UC Davis

UC Davis Previously Published Works

Title

John Spencer and the Perils of Sacred Philology

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1cf8c75r>

Journal

Past & Present, 214(1)

ISSN

0031-2746

Author

Stolzenberg, D

Publication Date

2012-02-01

DOI

10.1093/pastj/gtr031

Peer reviewed

JOHN SPENCER AND THE PERILS OF SACRED PHILOLOGY*

In 1650 the Bible's status as infallible revelation — unique guide to salvation and universal history of mankind's origins — appeared secure to most educated Europeans. True, more than a century of confessional struggle and theological debate had exposed scripture to unprecedented scrutiny and proliferating interpretations. Yet, amid the wrangling, scarcely any author questioned its divine authorship or historical reliability. Meanwhile, biblical scholars were at work shoring up the foundations of scriptural authority with the tools of Renaissance philology. But appearances were deceptive. The following decades witnessed scandalous publications by Thomas Hobbes, Isaac La Peyrère and Baruch Spinoza, which openly challenged established assumptions about the Bible, setting the stage for Enlightenment polemicists such as John Toland and Voltaire. Historical scholarship was a major arena for these debates, with orthodoxy challenged, not only by evidence extending the age of the world beyond the confines of biblical chronology, but also by arguments displacing the Hebrew nation from its privileged historical role. Enlightenment critics of Judaeo-Christian revelation, from Toland at the beginning of the eighteenth century to Friedrich Schiller at the end, turned sacred history on its head by arguing that, long before the Jews, the ancient Egyptians possessed a monotheistic religion, which Moses, raised in their culture, plagiarized.¹

This article looks at an important but puzzling episode in the reappraisal of biblical authority and of the relationship between Israel and Egypt: the work of John Spencer (1630–93), biblical

* For helpful discussions of earlier versions of this article, I thank the participants of the workshop on 'The Destruction of Biblical Chronology' at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, in 2005 (in particular, an exchange between Scott Mandelbrote and Moti Feingold helped me situate my interpretation more precisely within the history of Restoration polemics); the faculty seminar on 'Science and the Sacred' at the UC Davis Humanities Institute; the Sodality at Jupiter in Berkeley (especially Ethan Shagan and Jonathan Sheehan); and Jeremy Mumford.

¹ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

scholar, master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and dean of Ely Cathedral.² In his massively learned and meticulously argued treatise, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus* ('On the Ritual Laws of the Hebrews and their Reasons') (1685), Spencer historicized the religion of the Old Testament by situating the ancient Jews in a broader cultural context. He asserted the chronological priority of pagan over Jewish culture and presented powerful arguments that many of the ritual laws instituted by Moses had their origin in idolatrous Egyptian ceremonies.³ Spencer's work provoked fierce debate, with many readers taking its argument as an aspersion on the sanctity of the religion revealed at Sinai. Subsequent events confirmed the critics' fears, as radical thinkers used the evidence for the Egyptian origin of Jewish beliefs and practices to question the Bible's status as divine revelation. Spencer's avowed goal, however, was to defend scriptural authority.

In the eighteenth century, Spencer was sufficiently famous to offer Laurence Sterne an object of satire. In *Tristram Shandy*, in the wake of the protagonist's unintended circumcision by means of a broken window sash, his bookish father rushes to consult *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus*. 'Without stopping a moment to settle it first in his mind, whether the Jews had it from the Egyptians, or the Egyptians from the Jews', Walter Shandy reasons that, 'if the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Phoenicians, the Arabians, the Cappadocians, if the Colchi, and Troglodytes did

² The most recent studies devoted to Spencer's biblical scholarship are Fausto Parente, 'Spencer, Maimonides, and the History of Religion', in Christopher Ligota and Jean-Louis Quantin (eds.), *History of Scholarship: A Selection of Papers from the Seminar on the History of Scholarship Held Annually at the Warburg Institute* (Oxford, 2006); Guy G. Stroumsa, 'John Spencer and the Roots of Idolatry', *History of Religions*, xli (2001); Martin Mulsow, 'Orientalistik im Kontext der sozinianischen und deistischen Debatten um 1700: Spencer, Crell, Locke und Newton', *Scientia Poetica*, ii (1998); Francis Schmidt, 'Des inepties tolérables: la raison des rites de John Spencer (1685) à W. Robertson Smith (1889)', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, lxxxv (1994). In addition, Jan Assmann has written influentially about Spencer not only in *Moses the Egyptian* but in 'Das Geheimnis der Wahrheit: das Konzept der "doppelten Religion" und die Erfindung der Religionsgeschichte', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, iii (2001), and 'Moses as Go-Between: John Spencer's Theory of Religious Translation', in Andreas Höfele and Werner von Koppenfels (eds.), *Renaissance Go-Betweens: Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe* (Berlin, 2005).

³ John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus* (Cambridge, 1685). The work was reprinted in The Hague in 1686 and Leipzig in 1705. An expanded edition, including revisions, new chapters and an entirely new fourth book, was published posthumously in Cambridge in 1727 and reprinted in Tübingen in 1732. Except where noted, my citations are from the 1685 edition.

it, if Solon and Pythagoras submitted, what is Tristram? Who am I, that I should fret or fume one moment about the matter?'⁴ Today, Spencer's name is less familiar, but he remains a significant figure for European intellectual history. Long hailed as a forerunner of the modern study of religion, more recent studies have seen him as a key figure in the overthrow of biblical chronology and the rise of secular interpretations of the Bible.⁵ Amos Funkenstein made Spencer a protagonist of the 'historical revolution' of the seventeenth century, who forged a new kind of contextual history based on the reconstruction of past mentalities.⁶ The last few years have seen the publication of a number of studies about the origins of modern scholarship that include Spencer.⁷

Nonetheless, something about Spencer remains elusive. One school of interpretation holds that he was a stealth opponent of revelation, a crypto-deist. This view is certainly mistaken — belied, as this article will show, by a careful reading of Spencer's work and the totality of his career — but its persistence points to a real ambiguity that has yet to be explained. Most recent studies of Spencer have been more attuned to his Christian outlook, but even the best have not succeeded in explaining the originality of his work or the controversy it engendered. At the bottom of Spencer's reputation as a radically innovative biblical scholar is a paradox. The thesis for which he was reviled by the orthodox and celebrated by the moderns — the theory of the Egyptian origin of Jewish rituals — was a well-known, ancient doctrine

⁴ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Wilbur L. Cross, 4 vols. (New York, 1904), iii, 82.

⁵ W. Robertson Smith's 1889 paean was widely influential: 'The value of comparative studies for the study of religion was brought out clearly, two hundred years ago, by one of the greatest of English theologians, Dr. John Spencer . . . whose Latin work on the ritual laws of the Hebrews may justly be said to have laid the foundations of the science of Comparative Religion': *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions*, revised edn (New York, 1957), p. vi. See also H. Pinard de La Boullaye, *L'Étude comparée des religions: essai critique*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1922–5), i, 166; Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 75; Schmidt, 'Des inepties tolérables'; Stroumsa, 'John Spencer and the Roots of Idolatry'.

⁶ Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, 1986), 241–3.

⁷ In addition to the works cited in n. 2 above, see Jonathan Sheehan, 'Sacred and Profane: Idolatry, Antiquarianism and the Polemics of Distinction in the Seventeenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 192 (Aug. 2006); Jonathan Elukin, 'Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians: Explaining Mosaic Law and the Limits of Scholarship', *Jl Hist. Ideas*, lxiii (2002).

with a respectable pedigree in Christian theology. This paradox was glossed over by his early modern critics and ignored by his modern commentators.⁸

This article offers a new interpretation of Spencer that treats his biblical studies as part of an apologetic campaign by moderate Church of England clergymen. By grounding Spencer's studies in the context of ecclesiastical polemics in the decades between the Restoration of 1660 and the Act of Toleration of 1689, it explains why his theory proved controversial despite its orthodox lineage and offers a more precise assessment of his significance. Although his theory of the origin of biblical rituals was not original, by applying state-of-the-art scholarly methods to an old theological doctrine, he pioneered a way of explaining religion that anticipated modern trends in historical and religious scholarship. The immediate and paramount challenge of defending Anglican ceremonies against puritan attacks led Spencer to espouse an interpretation of biblical religion that, in the hands of radical thinkers, soon proved corrosive to the very authority of revelation that he sought to uphold.

The decline of biblical authority was a crucial dimension of theology's displacement by civil and naturalistic modes of explanation that lay at the heart of the Enlightenment. A major achievement of the last generation of scholarship has been to show that this process did not, in general, entail a rejection of religion per se, but rather redefined religion by subjecting it to civil and naturalistic analyses.⁹ According to Justin Champion, some of the most radical Enlightenment critics of revelation are better described as religious reformers rather than irreligious apostles of secularism.¹⁰ Defining the confrontation between Anglican clergy and

⁸ Fausto Parente ('Spencer, Maimonides, and the History of Religion') argues against the widespread view of Spencer as an innovative historian of religion, but his alternative interpretation is unconvincing. Anachronistically defining theology and history as mutually exclusive categories of scholarship, Parente assigns Spencer to the former and argues that, since Spencer's theory involved God's supernatural agency, he was not a 'rationalist' and did not contribute to the development of the history of religion. He ignores the context of Anglican-puritan debates and instead reads *De legibus Hebraeorum* against the grain as a veiled defence of Socinian theology's attack on typological scriptural interpretation.

⁹ For a survey of recent scholarship, see Jonathan Sheehan, 'Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay', *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, cviii (2003).

¹⁰ J. A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge, 1992).

freethinkers as a debate over the nature of true religion, Champion has argued that the latter pioneered modern ways of studying religion that historicized and relativized Christianity.¹¹ Spencer, who deployed rational criticism to bolster the Restoration political and ecclesiastical order, instead fits the profile of England's conservative 'Enlightenment of the Establishment'.¹² Despite his different intentions, however, his method of studying religion tended in the same direction as the radical thinkers — so much so that modern scholars have had trouble distinguishing his defence of the Church of England from the arguments of its deist detractors.¹³ As a case study of the pious roots of unbelief, this article aims to shed light on the hazy borderland between orthodoxy and free thought at the dawn of the Enlightenment.¹⁴

I

THE CUNNING OF GOD

According to Spencer, the Mosaic Law had to be understood in terms of its two divine purposes: first and foremost, it was meant to abolish idolatry among the Jews; secondarily, some commandments served as 'mysteries', representing sacred truths, in particular by adumbrating the New Testament typologically. The Jews at the time of Moses, he argued, were thoroughly addicted to the idolatrous religion of the Egyptians. Thus, when God desired to lead them back to true religion, he provided the Mosaic commandments to cure them of their habit by means such as: promises of temporal rewards and punishments; marks to distinguish them from their pagan neighbours; distinctions between the pure and impure; prohibitions against the idolatrous practices of their neighbours; and the 'transfer' of other pagan

¹¹ *Ibid.* Peter Harrison makes an overlapping argument in his *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹² J. G. A. Pocock, 'Post-Puritan England and the Problem of the Enlightenment', in Perez Zagorin (ed.), *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1980), 103. On England's distinctively conservative Enlightenment, see also Roy Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981).

¹³ See n. 49 below.

¹⁴ Although mistaken about Spencer, Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago, 1984), remains an essential guide to this territory. See esp. 251–66.

rites into the cult of the true God.¹⁵ Spencer was most interested in the last two means, to which he devoted the entire second and third books of the three-part *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus*. Throughout, he claimed that God had 'accommodated' the Law to the particular circumstances and capacities of the ancient Jews. For example, God found it necessary to promise the Israelites temporal rewards and punishments because their lack of refinement made them impervious to heavenly ones.

In book II, Spencer argued that many Mosaic institutes were designed to contradict specific practices of the 'Sabians', a term he used, following Maimonides, to refer to a category of ancient idolaters.¹⁶ By detailed comparison with pagan rituals, especially those of the Egyptians, he believed he could demonstrate the divine purpose behind many ritual laws that otherwise seemed pointless. For example, the apparently arbitrary prohibition against cooking a calf in its mother's milk became comprehensible once it was known that this practice had been part of a Sabian fertility rite.¹⁷ The true, forgotten purpose of the dietary restriction was to prevent Jews from indulging in the Sabians' superstitious magic.

Book III was also based on a comparison of Mosaic and pagan rituals, but in this case Spencer's aim was to show, not that the Law contradicted idolatrous practices, but that it imitated them. A long-standing problem in Christian theology, which engendered various responses, was how to explain similarities between biblical and pagan religion. In opposition to the dominant plagiarism thesis, which explained such parallels as the result of the Devil 'aping' God, or pagan wise men copying from Moses,¹⁸ Spencer maintained that the idolatrous ceremonies came first and formed the model for the rites introduced by Moses. Although Spencer named the Devil as the author of some pagan ceremonies, he explained the resemblance between divine and demonic cults as being due to God's and the Devil's use of similarly cunning methods. In a remarkable passage, he compared God's borrowing idolatrous forms of worship in order

¹⁵ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, I, ch. 1, p. 21; ch. 2, p. 31.

¹⁶ See n. 31 below.

¹⁷ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, II, ch. 8, pp. 298–308.

¹⁸ See D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1972).

to lure the Jews, despite themselves, to true religion, to the Devil's copying pious rituals in order to trick simple people into idolatry.¹⁹ Spencer first presented a version of this thesis in *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* (1669), which argued for the pagan origins of the biblical technique of divination employed by the Israelite high priest.²⁰ He reprinted this treatise in *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus* alongside chapters tracing similar origins for other Jewish practices, including animal sacrifice, lustrations and purifications, and the celebration of the new moon. According to Spencer, these rituals, which paralleled the ceremonies of ancient idolaters, were of human, not divine, origin. But, since they were long established and exercised a powerful attraction upon the Jewish people, God chose to tolerate them, adapting them to the service of true religion and including them in the Law. They had no intrinsic worth, but stripped of their irreducibly impious elements they were 'indifferent' and need not be abolished.²¹

Spencer's work sparked a theological controversy that lasted decades. His opponents, including Hermann Witsius, John Edwards, Melchior Leydekker, Pierre Jurieu, Jacob Trigland and Samuel Shuckford, were primarily, though not exclusively, Calvinists. Among his prominent defenders were John Marsham, who endorsed the argument of *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* in his *Chronicus canon Aegyptiacus, Ebraicus, Graecus & disquisitiones* (1672), Jean Le Clerc, Dom Augustin Calmet and William Warburton, whose *Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1738–41) contained a lengthy rebuttal of the attacks by Witsius and Shuckford.²² The controversy revolved around Spencer's argument in the third book, which offended many Christians' understanding of the sacred. 'To assert that God did imitate this

¹⁹ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, III, Dissert. 1, Praefatio, p. 520; ch. 11, p. 627.

²⁰ John Spencer, *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* (Cambridge, 1669).

²¹ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, III, Dissert. 1, Praefatio, p. 520; and III *passim*.

²² Christoph Matthäus Pfaff's hostile, prophylactic preface to the 1732 Tübingen edition of *De legibus Hebraeorum* provides a detailed account of the controversy to that date: Pfaff, 'Dissertatio Praeliminari', in John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus earumque rationibus*, revised edn (Tübingen, 1732). See also John Gascoigne, "'The Wisdom of the Egyptians" and the Secularisation of History in the Age of Newton', in Stephen Gaukroger (ed.), *The Uses of Antiquity: The Scientific Revolution and the Classical Tradition* (Dordrecht, 1991), 178–80; Elukin, 'Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians', 627–8; Pinard de La Boullaye, *L'Étude comparée des religions*, I, 167; Schmidt, 'Des inepties tolérables', 130–1.

Abomination', Jurieu wrote, 'savours all over of impiety'.²³ Or, as John Edwards put it:

[Spencer] labours to shew . . . that the most Holy and Tremendous things in our Religion are taken from the most prophane and impure practices of the worst of the Heathens . . . that God raked up all the Vain, Ludicrous, Superstitious, Impure, Obscene, Irreligious, Impious, Prophane, Idolatrous, Execrable, Magical, Devillish Customs which had been first invented . . . by the most Barbarous *Gentiles*, the Scum of the World, the Dregs of Mankind, and out of all these patch'd up a great part of the Religion which he appointed to his own People. If you can credit this . . . there is nothing too hard for your Belief and Assent.²⁴

The critics were right about one thing. Regardless of Spencer's intentions, deists and freethinkers such as Charles Blount, Richard Howard and John Toland soon drew more radical conclusions from his historical insights.²⁵ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, conservative theologians recognized Spencer as having contributed to the development of higher biblical criticism by 'lower[ing] the impression of the spiritual character of the great Jewish legislator'.²⁶ The same feature of Spencer's work that disturbed his critics, his explanation of biblical religion in terms of 'utility' (or, as anthropologists would say, 'function') and by comparison to other Near Eastern religions, caused later scholars, beginning with W. Robertson Smith, to celebrate him as a pioneer in the scientific study of religion.

²³ Pierre Jurieu, *A Critical History of the Doctrines and Worships (Both Good and Evil) of the Church from Adam to Our Saviour Jesus Christ, Giving an Account of the Origin of All the Idolatries of the Ancient Pagans, as Far as They Relate to the Jewish Worship*, 2 vols. (London, 1705), ii, 89.

²⁴ John Edwards, *Πολυποικίλος Σοφία: A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations and Methods of Religion, from the Beginning of the World to the Consummation of All Things, as Represented in the Old and New Testament*, 2 vols. (London, 1699), i, 251.

²⁵ On Blount's use of Spencer, see Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, trans. John Bowden (London, 1984), 291–3. On Howard, see Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 139. On Toland, see Silvia Berti, 'At the Roots of Unbelief', *Jl Hist. Ideas*, lvi (1995), 569. On the radical reception of Spencer more broadly, see Mulsow, 'Orientalistik im Kontext der sozinianischen und deistischen Debatten'. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, 2 vols. (London, 1738–41), sought to recover Spencer's thesis in the name of Christianity from the deists who had usurped it.

²⁶ William Binnington Boyce, *Six Lectures on the Higher Criticism upon the Old Testament* (Sydney, 1878), 4. See also Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. George E. Day (New York, 1884), 31–2; Michael Russell, *A Connection of Sacred and Profane History: From the Death of Joshua to the Decline of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah*, ed. J. Talboys Wheeler, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (London, 1865), i, 247.

Despite the tumultuous reception of Spencer's work and his reputation as a path-breaker, the argument that biblical rituals such as sacrifice were a concession by God to the ancient Jews' predilection for pagan ceremonies was hardly new. As Spencer acknowledged, his thesis built upon a theory put forth by Maimonides in the twelfth century. In an influential section of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides argued that the goal of abolishing idolatry and effacing its memory was 'the foundation of the whole of our Law and the pivot around which it turns'. Like Spencer, he used this principle to unlock the meaning of many commandments that seemed resistant to rational explanation, arguing not only that certain Mosaic laws were designed to prevent the Jews from participating in idolatrous rites, but that others transferred pagan rituals into the divine cult. Indeed, several of Spencer's explanations were borrowed directly from Maimonides. It was part of God's 'gracious ruse', as Maimonides put it, that the Jews did not understand the true purpose of the ritual laws, all the better to make them forget their idolatrous past.²⁷

But Maimonides did not invent this theory either; he was heir to earlier Christian and Jewish writers. The doctrine of divine accommodation (*accommodatio*) or condescendence (*synkatabasis*) was developed by church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus. In its most general form it states that God accommodates the form of his message to the capacities of his human audience. The doctrine's original function was to explain the purpose of Jewish sacrifices and to demonstrate that Christians were not subject to Jewish ritual commandments. Reversing the plagiarism thesis espoused by other church fathers, Justin Martyr and subsequent theorists of accommodation explained the institution of sacrifices among the Jews in terms of God's strategic borrowing of pagan forms of worship. 'God, accommodating Himself to that nation', Justin wrote, 'enjoined them also to offer sacrifices, as if to His name, in order that [the Jews] might not serve idols'. Jewish rituals such as sacrifice, oblations, circumcision and keeping the Sabbath were not inherently righteous, but had been temporarily necessary owing to the sinfulness of the Jewish nation.²⁸

²⁷ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1963), III, chs. 26–49, quotations at II, 521, 528.

²⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chs. 19, 22 and *passim*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts

(cont. on p. 138)

If Christian thinkers felt it necessary to explain why God had instituted imperfect rituals only to abrogate them by a new dispensation, for Jewish thinkers the purpose of sacrifices and other rituals became a problem following the destruction of the Second Temple and the cessation of its cult. In response to such questions early medieval Christian and rabbinic writers argued that God had instituted sacrifices and other rituals in forms that resembled pagan worship as a substitute for the idolatry to which the Jews had become accustomed.²⁹

Recent scholarship has located Spencer's originality and importance in the more deeply historicist perspective that he supposedly brought to Maimonides' explanation of the Mosaic rituals. Maimonides' significant innovation had been to marry the doctrine of divine accommodation to a historical methodology. Since the Law was given by God in order to cure the Jews of idolatry, he reasoned, it could only be fully understood by studying the specific pagan practices in use at the time of Moses.³⁰ In order to implement this research programme he turned to non-biblical sources which supposedly preserved such customs: the memorials of the Sabians — practitioners of a prototypical form of idolatry based on the worship of celestial bodies — which he consulted in Arabic translations.³¹ But Maimonides, who believed in the continuing validity of the Mosaic

(n. 28 cont.)

and James Donaldson, revised A. Cleveland Coxe, 10 vols. (Buffalo, 1885–96), quotation at i, 204. See also Pinard de La Boullaye, *L'Étude comparée des religions*, i, 57.

²⁹ On the history of the doctrine of divine accommodation, see H. Pinard de La Boullaye, 'Les Infiltrations païennes dans l'ancienne loi d'après les pères de l'église', *Recherches de science religieuse*, ix (1919); Stephen D. Benin, 'The "Cunning of God" and Divine Accommodation', *Jl Hist. Ideas*, xlv (1984); Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, 1993). See also Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 213–27 and *passim*.

³⁰ Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 233–4; Abraham P. Socher, 'Of Divine Cunning and Prolonged Madness: Amos Funkenstein on Maimonides' Historical Reasoning', *Jewish Social Studies*, vi (1999).

³¹ For Maimonides the term 'Sabian' encompassed a broad category of pagan peoples, including the Egyptians of Moses' time, the idolatrous neighbours of Abraham, and the Zoroastrians of his own age. See Sarah Stroumsa, 'Entre Harran et al-Maghreb: la théorie maimonidienne de l'histoire des religions et ses sources arabes', in Maribel Fierro (ed.), *Judíos y musulmanes en al-Andalus y el Magreb: contactos intelectuales* (Colección de la Casa de Velázquez, lxxiv, Madrid, 2002), 156. Spencer likewise considered the Egyptians to be 'Sabians' in this broad sense; for his detailed discussion of the meaning of the term, see the beginning of *De legibus*

(cont. on p. 139)

Law, remained beholden to the ahistorical framework of Jewish legal thought. In contrast, Spencer, who believed as a Christian that the ritual laws had been abrogated, is credited with a 'paradigm shift' in the study of religion.³² Thus, according to this line of thought, Maimonides' motivations were essentially phenomenological, whereas Spencer was a true historian of religion, 'seeking to relativize and historicize religious phenomena, in order to better understand their origins'.³³

Inasmuch as Spencer believed that his analysis of the origin of the ritual laws implied that they were no longer valid, he may fairly be described as more 'historicist' than Maimonides. But by this standard so were the many earlier Christian proponents of divine accommodation, from Justin Martyr to Thomas Aquinas. However, no Christian writer anticipated Maimonides' key methodological innovation of explaining the Bible in historical context by studying non-biblical evidence that supposedly documented the religion of ancient Israel's idolatrous neighbours. It thus short-changes Maimonides and fails to get at Spencer's true significance to locate the latter's originality in this difference. The distinctiveness of Spencer's work, and the cause of the controversy around it, must be sought elsewhere than the mere historicizing of the Mosaic Law, which was, after all, a Christian commonplace.

To sum up, the explanation of Mosaic rituals as divinely sanctioned adaptations of pagan customs was familiar to seventeenth-century scholars. The relevant church fathers were standard reading for Christian theologians of all persuasions. Maimonides' treatment of the theory was known to European thinkers, including Aquinas, as early as the thirteenth century.³⁴ Maimonides' influence peaked in the seventeenth century, as Christian scholars investigated the nature and origin of idolatry and discovered the medieval Jewish sage to be an

(n. 31 cont.)

Hebraeorum, II, pp. 233–42. On early modern European conceptions of the Sabians, see Elukin, 'Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians'.

³² Assmann, 'Das Geheimnis der Wahrheit', 131–3; Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 59–61.

³³ Stroumsa, 'John Spencer and the Roots of Idolatry', 21–2. See also Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 241–3.

³⁴ See Pinard de La Boullaye, *L'Étude comparée des religions*, I, 122–3; Benin, *Footprints of God*, 177–85.

indispensable authority.³⁵ Even such a harsh critic of Spencer as John Edwards accepted the general principle of divine accommodation and approvingly invoked Maimonides' authority for the argument that the prohibitions in some Mosaic laws had been designed to prevent the Israelites from backsliding into pagan superstition. But when he came to attack Spencer's claim that other Mosaic laws achieved the same goal through imitation, Edwards neglected to inform his readers that the wise Maimonides — not to mention illustrious church fathers — agreed with his opponent.³⁶ It is true that the theory that the divine law borrowed pagan rituals was never Christian dogma, and that the alternative plagiarism thesis was more popular. But the former theory was widely known and respectable, and had not previously been the object of major controversy. Precisely what, then, was new about Spencer's work, and why did it stir up so much trouble?

II

FROM SACRED PHILOLOGY TO THE *HISTOIRE DES MENTALITÉS*

The formerly anodyne theory suddenly became corrosive, in part because of the new methods with which it was defended, and in part because of the new context in which it was promoted. Although the idea of the pagan origin of Jewish rituals was not original, Spencer's articulation of it was an unprecedented tour de force. With vast erudition, he marshalled the arguments for divine accommodation that had been made by Jewish and Christian authors since antiquity, backing them up with carefully

³⁵ On the Maimonidean moment in seventeenth-century thought, see Aaron L. Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis: Seventeenth Century Apologetics and the Study of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). On seventeenth-century interest in the history of idolatry, see Martin Mulsow, 'John Seldens *De Diis Syris*: Idolatriekritik und vergleichende Religionsgeschichte im 17. Jahrhundert', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, iii (2001); Jonathan Sheehan, 'The Altars of the Idols: Religion, Sacrifice, and the Early Modern Polity', *Jl Hist. Ideas*, lxvii (2006); Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010). Maimonides' most important works on idolatry were published in Latin translations in 1629 and 1641: Moses Maimonides, *Doctor Perplexorum ad dubia obscuriora scripturae loca rectius intelligenda veluti clavem continens*, trans. Johannes Buxtorf (Basel, 1629); Moses Maimonides, *De idololatria liber, cum interpretatione Latina & notis Dionysii Vossii* (Amsterdam, 1641).

³⁶ Edwards, *Πολυποικίλος Σοφία*, 240–52.

cited evidence from classical and oriental sources. Maimonides already had the insight to pursue the theory with historical and comparative methods. Taking up his research programme five centuries later, Spencer had more evidence to draw on and more sophisticated critical methods for interpreting that evidence. The seventeenth century was the golden age of 'sacred philology', as European scholars applied to biblical studies the methods of textual criticism and antiquarian research pioneered by Renaissance humanists, supported by rapidly expanding knowledge of oriental languages and literature.³⁷ What Maimonides argued in a few dozen pages, Spencer developed in one thousand, documenting the pagan origin of Jewish rituals with detailed arguments that were hard to dismiss. When Spencer claimed that his argument was entirely new, having been previously attempted only by Maimonides, he referred to the method of explaining the Mosaic Law by systematically investigating ancient paganism.³⁸ What was novel in Spencer was not the claim that God had imitated the idolaters, but the use of the comparative method to support that claim empirically.

Spencer not only expressed the argument for the Egyptian origin of Jewish rituals with unprecedented force, he did so at a moment when new challenges to biblical authority made its unorthodox implications threatening as never before. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europeans had become aware of other cultural traditions that claimed documented histories stretching back before the biblically established dates of the supposedly universal deluge, or even of the creation of the world. By the second half of the seventeenth century there was no shortage of individuals willing to connect these dots and suggest that the pagan chronologies, not the Bible, had it right. Following the publication of Isaac La Peyrère's *Men before Adam* in 1655

³⁷ See Peter N. Miller, 'The "Antiquarianization" of Biblical Scholarship and the London Polyglot Bible (1653–57)', *Jl Hist. Ideas*, lxii (2001), esp. 464–5. My thinking about sacred philology has been shaped by Miller's work. See also his 'Making the Paris Polyglot Bible: Humanism and Orientalism in the Early Seventeenth Century', in Herbert Jaumann (ed.), *Die europäische Gelehrtenrepublik im Zeitalter des Konfessionalismus / The European Republic of Letters in the Age of Confessionalism* (Wiesbaden, 2001), and Peter N. Miller, 'Taking Paganism Seriously: Anthropology and Antiquarianism in Early Seventeenth-Century Histories of Religion', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, iii (2001). On the beginnings of sacred philology in the Renaissance, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanistic Strains* (New York, 1961), 79–82.

³⁸ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, I, Prologomena, ch. 3, §4, pp. 14–15.

and Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in 1670, guardians of orthodoxy in all its varieties were keenly aware of the impious conclusions that might follow from describing ancient Israel as an immature nation in comparison to great Gentile civilizations such as Egypt. Since, as Spencer suggested, it was more plausible for a less developed culture to borrow from a more developed one than vice versa, evidence that Jewish religion was inspired by an Egyptian model could be taken as evidence of the extreme antiquity of pagan civilizations.³⁹ It could be used to defend the reliability of pagan annals that contradicted biblical chronology, such as the dynasty lists recorded in the third century before Christ by the Egyptian priest Manetho. It made plausible the historical claims of other pagan peoples, such as the Chinese, whose annals, Europeans now knew, also claimed to go back centuries before Noah.⁴⁰ If the ancient Jews were so uncivilized, should their historical claims — and the revelatory authority behind them — be relied upon? For many pious readers, pre-occupied by attacks on the Bible's authority from other quarters, the danger of Spencer's claims was palpable.

Spencer's explanation of Jewish rituals also differed from earlier versions in its greater psychological depth. In a leitmotif that ran throughout *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus*, he stressed the ancient Jews' crude and immature (*rudis et puerilis*) character, to which God had to accommodate the Law. As Amos Funkenstein argued, Spencer's breakthrough was 'the shift from the mere attempt to reconstruct early institutions, pagan or Jewish, to the attempt to reconstruct the mentality that generated — or called for — such institutions'.⁴¹ In other words, his treatment of ancient Judaism went beyond earlier versions of divine accommodation, not because it historicized biblical beliefs and practices, but because it historicized their underlying mentality. Like the theory of divine accommodation, however, the idea of explaining religion in terms of a primitive mentality was not original to Spencer. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, apologists for the Spanish Empire explained the apparently inferior state of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, III, Dissert. 1, ch. 2, p. 532.

⁴⁰ Anthony Grafton, 'Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline', *History and Theory*, xiv (1975); Edwin J. Van Kley, 'Europe's "Discovery" of China and the Writing of World History', *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, lxxvi (1971); Rossi, *Dark Abyss of Time*.

⁴¹ Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 243.

American Indian societies, including their idolatrous religions, by positing that Indians, by either nature or nurture, were unable fully to exercise the faculty of reason. As Anthony Pagden has shown, Catholic theologians and missionaries produced comparative ethnologies that explained differences of cultural and religious refinement in terms of the collective development of social groups over long periods of time.⁴² What was novel — and for many shocking — in Spencer's work was not simply the idea that religion could be explained in terms of a historically contingent, primitive mindset, but the application of this form of analysis to the revealed religion of God's chosen people, rather than New World 'savages' or other heathen nations.⁴³

Even here, however, it is important to recognize the continuity between Spencer's account of ancient Judaism and traditional Christian teachings. The claim that the ancient Hebrews had an unrefined national character drawn to excessive ceremonies was a long-standing Christian notion, even among thinkers who did not subscribe to the accommodationist explanation of the Mosaic rituals. Since Saints Paul and Augustine, Christians routinely explained the difference between the old and new dispensations by the metaphor of a passage from childhood to adulthood. To a significant extent Spencer was expressing old theological notions, but he did so in a modern idiom that resonated with unsettling ideas about biblical history, the origin of religion, and human nature.

As a corollary to the claim that Mosaic rituals derived from Egyptian practices, Spencer argued that the sacrifices of the earliest patriarchs, such as Cain, Abel, Noah and Abraham, did not originate with a divine command but arose spontaneously as expressions of human piety.⁴⁴ Furthermore, in earlier publications Spencer had advocated a thoroughgoing naturalism about divine activity in modern times, asserting that God had ceased to use supernatural interventions and now governed the world through purely natural means.⁴⁵ There was nothing inherently

⁴² Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge, 1982).

⁴³ In this regard, I mean to qualify the argument of Funkenstein, who described Spencer's originality in terms of his use of a historically contingent mentality to explain religion in general: see his *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 241–3.

⁴⁴ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, III, ch. 4, pp. 669 ff.

⁴⁵ See section IV below.

unorthodox about these views. The idea that unassisted human reason could attain partial understanding of God and his proper worship was a common feature of early modern theories of natural law, affirmed by many Protestant and Catholic writers with regard to ancient and modern pagan societies, and it had deep roots in Christian theology. The doctrine of the cessation of miracles after the early Christian era was widespread among Protestants.⁴⁶ But in the late seventeenth century these claims readily brought to mind more radical ideas. On the one hand, Spencer's account of the human invention of sacrifice suggested the critique of revelation by deists and freethinkers, who claimed that true, primordial religion was discoverable by reason alone.⁴⁷ On the other hand, his account of Jewish ritual law evoked Hobbes's notorious analysis of the origin and function of religious institutions. Without explicitly denying the truth of revelation, Hobbes ascribed all religions to the same 'natural seeds' of human ignorance and fear. For Hobbes, the founders of every religion, whether humanly or divinely inspired, had primarily political aims, seeking to mitigate the threat to social order posed by the intrinsic weakness of human nature.⁴⁸ Despite Spencer's affirmation of the divine origin of the Mosaic commandments and the reality of biblical prophecy, his explanation of the Law of Moses as a ruse to subdue the superstitious masses was readily susceptible to a Hobbesian reading.

If Spencer's interpretation of ancient Judaism — regardless of its roots in Christian theology and hermeneutics — posed such a grave challenge to biblical authority in the context in which he wrote, what was his intention in advancing it? A number of scholars have answered that Spencer was a covert critic of revelation, perhaps a crypto-deist. According to this interpretation, Spencer portrayed 'Moses the legislator in libertine terms, as an astute "politician" who, for political purposes, invented religious practices and restored the ancient customs, which sprang from human

⁴⁶ See D. P. Walker, 'The Cessation of Miracles', in Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe* (Washington, DC, 1988); Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 226–32.

⁴⁷ Harrison, 'Religion' and the Religions, 61–98. See also Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, esp. ch. 5.

⁴⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), ed. C. B. Macpherson (1968; New York, 1987), ch. 12.

needs and requirements, and not from divine inspiration'.⁴⁹ This reading is based on the resemblance of Spencer's argument to attacks on revealed religion by other authors, who sought to undermine the authority of the Bible by exposing the ancient Jews as ignorant and uncivilized. But Spencer explicitly upheld holy scripture's sacred status. Ancient Judaism may have been crafted to restrain dangerous popular impulses, but for Spencer this did not make it the product of merely human political manipulation. In Spencer's text Moses scarcely registered as an independent actor. God was the author of the Mosaic Law and the wily strategist of accommodation, while Moses came close to vanishing into the background, a passive conduit of revelation.⁵⁰ In effect, Spencer co-opted the impious tradition, associated with Machiavelli and Hobbes, which described religion as a political invention for manipulating the people, by transferring the role of manipulator from man to God. Religion was a ruse, but a divine one.

Admittedly, it was standard practice for heterodox authors to protect themselves by cloaking subversive views beneath a veneer of orthodoxy. But such a reading of Spencer is belied by his reception among his critics, who complained that he depicted God, not Moses, as a shrewd and deceptive politician.⁵¹ In an analogy crafted to sting Protestant ears, Witsius described Spencer's God 'as a Jesuit, who makes use of bad means for reaching a good aim'.⁵² The critics noted the affinity between Spencer's argument

⁴⁹ Rossi, *Dark Abyss of Time*, 125. See also Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680–1715*, trans. J. Lewis May (London, 1953), 45, who summarized the message of *De legibus*: 'No longer could it be held that God gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai; Moses would have merely copied the Egyptians, his lords and masters'. Following Hazard, Moshe Pelli, 'The Impact of Deism on the Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vi (1972), 38, claimed Spencer's 'objective was to prove the pagan nature of Judaism and hence its falsehood'. More recently, Justin Champion has described Spencer as a crypto-deist, whose 'work . . . argued that the Mosaic law was devised for political reasons rather than divine inspiration': see his *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 155–6.

⁵⁰ Thus, I disagree with scholars, most notably Jan Assmann, who see an 'Egyptian Moses' at the heart of Spencer's thesis. In Spencer's argument it was the Jewish people who needed to be reconceived as culturally Egyptian, not Moses. While he cited Acts 7:22, which described Moses as 'learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians', he did so to prove the greater age and sophistication of Egyptian civilization and the assimilation of the Jews, not to argue that Moses used personal knowledge to craft the Law.

⁵¹ Pfaff, 'Dissertatio Praeliminari', sig. C1^{r-v}; Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Day, 31–2.

⁵² Quoted by Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Day, 32.

and impious explanations of religion as the invention of cunning human legislators, but also understood what so many modern scholars have overlooked: that his biblical studies were part and parcel of a defence of the rituals of the Church of England against Calvinist detractors.⁵³

III

THE MOSAIC REFORMATION

In order to more fully comprehend Spencer's purpose and gauge his relationship to orthodoxy and free thought — to understand why he was willing to run the risk that his argument posed — it is necessary to situate his studies within a more local context: English religious controversy in the Restoration era. Spencer claimed that his explanation of the ritual laws would thwart a wide spectrum of religious error: modern Jews, who, ignorant of the original purpose of the divine institutes, had accreted countless superstitions on top of them; Catholics, whose superstitious ceremonies often had a Jewish origin; sabbatarians, who followed archaic biblical ordinances, oblivious to their true meaning; and, above all, puritans, 'who split the kingdom because of some insignificant rituals established for the ornament of public worship . . . as though religion were like a number and would change its kind by some minor addition'.⁵⁴ Here Spencer expressed the frustrations of Anglican clergy in the decades following the Restoration. The restored Stuart monarchy had re-established the Church of England, but the subsequent religious settlement failed to unify English Protestants and calm the roiling waters of sectarian controversy. The Clarendon Code, enacted between 1661 and 1665, aimed to compel universal

⁵³ Of the recent studies devoted to Spencer, only Mulsow, 'Orientalistik im Kontext der sozinianischen und deistischen Debatten', offers an in-depth contextualization of Spencer's work in terms of late seventeenth-century theological debates. Schmidt, 'Des inepties tolérables' (following Pinard de La Boullaye), refers to the Anglican dimension of Spencer's work, but does not pursue its implications. For a broad discussion of the polemical context of seventeenth-century studies of idolatry, which locates Spencer in relation to debates over ritual in the Church of England, see Sheehan, 'Sacred and Profane'.

⁵⁴ 'Nec sunt alii, qui ritûs alicuius minutuli causâ, ob cultûs publici decorem instituti, regnum in partes trahunt, & vulgi animis religionis è rebus periturae metum ingerunt: quasi Religio esset sicut numerus, ob levem quamvis additionem, in speciem planè aliam transitura': Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, 1, Prologomena, ch. 3, pp. 10–12.

participation in the established Church by banning other denominations and imposing severe burdens on nonconformists. But its strict terms — such as requiring clergy to be ordained by a bishop, to renounce past religious and political affiliations, and to follow a service based on the controversial revised Book of Common Prayer — were unacceptable to many Protestants, not only radical sects such as the Quakers, but also Presbyterians, who rejected episcopal government, and other Calvinists, who balked at the ‘superstitious’ ceremonies of the mandatory liturgy.⁵⁵

In Anglican minds, the obstinacy of overly squeamish puritans rankled most of all. Continuing fear of a Catholic coup, which erupted in a series of panics in the 1670s and 1680s, only exacerbated the intra-Protestant dispute, making the lack of unity in the face of an external enemy all the less tolerable. At the heart of the debate between Anglicans and puritan nonconformists was the question of where to draw the line between licit ceremony and idolatry. For Anglicans, the disputed details of church governance and worship were *adiaphora* or things indifferent: practices which, though not sanctioned by the Bible, were inessential for salvation and thus could be determined by temporal authorities in order to edify and preserve order. For puritans, however, practices such as bowing before the name of Jesus, making the sign of the cross at baptism, and priests wearing the surplice were tainted by their association with Catholic idolatry. Although most puritans agreed that such ceremonies were, in themselves, indifferent, their scandalous history rendered them offensive and superstitious. Between the Act of Uniformity of 1662 and the Toleration Act of 1689, Anglican apologists defended the Church of England against puritan charges of popery and idolatry and doggedly tried to convince nonconformists to abandon their unreasonable scruples and rejoin the established Church.⁵⁶

No cloistered scholar, Spencer was an active partisan of the Church of England, dedicated to defending the Restoration Settlement. Having begun his ecclesiastical career under the

⁵⁵ John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646–1689* (New Haven, 1991).

⁵⁶ See Mark Goldie, ‘The Theory of Religious Intolerance in Restoration England’, in Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel and Nicholas Tyacke (eds.), *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England* (Oxford, 1991); John Spurr, ‘The Church of England, Comprehension, and the Toleration Act of 1689’, *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, civ (1989); Jacqueline Rose, ‘John Locke, “Matters Indifferent”, and the Restoration of the Church of England’, *Hist. J.*, xlviii (2005).

Protectorate, ministering to the Cambridge parishes of St Giles and St Bene't, following the Restoration he promptly signalled his allegiance to the new political and religious order.⁵⁷ On 28 June 1660, a day appointed for public thanksgiving, he preached a sermon entitled *The Righteous Ruler*, in honour of the return of Charles II, whom he likened to Moses leading the English people out of the wilderness of the Interregnum. The sermon proclaimed the necessity that the pulpit obey the sovereign, and declared magistracy and ministry to be England's two pillars, which, like the steles that Seth carved to preserve antediluvian wisdom from the Flood, had nearly perished in the chaos of the preceding decades.⁵⁸ After the uncompromising religious settlement instituted in the following years, Spencer remained an engaged officer of the established Church. In 1677 he was promoted to be rector of Landbeach, then, by royal preferment, archdeacon of Sudbury, and later prebendary and dean of Ely Cathedral. A record of his tenure as archdeacon, during which he was responsible for enforcing parish compliance to the Anglican liturgy, survives in the form of articles of visitation printed in his name.⁵⁹

Spencer's views and personal associations place him in the company of those pragmatic, anti-Calvinist Anglican divines, usually, if problematically, referred to as Latitudinarians.⁶⁰ His history of compliance with the Protectorate and his reputation for kindness towards individual dissenters were typical of such moderate Anglican clergy, who nonetheless supported the exclusionary policies of the Restoration Church.⁶¹ Repelled by the

⁵⁷ For the details of Spencer's ecclesiastical career, see Robert Masters and David Lamb, *Masters' History of the College of Corpus Christi and the Blessed Virgin Mary in the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1831), 193–201. See also 'Spencer, John (bap. 1630, d. 1693)', *Oxford DNB*.

⁵⁸ John Spencer, *The Righteous Ruler: A Sermon Preached at St Maries in Cambridge, June 28. 1660* (Cambridge, 1660).

⁵⁹ *Articles for Visitation Concerning Certain Matters Ecclesiastical Exhibited to the Ministers, Church-Wardens and Side-Men of Every Parish within the Arch-Deaconry of Sudbury: In the Fifth Visitation of John Spencer D.D. Archdeacon of Sudbury* (Cambridge, 1672).

⁶⁰ John Spurr, "'Latitudinarianism' and the Restoration Church', *Hist. J.*, xxxi (1988); Nicholas Tyacke, *Aspects of English Protestantism, c.1530–1700* (Manchester, 2001), ch. 12.

⁶¹ My interpretation is thus compatible with Mulsow's evidence of Spencer's benevolence towards the anti-Trinitarian Oswald Crell. It is also compatible with Mulsow's speculative hypothesis that Spencer himself doubted the Trinity, if we allow, as Mulsow rightly does, that he could be an orthodox Anglican in the struggle against puritans, Catholics and so forth, while harbouring private Socinian

(cont. on p. 149)

intransigence of puritans and other nonconformists, they sought to unify English Protestants within an established Church based on the principles of 'reason' and 'moderation'. Their rhetoric celebrated the genius of the Church of England's *via media*, established by the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, which prudently avoided the dual extremes of Catholic superstition and puritan enthusiasm. This position was encapsulated in a treatise by Spencer's brother-in-law, Timothy Puller, published in 1679 in the midst of a major anti-Catholic panic. Entitled *The Moderation of the Church of England*, it set forth the case for Anglican ceremonies against nonconformists who obstinately refused to unite despite the Catholic threat. For the sake of peace and stability, Puller sought the comprehension of nonconformists within the Church of England, not by softening the terms of the Restoration Settlement, but by convincing them of the legitimacy of the 'middle path' that it embodied.⁶²

Spencer's turn to the doctrine of divine accommodation to explain Jewish rituals was a contribution to the same Anglican polemical campaign. In book III of *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus*, Spencer described the religion prevalent in the world before the Law of Moses. The first biblical patriarchs, he wrote, knew that worshipping God only in the mind was too difficult for the common people and therefore instituted rituals, such as consecrating first-fruits to God, erecting altars and monuments, offering sacrifices, preparing sacred feasts from the remains of the burnt offering, reserving special places for sacred rites, and so forth. In the course of time these few, simple rituals grew vast and elaborate as men descended into ignorance and created a religion in conformity with human nature. When God decided to recall the Israelites to the piety of their fathers, he forbade the cult of idols under pain of death and did away with all rites contrary to faith or good morals. But other rites, which had been made honourable by long and widespread use, God found harmless and tolerable, or suitable for adumbrating a mystery, and

(n. 61 cont.)

sympathies. See Mulsow, 'Orientalistik im Kontext der sozinianischen und deistischen Debatten'.

⁶² Timothy Puller, *The Moderation of the Church of England, Considered as Useful for Allaying the Present Distempers Which the Indisposition of the Time Hath Contracted* (London, 1679).

included among the sacred commandments. In particular, since the Israelites at that time were very crude and attracted to the idolatrous rites of the age, especially those of the Egyptians, God 'condescended' to modify some rituals, 'softening' them, in order to wean the Israelites from the idols and ceremonies of the Gentiles.⁶³

In this narrative it is evident that for Spencer the dispensation at Mount Sinai was analogous not so much to the new dispensation of Jesus Christ as to the Protestant Reformation. The congruity of his account of the origins of idolatry with the Protestant interpretation of church history is obvious: corrupt priests and ignorant people defiled the simple rites of the patriarchs, turning them into elaborate, superstitious ceremonies, until a reformer returned the people to the pure religion of their ancestors. Indeed, Spencer described the giving of the Law as the 'Mosaic Reformation'.⁶⁴ His explanation of the means by which God implemented religious reform specifically mirrored the controversial compromises with traditional ceremony adopted by the Church of England.

Having staked out a position on ritual midway between Rome and Geneva, the Church of England was in a tricky spot. The identification of Catholicism with idolatry was too deeply ingrained in Protestant discourse to be discarded; puritan attacks on Anglican ceremonies as similarly idolatrous needed to be refuted without giving quarter to papist superstition. The doctrine of divine accommodation offered a suitably supple analysis of rituals by showing that it did not matter if more austere Calvinist practices were arguably closer to an ideal form of worship, as human nature and contingent circumstances justified other practices. The Lutheran theologian Christoph Matthäus Pfaff, while disapproving of Spencer's thesis, summed up its logic concisely:

If it be understood that God himself adopted pagan rites into his cult which he ordained for the Israelites, with such a precedent why should the Church of England not be allowed to retain popish rituals, those that are indifferent and sober, if the superstition which stained them has been removed?⁶⁵

⁶³ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, III, Dissert. 1, Praefatio, pp. 519–20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, III, ch. 11, p. 627.

⁶⁵ 'Si enim constet, ipsum Deum ritus gentilium adoptasse in cultu suo Israëlitis praescripto, quidni & licuerit Ecclesiae Anglicanae, tanto exemplo praevio, retinere
(cont. on p. 151)

'Moderation' and the 'middle path' were widely shared but malleable values used to justify competing claims about what form English Protestantism should take.⁶⁶ The concept of *adiaphora* was similarly flexible, and puritans used it against Anglicans, arguing that certain ceremonies, because they were indifferent, should *not* be compulsory. In this context, the power of the doctrine of divine accommodation was to provide a scripturally grounded argument that gave these key categories of English Protestant discourse specifically Anglican implications. In effect, the theory of the pagan origins of Mosaic laws extended the category of *adiaphora*, which usually referred specifically to human institutions, to include rituals commanded by God, thereby undermining the key Calvinist distinction between things indifferent and practices explicitly ordained by scripture. The tainted Catholic history of controversial Anglican practices, far from rendering them irredeemably superstitious, as puritans claimed, was precisely what made them valuable tools for edifying the people.⁶⁷ In enumerating various reasons why the Mosaic Law imported pagan ceremonies, Spencer mentioned God's concern for the salvation of the Gentiles, who would be more likely to convert to the divine cult if it resembled their own practices.⁶⁸ As Old Testament exegesis this is an odd argument, but it makes perfect sense if Spencer was reading the Church of England's policy towards Catholics back into the relationship between ancient Jews and Gentiles. The precedent of the Mosaic Law showed that true moderation consisted in recognizing the limitations of human nature and the frailty of the social order, which made compulsory compliance to uniform norms of worship necessary. As Puller argued, the Church of England's middle path reflected the moderation that characterized the 'Oeconomy of the

(n. 65 cont.)

ritus Pontificos, indifferentes illos & sanos, si dematur, quae illos inquinat, superstitio?': Pfaff, 'Dissertatio Praeliminari', sig. C1^r.

⁶⁶ Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁶⁷ In this respect, Spencer and his colleagues may be seen as building on Richard Hooker's apologetic strategy, which openly acknowledged the Catholic pedigree of Anglican rites, but defined it as a strength, because of its edifying value, rather than a source of shame. See Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London, 1988), 164–9. I owe this observation to Ethan Shagan.

⁶⁸ Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum*, III, ch. 11, p. 629.

Gospel' by avoiding the excess of ceremonies typical of Catholics and Jews and also 'that other kind of *superstition*, of those that consider not the frame of men, nor the use and experience of having some Rites, for comeliness and edification; and for exciting *Piety and Devotion, in the publick worship of God*'.⁶⁹

By the late 1670s the accommodationist interpretation of Mosaic rituals, which Spencer first elaborated in detail in 1669, had entered the arsenal of moderate Anglican polemicists. For example, in *De sacrificiis* (1677), William Owtram, another Church of England clergyman and Cambridge University scholar, cited *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* while referring to Maimonides, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, among others, to support the claim that God had instituted Jewish sacrifices because the Israelites had grown accustomed to Egyptian rituals.⁷⁰ A future archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tenison, Spencer's close friend and literary executor, did likewise in his treatise *Of Idolatry*, published in 1678. Tenison's aim was to prove that the Church was entitled to institute indifferent rites for the 'preservation of Peace and Order', so long as they were seemly and not excessively numerous or onerous, as among the superstitious Catholics. In order to defend this proposition, he argued that the sacrifices ordained by Moses in Leviticus were not necessary to God, who preferred a more intellectual mode of worship. But since the 'feeble and earthly' Israelites, accustomed to the idolatry of their pagan neighbours, were incapable of a more perfect cult, 'it pleased God to give them a Law which might at once indulge them in their inclination, and restrain them from sacrificing unto Idols'. For Tenison, the majority of men, not only the Jews, were ignorant and thus always at risk of falling into superstition. Consequently God provided mankind with 'cures' or 'antidotes' against idolatry: all men were bestowed with reason; in addition, the Jews had the Mosaic commandments, and Christians had the Church and its sacraments. Like Owtram, Tenison relied on Spencer's *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* in support of his argument.⁷¹ The debate between Anglicans and puritans in

⁶⁹ Puller, *Moderation of the Church of England*, 205.

⁷⁰ William Owtram, *De sacrificiis libri duo: quorum altero explicantur omnia Judaeorum, nonnulla gentium profanarum sacrificia, altero sacrificium Christi* (London, 1677), 8–12.

⁷¹ Thomas Tenison, *Of Idolatry: A Discourse, in Which Is Endeavoured a Declaration of its Distinction from Superstition* (London, 1678), 4–5, 100, 311–12, 349.

Restoration England led moderate clergymen to defend the Church of England by arguing that Mosaic rituals such as sacrifice were purified imitations of pagan superstitions.

IV

CHURCH AND STATE IN THE AGE OF GOD'S HIDDEN HAND

Arguments over ritual in Restoration England were as much political as religious. From the point of view of Anglican divines such as Spencer, Tenison and Puller, the ever-present danger of society disintegrating into chaos made puritan and presbyterian ecclesiastical policy not only impractical but dangerous. The Civil War had revealed the paramount threat that religious extremism posed to social stability. As an antidote to the dangerous errors produced when men's passions overcame their reason and prudence, Spencer espoused a 'rational' and 'moderate' Christianity that would safeguard public order. His first treatises, written in the years immediately following the Interregnum, used theological arguments explicitly to defend the Restoration political and ecclesiastical settlement. Here, his target was not puritan nonconformism but rather superstitious individuals and sects who claimed special knowledge of the divine will. *A Discourse Concerning Prodigies*, published in 1663, was Spencer's response to a spate of pamphlets that interpreted recent prodigious events as evidence of divine disfavour towards the restored monarchy.⁷² It was followed in 1665 by *A Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies*, which dealt in similar terms with claims to inspired foreknowledge and other contemporary forms of divination.⁷³ As he wrote in the preface to the *Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies*, by countering belief in portents, which tends to incite sedition, his argument would 'minister . . . to the tranquility

⁷² I have consulted the revised second edition of the first discourse, which was printed with the second discourse as an addendum: John Spencer, *A Discourse Concerning Prodigies, Wherein the Vanity of Presages by Them Is Reprehended, and their True and Proper Ends Asserted and Vindicated*, 2nd edn, 'corrected and enlarged' (Cambridge, 1665). For its context, see William E. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics and Providence in England, 1657–1727* (Manchester, 2002), chs. 1–2.

⁷³ John Spencer, *A Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies, Wherein the Vanity of Receiving Them as the Certain Indications of Any Future Event Is Discovered* (London, 1665).

of the state' and 'make men more manageable to the commands of authority'.⁷⁴

In contrast to his later study of Mosaic rituals, these works used the theory of divine accommodation to emphasize the difference, rather than the similarity, between ancient and modern circumstances. For Spencer, belief in portents and prophecies resulted from misconceptions about how God governed the world. He argued that anomalies, such as unusual weather, comets or monstrous births, were entirely natural (if sometimes perhaps demonic)⁷⁵ and that divine prophecies and miracles had, in all probability, long since ceased. In arguing for the falsehood of these popular beliefs Spencer frequently contrasted mental states associated with childhood and adulthood. People's desire for heavenly communications and knowledge of the future, he wrote, stemmed 'from a weakness and childishness of temper whereby they cannot relish and digest the *strong meat* of substantial Doctrine and solid argument'.⁷⁶ He also associated this type of mentality with the uneducated rustic: men fall into the error of believing in portents and divine retribution, he wrote, because they conceive of divine justice in terms of 'a peasantry notion of good and evil'.⁷⁷

This argument depended on a sharp distinction between two epochs, or divine economies, within which God governed his creation by different means. While recognizing that the penchant for ceremonies and divination was widespread in all times and places, Spencer frequently spoke in terms that made this mentality and the religious forms it begat typical of the 'rudeness of former times'.⁷⁸ Like the ancient Gentiles, who were unable to 'lift up their heavy minds above the dull flats of things sensible and worldly', and who practised divination 'by all manner of strange and unusual Accidents', so too, he wrote,

the *Jews* . . . were very solicitous about the meaning of strange Providences, Signs of Times, and the issue of affairs: and God was

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, sig. a3^{r-v}.

⁷⁵ Spencer acknowledged the possibility of demonic agency, but, like most early modern intellectuals, he considered demonic actions to be natural, demons being part of God's creation, and limited the realm of the supernatural to miracles accomplished by God acting outside nature: Spencer, *Discourse Concerning Prodigies*, 238 ff.

⁷⁶ Spencer, *Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies*, 29.

⁷⁷ Spencer, *Discourse Concerning Prodigies*, 350.

⁷⁸ Spencer, *Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies*, 22–3; Spencer, *Discourse Concerning Prodigies*, sigs. A5^v–A8^r, 236.

pleased, by many Oracles, Signs, and Prophecies, to accommodate himself to this low and worldly temper of theirs.⁷⁹

The reasoning was the same that Spencer later used to explain the Mosaic rituals: God accommodated the crude Hebrews by condoning divinatory practices that had no intrinsic value and were linked to idolatry. 'God gave the People of the *Jews* their Oracles and Prophets', he wrote, because they were hungry for future knowledge; had God not given them such signs, '*in all likelihood they would have apostasized to the Rites of the Heathen, who had the Oracles and the Diviners*'. But times had changed:

To suppose Prophecy necessary now for this end, to save mens longing after the knowledge of things sealed up in the Counsels of God, is to reproach the World, and to suppose it as liquorish as in its more childish years. Hath not the World out-grown the follies of Auguries, Soothsaying, and profest Diviners long ago, and took up in the resolves of Reason, as the best Oracle to consult in a civil business?

God also made use of signs and prophecies in early Christian times, Spencer acknowledged, in order to signal the advent of Jesus Christ. But these circumstances having 'long expired', God had ceased to use such extraordinary measures and now governed the world entirely through natural providence.⁸⁰

There was considerable continuity between the arguments of these early treatises, written in English for a wider audience, and Spencer's later biblical studies, composed in Latin for erudite scholars. Indeed, Spencer's first attempt to apply Maimonides' theory of the Mosaic rituals, *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* (1669), was a natural progression from the *Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies*, as it concerned a Jewish method of divination that resembled pagan superstitions, but which God had sanctioned in the Mosaic Law. Its preface described the different methods used by God in the infancy and adulthood of the Church. Today, Spencer wrote, 'the Church now grown up, God governs it as if with a hidden and skilful hand and with

⁷⁹ Spencer, *Discourse Concerning Prodigies*, 302–3.

⁸⁰ Spencer, *Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies*, 120–1. For an analysis of Spencer's work in terms of seventeenth-century conceptions of providence, see Gascoigne, "'Wisdom of the Egyptians" and the Secularisation of History'. The distinction between God's mode of governance in ancient and modern times is a crucial element of Spencer's thought, which has been overlooked by Gascoigne (*ibid.*, 175–6) and also by Mulsow ('Orientalistik im Kontext der sozinianischen und deistischen Debatten', 35–6), who describe Spencer's God as acting only through natural, secondary causes, without qualification.

means agreeably suited to the circumstances of a rational character'. In contrast, during the early days of the 'Jewish Church', events such as angels taking human form, oracles issuing from the tabernacle, and heavenly fire pouring down upon the altar, occurred so frequently that

the first age of the world seems to have enjoyed more heavenly displays and outright miracles than there have been false ones in later times. For the Jewish nation had a character so coarse and lacking in divinity that the Jews could only be led to faith in the divine presence and to righteousness by evidence that hit them right between the eyes. The degenerate customs to which they had grown accustomed in Egypt and the harsh and unhappy circumstances they endured there stripped the people of any sense of the divine . . . Troubled by the inconstancy of human affairs and fearful forebodings, men frequently sought predictions of the future from Demon Oracles and mystagogues in order to soothe their agitated breasts.⁸¹

Once upon a time, God spoke through miracles and prophecy, a language appropriate to spiritual children. But after centuries of instruction, and a new dispensation, he expected the members of his Church to understand the language, if not of God, at least of grown-ups.

For Spencer the analogy between the Protestant and Mosaic Reformatations only went so far. God always instructed man by means of accommodation, but the accommodation of the new dispensation, administered with a 'hidden and skilful hand', was different from, and superior to, the blunt, remedial education of the old. While there seemed to exist a universal human propensity towards superstition and idolatry, sixteen centuries after Christ mankind had received enough divine instruction to be held to a higher standard. Some accommodation was still necessary, but

⁸¹ 'Manu quasi tacitâ faciliq̃ue, & modis naturae rationalis conditioni suaviter attemperatis Ecclesiam iam adultam administrat DEUS . . . At verò sub primos Ecclesiae Judaicae natales, Angeli humanam personam praeferentes, opera rerum creaturarum vires longè superantia, Prophetarum pectora motu divino calefacta, oracula è Tabernaculo aut *Gloriâ magnificâ* prodeuntia, ignis coelitus in aram delapsus, tremenda justitiae divinae monumenta, tam frequentes mortalibus mirandi causas attulere, quòd spectaculis huiusmodi coelestibus & miraculi plenis priora mundi secula saepius frui, quàm posteriora fingere videantur. Nam animo tam crasso & coelestium inani fuit Hebraeorum natio, quòd nullo nisi quod oculos pene feriret argumento ad praesentiae divinae *fidem* & frugem bonam perducì potuerunt: perditissimi quibus assueverant *Aegypti* mores & conditio ibi vivendi dura & infelix, penè omnem Numinis sensum populo excussère: Oracula viva, publici voluntatis divinae indices, nondum literis tradita fuerunt: homines ob lubricos rerum humanarum casus & timida praesagia anxii & solliciti, à Daemonis Oraculis & mystis responsa de futura saepius petière, quae eorum pallidis curis turbata levarent pectora': Spencer, *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim*, sigs. A3^r-A4^r.

surely there was no comparing the surplice of the Anglican minister to the magical breastplate of the Israelites' high priest. On the basis of the doctrine of divine accommodation, Spencer proclaimed a 'rational Christianity' (in which scripture and all God's actions were demonstrably compatible with reason), which all but denied any role for the supernatural in the contemporary world, while preserving the revelatory authority of holy scripture by arguing that portents, prophecy and miracles had been necessary in the particular circumstances of ancient times.⁸²

For moderate Anglicans such as Spencer and Tenison, faith in reason and progress was tempered by pessimism about human nature rooted in recent English history. As Tenison wrote, comparing the vulgar pagans of antiquity to the English masses:

few Heads are exercised by Philosophy; and we meet not with one Peasant of a Thousand among our selves, who asks how the Sun enlightens this Globe . . . Such Heads are inclined . . . to exchange the Sovereign Deity for that which is esteemed a God, but is not; and to multiply the kinds of it, according to the variety of considerable effects and appearances whose Causes are only known to the Secretaries of Nature.⁸³

In a hypothesis deeply influenced by Spencer's ideas, Tenison drew the conclusion that human beings necessarily require the mediation of sensory objects to worship God. In the divine economy of the Mosaic Law, God manifested himself directly to prophets and appeared visibly to the multitude in the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant and the High Priest's breastplate. In the new dispensation, by contrast, God was manifest in the person of Christ. But the faithful did not see Christ 'with their eyes on earth, yet, from the words of Scripture, they can excite their minds to behold it, even in the Sanctuary of Heaven', because Christians were 'a people under a more spiritual dispensation than the *Jews*'.⁸⁴ According to Tenison, the better men understood God, the more rationally — which was the same as to say, Christianly — they worshipped him.⁸⁵

There was a tension in the doctrine of divine accommodation between the view that human nature was perennially prone to superstition and the idea of a difference between ancient and

⁸² On 'rational Christianity', see John Spurr, '“Rational Christianity” in Restoration England', *Jl Hist. Ideas*, xlix (1988); Mulsow, 'Orientalistik im Kontext der sozinianischen und deistischen Debatten', 38.

⁸³ Tenison, *Of Idolatry*, 51.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 388–9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

modern times. For an Anglican apologist this tension could be constructive. By teaching the necessity, at all times, of taking account of the limitations of human nature, the doctrine justified the Church of England's liturgical policy by drawing an analogy to God's method in the Mosaic Law. At the same time, by positing man's spiritual and mental progress over time, it supported a reasonable, naturalistic religion that promised to minimize the threat to the social order posed by human passions. The present age was more rational than ancient times, and thus there were no more miracles: the time had long come to put away childish things. But it was not so rational that accommodation was altogether unnecessary — had not the Civil War made that abundantly clear? By mixing faith in reason and progress with pessimism about essential human nature, and driving a deep wedge between ancient and modern divine economies, Spencer's theory promised moderate Anglicans they could have their cake and eat it too. It was a powerful, flexible theological weapon. But it had the potential to backfire.

V

REASON AND REVELATION

As we have seen, Spencer's first treatises employed the theory of divine accommodation to counter 'superstitious' beliefs among radical sects that threatened the social order. Beginning with *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim*, he pursued erudite studies of biblical rituals in order to defend the Church of England against puritan accusations of superstition. As the seventeenth century drew to a close, individuals and groups challenging basic Christian tenets became an increasingly visible part of the English landscape: Socinians, who cast doubt on the divinity of Christ, and deists and freethinkers, who denied the reality of revelation and miracles. They expressed their views in an idiom of 'rational religion' that bore a disquieting resemblance to the claims of Spencer and like-minded defenders of the Church of England. The discourse of moderate Anglicanism was a delicate balancing act, not only because it sought to justify religious ceremonies without lapsing into papist idolatry, but also because it tried to advocate rational religion without lapsing into unbelief.

Consider Tenison's account of the origin of idolatry, which seems almost lifted from the pages of *Leviathan*:

Now man, in this earthly state, receiving knowledge chiefly from the senses, he is exceeding covetous of sensible helps in his research after the most abstracted notions, which inclination being vehement in the vulgar, who are generally of very gross apprehension; they pursue not the object of their minds (be it the most Divine and Spiritual God himself) with pure and unmixed reason; but they at best, blend it with some bodily phantasm, and often dwell wholly upon such an Image, and the external object of it; insomuch that their imagination worshippeth that which should be entertained only as the help and instrument of their mind. So that although the natural desire of a visible object be not the necessary cause, yet it is the occasional root of all that proper Idolatry, or Image-worship, which divided it self into more kinds, than there are Nations in the world.⁸⁶

Hobbes's instrumental view of religion and politics cast a long shadow over Anglican claims that temporal authorities ought to demand uniform compliance to humanly contrived rituals for the sake of public order. At Corpus Christi College in the late 1660s, Spencer and Tenison found themselves in a compromising position when Tenison's student, Daniel Scargill, was expelled for upholding Hobbesian materialist views.⁸⁷ Shortly afterwards, Tenison felt compelled to publish a refutation of Hobbes's philosophy.⁸⁸ When Tenison's predecessor as archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson, published a sermon that advanced the accommodationist doctrine of the origin of sacrifice and the Mosaic ritual laws, he found himself accused of Socinianism.⁸⁹

Seeking an Anglican resolution to the political and religious crises that followed the Restoration, Spencer constructed the most compelling possible case for the old theory that Mosaic rituals were the product of divine accommodation. In doing so, he pushed the theory's most troubling aspects to the limits of what orthodoxy could bear. A degree of naturalism and historicism

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 314–15.

⁸⁷ Jon Parkin, 'Hobbesism in the Later 1660s: Daniel Scargill and Samuel Parker', *Hist. J.*, xlii (1999).

⁸⁸ Thomas Tenison, *The Creed of Mr Hobbes Examined: In a Feigned Conference between Him, and a Student in Divinity* (London, 1670).

⁸⁹ John Tillotson, *Sermons Concerning the Divinity and Incarnation of our Blessed Saviour Preached in the Church of St Lawrence Jewry* (London, 1693), esp. no. 5; Charles Leslie, *The Charge of Socinianism against Dr Tillotson Considered . . .* (Edinburgh, 1695). Owtram was also at pains in *De sacrificiis* to distance his position from Socinianism.

concerning the foundation of sacred rituals was intrinsic to divine accommodation in all its iterations, from Justin Martyr to Maimonides. In explaining the logic of divine accommodation, Maimonides and his Anglican followers argued that sacrifice and other forms of worship were human inventions, discoverable through unassisted reason, thus providing a scripturally grounded but naturalistic account of the origin of religion. Christian accounts of divine accommodation were always linked to a covenantal theology that posited a fundamental difference between the ancient Jewish and modern Christian spiritual temperament. This tendency was amplified by the Protestant doctrine of the cessation of miracles.

Inspired by pressing Anglican apologetic needs, Spencer developed an innovative interpretation of the history of religion that influenced subsequent, secular approaches to the study of religion. But the elements of his interpretation were derivative. The comparative approach to studying ancient Judaism and idolatry was the legacy of the previous generation of sacred philologists, such as John Selden, Gerhard Voss and Samuel Bochart.⁹⁰ But, where these earlier writers followed the dominant theological tradition that identified Judaism as the source of paganism, Spencer reversed the relationship. He did so by adopting the ancient doctrine of divine accommodation, which he gave a new twist by endowing the ancient Jews with the kind of primitive mentality that missionary ethnographers had attributed to New World 'barbarians'. As a Christian, Spencer still acknowledged the distinction between true and false religion, but his method did not respect it. By combining the comparativism of the biblical scholars with the psychologizing of the ethnologists, he subjected revealed religion to a type of explanation that pious scholarship had previously allowed only in the study of superstition. Doing so, he made the chosen people barbarians. It was a high price to pay, but the prize — the preservation of social order and scripture's embattled authority — seemed worth it.

⁹⁰ John Selden, *De dis Syris* (London, 1617, STC 22167); Gerardus Ioannes Vossius, *De theologia gentili* (Amsterdam, 1641); Samuel Bochart, *Geographia sacra*, 2 vols. (Caen, 1646–51).

VI

THE CUNNING OF HISTORY

The doctrine of divine accommodation was one of many strategies adopted over the millennia to reconcile the Bible with dissonant information. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the face of unprecedented information about past ages and different cultures, as well as new critical methods for interpreting that information, one strategy after another was undermined. The early modern project of sacred philology sought to reconcile the evidence of sacred and profane history. Using non-biblical materials to illuminate holy scripture, it aimed to create a rigorous universal history that would subsume Gentile history within the framework of biblical chronology. Spencer's predecessors in sacred philology's comparative approach had sought to harmonize biblical and Gentile traditions by arguing for the influence of the former on the latter. But in the face of mounting evidence of the extreme antiquity of Egyptian civilization, eventually synthesized by John Marsham, the claim that pagans had plagiarized Moses became increasingly tenuous.⁹¹ Spencer responded by using the theory of accommodation to reconcile the evidence of Egyptian antiquity with the divine nature of the Mosaic revelation, but this too did not prove an enduring fix.

As deists and freethinkers took up Spencer's arguments, orthodox critics reproached him, as if the defence of revelation had any sounder alternative. But the traditional alternative to the accommodation thesis, the plagiarism thesis, had been exposed as historically doubtful, and Spencer's theory sought to redress that failure. When it proved equally if not more corrosive, more radical solutions were proposed. As Arnaldo Momigliano and Paolo Rossi argued, Giambattista Vico developed his new science of history, with its inviolable wall between sacred and profane history, in reaction to the impious consequences of the mixing of the two by seventeenth-century biblical scholars, culminating with Spencer and Marsham.⁹² But as a bulwark to protect revelation

⁹¹ John Marsham, *Chronicus canon Aegyptiacus, Ebraicus, Graecus & disquisitiones* (London, 1672).

⁹² Arnaldo Momigliano, 'La nuova storia romana di G. B. Vico', in his *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, i (Rome, 1980); Rossi, *Dark Abyss of Time*.

Vico's method was no more successful. Nothing beyond a feeble warning prevented others from applying Vico's theory of the invention of pagan religion by primitive man's poetic imagination to the Jews as well. Far from safeguarding sacred history, Vico is celebrated for secularizing historical thought.

By tracing a key argument in the Enlightenment attack on revealed religion to the apologetic scholarship of an Anglican clergyman, and showing that the core of that argument was a traditional Christian doctrine, this article has emphasized the indeterminacy of ideas alone and the crucial role of scholarly practices and local contexts in explaining intellectual change. In the classic narrative of the Enlightenment, the destruction of biblical authority, like other modern developments, is credited to a deliberate campaign by intellectual reformers hostile to Christianity.⁹³ In his epic study of the 'Radical Enlightenment' Jonathan Israel offers a new version of this kind of narrative, an endeavour that depends on a narrowly philosophical definition of the Enlightenment, as well as methodological assumptions that leave little room for unintended consequences.⁹⁴ Israel's argument for the overarching influence of Spinoza and the radical, as opposed to the 'mainstream', Enlightenment rests on the assumption that ideas are to be explained primarily by reference to earlier, homologous ideas: radical effects follow radical causes. From this perspective, a figure such as Spencer is bound to appear as either a dissimulating opponent of revelation or a reactive moderate, futilely trying to domesticate ideas generated by Christianity's critics. The dominant trend in the study of this period, however, has been in a different direction: towards a view of the Enlightenment, not as a unified movement defined by a philosophical programme, but rather as a more diffuse process of intellectual and cultural transformation, arising from multifarious sources and determined as much by practices as by ideas.⁹⁵ Among the many results of this shift in approach, philology has found a place alongside philosophy as an arena of Enlightenment.⁹⁶

⁹³ In English, the *locus classicus* is Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York, 1966–9).

⁹⁴ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001); Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford, 2006).

⁹⁵ See Sheehan, 'Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization'.

⁹⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, 'Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of their History', *Mod. Intellectual Hist.*, v (2008); Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment*

(cont. on p. 163)

Spencer's legacy was not the one he intended. In the hands of later writers the argument for the Egyptian origin of Jewish rituals was not used to demonstrate a providential order by which God, through revelation, led mankind towards truth. On the contrary, it was redeployed to demonstrate the merely human origin of the Jewish religion and its scripture. In retrospect we can say that sacred philology in general failed to deliver on its fundamental promise. Applying the methods of Renaissance scholarship to understand the Bible in historical context was meant to strengthen Christian faith, but ultimately it did the opposite. The sacred philologists' confidence that they could historicize scripture without relativizing it turned out to be misplaced. Having set out to swallow profane history, sacred history was swallowed by its prey. Nonetheless, the desire of scholars such as Spencer to study their religion critically was motivated less by the challenge of unbelievers than by theological debates with other Christians. Spinoza, Toland and other radical thinkers played an important role in the erosion of biblical authority, of course. But they were not alone. To a significant extent the radicals stormed the gates of an already crumbling fortress with weapons stolen from its defenders. The empire of sacred history fell from within.

University of California, Davis

Daniel Stolzenberg

(n. 96 cont.)

Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture (Princeton, 2005); Dan Edelstein, 'Humanism, l'Esprit philosophique, and the Encyclopédie', *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts*, 1, 1 (2009), at: <<http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/27>>.