Priestcraft. Anatomising the Anti-Clericalism of Early Modern Europe.

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Abstract

This paper aims to take the measure of the strand of early modern anti-clericalism that was conveyed by the term "priestcraft." Priestcraft amounted to the claim that priests had illegitimately usurped civil power and accumulated material wealth by systematically deceiving the laity and its secular rulers. Religion as it was practised and avowed by believers in early modern Europe was left tainted by this charge since manifold aspects of religious practice and belief fell under the pall of the suspicion that they were merely part of the ruse perpetrated through the centuries by greedy and power-hungry priests. While the English language was particularly effective in condensing this claim into the term in question, mistrust of the clergy informed numerous discourses unfolding in the diverse confessional and intellectual contexts of early modern Europe. The present article seeks to draw attention to the thematic richness of priestcraft as an object of historical inquiry by identifying the multiple ways in which this trope made its presence felt in the early modern world.

"Priestcraft" as a term belongs to the past. Although it can only qualify as anecdotal evidence, the quizzical expression with which most people react to mention of the term is as good a sign as any that it has been retired from active use. Its decommissioning followed a recognisable pattern: repeated relegation to employment within figurative speech and reminiscences, and a tendency for important aspects of the concept to fall by the wayside. A remark made by Jacob Bronowski (1908-1974) in a lecture he delivered at MIT in 1953 exemplifies the former aspect. Bronowski reminded his audience how the "Egyptians [had once] practised their priestcraft" in "secret establishments"; a reminiscence that only served as foil in drawing attention to the essentially public nature of modern science.[1] But was science really so intrinsically public? The way in which it was conducted during the Cold War left the American social critic Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) with serious doubts. Across the Potomac from Washington stood the

Pentagon, and its slightly occult geometry suggested to him a "priestly monopoly of secret knowledge."[2]

Whatever their differences in assessing the public status of science, commentators such as Bronowski and Mumford occasionally resurrected the term "priestcraft" and its entourage of associations when attempting to characterise restricted access to knowledge and, in particular, restricted access to the form of knowledge most directly linked to the existential questions posed by the Cold War. At this juncture in history, that meant scientific knowledge. But the tendency for important aspects of the concept to fall by the wayside was also evident in the diminished significance assigned to the "craftiness" of priestcraft in this context. The earlier association of priestcraft with trickery, deceit and fraud no longer loomed large in the figurative deployment of the idea. Bronowski had begun his lecture by recalling an eerie visit to Nagasaki in late 1945. The blasted landscape attested to the awesome power bestowed by science. His reflections revolved not around the reality of this power but instead around the exclusivity with which the military-industrial complex maintained their hold on the knowledge that was key to unlocking it.

It is tempting to discern in intimations of a "scientific priestcraft" a changing of the guard. The old social elite of priests had been replaced by a new one, whose vestments were the white lab coat, and whose loyalty was to observation, experiment, and critical inquiry rather than to dogma. Seen in this way, priestcraft provides a classic example of an idea falling victim to its own success; by undermining priestly authority, it contributed to the emergence of a secular society in which the decline in power and prestige formerly associated with the priesthood effectively obviated any further need to invoke the idea.

If by the late twentieth century the social power of the priest had dramatically diminished, our immersion in the resulting secularized setting of modernity should not bias our estimation or obscure our awareness of how the priesthood formerly possessed the power to damn and save and, on this basis, to make kings and topple governments. Commensurate with this immense power was a fear of its abuse and a suspicion about its legitimacy, subsumed largely under the heading of priestcraft. Although all-but-forgotten today, the concept of priestcraft functioned as a crucial part of the scaffolding enabling a secular modern to be erected on the foundations of an intensely religious early modern. Recapturing the significance of priestcraft requires a broad assessment of its origins, function, applicability, and decline. This paper attempts a general survey of priestcraft by anatomizing the doctrine into the following aspects: semantic considerations, epistemological implications, historiographical applications, ethnographical extensions, and social and political ramifications. In large part, this dissection has been undertaken in order to identify areas whose more detailed examination remains a desideratum. The result is unapologetically wide-ranging. But then so too was priestcraft's contribution to the making of modernity.

1. Semantic Considerations

Much of the previous scholarship on priestcraft has focussed on English history.[3] This preponderance of research devoted to the English case reflects the fact that, of all the European languages, English was most effectively able to condense the charge into a compact term, namely: "priestcraft." In its earliest incarnation in the 1480s, it was used to refer to the "craft" of priests, in the neutral sense of their work.[4] Usage in this sense was not common, although later examples can be identified.[5] Far more common was the pejorative sense, which emphasised the "craftiness" of priests and which was certainly gaining currency before the end of the sixteenth century. The Protestant polemicist John Bale (1495-1563), for instance, wrote in his *Pageant of Popes* (1573) of Formosus I, who had "forsoke priestcraft, and became a layeman" and, later, of a cardinal who had "renounced priestcraft & ranne into Fraunce with a mightye masse of gould."[6] It is possible to interpret both usages as neutral references to the practices entailed by membership of the priesthood, yet the wider context in which the second quotation is embedded lends it a critical edge by suggesting that priestcraft was in fact the source of the "mightye masse of goulde" with which the cardinal absconded to France.

A more detailed word history would locate "priestcraft" within the broader semantics of "craft" as a concept and a suffix ("statecraft," "stagecraft", "handicraft," etc.) that acknowledges a distinctive skill (think: "craftsmanship") and yet that often connotes this acknowledgment with a suspicion of the devious purposes to which the skill in question could potentially be put to use (think: "craftiness"). Certainly in the case of "priestcraft" the pejorative sense that channels the instinctive suspicion of "craft" came to dominate and eclipse the neutral sense. Although uncommon until the 1690s, the word came to be used much like "witchcraft," referring to the deceitful, fraudulent, or cunning "craft" by which priests maintained or extended their power. This power was usually defined in terms of political authority, wealth, or both. By preying on the credulity of common people, priests could increase their wealth and political power. Unlike witchcraft, however, the term "priestcraft" did not insinuate the possession of super- or preternatural power; evil witches might invoke the Devil, but the craft of priests worked with more mundane realities, such as the gullibility of laypeople. The republican James Harrington (1611-1677) made this clear when he used "priestcraft" in his 1657 *Pian Piano*. In his view, the talent possessed by priests for hijacking civil government hinged on their false claims to the exclusivity of ordination. Such claims manifested themselves further in the *iure divino* monarchy by which priests arrogated for themselves the legitimizing function for the king under whose rule the people lived. Priestcraft, Harrington argued, found fertile soil wherever priests established a primacy of ordination (*chirotesthia*) over election by citizenry (*chirotonia*).[7] As devious as the machinations of conniving priests might be, they seem pedestrian and prosaic in comparison to those imagined in the case of witches. The comparison draws attentions to an important point: while a belief in witchcraft connoted a superstitious frame of mind, opposition to alleged priestcraft was, by contrast, mostly allied with fervent disdain of superstition, precisely because superstition was identified as one of the chief means by which priestcraft had managed to perpetuate itself.

The pejorative sense of "priestcraft" begs the question of whether the motivations and activities it ascribes to priests were real or merely perceived. The *locus classicus* for rehearsing the arguments pro and contra is provided by the sale of indulgences, which were advertised as a way of reducing the time spent in purgatory and which advanced to an important source of

revenue for the late medieval Church. Luther's criticism of this practice could point to the complete absence of any scriptural reference to purgatory. This absence implied that purgatory was a fiction, conjured up the Church for its material benefit. The implication was central to the discourse that disparaged "popery." In the course of time, "popery" was complemented by and, to some degree, superseded by "priestcraft," a charge that no longer targeted Roman Catholicism exclusively but broaden its focus to impugn the integrity of the clerical class in potentially all its historical manifestations.[8] A quantitative analysis of the term reveals a sudden spike in its usage in the final decade of the seventeenth century.[9] Consulting the actual text reveals the reasons for the spike: at this time priestcraft was appropriated as a term of choice by three closely related groups: deists, republicans, and radical Whigs. The appeal the term held for these groups derived from its potential to be used in diatribes not just against foreign Catholics, but also against home-grown divines.

Although priestcraft maintained its primarily anti-Catholic animus—encountering Catholic "Ecclesiatiks" on his 1777 expedition to Sicily could still arouse in Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824) a disdain for that "Priestcraft" with which "inquiry or improvement of every kind is checked"—by the 1690s Catholic priests were therefore no longer the only target.[10] In the writings of the aforementioned groups, the critique of priestcraft shifted towards "our *Protestant High-Priests*."[11] As Mark Goldie has argued, Hobbes' identification of the "three knots" of "popedom, prelacy, and Presbytery" was eventually condensed in the term "priestcraft" as a charge directed against clergymen of all stripes.[12] In the English context, "priestcraft" then continued to be employed largely within critiques of sacerdotal corruption by deists, Whigs, and republicans into the eighteenth century. It is worth noting that the Whig pamphleteer Thomas Gordon (c.1691-1750) launched a synonymous concept in 1720 with *Priestianity, or a View of the Disparity between the Apostles and the Modern Inferior Clergy*, a piece which frequently invokes "priestcraft" in condemning the self-serving attempts by clerics to ingratiate their way into the social fabric of early eighteenth-century Britain but which fails to elaborate upon the reasons why Gordon saw fit to formulate an alternative term for the title of his piece.[13] The coinage "Priestianity" seems to have found little traction in the eighteenth century but a smattering of citations can be adduced that attest to its presence in the anti-clerical discourse of the nineteenth century.

Other European languages employed what by comparison are circumlocutions or sought recourse to the more general idea of imposture. Even if some Germans knew and spoke of "Priesterbetrug," the term did not grace any title pages, in marked contrast to the English situation.[14] The French spoke of "imposture sacerdotale" or "fourberie" in such matters, though in view of the large amount of English deism translated and fed into the discourse of the French Enlightenment by d'Holbach (1723-1789) there remains a need to examine more closely the details of this process of appropriation.[15] It would also be worthwhile to consider to what degree the anti-clericalism of French Enlightenment discourse drew upon Huguenot traditions of anti-clericalism, as formulated, for instance, in works such as Du Plessis-Mornay's (1549-1623) *Mystère d'iniquité, c'est-à-dire l'histoire de la papauté* (1611).

This points to one of the challenges inherent in any broader investigation of the idea of priestcraft: namely, that attempts to trace the channels of transmission and reception need to be complemented by an awareness that social tensions and indigenous intellectual traditions could

enable its emergence *sui generis*. In other words, a treatment of the charge of priestcraft that models its dissemination on something akin to Chinese Whispers foreshortens an appreciation of its vitality. It seems doubtful that figures such Ludovico Muratori (1672-1750) and Pietro Giannone (1676-1748) were taking direct cues from English publications in formulating their anti-curial interpretation of church history.[16] The early modern fascination with ideas of simulation and dissimulation, combined with older forms of anti-clerical sentiment, might have sufficed to foster conceptions of priestcraft among Italian anti-curialists without the need of any external prodding from Protestant polemicists.[17]

While the doctrine of priestcraft was able to flourish in confessionally diverse contexts, it is useful to consider the reasons why in some settings it found little traction. Peter Harrison has noted that, while virtually all the English deists converged in their conviction that positive religion was a story of priests peddling lies for their own material and social benefit, the earlier Cambridge Platonists felt no affinity towards such notions.[18] The Socinians were another group whose intellectual history appears largely bereft of any highly developed notion of priestcraft, a fact which, should further research bear it out, is almost counter-intuitive in view of the ease with which priestcraft lent itself to an explanation for the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity.[19] Yet one must be cautious not to define too tightly groups such as the Socinians, deists, republicans, and radical Whigs, as they were intellectually porous and, more often than not, defined by their detractors.[20]

Adopting a pan-European perspective and considering distinct traditions of insinuating priestcraft, some which predated Luther and Calvin's assault upon Rome, offers a context that also enables a heightened appreciation of the English case. Other European nations experienced fractious religious disputes occasioned by doctrinal difference: one need only think of the divide between Arminians and Calvinists in the Protestant Low Countries, Calvinists and Lutherans in Prussia, or Jansenists and the Jesuits in France. Yet in England the conflict took on a distinctly ecclesiological character, in large part because a stable consensus in questions about the institutional form of the church and its social role proved so hard to come by in this case. Moreover, the register of the discourse shifted in the course of the tumultuous seventeenth century; whereas it had formerly been theological, in the course of the century it began to find expression in more philosophical and legal terms. By the 1690s, it was as much Tory against Whig, as High against Low Church. It remains only to note the curious disparity between the virulence of the allegation of priestcraft in England and the comparative mildness of any actual violence or repression that accompanied the deployment of the allegation, at least when the comparison is made to the massacres suffered by priests in revolutionary France in the 1790s or even to the imprisonment and banishment endured by priests in Germany during the *Kulturkampf*.[21]

2. Epistemological Implications

In his essay "On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance," Karl Popper (1902-1994) wrote that "the great movement of liberation," embracing both the Renaissance and the Reformation,

"was inspired throughout by an unparalleled epistemological optimism: by a most optimistic view of man's power to discern truth and to acquire knowledge."[22] A sanguine estimation of the reach of human comprehension pervades, for example, a work such as *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), whose author, the Irish free-thinker John Toland (1670-1722), was adamant that "There is no Defect in our Understanding."[23] Yet as Popper realized, such epistemological optimism entailed a curious corollary: it created a need to explain the undeniable presence of error in the world and its persistence through history. After all, if our minds were primed to apprehend truth, why were they so enmeshed in falsehoods? Popper appreciated how epistemological optimism could compel a recourse to the trope of the "wicked and fraudulent priest who keeps the people in ignorance."[24] Indeed, Toland in his determination to explain "*how Christianity became mysterious*" could chalk up much of this lamentable development to the "Craft and Ambition of *Priests.*"[25]

In his account of epistemological optimism, Popper had spoken of the human ability to "discern truth and acquire knowledge." Yet what was the status of the sacred knowledge that had been not acquired but rather bequeathed from generation to generation and whose truth could only be openly questioned in a spirit of egregious impiety. Even Toland, as provocative as his posited equivalence of authentic Christianity and reason might be, held fast to revelation as a source of simple yet profound truths. Yet the charge of priestcraft carried within itself the potential for a radicalization. Intellectual stirrings from the 1690s onward bear witness to a tendency of priestcraft to raise a key question about the means with which the layperson was to distinguish legitimate matters of faith from the frauds of the clergy. If the custodians of the tabernacle were corrupt, where was the surety that this did not also apply to the contents of the tabernacle? As Anthony Collins (1676-1729) asked in 1713, given "the infinite number of Pretenders in all Ages to *Revelations* from Heaven, how was any Man to distinguish between the true Messenger from Heaven and the Impostor?"[26] Edward Herbert (1583-1648), Hugo Grotius, and Thomas Hobbes had posed similar questions, and their inquiries had resulted in some of the most recognizable ideas (for instance, common notions and absolute sovereignty) of the seventeenth century. By the 1690s, radical Whigs, deists, and free-thinkers were once again formulating methods by which the layperson could determine the truth of matters of faith; Locke, Collins, Toland, and others used the problem posed by priestcraft as a catalyst to reassess the grounds for legitimate faith in the absence of trustworthy sacerdotal authority.[27]

The foregoing discussion makes it apparent that the trope of priestcraft could be invoked to solve an epistemological problem, namely: the persistence of error in a world in which there was an expectation that the truth should be manifest, but that, priestcraft, like many solutions, then generated its own problems. These problems were evident in particular in the manner in which priestcraft gave rise to doubts about the integrity of the scriptural revelation. Of course it was initially the rock-solid certainty in the authority of Scripture that enabled the progenitors of the Reformation to pivot away from the authority represented by the institution of the Church. And yet this observation prompts a qualification of the simple narrative Popper sketched. Thus anyone with even a passing acquaintance of the Augustinian sources on which Luther and Calvin drew is likely to register doubt about Popper's attempt to claim these figures for his story of epistemological optimism.[28] Both Luther and Calvin espoused a very dim view of the general ability of humans in their fallen state to grasp true knowledge. Such a qualification

suggest that the emergence of this epistemological optimism was a more interesting historical process than Popper realized: it resulted from developments set in motion at least in part by theologians profoundly committed to the opposite pessimistic doctrine, i.e. the doctrine that saw humans condemned to a postlapsarian state of error and blindness.

If such objections to Popper's simplified account suggest that abstract epistemological considerations can only be taken so far before a need arises to turn to the historical material in order to tell a more nuanced and complex story, the same lesson applies to the trope of priestcraft. On one level it offered an easy solution to a philosophical problem, namely the persistence of error in the world. But of course the "quick fix" it offered was on closer inspection actually an enjoinment to begin the real work of historical inquiry. Exactly how, when, and why had priests defiled religion by introducing error, manifest in absurd rituals, doctrinal obscurity and popular superstition? The epistemological appeal of priestcraft entailed therefore a challenge to formulate an account of church history in accordance with this template – and to then determine whether such an account stood up to scrutiny. It was a challenge that renegade figures such as Toland had in fact already accepted by outlining such a narrative in the chapter of *Christianity not Mysterious* entitled: "When, why, and by whom were Mysteries brought into Christianity" and it was a challenge that others such as the German savant Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) would subsequently take up with an even greater attention to historical detail.

3. Historiographical Applications

The trope of priestcraft was admittedly never applied in a disinterested manner. Rather its use was always embedded in specific polemical contexts. Adopting an older model of intellectual history that envisages thinkers and writers calmly meditating upon edifying ideas is therefore distinctly unsuited to capturing the character of the priestcraft-trope. This is hardly a novel point, yet it deserves reiteration in the context of this subject. The charge of priestcraft was in fact only one in a number of rhetorical strategies originally deployed to traduce other religions or confessions. It took its place therefore among a repertoire of alternative strategies, which included, for example, attempts to insinuate an identity of the maligned religion or confession with pagan idolatry (as demonstrated by tracts such as Oliver Ormerod's (c.1580-1626) *Pagano-Papismus: where is proved … that Papisme is flat Paganisme* (1606)) or with Islam (as exemplified by William Reynold's (c.1544-1594) and Gabriel Gifford's (1554-1629) *Calvino-Turcismus id est, Calvinsticae perfidiae, cum Mahumetana collatio, et dilucida utriusque sectae confutation* (1597)).

Yet as distant as polemical invocations of priestcraft might seem from the ideals of objective inquiry, priestcraft as a trope made an important contribution to the emergence of modern historiography. It did so not least because of its propensity to profane history. Although the machinations of the priests were occasionally traced back to the Antichrist or the Devil as the ultimate originator of all fraud and deceit, the long-term effect of the charge of priestcraft was to render the church a human and highly flawed institution.[29] By denuding church history

of its hallowed aura, the notion of priestcraft helped to transform the historical world into one in which terrestrial causes gave rise to terrestrial effects. The idea that the history of religion was the history of an original, pristine religion (*prisca theologia*) gradually corrupted and split into a multitude of superstitions tallied with the experience of many early modern Christians. Moreover, the fragmentation of Christianity into myriad confessions after the Reformation required explanation. Here, priestcraft could serve as an interpretative framework. By the late-seventeenth century, the trope of priestcraft was finding favour among deists in their attempts to account for the degenerative process by which religion had arrived at its present sorry state.[30]

"Imposture," or fraud perpetrated by the originator of a religion, was arguably the most extreme and encompassing form of priestcraft. Humphrey Prideaux (1648-1724), an Oxford orientalist and later Dean of Norwich, published in 1697 *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet*, in which he elaborated upon an extant narrative that depicted Islam as a giant ruse concocted by a power-hungry, fraudulent prophet. But could not the same story be told of Christianity? Rumours had circulated for centuries about the existence of a scandalous treatise which charged the founders of all three Abrahamic religions with imposture. Henry Stubbe's (1632-1676) 1671 *Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanisme*, which circulated in clandestine manuscript, even went so far as to suggest that Christ had been a lacklustre impostor compared to Muhammad.[31] To counter this dangerous tendency, Prideaux appended to his account of the origins of Islam a "Discourse […] for the Vindicating of Christianity from this Charge; Offered to the Consideration of the Deists of the present Age." In the preface, he explained his intentions in more detail; the discourse should show "That none of those Marks and Properties which are so visible in the Imposture of Mahomet […] can possibly be charged upon that holy Religion which we profess."[32] Expressed more colourfully: while according to Prideaux imposture captured the historical reality of Islam, the notion threatened to became a "Poyson" affecting piety among Christians. For this reason Prideaux's account of Mohammed's trickery came with the discourse, "subjoined thereto" and conceived as the "Antidote" forestalling any harm potentially inflicted by the trope of imposture on the Christian religion.[33]

Such considerations allude to the impressive ability of the idea of priestcraft to find purchase within diverse religious and historical contexts. The trope proved its worth by providing the template with which to understand the social position and power of the Egyptian priests, the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament, or the oracles of ancient Greece.[34] Priestcraft offered a historiographical model through which it became possible to peer into the distant past in order to make sense of the corruptions of the present. And yet the grave shortcomings of priestcraft as a model for interpretation could not be ignored forever. A few moments' reflection sufficed even for the most irreligiously minded to admit that simplistic conspiracy theories can hardly do justice to the enormously complex history of belief in the supernatural.[35] In Prideaux, for instance, we find a remarkable refutation of allegations of imposture, whose validity is undiminished when brought to bear upon modern conspiracy theories:

> No *Imposture*, when entrusted with many *Conspirators*, can be long concealed. For what
> *Plot* or *Conspiracy* have we ever known or heard of, which have been thus managed, and
> hath not had some false Brother or other to discover it? especially if there be any great

Wickedness intended by it, or any great Danger attending the execution of it (as mostly is in such designs.) [...] And what *Plot* can be more wicked, than to impose a *false Religion* upon mankind?[36]

Prideaux's specific scepticism about the prospects of success for any long-term conspiracy prompts a question about the more general process by which historically-minded thinkers began to register the obvious deficits of priestcraft as a framing device for reconstructing the past. A partial answer to this question could point to the manner in which the story of regression and degeneration implied by the denunciation of priestcraft began to chafe against optimistic narratives of progress and improvement. The tension is apparent in a remarkable passage in Carl Gustav Jochmann's (1789-1830) *Reflections on Protestantism* (*Betrachtungen über den Protestantismus*) (1826). Here the historical significance of priestcraft is downplayed on the grounds that it implies a corruption of an originally pure religion; a conception that jars with Jochmann's conviction that in religion, as in all other aspects of human existence, "the more perfect proceeds out of the more imperfect." For this reason he believes that superstition is not to be understood as the corruption of something originally pure, as a story based on the notion of priestly deception would imply; rather, superstition represents, according to Jochmann, "the first uncertain steps" taken by humanity in the direction of "a purer religion."[37]

4. Ethnographical Extensions

As we have just seen, the trope of priestcraft furnished the means to peer deep into the distant past. But what about distant climes? Viewed from a global perspective, the story of the early modern period is one of encounters between Europeans and non-Europeans. While isolated cases attest to how proto-ethnographic efforts at understanding other cultures were refracted through the prism of priestcraft, there is undoubtedly the need to more systematically investigate the application of this idea in cultural contexts lying beyond Europe.[38] To give one instance, we can point to the Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart (1753-1828). Stewart used the priestcraft trope to ethno-linguistic ends in submitting a peculiar re-interpretation of William Jones's postulate of a common Indo-European ancestry that linked the languages of the subcontinent to those of Europe. In his interpretation, the Indian Brahmans were "a learned, artful and aspiring priesthood," who, on the basis of their encounter with the invading forces of Alexander the Great, had forged the language of Sanskrit by modifying the Greek.[39] It was in this manner, claimed Stewart, that the Brahmans had secured their position atop the hierarchy of castes.[40]

Between 1830 and 1850, "priestcraft" found widespread application in the efforts of Western scholars to reconstruct a religion of "Buddhism" during the course of their colonial encounters with ancient Indian texts. Siddhartha Guatama was fashioned in this way into a reformer who had vanquished the pervasive priestcraft of the Brahmins.[41] According to his Victorian admirers, the Buddha's proto-scientific insights had brought an end to the frauds by which the Hindu priests maintained the caste system.[42] The identification of the Buddha as a vanquisher of priestcraft continued into the twentieth century, when a tendency emerged to

highlight his scientific insights. Thus the Sinhalese activist Anagārika Dharmapāla, in a 1925 speech in New York, explained:

> The Message of the Buddha that I have to bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths. The Buddha taught to the civilized Aryans of India 25 centuries ago a scientific religion containing the highest individualistic altruistic ethics, a philosophy of life built on psychological mysticism and a cosmogony which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity and relativity.[43]

In the works of other scholars, such as Laurence Waddell's 1895 *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism*, priestcraft later came to be directed *against* Buddhism.[44]

The long life of these tropes in ethnology can be appreciated by considering a passage from William Howells's (1908-2005) *The Heathens. Primitive Man and his Religions* (1948), which, in addressing shamanism, attests to how considerations of trickery and deceit could still find a place in anthropological writings of the mid-twentieth century:

> The shamans know, of course, that their tricks are impositions, but at the same time everyone who has studied them agrees that they really believe in their power to deal with spirits. Here is a point, about the end justifying the means, which is germane to this and to all conscious augmenting of religious illusion. The shaman's main purpose is an honest one and he believes in it, and does not consider it incongruous if his powers give him the right to hoodwink his followers in minor technical matters. If shamanism were a conspiracy or a purposeful fraud, it would attract only the clever and the unscrupulous, interested in their own aggrandizement and the public would shortly see the snare, being no bigger fools than we are. But shamanism is an institution, and the things that keep the public from rejecting it are religious characteristics: shamanism does something to help them, and the shamans themselves are inside the system and believe in it, too.

While this passage demonstrates the persistence of notions of priestcraft, such an interpretation of the shaman's influence is clearly modified by an awareness of the need to develop a more subtle and sophisticated understanding of the psychology and social dynamics underpinning their role in the communities they serve. As Howell goes on to point out, whatever elements of conscious trickery might be in play, this trickery does not undermine the shaman's own faith in the healing potential of their rituals; after all, the sick shaman will not fail to "call in a superior shaman to cure him" if he himself falls ill.[45]

5. Social and Political Ramifications

Like most claims characterized by sweeping generality, the attribution of a purely historical status to "priestcraft" must be qualified by admitting the odd exception here and there. Thus as recently as 1994 a pamphlet bearing the title: *The Four Crafts: Doctorcraft, Lawyercraft, Priestcraft, Kingcraft* employed the concept with all the earnest sincerity that had characterised its usage in England three hundred years earlier. Its author was Ogden Kraut (1927-2002), a Mormon fundamentalist and defender of polygamy, who had found the inspiration for his title in a statement made in 1863 by Brigham Young (1801-1877): "when God spoke from heaven

to Joseph Smith, the people were bound down by priestcraft, doctorcraft, kingcraft and lawyercraft, the four grand crafts that uphold Satan's kingdom."[46]

The suspicion that a trade or a profession represents something sinister and conspiratorial on the grounds of an especially intense group solidarity and a "craft"- knowledge inaccessible to outsiders has found expression on numerous occasions.[47] On many occasions this suspicion has found expression by appending "-craft" as a suffix to these trades or profession. Thus, in his critique of English law, Jeremy Bentham was clearly inspired by the notion of "priestcraft" in decrying "lawyer-craft":

> In pointing out the artifices of priestcraft, what multitudes have already exercised themselves. The artifices of lawyer-craft have been not less numerous, not less successful, not less wicked. Yet scarce has any hand lifted up so much as a corner of the veil that covers them. Near three hundred years has religion had her Luther. No Luther of Jurisprudence has yet come; no penetrating eye and dauntless heart have as yet searched into the cells and conclaves of the law.[48]

In mapping out his programme to reform the law Bentham was thus unequivocal in his belief that the purge of "lawyer-craft" should take inspiration from the Reformation in its victory over priestcraft. Such a passage strongly suggests therefore that "lawyer-craft" was modelled on older notions of "priestcraft." Could priestcraft have similarly provided the template other forms of craft, such as "king-craft"? One would presume so, yet there is a need for further investigation to uncover the circumstances in which a criticism of civil authority began to imitate the forms already fashioned by critics of religious authority.

It has already been noted how allegations of priestcraft and, more generally, of imposture possessed a potent suggestiveness; in its application to the religions of pagans, infidels, heretics, and idolaters, the charge of priestcraft threatened to turn back against those who deployed it. But these considerations point to another manner in which the charge could spread. Sometimes it rubbed off on attitudes towards the secular authorities: the pretension of kings and princes in locating the source of their power in God—and not in the assent of their subjects—could be denounced as "kingcraft." Priestcraft and kingcraft could then be suspected of forms of collusion. Admittedly even a superficial historical survey of the often hostile relations between king and priest or between pope and emperor sufficed to demonstrate that such collusion had rarely been harmonious. It was in this spirit that the pamphlet *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (1764) by the Massachusetts attorney James Otis (1725-1783) contained a passage condemning the doctrine of divine right, to which he appended the following footnote: "Kingcraft and Priestcraft have fell out so often, that 'tis a wonder this grand and ancient alliance is not broken off forever. Happy for mankind will it be, when such a separation shall take place."[49]

This envisaged separation of kingcraft and priestcraft anticipated the "wall of separation between church and state" later propounded by Jefferson. Indeed, both kingcraft and priestcraft represented these institutions in their traditional condition of co-mixture. The distillation that yields a depoliticized church and a desacralized state has since become so self-evident to secular societies that there is a danger of overlooking how historically contingent its realization is. Even historians are not immune to the risk of taking such principles for granted and thereby

underestimating the degree to which the concerns of state and church were entwined in the early modern period. In this regard, an inquiry that reveals, for example, the close connections between the critique of priestcraft and the critique *iure divino* kingship can more generally promote an awareness of just how politically charged religious questions were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and, by the same logic, how religiously charged political questions were).[50]

6. Conclusion

The early modern entwinement of religion and politics engendered a climate in which the questions of genuine import did not so much pertain to abstract scholastic interests, such as the existence of God, but the rightful grounds of authority, both sacred and secular. For many early modern Europeans the authority of the priest was the real bone of contention, and a fly on the wall of a tavern or a coffee-house in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would most likely have been privy more to vituperations against the clergy and its duplicitous schemes than theological-ontological speculations about God. In his correspondence with John Locke, William Molyneux (1656-1698) opined that "Coffee-houses and Publick Tables are not proper places for serious discourses relating to the most important truths."[51] This sentiment was echoed twenty years later by the Whig William Stephens (1671-1753) when he reported reporting on his encounters with boastful adherents to the philosophy of Hobbes and Spinoza; Stephens claimed that, although he had "conversed with several of this Temper," he "could never get any of 'em serious enough to debate the reality of *Revelation* ... a witty Jest and t'other Glass puts an end to all further Consideration."[52] While such remarks might suggest that coffee-houses or taverns did not provide a hospitable environment for disquisitions upon high-minded topics of philosophy and theology, it is not hard to imagine how such locales might have been far more amenable to the articulation of vigorous opposition to the clergy. In questions about the forces behind the secularization of Europe as it transited from the early modern to the modern, there are thus good reasons to consider disputes about priests and insinuations about their "craft" as one of the sites where genuine work was done in reconfiguring the cultural coordinates of European society.

The ironic dimension to this story becomes apparent when the contribution of a heightened religiosity to the disdain for the traditional clergy is appreciated. In some cases this disdain culminated in the determination to transform the entire laity into a "priesthood of all believers." Yet if the charge of priestcraft was therefore often the product of a genuine zeal for a purer, more authentic way of leading a Christian life, the social reality in the communities animated by this zeal most often fell conspicuously short of the vision. No confession or sectarian group was able to entirely forego some degree of differentiation within the community on the basis of religious expertise nor suppress the emergence of at least some form of religious authority. Given that the idea of priestcraft could then find a foothold wherever the hieratic/demotic distinction developed and was to some degree institutionalized within society, this had an important consequence for the story of the trope of priestcraft: as much as one confession might appeal to priestcraft in denouncing another

confession, the applicability of the trope to all forms of Christianity meant that there was always a danger of "blowback"; charges of priestcraft and imposture could always be hurled back against those who first deployed them, as the example provided by Humphrey Prideaux demonstrated. Priestcraft as an idea was thus characterized by promiscuity in its willingness to do the bidding of diverse confessional camps and intellectual groups. It could serve both the religiously devout and the brazenly irreligious. Unlike theological doctrines (e.g. Catholic notions of transubstantiation) or metaphysical principles (e.g. the atheistic materialism of the Radical Enlightenment) that can be precisely located on the intellectual map of early modern Europe, the idea of priestcraft was therefore an idea given to travelling (and often in unexpected directions).

This former vitality contrasts starkly with the obsolescence into which the idea subsequently fell. Yet a contemporary successor to the suspicion of priestcraft might be identified in the increasingly prevalent mistrust shown towards science, as is particularly evident in the scepticism of climate science or in resistance to policies of vaccination. Allegations that scientists are in cahoots and systematically dupe the public mirror early statements to the effect that priests hoodwinked the laity. Is there anything we can learn about the current mistrust of "science-craft" from reviewing the history of the trope of priestcraft? As mentioned above, few people—with the possible exception of the odd Mormon here and there—are likely to object to the characterisation of "priestcraft" as a purely historical term. The life of the idea itself has followed an arc that has long since carried it beneath the horizon within which most of us think about contemporary religious issues. It falls therefore to historians to attempt to peer beyond this horizon and to consider those ideas which have now disappeared from view, in part because such endeavours can stimulate important re-evaluations of the present.

Notes

[1] Bronowski, *Science*, 80.
[2] Mumford, *The City*, 443.
[3] For the predominance of English-language scholarship on priestcraft, see the bibliography.
[4] "Priestcraft, n." In *OED Online*.
[5] Ibid.
[6] John Bale, *The Pageant of* Popes, fol. 60 and fol. 174.
[7] Goldie, "The Civil Religion of James Harrington," 215-216.
[8] Goldie, "Ideology."
[9] A Google nGram and EEBO search suggest that "priestcraft" spiked suddenly in the 1690s.
[10] Knight, *Expedition*, 61.
[11] Stephens, *An Account*, 6.
[12] Goldie, "Priestcraft," 217.
[13] "Priestcraft" is to be found on pages xi, xiv and 35 of *Priestianity*.
[14] Anthony Collins's *Priestcraft in Perfection* (1709) features, however, as the fourth entry in U. G. Thorschmid's *Versuch einer vollständigen Engelländischen Freydenker-Bibliothek* (1765-1767), where the title is translated as "Der vollkommene Priesterbetrug." For the reception of English deist thought in the German context, see Voigt, *Der englische Deismus in Deutschland.*
[15] See Curran, *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment*, 34-35.
[16] Barnett, *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests*, in considering both the English and Italian contexts offers little evidence of a cross-pollination of ideas.
[17] See, for instance, Snyder, *Dissimulation*.
[18] Harrison, *'Religion'*, 73.

[19] See McDonald, *Biblical Criticism*, for discussion of Trinitarian debates. We are indebted to Sascha Salatowsky for this estimation of the presence of the priestcraft-trope in Socinian thought.

[20] See Hudson et al., Atheism and Deism Revalued, "Introduction."

[21] Aston and Cragoe, *Anticlericalism in Britain*, "Introduction."

[22] Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 6.

[23] Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 49.

[24] Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 9.

[25] Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, 96.

[26] Collins, *A Discourse*, 40.

[27] See Paper 9 in this issue.

[28] See Harrison, *The Fall of Man*.

[29] See Paper 3 in this issue.

[30] See Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, Chpt. 5, and Harrison, *Religion*, 77-85.

[31] Stubbe, *Account*, 151. See Champion, "Legislators."

[32] Prideaux, iv.

[33] Prideaux, ii.

[34] See Assmann, *Religio Duplex*; Groetsch, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus*; and Ossa-Richardson, *The Devil's Tabernacle*.

[35] See also Harrison, *'Religion'*, 77-85.

[36] Prideaux, *Discourse*, 117.

[37] Jochmann, *Betrachtungen*, 9.

[38] See Ossa-Richardson, *The Devil's Tabernacle*, 144-5.

[39] Stewart, *Elements*, 94.

[40] For a discussion of Stewart's theory, see Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 124-130.

[41] Lopez Jr., "Buddhism," 214.

[42] See Lopez Jr., *Prisoners*, 17, 29, 31.

[43] Dharmapāla, "Message of the Buddha."

[44] Lopez Jr., *Prisoners*, Chpt. 1.

[45] William Howells's 1949 *The Heathens*, 125-6.

[46] Kraut cites as the sources for this statement the July 12, 1863 edition of the *Deseret News*.

[47] It is interesting that George Bernard Shaw in the preface to his play *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906) considered the conspiracy among doctors to be motivated not by a desire to hide secret knowledge but rather to cover-up incompetence and negligence: "… the effect of this state of things is to make the medical profession a conspiracy to hide its own shortcomings. No doubt the same may be said of all professions. They are all conspiracies against the laity: and I do not suggest that the medical conspiracy is either better or worse than the military conspiracy, the legal conspiracy, the sacerdotal conspiracy, the pedagogic conspiracy, the royal and aristocratic conspiracy, the literary and artistic conspiracy, and the innumerable industrial, commercial, and financial conspiracies, from the trade unions to the great exchanges, which make up the huge conflict we call society." *The Doctor's Dilemma* [1906] (London, 1987), 17. One has the feeling that whereas the suffix "-craft" would have been employed in the past to denote these more or less permanent forms of subversive collusion, semantic shifts meant that by Shaw's time 'conspiracy' had become the term of preference.

[48] Bentham, *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*, vol. 4, 254.

[49] Otis, *The Rights*.

[50] See the publications of Goldie and Champion.

[51] Quoted in Champion, *Republican Learning*, 74.

[52] Stephens, *An Account*, 5.

Acknowledgements

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