

## William Godwin and Catholicism

Historians like Lynda Colley continue rightly to remind us of the extent to which a shared Protestantism helped cohere the disparate peoples of the newly-formed United Kingdom. Others, most notably Jonathan Clark, have fruitfully problematized this picture emphasizing how Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century was a “confessional state” as marked by its repudiation of Protestant Dissent as of Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> Both positions have their difficulties: Protestantism (even Anglicanism) was never as unified, nor was Anglicanism as consistently opposed to Dissent and Catholicism as these useful, though overly neat, caricatures suggest.<sup>2</sup> Even so, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the growing ranks of British Nonconformists were faced with an especially complicated task as they grappled with the religious dimensions of British history, national identity and citizenship, a problematic in which attitudes to Catholicism figured centrally. The contours of this complex terrain are usefully illustrated in the historiographical activity of the novelist, philosopher and ex-Dissenting minister, William Godwin (1756-1836). This essay traces Godwin’s changing attitude to Catholicism by exploring a variety of texts generally considered marginal to his *oeuvre* and a hitherto unexamined selection of his unpublished manuscripts.<sup>3</sup>

Britain’s premier radical intellectual of the Romantic period, Godwin is

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London: Random House, 1996); J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland c. 1650 – c. 1850* ed. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See especially the essays by Colin Haydon, Jeremy Black and Brian Young. See also Clark’s critique of Colley’s thesis in J. C. D. Clark, “Protestantism, Nationalism, and National Identity, 1660-1832”, *The Historical Journal* 43, 1 (2000): 249-76.

<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of Godwin’s unpublished writings are contained in the Abinger Collection held by the Bodleian Library. This archive has recently been recatalogued, though the new shelfmarks are easily matched with the old which I employ here.

remembered today primarily as author of the anarchist *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and the pioneering detective novel/psychological thriller *Caleb Williams* (1794). As his fellow Dissenter William Hazlitt later remarked, these works procured for Godwin, albeit briefly, “the very zenith of a sultry and unwholesome popularity.”<sup>4</sup> If initial reception of his work had been generally positive, conservative reaction to the French Revolution and the principles espoused by English Jacobins caused public opinion very quickly to turn against Godwin. The government-subsidised *Anti-Jacobin Review* particularly targeted Godwinism, denouncing it as a philosophy characterised by, and devoted to, “the annihilation of all systems of religion and government... .”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Godwin became, somewhat undeservedly, so associated with the radical “new philosophy” that by the beginning of the nineteenth century he was making his living pseudonymously writing children’s books.<sup>6</sup> In time, Godwin’s reputation was rehabilitated though he never achieved the popularity he had enjoyed in the mid-1790s with *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, texts which still attract the vast majority of scholarly interest and comment. Godwin’s literary output was prodigious and wide-ranging, however; and it is only in relatively recent times that scholars have commenced the task of uncovering the full significance of his lesser-known writings, particularly those reflecting on history.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (London: Collins, 1969), 35

<sup>5</sup> *Anti-Jacobin Review* September, 1798, 334.

<sup>6</sup> Still useful is B. Sprague Allen’s “The Reaction Against William Godwin,” *Modern Philology* 16 (1918): 57-75.

<sup>7</sup> Notable among the limited commentary on Godwin’s historical writings are the following: John Morrow, “Republicanism and Public Virtue: William Godwin’s *History of the Commonwealth of England*”, *The Historical Journal* 34 (1991): 645-664; Tillotama Rajan, ‘Uncertain Futures: History and Genealogy in William Godwin’s *The Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton*’, *Milton Quarterly* 32 (1998): 75-86; Rowland Weston, “Politics, Passion and the Puritan Temper: Godwin’s Critique of Enlightened Modernity”, *Studies in Romanticism* 41 (2002): 445-470; Rowland Weston, “History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge: William Godwin’s *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809)”, *The European Legacy* 14 (2009): 651-665. Most recently, four essays on Godwin’s historical practice – though still from the perspective of his supposed primary significance as a philosopher and novelist

In 1806, writing as Theophilus Marcliffe, Godwin published a school text *Life of Lady Jane Grey*, a work concerned with what remained for Godwin – as it did for his contemporaries – one of history’s “great objects...the Reformation.”<sup>8</sup> While the work’s categorisation of Catholicism as “tyranny and nonsense” and “superstition and idolatry”<sup>9</sup> might appear churlish and bigoted to modern readers, Godwin’s readership would rather have been surprised at his preparedness generally to extend historicist sympathies to sixteenth century Catholics and even to criticize some Protestant protagonists and their actions. In conclusion the work encourages the reader to be grateful for the undoubted progress induced by the Reformation, but to avoid the divisive and destructive consequences of over-identification with the parties to that conflict.

“This contest is now happily over: the Protestants, by establishing the Reformation, have spread the seeds of knowledge and liberty over Europe; and the Roman Catholics are at this day reaping the benefits of those improvements, which their forefathers were eager to oppose.”<sup>10</sup>

Discouraging sectarian historical identities was doubtless a sensible strategy for a Dissenter.<sup>11</sup> Extending his sympathies so explicitly to Catholics, however, was not a move Godwin would have been prepared to make earlier in his career. The tacit historiography underpinning his *Political Justice* was a commonplace of late

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– have appeared in *Godwinian Moments: From the Enlightenment to Romanticism* ed. Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Theophilus Marcliffe, *The Life of Lady Jane Grey and of Lord Guildford Dudley, her husband*, (London: Thomas Hodgkins, 1806), vi. Godwin’s emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Marcliffe, *The Life of Lady Jane Grey*, 27-28, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Marcliffe, *The Life of Lady Jane Grey*, 111-12.

<sup>11</sup> We do well to remember how much middle class reformism of the period – including Godwin’s *Political Justice* – emanated specifically from Dissenters protesting their exclusion from full participation in civic and economic life. See Isaac Kramnick, “Religion and Radicalism: English Political Theory in the Age of Revolution”, *Political Theory* 5, 4 (1977): 505-34.

eighteenth century Rational Dissent.<sup>12</sup> Extending the so-called 'Rationalist' historiographies of Voltaire, Hume, Gibbon and others, Godwin saw the process of enlightenment begun in the Renaissance, reaching its logical and most telling expression in the Reformation, an event which "gave an irrecoverable shock to the [medieval, Catholic] empire of superstition and implicit obedience."<sup>13</sup> The most fulsome illustration of the early Godwin's dismissive attitude to Catholicism can be found in his unperformed play *Dunstan*, written in 1790 as, he says, his "mind became more and more impregnated with the principles afterwards developed in...*Political Justice*."<sup>14</sup>

The play details events supposedly occurring around St Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury in the late tenth century. Godwin's general conception of the middle ages in this play is pretty much illustrative of Protestant/Rationalist historiography; and his version and interpretation of events would have been recognizable to, and approved by, his anticipated audience, for whom the standard and most popular work on English history was Hume's *History of England* (1754-62).<sup>15</sup> Dunstan, "...one of those numerous saints of the same stamp who disgrace the Romish calendar," was, for Hume, a self-deluded, religious fanatic who, as a consequence of the unenlightened and superstitious nature of his times, managed to gain a damaging influence over the tenth century English.<sup>16</sup> Godwin's dramatic version

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<sup>12</sup> Over the course of the eighteenth century, more liberal streams of Dissent developed extending this emphasis on private judgment and marrying it with prevalent notions of the power of human reason. As a consequence, such (Rational) Dissenters conceived true Christianity as that which conformed to the dictates of reason. See Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 464ff.

<sup>13</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence On Morals and Happiness*, ed. F. E. L. Priestley, 3 vols. 3d ed. (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1946), 1. 450-51.

<sup>14</sup> William Godwin, "Autobiographical Notes" in *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp (Pickering & Chatto: London, 1992), 1.48.

<sup>15</sup> On the popularity of Hume's *History*, see John Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England Since the Renaissance*, 2nd. ed. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), 59, 86.

<sup>16</sup> David Hume, *The History of England* (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1983), 1. 90-96.

follows this Humean line, although he invents quite a bit to hammer home the point that the Catholic Church is characteristically riddled with priestcraft and superstition and is consequently ever the enemy of natural morality and true sociability. The following specimen is typical:

“ Headlong & blind is superstitions [sic] rule,  
 And in this island has she fix'd her throne.  
 Before the mitred delegates of Rome  
 You senseless people yield entire submission;  
 And, as the haughty priest extends his hand  
 To bless, they bend the supple knee, & lift their eyes  
 In holy wonder of his condescension.  
 Darkness & ignorance, unletter'd barbarism  
 Came forth the prelude of this bold imposture,  
 Now should these holy cheats direct the son  
 To plunge his dagger in the father's bosom,  
 And place the weapon, breach'd in sacrilegious gore  
 Upon the altar, he would fly to do it.  
 Order, & sacred law, the hinge of nations  
 Are thus unsettled, & confusion comes  
 Chaos & death, to reassert their empire.”<sup>17</sup>

The Humean attitude to Catholicism – or at least a simplified, unsophisticated version of it – reflected that of most Britons at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In

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<sup>17</sup> William Godwin, *Dunstan*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep c. 663/1. This text is now available in David O'Shaughnessy, *The Plays of William Godwin* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> For a recent summation of the intricacies of Humean historiography with regard to the roles of 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm' in British/English culture, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume 2: Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 209-21.

this view, Britain's egregious liberty and prosperity was created and safeguarded by the Anglican state-church nexus's provision of a rational and stable *via media* between the twin dangers of "superstition", Catholicism and despotism on the one hand and the "enthusiasm", antinomianism and republicanism associated with radical Protestantism on the other.<sup>19</sup> For their part, Dissenters could employ this paradigm in critiquing aspects of church and state policy, and even the alliance between church and state itself, as Godwin was to do in *Dunstan*. Indeed, as David O'Shaughnessy argues, Godwin probably abandoned the work because its criticism of the interconnection of Church and State would have been too politically sensitive in the context of debates over the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.<sup>20</sup> Given that he worked intermittently on the play until as late as 1795,<sup>21</sup> it is also possible that Godwin was tempted to abandon it as the reflexive anti-Catholicism characteristic of the hitherto prevalent historiographical orthodoxy lost some of its purchase on the British imagination in the context of war with republican France. That is, emphasizing Catholicism as the arch-enemy was increasingly impolitic in an environment in which Christianity itself seemed under threat and that threat could be seen in some quarters to emanate from, or at least be nurtured in, the more liberal or 'Rational' varieties of Protestant Dissent.

This latter perception was due in no small part to Edmund Burke's pointed association – in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) – of atheistic French republicanism with the seventeenth century English Puritan regicides from whom

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<sup>19</sup> Hume, *The History of England*, 6. 530-31. See also Hume's essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm", in *Essays. Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1985), 73-79.

<sup>20</sup> David O'Shaughnessy, *William Godwin and the Theatre* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 51-81; "The vehicle he has chosen": Pointing out the theatricality of *Caleb Williams*", *History of European Ideas* 33 (2007): 54-71.

<sup>21</sup> Godwin "revised and updated [the play] from time to time, and as late as 1795, he was still contemplating bringing it forward for possible production or publication." William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: the Biography of a Family* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 116.

many late eighteenth century Nonconformists traced their theological descent.<sup>22</sup> By the late 1790s, a number of works appeared putatively exposing a radical, anti-Christian conspiracy inspired by the “new philosophy.”<sup>23</sup> A specifically English manifestation of this genre was William Reid’s *The Rise and Dissolution of Infidel Societies in this Metropolis* (1800). Like most British conservatives, Reid traced the history of infidelity in England to the Puritan Interregnum of the seventeenth century, emphasising the intimate intellectual connections between contemporary infidels like Godwin and the radical “sectarists” of that earlier period.<sup>24</sup>

Godwin thus had good pragmatic reasons for softening his line with regard to Catholicism. His revisionism in this regard is, however, also due – is perhaps mostly due – to changes in his moral philosophy. This is evidenced initially in his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1803), a social and intellectual history of England in the fourteenth century. As he came to downplay his erstwhile hyper-rationalism and regard humanity’s somatic, emotional and habitual reflexes more favourably, Godwin was prepared to acknowledge the superior capacity of various Catholic doctrines and rituals to express and inculcate legitimate religious sentiments in a less-intellectualized, pre-modern culture. In time, his views were to move beyond an appreciation of the contextual fitness of Catholicism to a more emphatic assertion of its signal importance in the development of salutary modern attitudes and institutions.<sup>25</sup> Relatedly, Godwin’s historiographical priorities and practice underwent a significant shift. Moving away from the triumphalist grand narratives unreservedly

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<sup>22</sup> C. C. O'Brien, "Introduction" to Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 22-41.

<sup>23</sup> Most famously, John Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe* (1797) and Abbé Augustin Barruel’s *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797-98).

<sup>24</sup> W. H. Reid, *The Rise and Dissolution of Infidel Societies in this Metropolis* in *Literacy and Society* ed. Victor E. Neuberg (London: The Woburn Press, 1971), iii-v, 3-8, 69-70, 74-75, 83-84.

<sup>25</sup> Weston, “Politics, Passion and the Puritan Temper,” 445-470.

(if often tacitly) celebrating particular sectarian heritages, Godwin came to employ his historical investigations in the pursuit of the moral instruction and inspiration which derives from an intimate acquaintance with exemplary personalities.<sup>26</sup>

An instructive early attempt in this direction can be observed in the manuscript fragment “On the composition of History; An occasional Reflection,” written sometime after 1807.<sup>27</sup> In this extended and sympathetic examination of the Catholic martyr, St Thomas More, Godwin compares the latter’s account of his torture of the Protestant reformer James Bainham in *The Apologye of Syr Thomas More, Knyght* (1533) with extracts from three influential and unsympathetic contemporary narratives: Hume’s *History of England*, James Pettit Andrews’ *History of Great Britain* (1794-5) and Robert Henry’s *The History of Great Britain* (1771-93). He argues that the first accounts of an event – no matter how erroneous, and these often are – tend to be adopted uncritically by all subsequent historians, often encouraged to do so by partisan agenda.<sup>28</sup> In the Bainham case the very flawed and biased source referred to is Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, a staple of the young Godwin’s reading and a continuing source of popular anti-Catholic sentiment in Georgian England.<sup>29</sup>

Godwin finds More’s *Apologye* a fascinating example of a man consciously refusing to accept calumny and the false representation of his views or person. Vilified by Britain’s anti-Jacobins as a revolutionary atheist, Godwin identifies with the sixteenth century Catholic statesman and scholar as a fellow humanist and

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<sup>26</sup> Weston, “History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge.”

<sup>27</sup> “On the composition of History; An occasional Reflection”, Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 226/6. The essay is written on paper watermarked 1808.

<sup>28</sup> Godwin, “On the composition of History”.

<sup>29</sup> Colin Haydon, “‘I love my King and my Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate’: anti-catholicism, xenophobia and national identity in eighteenth-century England” in *Protestantism and National Identity*, 40-42. For Godwin’s early exposure to Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* see William Godwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” 18.



*philosophe*. More, Godwin opines, was not actuated by class loyalty or even, astonishingly, by religious expectation. He was, above all, “a scholar, free from the shackles of the ecclesiastical profession,” and motivated by “a deep feeling of public interest & virtue.”<sup>30</sup> For Godwin, More was, like himself, a free-thinking, enlightened patriot incidentally embroiled in and sullied by contemporary politico-religious controversies.

In his now much-cited manuscript essay “Of History and Romance” (1797),<sup>31</sup> Godwin stressed the superior value of “individual history” or biography over “general history”. History is ultimately of most profit as it uncovers human psychology and provides exemplary characters for emulation.<sup>32</sup> Most historians are differently motivated, however. All who have written about More have, revealingly, neglected his *Apologye*, despite its ready availability. Godwin finds Hume’s failure to use the work particularly puzzling given the Scotsman’s customary cool regard for the early English Reformation and his partiality for More. For all his literary ability, this most popular of historians was, Godwin contends, “the most superficially informed...of all historians,” and among the most partial. Godwin laments, then, that English history and historians have thus obscured the merits of a virtuous and fascinating individual through at best ignorance and most probably through prejudice.

While admitting that More’s Catholicism and antipathy to Protestantism render the statesman troubling to a contemporary readership, the historicist in Godwin demands that we attempt properly to understand these proclivities, that is, to understand the man himself. The ideal object of the historian, he opines, is a perfect

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<sup>30</sup> Godwin, “On the composition of History”.

<sup>31</sup> William Godwin, “Essay of History and Romance”, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin* vol. 5, *Educational and Literary Writings* ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993): 291-301.

<sup>32</sup> See also Weston, “History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge”.

empathy with his subjects.<sup>33</sup> While Godwin admits that this is not ultimately achievable, he undertakes a sympathetic reconstruction of the world view of More. Yet in its attempts to be even-handed and empathetic, the essay concludes indecisively with a not entirely admirable portrait of the Catholic knight and saint. Godwin stresses More's sense of the tried and tested validity and continuity of the Church and notes the moral value of certain of its institutions. In the light of More's conviction that the unity of the Church was essential to the survival of Christendom, Godwin maintains that there is much in More's conduct that can be explained and excused. At the same time he is definite in his condemnation of More's attempted violation of the right of private judgement in the torture and execution of dissenters. But in thus condemning More we must admit the benefit of hindsight – More's fears for the survival of Christendom were ill-founded. This was not so certain at the time, however:

“It is certainly a great mistake to call the questions then at issue mere speculative opinions. They were...as practical as the disquisitions on political liberty & political power & the rights of man, which preceded the French revolution, & bore a much more formidable aspect. Political disquisitions seemed the business of the studious or the idle; but religion has always come home to the feelings of all mankind. The Christian church, as hitherto established, must stand, or must fall; toleration seemed to be no part of the question.”<sup>34</sup>

In placing the religious controversies of the early sixteenth century in parallel with the political debate prior to the French Revolution, Godwin further underlines his

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<sup>33</sup> ‘No historian & no critic has given himself the trouble to assign the reason, & make a true estimate, of this conduct. Nothing is in appearance so simple, as the fundamental laws of moral judgement; the putting ourselves in the place of the party, seeing those things, & those only, which he saw, of feeling what he felt: & yet in practise, not only no ordinary man, & no sectary, but no moralist, & no historian, is formed competent to the application of this rule.’ Godwin, “On the composition of History”.

<sup>34</sup> Godwin, “On the composition of History”.

identification with More and suggests, perhaps, that his own, at times injudicious, political and philosophical pronouncements be afforded a similar degree of historicist empathy. One also senses a veiled critique of the paucity of toleration in the current polity. For “religious” issues clearly continued to be of immense “practical” importance in Britain at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were reflected in, and encouraged by, partisan historiographies.

The Revolutionary Wars prolonged newly-revived fears of Dissent’s historical association with republicanism and Humean “enthusiasm” and thus held in further abeyance the liberalization of proscriptions against Dissenters expected early in the 1790s.<sup>35</sup> Unsurprisingly then, between the end of hostilities in 1815 and the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 Godwin’s historiographical focus was very much on his seventeenth century Nonconformist forebears.<sup>36</sup> Yet although these varied writings assert Puritanism’s rational and patriotic credentials, they do so without descent into the denigration of Catholicism automatically invited by the ‘Humean’ historiographical paradigm. Indeed, in the novel *Mandeville. A Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England* (1817), Catholicism is presented as the sane and sociable repository of true religiosity, while the specific Puritanism of the novel’s eponymous protagonist (a man-devil) is unreservedly condemned. A more sympathetic reading of seventeenth century Puritanism – at least in its republican manifestation – is proffered in the *History of the Commonwealth* (1824-28); yet the general lesson Godwin draws from his extended studies of the seventeenth century is of the utter redundancy of the sectarian heritages upon which modern Britons

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<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 64-65.

<sup>36</sup> William Godwin, *Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton. Including Various Particulars of the Literary and Political History of Their Times* (1815); *Mandeville: A Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England* (1817); *History of the Commonwealth of England. From its Commencement, to the Restoration of Charles the Second* (1824-28).

reflexively relied for communal and personal identity. Such legacies, he insists, are not to be regarded as necessary and indelible determinants of the current polity famously defended by Hume as the best of all possible political worlds. Rather, they ought to be selectively employed as resources with which to construct a new sense of British identity and solidarity.<sup>37</sup> Such a project clearly implied a more sophisticated, non-partisan appreciation of those heritages.

Immediately following Catholic Emancipation and the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts Godwin sensed a public more receptive to less sectarian narrations of its past and in 1832 penned a “Prospectus of a History of the Protestant Reformation in England.” Noting that Reformation history had always been written “in a spirit of party” and no doubt promoting himself to a prospective publisher as the ideal candidate, he asserts the necessity for an impartial examiner prepared to focus on the various intentions and motives of protagonists on both sides of the issue.<sup>38</sup> Despite this statement of impartiality, however, the prospectus opens with the unequivocal assertion that “The grand characteristic of the Protestant Reformation was that it was the dawn of intellectual liberty to man.” He remarks equally emphatically that the intention and characteristic of Catholicism is to subjugate the mind. And although he does allow that some limited progress occurred in the middle ages, it was the Reformation which enabled real and continued progress by insisting that no limits be placed upon intellectual freedom:

“If any man therefore is satisfied that freedom of thought & of speech, & a free press, are insignificant advantages, he may consistently be an enemy to the

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<sup>37</sup> Rowland Weston, “William Godwin and the Puritan Legacy”, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 39 (2012): 411-42. Hume contended that as a consequence of the Glorious Revolution, “it may justly be affirmed, without any danger of exaggeration, that we, in this island, have ever since enjoyed...the most entire system of liberty, that ever was known amongst mankind.” *The History of England*. 6, 530-31.

<sup>38</sup> William Godwin, “Prospectus of a History of the Protestant Reformation in England,” Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 226/5. This essay is paginated. See, 3, 5.

Protestant Reformation, for to the Protestant Reformation we are unquestionably indebted for these.”<sup>39</sup>

Though Godwin’s “Prospectus” scarcely suggests the non-partisan biographical analysis promised, we cannot assume his ultimate position to be that of an unreconstructed, Whiggish-Protestant triumphalism. At this time Godwin was also making notes towards his *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*, a work in which he was at his most emphatic and explicit in asserting the superiority of medieval Catholicism to many aspects of post-Reformation culture. Admittedly, these sentiments occur in a work primarily designed to demonstrate the overwhelming moral and intellectual poverty of Christianity in general (it was for this reason that the work was not published until 1873, more than three decades after Godwin’s death). Yet it seems that the freedom he allowed himself (privately) to attack Christianity in general enabled him more even-handedly to assess the respective defects and merits of its various sectarian expressions.<sup>40</sup> His views in this regard have much in common with those expressed by William Cobbett in the latter’s *History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland* (1824-27) which Godwin knew well.<sup>41</sup>

Cobbett’s work may be seen as the culmination of a long tradition of revisionist attitudes to the religious and social practices of the middle ages.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> William Godwin, “Prospectus of a History of the Protestant Reformation in England,” 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Rowland Weston, ‘William Godwin’s Religious Sense’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (2009): 407- 423.

<sup>41</sup> Godwin’s diary notes that he consulted Cobbett’s work in February and March, 1829, and again in September, 1832. Godwin’s Diary has recently been digitised and is available at <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/index2.html>

<sup>42</sup> For an especially informative discussion of this medievalist tradition in England and its culmination in authors such as Southey, Carlyle, Scott and Cobbett, see Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1971(1970)). That a degree of admiration for the pre-Reformation Church existed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, cannot be doubted. See, Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), 231-32.

Certainly his searing indictment<sup>43</sup> of the British Reformation and its consequences had been prepared by a series of ‘Romantic’ reappraisals of the middle ages and the Roman Church, to which Godwin’s *Life of Chaucer* was an astutely conceived addition. In his *History*, Cobbett argued the thesis – radical for an English Protestant – that the Reformation, rather than providing the initial impetus for the creation of a prosperous and independent polity, had been a bloodthirsty and self-interested *coup* by the emerging middle classes which had the effect of destroying the security and prosperity of the poor as well as the hitherto pervasive sentiments of “charity and benevolence which were essentially connected with the religion of our forefathers.”<sup>44</sup> Godwin’s notes for *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* – if not his finished text – express a sustained critique of the social consequences of the Reformation which owes much to Cobbett or at least to the revisionist tradition upon which both men drew.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, Godwin also expresses a horror of the intellectual innovation – the Humean “enthusiasm” – implicit in the Reformist challenge to authority which contemporary conservative opinion would have heartily endorsed.

“...we foresee, & partly already, begin to experience, that every man, being detached from all reverence of antiquity, will abound in his own sense; that sects innumerable will spring up; & that no principle

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<sup>43</sup> “...the ‘Reformation’, as it is called, was engendered in lust, brought forth in hypocrisy and perfidy, and cherished and fed by plunder, devastation, and by rivers of innocent English and Irish blood...”. William Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland* (Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd: London, 1929 (1824-27)), 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant Reformation* 105. Praise for monastic poor-relief appears a common theme among the more even-handed English historians of the early nineteenth century. See, for example, Henry Hallam, *A View of the State of Europe During the Middle Ages*, (London: John Murray, 1818). 2. 449.

<sup>45</sup> Cobbett had particularly emphasised the role of the monasteries in providing for the poor to an extent unrivalled in present times. Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant Reformation*, 106-116. Similarly, Godwin opines that “our [present] poor-laws are a very imperfect substitute” for the monastic “houses from which charity had flowed to all, [and] that had fed the poor & the destitute”. Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 227/1(d).

will be formed so unreasonable & monstrous, as not to have its advocate...The ecclesiastical machine, like the political one, is a complicated system, & ought to be approached with the caution and reverence that is due to that in which the happiness of millions is invested.”<sup>46</sup>

These last of Godwin’s writings instantiate the full range of sectarian historiography available to Enlightened Britons: from Whiggish celebration of the Reformation as the midwife of liberty, to conservative horror at radical enthusiasm, to revisionist, pro-Catholic Romanticism. Each utterance is, no doubt, tactical and context-specific, suggesting the persistence of different and divided audiences for such analyses. They also suggest the difficulties entailed in creating new histories for communities structured and identified by historical (and historiographical) contentions. As Michael Ignatieff remarked of this issue: “The problem of a shared truth is that it does not lie ‘in between.’ It is not a compromise between two competing versions.”<sup>47</sup> Inclusive historical narratives cannot, perhaps, be synthesized from component partisan versions. Moreover, Ignatieff continues, attempts to produce social solidarity through the location and dissemination of historical ‘truth’ rely on the doubtful assumptions that such truth is attainable and that it will automatically command universal assent.<sup>48</sup> Certainly Godwin was to become highly sceptical about the possibility for objective historical knowledge and was convinced, moreover, that History’s undoubted moral affectiveness had little to do with its truthfulness.<sup>49</sup> The moral and epistemological issues raised in Godwin’s

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<sup>46</sup> Godwin, Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 226/5.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 175.

<sup>48</sup> Ignatieff, *The Warrior’s Honor*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Rowland Weston, ‘William Godwin’ in Ellen J. Jenkins (ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Biography*,

historical writings have a clear resonance for us today. It is to be hoped that a fuller exposition of his historiographical achievement awaits us.