

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

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Introduction

The Other Voice

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

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

In Astell's view, women should not be treated like either children or fools—they ought to be permitted to form their own judgments about right and wrong. To support these claims, she appeals to her own immediate experience of an internal power of reason, “that light which God Himself has set up in my mind to lead me to Him” (§6), and the belief that her fellow women have the same capacity for rational

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

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

The Christian Religion is also the crowning achievement of Astell's career. Today Astell is best known as the author of three popular feminist works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (1694 and 1697) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700). The first *Proposal* details her plans for an all-female academy or a "religious retirement" for women,² the second offers her "method of improvement" for women to practice at home, and the *Reflections* provides her thoughts concerning the common causes of unhappy marriages in early modern society. In all three works, her emphasis is upon the

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

importance of women's cultivating a certain strength of mind and a disposition toward happiness, regardless of their material circumstances. *The Christian Religion* provides a further elaboration of the same themes. More than this, the treatise provides the reader with a sophisticated philosophical context in which to place the feminist arguments of the earlier works. We might think of this volume as a rather long "third part" to her famous *Proposal*. The first part of the *Proposal* outlines her view that in order for women to attain purity of mind and acquire truth and virtue, they must (temporarily, at least) withdraw themselves from the business of the wider world and devote their attention to the study of religion and philosophy. The second part gives women a provisional method of thinking to attain this purity, based upon the rules of René Descartes (1596–1650) and his followers Antoine Arnauld (1612–94) and Pierre Nicole (1625–95)—a method whereby women might withdraw their minds from sensory prejudices and regulate their passions in accordance with reason. This final "third part" shows her readers how that method might be applied to the study of God, the self, and other people and material beings. Building on the principles of thinkers such as the French Cartesian Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1714) and his English follower John Norris (1657–1711), Astell offers both theoretical and practical guidelines about how women can attain a Christian tranquility of mind in the midst of outward troubles and disturbances. She proposes to show that living in conformity with the will of God can bring happiness in both this life and the next. She provides moral arguments in favor of treating other people from motives of disinterested benevolence rather than petty self-interest, and she recommends psychotherapeutic techniques for the governance of the passions, those disturbing perceptions that occur in the soul as a result of its close intermingling with the body. Above all, Astell offers advice on how a woman can cultivate a virtuous disposition of character and live up to the dignity and perfection of her nature as a rational, thinking being. *The Christian Religion* thus spells out what Astell's female students would have come to understand, had they been given the opportunity to attend her academy. It represents the culmination of Astell's feminist project to teach her fellow women how to lead the good life and attain happiness.

Astell's Life and Works

When *The Christian Religion* first appeared in print in February 1705,³ Astell was at the height of her literary fame in London. She had already published seven works, including both her *Proposals* and the *Reflections*, to general public acclaim.⁴ Although these works were all published anonymously, her authorship seems to have been an open secret.⁵ Among her contemporaries, she enjoyed a reputation as a woman of great piety and wisdom. She was admired by leading literary figures such as John Evelyn, Daniel Defoe, and John Dunton, as

3. [Mary Astell], *The Christian Religion, As Professed by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (London: S.H. for R. Wilkin, 1705). The *Term Catalogues* record that Astell's *Christian Religion* was first published in octavo in Hilary term (February), 1705. See Edward Arber, *The Term Catalogues, 1668–1709 A.D.; with a Number for Easter Term, 1711 A.D.*, 3 vols. (London: Professor Edward Arber, 1903–6), 3:434. “Octavo” refers to the size of the pages of the book, brought about by folding a standard printing sheet three times in order to produce eight leaves.

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

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

well as the prominent religious writers John Norris, Francis Atterbury, and George Hickes. Her works were also known to the great philosophers, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and John Locke. And she was an inspiration to other defenders of women in her day, including Mary Chudleigh, Elizabeth Thomas, and the anonymous author known as “Eugenia.” In her private life at this time, Astell was also extremely fortunate: she had a close circle of friends and patrons—a small group of wealthy gentlewomen who provided her with much-needed emotional support and financial assistance.⁶

Only a few decades earlier, Astell had faced a rather lonely and dismal future. Born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on November 12, 1666, she was the eldest child of Mary (née Errington) and Peter Astell, both of whom hailed from respectable Northumberland families. Her father was a member of the Company of Hostmen, an elite coal merchants’ guild that held a powerful sway over the flourishing Newcastle coal trade. In her childhood, Mary had enjoyed the privileged lifestyle of a respected gentleman’s daughter. Alongside her younger brother Peter, she was educated by a clergyman uncle, Ralph Astell, the curate of St. Nicholas Church in Newcastle. She was apparently taught “all the accomplishments which are usually learned by young gentlewomen of her station,”⁷ and she may also have had some tuition in religion and philosophy. In 1678, however, Mary Astell’s father died and her life prospects were dealt a significant blow. Peter Astell’s untimely death left the family in serious financial trouble, and in the ensuing years her mother was forced to rely on charity and loans to supplement her pension. By 1684, both Astell’s mother and her uncle were dead. In a short period, then, Mary Astell went from being the daughter of a prosperous gentleman to an impoverished orphan with little chance of finding a suitable husband. By her own estimate, she was a rather poor

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

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

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candidate for marriage anyway: not only was she penniless, she was apparently bereft of both beauty and charm.⁸ Instead she developed “a certain ambition to be an author;”⁹ and shortly after her mother’s death, she moved from Newcastle to London, most likely with the aim of pursuing this ambition. Once there, she received some assistance from the nonjuror William Sancroft (1617–93), the archbishop of Canterbury, who was kind enough “to receive a poor unknown, who hath no place to fly unto and none that careth for her soul.”¹⁰ One of her earliest written pieces, a manuscript of religious poetry titled “A Collection of Poems” (1689), is dedicated to Sancroft out of esteem and gratitude.

In the 1690s, Astell turned her hand from poetry to philosophy. Her childhood tutor, her uncle Ralph, had been educated at the University of Cambridge at the time of the religio-philosophical movement known as Cambridge Platonism.¹¹ In her published works, Astell evinces a sympathy for the moral and religious doctrines of the Cambridge thinkers—especially those of Henry More (1614–87), who

8. In an early poem, “In emulation of Mr. Cowley’s Poem called the Motto page I” (1688), Astell’s speaker laments: “What shall I do? not to be Rich or Great, / Not to be courted and admired, / With Beauty blest, or Wit inspired.” This poem is in “A Collection of Poems humbly presented and Dedicated To the most Reverend Father in God William By Divine Providence Lord Archbishop of Canterbury & c” (1689), Rawlinson MSS Poet. 154:50–97, Bodleian Library, Oxford. For a transcription, see Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 400–454 (402).

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

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

11. Astell later inherited her uncle’s library, a collection of books that includes a number of religio-historical texts now housed at the Northampton Records Office in the United Kingdom. Among the surviving works bearing her inscriptions are William Cave’s *Antiquitates Christianae* (1675) and his *Apostolici* (1677). See E. Derek Taylor, “Mary Astell’s Work Towards a New Edition of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*,” *Studies in Bibliography* 57 (2005–6): 197–232 (200n6); and Taylor and New, introduction to Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 8n18.

was well-known for his reasoned defenses of the immaterial soul and the existence of God. In 1693, Astell initiated a correspondence with a man sometimes now known as “the last of the Cambridge Platonists,” the Oxford theologian-philosopher John Norris. Inspired by Norris’s reputation as a man who was “not so narrow-souled as to confine learning to his own sex,” she wrote to him with a puzzle concerning the love of God.¹² Their ensuing correspondence was a long and lively discussion on Norris’s distinction between the love of desire (a love that we owe exclusively to God) and the love of benevolence (the love that we owe to other people), and the Malebranchean metaphysics underlying these views.¹³ During this exchange, from 1693 to 1694, Astell published her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, an instant success that ran to four editions in her lifetime. When the correspondence with Norris was eventually published in 1695, the title page announced that the *Letters Concerning the Love of God* were “Between the Author of the *Proposal to the Ladies* and Mr. John Norris.”

Over the next decade, Astell proceeded to establish herself as a writer. She took lodgings in Chelsea, a respectable suburb of London, where it seems that her clever wit and cheerful disposition won her several friends. Her most intimate and long-lasting relationship was with Lady Catherine Jones (d. 1740), the well-to-do daughter of the first earl of Ranelagh. Astell permitted Norris to publish their letters only on the proviso that he dedicated them to “the truly honorable lady, the Lady Catherine Jones, in due acknowledgement of her merits.” Astell describes her friend as someone who, from an early age, shunned the temptations of birth and beauty and chose instead to remain a virgin and pursue God’s work. She adds that she loves Jones “with the greatest tenderness, for all must love her who have any esteem for

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

13. For details, see Taylor and New, introduction to Astell and Norris, *Letters*.

unfeigned goodness, who value an early piety and eminent virtue.”¹⁴ Jones is the most likely addressee of Astell’s *Christian Religion*, which is written in the style of a letter to “the Right Honorable, T. L. C. I.”¹⁵ In the final years of her life, Astell lived with Jones in her home in Jew’s Row, Chelsea.

When Astell’s female academy failed to win support, she followed up her *Proposal to the Ladies* with a second part, “Wherein a Method is Offered for the Improvement of their Minds,” in 1697. According to Astell’s friend Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756), a “good lady” had expressed interest in providing financial backing for the academy but was dissuaded by Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715), the bishop of Salisbury.¹⁶ Astell’s second part is dedicated to Princess Anne of Denmark (later Queen Anne of England), in the hope that she will not “deny encouragement to that which has no other design than the bettering of the world, especially the most neglected part of it.”¹⁷ In her later works, Astell’s royalist sympathies come to the fore, not only in her *Reflections upon Marriage* (reprinted with a long preface in 1706), but also in three Tory political pamphlets of 1704: *Moderation truly Stated*, *An Impartial Enquiry Into The Causes Of Rebellion and Civil War*, and *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons*.¹⁸ Astell’s final work, *Bart’lemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry after Wit* (1709), is a critique of *A Letter concerning Enthusiasm* (1708) by the Whig thinker Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury.

14. Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 66.

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

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

17. Astell, *Proposal II*, 117.

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

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

Historical-Intellectual Context

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

19. *London Evening Post*, no. 553, June 12–15, 1731.

this debate. In *The Christian Religion*, she expresses the same religious and political sympathies—she defends a High Church Anglican, anti-toleration, and antidissenter point of view—but with some important qualifications.

In this treatise, Astell provides a sustained critique of three religio-political works: the anonymous *A Lady's Religion* (1697), another anonymous pamphlet titled *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation Explained* (1704), and John Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).²⁰ There has been some speculation about the authorship of the first two works. *A Lady's Religion*—the text that inspired Astell to write her *Christian Religion* in the first place (see §1 below)—was supposedly written by “a Divine of the Church of England.” But despite this ascription, Astell seems to have suspected Locke's involvement.²¹ In one part of the text, she drily observes that “the *Lady's Religion* seems to be little else but an abstract of the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, with all those disadvantages that usually attend abridgments” (§368). Years later, upon reading *The Christian Religion*, the antiquarian William Parry (1687–1756) praises Astell for stripping Locke of his disguise “in [im]personating a clergyman, and yet writing like a Socinian.”²² His attribution of *A Lady's Religion* to Locke is not unreasonable given that a French translation of the work, *La religion des dames*, appeared in the same volume as the French translation of Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* in 1715, 1731, and 1740. The translator of both texts was a young Frenchman named Pierre Coste (1668–1747), French tutor

20. Astell addresses these specific editions: *A Lady's Religion: In a Letter to the Honorable My Lady Howard. The Second Edition. To which is added, a Second Letter to the same Lady, concerning the Import of Fear in Religion. By a Divine of the Church of England*, 2nd ed. (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1704); *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation Explained In A Letter of Resolution Concerning Church-Communion* (London: n.p., 1704); and [John Locke], *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As delivered in the Scriptures*, 2nd ed. (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1696).

21. See Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 90–91.

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

to the son of Sir Frances and Lady Damaris Masham, at whose manor house of Oates in the Essex countryside Locke also resided.²³

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

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

23. On Coste, see John Milton, "Pierre Coste, John Locke, and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury," in *Studies on Locke: Sources, Contemporaries, and Legacy*, ed. Sarah Hutton and Paul Schuurman, International Archives of the History of Ideas/Archives internationales d'histoire des idées 197 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 195–223.

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

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

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

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

26. Apetrei, *Women, Feminism, and Religion*, 124.

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

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

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

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

The fundamental articles of saving faith must therefore be few and simple, plain and intelligible—or, in short, they must be reasonable. This argument for the “way of fundamentals” in the Christian faith is consistent with Locke’s now well-known Whig stance on the toleration of nonconformists in England. In his *Letter concerning Toleration* (first published in Latin as *Epistola de Tolerantia* in 1689), he points out that God has placed each man’s salvation in his own hands, and that attaining this salvation requires individuals to come to the true religion through their own efforts, and not through the compulsion of others. On this view, the attainment of eternal happiness depends not on the outward observance of ceremonials but upon an inward persuasion of mind—the individual’s assent, that is, to certain fundamental religious propositions. In keeping with his irenicism, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* Locke highlights the fact that many points of difference between Protestant sects are simply not fundamental enough to justify separate communion.³¹

In response, one of Locke’s earliest and harshest critics, the Cambridge preacher John Edwards (1637–1716), accused *The Reasonableness of Christianity* of being “all over Socinianized.”³² Though the term has variable usage in England during this period,

30. Locke, *Reasonableness*, 305 [169–70].

31. Locke, *Reasonableness*, 306 [170].

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

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

Like Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity, A Lady's Religion* was also labeled Socinian.³⁴ This short tract was addressed to Lady Howard, a woman who had apparently requested the author's opinions about how to live in accordance with the Christian religion. Despite being an Anglican clergyman, the author elects to promote the "common cause" of Christian piety rather than defend the Church of England against dissenters. He advocates a highly moralistic approach to religion, one that places an emphasis upon practical duties rather than the observation of outward formalities. To lead a virtuous life, he says, we do not need to study obscure and unintelligible doctrines of divinity, but only to understand those moral laws that are intelligible to all reasonable persons. When in doubt, Lady Howard might consult

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

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

her own reason to inform herself “wherein you are justly dealt with, and wherein you receive wrong.” Likewise, when dealing with other people, she might consult the same principle to “know when you deal justly or wrongfully, and when you do kind or ill offices to another.”³⁵ It is fitting that the moral law is so easily intelligible, he says, echoing Locke, because “the greatest part of mankind being necessarily employed in making daily provisions for themselves and families, and discharging the common offices of life, cannot attend to any religious institution which is either difficult or tedious.”³⁶

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

All of the principal targets of *The Christian Religion* were the subject of heated controversy in Astell's lifetime. *The Principle of the Protestant Reformation* was despised among Tories. In *The Necessity of Church-Communion Vindicated* (1705), the nonjuror Robert Nelson (1656–1715) denounced the pamphlet as “one of the vilest this age has

35. *Lady's Religion*, 16.

36. *Lady's Religion*, 19.

seen.”³⁷ In 1697, in a presentment to the grand jury of Middlesex, both *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *A Lady’s Religion* were charged alongside Toland’s *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) with being works of “Socinianism, Atheism, and Deism.”³⁸ The same document calls for these authors to be punished “according to the utmost severity of the laws,” the death penalty. In his *Christianity not Mysterious*, Toland claims that “no Christian doctrine can be properly called a mystery,” in the sense of being above or contrary to reason.³⁹ Using Lockean terms, he defines reason as the clear perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas, and then points out that we cannot reason about mysteries of faith because we have no clear ideas of them. If the Christian religion allows such mysteries that are above or contrary to reason, then this opens the floodgates to any number of absurd religious doctrines. Almost immediately upon publishing these ideas, Toland earned for himself an unparalleled infamy: his name became a byword for freethinking atheism in the period, his book was burned by the common hangman in Ireland, and for at least a decade following its publication, *Christianity not Mysterious* was the subject of numerous refutations in print. One of Toland’s first and most influential critics was Edward Stillingfleet (1635–99), the bishop of Worcester. In the tenth chapter of his *Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1696), Stillingfleet interprets Toland’s rejection of Christian mysteries as a necessary consequence of Lockean empiricism. Stillingfleet accuses Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) of providing the philosophical groundwork for heretical ideas, including not only denial of the trinity but denial of the soul’s immateriality and immortality, and even of the very existence of God. In particular, he highlights the negative implications of Locke’s

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

38. See Gailhard, *Epistle and Preface*, 82–83.

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

view that neither sensation nor reflection can provide us with a clear idea of substance (the substratum underlying perceived qualities). This attack on the *Essay* drew Locke into what is now regarded as “one of the most memorable controversies in the history of philosophy,” the Locke-Stillingfleet debate.⁴⁰ In response to Stillingfleet, Locke pointed out that he had never in fact denied the existence of substance, but only affirmed that we have an imperfect and inadequate idea of it. For Stillingfleet, this disclaimer was beside the point. In his subsequent replies, he reiterated his initial charge: in his mind, Locke’s epistemology could have nothing but dangerous consequences for the articles of the Christian faith.

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

But Astell also focuses on something other critics of her time overlook or downplay: she charges both Locke and his followers (namely, Coste) with harboring unfairly prejudicial attitudes toward women’s intellectual abilities. This charge is justified. In his *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke says that the majority of men, “to say nothing of the other sex,” have neither the time nor the capacity for demonstration and that they cannot “carry on a train of proofs.”⁴²

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

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

42. Locke, *Reasonableness*, 282, 305 [157, 169–70].

He once again includes women among “the bulk of mankind” when he observes, “you may as soon hope to have all the day-laborers and tradesmen, the spinsters and dairy maids perfect mathematicians, as to have them perfect in ethics this way.”⁴³ The only sure way to bring women to obedience and practice, he suggests, is for them to hear plain commands. Because they are incapable of understanding difficult concepts, they must be presented with fundamentals: “The greatest part cannot know, and therefore must believe.”⁴⁴ Echoing Locke, in his preface to the French translation of *A Lady’s Religion*, Coste observes that the Christian religion has obviously been accommodated to the meanest capacities. It is “easy to be explained, and every way adapted to the capacity of the illiterate, *of women*, and of the meanest sort of people, that is to say, of the greatest part of mankind.”⁴⁵ Like Locke, Coste implies that the female sex are among those who are “incapable of a long application of mind, and who have neither penetration nor leisure enough to give up themselves to the study of curious and subtle inquiries, not easy to be resolved.”⁴⁶

Such negative attitudes toward women’s mental abilities are not unusual for the times. At the start of *The Christian Religion*, Astell expresses her admiration for an anonymous work titled *The Ladies Calling* (1673). This advice manual for women was written by the Anglican clergyman Richard Allestree (1621/22–81), now thought to be the author of the tremendously popular *Whole Duty of Man*

43. Locke, *Reasonableness*, 282 [157].

44. Locke, *Reasonableness*, 282 [158]. In a posthumously published work, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (1706), Locke’s sexism becomes even more apparent. When it comes to public religious worship, he suggests, women must submit to the spiritual authority of men and never presume to act according to their own knowledge or abilities. This is because the Christian religion does not permit women to break free from their natural subjection to men. See John Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians* (1706), ed. Arthur W. Wainwright, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). In the preface to her 1706 third edition of *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell takes Locke to task for assuming that women are naturally subordinate to men. For details, see Mark Goldie, “Mary Astell and John Locke,” in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, ed. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 65–85.

45. *Lady’s Religion*, A4v; my italics.

46. *Lady’s Religion*, A5v.

(1657). In his *Ladies Calling*, Allestree argues that, in terms of their souls, women are equal to men and just as capable of attaining eternal happiness. Toward this end, he recommends that women be properly educated so that they may cultivate the feminine virtues of modesty, meekness, compassion, affability, and piety. His work thus forms part of the Anglican reformation of manners movement in this period, a movement committed to educating both men and women in the Christian religion.⁴⁷ In the course of expounding his educational program, however, Allestree frequently highlights the “natural imbecility” and “native feebleness” of women.⁴⁸ At the start of the work, for the sake of argument, he concedes that in respect of their intellects, women are inferior to men. Later, he refers to women’s natural talkativeness (“a kind of incontinence of the mind, that can retain nothing committed to it”), their changeability, and their easy credulity (an “impotency” and “defect” in their nature).⁴⁹ On the whole, it must be said, if his work is directed toward women’s learning to form rational judgments, it is not for themselves, not for the sake of their own moral and intellectual enlightenment, but rather so that they will adopt Anglican liturgical and devotional practices. Despite holding progressive views about women’s education, Allestree does not challenge the prevailing sexism of the times. By contrast, Astell does.

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

47. On Astell’s part in the Anglican moral reform movement, see Hannah Smith, “Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), and the Anglican Reformation of Manners in Late-Seventeenth-Century England,” in Kolbrener and Michelson, *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, 31–47.

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

49. Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 12, 80, 88.

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

The Text

The Christian Religion is Astell's most profound and significant scholarly achievement.⁵³ In its original form, the text amounts to more than

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

51. See Astell, *Proposal I*, 77–78; *Proposal II*, 166, 184, 189.

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

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