

Giuliana di Biase

**DAMARIS CUDWORTH MASHAM CONTRO IL DEISMO. UNA DIFESA
DI *THE REASONABLENESS OF CHRISTIANITY* DI JOHN LOCKE**

RIASSUNTO - In *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705), Damaris Cudworth Masham set out to defend a reasonable Christianity from deism and superstition. Against the deists, Lady Masham insisted on the importance of revelation and faith and denied that natural religion based purely on reason was sufficient for salvation; she employed the same arguments which her friend John Locke had used in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* to argue against deism. The paper aims at showing that Masham's intent was to defend *The Reasonableness* from the serious accusations which the Calvinist John Edwards had brought against it, which had been restated by the devout Anglican Mary Astell in her book *The Christian Religion, as profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*, immediately after Locke's death. Astell's book appeared in 1705, the same year in which Masham's *Occasional Thoughts* was published.

ABSTRACT - In *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705), la neoplatonica Damaris Cudworth Masham si proponeva di difendere un cristianesimo "ragionevole" dal deismo e dalla superstizione. Contro i deisti, Lady Masham insisteva sull'importanza della rivelazione e della fede, negando che la religione naturale, basata sulla sola ragione, fosse sufficiente alla salvezza; ella utilizzava i medesimi argomenti che il suo amico John Locke aveva introdotto nella sua *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) per rigettare il deismo. Scopo del saggio è mostrare che l'intento di Lady Masham era difendere la *Reasonableness* dalle pesanti accuse che il calvinista John Edwards aveva mosso contro di essa, accuse ribadite dalla devota anglicana Mary Astell in *The Christian Religion, as profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*. Il libro della Astell fu pubblicato nel gennaio del 1705, pochi mesi dopo la morte di Locke; lo stesso anno comparvero gli *Occasional Thoughts* di Lady Masham.

PAROLE CHIAVE: deismo, legge di natura, ragione, John Locke, rivelazione, Mary Astell

KEYWORDS: Deism, law of nature, reason, John Locke, Revelation, Mary Astell

1. Introduction

Several early modern philosophers found a source of inspiration in their friendship with a talented woman: this was the case of Descartes and Elisabeth of Bohemia, Henry More and Anne Conway, as well as of John Locke and Damaris Cudworth Masham. Lady Masham¹ was the

¹ Concerning Masham's biography and thought, see J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 114-140; J. G. Buickerood (ed.), *The Philosophical Works of Damaris, Lady Masham*, Thoemmes Press, Bristol 2004, pp. v-xliv; L. Frankel, *Damaris Masham: A Seventeenth-Century Feminist Philosopher*, in «Hypatia» n. 4, 1989, pp. 80-90; Id., «Damaris Cudworth Masham» in M. H. Waithe (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers*, 2 vols., Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2, pp. 73-85; S. Hutton, *Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham: between Platonism and Enlightenment*, in «British Journal for the History of Philosophy» n. 1, 1993, pp. 29-54; S. O'Donnell, «"My idea in your Mind": John Locke and Damaris Cudworth Masham» in R. Perry and M. Broulney (eds.), *Mothering the Mind*, Holmes and Meier, New York 1984, pp. 26-46.

daughter of the renowned theologian Ralph Cudworth, Master of Christ College at Cambridge and a leading figure among the Cambridge Platonists; his major work *The true Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) was directed at confuting Hobbes' materialism. Masham was influenced by her father's ideas and erudition, although he did not teach her Latin or Greek; she learned Latin later, following the method her friend Locke had recommended in *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. Her interest in philosophy was nurtured by her reading of the Cambridge Platonists; she was familiar with their works when, some time before 1682, she met Locke. He encouraged her interest in philosophy and was probably influenced by her Platonism; in turn, Masham became one of the earliest proponents of his philosophy.

Masham began to correspond with Locke in 1682²; they continued to correspond during the years he spent in Holland (1683-89). In 1685, Damaris Cudworth married Sir Francis Masham, an Essex squire; on his return to England in 1689, Locke became a guest and later a permanent resident at Masham's home at Oates, in Essex, where he died in October 1704.

Masham penned two books, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) and *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705); they were written with encouragement from Locke, and printed anonymously. The first was intended as a response to a collection of letters by the English cleric and philosopher John Norris, a disciple of Malebranche; the collection was published with the title *Letters Concerning the Love of God*³. Norris argued that we should love only God with desire, for God is the sole cause of our pleasure and therefore of our good; Masham criticized this opinion, and claimed that we legitimately love both God and his creatures with desire. She insisted that love of God comes not from a divinely instilled idea of God in our minds, but from observing the world around us, from which we conclude, rationally, that we owe love to its creator. Her fundamental objection to Norris' theory was that it undermined the foundations of morality because, by denigrating God's works, it eroded the bonds of human society and the very basis of Christian morality. In opposition to Norris, Masham emphasized the importance of practical morality, arguing that it was integral to religious conduct.

Locke's influence was clearly discernible in Masham's *Discourse*: her pessimism on human nature, but also her insistence on the importance of a good education and of a good life showed their debt to the author of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. She took a Lockean position when she argued that we derive our knowledge of God by comparing ideas received from sense and reflection, and that the idea of God is «a Proposition containing many complex Ideas in it; and which we are not capable of framing till we have been long acquainted with pleasing Sensations»⁴. She also defined love in a Lockean manner as "complaisance".

Locke's influence was even clearer in Masham's second book, *Occasional Thoughts*. Here she defended Christianity from deism, on the one hand, and superstition on the other; against the deists, Masham insisted on the importance of revelation and faith and denied that natural religion based purely on reason was sufficient for salvation. On the other hand, she claimed that religious belief that ignored the role of reason in religion was mere superstition, and would result in bigotry and atheism. Defending Christianity against deism, and showing the evidence supporting a rational assent to revelation had been Locke's main concern in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, published in 1695; the book did not escape criticism. The Calvinist divine John Edwards charged *The Reasonableness* with anti-Trinitarianism in 1697; later, in 1705 the devout Anglican Mary Astell, who had coauthored Norris' *Letters*, attacked both Locke's *Reasonableness* and Masham's *Discourse*. Astell, a skilful literary author and a supreme ironist, brought against Locke the same charge as Edwards; no doubt, Masham desired to defend her friend's memory when she published

² See E. S. De Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976-2010, pp. 472-473.

³ J. Norris, *Letters concerning the Love of God between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris*, S. Manship, London 1695.

⁴ See D. Masham, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God*, in J. G. Buickerood (ed.), *The Philosophical Works*, cit., p. 66.

Occasional Thoughts, as shown by her arguments. In what follows, I shall first expose these arguments and then focus on Masham's response to Astell's criticism, so as to show that her intent was to defend *The Reasonableness* from its critics.

2. Lady Masham's *Occasional Thoughts*

The point of departure of Masham's *Occasional Thoughts* is an analysis of her age, which she describes as a time of «skepticism and infidelity»⁵: Christians do not behave like they should, vices and impiety are to be found everywhere and viewed as fashionable, and the auspicated reformation of manners seems to be far from coming⁶. Since «Men's Practices have infected their Principles and Opinions», Masham claims, the personal virtue of the prince, «however conspicuous», is insufficient to restore morality, unless other means concur⁷. These means reduce essentially to one in her argumentation, a good education. Her insistence on good breeding as necessary both to «our present and National, as to our Personal and Future Happiness»⁸ recalls what Locke had affirmed in *Some Thoughts concerning Education*; Masham develops his ideas, laying great emphasis on the importance of women's education – a theme on which she dwells at length in the second part of *Occasional Thoughts*.

In the first part, deism and its causes are considered. Masham claims that the idea of virtues and the rules of action which conform to them are to be apprehended through education: when this knowledge is faulty or ill established, the «Truth and Reasonableness» of moral principles is put into doubt, and personal inclinations, passions and interests prevail. The only way to acquire a firm knowledge of virtue and moral rules, she declares, is to apprehend their «conformity with, or evident deduction from» the Principles of True Religion: these principles represent «the only sufficient ground or solid support of Virtue», those of natural law being insufficient for this scope. In *The Reasonableness*, Locke had insisted on the necessity of Christian revelation to establish morality on solid grounds and, thus, to pursue salvation effectively; Masham develops this thesis focusing on the importance of a good education to counteract immorality and skepticism. The decadence of virtue, she maintains, is the consequence of teachers' inability to highlight the conformity between the content of religion and that of morality; most importantly, it is the consequence of their inability to provide evidence of the truth revelation. «The Christian Religion cannot be a solid Foundation for Vertue – Masham affirms – where Vertue being inculcated upon the Declarations of the Gospel, those who are so instructed, are not convinc'd of the Authority and Evidence of That Revelation»⁹. Religious truths must be taught on the grounds of their evidence, otherwise what is built on them is liable to be questioned; the spreading of deism would confirm this, for Masham.

In *The Reasonableness*, Locke had insisted on the evidence of the revelation contained in the Gospel, which was such that it could not «be denied by any of the enemies, or opposers of Christianity»¹⁰. He had remarked his distance from the core tenets of deism – namely, that unassisted reason had actually grasped natural law, i.e. moral law, in its entirety, that natural law was sufficient for establishing morality on solid grounds and lead to salvation, and that Jesus had merely reaffirmed natural law without adding anything to it. Against the deists, Locke had insisted

⁵ See D. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* in J. G. Buickerood (ed.), *The Philosophical Works*, cit., p. 28.

⁶ Here Masham alludes to the Movement for the Reformation of Manners, which originated in London in 1688; the movement was supported by the action of several societies, the first of which was founded in 1691. Its aims were the suppression of profanity, immorality and lewd activities, and its strength largely lay in a network of informers appointed to detect and denounce cases of immorality. The societies' appeal to the magistrate for an enforcement of the laws against immorality found a ready answer in the several royal edicts passed by William III during the nineties; at his death, the Movement began to lose its strength.

⁷ D. C. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p.5.

⁸ *Ivi*, p.6.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 16.

¹⁰ See J. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. by J. C. Higgins-Biddle, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1999; trad. it. di M. Sina, «La ragionevolezza del Cristianesimo» in Id. (a cura di), *John Locke. Scritti etico-religiosi*, Utet, Torino 2000, pp.281-422. I quote from the English edition, p. 52.

that men had gained several advantages from Christ's Coming. These advantages have been usefully summarized by Diego Lucci in these terms:

First, Christ revealed the existence of "the one invisible true God", thus putting an end to polytheism, idolatry, and superstition, all caused mainly by priestcraft. Second, Christ revealed to humankind "a true and compleat Morality", clarifying all the elements and implications of the divine law that unassisted reason had always failed to comprehend. Third, Christ had reformed the worship of God, depriving it of its ritualistic elements. Fourth, Christ's teaching and resurrection offered humankind a "clear revelation" and "unquestionable assurance" of an afterlife with reward and punishment. Thus, Christ gave humanity a strong incentive to act morally – an incentive that no philosopher before him had provided. Fifth and last, Christ promised assistance by "the Spirit of God" in the form of the gift of grace, which, according to Locke, human beings were able to freely accept or reject¹¹.

Masham's arguments in *Occasional Thoughts* focused on the fifth advantages which humanity, in Locke's view, had gained from Christ's Coming, although her treatment of the question was no doubt original. Against deism, she argued first that there was only one motive which might lead men to conform to the moral law, and that this motive could not be effective with those who did not believe in revelation:

It is indeed only a Rational Fear of God, and desire to approve our selves to him, that will teach us in All things, uniformly to live as becomes our Reasonable Nature, to inable us to do which, must needs be the great Business and End of a Religion which comes from God¹².

A rational fear of God, and the consequent desire to be approved by Him through good works, could not be experienced by those who did not believe in Him, remarked Masham. Atheists were irrational, for their unique concern was about following their inclinations and gratifying their passions¹³; deists made a different mistake. They did not use their reason properly, for they did not acknowledge the truth of revelation which, however, could be clearly ascertained by examining the content of the Scriptures. In Masham's words,

tho' Reason cannot from the Evidence of the thing it self induce our assent to any Propostion, where we cannot perceive the Connexion of the Ideas therein contain'd; yet if it appears that such a Proposition was truly reveal'd by God, nothing can be more Rational than to believe it since we know that God can neither Deceive, nor be Deceived¹⁴.

In the *Essay*, Locke had affirmed that «*Revelation* is natural *Reason* enlarged by a new set of Discoveries communicated by God immediately, which *Reason* vouches the Truth of, by the Testimony and Proofs it gives, that they come from God»¹⁵; although revelation included things «whose truth our mind, by its natural faculties and notions, cannot judge» – things that are «above reason»¹⁶, its truth could be ascertained through the witness of the Scriptures¹⁷. In his *Vindications of The Reasonableness*, Locke had insisted that

¹¹ See D. Lucci, *John Locke on Atheism, Catholicism, Antinomianism, and Deism*, «Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics», n. 3, 2018, pp. 201-246, at p.244; J. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., pp. 139-164.

¹² D. C. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 27.

¹³ *Ivi*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 34.

¹⁵ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975; trad. it. di V. Cicero e M. G. D'Amico, *Saggio sull'intelletto umano*, Bompiani, Milano 2004. I quote from the English edition; the quotation, which is from book IV, xix, 4, is on p. 698.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, IV, xviii, 9, p. 695.

¹⁷ Victor Nuovo has affirmed that in *The Reasonableness* Locke does not abandon natural reason but rather enlarges it through revelation, showing «the reasonableness of extending belief to matters beyond the capacity of reason and experience to discover». See J. Locke, *Writings on Religion*, ed. by V. Nuovo, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 216.

If the reading and study of the Scripture were more pressed than it is, and Men were fairly sent to the Bible to find their Religion; [...] Christendom would have more Christians, and those that are, would be more knowing, and more in the right, than they now are¹⁸.

This was also Masham's opinion. In *Occasional Thoughts*, she wrote,

The Authority of that Revelation by which God has made known his Will to Men is to be firmly establish'd in People's Minds upon its clearest, and most rational evidence; and consequentially They are then to be refer'd to the Scriptures themselves, to see therein what is that God requires of them¹⁹.

The real problem, for Masham, was that nobody taught this: children were reproached when they asked for a proof of the divine authority of the Scriptures, and being not encouraged to inquire into their truth by their teachers and parents, they often became persuaded that there was no truth in them. Deism was one of the consequences of this²⁰; immorality was another. Rejecting revelation, deists were unable to fully obey the dictates of moral law, insisted Masham; they could discern its content, at least in part, through the light of reason, but they could not restrain their natural desire for immediate pleasure, for this required the special assistance of Revelation. She wrote,

without the help of Revelation, the Commands of Jesus Christ (two positive Institutions only excepted) are, as dictates likewise of Nature, discoverable by the Light of Reason, and are no less the Law of God to rational Creatures than the injunctions of Revelation are, yet few would actually discern this Law of Nature in its full extent, merely by the Light of Nature, or if they did, would find the inforcement thereof a sufficient Balance to that Natural love of present pleasure²¹.

These were arguments which Locke had used in *The Reasonableness* against deism: the limits of human understanding and the frailty of human nature, he had affirmed, had always prevented unassisted reason from grasping the law of nature in its entirety. He had written,

['T]is too hard a task for unassisted Reason – he had written – to establish Morality in all its parts upon its true foundation; with a clear and convincing light. [...] Such trains of reasoning the greatest part of Mankind have neither leisure to weigh; nor, for want of Education and Use, skill to judge of. We see how unsuccessful in this, the attempts of Philosophers were before our Saviour's time. How short their several Systems came of the perfection of a true and compleat Morality, is very visible. [...] Experience shews that the knowledge of Morality by mere natural light, (how agreeable soever it be to it) makes but slow progress, and little advance in the World. And the reason of it is not hard to be found in Men's Necessities, Passions, Vices, and mistaken Interests; which turn their thoughts another way²².

Masham drew attention to the consequences of this: deists were in danger of becoming immoral, for they could not conform strictly and steadily to moral principles without revelation. «Natural Light, unassisted by Revelation, is insufficient to the Ends of Natural Religion», she insisted²³. To confirm this, she referred to the idolatry and immorality spread among the heathens before the advent of Christ: the end of idolatry and polytheism was one of the advantages of His coming in *The Reasonableness*. Masham used the same argument, dwelling on an apparent exception to it i.e. the «happy Americans» whose customs had been commended by Garcilaso de la Vega²⁴. She claimed that their uncommon virtues were the result of the strength of the light of nature and of the «long uninterrupted series of Excellent Princes» who had governed them, but insisted that this did

¹⁸ J. Locke, «A Second Vindication», in Idem, *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. by V. Nuovo, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2012, p. 125.

¹⁹ D. C. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 43.

²⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 48-49.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 52.

²² J. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., pp.148-50.

²³ D. C. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 56.

²⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 58-59. Garcilaso referred to the Peruvians. His *Royal Commentaries of the Inca* appeared at Lisbon in 1609; he published the *General History of Peru* at Cordoba in 1617.

not demonstrate that revelation was not needed to enforce natural law. The case of the Americans rather showed that there might be some few people less prone to vice than others:

whatever Force of Reason – Masham wrote – these Natural Truths did appear to this People to carry with them, when represented as divine Commands, this light had never yet attracted their sight purely by its own Brightness, nor ever has any where done so, but here and there in a few Instances of Persons of more than ordinarily inquisitive Minds, and (probably) for the most part, exempted by a happy priviledge of Nature from the servitude of sensual, and sordid Passions²⁵.

The natural light of reason, in Masham's view, had led both the Americans and the rest of humanity to acknowledge several fundamental truths concerning God, his attributes and wills²⁶; thanks to this light, they had begun to believe in a superior invisible power as their creator, and to consider transgressing to its rules as a motive of punishment. However, some new beliefs had begun to merge with these: «the more Guilty and Fearful» among men invented ceremonies of expiation and purgation, which became lucrative for those invested with the authority to practise them (an authority they claimed to receive directly from God by means of a special revelation). As a consequence, those who observed superstitions such as sacrifices and processions were looked upon as being truly religious men; similarly, those who conformed to the variable civil institutions and customs of their country, which they believed to be divinely inspired, were considered as virtuous²⁷. One of the advantages of Christ's Coming, Locke had affirmed in *The Reasonableness*, had been that He had reformed the worship of God, depriving it of its ritualistic elements; no doubt Masham was thinking of this argument, which embodied a criticism of clericalism and priestcraft. This criticism could be found in *The Reasonableness* and elsewhere in Locke's writings²⁸.

Following Locke, Masham insisted that the virtue of a Christian man did not consist in conforming to customs and superstitions but rather in obeying natural law, whose prescriptions were identical with those of the Gospel: they were «but one and the same, differently promulg'd», she claimed²⁹. The content of natural law, however, had become fully apparent only at Christ's Coming; he had complemented and completed it with the prospect of reward and punishment in the afterlife, so that it was clear that without revelation natural law was insufficient to bring men to salvation. Masham wrote,

But there is still, beyond this, a farther impediment to Mens obeying the Law of Nature, by virtue of the meer Light of Nature; which is, that they cannot, in all circumstances, without Revelation, make always a just estimate in reference to their happiness. For, tho' it is demonstrable that the Law of Reason is the Law of God, yet the want of an explicite knowledge of the penalty incur'd by the breach of that Law, makes it not to be evident to all Men that the incurring of this penalty shall (in all cases) make the preference of breaking this Law, an ill Bargain which it may, sometimes not be to many, in regard of the discernable natural consequences of such a Transgression³⁰.

Revelation taught men that there was an eternal life and that eternal punishments and prizes were linked to the observance or violation of the precepts of natural law; these truths were the solid grounds of a virtuous life which were absent in natural religion. This was the teaching of the author

²⁵ D. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 101.

²⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 58-78.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 96.

²⁸ See J. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., pp. 161-163; concerning his anticlericalism and views on priestcraft, see J. Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 353-357, 405-410; R. Ashcraft, «Anticlericalism and Authority in Lockean Political Thought» in R. D. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, pp. 73-96; M. Goldie, *John Locke, the Early Lockean, and Priestcraft*, «Intellectual History Review», n. 28, 2018, pp. 125-144; J. A.T. Lancaster, *From Matters of Faith to Matters of Fact: The Problem of Priestcraft in Early Modern England*, in «Intellectual History Review», n. 28, 2018, pp. 145-165.

²⁹ D. C. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 98.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 103.

of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*³¹: Masham overtly praised the book, insisting that «the unhappy mistakes and disputes among us concerning the Christian Religion, make [it] useful to all Men»³². She might also be referring to *The Reasonableness* when she affirmed that «The prevalency of Deism has been so much and so justly complain'd of»³³: no doubt Locke deserved praise for this work, in Masham's view, not harsh criticism.

Masham added a final motive which made revelation necessary to salvation, and deism insufficient for this purpose³⁴: she affirmed that Christ had come to repair the breach of the law men were culpable of and to inaugurate a «Covenant of Grace», in order to assure them of the possibility of an eternal life. This covenant required them «to believe in his Son, taking him for their King, and submitting to his Law» in order to obtain remission for their sins. Thanks to the new covenant, faith was imputed to men for righteousness, and accepted by God «in lieu of perfect Obedience»: this was described as another advantage of Christ's Coming in *The Reasonableness*. Locke had affirmed that «by the Law of Faith, Faith is allowed to supply the defect of full Obedience; and so the Believers are admitted to Life and Immortality as if they were Righteous»³⁵. Masham drew attention to the consequences of this: deists could not be saved, for they did not believe in Christ and were therefore deprived of any justification for their unavoidable sins. To accept the revelation of the Gospel not only provided a solid ground for a virtuous life, but represented the only way to be saved: those who did not accept it were deprived of the assurance of being forgiven through faith, and might be «driven into despair of being accepted to God»³⁶.

Masham's arguments against Deism were therefore the same ones Locke had used in *The Reasonableness*; like him, she was convinced that the main cause of deism was that Christians did not have an adequate knowledge of the Scriptures and, as a consequence, were prone to accepting those confusing secondary doctrines which theologians attempted to impose on them as if they were integral parts of the Christian creed. Locke had insisted that differences in non-fundamental beliefs and practices should not hinder peace and toleration among Christians; in *The Reasonableness*, he had affirmed that every Christian had the duty to study the Scriptures conscientiously throughout his life and live in accordance with the fundamentals of his religion, namely faith, repentance and obeisance, with faith including good works. Every Christian had a right to give his own interpretation to the Scriptures and to infer particular doctrines from his understanding of the biblical text; no one could impose his interpretation on others. Locke thought that the beliefs needed to make one a Christian were so simple and readily discernible that all people could discover and understand them, whatever their intellectual capacities; there was no need for secondary doctrines to support these beliefs. Similarly, in *Occasional Thoughts* Masham drew attention to some «Teachers» of the Christian religion, who did not submit their opinions to the trial of the Scriptures but rather insisted upon «some of their own Theorems as necessary to be believ'd in confirmation of any thing taught by our Saviour»; those who heard their teachings and had not the time to examine the Scriptures by themselves preferred natural religion as a more trustworthy teacher than revelation³⁷. Ignorance of the Scriptures was therefore the true reason for the spreading of deism; also the proliferation of skepticism was to be considered, in Masham's view, as the outcome of

the preceding fashionableness of a very general Ignorance, both in regard of Religion, and also of other useful Sciences, for Men's not knowing how profitably, and with pleasure to employ their Time, is apparently one great cause of their Debauchery, and so long as the Conscience and Shame of not acting like rational Creatures is not extinguish'd in them, the uneasiness of that remorse puts them Naturally upon seeking out Principles to justifie their Conduct upon, few Men being able to endure the constant Reproaches of their own Reason³⁸.

³¹ J. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., pp. 160-161; this was one of the advantages of Christ's Coming, in his view.

³² D. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 109.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 110.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 115.

³⁵ J. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 19.

³⁶ D. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 121.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 144-146.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

Clearly Masham was convinced that Locke could not be charged with skepticism, although John Edwards had thought otherwise³⁹; by restating Locke's arguments against deism in *Occasional Thoughts*, she intended to defend the memory of her friend and master of thought, who had been unjustly accused of such great mistakes. Edward's accusations had been restated by Mary Astell in her book *The Christian religion*, published in January 1705; Masham might have felt the duty to reply to her, especially after Locke's death in October 1704. In the Preface of *Occasional Thoughts*, she affirmed that the book had been written some years before, but had remained unpublished until 1705; the reading of Mary Astell's work might have prompted her to make it public.

3. Masham against Mary Astell's criticism of Locke's *Reasonableness*

Astell's book, *The Christian Religion as professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, was not her first work: in 1694 she had published *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, which intended to demonstrate the existence, perfection, and necessary creative power of God. A few years later, she wrote a second part of this work, offering a method for the improvement of women's reason; the book embodied the prospectus for a female academy devoted to learning and piety.⁴⁰ Astell was a keen reader of Descartes; she was indebted to Descartes' ethical theory of the passions, yet her moral-theological viewpoint was closer to the Augustinianism of John Norris and Malebranche. In 1693, she had embarked on a correspondence with Norris; their letters discussed Norris's appropriation of the moral and metaphysical ideas of Malebranche. Their correspondence continued for one year and was published as *Letters Concerning the Love of God* in 1695.

Together with the *Letters*, the first and second *Proposals* earned Astell fame; she was celebrated for her wit and eloquence, and openly commended by John Evelyn and Daniel Defoe. In 1700, Astell published her most popular feminist work, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, which denounced the oppression of wives by their husbands; following this, her bookseller seems to have commissioned her to write several Tory political pamphlets. Astell had considerable Tory sympathies; in 1704, she published three short tracts, *Moderation Truly Stated*, *An Impartial Inquiry*, and *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*, which supported the Tory battle against religious dissent⁴¹. Then, in 1705, she published her longest and most sophisticated work of moral philosophy, *The Christian Religion*. In the Appendix, Astell moved serious criticism against the author of *The Reasonableness* and the *Discourse concerning the Love of God*, which she thought had been written by the same person. This criticism was somehow unexpected, for she had shown a certain sympathy to the author of the *Essay* in her previous works. She had mentioned him in the second part of *A serious proposal to the Ladies*, where she had praised him for his advice on good grammar⁴²; in *Moderation truly stated*, Astell again cited Locke approvingly, referring to his criticism of the abuse of language in the *Essay*. The argument of the tract – which deplored the appeasement of dissenters by Whigs and echoed many other Tory attacks against dissent – showed that her ideas were very different from those expressed by the author of the *Letters for Toleration*, or of the *Two Treatises of Government*; Astell however only referred to Locke's epistemology. Similarly, in another tract she published in 1704, *An impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion*

³⁹See J. Locke, «A Second Vindication», cit., p. 201. Edwards wrote four books against Locke: *Some Thoughts concerning the several Causes and Occasions of Atheism, especially in the Present Age, with some brief Reflections on Socinianism and on a late Book entitled The Reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures*, J. Robinson, London 1695; *Socinianism Unmask'd*, J. Robinson, London 1696; *The Socinian Creed*, J. Robinson, London 1697; *A Brief Vindication of the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Faith, as also of the Clergy, Universities and publick Schools, from Mr. Lock's Reflections upon them in his Book of Education*, J. Robinson, London 1697. Edwards charged Locke with anti-Trinitarianism and skepticism.

⁴⁰ M. Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. by P. Springborg, Peterborough, Ontario, Broadview Press Ltd. 2002.

⁴¹ See Id., *Political Writings*, ed. by P. Springborg, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.

⁴² See Id., *A Serious Proposal*, cit., p. 139. Concerning Astell's mentions of Locke, see W. Kolbrerner, M. Michelson (eds.), *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, Ashgate, Burlington VT 2007, pp. 65-94.

and *Civil War*, she referred to his epistemology to criticize a sermon which applauded the regicide of Charles I⁴³, but refrained from considering the ideas of the author of the *Two Treatises*.

In *The Christian Religion*, however, Astell associated Locke's *Essay* with his other writings. She criticized the *Second Treatise*, insisting that its author had misunderstood the right to self-preservation on which he had grounded his defence of resistance: self-preservation, intended as one of the commands of natural law, had to be intended as the duty of preserving oneself from evil, not as the duty to preserve one's life⁴⁴.

Astell also expressed reservations about the content of the *Essay*, although she declared to have «a due Esteem» of its author⁴⁵: she criticized Locke's hypothesis of a thinking matter, which in her opinion could justify a materialistic conception of the human mind, and deplored several inconsistencies in the arguments by which he had intended to defend his *Essay* against Bishop Edward Stillingfleet⁴⁶.

The criticism of *The Reasonableness* preceded that of the *Essay*. Astell insisted that, notwithstanding the fact that the book had been intended to convince the dissenters of their mistakes (for this Locke had replied to Edwards' accusations)⁴⁷, it did not mention the Trinity, although this could render it very profitable to the Socinians⁴⁸; this was a veiled accusation of anti-Trinitarianism. Quoting *The Reasonableness*, Astell claimed that «the bare belief that JESUS was the promis'd Messiah was not the only Article of Faith Preach'd by Christ and His Apostles to those who acknowledg'd the One True GOD»⁴⁹; the belief in the Trinity was also fundamental. She also insisted that Locke had not sufficiently exposed the doctrine of the divinity and satisfaction of Christ; this was another veiled accusation of Socinianism, for Socinians rejected the orthodox belief in the divinity of Christ and the propitiatory view of atonement⁵⁰. Astell remarked that Locke had described Christ as «the son of God», the «Messiah», and «an extraordinary man»⁵¹, but had not spoken of him as one person of the Trinity.

Then Astell extended her criticism to the author of the *Discourse*, whom she thought might be Locke himself. She blamed the *Discourse* for confirming the silence of *The Reasonableness* on some fundamental articles of faith⁵²; against its author, she remarked that Malebranche's hypotheses of seeing all things in God could be really helpful in defending Christ's divinity from possible objections⁵³, and lauded Norris' insistence on the necessity to love only God with desire. In her *Discourse*, Masham had criticized those «Pompous Rhapsodies of the Soul's debasing her self, when she descends to set the least part of her Affections upon any thing but her Creator»⁵⁴; «I make

⁴³ M. Astell, *Political Writings*, cit., p. 177.

⁴⁴ Id., *The Christian Religion, as profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*, London, R. Wilkin 1705, p. 218. The *Two Treatises* had been printed anonymously, so it is no surprise that Astell did not mention its author.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 326.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 326-333. In his *Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, published in 1697, Stillingfleet had charged Locke's *Essay* with anti-trinitarianism and skepticism; Locke had replied to his attack. Their controversy ended two years later, as a consequence of the Bishop's death.

⁴⁷ See J. Locke, «A Second Vindication», cit., p. 101: «Twas these I chiefly designed, and I believe, nobody of all that read my Vindication, but the Unmasker mistook me, if he did». See also *Ivi*, p. 191, where Locke makes a similar affirmation.

⁴⁸ M. Astell, *The Christian Religion*, cit., pp. 294-295. The Socinians were the disciples of the anti-Trinitarian and anti-Calvinist Faustus Socinus.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 300.

⁵⁰ Astell was probably right. Concerning Locke's position on the Trinity and his attitude towards Socinianism, see J. Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul*, ed. by A. W. Wainwright, 2 vols., Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987, 1, Introduction, pp. 1-88; Idem, *Reasonableness*, cit., Introduction, pp. xv-cxv; J. Marshall, «Locke, Socinianism, and Unitarianism» in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 111-182.

⁵¹ M. Astell, *The Christian Religion*, cit., pp. 296-297.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 309.

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 310.

⁵⁴ D. C. Masham, *Discourse*, cit., p. 21.

no scruple to say – Astell replied –, without fear of losing my self in a *Pompous Rhapsody*, that the Soul debases her self, when she sets her affections on any thing but her Creator»⁵⁵. Both *The Reasonableness* and the *Discourse* had the same end in view, to Astell, to promote a system of thought favorable to a certain political party (the Whigs) and indifferent to religion: she wrote,

every thing is not True which we find in the *Discourses* of our Modern Authors, who not only refine upon Philosophy, by which they do Service to the World, and upon Politicks, by which they mean to Serve their Party; but even upon Christianity it self, pretending to give us a more *Reasonable* Account of it, by which they mean somewhat more agreeable to their Genius and Conveniency; for their Systems, so far as I can find, do no manner of Service to decaying Piety, and mistaken and slander'd Christianity⁵⁶.

In general, Astell's criticism was intended to show that the content of the *Discourse* was hardly reconcilable with the Christian religion; both *The Reasonableness* and the *Discourse* were guilty of several mistakes and omissions.

Ruth Perry has affirmed that Masham partly re-wrote *Occasional Thoughts* in response to some of Astell's points⁵⁷; I agree with her, yet I think that Masham's intention was to reply not only to Astell but also to Edwards. She wanted to defend Locke's memory from their accusations: her arguments against deism were those her friend had exposed in *The Reasonableness*, which both Edwards and Astell had criticized as insufficient. Probably Masham was thinking of both of them when, in *Occasional Thoughts*, she argued that «it is a great recommendation of the Precepts of the Gospel to find that they have an exact correspondence with, and conformity to the Nature of Things»: this, in her opinion, might help those who were not «throwly perswaded of this Divine Revelation», the deists, to embrace virtue much more than those «nice, or subtle speculations» on virtue «pompously set out». These ineffectual «speculations»⁵⁸ were those of Edwards and Astell; unlike them, Locke had meant to highlight the natural conformity between the content of Revelation and that of natural law, which could not be changed “without changing the nature of things”. He had affirmed this in *The Reasonableness*: he had written,

The duties of that law arising from the constitution of his [man's] very nature, are of eternal obligation; nor can it be taken away or dispensed with, without changing the nature of things, overturning the measures of right and wrong, and thereby introducing and authorizing irregularity, confusion, and disorder in the world⁵⁹.

Locke's insistence on the conformity between the content of natural law and that of revelation could be of great help to convince the deists of their errors, for Masham; this was not Astell's opinion. In *The Christian Religion*, she affirmed that the belief in revelation was necessary to acquire a full knowledge of the cause of the weakness of human nature (Adam's sin), of God's nature (that is to say, of the Trinity) and of the way to be reconciled with Him⁶⁰; clearly the content of natural law and that of revelation were different, in her view. In Astell's opinion, Christian's duties were not those of the natural person, which consisted in «making the best use of our Talents and hereby aspiring to the highest degree of Happiness and Perfection of which we are capable»; only Christian duties required to do «nothing that misbecomes the Relation we bear to Christ as Members of his Body»⁶¹. Deists could not practise Christian duties, which were the only perfect

⁵⁵ M. Astell, *The Christian Religion*, cit., p. 317.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 314.

⁵⁷ R. Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell. An Early English Feminist*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1986, p. 96. Jacqueline Broad defined Perry's reasons “unclear”, because of this lack of evidence: see J. Broad, *Adversaries or Allies? Occasional Thoughts on the Masham-Astell Exchange*, «Eighteenth-Century Thought», n. 1, 2003, pp. 123-49. I hope to have been able to show that there is sufficient evidence in *Occasional Thoughts* to affirm that Perry was right.

⁵⁸ D. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 81.

⁵⁹ J. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 119.

⁶⁰ M. Astell, *The Christian Religion*, cit., p. 43.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

duties; they were not only irrational, because of their failing to recognize the evidence of revelation, but also presumptuous, since they only accepted what was accessible to their feeble reason.

Locke had laudably attempted to bridge the gap between the deists and the Christians by insisting on the identity between the moral teaching of the Gospel and natural law; both Edwards and Astell had reopened the gap, charging Locke with Socinianism. This was probably what Masham intended to suggest in that passage of *Occasional Thoughts* where she affirmed:

But some Men there are so far from approving of any Notion or Theorem being advanc'd with respect to Deity, whereby, as such, they may be induc'd to the love of Vertue (which is the best predisposition to the entertainment of Christianity), that they are ready to treat as not being themselves Christians, if not as Atheists, any one who in the view of gaining thus much upon these Men assert Vertue by any other Arguments than such as they will not admit of, viz. those drawn from Revelation⁶².

In Masham's view, Locke had meant to encourage deists to love virtue by reconciling them with revelation; as a consequence, he had been charged with atheism. Another passage in *Occasional Thoughts* confirmed that Masham was replying to Edwards and Astell's arguments against Locke; she wrote,

all Theorems too abstruse for Vulgar Apprehensions – she wrote –, which Christianity is believ'd to Teach, however Divine Truths, are yet no part of the Doctrine of Salvation. There is not therefore this pretence to impose upon any one the belief on any thing which they do not find to be reveal'd in Scripture; the doing of which, has not only caus'd deplorable dissentions among Christians, but also been an occasion to multitudes of well meaning People of having so confus'd and unsatisfactory conceptions and apprehensions concerning the Christian Religion as tho' perhaps not absolutely, or immediately prejudicial to their Salvation, yet are so to their seeing clearly that Christianity is a rational Religion; without which few will be very secure from the infection of Scepticism, or Infidelity⁶³.

Here Masham restated the purpose of Locke's *Reasonableness*, which had been misunderstood by his critics: Locke had concentrated only on the fundamentals of Christianity, not on disputed doctrines, in order to recompose those "deplorable dissentions" which divided Christians and favored skepticism. She clearly agreed with Locke's purpose, which was rooted in an established tradition including, among others, Socinians, Arminians, and, in England, several latitudinarian divines. To these theologians, the core of the Christian religion consisted of few fundamental tenets concerning God's existence, His assisting grace, the divine authority of the Scriptures, rewards and punishment in the afterlife, and the necessity of good works to achieve salvation. Different beliefs and practises stemming from divergent interpretations of the Scripture were viewed as worthy of toleration, for they did not concern fundamental beliefs and practises. Masham agreed with this tradition, as Locke did. She had been at his side when he was writing *The Reasonableness*, and no doubt felt a special bond with this work⁶⁴.

Conclusion

Several pages in the second part of *Occasional Thoughts* showed that Masham did not intend to continue disputing with Astell. On the contrary, she was aware that they had many ideas in common, being both concerned with women's right to be educated. In the second part of her *Proposal* Astell had claimed that women could find knowledge useful, both for their souls and for the management of their families, the education of their children and their relations with their neighbours⁶⁵. She had

⁶² D. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, cit., p. 82.

⁶³ *Ivi*, pp. 167-68.

⁶⁴ In his letter to Samuel Bold, included in the preface to the *Second Vindication*, Locke mentioned an unnamed person, someone intimate, who everyday enquired of him how *The Reasonableness* was progressing. Locke was at Oates when he penned the work; no doubt the unnamed person was Lady Masham. See Locke, «A Second Vindication», cit., p. 36; V. Nuovo, «*The Reasonableness of Christianity and A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul*», in M. Stuart (ed.), *A Companion to Locke*, Blackwell, Oxford 2016, pp. 486-500, at p. 489.

⁶⁵ M. Astell, *The Christian Religion*, cit., p. 210.

declared that women should be allowed to develop their intellectual potential, for God had endowed them with reason. Similar ideas could be found in the second part of *Occasional Thoughts*, where Masham insisted on the important role played by mothers in educating their children⁶⁶, and on the great advantages which they could gain from improving their understanding; she blamed the popular custom of considering instruction as inappropriate to women and claimed that they could benefit considerably from learning. Masham might have been looking for a way to show Astell that they could well be allies, not enemies, provided that Locke's memory was not tarnished.

⁶⁶ Florence Mary Smith was no doubt right when she affirmed that Masham had feminized the content of Locke's *Some Thoughts concerning Education* in her *Occasional Thoughts*. See F. Smith, *Mary Astell*, Columbia University Press, New York 1916, p. 113.