

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

MARY ASTELL



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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.

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: Awsham 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*.