

The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead. Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the Enlightenment

Review Number:

781

Publish date:

Friday, 31 July, 2009

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ISBN:

9780748634262

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

174pp.

Publisher:

Edinburgh University Press

Place of Publication:

Edinburgh

Reviewer:

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Michael Graham's work is the first book length study of the life and unfortunate death of Edinburgh university student Thomas Aikenhead. It builds on the important article length study of Michael Hunter first published in 1992.⁽¹⁾ Taking the model approach of the case-study of individual heterodoxy beautifully initiated by Ginzburg's study of Menocchio, Seaver's exploration of the mind of Nehemiah Wallington, or more recently Hessayon's imaginative reconstruction of the mentalité of Thomas Tany, Graham aims to place Aikenhead's blasphemy and execution in the various legal, confessional and political contexts of late 17th-century Edinburgh.⁽²⁾ The last person to be executed for blasphemy in Britain, Aikenhead was punished for articulating his educated scepticism about commonplace Protestant doctrine and convictions in the wrong places – in the public spaces of coffee-houses and drinking dens. Since the 19th century when Macaulay's whiggery commemorated Aikenhead as a martyr to reason, Aikenhead's case has been a marker of the persecuting tendencies of the confessional state: a victim of bigoted priests. As Graham shows by exploring the reportage of the trial and execution in newspapers such as the *Post Man* and *Post Boy* in London, news of the brutal punishment whipped up both clergymen and the heterodox to read providential and political meaning into his death.

The late 1690s was a time of profound political and religious instability – the new Williamite regime, keen to discipline and restrain the threat of international and domestic 'popery', had relinquished (at least temporarily) the ambition of Godly conformity. In England the Church of England – in particular those foot-soldiers in the reborn Lower House of Convocation – following the model of Atterbury were equally keen to restate their vision of a social order underpinned by *de jure divino* principles. For much of the decade John

Locke had cause to defend the values of toleration and ‘reasonableness’ against the assaults of churchmen of all hues, who insisted in their different ways, that it was the duty of the Godly magistrate and priest to restrain vice, immorality and blasphemy. Men like Jean Gailhard called down the judgement of God upon all dissidents: punishment by death was an act of Christian piety, forbearance of heterodoxy was an unforgiveable sin. In Scotland the sense of religious crisis was if anything even more profound. As Graham establishes, those rigorous Presbyterian ministers such as George Meldrum involved in the pursuit of Aikenhead equally saw it as their Godly duty to hound young girls to death for playing on Sundays. One did not need to be an articulate atheist to suffer the deadly consequences of upsetting the Godly.

Graham’s study emplots Thomas Aikenhead into an excellent reconstruction of the routines of religious and university life in the university and city of Edinburgh. He also locates the troubles Aikenhead faced in the broader moral panic of the 1690s. This is detailed and archivally informed historical writing – exploiting parish, judicial, ecclesiastical and private papers Graham delivers a textured sense of the tense atmosphere riven by a bustling and intellectually robust university and the assumptions of a civic society which assumed the rightness of divine punishment for public sins. Fear of atheism was rendered more sensitive by anxieties about the political instability of the new order and the varieties of challenges to the ecclesiastical establishment. This account literally allows us to retrace Aikenhead’s footsteps to the gallows (see Figure 1.1 ‘Thomas Aikenhead’s final journey’ p. 3).

Aikenhead was very much (in this account) the wrong person in the wrong place. As Hunter pointed out in his earlier article Aikenhead’s case was not the first example of heterodoxy to be put before the Scottish privy council in October and November of 1696. In early October 1696, John Fraser, a bookkeeper to the merchant Alexander Innes was charged with maintaining that ‘there was no God to whom men owed that reverence worship and obedience so much talked off’ and more to the point that the beliefs in establish religion was made to ‘frighten folks and to keep them in order’ (p. 61). The origins of the accusation, Fraser claimed, had been prompted by a misunderstanding between himself and his landlord and landlady over discussion of the impious views advanced by the dead freethinker Charles Blount in his *Oracles of Reason* (1693). Clearly receiving expert legal advice, Fraser called in all the support he could draw on in the mercantile and Presbyterian community – it was his first offence, he was repentant. Certainly the punishment meted out by the Privy Council – imprisoning him in the tollbooth in sackcloth until the following February – did not preserve his reputation, but it did his life. Unlike Aikenhead, who displayed both obstinacy and repeated hostility, Fraser avoided the fatal consequence for expressing his beliefs.⁽³⁾

Reconstructing the specific nature and identity of Aikenhead’s views is complex – the fragmentary nature of the extant records of the trial, including depositions of compromised witnesses like fellow student Mungo Craig, render difficult an appreciation of his sceptical account of orthodox doctrinal and cultural assumptions. Certainly his ‘practical atheism’ alienated the most powerful interests and resonated with many of the anxieties about propitiating a vengeful God by fasts and civil punishments. Aikenhead’s opinions (as recorded in multiple voices in the Justiciary Court papers and later in the printed edition of the *State trials*) suggest he advanced forms of anti-Trinitarianism, an hostility to divine revelation and a naturalistic materialism all of which combined refuted the conventional understandings of the divine origins of the Christian religion, treated beliefs in God as delusional, and promoted a fundamental anticlericalism.

Although working with the combined archival records of the trial, Aikenhead’s various defence papers and subsequent newspaper reports, Graham does not pause to consider the nature of the sources in detail (he prefers to cite the material reproduced in the printed edition rather than the ‘original’ manuscripts). Indeed the preservation of the records of the trial itself is a compelling and significant story – much of the material is most readily available in the 19th-century printed edition of the *State Trials*.⁽⁴⁾ After Macaulay (as Graham explores in his later chapter), Aikenhead’s story became one that underscored the bigotry of the pre-Enlightened world. Much of the text reproduced in that 19th-century edition was drawn from papers originally owned by John Locke and currently held in the Bodleian at MS. Locke b. 4. The fact that Locke preserved and commented on the material suggests the anxieties surrounding the case resonated around the British Isles. Some of these materials – the indictment, and in particular Aikenhead’s ‘Cygnea Cantio’ (last dying swan song statement) – are extant in duplicate copies in collections in Oxford, London and Edinburgh.

Locke's collection was concerned not just with the trial but the broader issue of the licensing of the press and censorship including a number of papers directly concerned with the Licensing Act of 1662 and a copy and revisions of a draft bill for the better regulating of printing for 1695.

The papers related to the Scottish trial were supplied by James Johnstoun; some of these were endorsed by Locke.⁽⁵⁾ Multiple copies of the 'Indictmt:' with corrections and endorsements by Locke and copies of the petitions by Aikenhead to the Judiciary and the privy Council were reproduced alongside the depositions of witnesses against the accused. There is evidence that some of this material was circulated amongst a broader Anglo-Scottish circle in the period – Aikenhead's 'Cygnea cantio' is extant in two copies and was refuted over a decade later by his sometime friend Thomas Halyburton in his *Natural Religion Insufficient*.⁽⁶⁾ Hunter has noted that some of the material printed in the *State Trials* is inaccurate.⁽⁷⁾ It is a great shame Graham did not take the opportunity to reproduce a critical and collated edition of this archive which would open up the material to further study and discussion.⁽⁸⁾

Graham's account also opens up the issue of the authenticity of the accusations against Aikenhead. The question of the reliability of trial records for assessing motive and intention for both prosecutors and accused has a distinguished historical pedigree.⁽⁹⁾ On the continent the tradition of inquisitorial prosecution has left the historian with a substantial corpus of material for exploring heterodoxy, even if such evidence needs cautious handling. The evidence remaining for British cases is slender – the various heresy and blasphemy trials in the 16th century are matched by the examples of Edward Wightman, Bartholomew Legate, Paul Best and still later James Naylor.⁽¹⁰⁾ In most of these cases the drive for conviction and exemplary destruction overrode any concern to explore the theological dimensions of the heterodox belief. The very fact that a case had come to trial ensured that the judicial process almost by necessity resulted in conviction. The thrust of Graham's argument confirms this – given the nature of Aikenhead's aggressive disposition, his half hearted repentance and the context of providential ire whipped up by the Kirk, there was very little doubt about the outcome of the trial. This raises a tough question. Does the case tell us more about the intolerant nature of the persecutory society of the period, and less about the precise heterodoxy he advanced? In other words was Aikenhead a singular and unfortunate victim of his times, or was he emblematic of deeper cultural changes which were unpicking the common values of contemporaries? The evidence of the management of the trial (the gathering of testimony from his friends and fellow students, and the brutal procession to capital punishment) suggests there was little Aikenhead could do to defend himself. This perhaps makes his final statement of heterodoxy so remarkable: when the game was up he returned to his own beliefs.

The origin of these remarkably offensive ideas was, as one contemporary put it, the young man's intellectual encounter with 'ill books which corrupt and ensnare curious fancies'. As Hunter established and Graham has further explored, Aikenhead absorbed a variety of non-orthodox ideas through reading and exchanging 'atheisticall books'. In his defence petition Aikenhead represented himself as a young man in search of certainty – it was 'a principle innate and co-natural to every man to have an insatiable inclination to truth'; as a consequence of his 'doubtings and inquisitions' he had been forced to 'reject the authorities and testimonys, both of my parents and others'. As he explained these rational enquiries convinced him that 'I found my education altogether wrong'.⁽¹¹⁾ Aikenhead presents himself as a constructive sceptic, not freed from all constraint by his reason, but applying it to achieve 'good and sufficient grounds whereon I might safely build my faith'. Key Christian doctrines – the nature of God's government of the world, the Trinity – puzzled and vexed him: indeed concerning the Trinity he commented 'that the more I thought [on it] the further I was from it'. Aikenhead's sorrowful conclusion was not that he was convinced by such doctrinal matters, but that he must not expect such 'certainty, either in natural or supernatural things as I would have'.

This picture of the earnest, distracted, sincere mind in pursuit of certainty fits well with Locke's defence of the rights of conscience – although (of course) he excluded 'athiests' from tolerance. The trial account of Aikenhead's beliefs are spun in a somewhat different way. Derived from testimonies extracted from his student and town associates they present a much more aggressive and corrosive articulation of unbelief. Legally charged with cursing God and denying revelation and the Trinity, the accusations of heterodoxy were much more profound. According to the overview of the trial transcript Aikenhead's expressions were

woven into one system of impiety which saw scripture dismissed as ‘Ezra’s fables’ and ‘a rapsodie of feigned and ill-invented nonsense, patched up partly of poetical fictions and extravagant chimeras’; Jesus and Moses regarded as were political ‘impostors’ – and Mahomet privileged as a more effective legislator. Miracles were ‘pranks’. Moses and Jesus exploited a common training in Egyptian magic to manipulate the vivid imaginations of ‘ignorant blockish fisher fellows’.

Each of the separate depositions of Adam Mitchell, John Neilsons, John Potter, Patrick Midletoune and Mungo Craig contributed elements and variations on this overview. The adjectives and phrases recorded to describe Aikenhead’s delivery – ‘scoff’, ‘curse’, ‘a scorning and jeering manner’, and ‘ridicule’ – were similar. Many of the phrases were identical (driven either by the legal crime, or perhaps by collusion of accounts), some were different – for example, Mungo Craig ‘heard him revile the books of the New Testament and call them the books of the impostor Jesus Christ’; Midletoune reported ‘that about the middle of August last, about eight o’clock at night, going by the Tron kirk, he hard him (being cold) say that he wished to be in the place Ezra called hell, to warm himself there’; Neilson said Aikenhead thought of the contradictory nature of the Trinity as the same as a ‘squaire triangle’. These different remarks did not make it into the final version of the indictment. Potter’s contribution – recorded as ‘nihil novit’ (nothing new, nothing to add) – is perhaps the most telling in allowing us to think about how the trial was co-ordinated to reinforce core themes of his assault on the scriptures, the status of Christ and public religion. Undoubtedly the prosecution needed to make its strongest case to ensure conviction, but historians are rightly cautious of taking such evidence as indicative of a coherent worldview.

Hunter and Graham agree that the textual sources for this unbelief was a canon of reasonably available wicked works. Books by Hobbes, Spinoza, Blount and others might readily provide arguments which were adapted to oral debate and conversation – certainly Hobbes and Blount provided their own witty and scoffing contributions against mystery and delusion.⁽¹²⁾ Contemporaries like John Toland were publishing even more provocative material in the late 1690s. Many of Aikenhead’s views can be seen to draw from this libertine, deistical and heterodox tradition. There is however a more radical seam which does not receive much consideration in this book. The most noticeable lacunae in Graham’s book is that it does not engage with the historiography of the early and radical ‘enlightenment’ delivered powerfully initially by Margaret Jacob and more recently in revised form by Jonathan Israel’s volumes.⁽¹³⁾ Graham does give sensitive attention to the variety of contemporary labels attached to dissidence in the period. He also points to the trajectory of some of the positions in the later Scottish Enlightenment.⁽¹⁴⁾

One of the textual traditions that this research unearthed to view was the existence of a powerful materialist account of religious belief underpinning the so-called ‘three impostors’ treatises. Whether derived from the Latin manuscript (*De Tribus Impostoribus*) which we now know thanks to the work of Winfried Schröder was composed in the 1690s in a similar university environment to Edinburgh but in Germany, or the French tradition (*Le Traité des Trois Imposteurs*) which we can date (according to the findings of Silvia Berti) to the 1710s – there was a European wide scribal exchange of clandestine works which suggested all three great religions and leaders were political impostors exploiting popular credulity for their own ends.⁽¹⁵⁾ Aikenhead’s repeated use of the language of imposture and delusion – combined with the remarks about Moses and Jesus learning the tricks of delusion in Egypt suggest that either he was drawing on similar traditions, or (less likely) had access to some of this clandestine material. As Berti and others have shown, the French treatises exploited material from a variety of classical sources (Tacitus in particular) to deliver the account of Moses the Egyptian trained impostor. Recent research suggests that readers in the British Isles were more familiar with the three impostors thesis than has been commonly accepted. Rumours of a text with such a title were evident in the 1670s; Charles Blount alluded to the issue in his edition of Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius* (1680); literary journals in the 1710s were delivering ‘reviews’ of such works to metropolitan readers.⁽¹⁶⁾ The clandestine texts themselves were *bricolages* of ancient and early modern impiety, most significantly derived from Spinoza and Hobbes, so it is a possibility that Aikenhead’s impious beliefs and outbursts are evidence of a similar type of irreligious reading to those going on in clandestine continental milieux. As studies of Toland, another product of Edinburgh University, have suggested there was both social and intellectual permeability between these shores and Europe.⁽¹⁷⁾

Aikenhead then may then have broader significance than simply casting light on the brutality of a Kirk dominated culture. As Graham shows towards the end of the trial Aikenhead tried to distance himself from what he called the ‘raging spirit of atheism which hath taken such a footing in Brittain, both in practice and profession’. He was unsuccessful and paid with his life. The monograph has made an excellent contribution to contextualising both the possibilities and consequences of articulating dissident ideas in an anxious confessional culture. The moral panic which drove his trial to its fatal conclusion also resulted in increased surveillance of intellectual dissidence in the university and town – the General Assembly initiated a register of students with a view to ensuring their piety. Graham establishes quite how high the stakes were for those who stepped outside commonplace Christian culture: it also explains why men like John Locke, and even more so Isaac Newton were concerned to preserve their inner heterodoxies from the prying eyes of priests.

Notes

1. See M. C. W Hunter “‘Aikenhead the atheist’: the context and consequences of articulate irreligion in the late seventeenth century”, in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. M. C. W. Hunter and D. Wootton (Oxford, 1992) pp. 221–54, subsequently expanded and revised in *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy: Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Britain*. (Woodbridge, 1995). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (London, 1980); P. Seaver Wallington’s *World: a Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (London, 1985); A. Hessayon ‘*Gold Tried in the Fire*’: *the Prophet Theaurau John Tany and the English Revolution* (Aldershot, 2007). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Hunter, ‘Aikenhead’ pp. 322–3. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *A Complete Collection of State Trials*, ed. W. Cobbett, T. B. Howell *et al* (34 vols., London, 1809–28), xiii, pp. 917–40 (item no. 401). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. So for instance the letter from Johnstoun has in Locke’s hand ‘Aikenhead 96/7 The Acts agt Blasphemie’. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See MS Locke b. 4 fols. 99–101, 103–5 and Harleian MS 6846 fols. 400–1. Thomas Halyburton *Natural Religion Insufficient; and Reveal’d Necessary to Man’s Happiness in his Present State: or, a Rational Enquiry into the Principles of the Modern Deists* (Edinburgh, 1714) pp. 119–23. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Hunter [p. 313 footnote 17; p. 316 footnote 28], comparing records in the Scottish Records Office

- [SRO JC26/78/1/12 with col. 922 and col. 933; SRO JC/78/1/11 and JC2/19 (Book of Adjournment) with cols. 917–20] notes the omission of a significant phrases [‘atheisticall books, & did frequently presse upon me to repeat’] and other singular words.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. The volumes of the *State Trials* are available on various open access databases. [Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Carlo Ginzburg ‘Checking the evidence: the judge and the historian’ *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1991), 79–92.[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. See I. Atherton, D. R. Como ‘The burning of Edward Wightman: puritanism, prelacy and the politics of heresy in early modern England’. *English Historical Review*, 120 (2005), 1215–50; A. B. Worden, ‘Toleration and the Cromwellian protectorate’, in *Studies Church History* 21, W. J. Sheils(1984).[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. *State Trials* Col. 931. [Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. Graham interestingly uses the nonjuring polemics of Matthew Earbery (miss-identified at Earbert at p. 142 and in the index) *Deism Examin'd and Confuted in an Answer to a Book Intituled, Tractatus Theologico Politicus* (London, 1697) as evidence of intellectual contamination by Spinoza. Nonjurors like Earbery and later William Carroll were at the forefront of stigmatising contemporary authors with the charge of ‘Spinozism’.[Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. See M. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981); J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2001). [Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. Here John Robertson’s brilliant *The Case for the Enlightenment. Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005) provides useful perspectives: he discusses Aikenhead at pp. 99–100. [Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. See S. Berti ‘The first edition of the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, and its debt to Spinoza’s Ethics’ in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. M. Hunter, D. Wootton (Oxford, 1992) pp. 183–220; *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Freethought in Early Eighteenth Century Europe. Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, ed. S. Berti, F. Charles-Daubert, R. H. Popkin (Klewer, 1996). *De Imposturis Religionum (De Tribus Impostoribus). Von den Betrügereyen der Religionen*, ed. W. Schroder(Stuttgart, 1999).[Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. See for example discussion of Richard Smith’s 1670s discussion of the existence of the manuscript in J. A. I. Champion, R. H. Popkin ‘Bibliography and irreligion: Richard Smith’s observations’, *The Seventeenth Century* 10 (1995), 77–99. See also J. A. I. Champion “‘The forceful, full, energetic, fearless expression of heretical thoughts’: rethinking clandestine literature and the European reading public, 1680–1730’, in (forthcoming) *La Lettre Clandestine* (2009).[Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. J. A. I. Champion “‘Manuscripts of mine abroad’: John Toland and the circulation of ideas, c. 1700–1722’. *Eighteenth-century Ireland : Iris an dá chultúr*, 14 (1999), 9–36 and ‘Enlightened erudition and the politics of reading in John Toland’s circle’ *Historical Journal*, 49, (2006), 111–41. [Back to \(17\)](#)

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