

John Toland

Christianity not Mysterious: or, a TREATISE Shewing, That there is nothing in the GOSPEL Contrary to REASON, Nor Above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd A MYSTERY

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John Toland (30 November 1670 – 11 March 1722) was a rationalist philosopher and freethinker, and occasional satirist, who wrote numerous books and pamphlets on political philosophy and philosophy of religion, which are early expressions of the philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment. Born in Ireland, he was educated at the universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Leiden and Oxford and was influenced by the philosophy of John Locke.

On 18 September 1697, "Christianity not Mysterious" was burned in Dublin by order of Parliament. Toland's work argues that "there is nothing in the Gospels contrary to reason" and that the so-called Christian mysteries are merely the inventions of competing sects. This view threatened the very basis of the supremacy of the Established Church over the other churches in Ireland. Toland was forced to leave Ireland and spent the remainder of his life on the European continent, "Christianity not Mysterious" was rather more successful as well as influential. Toland's defence of reason over revelation in Christian belief went farther than Locke and other previous rationalists had dared, and so provoked a distinguished Irish counter-tradition that included Swift, Berkeley, King, Burke and many others.

Preface

The problem: the Church does not allow people to think for themselves; and that further it claims that the Faith is so complex that only authorised persons may reveal or expound it.

And that what is our highest interest perfectly to understand, should... both be maintained to be obscure, and very industriously made so!

And on the other hand, antagonists of religion trample upon the truth. This book is aimed at rectifying the errors of both parties. 'No atheist.. can justly be angry with me for measuring swords with them, and attacking them only with the weapons they prescribe me. The true Christian can no more be offended, when he finds me employ reason, not to enervate or perplex, but to confirm and elucidate revelation.'

The gospel is not intended to be complex, difficult or mysterious. *The poor, who are not supposed to understand philosophical systems, soon apprehended the difference between the plain convincing instructions of Christ, and the intricate ineffectual declamations of the scribes. For the Jewish rabbis, divided at that time into stoick, platonick and pythagorean sects, did by a mad liberty of allegory, accommodate the scriptures to the wild speculations of their several masters.*

His previous work was called *Systems of Divinity Exploded!* The present work is based on the assumption that the NT is of divine origin. It will be followed by a second discourse which will offer a rational explanation of the reputed mysteries of the gospel. A third will demonstrate the verity of divine revelation against atheists. The author does not wish to be identified with a particular denomination – he is not a follower of Paul or Cephas or Apollos, but of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Nor does he wish to be labelled an enemy of the Church – only of corrupt clergy who make a trade of religion, and build an unjust authority on the abused consciences of the laity.

And such is the deplorable Condition of our Age, that a Man dares not openly and directly own what he thinks of Divine Matters, tho it be never so true and beneficial; if it but very slightly differs from what is received by any Party, or that is establish'd by Law; but he is either forced to keep perpetual Silence, or to propose his Sentiments to the World, by way of Paradox, under a borrow'd or fictitious Name... To

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SECTION I: THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

The Divines, whose job it is to explain religion, say it cannot be understood, and that *we must adore what we cannot comprehend*. But they don't agree among themselves; some appeal to the Doctors or the Fathers of the Church, but these don't agree either. Some appoint a Council, others a Head of the Church as the definitive voice – but why should these have more weight than the Doctors or the Fathers? The only ones who make any sense are those who say we are to keep to what the scriptures teach – but then again, some say what the scriptures teach literally, others allegorically. The only answer seems to be to use our own reason.

Toland's aim – to define reason, then to prove there is no doctrine of the gospel contrary to it; then to show there's nothing which is above reason either, and therefore that there is no mystery in the gospel.

1. What reason is not

It's not another word for the soul. It's not another word for thinking either.

2. Wherein reason consists

Considering evidence or fact is not reason. But trying to discern a third fact from two known facts is reason. Reason is *'that faculty of the soul which discovers the certainty of anything dubious or obscure, by comparing it with something evidently known.'*

3. Of the means of information

The means of information is the way something comes to our knowledge (through either experience or authority).

4. Of the ground of persuasion

The ground of persuasion is the act of evaluating it (by considering evidence). *God the wise Creator of all.. who has enabled us to perceive things, and form Judgments of them, has also endued us with the power of suspending our judgments about whatever is uncertain, and of never assenting but to clear perceptions.* So he gave us the power to discern truth by considering evidence.

SECTION II: THAT THE DOCTRINES OF THE GOSPEL ARE NOT CONTRARY TO REASON

1. The absurdity and effects of admitting any reason or seeming contradictions in religion

This is a false refuge used by those who are at a loss to explain a particular passage – it covers up their ignorance. *The clergy.. have improved it so far as not only to make the plainest, but the most trifling things in the Word mysterious, that we might constantly depend upon them for the Explication.* It is plainly ludicrous to suggest that reason might authorize one thing, and the Spirit of God another – eg we cannot believe that bread and wine have transubstantiated into the body and blood of Jesus when our senses and our reason demonstrate that they are still bread and wine. We don't seek such a literal understanding when we read that Christ is a rock, or we are worms or sheep. We apply reason to these things. If a man is asked to believe things which his reason plainly can make no sense of, he will be confused and discouraged, and his faith will not be stable – and he is open to being carried away by every wind of doctrine. *To believe the divinity of scripture, or the sense of any passage thereof, without rational proofs, and an evident consistency, is a blameable credulity.* Why do we do it? Because to embrace such doctrines serves our designs better than the truth?

2. Of the authority of revelation

Revelation is a means of information; we apply reason to it. So if someone says he saw a cane without two ends, we won't believe him. If he says he saw a staff that sprouted branches, we might well believe him – because reason tells us this is possible. Likewise, if we are told an object is round and square at the same time, we won't accept this. Revelation is revealing a previously unknown fact – eg there is an island called Jamaica, or the creation of the world was one in such a way.

3. That by Christianity was intended a rational and intelligible religion – proved from the miracles, method and style of the NT

All the doctrines and precepts of the NT should agree with natural reason, and our own ordinary ideas; which means anyone should be able to understand it – it is not hidden or far off, but near to us, in our mouths and hearts (Deut 30.11-14). Jesus provided evidence to back up his statements, in the form of miracles – and these were commonly accepted as appropriate evidence of his identity/authority by those who witnessed them. He also appealed to their reason, urging them to search the scriptures. The NT is written carefully to give an ordered account, and in ordinary language – *without the disguise of pompous eloquence.* Paul points out he came with ordinary words, 1 Cor 2.1-4, contrasting himself with clever orators who teach for their own glory and gain.

4. Objections answered, drawn from the pravity of human reason

One final argument is that our reason is corrupt, and unreliable; and it's true that we are easily led astray by our own inclinations. But if our human reason were not a thing to be relied on, we might as well say we are not responsible for keeping the commandments. All our choices are based on reason; and we are held accountable for them. Truth does not dwell in light inaccessible... It's no virtue to imagine mysteries where there are none, or to lack confidence in our own ability to reason – and we are told by James to ask for wisdom, if we need to.

SECTION III : THAT THERE IS NOTHING MYSTERIOUS, OR ABOVE REASON IN THE GOSPEL

We've shown that no doctrine of the gospel is contrary to reason. Is any then above reason – that is, is there anything in the gospel which cannot be penetrated by reason; or is there anything which cannot be judged by our faculties however clearly it be revealed to us?

1. The history and signification of mystery in the writings of the Gentiles

The meaning of the word mystery goes back to the theology of the ancient Gentiles – Romans 1, those who turned the truth of God into a lie. They disguised their religion (they must have been either ashamed or afraid to exhibit it openly) *with various ceremonies, sacrifices, plays etc, making the superstitious people believe that admirable things were adumbrated by these externals. The Priests, but very rarely, and then obscurely, taught in publick, pretending the injunctions of their Divinities to the contrary, lest their Secrets, forsooth, should be exposed to the profanation of the ignorant, or violation of the impious. They performed the highest acts of their worship, consisting of ridiculous, obscene, or inhumane rites, in the inmost recesses of Temples or Groves consecrated for that purpose: And it was inexpiable sacrilege for any to enter these but such as had a special mark and privilege, or as much as to ask Questions about what passed in them. All the Excluded were for that Reason stiled the Profane, as those not in Orders with us the Laity.* Further, they set up initiation rites, making initiates spend several years undergoing them, and swearing them to secrecy.

Mystos in their systems signified to initiate: myesis, initiation: mystes, a name afterwards given the priests, denoted the person to be initiated, and mystery the doctrine in which he was initiated. As there were several degrees, so there were different sorts of Mysteries. The most famous were the Samothracian, the Eleusinian, the Egyptian, and those of Bacchus.

From what has been said it is clear, that they understood by Mystery in those Days a thing intelligible of itself, but so veild by others, that it could not be known without special Revelation.

But some Christians hold that some Christian doctrines are still mysterious in the second sense of the word – that is, inconceivable in themselves, however clearly revealed.

When the NT uses the word mystery, it uses it in the original sense – that is, to describe things which of themselves are intelligible, but so covered by figurative words and rites that reason cannot discover them without special revelation. If however we consider the fact that we have indeed received the special revelation required, then it follows that these things can no longer be called mysteries.

2. That nothing ought to be called a mystery, [on the grounds that] we have not an adequate idea of all its properties, nor any at all of its essence.

If this were the definition of a mystery, everything would be one. We understand things when we know its chief properties and uses – we don't say water is a mystery to us, even if we don't know how many particles go into a drop of it, or whether it contains air. All Christian doctrines fall into the same category as the water; they cannot be said to be mysteries simply on the grounds there are things we don't completely know about them. Further, everything revealed in religion is perfectly comprehensible – just as comprehensible as water. Even God is known to us through his attributes.

3. The signification of the word mystery in the NT, and the writings of the most ancient Christians.

The main point is this: whether or not Christianity is mysterious should be decided by the NT, which contains it.

Christianity is not mysterious, because it has been revealed in such a way that it may be understood. 1 Cor 2.7-10 – Paul says that God has revealed to us, by his Spirit, things which were previously hidden in a mystery. No philosophers foretold the coming of Christ, explained the resurrection of the body, etc. The Gentiles could not discern, in the face of pain and suffering, that there is a good and merciful Deity. They came up with explanations for evil and misfortune like transmigration. But the whole thing is explained to us by the NT; with the doctrine of sin all becomes clear. Some elements of the gospel were mysterious to the people of the OT, because they had not

Such Revelations then of God in the New Testament are call'd Mysteries, not from any present Inconceivableness or Obscurity, but with respect to what they were before this Revelation

yet been revealed – but Jesus revealed them, and the veil was removed. Romans 6.25-26 Paul says the mystery which was kept secret since the world began is now made manifest.

Uses of the word mystery in the NT:

1. **Mystery refers to the gospel in general, as hid from the Gentiles and imperfectly known to the Jews**

- Romans 16.25-26 : the preaching of Jesus according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest.. and made known to all nations for the obedience of faith
- 1 Cor 2.7 ditto
- 1 Cor 4.1: ministers of Christ, and the stewards of the mysteries of God – ie preachers of the doctrines God chose to reveal
- Eph 6.9 : praying that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel
- Col 4.3-4 : praying that God would open a door of utterance to speak the mystery of Christ – that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak
- Col 2.2 : the riches of the knowledge of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ
- 1 Tim 3.8-9 : deacons.. holding the mystery of the faith in a pure consciences
- 1 Tim 3.16 : without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest n the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of Angels, preached unto the gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

of the Gospel. No Doctrine then of the Gospel is still a Mystery (for the Apostles conceal'd nothing from us that was useful, and have acquainted us with the whole Counsel of God :) but 'tis the Gospel it self that was heretofore indeed a Mystery, and cannot now after it is fully reveal'd, properly deserve that Appellation.

2. **Some particular doctrines occasionally revealed by the apostles are said to be manifested mysteries, ie unfolded secrets – at which point they cease to be mysteries.**

- Eph 3.1-6, 9 : by revelation he made known to me the mystery which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as its now revealed unto us, his holy apostles and prophets, by the Spirit, that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs
- Romans 11.25 : I would not that you should be ignorant of this mystery
- Col 1.25-27 : the mystery which has been hid from ages and generations but now is made manifest to his saints, to whom God would make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles
- Eph 1.9-10 : having made known unto us the mystery of his will.. that he might gather together into one all things in Christ
- 1 Cor 15.51-52 : I show you a mystery, a secret – we shall not all die, but be changed in a moment
- Eph 5.31-32 : the conjunction of man and wife is a type of the union between Christ and his Church
- 2 Thess 2.3-8: the mystery of iniquity already works

3. **Mystery is used to refer to anything veiled under parables or enigmatic speech**

- Matt 13.10-11 : the disciples ask why Jesus speaks in parables, and he says it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom but to them it is not given
- Mark 4.11 : ditto
- Luke 8.10 : ditto
- 1 Cor 13.2 : if I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have all faith so that I move mountains, and have not charity..
- 1 Cor 14.2 : he who speaks in a strange tongue speaks mysteries

He omits Revelation because it contains no new doctrines. It does use the word mystery, though.

- Rev 1.20 – the mystery of the 7 stars (then explained)
- Rev 17.5-7 – mystery is written on the head of the woman (then explained)
- Rev 10.5-7 – the angel will reveal the mysteries of God

Mystery in the whole New Testament is never put for any thing inconceivable in itself, or not to be judg'd of by our ordinary Notions and Faculties, however clearly reveal'd

It always signifies some things naturally intelligible enough, but either so veil'd by figurative Words and Rites, or so lodged in God's sole Knowledge and Decree, that they could not be discovered without special Revelation.

Of the ancient writers, Clement of Alexandria understood mystery in this same way that the Gentiles did and Toland believes the gospel writers did. But the primitive Christians, *in a ridiculous imitation of the Jesus, turn'd al the Scripture into allegory*. Things in the OT were linked with things in the New, and regarded as the Type or Mystery of them. So Justin Martyr uses the words type, symbol, parable, shadow, figure, sign and mystery interchangeably. Origen further developed this mystick or allegorical system of interpreting scripture to its perfection. But he never extended this to the gospel itself, which he and the other Fathers did NOT regard as a mystery. There is no justification in the Fathers, of scripture, or reason, for regarding the gospel as a mystery (unless it be as a mystery now revealed).

4. Objections brought from particular texts of scripture, and from the nature of faith answered.

I should read the Gospel a Million of Times over before the Vulgar Notion of Mystery could ever enter into my Head, or any Passage in that Book could suggest to me that the Sense of it was above Reason or Enquiry. The subject of Faith must be intelligible to all, since the belief thereof is commanded under no less a penalty than damnation (Mk 16.16).

Either the apostles could not write more intelligibly of the reputed Mysteries, or they would not.

5. Objections, drawn from the consideration of miracles, answered

When their other arguments have been defeated, the partisans of mystery fly to miracles as their last refuge. *A miracle is some action exceeding all humane power, and which the laws of nature cannot perform by their ordinary operations.* A miracle isn't something contrary to reason, something impossible – it's a possible thing done in an extraordinary way. People can be healed through medicine; and through miracle.

6. When, why and by whom were mysteries brought into Christianity

The converted Jews wanted to retain their Levitical rites and feasts. The converted Gentiles were *scandalised at the plain dress of the gospel, with the wonderful facility of the doctrines it contained, having been accustomed all their lives to the pompous worship and secret mysteries of deities without number.* The Christians, keen to accommodate them, set up communion and baptism in the form of pagan mystic rites, and insisted on initiation before participation. The emperors put up stately churches, and converted heathen temples and sanctuaries to the use of Christians, but *all their endowments, with the benefices of the priests, flamens, augurs, and the whole sacred tribe, were appropriated to the Christian clergy* – including stoles, mitres, etc.

Similarities between this rebranded Christianity and the pagan mysteries:

- use of words initiating and perfecting, mystery, priest, et al
- same preparations for the initiations – washings, fasting, abstention from sex beforehand – this was the original of fasting and clerical celibacy
- same secrecy about the mysteries – Chrystostom wrote how the doors were shut and the uninitiated excluded
- the Fathers did not speak about their mysteries before unbelievers or catechumens, using circumlocutions in their writings
- both used steps and degrees in their initiations

Mystery in this sense crept into Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, through ceremonies – eg to baptism adding anointing, the sign of the cross, a white garment etc. The Last Supper took on its ritual aspect in the same way – not letting bread fall to the ground, only receiving it from a priest etc – there is nothing of any of this in scripture.

The clergy did all this with an eye to their own advantage – by reviving mystery, they made themselves into a separate body with its various orders and degrees. The priestly hierarchy arose now, in the 3rd century.

Conclusion

There is no mystery in Christianity.

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