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**DECONSTRUCTING DIVINATION: SUPERSTITION, ANTICLERICALISM, AND CICERO'S *DE  
DIVINATIONE* IN ENLIGHTENMENT ENGLAND, C. 1700-1730**

**Katherine A. East**

**Abstract**

In the complex inter-confessional exchanges which defined Enlightenment England the accusation of 'superstition' became a powerful weapon to wield, and few wielded it more extensively and controversially than those radical figures waging war on the power of the clergy. As treatises proliferated which condemned miracles, prophecies, and sacerdotal authority as superstitions with no place in a true religion, one text in particular was regularly invoked in support: the second book of Cicero's theological dialogue *De Divinatione*, in which, in response to his brother's defence of divination in the first book, Cicero deconstructed the proffered examples of divinatory activity, the oracles and dreams, with rational argument. This chapter will examine how Cicero's attack on *superstitio* in *De Divinatione* was adapted and deployed by three anticlerical writers: John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal. In the work of these men ancient perceptions of divination and its place in religion and society can be found informing Enlightenment efforts to challenge the customary authority of the Church.

**Introduction**

Anticlericalism was one of the defining *topoi* of heterodox writing within the English discourse of the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> The clergy possessed an immense authority over the spiritual well-being of their flock; they were there to ensure the laity's access to the spiritual world, to interpret the Bible on the people's behalf, and to exercise their special position as interpreters of the divine will. It was to the clergy that people went for reassurance about future worries,

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<sup>1</sup> This anticlericalism – or the 'war on priestcraft' – continues to be a point of debate with respect to its the 'radicalism' of the English Enlightenment. The assumption that this anticlerical fervour in English discourse signified a wish to see the Established Church overthrown can be found in the works of Israel 2001: 566-627 and Beiner 2011: 156-175, and in narratives championing the traditional perception of the period as the overthrow of the Age of Faith by the Age of Reason. An alternative reading – championed by Goldie 1993: 209-231, Popkin and Goldie 2006: 79-109, Champion 2003: 249-251, and Champion 1992: 1-24, 173-179 – has worked to show that in attacking the privileges of the clergy with this rhetoric, these heterodox writers sought only to reform the Church, not to overpower it.

and for indications of divine intent. This was an unacceptable level of influence over the lives and minds of men in the view of those who declared war on this ‘priestcraft’, a term used to broadly encompass the crimes of the clergy, their harvesting of power from the dependency of their flock, and the theological foundations of that power. The anticlerical challenge was mounted on the argument for a natural religion in place of a revelatory one: if religion is bound by the laws of nature, as these men believed it to be, then so was God, a conclusion which eliminated the possibility of miracles, portents, providence, and, most importantly, revelation.<sup>2</sup> In this understanding of God and nature, the clergy became superfluous; what need was there of a body to interpret the divine on behalf of the laity, when all truly divine acts were fully accessible to man’s natural reason? If it proved inaccessible to that reason, if it required divination or interpretation, then it was simply not part of the true religion. It was for this reason that the rhetoric of superstition, a feature of religious discourse throughout its history, became one of the means by which anticlerical writers constructed their attacks. The association of the clergy and its power with superstition would be the most effective strategy for solidifying its segregation from true religion.

As pamphlets and treatises waging this war on priestcraft flew from the presses, Cicero’s *De Divinatione* assumed a position of prominence in these texts.<sup>3</sup> The work contained two books, in the first of which ‘Quintus Cicero’ presented the Stoic arguments in favour of divination, and in the second of which ‘Marcus Cicero’ (hereafter Cicero-as-Marcus) countered

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<sup>2</sup> On the political context of these theological debates see Wigelsworth 2009: 109-141.

<sup>3</sup> While no English translation of *De Divinatione* was made available until the nineteenth century, it was available in various forms to the men of learning engaging in this discourse. In 1721 John Davies of Queens’ College, Cambridge University, published an edition of *De Divinatione*, together with Cicero’s *De Fato*, as part of his project to contribute editions of Cicero’s philosophical works to the series of editions of Cicero’s works begun by Johann Georg Graevius in 1684. *De Divinatione* was also available through the complete editions of Cicero’s works, the most recent of which was published in 1692 by Jacobus Gronovius in Amsterdam, using the recension of the text which had been produced by Janus Gruterus in Hamburg in 1618. Further complete editions would be produced across the eighteenth century by Isaac Verburg in Amsterdam in 1724, Johannes Albertus Ernesti in Leipzig between 1737 and 1739, and by Olivetus in Paris between 1740 and 1742. Several French translations of *De Divinatione* were published across the early eighteenth century, including by Roland Desmarets (or Maresius) in 1710, and by L’Abbé Le Masson in 1721, both printed in Paris. The library of Anthony Collins provides an indication of the versions of *De Divinatione* actually consulted by men such as him; see Tarantino 2007. It includes the two French translations, the complete editions by Verburg, Gronovius, and Gruterus, and the edition by John Davies.

with an extensive critique of Quintus' arguments by employing the rational strategies of an Academic Sceptic, a structure which provided a wealth of material for different theological stances. The explanation of the Stoic conception of a providential god in the first book provided material for orthodox Christians, particularly those Latitudinarians hoping to reconcile Newtonian physics with the traditional tenets of their faith, and for whom Stoic theism had yet to lose its lustre.<sup>4</sup> The rebuttal of Stoic providence and the associated rationalisation of religion in the second book inevitably attracted the attention of the champions of natural religion in the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> It is the attraction of the second book of *De Divinatione* for the anticlerical cause among heterodox writers which will be considered here, and the evolution of this text into a weapon which could be deployed effectively in the war on priestcraft. The material was clearly present; the second book, in which the arguments were presented by a character bearing Cicero's own name (a controversial point which will be expanded upon later), amounts to an extended refutation of the belief in divination, and consequently the belief in the possibility of interpreting the divine will, and even the idea that the divine sought to communicate that will with mankind. This target was sufficiently close to that of the anticlerical writers that the arguments and strategies in evidence were adopted and deployed in their own battle against claims to a special relationship between the clergy and God.

While the examples of how to disprove divination provided by the second book of *De Divinatione* were useful, there was an additional facet of its argumentation which appealed particularly to anticlerical writers: the deployment of the accusation against divination that it was a superstition, and the consequential argument that it must therefore be held separate from true religion, as *religio* and *superstitio* are separate and mutually exclusive entities. This Ciceronian *superstitio* offered a means by which sacerdotal authority could be first identified as superstitious, and then rejected on the basis that a superstition could not be part of the true religion.<sup>6</sup> The engagement with *De Divinatione* which grew from this identification will be illustrated here with reference to three of the most prominent anticlerical writers of the English

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<sup>4</sup> The fate of Stoic theology in this period, in particular its shift from a favoured resource for theism to its later rejection as atheism, is recounted by Brooke 2012: 127-148.

<sup>5</sup> The contribution of *De Divinatione* to theories of natural religion and the rise of Deism in the English Enlightenment has received some attention; see Gawlick 1963: 657-682 and Zieliński 1929: 260-286.

<sup>6</sup> East 2014: 970-975.

Enlightenment: John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal.<sup>7</sup> After establishing the significant role played by the rhetoric of superstition in the heterodox discourse of the early Enlightenment, the efforts of these three men to associate *De Divinatione* with the fight against superstition, particularly by characterising Cicero as an enemy of superstition and *De Divinatione* as his most explicit challenge to superstition, will be investigated. It was the understanding of Ciceronian *superstitio* in this dialogue which informed how these anticlerical writers constructed their argument that the clergy itself drew its power from superstition, and moreover exploited that superstition for its own gain, severing it from true religion.

### **Heterodox Approaches to Superstition**

In 1741, David Hume (1711-1776) – that foremost figure of the Scottish Enlightenment – included among his *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, a very brief essay on the subject ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’.<sup>8</sup> While the primary purpose of this essay was to demonstrate the fundamental opposition of these two afflictions, with his treatment of superstition Hume also provided an extremely useful summary of the interpretation of superstition prevalent among the heterodox in the early Enlightenment. Accordingly it will be used here to illustrate some of the principles which guided the integration of superstition into Enlightenment discourse. Hume begins with the uncontroversial and fundamental assumption that superstition should be explained in terms drawing on its identification as separate from, indeed opposed to, religion itself: ‘*That the corruption of the best things produces the worst, is grown into a maxim, and is commonly proved, among other instances, by the pernicious effects of superstition and enthusiasm, the corruptions of true religion*’.<sup>9</sup> This was a definition which had

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<sup>7</sup> There is clearly a wide body of potential evidence regarding the use of Cicero’s *De Divinatione* beyond these three particular individuals, but for such a piece some chronological and geographical boundaries are necessary. Tindal, Toland, and Collins are the best examples of the particular engagement with Ciceronian *superstitio* in *De Divinatione* which I am illustrating here.

<sup>8</sup> Hume 1788 [1741-42]: 69-74. While there is insufficient space to discuss it here, it is worth noting that Hume’s works and thoughts also bore the marks of the influence of Cicero. See Berman 1980: 150-154; Fosl 1994: 103-120; Olszewsky 1991: 269-287; Harris 2015: 186-195.

<sup>9</sup> Hume 1788 [1741-43]: 69. On the separation of superstition and religion as an embedded topos, see Cameron 2010: 4-7; Martin 2004: 9-20; Santangelo 2013: 38-47. Several works in this period drew upon this opposition in their titles, such as Anon. 1730. *False Religion worse than No Religion: An Enquiry concerning Superstition, as it affects the Rights and Happiness of Civil Society: Written for the Advancement of True Religion and Virtue*, London.

governed discussions of superstition since antiquity, and which is indeed strongly associated with Cicero himself, due to his pledge at the end of *De Divinatione* ‘to extend the influence of true religion, which is closely associated with the knowledge of nature, so it is a duty to weed out every root of superstition’.<sup>10</sup>

While the opposition of superstition and religion was an established principle in intellectual discourses concerning religion, what proved more fluid, with infinite repercussions for that discourse, was the understanding of what constituted this ominous entity ‘superstition’.<sup>11</sup> Encompassing understandings from inappropriate attempts to influence future occurrences, to a means of condemning particular practices, most notably witchcraft, to an accusation thrown at Catholicism in its entirety during the Reformation, it was a flexible tool for denouncing the ‘other’ in religion. Returning to David Hume, his description of the origins of superstition articulates well the meaning superstition had come to assume among the heterodox by the mid-eighteenth-century:

The mind of man is subject to certain unaccountable terrors and apprehensions, proceeding either from the unhappy situation of private or public affairs, from ill health, from a gloomy and melancholy disposition, or from the concurrence of all these circumstances. In such a state of mind, infinite unknown evils are dreaded from unknown agents; and where real objects of terror are wanting, the soul, active to its own prejudice, and fostering its predominant inclination, finds imaginary ones, to whose power and malevolence it sets no limits. As these enemies are entirely invisible and unknown, the methods taken to appease them are equally unaccountable, and consist in ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents, or in any practice, however absurd or frivolous, which wither folly or knavery recommends to a blind and terrified credulity. Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of SUPERSTITION.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.149: ‘quam ob rem, ut religio propaganda etiam est, quae est iuncta cum cognitione naturae, sic superstitionis stirpes omnes eiiciendae’ (trans. W. A. Falconer).

<sup>11</sup> On the differing forms superstition could take see Cameron 2010: 29-75; Thomas 1971: 113-150.

<sup>12</sup> Hume 1788 [1741-42]: 69-70.

Evident here is the understanding that superstition takes root and thrives where reason is absent. The opposition between superstition and reason became the new framework around which the rhetoric of superstition functioned in the debate, particularly in the works of the heterodox.<sup>13</sup>

In 1683 Charles Blount (1654-1693), whose works performed a crucial service for English Deism by transmitting the ideas of both Herbert of Cherbury and Baruch Spinoza, had defined superstition in terms very similar to those used by Hume. The belief in miracles, he explained, was rooted in superstition,

For the Minds of men being naturally prone to be agitated betwixt *Fear* and *Hope* of the future (the two grand Passions that govern humane life) thence it comes to pass, that they very often fancy a certain extraordinary divine power in all Contingents which are unusual, and the natural Causes of which they do not comprehend, as if those Contingents certainly proceeded, not from the order of Nature, but from an immediate operation of God transcending or changing that order; and that they presignified some good or evil Fortune to themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Apparent here was that this was an echo of the broader issues governing the debate. The relationship between God and nature had become the focal point of disputes, as support for a natural religion, in which the divine power was entirely constrained by the laws of nature, gained traction. In this natural religion reason became a guiding force, therefore the association of the antithesis of religion (namely superstition) with the antithesis of reason and nature (namely irrationality) was a logical conclusion.<sup>15</sup> In the heterodox discourse the function of superstition was increasingly defined by its complete and direct opposition to reason.

This facilitated the integration of superstition into another prominent part of the English Enlightenment discourse: anticlericalism. This is once more illustrated by Hume, who having established what superstition and enthusiasm were, began enumerating their consequences for society. Regarding superstition, foremost among these consequences was the enhancement of the power of the clergy:

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<sup>13</sup> Cameron 2010: 6.

<sup>14</sup> Blount 1683: 3. On Blount's treatment of superstition see Israel 2001: 360-363. There are also numerous examples of this association between superstition and irrationality in the works of John Toland. For example, see Toland 1696: 44; Toland 1714: 29; Toland 1700: 18.

<sup>15</sup> See Harrison 1990: 5-18.

My first reflection is, *That superstition is favourable to priestly power, and enthusiasm not less or rather more contrary to it than sound reason and philosophy.* As superstition is founded on fear, sorrow, and a depression of the spirits, it represents the man himself in such despicable colours, that he appears unworthy, in his own eyes, of approaching the Divine presence, and naturally has recourse to any other person, whose sanctity of life, or perhaps impudence and cunning, have made him supposed more favoured by the Divinity. To him the superstitious intrust their devotions: To his care they recommend their prayers, petitions, and sacrifices: And by his means they hope to render their addresses acceptable to their incensed Deity.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous heterodox writers sought to cement this association, from Herbert of Cherbury to Charles Blount to John Toland to Matthew Tindal. In 1709 the Whig writer John Trenchard (1662-1723) used his work *The Natural History of Superstition* to perpetuate the anticlerical agenda which dominated so much of his work, writing that

Though true Religion improves the Faculties, exhilarates the Spirits, makes the Mind calm and Serene, renders us useful to Society, and most active in the Affairs of the World, yet I dont know how it has happened, that in all Ages and Countries, Fanatical, Melancholly, Enthusiastick, Monkish, Recluse, Sequestred Persons have passed upon the World for Religious, such who lived in Cloisters and Caves or became Pilgrims and Hermits, who seeming not to mind the Affairs of this World, were believed to know more of the next.<sup>17</sup>

This then was how the rhetoric of superstition developed among the heterodox into a tool to be employed in the deconstruction of clerical authority, by arguing on the basis that authority fed off irrational hopes and fears, and must consequently be identified as a superstition.

### **Cicero: The Enemy of Superstition**

The promotion of superstition within heterodox discourse was accompanied by the integration of Cicero, here assuming the role of the ‘enemy of superstition’, achieving an almost paradigmatic status in this incarnation due to his forceful rejection of superstition at the conclusion of the second book of *De Divinatione*, referred to above and here quoted in full:

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<sup>16</sup> Hume 1788 [1741-42]: 71.

<sup>17</sup> Trenchard 1709: 16.

Speaking frankly, superstition, which is spread among the nations, has taken advantage of human weakness to cast its spell over the mind of almost every man. This same view was stated in my treatise *On the Nature of the Gods*; and to prove the correctness of that view has been the chief aim of the present discussion. For I thought that I would be rendering a great service both to myself and to my countrymen if I could tear this superstition up by the roots. But I want it distinctly understood that the destruction of superstition does not mean the destruction of religion. For I consider it the part of wisdom to preserve the institutions of our forefathers by retaining their sacred rites and ceremonies. Furthermore, the celestial order and the beauty of the universe compel me to confess that there is some excellent and eternal Being, who deserves the respect and homage of men. Wherefore, just as it is a duty to extend the influence of true religion, which is closely associated with the knowledge of nature, so it is a duty to weed out every root of superstition.<sup>18</sup>

This passage represents the conclusion of a book in which the character Cicero-as-Marcus had point by point rejected the arguments for divination, primarily Stoic in their understanding, offered by his brother Quintus in the first book. Cicero's decision to present this attack on religious divination under his own name, and to conclude it with such a statement of intent against superstition still under his own name, inevitably drew the enthusiastic attentions of heterodox writers.

As noted above, Cicero's positioning of *religio* and *superstitio* in direct opposition to each other solidified a way of comprehending *superstitio* which was influential until well into the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The consequence in *De Divinatione* is the use of

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<sup>18</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.148-149: 'Nam, ut vere loquamur, superstitio, fusa per gentis, oppressit omnium fere animos atque hominum imbecillitatem occupavit. Quod et in iis libris dictum est, qui sunt *de natura deorum*, et hac disputatione id maxime egimus. Multum enim et nobismet ipsis et nostris profuturi videbamus si eam funditus sustulissemus. Nec vero - id enim diligenter intellegi volo - superstitione tollenda religio tollitur. Nam et maiorum instituta tueri sacris caerimoniisque retinendis sapientis est, et esse praestantem aliquam aeternamque naturam, et eam suspiciendam admirandamque hominum generi pulchritudo mundi ordoque rerum caelestium cogit confiteri. Quam ob rem, ut religio propaganda etiam est, quae est iuncta cum cognitione naturae, sic superstitionis stirpes omnes eligendae' (trans. W. A. Falconer).

<sup>19</sup> This distinction is elaborated on by Santangelo 2013: 38-47; its legacy is considered by Martin 2004: 126-129.

*superstitio* as a means of characterising *divinatio* so that it can be ostracised from appropriate religious practice. The practices identified with divination are dismissed as superstitions, defined as such on the basis that they draw their power from irrational fear: ‘what wonder, then, if in auspices and in every kind of divination weak minds should adopt the superstitious practices which you have mentioned and should be unable to discern the truth?’<sup>20</sup> Again and again, the ability to reject a particular divinatory endeavour as a superstition is utilised, and to consequently make the case for the exclusion of said practice from religion:

What a conflict this is! In view, then, of the differences between different nations in the responses, in the manner in which observations are made and in the kinds of birds and signs employed, need I assert that divination is compounded of a little error, a little superstition, and a good deal of fraud? And to these superstitions you have actually joined omens!...Then you go on and speak of the order of silence, *favete linguis* and the ‘prerogative’, or omen of the elections. This is indeed turning the artillery of one’s eloquence against oneself! For while on watch for these ‘oracles’ of yours could you be so free and calm of mind that you would have reason and not superstition to guide your course?<sup>21</sup>

Here, in this sustained use of *superstitio* as a means of condemning aspects of religious practice as not appropriate to the true religion due to their irrationality, existed a strategy for employing the rhetoric of superstition to segregate certain elements of religion deemed unacceptable.

This image of Cicero as the enemy of superstition was eloquently presented by John Toland (1670-1722), whose anticlerical and heterodox works provoked controversy in the first decades of the eighteenth century. In 1712 Toland wrote *Cicero Illustratus*, a work in which he presented his plans for a new edition of Cicero’s complete works to his intended sponsor

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<sup>20</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.81: ‘quid mirum igitur si in auspiciis et in omni divinatione imbecilli animi superstitiosa ista concipiant, verum dispicere non possint?’ (trans. Falconer)

<sup>21</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.83: ‘quid quod aliis avibus utuntur, aliis signis, aliter observant, alia respondent? Non necesse est fateri partim horum errore susceptum esse, partim superstitione, multa fallendo? Atque his superstitionibus non dubitasti etiam omina adiungere...iam illa “Favete linguis” et “praerogativam, omen comitiorum”. Hoc est ipsum esse contra se copiosum et disertum, Quando enim ista observans quieto et libero animo esse poteris, ut ad rem gerendam non superstitionem habeas, sed rationem ducem?’ (trans. Falconer).

and his correspondent in matters heterodox, Prince Eugene of Savoy.<sup>22</sup> Indicating his plans to include an index in the edition recording all of those Ciceronian passages relevant to the Christian faith, Toland declared that ‘Tully can be called the hammer of Superstition before all other mortals’.<sup>23</sup> Earlier in the work Toland had reflected on the doubts which arose from Cicero’s philosophical dialogues, doubts which emanated from the obscurity regarding where Cicero’s voice should be located in these works, when often the author distanced himself through the use of different characters and historical settings. The subject of *De Divinatione* naturally arose in this context, as the work in which this dilemma was most pertinent: Cicero wrote the second book apparently under his own name, suggesting it might reflect his own personal views on the matter, yet it seemed to contradict the stance taken in favour of Stoic theism in the preceding dialogue *De Natura Deorum*, and the stance he often assumed in his speeches in favour of traditional Roman religion and its divinatory practices.<sup>24</sup> Toland confronted this dilemma, arguing that the statements at *De Divinatione*, 2.148-149, must be read as representative of Cicero’s true views, not simply the articulation of a possible standpoint by a character in a dialogue:

I would like [the reader] to notice that Cicero plainly removes his mask in *De Divinatione* (which, as he often says himself, is simply a continuation of *De Natura Deorum*), and confirms these things completely in his own name. But, fearing that Readers would not finally understand his mind, he declares the meaning of these Books at the end of the second book of *De Divinatione*, in these words...<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> John Toland was a prolific writer of political pamphlets and theological treatises, all of which were directed towards defending the Commonwealth and championing the rationalisation of religion. On Toland’s contributions to heterodox thought see Champion 2003 and 1992; Israel 2001: 599-627; Wigelsworth 2009: 75-86, 143-148; Jacob 1976: 201-250; Hudson 2009: 81-97.

<sup>23</sup> Toland 1712: 59: ‘et Tullius profecto prae cunctis mortalibus Superstitionis malleus dici poterat’.

<sup>24</sup> The debate regarding where – or indeed whether – Cicero’s true voice can be located in *De Divinatione* and *De Natura Deorum* has a long history in Ciceronian scholarship, and will probably continue to exercise Ciceronian scholars for a long time to come. Some of the key studies include Beard 1986: 33-46; Schofield 1986: 47-65; Krostenko 2000: 353-391; Santangelo 2013: 10-36.

<sup>25</sup> Toland 1712: 37-38: ‘is advertat velim, eum in libris *de Divinatione* (qui, ipso pluries dicente, horum *de Natura Deorum* sunt tantummodo continuatio) larvam sibi aperte detrahere, ac eadem omnino suo ipsius nomine affirmare. Sed, ne mentem ejus non caperent tandem Lectores, subverens, satis speciatim subjectam illorum Librorum sententiam in sine secundi *de Divinatione*, his verbis declarat...’.

Cicero's words on *superstitio* and *religio* at the end of *De Divinatione* are then quoted in full. Toland's determination to affirm these words as truly Ciceronian reflects the prominence they had and would continue to possess in his broader corpus. Lines from these passages had been employed by Toland in 1709, appearing on the frontispiece of his *Adeisidaemon*, a work seeking to defend Livy from the accusation of being a 'superstitious man': '*Ut RELIGIO propaganda etiam, quae est juncta cum cognitione Naturae; sic SUPERSTITIONIS stirpes omnes ejiciendae*'.<sup>26</sup> Cicero's repudiation of superstition is again quoted in full by Toland in the partner work to *Adeisidaemon*, *Origines Judiciae*, a refutation of Pierre Daniel Huet's *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679) and its presentation of the traditional view of Moses as a prophet, in which Toland crafted an alternative account of Moses as an historical and political figure. *De Divinatione* is quoted towards the beginning of this work, followed by the declaration from Toland that he wants the same sentiment understood about himself, that while he impugns superstition, he will fight for religion.<sup>27</sup> In 1720, the passage was once more quoted in full by Toland in his work *Pantheisticon*, a work in which the Christian liturgy was reimagined to suit the purposes of a Pantheistic Society. The *Modiperator*, leader of the congregation's meetings, after reciting Cicero's definition of reason from the third book of *De Republica* calls on his audience to always follow that law, before reciting for them the passage from *De Divinatione*.<sup>28</sup> An exchange between the Modiperator and the congregation follows in which the difficulties faced by the superstitious man are enumerated, with the obvious conclusion being that Pantheism will provide the liberation of men from the tyranny of such superstitions, much in the manner Cicero deems desirous in *De Divinatione*.

Anthony Collins (1676-1729), a Freethinker and Toland's friend and ally in the anticlerical cause, also saw in *De Divinatione* an opportunity to depict Cicero as the adversary of superstition.<sup>29</sup> In 1713 Collins published *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, the work for which

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<sup>26</sup> Toland 1709. Typographical emphasis is as it appears on the frontispiece.

<sup>27</sup> Toland 1709: 102-103.

<sup>28</sup> Toland 1720: 69-70.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Collins was an English philosopher who contributed numerous tracts which sought to demonstrate the rational basis of true religion, a focus which has situated him within the radical Deist tradition. Due to *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, published in 1713, Collins is also strongly associated with the development of Freethought in England, and its demand that all assertions meet the standards of reason to be accepted as 'true'. On Collins see Wigelsworth 2013: 86-101, 112-123; Hudson 2009: 98-106; Tarantino 2014: 81-100; Berman 1980: 1501-54; Berman 1975: 82-102.

he is best remembered, and the work which ensured that his primary legacy was as one of the foremost proponents of that philosophy. This was a text in which Collins reiterated those beliefs which had already gained him notoriety – namely a radical Deism and an overt hostility to the established Church – and advocated a philosophy in which any belief could be challenged, and discarded if it failed to meet the requirements of rational law. To this end, in the Second Section of the *Discourse* Collins presented a series of arguments intended to confirm his thesis that it is the duty of all men to think freely on questions concerning God and the Scriptures. The third argument offered is that ‘*there is no remedy for the great Evil of Superstition, but thinking freely on these Points*’.<sup>30</sup> There Collins made his case that ‘Superstition is an Evil, which either by the means of Education, or the natural Weakness of Men, oppresses almost all Mankind. And how terrible an Evil it is, is well describ’d by the antient Philosophers and Poets’.<sup>31</sup> Whom should he quote in order to confirm this point, but Cicero? Moreover, later in the *Discourse* he describes *De Divinatione* as a work in which Cicero ‘baffles all the *Stoical* Arguments for Superstition, openly under his own name’, and ‘destroy’d the whole Reveal’d Religion of the Greeks and Romans, and show’d the Imposture of all their Miracles, and Weakness of the Reasons on which it was pretended to be founded’.<sup>32</sup>

Over a decade later, Cicero was still being utilised as something of a Gospel on Superstition (or the Gospel against Superstition) in anticlerical discourse. In 1730 Matthew Tindal (1657-1733) – another Freethinker and heterodox writer - looked to *De Divinatione* in his work *Christianity as Old as the Creation*.<sup>33</sup> This, his final work, once more took up the argument for the supremacy of a natural over a revealed religion, directing that argument particularly against the power of the clergy. As can be expected, when disputing the possibility of revelation, the question of superstition arose. Written as a dialogue, the first interlocutor asks ‘but if every Thing, as you contend, ought to be look’d on as superstitious which is not of a moral Nature, Superstition has spread itself over the Face of the Earth, and

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<sup>30</sup> Collins 1713: 35.

<sup>31</sup> Collins 1713: 35-36, in which Collins goes on to quote Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.150.

<sup>32</sup> Collins 1713: 110-111.

<sup>33</sup> Another Deist writer, Matthew Tindal produced works which challenged the power held by the Church and its clergy on the basis of the rational basis of true religion. On Tindal see Stephen 2006; Hudson 2009: 106-113; Wigelsworth 2009: 58-64.

prevail'd more or less in all Times and Places'.<sup>34</sup> The second interlocutor replies, 'this is no more than what has been own'd long ago by a very good Judge, who says, *Superstition, which is widespread among the nations, has taken advantage of human weakness to cast its spell over the mind of almost every man.* And the Universality of Superstition is in Effect own'd by every Sect, in affirming that Superstition is crept into all other Sects; and that 'tis the chief Business of their respective Teachers to promote it'.<sup>35</sup> Once again, later in this text, Tindal calls upon *De Divinatione* as evidence of Cicero's campaign against superstition, undertaken in spite of his own status as a Priest, 'Of this, *Cicero* is a remarkable Instance; who, in his Book *de Divinatione*, exposes the Superstition of his own Country-men, and ridicules those Miracles, with which the Annals of the Church-Priests were fill'd'.<sup>36</sup>

The characterisation of Cicero as the enemy of superstition was of great importance to these anticlerical writers seeking to engage with a discourse in which the accusation of superstition remained a powerful rhetorical and ideological weapon. What particular value did Ciceronian *superstitio* hold for these men?

### **Interpreting Ciceronian *Superstitio***

A revealing insight into the understanding of Ciceronian *superstitio* which underpinned its anticlerical popularity is provided by an exchange between Anthony Collins, vocal critic of the clergy, and Richard Bentley, who, as well as being one of the most notable classical scholars of the English tradition, was a clergyman and a great champion of the Anglican rational cause. In 1713 Bentley had felt compelled to pen a response to Collins' *Discourse of Free-Thinking* in order to defend the clergy against Collins' barely veiled accusations and condemnations.<sup>37</sup> In this response, Collins' arguments were addressed point by point, including his use of Cicero to support his assertion – noted above - that Freethought was the only means by which the power of superstition over the minds of men could be overturned. The Ciceronian passage used by Collins reads as follows in his translation of the text:

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<sup>34</sup> Tindal 1730: 148.

<sup>35</sup> Tindal 1730: 148-149, quoting Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.148.

<sup>36</sup> Tindal 1730: 360.

<sup>37</sup> Bentley 1713.

If you give way to Superstition, it will ever haunt and plague you. If you go to a Prophet, or regard Omens: if you sacrifice or observe the Flight of Birds; if you consult an Astrologer or Haruspex; if it thunders or lightens, or any place is confirm'd with Lightning, or such like Prodigy happens (as it is necessary some such often should) all the Tranquillity of the Mind is destroy'd. And sleep it self, which seems to be an Asylum and Refuge from all Trouble and Uneasiness, does by the aid of Superstition increase your Troubles and Fears.<sup>38</sup>

Responding to Collins' Freethinking strategy to guard against superstition, Bentley wrote that,

One of his Capital Arguments is from the *Evil of SUPERSTITION*, which *terrible Evil* and *great Vice* can never be avoided, but by turning *Free-thinker*, that is (in plainer *English*) abandoning all Religion. Strange! That *Superstition* and *Religion*, which have been distinguish'd and divided this two thousand Years, should yet stick so fast together, that our Author cannot separate them: so that to ease himself of the One, he must abdicate Both.<sup>39</sup>

This dismissal precedes an extended critique of Collins' translation of the Ciceronian passage, a critique which clause by clause challenges and disparages Collins' linguistic abilities and understanding of his Ciceronian source.

Concluding his rebuttal, Bentley declares that 'His dismal *Description* of [superstition] is in the words of *Cicero*; which chiefly relate to little Bigotries in Civil Life, not to fabulous Conceptions of the Supreme Being. And his Inference from thence is exactly, as if I should now say to You: *Sir*, you must renounce your Baptism and Faith, or else you can never be rid of those *terrible Superstitions* about the *Death-watch*, *Thirteen at one Table*, *Spilling of Salt*, and *Childermas-day*'.<sup>40</sup> Herein lies the distinction. According to Bentley's reading, the

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<sup>38</sup> Collins 1713: 35-36, quoting Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.150: 'Superstitio enim instat & urget, & quocunq; te verteris persequitur: sive tu vatem, sive tu omen audieres; sive immolares, sive avem aspexeris, sive Chaldaeum; si haruspicem videris; si fulserit, si tonuerit, si tactum aliquid de coelo erit, si ostenti simile natum factumve quidpiam; quorum necesse est plerumque aliquid eveniat: ut nunquam quieta mente liceat consistere. Per fugium videtur omnium laborum & sollicitudinum esse somnus; at ex ipso plurimae nascuntur curae metusque' [this is the Latin as presented by Collins].

<sup>39</sup> Bentley 1713: 34.

<sup>40</sup> Bentley 1713: 34-35. Regarding the superstitious practices identified by Bentley here: the *Death-watch* was the belief that if someone watching over the dying fell asleep in the hour before or after midnight, they would then

superstitions which Cicero rejected in *De Divinatione* were the small incursions, the out-dated or inappropriate practices, or practices performed incorrectly or for untoward ends. For Collins, however, ‘there is no just Remedy to this universal Evil [of Superstition] but *Free-Thinking*. By that alone can we understand the true Causes of things, and by consequence the Unreasonableness of all superstitious Fears’.<sup>41</sup> Collins explicitly adopts the understanding of superstition which places it in direct opposition to reason, determining all that is irrational in religion to be superstitious, and provoking Bentley’s outraged response that by employing this definition Collins is in fact dismissing religion as a whole. Here the matter of revelatory and natural religion ultimately divides the men: only an entirely rational religion is acceptable to Collins, while Bentley’s religion still requires space for a providential god. So, while in Cicero’s treatment of superstition in *De Divinatione* Bentley perceives an account of the usual inappropriate religious practices to be encompassed as superstitions, Collins perceives a confirmation of the equation of superstition with all that is contrary to rational law.

Collins’ interpretation depends heavily on the second book of Cicero’s *De Divinatione* and its conclusion. Not only does Cicero-as-Marcus associate the origins and power of superstition with ‘human weakness’, with men of credulity and who lack reason, but throughout the second book he deploys *ratio* as the means of exposing religious practices as superstitions.<sup>42</sup> When addressing Quintus’ examples of the success of divination through dreams, Cicero-as-Marcus asks ‘which is more consonant with philosophy: to explain these apparitions by the superstitious theories of fortune-telling hags, or by an explanation based on natural causes?’<sup>43</sup> For Cicero-as-Marcus, who is taking the part of the Academic Sceptic in this dialogue, the deployment of *ratio* against the examples and precedents provided as evidence by Quintus is the natural means by which to challenge the legitimacy of the arguments presented to him.

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die within the year; *Thirteen at one Table* refers to the belief that if there are thirteen seated around a table, one will die within the year, a superstition connected to the number of Jesus’ disciples; the *Spilling of Salt* refers to the belief that it is unlucky to spill salt, as Judas Iscariot spilled salt at the Last Supper; *Childermas-day* refers to The Holy Innocents’ Day, the 28<sup>th</sup> December, which marks the massacre of the children of Bethlehem ordered by King Herod, a day which was considered unlucky, particularly for entering agreements such as marriage.

<sup>41</sup> Collins 1713: 37.

<sup>42</sup> The references to human weakness, or ‘hominum imbecillitatem’, occur at *Div.*2.148, 19, 81, 125. On how Ciceronian *superstitio* developed across his works, see Santangelo 2012: 37-47.

<sup>43</sup> *Div.*2.129: ‘utrum philosophia dignius, sagarum superstitione ista interpretari an explicatione naturae?’ (trans. W. A. Falconer). See also *Div.*2.83, 85, 100.

This repudiation of divination as superstitious on account of its inconsistency with rational argument was clearly going to appeal to the heterodox readers of the early Enlightenment, for whom it would serve as a model for engagement when faced with their own notion of superstitious practice: the authority claimed by the clergy.

### **Using Ciceronian *Superstitio*: Profiteering from Priestcraft**

If we return to John Toland's *Pantheisticon*, the connection forged between Ciceronian *superstitio* and the clergy is articulated when *De Divinatione*, 2.148-149, is recited. First, the *Modiperator* and his congregation have a series of exchanges in which the principle that superstition encompasses all that is irrational is reiterated, as the congregation declare 'We want to be made ready and ruled by this Law: [the Law in question being the law of reason, the definition of which provided by Cicero in the third book of *De Republica* having just been recited], Not at all by the mendacious, and superstitious fabrications of men'.<sup>44</sup> The *Modiperator* then states that 'False Laws are neither clear, nor universal, Nor always the same, nor ever efficacious', to which the congregation replies 'Therefore they are useful to few, or to none at all, With the sole exception of the INTERPRETERS'. The lesson being that those beliefs which exist outside the realm of reason and which consequently rely on the interpretation of others for their meaning to become clear must be categorised as superstitions, profitable solely to those whose role it was to 'interpret' their meaning. The reader is left in no doubt as to who these interpreters exploiting superstition are, when after quoting the passage from *De Divinatione* the congregation recites that 'The SUPERSTITIOUS MAN is tranquil Neither awake nor asleep; He neither lives happily, Nor dies fearlessly: Alive and dead, he is made the prey of PRIESTS'.<sup>45</sup> The clergy's claim to power, that they are in possession of a special authority as interpreters of the divine on behalf of the laity, is therefore identified as a superstition according to the terms identified in Cicero's *De Divinatione*.

The same use of Ciceronian *superstitio* is in evidence in Anthony Collins' celebration of Freethought in 1713. In that work Cicero becomes the subject of focussed discussion when

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<sup>44</sup> Toland 1720: 70: 'RESP. Hac Lege institui regique volumus: Haudquaquam mendacibus, Et superstitiosis hominum commentis. MOD. Non claræ sunt fictæ Leges, nec universales, Non semper eædem, nec efficaces unquam: RESP. Paucis ergò, aut oppidò nullis sunt utiles, Solis exceptis INTERPRETIBUS. MOD. Aures interim advertite'.

<sup>45</sup> Toland 1720: 70: 'RESP. Non vigilat SUPERSTITIOSUS, Non dormitat tranquillus; Neque beatè vivit, Neque securè moritur: Vivus & mortuus, Factus SACRIFICULORUM præda'. On Toland's use of Ciceronian Scepticism against priestcraft in *Pantheisticon* see East 2016: 245-262.

he is identified as one of the forebears of Freethought. While considering the theological dialogues *De Natura Deorum* and *De Divinatione*, Collins makes the following accusation: ‘now the modern Priests, whenever they meet with any Passage favourable to *Superstition*, which Cicero puts in the mouth of the *Stoick*, or any false Argument which he makes the *Epicurean* use, and which they have thought fit to sanctify...they urge it as Cicero’s own, and would have the Reader believe Cicero look’d on it as conclusive’.<sup>46</sup> Again, the clergy are denounced as figures who foster and feed off superstition for their own benefit. This is also the stance of Matthew Tindal, as demonstrated by his discussion of superstition cited above, and his assertion there that in all religious sects ‘’tis the chief Business of their respective Teachers to promote [superstition]’.<sup>47</sup> Each of these anticlerical writers presents a vision of the clergy as a body which exploits the irrational fears of men – fear of death, most particularly, and fear of divine retribution – for their own profit, constructing their power from that fear. The Ciceronian definition of superstition as that which contradicts reason thereby provides the means of turning the rhetoric of superstition against the clergy, for their very authority is based in the irrational.

The clergy is in fact further condemned, for not only did they exploit superstition to ensure the dependence of the laity, but also to advance their influence in the political sphere, by facilitating the accumulation of power by others. Ciceronian examples are again invoked to illustrate this additional facet of the clergy’s profiteering from superstition. One particular instance, in which Cicero-as-Marcus scorns the divinatory power of the Sibylline Oracles due to their exploitation by their interpreters, the *quindecimviri*, garnered attention: ‘We Romans venerate the verses of the Sibyl who is said to have uttered them while in a frenzy. Recently there was a rumour, which was believed at the time, but turned out to be false, that one of the interpreters of those verses [Lucius Cotta] was going to declare in the Senate that, for our safety, the man whom we had as king in fact [Julius Caesar] should be made king in name’.<sup>48</sup> John Toland referred to this dismissal of the Sibylline Oracles and their interpreters in his work *Two*

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<sup>46</sup> Collins 1713: 110-111.

<sup>47</sup> Tindal 1730: 168.

<sup>48</sup> *Div.*2.110: ‘Sibyllae versus observamus, quos illa furens fudisse dicitur. Quorum interpres nuper falsa quadam hominum fama dicturus in senatu putabatur eum, quem re vera regem habebamus, appellandum quoque esse regem, si salvi esse vellemus’ (trans W. A. Falconer).

*Essays in a Letter from Oxford* (1695).<sup>49</sup> Addressing what he terms the ‘Rise, Progress, and Destruction of Fables and Romances’, Toland used the condemnation by Cicero-as-Marcus and directed it against the efforts of the Christian Church to arm itself with equivalent oracles through which they might influence contemporary affairs.

The Sibylline Oracles and their potential for corruption are also a point of discussion in the writings of Ralph Cudworth, who, as a defender of the orthodox and a foremost figure among the Cambridge Platonists, was situated in a very different theological arena from Toland, yet who in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) also cited Cicero’s condemnation of those oracles when considering their exploitation by early Christians.<sup>50</sup> An extensive discussion of the Oracles, during which several excerpts from *De Divinatione* are quoted, argues that although the Oracles were undoubtedly abused and corrupted, there can be discerned therein the foretelling of the rise of Christianity. The abuse identified by Cicero is paralleled to that by those early Christian priests:

Now as *Cicero* seems to complain, that in his time these Sibylline Oracles were too much exposed to view, so is it very probable, that notwithstanding they were to be kept under the Guard of the *Quindecimviri*, yet many of them might be copied out, and get abroad, and thereby an occasion be offered, to the ignorantly zealous Christians, who were for *Officious Lyes and Pious Frauds*, to add a great deal more of their own forging to them.<sup>51</sup>

Not only was Ciceronian *superstitio* identified with priestly authority (although not by Cudworth, whose purpose was the endorsement of the established Church), but *De Divinatione* provided a rich resource for examples of how priests profited from that authority through the exploitation of superstition to facilitate the increased power of secular rulers. For heterodox writers such as Toland, this fostering of superstition among the laity amounted to a tyranny of the mind, made even more dangerous by its association with tyranny in the civil world.

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<sup>49</sup> Toland 1695: 31-32. Toland again employed examples from *De Divinatione* to demonstrate priestly exploitation of superstition in his *Origines Judiciae* to facilitate political gain. See Toland 1709: 167-168, quoting Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.141, on Alexander’s dream of a serpent; Toland 1709: 177-184, quoting Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 2.118, on the Pythian manipulation of prophecies to benefit Philip of Macedon.

<sup>50</sup> Cudworth 1678.

<sup>51</sup> Cudworth 1678: 283.

## Conclusion

The profit to be won from prophecy can take innumerable different forms, as this volume demonstrates emphatically. Among the anticlerical writers of the English Enlightenment, it was fury at the perceived profit derived by the clergy – in the form of the dependence of their priests, and the ability of those priests to influence secular matters - from their special relationship with the divine, which drove their war on priestcraft. When fashioning the strategies to be employed in that war, Cicero's *De Divinatione*, with its unrelenting critique of claims to divine communication and intervention, proved an invaluable resource. A tract which explicitly condemned superstition, and in which superstition was characterised as the intrusion of the irrational into the true, natural, rational religion, it provided an understanding of superstition which could be turned against the clergy. Superstition became the pseudo-religious practices constructed by men – contrary to reason – in order to enforce their own power; their claims to power which existed outside the realms of man's reason - essentially as interpreters of an aspect of divinity incomprehensible to the laity – could be identified and condemned as superstitions. In the hands of these anticlerical writers the attack on superstition in *De Divinatione* became the outright rejection of the irrational in the true, natural religion, and consequently the ideal weapon to turn against the power of the clergy. This is only one of the functions performed by *De Divinatione* in a broad and complex discourse, but it serves to illustrate the significance this ancient text on ancient religious practices could attain in the context of an entirely modern discourse.

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