Republican learning: John Toland and the crisis of Christian culture, 1696-1722

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This book explores the life, thought and political commitments of the free-thinker John Toland (1670-1722). Studying both his private archive and published works, it illustrates how he moved in both subversive and elite political circles in England and abroad. The book explores the connections between Toland's republican political thought and his irreligious belief about Christian doctrine, the ecclesiastical establishment and divine revelation, arguing that far from being a marginal and insignificant figure, he counted queens, princes and government ministers as his friends and political associates. In particular, Toland's intimate relationship with the Electress Sophia of Hanover saw him act as a court philosopher, but also as a powerful publicist for the Hanoverian succession. The book argues that he shaped the republican tradition after the Glorious Revolution into a practical and politically viable programme, focused not on destroying the monarchy but on reforming public religion and the Church of England. It also examines how Toland used his social intimacy with a wide circle of men and women (ranging from Prince Eugene of Savoy to Robert Harley) to distribute his ideas in private. The book explores the connections between his erudition and print culture, arguing that his intellectual project was aimed at compromising the authority of Christian 'knowledge' as much as the political power of the Church. Overall, it illustrates how Toland's ideas and influence impacted upon English political life between the 1690s and the 1720s.

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Noting that the ‘anti-Christian’ Toland refused the ministrations of the Church on his deathbed the general opinion was that Toland had received his just deserts. As Hearne put it, he was no more than an ‘impious wretch’. Some contemporaries did, however, mourn his death. Locating John Toland truth, breaking both political and intellectual chains, would inspire ‘noble emulation’ in the youth of the nation. Far from being an icon of impiety, Toland was a hero of liberty, who had ‘freed our minds of superstitious pains’. Typically, for a man sensitive to his reputation, Toland wrote his own epitaph. By locating Toland’s writings within a wider intellectual, social and political culture, the ambition is to contribute to an understanding of the nature of political debate in the period of his life. John Toland (November 30, 1670 - March 11, 1722) was an Irish-born British philosopher, linguist, translator, political and religious polemicist, and diplomat, known as a deist and a pantheist. Raised as a Roman Catholic, he converted to Protestantism at 16 and studied theology at the University of Glasgow. He admired the works of Lucretius and Giordano Bruno, and in 1696 published Christianity not Mysterious, claiming that all revelation was human revelation and could not contradict reason, and that there were no facts or doctrines from the Bible which were not perfectly plain and reasonable. 2003. Republican learning John Toland and the crisis of Christian culture, 1696-1722. Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN 1417582693 ISBN 9781417582693.