about subscribing to the church's rigorously Calvinist creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and none of them ever overtly denied its fundamental tenets.<sup>801</sup>

In the early part of the eighteenth century the Kirk had of course been shaken in turn by disputes over the Auchterarder Creed, the theology of the *Marrow*, the case of John Simson, and the Secession formation, in addition to the later establishment of the Relief church. By maintaining an 'orthodox' position on the Confession, the Moderates believed they would be more able to realise their overarching ambition of achieving a strong church polity within the Presbyterian courts. At the back of their minds was always the spectre of another secession or split, which would only serve to weaken their hold on the church.<sup>802</sup> This would also seem to be a plank in their response to McGill himself. To censure or depose him from the church ran the risk of making him a martyr for others with similar views, thus leading to a division over Confessional subscription in the latter part of the century. Indeed it is also illustrative of the changing attitudes towards 'heresy' in the established church. As John McIntosh suggests, during the case "the synod's investigation was conducted almost entirely on procedural grounds, demonstrating that, while willing to condemn errors of doctrine, no party within the Church of Scotland had a majority prepared to prosecute repentant perpetrators."<sup>803</sup> The outcome of the case also displayed the lack of an overall hold for 'Moderate' theology on the church. Rather from the sentiment

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<sup>800</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, II 'Narratives of civil government', (Cambridge, 1999), p.270. Cited in Colin Kidd, 'Subscription, the Scottish Enlightenment and the Moderate Interpretation of History', in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>801</sup> Richard Sher, *Church and University*, p.35.

<sup>802</sup> Kidd, 'Subscription, the Scottish Enlightenment'.

of McGill's opponents (especially from the Secession camp) emerged a demonstration of the restatement of more traditional Calvinist principles.<sup>804</sup>

## **VII) Response from and divisions within the Burgher and Anti-Burgher Burgher churches.**

### **Synod Committee of Falkirk: A Warning against Socinianism (1788)**

During the McGill case, a Committee of the Associate (Burgher) Synod of Glasgow was appointed to offer a response to Socinianism. It duly met at Falkirk and published its findings in 1788.

Having introduced the reader to a brief account of various heresies to have afflicted the church throughout its history, encompassing Pelagius and Socinus, the document set out to assess the system of doctrine delivered in the *Practical Essay* which it regarded thus:

The sum of the doctrine contained in the *Essay* appears to be this - the Scripture-revelation is perfective of human reason: there is nothing in it, which if rightly understood is not consonant to our Reason; so that we see these mysteries or doctrines which cannot be fully understood, are to be rejected as not fair interpretations of Scripture, although God's Law is perfect, and cannot but require perfect obedience, yet God does not expect an obedience absolutely perfect from men, but is willing to accept of sincere obedience in its stead: and as a remedy for the defects of our obedience, he requires repentance, repentance and sincere obedience are the condition of salvation.<sup>805</sup>

However, for John McKerrow:

The publication of the Warning, and the circulation of it in the different districts of the country, could not fail to have had a favourable influence in checking the progress of error, and in establishing the minds of men in the truth.<sup>806</sup>

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<sup>803</sup> McIntosh 'William McGill' in DNB [accessed December 5<sup>th</sup> 2008]

<sup>804</sup> Ibid.

<sup>805</sup> Synod Committee of Falkirk, *A Warning against Socinianism* (Falkirk, 1788), p. 10.

### Anti-Burghers - An Overture

Due to their frustration with the outcome of the case, the Associate Synod of Glasgow decided to take the matter further by way of issuing an ‘Overture’. This was to take the form of a protest not only aimed at McGill, but additionally against the church which allowed him to continue in his ministry and therefore included itself in his “heresies”.

From the outset, under the leadership of Erskine, the Secession had been rebuking the established church for its ‘Latitudinarian’ attitudes and reductionist approach to doctrine. In addition to its opposition to patronage, its striving for doctrinal purity (in particular the doctrines of grace) had caused its initial split from the establishment.

At the Associate Synod of Glasgow another motion was drafted on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1791, which carried without the requirement of a vote, as it had been the year which stated that:

Whereas it is a matter of notoriety that the Rev William McGill, in Ayr, has vented a number of gross errors in a book entitled *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ*, and, that, on account of these errors, a process was commenced against him before the Courts of the established church, which process was issued without any censure being inflicted on the author, or any condemnation of his errors, and a second process, having been taken, was dismissed by the General Assembly on this account that they held the matter to be already judged, it is humbly moved that this Synod should emit a warning against said errors, and show that the Established Church Courts have acted sinfully in this matter... That something might be done as speedily as possible the Synod appointed the Presbytery of Kilmarnock as a committee to prepare a draft of said warning, to be laid before the Synod at an interim meeting to be held in Glasgow.<sup>807</sup>

Six months later, on March 6<sup>th</sup> 1792, the draft was presented by the Rev James Robertson, AM of Clerk’s Lane, Kilmarnock.

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<sup>806</sup> McKerrow, *History of the Secession*, p.567.

<sup>807</sup> “Friends of the Truth”, *Procedure*, p.3.

### VIII) Rev. James Robertson and his Overture.

James Robertson (d. 1811), who was to be a very significant figure in the McGill case, was also covered by Rev John Mitchell's work.<sup>808</sup> Mitchell, a Secession minister in Glasgow, composed his *Memories of Ayrshire* around 1832. In it he suggested that Robertson was a man of originality in thought and high attainment in matters linguistic (being conversant in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic as well as Arabic and Syriac) as well as theological. Indeed, it was believed that he had read more theology in systems and commentaries than any other contemporary minister.

Mitchell describes Robertson as “though not an elegant, or in a strict sense an eloquent speaker, was yet a most respectable divine, as well as a very popular, instructive and impressive preacher”.<sup>809</sup>

The *Overture* is divided into four parts, the first consisting of a rehearsal of the McGill process, designed to show how it had been mismanaged throughout.

However, as Alexander McNair noted, “a certain indefiniteness is imparted to the narrative by the fact that, of the numerous speakers [involved in the case] introduced, not one is mentioned by name”.<sup>810</sup> Dalrymple was criticised for his “congratulatory address to the Deity” following McGill's apology, as Robertson styles the prayer, he “contrived to smuggle an apology for his colleagues' regrettable failure to accomplish the good he had intended, or that he himself had expected”.<sup>811</sup>

McNair's observation of Robertson's style was that:

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<sup>808</sup> John Mitchell, *Memories of Ayrshire about 1760* (in *Miscellany*, Scottish History Society, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, Vol. 33) (Glasgow, 1939), p. 1.

<sup>809</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>810</sup> Alexander McNair, *Scots Theology in the Eighteenth Century*, (London, 1928), p. 110.

<sup>811</sup> James Robertson, *Overture Concerning Dr. McGill's Errors and Process containing a warning against the said errors and their sinful proceedings of the Courts in that Process* (Paisley, 1792), p.2.

So changed is the present mode of conducting theological controversy from the manner which prevailed at the end of the eighteenth century that the abjuratory style of Robertson, which is one of the his most marked characteristics, offends our sense of propriety, consorting neither with the seriousness and sacredness of the issues at stake, nor with the religious character of the ecclesiastical organisation which he represented.<sup>812</sup>

McGill, for Robertson, “licks up the filthiness of error wherever he can find it”; further, “Like most of the moderns, he is to be credited with a sovereign contempt of all systems, in virtue of which he glories in self-contradiction as a distinguished piece of theological heroism, and can be either Arian, Nestorian, or Socinian, as answers his convenience”.<sup>813</sup>

An example of Robertson’s terms of abuse were again illustrated by his description of McGill’s theology as follows: “You shall here find united the self-righteous Jew, the Christianised infidel, the Popish merit-monger, the proud Pelagian, the truckling, trimming Baxterian”.<sup>814</sup> Robertson’s feeling towards Richard Baxter (1615-1691)<sup>815</sup> appears to have been keeping with that of Fraser of Brea’s, who “abhorred and was at enmity with Mr Baxter, as “a stated enemy of the Grace of God”<sup>816</sup> due to his antinomian views.

In one passage (of the *Practical Essay*), he detected: “The deadly poison of Socinian heresy, wrapped up in part with serpentine cunning; in part discharged with the boldness of the most determined enemy”.<sup>817</sup> Clearly, Robertson felt that McGill was both implicit and explicit in his heretical stances.

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<sup>812</sup> McNair, *Scots Theology*, p. 112.

<sup>813</sup> Robertson, *Overture*, p. 4.

<sup>814</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>815</sup> Author of such works as *Saints Everlasting Rest* (1649), *Reformed Pastor* (1656) and *Call to the Unconverted* (1658).

<sup>816</sup> McNair, *Scots Theology*, p.113.

<sup>817</sup> *Ibid.*

Although affirming, as “most unquestionable” that McGill is a Socinian on the question of the nature of Atonement for sin, Robertson admits that “his real sentiments upon the doctrine of the Trinity are not so plainly declared... Sometimes he speaks as a Nestorian, but more frequently we apprehend, he discovers himself to be of the Arian band”.<sup>818</sup>

In McNair’s opinion, if Robertson had been quite sure that McGill had no fixed perception of the person of Christ, but was Socinian, Nestorian, and Arian, by turns, with a preference for Arianism, he would not have been content to say that “he apprehended” that such was the case. Indeed, (for McNair) it appears that McGill, “nor any other, whatever his aptitude for heresy, could have entertained, at one and the same time, those three conflicting forms of Christological belief or unbelief!”<sup>819</sup>

Summing up the whole process against McGill, the protagonist of the Associate Synod of Glasgow characterised the gravity of the decision:

We know of no reformed church, at home or abroad, which has dismissed without any censure, such a system of error, as is contained in Dr. McGill’s writings, after it was brought under judicial cognisance...[indeed]... The decisions, or judgements of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, with that of the last general Assembly in this cause, have given a deeper wound to the purity of the doctrines of the Gospel, than ever was given in this church since the Reformation from Popery.<sup>820</sup>

Moreover the Declaration of Doctrine, issued by the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr was completely dismissed by Robertson:

The Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, indeed in April last, published what they called a ‘Declaration of Doctrine’, in which, after complimenting their Church in a manner by far too flattering to correspond with her real character for 60 years past, they gave a few extracts from the Confession of Faith...but this was a piece of shameful dishonesty in those gentlemen, who are the enemies of these doctrines, and it is

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<sup>818</sup> Ibid, p.119.

<sup>819</sup> Ibid.

<sup>820</sup> Robertson, *Overture*, pp.88-89.

impossible to consider their conduct in any other light than as a piece of low deceitful policy, to quash the prosecution against Dr. McGill.<sup>821</sup>

Having quite categorically established the grounds of complaint against the established church, Robertson arrived at the crux of the action to be taken on the part of the Anti-Burgher Secession church as a result of the McGill case when he suggested that:

It is more than time that the people in this country were falling upon more resolute and regular methods. They should resolve to let every intruder instruct his proper audience, the pews, walls, bells and steeples, with his honourable or right honourable patron, and they should persist in an orderly and peaceable, but firm and determined application to parliament every year, till they get either this legal and oppressive tyranny [patronage] abolished, or the public funds applied for the support of one in each parish to whose ministration they can with a safe conscience submit...instead of a Patron; men may be often as safe under the power of one despot as of many.<sup>822</sup>

Having abandoned all hope for the Church of Scotland following their lack of action over McGill, Robertson set up the first moves towards a Voluntaryist position. As patronage was one of the main ‘evils’ by which men such as McGill, and others who shamefully controverted the accepted doctrinal standards of the Confession of Faith, were allowed to continue in their posts, the only solution would seem to be the separation of church-state relations in this regard. Indeed, for Robertson, the McGill case merely served as a stark reminder of why the Secessionists had been right to leave the establishment in the first place, back in the 1730s: “The grounds of our Secession from the National church are greatly increased and strengthened by the judgement of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, and that of the General Assembly in 1791”.<sup>823</sup> Although he had hoped that some within the Popular party might have been able to use their leverage to remove McGill, their failure to achieve the desired

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<sup>821</sup> Ibid, p.96.

<sup>822</sup> Ibid, p.94.

result was a cause of further disappointment. However, he did make a call to all those of “whatever denomination”,<sup>824</sup> to join the Anti-Burghers in withstanding those “Dissenters” in England, and “Unitarians and Pelagians” in Scotland, who were now “able to set up some meetings”.<sup>825</sup> Clearly Robertson was not averse to using the tactic of fear in constructing a wider and greater Unitarian/Socinian threat than was actually a reality in Scotland, just as men such as Bell, Moir and Jamieson had previously done.

With Robertson’s Overture being generally approved by the Synod there would be a gap of some twelve years prior to the formal establishment of committees and Testimonies, in order to reflect the change of opinion which had taken place.<sup>826</sup> Consequently, following the procedural process of committees being appointed to draw up a revised formula, a new Testimony was issued, and accepted by the Synod in May 1804.

The standard on which the Testimony was based was thus outlined:

We call no man, no church, master. One is our master, even Christ, and his word is our only unerring rule. To the law and to the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.<sup>827</sup>

With regard to the Westminster Confession the Testimony stated:

In our adherence to them we are not to be viewed as adopting a rule of faith distinct from the Holy Scriptures. Though we acknowledge them as subordinate standards, they are not at all the rule of what we are bound to believe, but a public declaration of what we do believe, and believe because revealed to us in the word of God. The reason why we use them, and avow our adherence to them is, that we may give public testimony of our soundness in the faith,

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<sup>823</sup> Ibid, p.93.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid, p.100.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid.

<sup>826</sup> Grubb, *Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, p.160.

<sup>827</sup> Cited in Grubb, p.161.

and thereby *distinguish ourselves from those who pervert the Scriptures, by glosses contrary to their genuine meaning.*<sup>828</sup>

Certainly the last sentence of this reiteration of Confessional Orthodoxy would appear to be aimed at men such as McGill, who had been ‘allowed’ in Secession eyes to contravene both the Confession and Scripture, with his ‘heretical’ views.

In the field of Church/State separation, the Testimony declared:

The Church has a spiritual authority over such of the subjects and rulers of earthly kingdoms as are in her communion; and the civil powers have the same authority over the members and office-bearers of the Church as over the rest of their subjects. But she has no power over earthly kingdoms in their collective and civil capacity; nor have they any power over her as a Church. Christ, her Head, while on earth disclaimed all exercise of civil authority, there is no evidence from the New Testament that He instructed his servants with any... In matters purely religious, civil rulers have no right to judge for any but themselves.<sup>829</sup>

Although the revised Testimony was accepted by the majority of those present at the Synod, Thomas McCrie (1772-1835), Archibald Bruce (1746-1816) and professor of the General Associate Synod divinity hall),<sup>830</sup> along with two others refused to endorse it, and as a result being deposed by the Synod, reformed themselves into the ‘Constitutional Associate Presbytery’ (commonly known as Old Light<sup>831</sup> Anti-Burghers). McCrie had arrived at an acceptance of the Confession in regard to the establishment of religion within the nation. Subsequently he composed the *Statement of the Difference* (1807), which outlined the more traditional teaching on the matter of state establishment. Following the acceptance of the Testimony the New Light section of the church had moved to a Voluntarist position, with regard to

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<sup>828</sup> p.161.

<sup>829</sup> Ibid, p.163.

<sup>830</sup> Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, p.61.

<sup>831</sup> Grubb, p.163.

Meanwhile, with the Burgher faction having also expressed dissatisfaction with the power of the civil magistrate, as well as qualms over staunch adherence to the Confession and the Covenants, a committee was entrusted with composing an overture to address the concerns.

However, the initial overture, which, although wishing to “fear God and honour the king” in regard to Church/State relations, and no longer making the subscription to Confession and Covenant a “term of ministerial and Christian communion”, was rejected in 1797. Rather it was replaced with another motion of overture which went even further in distancing the church from Confessional requirements:

The Synod hereby declare that, while they hold the obligation of our Covenants upon posterity, they do not interfere with that controversy which has arisen respecting the nature and kind of it, and recommend it to all their members to suppress that controversy as tending to gender strife rather than godly edifying.<sup>832</sup>

Predictably, this was an unacceptable move away from Covenanting tradition for some within the Burgher church, which led to the opponents of the overture forming themselves into ‘The Associate Presbytery’ in 1799, later to become the “Associate Synod” in 1805, (although they were normally thought of as “The Original Burgher Synod”, later the “Original Burgher Presbytery”).<sup>833</sup> As their position was akin to those who had formed the “Constitutional Associate Presbytery”, both were now at the stage of attempting to defend “Old Light” principles, as opposed to the “New Light” tenets of their opponents.

As there was so much common ground between the different factions of the two parties within both Burgher and Anti-Burgher synods, moves towards a union were made over the following years. Subsequently, a “Basis of Union” was

formulated in 1818, between the New Light parties, which initiated the United Secession Church. The Old Light (Original Burgher Synod) would rejoin the Church of Scotland in 1839.

### **IX) Unitarian Response**

It is certainly worth considering the response the McGill case provoked from leading Socinians/ Unitarians in England. Overall they appear to have viewed the outcome as a defeat for their theology north of the border. Leonard Short cites some mentions of McGill from Priestley, Belsham and Lindsay. However as Short did not reference his sources of this material, it was not possible to find the original documents which they came from. I have therefore relied on his (Short's) citations for this section.

Joseph Priestly regretted that McGill was “not more firm, especially if the General Assembly had supported him”.<sup>834</sup> Thomas Belsham commented that “I have seen his recantation...he is truly to be pitied”<sup>835</sup> (although Short suggests, he was ‘pitied’ more for his difficult domestic life rather than his ‘apology’). In reference to the attempts by the Friends of the Truth to re-ignite the case Theophilus Lindsay remarked in a letter to William Turner in 1791 that “the second storm which threatened the good Dr.McGill is happily blown over”.<sup>836</sup>

What these snippets do suggest is the interest and importance which those in England attached to the McGill case. Clearly they had hoped that the Ayr minister would have stood his ground in defence of their views whereby the movement could have gained more credence in Scotland.

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<sup>832</sup> Ibid, p.164.

<sup>833</sup> Grubb, p.165.

<sup>834</sup> Cited in Short, *Pioneers of Scottish Unitarianism*, p.26.

<sup>835</sup> Ibid.

## X) Scotland

### Unitarianism in Ayrshire and Glasgow

An interesting account of the impact left by the McGill case in Scotland was made by an unnamed ‘correspondent’, signing himself as ‘BM’ (although this appears to be the Unitarian minister of Glasgow)<sup>837</sup> in the 1823 edition of the *The Monthly repository of theology and general literature*.<sup>838</sup>

This concerned one John Blair of Dalrymple near Ayr who had recently applied to the parish minister to have his child baptised, although the clergyman suspected that Blair “had some leaning to Unitarianism.”<sup>839</sup> During his Confessional examination Blair was asked, “John, do you not believe that he (Christ) was God himself, and instituted baptism by his own authority?. Answer: No, indeed I do not think that he was God, and I am informed in Scripture that he did nothing by his own authority. (John 5:30.)”<sup>840</sup> As a result the proposed baptism was refused, with Blair being given some orthodox literature to read in the meantime. However, upon retaining his Unitarian convictions Blair applied to the Unitarian Minister of Glasgow, “who had before visited another part of Ayrshire, on a similar occasion.”<sup>841</sup> to have the child baptised.

Around 100 people attended the subsequent service (December 1822) from the “adjoining parishes of Kirkmichael, Coylton, Ochiltree, Dalmellington and Spaiton”,<sup>842</sup> assembled in a room in the public house, where a discourse on Unitarian

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<sup>836</sup> Ibid.

<sup>837</sup> *The Monthly repository of theology and general literature* Vol 18. (London, 1823), p.122.

<sup>838</sup> *The Monthly Repository* being a Unitarian periodical which published between 1806-38.

<sup>839</sup> *The Monthly Repository* Vol.18, p.122.

<sup>840</sup> Ibid.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid.

<sup>842</sup> Ibid.

doctrine and principles was duly delivered, which met with a favourable response, in the correspondent's opinion.

From this the correspondent averred that:

It appears to me that the soil of Ayrshire is well prepared for the reception of Unitarianism, by many ministers of the last as well as of the present century, who, if they did not directly preach Unitarianism, preached nothing against it, or in favour of Calvinism. The well known prosecution of Dr. M'Gill, of Ayr, at the close of the 18th century, produced a discussion, the effects of which are felt at the present day, and will continue to be much longer felt. His *Practical Essay on the Death of Christ*, which was the chief subject of that prosecution, a work of singular piety and elegance, would, if republished, be still very useful in the promotion of scriptural truth in Scotland. Several of my congregation (Glasgow) owe their first impressions in favour of Unitarianism to a perusal of it; and were led to this, by the general outcry which was raised against him.<sup>843</sup>

Clearly then the resonance of McGill's thought and theology was felt at a local level, within Unitarian circles in Ayrshire and Glasgow at least, with the *Practical Essay*, as well as the overall case appearing to have converted some to the cause. However, although worthy of note it must be imagined that the numbers involved were rather small.

With further regard to the Ayrshire scene by 1833 in the report of the Scottish Unitarian Association:

at Cumnock, Unitarian books are read, and the few avowed friends continue steadfast in their profession...In Beith and its neighbourhood, there was very recently scarcely an avowed Unitarian; now there are several, besides a considerable number who are disposed to converse freely, and read upon the subject.<sup>844</sup>

References were also made to a society at Saltcoats and an attempt at sending a missionary to Kilmarnock around this time.

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<sup>843</sup> Ibid.

<sup>844</sup> The Unitarian Magazine and Chronicle Vol 1. (London, 1834)

The fact that McGill was already held in high regard by the organised Unitarians in Scotland is evidenced from an account of their fifth annual meeting on the on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1817, when a toast was made to: “the memory of the Rev. Dr Dalrymple and the Rev. Dr. McGill, late ministers of Ayr”.<sup>845</sup>

The Scottish Unitarian Association had been established in 1813 by two Englishmen, the Rev. James Yates (1789–1871), minister in Glasgow, and the Rev. Thomas Southwood Smith (1788–1861), who was also a Physician and sanitary reformer, of Edinburgh. This had been made possible by the Unitarian Toleration Act of the same year, which had legalised worship.<sup>846</sup> However, due to the low numbers of adherents in Scotland, the Association had dissipated by 1824, until being re-established in 1830 by another Englishman, the Rev. George Harris (1794-1859).

In considering the wider impact of McGill’s theology on the established churches of Scotland, England and Ireland, it must be said that all remained firmly Trinitarian in their official outlook. The Westminster Confession also continued as the accepted standard of doctrine for the Church of Scotland. From this, coupled with the limited scope of the organised Unitarian movement it could be argued that his views had suffered a resounding defeat. Despite the impact of the Enlightenment which did manage to free religion in Britain to some extent from the shackles of the seventeenth century, the time was not yet right for the advancement of more ‘liberal’ views of the nature of the Atonement, or the removal of Confessional standards.

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<sup>845</sup> *The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature* Vol.12. (London,1817) p.433.

<sup>846</sup> See Iain McCalman, Jon Mee et al, *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture, 1776-1832* (Oxford, 2001), p.729.

## Conclusion

The outcome of the McGill case, whereby the Ayr minister was able to offer an apology and ‘retraction’, to some extent, of his opinions was a contrast to the previous heresy trials concerning anti-Trinitarian sentiment in Scotland. From the case of Thomas Aitkenhead to that of John Simson in the early part of the century it appeared, on the surface at least, that the established church had ‘softened’ its tone. However, despite McGill not being censured or deposed by the church courts different factors in their approach must be considered. There can be little doubt that the spectre of a further schism haunted the Kirk, following the establishment of the bodies of Secession and Relief. This provided the background to the dealings with McGill from Presbytery, through Synod to Assembly and helps to explain why the courts found it difficult to know how to deal with the case. Additionally, as many Presbyterians in England had been affected by Socinianism in addition to the issue of the non-subscribers of Antrim earlier in the century, to actively censure McGill risked opening up the whole issue of Confessional subscription (which the Moderates were keen to avoid), as well as worry that there could have been some ‘latent’ Socinians within the church willing to support McGill in the event of censure. Local church and civil politics were also involved, with McGill receiving the support not only of the Town Council in Ayr, but also the Moderate majority at Presbytery and Assembly level. Synod was of course a different matter, as the Evangelical faction enjoyed greater numbers in Glasgow. The ‘Declaration of Doctrine’ issued by the Synod is certainly a good indication of the views of those who wished to exonerate themselves from the outcome of the case.

In a wider sense it would appear from the documents of both the Burgher and particularly Anti-Burgher sections of the Secession churches that their anger at the

perceived weakness of the established church to deal appropriately with McGill fed into their eventual move towards a Voluntaryist position. This certainly affords a broader significance to the case. Also, although clearly admired by the later Scottish Unitarians, with McGill's theology 'inspiring' some to hold such a position, both in Glasgow and Ayrshire, it has to be consistently borne in mind that the numbers involved in this movement, even following the establishment of the Unitarian Association in 1813, were very small in a Scottish context. The fact that those in England such as Priestley and Lindsay followed the case and were familiar with McGill's work is not surprising. It would also appear that they had hoped for a more 'positive' outcome, with a victory of some sort for McGill ushering in new openings and potential for Unitarianism in Scotland. This of course failed to materialise and dealt a further blow in the early 1790s to a movement which was to be practically decimated following Fyshe Palmer's transportation and Christie's move to America. In this sense it may be concluded that McGill's theology did not have a wider impact of helping to 'launch' a more liberal theology in Scotland. However, given the difficult political circumstances of the mid-to-late 1790s, with a hardening of conservative attitudes in the church with regard to support of the establishment, it was even more unlikely for any radical theological views or movements to take off. Instead it might be imagined that a strait-jacketing of doctrine would occur. Rather than divide over matters such as the Atonement, it was instead a time for Scottish churchmen to unite in their loyalty not only to Kirk, but also country. Although Alexander McNair suggested that McGill's legacy lived on in the theology of James Morison (1816-1863) and John McLeod Campbell (1800-1872), into the nineteenth-century,<sup>847</sup> I feel that the work of these men cannot be directly attributed to the

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<sup>847</sup> McNair, *Scots Theology*, p. 8.

overall effects of the McGill case in the late eighteenth century, as they were both working within a different context, removed from McGill's own situation.

## POSTSCRIPT

Following the outcome of the case McGill offered an expression of his political views in 1795, in which he appears to be ‘conservative’ in tone. Of course initial excitement about the French Revolution had dissipated in the mid-1790s, as a result of the Reign of Terror, execution of the monarchy, the war between Britain and France from 1793 onwards, and the ‘irreligious’ nature of the Jacobins. As the churches were mainly united in their support of the political establishment by this point it is unsurprising to find McGill expounding the party line. What does make his comments interesting however is the difference in views from those of Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and of course Thomas Fyshe Palmer. Consideration will therefore be given as to quite why McGill, as well as appearing politically orthodox, felt the need to express these opinions in opposition to the Unitarian faction.

Having considered the ‘development’ of the Unitarian churches in Scotland post-McGill, it is also worthwhile briefly examining the later Unitarian/anti-Trinitarian movement in England in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries by way of postscript.

### **D) McGill’s Political Views**

In McGill’s final published work, *On the fear of God and the king, a sermon, preached at Ayr, on occasion of the public fast* (1795) we find the theological radical presenting himself firmly as a political conservative. It is therefore interesting to consider the multi-faceted motivation which may have lain behind this sermon.

Having been tainted with the charge of Socinian heresy McGill would of course have been well aware of the ramifications south of the border of equating theological heterodoxy with Republicanism. As a result, by clearly pledging his allegiance to crown and government he was able to distance himself from any such suspicion which could potentially have been prompted by, for instance, the establishment connections of John Jamieson. As discussed in chapter five, parts of Ayrshire had proven to be fertile ground for the Friends of the People societies in the early 1790s. Again, McGill was able to remove any possibility of guilt by association. Likewise he surely drew a line between himself and the organised Unitarian movement in Scotland (such as it was) by castigating those (Fyshe Palmer for instance) who had openly displayed political dissent. Indeed, in the sermon McGill felt that the punishment meted out to radicals was not only fully justified, but had been too limited in its scope: “our laws are too mild, as those attempting it (radicalism) have not suffered as much as they deserved”.<sup>848</sup> The Moderates had of course maintained their tactic of keeping the establishment on side during the Revolutions in order to serve their own ends to a large degree, and here he was ‘toeing the party line’ in this respect by his own loyalty. It must also of course be borne in mind that attitudes in Scotland towards the French revolution had shifted dramatically following the Terror, and also the war between the two countries from 1793 onwards. As a result those who had initially been supportive of the Jacobin cause (including his friend Robert Burns) as well as the likes of Price and Priestley in England, had to modify their views in the mid 1790s. There is, however, no way of knowing what McGill’s ‘early’ opinions on America and indeed France were, as no such published material exists. Within the sermon, in addition to his attacks upon

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<sup>848</sup> William McGill, *On the fear of God and the king, a sermon, preached at Ayr, on occasion of the public fast*, (Ayr, 1795), p.19.

dissenters, McGill takes the opportunity to suggest that ecclesiastical division in Scotland would have provided an encouragement to their French foes. In a thinly veiled swipe at his Secessionist opponents, who of course could have been accused of being ambivalent at best on the issue of the American and French Revolutions, McGill was able to lay the cause of division and disunity at their door. Additionally, in a tradition which was fashionable at the time, McGill is able to argue that God's providence would only fall on those nations which obeyed not only his laws, but also those of the monarch. Interestingly this was a view which was earlier shared by his arch-opponent William Peebles. Furthermore, in a clear attack on those who sought to reform political structures, McGill stated that:

From the fear of God and the King, to a temper directly the reverse, whereby men reject or infringe their joint commands, or act contrary to the laws of religion and government, upon any pretence whatsoever. Such things may be done under plausible pretences - pretences of reform, of liberty, of zeal for the good of the people, and for defending the rights of men. The plausibility of their pretences will make such innovators able to seduce and mislead well disposed people. For which reason there is the more to warn such persons against associating with them.<sup>849</sup>

In McGill's opinion there was a very close and intimate connection between honouring God and honouring the monarch, as the viceregent, appointed by the divinity. Indeed, in 'Christian' countries it was regarded as a duty which went hand in hand with respecting and worshipping God.<sup>850</sup> However, this was also tempered by a disclaimer whereby if the King ever strayed from the observance of 'proper' religion then a limitation would be placed on obedience owed, though only under such circumstances. There was also of course a natural delineation between the type of obedience owed to each, with McGill citing Matthew 22:21 in support: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's".

An early concern of McGill's over the situation in Revolutionary France was introduced at this stage of the sermon with the Jacobins being criticised for overseeing a system whereby "Christian worship is hardly tolerated by the pretended worshippers of reason and liberty".<sup>851</sup> In an echo of McGill's earlier views of Sabbath observance he also suggested that, in France "people are invited to open their shops and carry on their worldly business on the Lord's day".<sup>852</sup> As a result, "in that miserable country, the commands of human authority stand in direct opposition to the laws of God."<sup>853</sup> Britain was threatened in its war with France, in McGill's opinion, by a nation whose chief aim was to overthrow the monarchy and government of the former, by a land of "bloodthirsty Atheists".<sup>854</sup> The Ayr minister was also keen to stress that the war had been prompted by the French, with Britain in the position of fighting a defensive action in order to preserve her very liberty and Christian way of life.<sup>855</sup>

From this survey then it certainly appears that McGill, whether or not he had earlier admired the Revolution, in the sense of its offering a new spirit of freedom, had firmly distanced himself from any radical political overtones. This was however in sharp contrast to the situation experienced by Priestley and the Unitarians in England.

## II) England

In the later 1790s the impact of the French Revolution had of course led the English political and religious establishments to become more conservative in their outlook, as had been the case in Scotland. With growing opposition to the Jacobins

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<sup>849</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid, pp.5-8.

<sup>851</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>852</sup> Ibid.

<sup>853</sup> Ibid.

<sup>854</sup> Ibid, p.26.

those who espoused a radical political cause such as Joseph Priestley were clearly in danger. Consequently during the Birmingham riots of July 1791, in addition to the Unitarian chapel in the city, Priestley's own house, scientific base and library were destroyed by the mob.<sup>856</sup> Indeed he had become a "national figure of hate"<sup>857</sup> by this stage, being not only caricatured, but also burnt in effigy. These events led Priestley to flee firstly to Hackney (1791-4), and from there to America, where he would continue to act as an influence on the development of the movement until his death in 1804. Certainly the events in France as well as Priestley's removal from the country had a highly demoralising effect on organised Unitarianism in Britain, which it would take some time to recover from.

R.K Webb has offered an interesting and relevant comment on the direction of English Unitarianism in the wake of the 1790s, namely that:

The new 'Priestleyans' were severely tested almost at once, on the one hand by the pervasive anti-radicalism that swiftly arose in response to the French Revolution and its admirers in Britain. The Unitarianism that came out of this crucible was not scepticism or a renewed Deism, but a committed, articulated Christian religion, buttressed by sweeping metaphysical views and general piety.<sup>858</sup>

Webb also suggests that the influence of Priestley, following his move to America, lived on within English Unitarian circles by the legacy of promoting natural religion and revelation in their work. As Priestley had believed that God's overall purpose for humanity was to promote happiness, it followed from this that a study of nature would enable access to the revealed will of a loving creator in the world.

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<sup>855</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>856</sup> Rivers and Wykes, *Joseph Priestley, scientist, philosopher, and theologian*, p.43.

<sup>857</sup> Ibid, p.44.

<sup>858</sup> R.K. Webb, 'The Faith of Nineteenth-Century Unitarians: A Curious Incident', in Richard J. Helmstadter, Bernard V. Lightman (eds), *Victorian faith in crisis: essays on continuity and change in nineteenth-century religious belief* (Stanford, 1990), p.127.

After Priestley's death in 1804 the next fifteen or so years were "a time of consolidation for Unitarians"<sup>859</sup> in England. However, by 1820 as Webb continues to note, any last traces of 'Arianism' had been removed, with those Presbyterians and General Baptists who had gone over to the Unitarian camp now being firmly Socinian in their outlook.<sup>860</sup> From this it is clear that Priestley's influence in particular lived on. Ironically in later times, due to the prominent memory of his work as a scientist public statues were erected in Priestley's honour in Oxford (1860), Birmingham (1874), Leeds (1903) and Birstall (1912).<sup>861</sup>

Opposition to the political radicals was demonstrated by, for instance, Bishop Samuel Horsley (1733-1806) who preferred Roman Catholics to Dissenters, and the radical Jacobin strain which they brought. Indeed he felt that the move to close Sunday schools was beneficial, as it suppressed the rise of literacy, and the possibility of further political radicalism.<sup>862</sup> In addition, Lord Sidmouth's 1811 Bill attempted to outlaw the practise of itinerant preaching by Unitarian missionaries.

However, with the establishment of the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty in 1811 pressure mounted on Robert Banks Jenkinson, 2nd Earl of Liverpool's (1770-1828) Tory government to extend the scope of toleration. Subsequently in the following year the Toleration Act was loosened to enable twenty dissenters to congregate for worship (the previous number having been set at five). Then in 1813, as has been noted, the call first made in 1792 to encompass Unitarians within the Act was finally passed.<sup>863</sup>

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<sup>859</sup> Ibid, p.129

<sup>860</sup> Ibid.

<sup>861</sup> Rivers and Wykes, *Joseph Priestley*, p.13.

<sup>862</sup> William Gibson, *The Church of England, 1688-1832: Unity and Accord* (London, 2001), p.104.

<sup>863</sup> Ibid.

From this opening the Protestant Dissenting Deputies then initiated a campaign to repeal the Test and Corporations Act, an ambition which would finally be realised in 1828.

## CONCLUSION

### **I) Different Situations - Scotland, England and Ireland**

While Socinian /Unitarian opinions appear to have had significant resonance in England and Ireland, in Scotland the picture was considerably different. For instance in England, where Socinianism told hold of a substantial number of Presbyterians, it has to be borne in mind that they were outside the establishment. As a result notions of tyranny, and the fear of priestcraft fed into a fertile ground of theological and political dissent. Another factor, as outlined by S.J.Barnett, that suspicions of heterodoxy were inflated by the establishment in order to buttress their own position is important in considering the scope and influence of English Socinianism. Although there is little doubt that the work of men such as Nathaniel Lardner, John Taylor and Joseph Priestley did hold significant sway within their own denominations, quite what establishment Socinian views enjoyed within the Church of England is less easily to clarify.

In Ireland of course the situation was somewhat different, as there the Presbyterians were within the establishment. At an early stage opposition to confessional subscription drove the 'Arian' movement, leading to the expulsion of the Synod of Antrim in the 1720s.

The impact of the American and French revolutions on both countries was profound, as in Ireland was the United Irishmen movement of 1798. Where dissent and anti-Trinitarianism could be equated it could have only disastrous consequences for the Unitarian churches, as it indeed proved, particularly for Joseph Priestley. A shoring up of conservatism in both church and wider society left little scope for the

more radical politics of the Unitarians, in their attempts to repeal the Test and Corporations Acts, as well as the Thirty-Nine Articles in the late eighteenth century. Although conditions would improve in the early nineteenth-century, the movement was undoubtedly set back in the aftermath of the continental situation, especially in France.

Likewise in Ireland, the common front of Protestants and Catholics, initiated by the United Irishmen must have done considerable damage to sectarian attitudes which could have been engendered by Socinian/Unitarian factions.

In Scotland Unitarianism never became the established force it was south of the border. Again radical politics were to prove its downfall, following the extradition of Fyshe Palmer in the 1790s the denomination was decimated, surviving only in pockets into the nineteenth century.

Despite its various divisions Scottish Presbyterianism, as the established force, remained true to the Westminster Standards throughout the eighteenth century. While there is little doubt that the Secession and Relief churches had far more stomach for the importance of the Confession than say the Moderates, yet it would always prove to be a major point of contention to attempt to move away from its doctrine and polity, as proved in the cases of Fergusson and McGill himself.

Again, following the revolutions the Scottish church became more attached to the state and monarchy (although the Moderates had of course consistently and skilfully managed such a relationship throughout their tenure). Therefore suspicions of heterodoxy were less likely to be tolerated in such an atmosphere. If anything, McGill's theology was of the 'wrong time, wrong place' variety. In a church which still largely adhered to Calvinist doctrine, to question the nature and scope of the Atonement proved something of a gift to his opponents.

## II) Why he was a Socinian

It has long been suspected that McGill was under the influence of men such as Joseph Priestley and John Taylor. However given the records of the Ayr Library Society there can now be no doubt that he not only had access to the works of key English Socinians, but it may also be speculated that he leaned upon their ideas in his own thought. There are some parallels between the views expressed by Priestley, Lardner and Taylor on the person and role of Christ, and those of McGill in his *Practical Essay*, which may have led him down a firmly Socinian path.

In addition to such influence McGill must also be placed firmly within the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. It is clear that his early formation at University, under the guidance of William Leechman left an impression on his willingness to express his own opinions in public, despite their contravention of the accepted framework of the day. The movements of common-sense philosophy and contractarian political thought, whereby a liberty of conscience was promoted, must also have been instrumental in enabling McGill to criticise the Confessional subscription present within his own church. McGill was a man who was well read and well informed of wider events, being in touch with the efforts in England and Ireland to escape the shackles of creeds and standards. Within his own county of Ayrshire he would also have been aware of Fergusson of Kilwinning's escape from censure, which may well have emboldened McGill to make public his own anti-Confessional views, imagining that he too would be exempt from controversy.

McGill was certainly fortunate to enjoy the patronage and support of local politicians in Ayrshire, which served to protect him to some extent from the worst vestiges of his opponents' wrath. His own popularity also appears to have been

secure, not only in his friendship with Burns, but also the affection in which he was held by Dalrymple and his own congregation.

Having displayed a sense of bravery and indeed obstinacy in propounding his Socinian thought the issue of why McGill apologised for his opinions is certainly an interesting one. On the one hand his competence as a theologian may indeed be questioned as there are certainly some inconsistencies in the doctrines set out in the *Practical Essay*. However I believe that consideration must also be given to wider events such as the collapse of the Ayr Bank. For a man who had lost a considerable sum of money in this unfortunate venture it would have been somewhat reckless to try and stand his ground and lay himself open to removal from his post. It would also seem that McGill was shocked by the ferocity of opposition which emerged not only from within his own church, but also the Secession and Relief camps. His frank rebuttal of Peebles certainly appears to have been ill judged as it brought the doctrines contained within the *Essay* to a far wider audience than may have otherwise been the case. However, despite the local support he enjoyed, it would have been exceptionally difficult to ride out the storm of controversy provoked by his various prosecutors. This then could have been another component in the later apology.

### **III) The Nature of Opposition**

As has been suggested by James Barclay, the Secession churches suffered from a sense of social dislocation, which drove their response to the American and initially French Revolutions. I believe this aspect also fed into their frustrations over the McGill case. As a body who wished to hold onto a more traditional, Calvinistic model of ecclesiastical polity, it is understandable that they would have viewed the

failure to properly address the Ayrshire minister's flouting of the Confession as yet another example of the 'apostasy' of the established church.

Moreover the connections enjoyed by John Jamieson would have allowed him to potentially equate the heterodox position of McGill with suspicions of Republican radicalism, aware as Jamieson was of such sentiment in England. However it must also be said that the threat of Socinianism north of the border was exaggerated by McGill's opponents. As has already been noted any organised form of Unitarianism was very limited, even more so following the removal of its leaders from the scene in the early 1790s. There is indeed little to suggest that the Kirk was in any way fertile ground for such doctrine in the late eighteenth century. Therefore the inflated spectre of heterodoxy served to point out the firm orthodoxy by delineation of those within the Secession and Relief camps.

#### **IV) McGill's Overall Significance**

I believe that McGill continues to be a figure of significance in Scottish church history of the eighteenth century as, despite suspicions of the orthodoxy of leading Moderates, McGill went a considerable stage further by his open and avowed publication of opinions which were clearly contrary to the accepted standards of the day. The case against him, as well as its outcome, offers an interesting portrait of attitudes towards heresy in the late century. While John Simson had of course been deposed from his post at Glasgow in the 1720s there would appear to have been a softening of attitudes by the latter decades of the century. This must of course be tempered, not only by the vehement responses which emerged from both the Relief and Secession churches, but also from the 'Declaration of Doctrine', issued by the more conservative of McGill's opponents within the established church: evidence

which in itself dismisses the notion that the church courts were prepared to simply go along with McGill's teachings.

Clearly the eventual movement of the Secession churches towards a Voluntaryist position owed much to their anger and frustration at the failures, as they saw them, of the established churches to deal appropriately with McGill. This fact alone would accord significance to the McGill case. In addition, the attempts of laymen to re-ignite the prosecution against him affords an interesting insight into the attitudes of ministers of the day. Dismissed not only on the grounds of not being within McGill's parish, but more significantly as 'uneducated' in matters of theology, clerical power and authority would seem to have been vested in the hands of the ordained members of the church at this time. It can of course also be argued, with regard to this attempted "second case", that having had difficulty in dealing with McGill the first time around, the courts of the church were very reluctant indeed, having reached their decision, to reopen the case.

The fear of further schism was one which haunted the establishment, following their previous experiences with the Relief and Secession bodies. It is therefore understandable that they did not wish to accord McGill the role of martyr, with the possibility of his drawing other like-minded adherents to him.

#### **V) Limitations and suggestions for further work**

While this thesis does not address McGill's earlier works, for instance his *Five Single Sermons*, which appear to have led to him being awarded a DD by Glasgow University, the central aim has been to consider why he proved to be a contentious theologian, as well as the wider effects of his work, which place him firmly within the context of his time. Further research could certainly be undertaken in order to gain a

more holistic picture of McGill in the earlier period, in order to ascertain if he arrived at Socinian conclusions by way of a gradual process, as I suspect was the case.

Having touched upon the nature of radical politics in Ayrshire in the period of the American and French Revolutions, this again appears to be an area which lends itself to further research. From the evidence of McGill's final published work, *An Ode to the King*, it seems that he espoused a politically orthodox view in regard to state allegiance, which would of course disqualify him from any potential association with radicals in his locale. However, as he also was admired by 'open' radicals such as Fyshe Palmer, this is an area which may produce some material of interest.

As James Wodrow was a direct influence upon McGill in the publication of the *Practical Essay*, as well as his later support as a 'Friend of the Truth', it is regrettable that I was unable to access the correspondence of Wodrow, in order to gauge his written opinions on the McGill case. Again this is a field which would prove useful in any further work. Another potential area for further research would be the wider works of William Dalrymple to ascertain where he may have held heterodox opinions in general terms.

McGill lived on in the pages of the *Scotsman* as evidenced by John Gairdner's account of 1883 which highlighted once again the close nature of McGill's friendship with Robert Burns.<sup>864</sup>

Overall, despite his significance McGill cuts a somewhat tragic figure. Beset by problems in his private life, with the failure of the Bank of Ayr, his own difficult domestic situation with regard to his children, and the notoriety he attained by way of the case, his later years must have been lived out under a cloud. His character certainly displays a man who was well educated, and brave though somewhat

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<sup>864</sup> John Gairdner, *Robert Burns and the Ayrshire Moderates: A Correspondence Reprinted from "The Scotsman"* (Privately printed, 1883), pp.1-3.

stubborn. However his legacy at the end of the eighteenth century is one which remains worthy of attention, due to the national prominence and effects of his work and theology.

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