

Theology and Education: Later Stuart Academies for Protestant Dissenters in Southern England, and the Exeter Subscription Controversy, 1713–19

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I Protestant Dissenters and their Academies in Southern England, 1660–1719

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the means by which protestant dissenters educated themselves in the period between the 1662 Act of Uniformity and the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828).¹ This interest has been fuelled by historians' changing attitudes towards dissent more broadly, and its relation to the Church of England. Since the 1980s, historians have become increasingly aware of the limitations of national legislation, and the potential vagaries of its implementation locally, by individual

- 1 See especially the work undertaken at the Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies, Queen Mary, University of London: *Dissenting Academies Online: Database and Encyclopedia* <http://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/>; *Dissenting Academies Online: Virtual Library System*: <http://vls.english.qmul.ac.uk/>; Mark Burden, *A Biographical Dictionary of Tutors at the Dissenters' Private Academies, 1660–1729*: <http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/pubs/biographical-dictionary.html>; *The Letters of Joseph Priestley to Theophilus Lindsey 1769–1794*, edited by Simon Mills <http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/pubs/JLP%20letters.html>; *Dissenting Education and the Legacy of John Jennings*, edited by Tessa Whitehouse: <http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/pubs/jennings%20legacy.html>; *New College Hackney (1786–96): A Selection of Printed and Archival Sources*, edited by Stephen Burley: <http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/pubs/nc%20hackney.html>; Mark Burden, 'Academical Learning at the Dissenters' Private Academies, 1660–1720', unpublished PhD thesis, University of London (2012).

dioceses and quarter sessions courts; such notions of an uneven and unstable pathway between political 'centre' and 'locality' have even encompassed the Restoration period (1660–1689), an era traditionally viewed by dissenting historians as the 'Period of Persecution'.² Some writers continue to focus on the political effects of different theological positions, whereas others suggest that theological differences between dissenters themselves, or between dissent and the Church of England, were frequently minimal.³ Meanwhile, estimates of the significance of the Toleration Act of 1689 vary, between those who see it as the last 'act' in the English Reformation, and those who emphasise its limitations, seeing it rather as a catalyst for religious conflict during the reigns of William III and Anne.⁴

These debates inevitably inform historical understanding of the most important educational achievement of the dissenters in the later Stuart period: the development of networks of private academies across the country, where students learnt university-level subjects such as logic, natural philosophy, and ethics, alongside classical languages, and (frequently, but not universally) history, mathematics, and theology.⁵ The very earliest academies in the 1660s, such as Thomas Cole's academy in Nettlebed, Oxfordshire, were probably designed to serve the interests of the sons of dissenting gentlemen and nobles.⁶ They emerged because of changes to the universities following the

- 2 Tim Harris, Paul Seaward and Mark Goldie (eds), *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford, 1990); Andrew M. Coleby, *Central Government and the Localities: Hampshire 1649–1689* (Cambridge, 1987); Nigel Yates, *Church and Chapel in Portsmouth and South-East Hampshire, 1660–1850* (Portsmouth, 2003); A.R. Warmington, *Civil War, Interregnum and Restoration in Gloucestershire* (London, 1997); Stephen K. Roberts, *Recovery and Restoration in an English County: Devon Local Administration 1646–1670* (Exeter, 1985).
- 3 John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution* (Woodbridge, 2006); Tim Cooper, John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity (Farnham, 2011); Michael Davies, *Graceful Reading: Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan* (Oxford, 2002).
- 4 Roger Morrice, *The Entering Book of Roger Morrice*, edited by Mark Goldie, 7 vols (Woodbridge, 2007–9); Mark Goldie, *A Darker Shade of Pepys: The Entering Book of Roger Morrice* (London, 2009); Lois G. Schworer, *The Declaration of Rights, 1689* (London, 1981).
- 5 David L. Wykes, 'The Contribution of the Dissenting Academy to the Emergence of Rational Dissent', in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 99–139; Isabel Rivers, *The Defence of Truth through the Knowledge of Error* (London, 2003).
- 6 Bodleian Library, Rawlinson Letters 50, f. 69; 51, ff. 49, 87, 162; William Hamilton, *The Exemplary Life and Character of James Bonnell* (London, 1703), pp. 8–9.

Restoration, which included the ejection of many puritan tutors, the reintroduction of episcopalian liturgy and ceremonies in college chapel services, and the necessity for new tutors and students to subscribe to all of the articles of the Church of England.⁷ These changes made the universities unpalatable for many of the puritan gentry, many of whom can be described as 'dissenters' from this date onwards. As the academies developed in the 1670s, they increasingly came to serve the interests of a second related constituency: the sons of 'nonconformist' ministers who had been ejected from their livings, either following the Act for Confirming and Restoring Ministers of 1660, or the Act of Uniformity of 1662.⁸ Following their ejection, around 2,500 nonconformists, mostly Presbyterian, Congregational, or Baptist, continued to preach to illegal private gatherings known as conventicles; by the late 1670s, many of these preachers had died, meaning that new ministers, known to posterity as dissenting ministers, were required to take their place. The primary purpose of the dissenters' private academies from this date was to train these dissenting ministers to the high standards expected by most Presbyterian and Congregational gatherings. The most famous of the dissenters' academies of the period 1670–89 were in the midlands, the north, and in London, but there were important academies at this date in the south west of England, including Taunton, and – although its origins and early development are almost entirely obscure – at Brynllwarch in Wales.⁹

Under the terms of the Act of Uniformity of 1662, all schoolmasters had to be licensed by a bishop or ordinary, and attempts to prosecute academy tutors often had to start from the assumption that there was no legal distinction between grammar schools and university-level academies; more frequently, across the period 1662–89, dissenting tutors were prosecuted for their work as ministers, rather than as educators.¹⁰ The Toleration Act of 1689, while it suspended penalties for dissenting worship under certain conditions, did not mention the dissenters' academies specifically. This meant that after 1689, dissenting tutors could still be prosecuted on the (uncertain) grounds that they were schoolmasters; in the south and south west, proceedings of this sort

7 Burden, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 13–20.

8 The latest study of the impact of the nonconformist ejections is N.H. Keeble (ed.), *'Settling the Peace of the Church': 1662 Revisited* (Oxford, forthcoming, 2014).

9 William Tong, *Some Memoirs of the Life and Death of the Reverend Mr. John Shower* (London, 1716), pp. 6–9; Charles Owen, *Some Account of the Life and Writings of the Late Pious and Learned Mr. James Owen* (London, 1709), pp. 1, 2, 5.

10 Burden, 'Academical Learning', pp. 44–101.

were made against the tutors Benjamin Robinson of Hungerford, and Samuel Jones of Tewkesbury.¹¹ Other tutors, such as Samuel Cradock of Wickhambrook, Suffolk, were accused of reneging on oaths they made when graduating at the universities in the 1640s and 1650s that they would not give lectures outside the universities.¹²

The situation for dissenting tutors and students worsened further during the reign of Queen Anne (1702–14). High Church hysteria, whipped up by Henry Sacheverell, Samuel Wesley, and the editors of Clarendon's *History of the Great Rebellion*, frequently focussed on the supposed immorality, sedition, and theological heterodoxy of the dissenters' academies.¹³ The Schism Act of 1714 was a measure designed to buttress existing provisions for the licensing of schools in the Uniformity Act; the act specifically outlawed the dissenters' academies, and clarified the penalties for dissenting tutors.¹⁴ It has often been suggested that the act had little impact prior to its repeal in 1719; however, this assumption ignores the fact that during this brief period, many academies, including those in the south of England, came under severe political, social, and economic pressure. The Tewkesbury academy was attacked by a Jacobite crowd in 1714, and John Moore's Bridgwater academy temporarily closed its doors.¹⁵ Meanwhile, funding for the southern academies from the London-based Presbyterian fund gradually collapsed across the 1710s.¹⁶

11 John Cummings, *A Funeral Sermon on Occasion of the Death of the Late Reverend and Learned Mr. Benjamin Robinson* (London, 1699), pp. 55–56; Gloucestershire Archives, MS GDR B4/1/1056.

12 Edmund Calamy, *A Continuation of the Account of the Ministers, Lecturers, Masters and Fellows of Colleges and Schoolmasters, who were Ejected and Silenced*, 2 vols (London, 1727), II, pp. 731–35. For further information on proceedings against dissenting tutors after the Toleration Act, see Burden, 'Academical Learning', pp. 102–43.

13 Samuel Wesley, *A Letter from a Country Divine to his Friend in London* (London, 1703), *A Defence of a Letter* (London, 1704), *A Reply to Mr. Palmer's Vindication* (London, 1707); Henry Sacheverell, *The Nature and Mischief of Prejudice and Partiality Stated* (London, 1704); Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1702–3) II, part 1, p. vi, III, part 1, p. xvii.

14 Daniel Defoe, *A Brief Survey of the Legal Liberties of the Dissenters* (London, 1714) and *The Schism Act Explain'd* (London, 1714).

15 David L. Wykes, 'Jones, Samuel (1681/2–1719)', in H.C.G. Matthew, B. Harrison et al (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004–) XXX, pp. 631–32; Dr Williams's Library, 24.59, p. 65.

16 Dr Williams's Library, OD68.

Gaining any clear sense of the number, exact location, or size of the academies in the south of England during the later Stuart period is difficult, since few tutors left much in the way of manuscript papers; what little is known about most of these societies must be pieced together from funeral sermons for tutors and students, manuscript memoirs, a small handful of letters, and later traditions recorded by dissenting antiquarians from the 1770s onwards. It is, however, reasonably clear that there were academies at the locations listed on p. 135.¹⁷

Most of these academies were extremely small and short-lived, educating only a handful of students in total. Slightly more information about the number and background of students exists in a small number of cases: over 140 students at the Taunton academy are known for the period 1672–1759; a similar number of students at Samuel Jones's academy at Gloucester and Tewkesbury are known, despite the fact that his academy was only open for about a decade; at Bridgwater John Moore and his sons educated over 50 students across a 60-year period; over 40 students of Joseph Hallett's Exeter academy are known by name; Samuel Cradock's 21 known students at Wickhambrook may be divided according to whether they pursued grammatical, philosophical, or theological learning.¹⁸ These figures do not provide any reliable indication of the size of most of the southern academies, although they do indicate that they were capable of contributing substantially to intellectual life at a regional, and sometimes at a national, level.

The intellectual legacy of academy tutors was twofold. On the one hand, the systems of learning which they used in their academies tended to be compilations from earlier authors and remained in manuscript. On the other hand, tutors went into print to explain their own theological views, often through controversial writings, or to expound doctrines of practical Christianity through their sermons and treatises. One of the most significant authors among the first generation of dissenting tutors in southern England was John Flavell; although he died before

17 This table is modelled on Burden, 'Academical Learning', pp. 256–62, with additions from *Dissenting Academies Online* and Burden, *Biographical Dictionary*. For the purposes of the table, the 'South of England' is defined as the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, East and West Sussex, Surrey, and Kent; I have excluded academies in the vicinity of London, which require a separate study.

18 Burden, 'Academical Learning', pp. 277, 283–84, 287–93; Edmund Calamy, *An Historical Account of My Own Life, with Some Reflections on the Times I have Lived in, 1671–1731*, ed. J. T. Rutt, 2 vols (London, 1829), I, pp. 133–35.

**Academies for Dissenters in the South of England,
opening between 1667 and 1720**

Locations	Tutors	Dates of Operation
Axminster (Devon)	Stephen Towgood	fl. 1695
Bicester (Oxfordshire)	John Troughton	fl. c.1674
Bridgwater (Somerset)	John, John and Thomas Moore	before c.1693–1747?
Bristol (Gloucestershire)	Bernard Foskett <i>et al.</i>	1720 or before – 2014
Dartmouth (Devon)	John Flavell	?–1691
Exeter (Devon)	Joseph Hallett	before 1693–c.1719
Gloucester (Gloucestershire)	James Forbes	before 1696 – after 1698
Gloucester, Tewkesbury (Gloucestershire)	Samuel Jones	1708x11–12; 1712–19
Gloucester (Gloucestershire)	John Alexander	c.1720–c.23
Hungerford (Berkshire)	Benjamin Robinson	1696?–1700?
Lyme Regis (Dorset)	Ames Short	before 1682 – 1691x7
Nailsworth (Gloucestershire)	Jeremiah Jones	1719 – date unknown
Nettlebed (Oxfordshire)	Thomas Cole	1662x7–c.1674
Newbury (Berkshire)	John Southwell	1692–5 or later
Shepton Mallet (Somerset)	Matthew Towgood	dates unknown
Taunton (Somerset)	Matthew Warren; succeeded by Stephen James, Robert Darch, Henry Grove; Thomas Amory	1672–1759?
Tiverton (Devon)	John Moore	c.1720–30 or earlier
Tubney (Oxfordshire)	Henry Langley	dates unknown

his nascent academy was able to flourish – he may have educated only four young men in total – Flavell earned an international reputation as a writer of spiritual and practical works, including *A Saint Indeed* (1668) and *Navigation Spiritualized* (1677), both of which went through multiple editions, and *The Fountain of Life* (1673), *The Method of Grace* (1681) and *Pneumatologia* (1685). Flavell was a moderate Calvinist, who avoided scholastic terminology in favour of a plain preaching style,

but who was by no means a rationalist.¹⁹ Other early dissenting tutors, such as John Troughton, stuck to a more rigid Calvinism, accusing their opponents of encouraging Arminian and Popish doctrines.²⁰ James Forbes's Calvinist theology of grace included belief in a limited atonement (Christ's sacrifice only satisfied God's justice in relation to the elect), and a corresponding belief that grace was a special gift of God, bestowed only on a few people.²¹ For Thomas Cole, salvation was predicated upon the Reformed doctrine of 'Faith in the Righteousness of Christ for Justification'; this faith was founded in the certainty of divine testimony but the grace of God entered the soul with 'the free consent of Mans Will'.²² Another popular topic for tutors in their printed pamphlets was to defend dissenters against accusations of being schismatic, by re-examining the role of liturgy among congregations from the early church to the Reformation; this argument was the cause of a significant print controversy between the tutor Benjamin Robinson and the episcopalian Thomas Bennet.²³ Later tutors, such as John Moore Jr of Bridgwater, often intervened in the persistent eighteenth-century debates about the nature of the Trinity, usually on the side of orthodoxy; others, such as Matthew Towgood of Shepton Mallet, defended the right of dissenters not to subscribe to pre-agreed articles of any kind relating to theological matters.²⁴ From the early eighteenth

- 19 Substantial recent studies of Flavell include Gerald Bray and Brian H. Cosby, *Suffering and Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence* (Grand Rapids, 2012), Embury, Adam Burgess, 'An Honest and Well-Experienced Heart': *The Piety of John Flavel* (Grand Rapids, (2012), and *Keeper of the Great Seal of Heaven: Sealing of the Spirit in the Life and Thought of John Flavel* (Grand Rapids, 2011); Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel's Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids, 2007), and Nathan Parker, 'Proselytisation and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World – The Theology of John Flavel', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham (2013).
- 20 John Troughton, *Lutherus redivivus: Or the Protestant Doctrine of Justification by Faith Onely, Vindicated*, 2 vols (London, 1677–78).
- 21 James Forbes, *Nehushtan: Or, John Elliot's Saving Grace in All Men, Proved to be No Grace* (London, 1694), pp. 1–7.
- 22 Thomas Cole, *A Discourse of Faith in Two Points* (London, 1688), pp. 1–25.
- 23 Benjamin Robinson, *A Review of the Case of Liturgies, and their Imposition* (London, 1710); *A Letter to Mr. Thomas Bennet, in Defence of the Review of the Case of Liturgies, and their Imposition* (London, 1710); Matthew Towgood, *A Vindication of Mr. Nation's Sermon, in a Letter to Mr. P. C.* (London, 1732); *Charity and Sincerity Defended: In a Reply to Mr. P. C's Letter to the Author of the Vindication of Mr. Nation's Sermon* (London, 1732).
- 24 John Moore, *Propositions of Natural and Revealed Religion* (London, 1736) and *The Doctrine of the Ever Blessed Trinity Defended* (London, 1739); Matthew Towgood, *A Vindication of Mr. Nation's Sermon, in a Letter to Mr. P. C.* (London, 1732); *Charity*

century, several tutors – most notably Henry Grove of Taunton – were urging a theology based on rational principles, although most of them still held traditional views on the nature of Christ and the immortality of the soul.

The most important manuscript writings to survive from dissenting tutors are 'systems' of learning, which tutors used as the basis for their lectures, and which were frequently copied verbatim by their students. The dissenting memorialist Edmund Calamy informs us that Samuel Cradock read 'systems that were of his own extracting out of a variety of writers', and that his students (including Calamy) were 'obliged to copy them out for their own use', which was 'a great drudgery'.²⁵ This practice continued at the academies throughout the eighteenth century, although the nature of tutors' systems shifted in many instances from compendia to more formalised sets of lectures. For the southern academies, the most extensive sets of lecture notes survive for the academy of Samuel Jones, tutor to Joseph Butler and Thomas Secker among many others.²⁶ Jones's 'Notae in Godwini Mosem et Aronem', informally known as his 'Jewish Antiquities', was modelled on notes he made while a student of Hermann Witsius; they influenced later writings in the same genre, including the tutor David Jennings's *Jewish Antiquities* (1767).²⁷ His 'Notae in Scripturum' was a prolegomena (introduction) to the critical study of the Bible, discussing a range of different editions in both ancient and modern languages.²⁸ Jones's 'Notae in Dionysii Periegesis' took the relatively common grammar school exercise of translating Dionysius' *Orbis descripto* from Greek into Latin a step further, by including geographical notes;²⁹ he also drew up a Euclidian system of geometry, together with algebraic and arithmetical problems.³⁰ Broadly contemporary with surviving copies of Jones's systems of learning are the earliest surviving student notebooks from the Taunton academy, containing copies of systems by Robert Darch and Stephen James. Darch's natural philosophy was designed to cover the basics of the discipline, including a Copernican explanation of the solar system, and discussion of basic principles of mechanics, including

and Sincerity Defended: In a Reply to Mr. P. C's Letter to the Author of the Vindication of Mr. Nation's Sermon (London, 1732).

25 Calamy, *Own Life*, I, pp. 132–33.

26 The most accurate list to date is in Burden, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 327.

27 See, for example, Dr Williams's Library, 24.2 (Witsius), 24.3–4 (Jones).

28 British Library, Additional MSS 23917–18.

29 British Library, Additional MS 23919.

30 Birmingham University Library, XMS 400.

notes on Newton's theories of gravity.³¹ James's theology, while not rigidly Calvinistic, included a critique of the theological innovations of Richard Baxter, and firmly opposed any departure from orthodox Trinitarianism.³² Similarly, Grove's manuscript treatises confirm his print reputation for rationalism; however, his pneumatology and ethics include further attacks on the Cartesian belief in the materiality of the soul, and on John Locke's controversial dismantling of the concept of innate ideas.³³

II The Subscription Controversy, 1713–19

Printed and manuscript works by dissenting tutors came under intense scrutiny from both their friends and enemies in the second decade of the eighteenth century. Between 1713 and 1719 a divisive controversy arose between dissenters about the necessity or otherwise for ministers to subscribe publicly to the Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity.³⁴ In 1719 lists were drawn up in Exeter and London of those who were prepared to subscribe (the 'subscribers') and those who were not (the 'non-subscribers'). The controversy led to lasting animosity between the two camps. It arose after it emerged that several groups of dissenting students in the south west of England had been reading Samuel Clarke's *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705), Clarke's *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712), and William Whiston's *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd* (1711–12). Whiston and Clarke, neither of whom were dissenters, were two of the chief apologists for subordinationism, a belief that the Son and Holy Spirit were subordinate in power and authority to the Father. This conviction, accompanied by their preference for describing the Son as 'immediately created' by rather than 'co-eternal' with the Father, led to Whiston and Clarke being described as Arians. Both denied holding the view, attributed to Arius himself, that a time had existed before the Father's creation of the Son; however, Whiston was prepared to concede that he shared some of his

31 Wellcome Library, MS 3636.

32 Congregational Library, London, I.h.1–3.

33 Huntingdon Library, MS HM46326; Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford, Grove 1.

34 Earlier accounts of the controversy include Roger Thomas, 'The Non-Subscription Controversy amongst Dissenters in 1719: The Salters' Hall Debate', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 4 (1953), 162–86, and Allan Brockett, *Nonconformity in Exeter, 1650–1875* (Manchester, 1962), pp. 64–117.

views with the fourth-century followers of Arius who described the Son as a 'creature' of the Father.

Early twentieth-century accounts of the subscription controversy assumed that most of the non-subscribers were Arians, who had formed their views when they were students at the dissenters' private academies in the south west; in particular, their opinions had been shaped by attending academy lectures delivered by tutors who were sympathetic to the views of Whiston and Clarke. These views, it was argued, opened the door to late eighteenth-century Unitarianism.³⁵ There are a number of problems with this interpretation. Firstly, Whiston, Clarke and their followers used the term 'Arian' reluctantly, if at all. Secondly, both Whiston and Clarke viewed their writings explicitly as defences against Unitarianism (or, to use the term which they preferred, 'Socinianism'). Thirdly, not all of the students who read Whiston and Clarke shared their views. More recently, scholars have suggested that early eighteenth-century subscription controversies were not generally about Arianism at all, but about a defining principle of Protestant dissent – the right to freedom of conscience.³⁶ This interpretation may be accurate so far as it goes, but it is not a sufficient explanation. Firstly, it confuses freedom of conscience over doctrine, which few dissenters had ever permitted, with freedom of conscience over church government, which continued to be a principle used to justify the departure of puritan ministers from the church after the passage of the 1662 Act of Uniformity. Secondly, in suggesting that the controversy was primarily about freedom of conscience, some scholars have created the misleading impression that it was not about doctrine. However, it is evident that many of the core participants in the controversy became involved because of their doctrinal disagreements.

It used to be argued that dissenting students encountered the views of Clarke and Whiston in theology lectures at the so-called 'liberal' academies, such as those in Exeter, Taunton, Gloucester and Tewkesbury. This seems unlikely. None of the manuscript systems of learning which survive from the southern academies at this time

35 J.H. Colligan, *The Arian Movement in England* (Manchester, 1913). His views influenced later works on the same topic, e.g. Olive M. Griffiths, *Religion and Learning* (Cambridge, 1935), and C.G. Bolam, Jeremy Goring, H.L. Short, and Roger Thomas (eds), *The English Presbyterians from Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism* (London, 1967).

36 A.D.G. Steers, 'Samuel Haliday (1685–1739): Travelling Scholar, Court Lobbyist, and Non-Subscribing Divine', in Ruth Savage (ed.), *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain: New Case Studies* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 112–40.

mention Whiston or Clarke, and they share very few of the subjects, principles, or methods of these authors. There is no evidence that Whiston's 'Advice for the Study of Divinity' was adopted by dissenting tutors, and plenty of reasons to believe that tutors ignored his lists of books for divinity students. While it is clear that Henry Grove, the moral philosophy tutor at the Taunton academy, was critical of the traditional Calvinist focus on God's will, he was nevertheless a committed Athanasian Trinitarian.³⁷ Stephen James, the theology tutor at Taunton, was even less of an innovator: while he accepted that some strands of puritanism had underemphasised the importance of human free will, he criticised Richard Baxter – who was certainly no Arminian, let alone an Arian – for appearing to limit God's power and knowledge.³⁸ At Samuel Jones's academy in Tewkesbury, students were taught from a very early stage to treat new notions with caution. Unusually for tutors of the period, Jones did introduce students to John Locke's ideas; this was risky, since Locke had been prohibited at the English universities since 1702. However, Jones was typical of early eighteenth century dissenters in his view that Locke should be critiqued alongside writings by earlier logicians.³⁹ For his account of Jewish antiquities, Jones extended Witsius's notes and altered some of the wording to fit his Presbyterian views on church government, but he did not use the text to make any substantive points on Trinitarian doctrine.⁴⁰ Jones's brief work of biblical criticism, *Critica sacra*, was not intended to promote heterodox readings of scripture, although it did draw attention to textual differences between Bibles in different languages. However, Jones drew most of the information for this text directly from seventeenth-century sources including Selden, Bochart and Buxtorf; he did not intervene in the debate surrounding Whiston's views on the authenticity of early Christian epistles.⁴¹

In large measure, the subscription controversy was sparked not by academy lectures, but by student reading practices. It may have been an unintended consequence of the principle of 'free enquiry', which had

37 See, for example, Henry Grove, *An Essay towards a Demonstration of the Soul's Immateriality* (London, 1718).

38 Congregational Library, London, MS Ih1, ff. 29–98.

39 Bristol Baptist College Library, Ze1.

40 Burden, 'Academical Learning', pp. 213–19; Tessa Whitehouse, 'Intellectual and Textual Entrêpôts: 'Moses and Aaron', Herman Witsius and the International Transmission of Educational Texts', *English Studies* 92 (2011), 562–75.

41 These observations are based on a copy of the text in Birmingham University Library, XMS 401.

been in operation at some of the dissenters' academies since the 1680s. Later to be defined by Philip Doddridge as 'the pursuit of truth through the knowledge of error', the original purpose of free enquiry had been to expose students early in their career to erroneous philosophical and theological principles; in so doing, tutors hoped that their charges would come to understand the weakness of false opinions.⁴² During theology disputations at James Owen's academy in Shrewsbury, for instance, the tutor would not allow students to 'personate the Heterodox too much to the Life, and urge their Arguments or Objections with that Earnestness, as if they were really their own'.⁴³ Isaac Watts's tutor Thomas Rowe, an influential exponent of free enquiry, nevertheless provided students with notes on the strengths and weaknesses of a huge array of theological texts and biblical commentaries.⁴⁴ However, it is clear from academies in other parts of the country that students who read widely in theology sometimes formed opinions which were unacceptable to their tutors. While studying at John Chorlton's academy in Manchester c.1700, James Clegg frequently read in Chetham's library during the afternoons. There, after encountering works by Socinus, Episcopius and Crellius, Clegg confessed that he 'could never after be entirely reconciled to the common doctrine of the Trinity'.⁴⁵

III The Exeter Academy

An early focal point for the subscription controversy was Joseph Hallett's Exeter academy. At Exeter, the distinction between what was tolerable in private reading and what was permissible in student disputation became porous. According to the Devon minister Josiah Eveleigh, Whiston's 'new Notions about the *Trinity*, were toss'd about by Mr. Hallet's Accademicks, with too much Fondness'. Eveleigh believed that if Hallett had 'dissolv'd his Accademy, (as he ought to have done, if nothing less would be effectual)', much evil could have been prevented.⁴⁶ In a letter of 1719 Hubert Stogdon, a former student of Joseph Hallett's academy in Exeter, referred to Whiston as 'that

42 Rivers, *Pursuit of Truth*.

43 Owen, *James Owen*, 92.

44 Dr Williams's Library, 564.C.19.

45 James Clegg, *The Diary of James Clegg of Chapel en le Frith, 1708-1755*, ed. V.S. Doe, 3 vols (Matlock, 1978-81), III, pp. 912-16.

46 [Josiah Eveleigh], *An Account of the Reasons why Many Citizens of Exon have Withdrawn from the Minsitry of Mr. Jos. Hallet and Mr. James Peirce* (Exeter, 1719), 4.

excellent, and strictly conscientious, pious, and primitive divine'.⁴⁷ In 1719 an anonymous writer from the south west complained that many ministerial candidates came forth from their academical studies with the 'Taint' of Whiston's views, and that others who pretended to be orthodox at their ordination revealed their true beliefs soon after.⁴⁸

The controversy became problematic for the governing bodies of dissent in the south west when the private discussions of students began to affect the public activities of dissenting ministers. By 1717 the divinity of Christ was being disputed in the house of a layman who boarded some of Hallett's pupils; rumour spread that three dissenting ministers in Exeter favoured Arian notions, including Hallett's ministerial colleague James Peirce. In June 1717 Peirce delivered a sermon in which he quoted passages from Scripture about Christ, but prevaricated about the nature of Christ's Godhead. In 1718 the Exeter Assembly of Ministers debated the issue, and each minister made a profession of faith in the Trinity. A pamphlet war followed, and in November 1718, a group of laymen who monitored the Exeter Presbyterians, known as the Committee of Thirteen, desired the four Exeter ministers to demonstrate their orthodoxy, using either the words of the First Article of the Church of England, the Sixth Answer in the Westminster Assembly's catechism, or the words of the Exeter Assembly. Only one of the four ministers, John Lavington, agreed.⁴⁹ In Peirce's case, this non-subscription was demonstrably on account of theological disagreements with the Athanasian creed. When in 1720 he finally published his *Propositions* relating to the controversy, he included the following: that the Father of Christ was alone the One God (Propositions 2–3), that the Logos was a distinct being from the Father (Proposition 5), that the term God was used of the logical accidents of Christ, not of his being (Proposition 6), that Christ was not equal to God (Proposition 7), that the Father was the primary and principal cause of actions, and the Son the secondary cause (Proposition 9), that we are to worship the Son not from his Nature, but from his Father's appointment (Proposition 14), and that such worship was subordinate, to be referred to the Father (Proposition 15).⁵⁰

47 Hubert Stogdon, *Poems and Letters of the Late Reverend Mr. Hubert Stogdon* (London, 1729), p. 59.

48 *A Plain and Faithful Narrative of the Differences among the Dissenters at Exeter* (London, 1719), p. 6.

49 [Eveleigh], *Account*, pp. 3–6.

50 James Peirce, *Propositions relating to the Controversy among the Dissenters* (London, 1720).

When in 1719 the Committee of Thirteen sent a letter to dissenting ministers in London asking for advice, the London ministers held a meeting at Salters' Hall, at which a clear division opened between the 'subscribers' and the 'non-subscribers'. Each camp produced a list of their supporters; the list of seventy-eight 'subscribers' showed those who were willing to make a declaration of faith in the Trinity; the list of seventy-three 'non-subscribers' revealed those who had refused to do so, either because they did not believe the declaration to be correct, or because they disapproved of the principle of subscription.⁵¹ Once again, these lists suggest that it was not academy lectures so much as private study which influenced each minister's decision whether or not to 'subscribe'. Students of John Woodhouse, Timothy Jollie, Charles Morton, John Ker, Richard Frankland, and Thomas Doolittle signed both lists.⁵² At the top of the list of subscribers was William Lorimer, a tutor at Hoxton; also near the top of this list was his colleague at the academy, William Tong; however Joshua Oldfield, who also taught at the Hoxton academy, headed the list of non-subscribers.

Once again, however, many of the London ministers were exercised over points of doctrine as much as the principle of subscription. Indeed, there was a history of dissenting institutions fracturing over doctrinal disagreements. In the 1690s, a plan to achieve a 'Happy Union' between Presbyterians and Congregationalists foundered when the Congregationalists left in ignominious circumstances. According to the Congregational tutor Stephen Lobb, one of the key participants, the controversy was 'not about *Church-Order* but *Doctrinals*; and may be reduced to Two General Heads, viz. *Christ's Satisfaction*, and the *Penal Sanction of the Law*'.⁵³ Similarly, it was for theological reasons that the London ministers advised the Exeter Committee to adjudicate over Peirce and Hallett. The Committee later found that the Exeter pastors held errors of doctrine of sufficient significance for their people to withdraw from their ministries. When Hallett and Peirce again refused to subscribe to statements of doctrine drawn up by the Committee of Thirteen, they were ejected from their meeting-house, and set up a rival congregation in Exeter. Like the London ministers,

51 *A True Relation of Some Proceedings at Salters-Hall* (London, 1719); [Benjamin Grosvenor], *An Authentick Account of Several Things Done and Agreed upon by the Dissenting Ministers Lately Assembled at Salters-Hall* (London, 1719).

52 For lists of the students of these men, see Burden, 'Academical Learning', pp. 272–93, and *Dissenting Academies Online: Database and Encyclopedia*.

53 Stephen Lobb, *A Report of the Present State of the Differences in Doctrinals* (London, 1697).

the Exeter Assembly ministers divided into two camps of 'subscribers' and 'non-subscribers'; here, however, the two camps were divided along academy lines. Whereas the forty-six Exeter subscribers included ministers educated at a range of academies, including Bridgwater and Taunton, the list of twenty non-subscribers consisted almost entirely of Peirce, Hallett, and Hallett's students.⁵⁴ Of course, it is important to recognise that many of these men did not hold Arian or Socinian views; several of them were no doubt refusing to subscribe in support of their colleagues, on the basis that subscription was a foolhardy method for imposing upon individual conscience. Nevertheless, it is clear that the opinions of several of the 'non-subscribers' to the agreed form of words on the Trinity were not Athanasian.

One of the first students at the Exeter academy to consider Whiston's works sympathetically was the tutor's son, Joseph Hallett the younger. According to his fellow student John Fox, Hallett Jr 'fell into the Unitarian scheme' and 'held a secret correspondence with Mr. Whiston, then publishing his "Primitive Christianity."' Hallett Jr was not, in fact, a Unitarian, but he shared Whiston's belief in the subordination of the Son to the Father. Fox wrote that Hallett Jr was 'very grave, serious, and thinking', and had 'read most of any in the house', being 'well versed in divinity, morality and such kind of things as most suited him'. According to Fox, Hallett had 'a great propensity to rule and management', and was 'careful to maintain correspondencies which promoted these, and made him significant'. Part of Hallett's propensity to dominate was, ironically, expressed through his decision to pass several suspect theology books to his fellow students for their private reading. Fox's own views on the controversy developed after reading some of Hallett's books, including works by the Unitarian Thomas Emlyn and his orthodox respondent, Joseph Boyse. In Fox's words, the 'bare quotations' which Boyse gave from Emlyn, 'seemed to strike so strongly, that I began to doubt from that moment', notwithstanding Fox's 'natural prejudices' in favour of orthodoxy, and Boyse's art and learning. Fox and Hallett discussed these suspect texts in a group of about five or six students, who 'conversed with great caution and secresy' about the issues which they raised.⁵⁵

54 *A True Account of what was Transacted in the Assembly of the United Ministers of Devon and Cornwall, met at Exon, May 5. and 6. 1719* (London, 1719); James Peirce, *Remarks upon the Account of what was Transacted in the Assembly in Exon* (London, 1719), pp. 37-39.

55 John Fox, *Memoirs of Himself, by Mr. John Fox, of Plymouth: with Biographical Sketches of some of his Contemporaries; and some unpublished Letters from*

It was the indiscretion of another student of Hallett Sr, Hubert Stogdon, which triggered the crisis at Exeter; his tutor later described him as 'sober', 'religiously inclined', and 'diligent', with an 'eager thirst after knowledge', 'great acuteness', and 'solidity of judgment'.⁵⁶ These comments are one of the few surviving indications that Hallett Sr was sympathetic to his students as they wrestled with their conscience over points of doctrine. Challenging one's natural prejudices could be extremely traumatic. Initially, Stogdon believed that any departure from the Westminster Assembly's explication of the Trinity would be extremely dangerous. His future ministerial colleague, John Billingsley, wrote that Stogdon changed his mind 'by slow degrees, laborious and humble enquiries', and only after 'many prayers and tears'. Billingsley believed that Stogdon settled in his views as a result of 'long and deliberate reading, and examining both sides of the question'. Eventually, Stogdon settled as a subordinationist. After he had privately expressed the belief that his new position was 'more clear, consistent, and scriptural' than Athanasian doctrine, the matter spread across Exeter, causing him to be labelled with 'opprobrious and reproachful names, such as *Arian*, *Deist*, *Atheist*, &c.' In order to prevent a confrontation with the Exeter Assembly, Stogdon agreed not to seek ordination at the next meeting, but retreated to a small congregation meeting fortnightly at Wookey, near Wells at Midsummer 1717.⁵⁷ Stogdon was ordained in 1718 in the dissenting chapel at Shepton Mallett, where the minister was Matthew Towgood, another academy tutor sympathetic to the future non-subscribers. At his ordination, Stogdon recited a lengthy declaration of his beliefs, in which he avoided direct discussion of the divinity of Christ, but disowned 'any living infallible judge of controversies upon earth' and renounced any doctrine 'which denies to any man the liberty of reading the scriptures ... under the pretence of the danger of broaching heresy'.⁵⁸ These were familiar anti-Catholic declarations, but in Stogdon's case they also reflected his dissatisfaction with the imposition of non-scriptural expressions.

Archbishop Secker and Dr. Samuel Chandler', *The Monthly Repository* 16 (1821), 131.

56 Nicholas Billingsley, *A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Late Reverend Mr. Hubert Stogdon* (London, 1728), p. 18.

57 Billingsley, *Stogdon*, pp. 20–22.

58 Billingsley, *Stogdon*, pp. 22–33.

IV The Wider Significance of the Controversy

The spread of a range of views on the Trinity and the authority of the Scriptures may also be witnessed at several other academies in the south west. It is not always appropriate to characterise these views as 'Arian' or 'Socinian' or 'unorthodox', since in many cases students were making an honest attempt to reconcile their critical learning and opinions with Church of England creeds and confessions, and dissenting declarations of faith. Neither is it necessarily correct to categorise students at other academies in the 1710s as subscribers or non-subscribers. These terms only acquired their formal significance after the controversy reached its zenith in 1719; even after that date, many dissenting intellectuals refused to position themselves on either side. Nevertheless the complex relationship between the academies and the subscription controversy can be studied using the considerable surviving evidence relating to student opinions at Samuel Jones's Tewkesbury academy. This is particularly useful, since Jones's students included several of the most influential philosophers and theologians of the early eighteenth century, including the philosopher Joseph Butler, the future prelate Thomas Secker, and the academy tutor Jeremiah Jones.

By 1713 Butler had read Clarke's *Demonstration* appreciatively, and had embarked upon a secret correspondence with him. Butler's letters reveal that he was no slavish disciple of Clarke, but neither did he provide an Athanasian critique of Clarke's views. Instead, Butler began his correspondence by requesting further demonstration of Clarke's argument that to suppose two independently self-existing beings was contradictory. Butler's wording was not strictly orthodox, since the Athanasian creed did not posit that the father and the son were independently self-existing beings, but that they were two distinct persons. Butler was also critical of Clarke's belief that the self-existence of a finite being would make its non-existence a contradiction in terms. Yet in denying this principle, Butler was moving closer to deism, not closer to orthodoxy. By the end of their correspondence, Butler had accepted Clarke's argument against the deists that an absolutely necessary being had to exist everywhere. However, he was still prepared to outflank Clarke by criticising his assumption that every property of a self-existent substance was as necessary as the substance.⁵⁹

59 [Joseph Butler], *Several Letters to the Reverend Dr. Clarke, from a Gentleman in Gloucestershire, relating to the First Volume of the Sermons Preached at Mr Boyle's Lecture* (London, 1716).

According to John Fox, the young Thomas Secker was 'strong in Dr Clarke's scheme about the Trinity', which made him 'under great difficulty about subscribing the [Church of England] Articles'. Secker's early support for the non-subscribers is evident in his surviving letters. In 1718 Secker wrote to Fox of the 'noble resolution' of the London ministers to increase 'Mr. Stockden's [i. e. Stogdon's] allowance', despite the silent opposition of William Tong, and remarked on his 'great pleasure' at 'what Mr. Peirce does at Exeter'.⁶⁰ When Secker conformed and swiftly moved up the Church of England hierarchy, Fox commented that there had to have been 'a very great alteration, both in his temper and principles' for him to have 'stooped to such preferments, as I knew he once despised'.⁶¹ Another student at Tewkesbury was Daniel Scott, who later studied theology at Leiden; his biblical scholarship earned the appreciation, if not always the approbation, of Secker, Butler, and Philip Doddridge. In *An Essay Towards a Demonstration of the Scripture-Trinity*, published pseudonymously under the name 'Philanthropus Londin', Scott used a geometrical method consisting of axioms, definitions, corollaries, and scholia, in an attempt to prove the heterodox case that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were 'three distinct Spirits, of which the Father only is God'.⁶²

Not all of Samuel Jones's students were supporters of Clarke and Whiston. In *A Vindication of the Former Part of St. Matthew's Gospel, from Mr. Whiston's Charge of Dislocations* (1719), Jeremiah Jones sought to prove that the extant Greek copies of the gospel told their narrative in the same order as they were originally written by Matthew. The prefatory epistle, addressed to Samuel Jones, praised his 'unwearied ... Endeavours' to revive understanding of the original languages of the Scriptures, and claimed that it was owing to him that 'a great Number of Youth' were now attempting to understand them.⁶³ Some of Jones's students did indeed side with the non-subscribers on account of their opposition to subscription, not because they shared Clarke's doctrines. Thomas Mole, minister at Uxbridge (1725–8), Jamaica Row, London (1728–46), and the Gravel Pit, Hackney (1746–76), defended the principle of the 'sacred Authority of Jesus Christ' against 'Faction and Enthusiasm', and used St Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians to urge dissenters to 'lay aside their Contention', since 'a Unity of

60 Fox, 'Memoirs', 634.

61 Fox, 'Memoirs', 193–94.

62 [Daniel Scott], *An Essay Towards a Demonstration of the Scripture-Trinity* (London, 1725), p. 1.

63 Jones, *Vindication*, pp. i–ii.

Affection is as necessary, as a Unity of Opinion is impossible'.⁶⁴ During his ordination at the Old Jewry on 11 January 1721 Obadiah Hughes, a non-subscriber, gave a lengthy confession of faith which was printed later in the year; the text was dedicated to his friends under the charge of Joshua Oldfield, whom he had been asked to assist. Hughes's confession avoided most of the controverted points about the nature of Christ's divinity, but accepted him as divine.⁶⁵

V Conclusion

The subscription controversy of 1719 provides a useful vantage-point from which to draw some general conclusions about the contribution which academies in the south west of England made to theological debate in the early eighteenth century. The role of these academies in the controversy was less uniform than is sometimes assumed. The academies did not educate a generation of Arian ministers. Yet neither were the disagreements in the south west about subscription alone. The Exeter academy certainly produced a large number of non-subscribing ministers, but their theology was varied. Students from Samuel Jones's Tewkesbury academy were not uniformly of the non-subscribing party, but several of them were sympathetic to the views of Whiston and Clarke. Part of the reason for this variety lay in the conflicting expectations placed upon academy tutors. Students at many of the dissenters' academies were encouraged to debate arguments for and against orthodox positions, but when a tutor failed to prevent his students from openly expressing heterodox beliefs, as happened to Hallett at Exeter, his academy could be forced to close. Over time the theological opinions of academy students did change. However, these changes were not the direct result of academy lectures, but reflected student reading practices. The academies, then, were only indirectly a motor of theological change, but change was nevertheless taking place.

64 Thomas Mole, *A Farewel Sermon Preached at Uxbridge* (London, 1728), sig. A2v, 12, 19.

65 Obadiah Hughes, *A Confession of Faith, Deliver'd at the Old Jewry, January 11th, 1720/21* (London, 1721), pp. 5–13.