

'The extirpation of Athanasianism': The Considerable Doubts of Francis Stone (1738–1813)

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This essay examines the doubts of Francis Stone, rector of Cold Norton, Essex – doubts which brought him notoriety and ruin. In 1806, Stone preached a sermon, four editions of which appeared by 1809, expressing doubts about Anglican doctrine and the Thirty-Nine Articles. He maintained that Christ, though God's 'great messenger', was merely human, and that the Virgin Birth was a myth. Moreover, he also doubted the 'Athanasian trinity in unity' and the doctrine of the atonement. Stone's doubts were far from new. He had expressed various concerns forcibly in print and had played a major part in the raising of the anti-subscription Feathers Tavern petition. He was determined to teach only 'that, which ... [might] be concluded and proved by the Scripture'. But the storm provoked by the sermon was terrible. In 1808, Stone was arraigned before the bishop of London's consistory court. There he declared that the Church of England had no authority to override his conscience. Nevertheless, the court rejected his arguments and deprived him of his living; when he appealed to the Court of Arches, it upheld the sentence. Stone's doubts produced an important test case and a powerful warning for Anglican clerics holding heterodox opinions (and, indeed, liberal churchmen wanting just 'free' and 'candid' theological debate) in the conservative 1800s. Moreover, the issues Stone raised foreshadowed controversies which erupted long after his death.

Following the English Reformation, popery was often likened to a dragon or hydra; but by the early eighteenth century Church of England divines seemed satisfied that, doctrinally, gifted polemicists such as Edward Stillingfleet had slain it. Moreover, by the 1730s Dissent was in disarray and appeared in decline. Yet within the bosom of the established Church lay a serpent which, though largely slumbering, periodically uncoiled: a serpent of doubt about the Church's own doctrines and, principally, its adherence to the doctrine of the Trinity.

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The Scriptures themselves gave no direct sanction to Trinitarian belief. The one possible warrant in the King James Bible, 1 John 5: 7, had been rejected as a spurious interpolation by such intellectual colossi as Richard Bentley (notably in his 1717 praelection as Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge), Edward Gibbon and Richard Porson.¹ Trinitarianism could appear a suspicious and unjustifiable reconciling of Christian theology and Greek philosophy. The most unequivocal statement of the doctrine was the Athanasian Creed (whose date and authorship were, and remain, the subject of scholarly debate).² Besides its dogmatic assertion of ‘the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity’, the Creed contained anathemas insisting that, without belief in ‘the Catholick Faith’, including Trinitarianism, a soul ‘shall perish everlastingly’, in ‘everlasting fire’. The Athanasian Creed was an integral part of the Church of England’s doctrine and liturgy: the eighth of the Thirty-Nine Articles proclaimed that it and the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds ‘ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture’, and in 1662 the Book of Common Prayer decreed that the Athanasian Creed should be said at morning prayer on thirteen days each year, including Christmas Day, Epiphany, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day, Whit Sunday and, naturally, Trinity Sunday. Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles and their Trinitarianism was required for matriculation at Oxford and graduation at Cambridge, and, for the clergy, upon nomination to a benefice. Unitarianism was outlawed under the Blasphemy Act of 1698 and ‘any person ... deny[ing] in his Preaching or Writeing the Doctrine of the Blessed Trinity’ was ineligible for the benefits of the 1689 Toleration Act.³

Eighteenth-century Dissenters were beset by grave theological doubts, and Arianism and Socinianism split Dissenting ministers and congregations.⁴ The divisions were spotlighted at Salters’ Hall in 1719 by London ministers’ debates on adherence to Trinitarianism; within a century, most Presbyterians and many General Baptists had

¹ *ODNB*, *s.mn.* ‘Bentley, Richard (1662–1742)’; ‘Porson, Richard (1759–1808)’.

² J. N. D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (London, 1964).

³ 9 Will. III c. 35, §1; 1 Will. & Mar. c. 18, §14.

⁴ Arianism – from the Alexandrian priest Arius (d. 336) – represented Christ as a subordinate deity to the Father but upheld the former’s pre-existence and the doctrine of the atonement. Socinians – from the Sienese Fausto Sozzini or Faustus Socinus (1539–1604) – denied Christ’s divinity, his pre-existence and the atonement.

embraced Unitarianism.⁵ But doubts about Trinitarian doctrine, with, particularly, their obvious implications for belief in Christ's divinity, had the potential to create discord among Anglicans too. The open anti-Trinitarianism of William Whiston, the successor as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge to Newton (whose own radical and heretical theology had been largely kept veiled),⁶ cost him his chair in 1710. In 1714, Convocation threatened to prosecute the illustrious Samuel Clarke, rector of St James's, Piccadilly, for the publication of his neo-Arian *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712). Ninety years later, it was a minor clergyman's considerable anti-Trinitarian doubts which produced first a *cause célèbre* and then a test case for the Church of England's authorities.

JEWISH PROPHECY: STONE'S SERMON OF 1806

On 8 July 1806, Francis Stone, rector of Cold Norton in Essex, preached a sermon, which he later published, at nearby Danbury. The occasion was the visitation of the archdeacon of Essex, William Gretton, and the sermon, spluttered the Pittite cleric Edward Nares, proved 'most extraordinary ... entirely in abuse of the Creeds, and articles of the establish'd Church'.⁷ The sermon was lucidly argued, learned (though not ostentatiously so), eloquent – and explosive. Its premise was that Christian Scripture concerning Christ should match Old Testament prophecies perfectly: when it did not, either the former was spurious or the latter misapplied. Using this touchstone, Stone concluded that Christ, although God's 'great messenger',⁸ was just a man (the prophecies had foretold nothing more), and that the Virgin Birth was a myth and the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel forgeries.⁹ How, Stone asked, was 'plain, pure, primitive christianity ... absorbed in the monstrous figments and incredible errors of men'?¹⁰ For him, and those like him, the answer was clear: through 'the interpolations and misinterpretations of ... [genuine Christian Scripture] by the perverse disputing Christian sophists of

⁵ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1978), 375–6.

⁶ *ODNB*, s.n. 'Newton, Sir Isaac (1642–1727)'.

⁷ Oxford, Merton College Archive, E.2.42, Autobiography of Edward Nares, 54.

⁸ Francis Stone, *Jewish Prophecy, the Sole Criterion to Distinguish between Genuine and Spurious Christian Scripture*, 4th edn (London, 1809), 49.

⁹ *Ibid.* 25–9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 32.

the Platonic school of Alexandria'.¹¹ By aligning Plato's doctrines (necessarily corrupted) and Christian theology, those sophists had concocted the Arian Trinity, which soon 'swell[ed] ... into that monster of error and absurdity, the Athanasian trinity in unity' ('that most senseless doctrine of human invention').¹² Furthermore, Stone assailed the doctrine of the atonement as a 'disgusting impossibility'.¹³ It was necessary, he maintained, for the Church to renounce these errors which constituted the principal barriers to Christianity's acceptance by pagans, deists, Jews and Mahometans,¹⁴ for, after their various conversions "shall the earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea", and 'the beautiful economy of the several divine dispensations, the patriarchal, the Mosaic, and the Christian, be completely developed'.¹⁵

THE DEVELOPMENT OF STONE'S THEOLOGY AND THE RESPONSE TO THE SERMON OF 1806

Commenting on Stone's behaviour in a letter of December 1807, Hannah Lindsey, writing for her husband, the great Unitarian Theophilus Lindsey, described Stone as 'a conscientious (tho' too hasty man)'.¹⁶ Too hasty? Stone was an old man when he preached his sermon: as he said in it, 'it is improbable, that, at my advanced period of life, an eligible opportunity similar to the present, should [again] occur, to bear my public testimony against ... corruptions of Christian doctrine'.¹⁷ But, as he reminded those present, he had proclaimed his anti-Trinitarianism – though less fully and forcefully – over thirty-five years before.¹⁸ In 1768, two years after the publication of Francis Blackburne's *Confessional*, which attacked compulsory subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, Stone had published, anonymously, *A Short and Seasonable Application to the Public, In Behalf of a Respectful Address to the Parliament, to Procure a Legal*

¹¹ Ibid. 39.

¹² Ibid. 41, 38.

¹³ Ibid. 46.

¹⁴ '[T]he Mahometan', Stone contended, 'entertains more rational and consistent ideas of the unity of the Supreme Being than many Christians': ibid. 56.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Theophilus Lindsey, *The Letters of Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808)*, ed. G. M. Ditchfield, 2 vols, CERS 15, 19 (Woodbridge, 2007, 2012), 2: 637.

¹⁷ Stone, *Jewish Prophecy*, 32.

¹⁸ Ibid. 48.

Redress of Notorious, Religious Grievances. In it, he maintained that the Athanasian Creed was unsupported by Scripture and that it, together with Athanasian forms of worship, defiled the Church's liturgy.¹⁹ Moreover, he asserted, subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles was a burden to the scrupulous, and one which grew ever heavier as rational explanations of the Scriptures dispelled error.²⁰ Stone advocated replacing subscription to the articles with a simple assent to the Scriptures, with a renunciation of popery and Jacobitism.²¹ He urged 'unitarian believers of weight, whether laity or clergy' to petition Parliament to this end, and wanted a society, to include Dissenters, formed in London for 'the extirpation of Athanasianism'.²² Indeed, a clerical society was established at the Feathers Tavern in the Strand in 1771, and a petition to Parliament produced for the abolition of compulsory subscription. Stone became the society's chairman and was one of the few Oxford graduates to support the petition strongly; in addition, he apparently secured the signatures of many Essex clergymen: they comprised thirty-one of some two hundred clerical signatories.²³ The House of Commons rejected the petition in February 1772 by 217 to 71,²⁴ and thereafter nine signatories seceded from the Church; Lindsey left his living in 1773, and his friend John Disney did likewise in 1782. Yet Stone kept his benefice. That was not dishonourable: he wanted to remove, *from within*, 'every gross church-corruption in doctrine, discipline, and worship',²⁵ the stance of Blackburne himself.²⁶ Thus, in the debate over the visitation sermon, Stone provocatively described himself as a 'Unitarian Christian Minister in the Church of

¹⁹ Tyro-Theologus [Francis Stone], *A Short and Seasonable Application to the Public, in Behalf of a Respectful Address to the Parliament, to Procure a Legal Redress of Notorious, Religious Grievances* (London, 1768), 6–9.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 12.

²¹ *Ibid.* 11, 13–14, 16.

²² *Ibid.* 8, 21.

²³ For an incomplete list of the signatories, see V. M. H., 'List of Petitioning Clergy, 1772', *Monthly Repository* 13 (1818), 15–18.

²⁴ It was reintroduced in 1774, and rejected without a division: G. M. Ditchfield, 'The Subscription Issue in British Parliamentary Politics 1772–79', *Parliamentary History* 7 (1988), 45–80.

²⁵ Tyro-Theologus, *Short and Seasonable Application*, 22. As a correspondent later wrote to the *Monthly Repository*, Stone had 'many more opportunities, by preaching in a Trinitarian church, of making converts to Unitarianism, than if he preached to Unitarians themselves': C. G., 'Defence of Mr. Stone: To the Editor of the Monthly Repository', *Monthly Repository* 2 (1807), 20–1, at 20.

²⁶ Blackburne accordingly regretted the secessions of Disney and Lindsey, who were his sons-in-law.

England'.²⁷ But was that a chimera, the term an oxymoron? Could Stone be permitted to retain his living?

Besides the *Short and Seasonable Application*, Stone presented his ideas more fully in 1783 in *A Call to the Jews: By a Friend to the Jews*. Although again published anonymously – Stone did not affirm his authorship until 1806²⁸ – Lindsey and his circle easily identified the writer.²⁹ The work detailed Stone's considerable doubts about key orthodox – not only for the established Church – doctrines. The book cast doubt on 'the absurd hypothesis of the miraculous conception of Christ Jesus, in the womb of a virgin': the Old Testament had not prophesied that, and the Gospels of St Matthew and St Luke contained differing accounts of the journeyings of Mary and Joseph at Christ's birth.³⁰ Christ was Joseph's son, an 'absolutely good man', exceptional because he lived a 'literally sinless life'.³¹ Stone ridiculed 'that incomprehensible arch-mystery of human invention, the Athanasian trinity in unity': God was not 'a fanciful *tripartite* Divinity', 'three divine beings jumbled together'.³² It was vital to dispel 'the thick black mist, raised by *human* systems of *divinity*', and to expunge the 'absurd dogma of the Christian Platonists'.³³ Interpolations and forgeries in the Scriptures had to be exposed and rejected.³⁴ Once this had been done, the Jews, recognizing that the uncorrupted Christian Scriptures entirely accorded with the Old Testament prophecies, would convert to Christianity. Stone, displaying a bizarre egotism or megalomania,³⁵ even declared his willingness to lead them back to Israel, a fantasy which he seemingly shared with the asinine Lord George Gordon.³⁶

²⁷ Stone, *Jewish Prophecy*, v.

²⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 2 September 1806.

²⁹ Lindsey, *Letters*, ed. Ditchfield, 1: 384.

³⁰ [Francis Stone], *A Call to the Jews: By a Friend to the Jews* (London, 1783), 37, 44–5, 60, 99–100.

³¹ *Ibid.* 20, 65, 238.

³² *Ibid.* 9, 98, 133.

³³ *Ibid.* 15, 59.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 40–1, 123, 125.

³⁵ For other examples, see below, 371. Stone believed that Providence had made him an instrument for the Jews' conversion: *Call to the Jews*, 235.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 169, 234–5; Robert Watson, *The Life of Lord George Gordon* (London, 1795), 79; Marsha Keith Schuchard, 'Lord George Gordon and Cabalistic Freemasonry: Beating Jacobite Swords into Jacobin Ploughshares', in Martin Mulso and Richard H. Popkin, eds, *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2004), 183–232; Iain McCalman, 'New Jerusalem: Prophecy, Dissent and Radical Culture in England 1786–1830',

By comparison with Stone's 1806 sermon, this earlier publication remained relatively unknown; but the storm raised by the sermon was ferocious. The *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine and Review* was appalled by it: Stone, this 'miserable Revolter', 'this nauseous gangrene', 'this hoary veteran in blasphemy and heresy', was both 'impudent and dishonest'.³⁷ His sermon was a 'superlatively heretical and blasphemous composition', poisonous and contagious, and seemed 'to strike at the very fundamental articles of our Religion'.³⁸ The 'shameless outrageousness of the offence' merited exemplary punishment.³⁹ Edward Nares soon produced a response, and, although he endeavoured to refute Stone's theology carefully and sustainedly, he could not resist invective. The sermon inspired in him 'extreme disgust'; its derision of orthodox doctrine was wanton, insolent and weak; and its language was sometimes 'barbarously low and vulgar'.⁴⁰ One wonders if Stone, though highly intelligent and gifted, had failed to anticipate the furore because he had so long associated with heterodox clerics. Educated at the Charterhouse, for most of his years there its master was the Arian Nicholas Mann.⁴¹ After a period at University College, Oxford, Stone became curate to his uncle, Henry Taylor, Arian

in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1996), 312–35.

³⁷ 'Review of New Publications', Review of Stone, *Jewish Prophecy*, *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine and Review* 11 (1806), 296–306, at 300; Jonathan Drapier, 'On the State of the Church', *ibid.* 370–3, at 371; Clericus, 'On Stone's Visitation Sermon', *ibid.* 428–33, at 432.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 431; Observer, 'To the Editor of the Orthodox Churchman's Magazine', and 'To the Worshipful the Archdeacon of Essex', *ibid.* 12 (1807), 28–33, at 28, 29; Clericus, 'On Stone's Visitation Sermon', *ibid.* 120–5, at 121.

³⁹ 'To the Archdeacon', 28. Other periodicals were more sympathetic. The *Critical Review*, championing freedom of theological discussion, praised Stone for his 'truly christian frankness and intrepidity', and claimed that he had 'evinced a freedom of research, and a boldness of inference, which the ministers of the establishment have seldom manifested in any of their publications': 'Monthly Catalogue, Religion', *Critical Review* 3rd ser. 11 (1807), 93–4. The *Monthly Review* was astonished by, but gingerly admired, his courage: 'The magnanimity of the preacher of this discourse is more striking than his worldly prudence. Such a visitation sermon has, we believe, been rarely delivered': 'Monthly Catalogue, Single Sermons', *Monthly Review* 53 (1807), 333–4, at 333.

⁴⁰ Edward Nares, *A Letter to the Rev. Francis Stone, M.A.* (London, 1807), 2, 44, 66.

⁴¹ *ODNB*, s.n. 'Mann, Nicholas (bap. 1680?, d. 1753)'. Mann anonymously attacked the Athanasian Creed in *Critical Notes on Some Passages of Scripture* (London, 1747), 87–92, emphasizing, like Stone, that it alienated pagans, Jews and Mahometans: *ibid.* 92. Stone, perhaps nostalgically envisaging the Charterhouse's mastership as a heterodox refuge, applied for it in 1804: *Morning Post*, 1 December 1804.

controversialist and rector of Crawley, Hampshire.⁴² Appointed curate of Worth in Sussex two years later, he enjoyed close friendships with two nearby Arian clergymen, John Bristed and William Hopkins.⁴³ By 1783, he was associated with Theophilus Lindsey's Essex Street Unitarian congregation.⁴⁴ Yet, given his 1806 discourse's occasion and provocative wording, it is difficult to believe that Stone did not intend to shock and anger his hearers and subsequent readers. During the sermon, Archdeacon Gretton confessed himself '*so surprized and shocked that had he not considered it his Duty to stay ... he would have left the Church*'.⁴⁵ Another clergyman, 'being extremely disgusted', stormed out.⁴⁶ One warning Stone ignored was the case of Edward Evanson, vicar of Tewkesbury, whose heterodox opinions, as he knew, strongly resembled his own, and who, having openly proclaimed them, felt pressured into resigning his living in 1778.⁴⁷ Nares ominously argued that 'any Jew, Turk, infidel, or heretic, might as safely and as reasonably minister in the Church of England' as Stone.⁴⁸

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND: STONE AND THE CHURCH COURTS

On 10 April 1807, Stone received a citation, summoning him to the bishop of London's consistory court.⁴⁹ He was charged, under twenty-one heads, with preaching and publishing doctrines that were directly contrary or repugnant to the 'Articles of Religion as by Law

⁴² F. Stone, 'Brief Account of the Rev. Henry Taylor', *Monthly Repository* 8 (1813), 285–7, at 287; *ODNB*, s.n. 'Taylor, Henry (1711–1785)'. Taylor notoriously trumpeted his heterodoxy in the 1770s in *The Apology of Benjamin Ben Mordecai*. For Gibbon, he was 'Taylor the Arian': *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esquire*, ed. John, Lord Sheffield, 2 vols (London, 1796), 1: 154. Taylor provided testimonials when Stone sought ordination both as deacon and priest: Winchester, Hampshire Record Office, 21M65/E1/4/807, 825.

⁴³ *ODNB*, s.n. 'Stone, Francis (bap. 1738, d. 1813)'.

⁴⁴ Lindsey, *Letters*, ed. Ditchfield, 1: 384.

⁴⁵ London, LPL, Microfiche 10854–86, Records of the Court of Arches, Process Books, D2002, Stone v. Bishop (1808), 1446–7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 1038–9.

⁴⁷ Lindsey, *Letters*, ed. Ditchfield, 1: 384; G. M. Ditchfield, 'Varieties of Heterodoxy: The Career of Edward Evanson (1731–1805)', in Robert D. Cornwall and William Gibson, eds, *Religion, Politics and Dissent 1660–1832* (Farnham, 2010), 111–26.

⁴⁸ Nares, *Letter*, 68.

⁴⁹ Francis Stone, *A Letter to the Right Rev. Dr. Beilby Porteus, Lord Bishop of London* (London, 1807), 4.

established'.⁵⁰ His case was heard in May 1808, when he defended his stance fiercely. He also published an open letter to the bishop, Beilby Porteus, avowedly seeking 'the greatest publicity possible' because the prosecution wanted the proceedings conducted in 'the greatest privacy', 'in a small private parlour'.⁵¹ In his *Letter*, like a skilled tactician determined not to quit secure ground, he reminded Porteus that he had promised at ordination to teach only 'that, which ... [he was] persuaded ... [might] be concluded and proved by the Scripture' – a fact, he added, that could not 'be too often repeated'.⁵² Since subscription predated ordination, the latter rescinded acceptance of the Thirty-Nine Articles.⁵³ Following ordination, he was obliged to 'drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines', and the Church, he declared, had no authority to impose human interpretations of the Scriptures or override his conscience.⁵⁴ Moreover, he maintained, the sixth of the Thirty-Nine Articles, with its stress on the principle of *sola scriptura*, entirely supported his stance.⁵⁵ Stone restated such arguments in a tauntingly titled pamphlet, *An Unitarian Christian Minister's Plea for Adherence to the Church of England* (1808). Bravely, to his enemies' fury, he republished the visitation sermon, writing 'a most obnoxious preface' for the second edition.⁵⁶ By 1809, four editions had appeared. His efforts availed him nothing. The evidence against him was solid, the offences proved, and his arguments dismissed. When Stone last attended the court, it found that he 'still ... persist[ed] in and ... [had] not revoked his ... Error'.⁵⁷ He was accordingly condemned,

⁵⁰ London, LMA, DL/C/191, Consistory Court of London, Allegations, Libels and Sentence Book, May 1807 – December 1817, fols 25^r–38^r.

⁵¹ Stone, *Jewish Prophecy*, viii.

⁵² Stone, *Letter*, 6, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 9. However, seemingly inconsistently, Stone stated that, to secure advancement in the Church, he would resubscribe: Francis Stone, *An Unitarian Christian Minister's Plea for Adherence to the Church of England* (London, 1808), 41. By contrast, Blackburne had resolved not to resubscribe, thereby precluding his promotion.

⁵⁴ Stone, *Letter*, 6, 7, 10, 22–3, 40.

⁵⁵ 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is *not* read therein; nor may be proved thereby, is not to be *required* of any man, that it should be *believed* as an Article of the *faith*, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation': *ibid.* 28–9 (Stone's italics). Stone's rejection of some biblical passages qualified the principle, however.

⁵⁶ Clericus, 'On the Second Edition of Stone's Sermon: To the Editor of the Orthodox Churchman's Magazine', *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine and Review* 12 (1807), 359–65, at 359.

⁵⁷ Libels and Sentence Book, May 1807 – December 1817, fol. 41^v.

and Bishop Porteus deprived him of his living, worth £300 per annum.⁵⁸

Stone now appealed to the Court of Arches, which re-examined his case minutely: the manuscript records run to 1,844 pages.⁵⁹ The theology of the sermon was anatomized and the statements of some who were at Danbury demonstrate the discourse's impact: after time had lapsed, witnesses could well remember the most disturbing assertions.⁶⁰ Other depositions proved that Stone had published the sermon.⁶¹ Unsurprisingly, the Court of Arches upheld the consistory court's sentence. Lastly, Stone sent a petition to George III, but was told in June 1809 that the king 'was not Pleased to give any Commands respecting it'.⁶²

AFTER THE DEPRIVATION

Stone was now a sad, if somewhat perplexing, figure. He had apparently written his memoirs, but failed to publish them.⁶³ Few (excepting Unitarians) were, it seems, interested, and he probably failed to raise the necessary subscription. He was ruined financially and, from Michaelmas 1810, was confined as a debtor within the rules of King's Bench prison. After his first wife's death and 'when rather advanced in life', he had married his cook, who had borne him 'numerous ... children'.⁶⁴ By the *annus horribilis* 1808, he had nine – two more had not survived – and another was born subsequently, though he listed only eight in his will, made in February 1813.⁶⁵ Humiliatingly, his

⁵⁸ Ibid., fols 42^r–^v. On the day of the sentence, Stone wrote to Sir William Scott, the consistory court's judge. He had not appreciated, he stated, his preaching's violation of 13 Eliz. I c. 12, the 1571 Act for the Ministers of the Church to Be of Sound Religion, which, *inter alia*, enjoined the clergy's conformity to the Thirty-Nine Articles (§§1, 2). He therefore undertook 'not to offend again in like manner'. However, he reiterated his conviction that his ordination promises sanctioned him to preach as he had: Process Books, D2002, Stone v. Bishop (1808), 1823–5. That raised inconvenient questions about the respective jurisdictions of Church and state, and presumably ensured the compromise's rejection.

⁵⁹ Process Books, D2002, Stone v. Bishop (1808).

⁶⁰ Ibid. 1084, 1131–2, 1369. One noted that Stone spoke of one doctrine he attacked 'in the most contemptuous manner': *ibid.* 1359.

⁶¹ Ibid. 1656–99.

⁶² London, BL, Add. MS 38321, Liverpool Papers 132, fol. 85^r.

⁶³ *Morning Chronicle*, 12 April 1809; *DNB*, *s.n.* 'Stone, Francis (1738?–1813)'.
⁶⁴ BL, Add. MS 36527, J. Hunter, Notices of Contemporaries 1827–36, fol. 89^r.

⁶⁵ Stone, *Unitarian Christian Minister's Plea*, 40; *ODNB*, *s.n.* 'Stone'; Kew, The National Archives, PROB 11/1554/127, Will of Francis Stone, 15 February 1813.

son-in-law, an army captain, was now the mainstay of the whole family.⁶⁶ 'The family is in deep distress', wrote one sympathizer, and 'the poor old man is incapable of doing any thing to extricate them out of their difficulties.'⁶⁷ The Unitarians were dismayed by the 'persecution', whose sole object, Lindsey thought, was to beggar a wretched man; and they raised a subscription giving Stone £100 a year, although he remained a member of the Church of England.⁶⁸ Even Nares – who was, admittedly, prone to self-deception – expressed pity, saying he had meant Stone no harm.⁶⁹ Stone died in November 1813.

POLITICS AND PERSONALITY

Stone's 1806 sermon was the antithesis of a tract for the times. For most of the eighteenth century, Latitudinarians in the Church of England, heirs and continuators of Locke and Tillotson, questioned constricting dogma and old, perhaps obsolete, theological formulae; often the Athanasian Creed was a target. They interpreted antiquated articles of religion liberally, hoping for doctrinal and liturgical reform grounded on painstaking biblical study and rational argument; and shunned sacerdotalism and surviving vestiges of 'superstition' in the Church. Among them were bishops, including Benjamin Hoadly, Edmund Law, Jonathan Shipley and Richard Watson, and powerful theologians, such as Francis Blackburne and William Paley.⁷⁰ Yet from the 1780s, the appeal of Latitudinarian thinking was diminishing, and the advancement of Latitudinarian clerics checked. The French Revolution powerfully promoted conservatism in the Church. Stone's sermon was studded with Latitudinarian vocabulary: 'plain sense', 'dispassionate', 'impartial', 'candour', 'superstitious error', 'truly rational', 'a free, dispassionate, impartial investigation':⁷¹ wording which, as Nancy Uhlar Murray

⁶⁶ Hunter, *Notices*, fol. 89^r.

⁶⁷ Northallerton, North Yorkshire County Record Office [hereafter: NYCRO], Wyvill of Constable Burton Records, ZFW 7/2/215/9. I owe this and the other references to this collection to Grayson Ditchfield.

⁶⁸ Lindsey, *Letters*, ed. Ditchfield, 2: 637; NYCRO, ZFW 7/2/215/7, 19; 7/2/243/1; *ODNB*, s.n. 'Stone'. After Stone's death, provision was made for his widow and children: *Monthly Repository* 9 (1814), 133.

⁶⁹ *Autobiography of Nares*, 56.

⁷⁰ B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1998).

⁷¹ Stone, *Jewish Prophecy*, 22, 23, 25, 42, 47–8, 50.

demonstrated, had largely disappeared by 1806 from the writings of those liberal churchmen who had welcomed the Revolution in 1789.⁷² Furthermore, Stone's politics were comparably suspect in the 1790s and 1800s. Stone was a long-standing Whig. Following George II's death, he had composed a poem praising the late king, the duke of Cumberland and 'the Glories of the Brunswic [*sic*] Line'.⁷³ His Whiggism shaded into radicalism. In 1776, he published *A New, Easy, and Expeditious Method of Discharging the National Debt*, advocating the appropriation of the Church's property (for the state's use); the removal of bishops from the House of Lords and, indeed, the abolition of bishops and other ecclesiastical dignitaries; and the introduction of a standard clerical stipend (£200 per annum).⁷⁴ In 1789, he published his *Political Reformation, on a Large Scale*, proposing the separation of the executive and legislature; universal male suffrage (excluding civil and judicial office-holders); Catholic emancipation; the creation of new constituencies, all with roughly equal populations; annual Parliaments; the payment of MPs; provisions for combating corruption; and much else besides.⁷⁵ He also wanted the abolition of the slave trade and slavery.⁷⁶ Also in 1789, Stone praised the French Revolution as 'a glorious struggle for ... [the French nation's] recovery of the natural equal rights of men',⁷⁷ and in 1792 he produced a lengthy and forceful riposte to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.⁷⁸ Small wonder that some of his enemies thought him a clerical Tom Paine.⁷⁹

⁷² Nancy Uhlar Murray, 'The Influence of the French Revolution on the Church of England and its Rivals 1789–1802' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1975), 80.

⁷³ BL, Add. MS 37683, P. A. Taylor Papers 2, fol. 45^r. On Cumberland's victory at Culloden, Stone wrote: 'The impious Rage of foul Rebellion quell'd; | And the hideous Hydra-headed Monster slew, | With all her viperous Brood; dire Foes to Freedom's Reign': *ibid.*, fol. 40^r.

⁷⁴ Francis Stone, *A New, Easy, and Expeditious Method of Discharging the National Debt* (London, 1776), 21–6. Stone wanted the 'entire subversion of the constitution in church, as it now stands, established by law': *ibid.* 23. He had long disliked and distrusted bishops: Tyro-Theologus, *Short and Seasonable Application*, 18–19.

⁷⁵ Francis Stone, *Political Reformation, on a Large Scale* (London, 1789), 1–53.

⁷⁶ Francis Stone, *Thoughts in Favour of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and the Emancipation of the Negroes* (London, 1792).

⁷⁷ Stone, *Political Reformation*, 63.

⁷⁸ Francis Stone, *An Examination of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1792).

⁷⁹ *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine and Review* 11 (1806), 301, 431. On the wider links between religious heterodoxy and political radicalism, see J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Ideology, Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime*, 2nd edn

Stone's fate was not only determined by the times but also by his goading personality. Doubts about doctrine and pride in his powerful intellect combined to spawn an utter conviction of his rightness and a liking for combat. 'I glory in exposing ... [nonsense] to contempt and ridicule', he declared in his 1806 sermon, and he likened the Feathers Tavern petitioners to the Marian martyrs.⁸⁰ Later, he would claim that his 'Christian fortitude' was equal to St Paul's 'apostolic boldness' and Luther's 'intrepid spirit'.⁸¹ Arrogance begat dislike. An exasperated reviewer of *Political Reformation* ridiculed his pretensions and hinted at his eccentricity.⁸² A 'very vain old man', *The British Critic* snorted.⁸³ Stone's difficult personality was long-standing. As a young curate in Hampshire, he had exhibited an 'insolent', near-unmanageable temper; a 'most provokingly haughty' and contemptuous demeanour when riled; a 'self-conceited' manner; 'Weakness, Obstinacy, & Perverseness of Conduct, as Never Met in one Character'.⁸⁴ In a society lubricated by patronage, such traits were highly damaging. There was also an alienating theatricality about his behaviour, smacking of the fraudulent. When the consistory court's sentence was pronounced, Stone 'cast up his eyes to Heaven, and exclaimed, "God's will be done"'.⁸⁵ For a period after losing his living, he went to Bath, where he met Joseph Hunter, the Presbyterian minister and antiquary. Hunter recorded that Stone was not well received among the Dissenters, who felt he lacked the 'Sobriety of Mind' of Disney and Lindsey.⁸⁶ Disney, indeed, called Stone a scaramouch, and Hunter observed that 'there was about him something to justify' this, adding that there 'was nothing of the gravity of the Confessor

(Cambridge, 2000), 318–422; A. M. C. Waterman, 'The Nexus between Theology and Political Doctrine in Church and Dissent', in Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion*, 193–218.

⁸⁰ Stone, *Jewish Prophecy*, 46, 48.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* ix. Stone believed that 'the affection of modesty is more disgusting than the display of vanity' (!): *Political Reformation*, 60.

⁸² 'The length of title, and the name of the author, forbid our entering into a close examination of the plan. We fear Mr. S. is not the Hercules who can cleanse the Augean stable, which has baffled the wisdom of the legislature, and the wisest patriots': 'Review of New Publications', *Gentleman's Magazine* 59 (1789), 341.

⁸³ 'British Catalogue: Divinity', Review of Stone, *Jewish Prophecy*, *British Critic* 29 (1807), 211–12, at 211.

⁸⁴ Peter Alfred Taylor, ed., *Some Account of the Taylor Family* (London, 1875), 294, 295.

⁸⁵ *Aberdeen Journal*, 1 June 1808.

⁸⁶ Hunter, Notices, fol. 89^r.

about him'.⁸⁷ Even his intellectual claims excited suspicion. When Stone told Hunter that he was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, the latter was, it seems, inclined to disbelieve him.⁸⁸ But it was true; and, only a year before his death, Stone published a collection of documents in the Society's periodical, *Archaeologia*.⁸⁹

CONCLUSIONS

If an increasingly conservative era and Stone's problematical personality wrought his ruin, that ruin was none the less avoidable. Stone insisted that, from his ordination, he was 'absolutely required ... to lay before the people mine Unitarian Christian principles', and never to withhold them 'from the lower classes of the community'.⁹⁰ But that was hogwash. Others sharing his doubts, including William Hopkins, unobtrusively adapted the Church's services to their beliefs, omitting those parts they rejected;⁹¹ had Stone done likewise, prosecution would have been improbable. Besides, he was non-resident: instituted to Cold Norton in May 1765, his visitation return the next year states that he did not live there for reasons of health.⁹² He resided in London, and in 1783 Lindsey noted 'he never does any duty now as Minister of the Ch. of E.'⁹³ In his stead, Stone employed curates (a strategy which Christopher Wyvill, who signed the

⁸⁷ Ibid. The *Monthly Review* criticized Stone's *Thoughts in Favour of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* for some levity on the subject: 'Monthly Catalogue, Slave Trade', *Monthly Review* 8 (1792), 447.

⁸⁸ Hunter, Notices, fol. 89^r.

⁸⁹ *A List of the Society of Antiquaries of London, April 24, MDCCXCIII* [London, 1793], 6, col. 2; Francis Stone, 'Copies of an Original Letter ... Communicated by the Rev. Francis Stone, F.A.S.', *Archaeologia* 16 (1812), 181–93.

⁹⁰ Stone, *Letter*, 21; idem, *Unitarian Christian Minister's Plea*, 50–1.

⁹¹ F. Stone, 'A Brief Account of the Rev. W. Hopkins', *Monthly Repository* 8 (1813), 425–7, at 426. William Chambers, rector of Achurch, Northamptonshire, did this, as did Disney before his secession: *ODNB*, s.m. 'Chambers, William (1724?–1777)'; 'Disney, John (1746–1816)'.

⁹² LPL, MS Film 31, Diocese of London, Visitation Returns 1766, fol. 349^v. This was repeated in the 1790 visitation return: LPL, MS Film 37, Diocese of London, Visitation Returns 1790, No. 58/2. The explanation for non-residence was a common one: Viviane Barrie-Curien, *Clergé et pastorale en Angleterre au XVIII^e siècle. Le Diocèse de Londres* (Paris, 1992), 266–9.

⁹³ Lindsey, *Letters*, ed. Ditchfield, 1: 384. In the proceedings against Stone, one of Cold Norton's churchwardens testified that the rector preached in the parish church 'about four times a year', and an Essex clergyman observed that he 'hardly ever' attended archdiaconal visitations: Process Books, D2002, Stone v. Bishop (1808), 1343, 1749.

Feathers Tavern petition, also adopted),⁹⁴ and they presumably conformed to the liturgy. His unprovoked challenge to his ecclesiastical superiors in 1806, and his subsequent refusal to retract satisfactorily, were principled but foolhardy. Thomas Belsham, from 1805 minister at the Essex Street chapel, disapproved of Stone's 'whole conduct', and repeatedly castigated his imprudence: in his eyes, Stone had 'solicited & provoked' the 'persecution'.⁹⁵

Stone's test case demonstrated that an uncompromising and vocal 'Unitarian Christian Minister' was intolerable within the Church of England. That said, for the established Church, Stone's memory – especially given his family's suffering – was an embarrassment. And Stone's doubts about the authenticity of some Scripture passages also alienated or alarmed those heterodox Dissenters who upheld the Bible's authenticity and scrupulously sought to validate their Unitarianism from the Scriptures.⁹⁶ Stone was best forgotten.⁹⁷ Revealingly, when the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* was produced, his 1897 *Dictionary of National Biography* entry was merely revised: his career, it was deemed, failed to merit extensive re-examination.⁹⁸

Yet the manifold doubts which Stone expressed soon resurfaced after his death. Most broadly, his doubts about the authenticity of parts of the gospels anticipated the 'higher criticism' which emerged later in the nineteenth century, and that higher criticism proved destructive of the Bible-based Unitarianism of men like Lindsey. Within the Church of England, Stone's concerns were given voice by new generations of theologians. One of great distinction in the 1830s was Renn Dickson Hampden, Fellow of Oriel, Bampton Lecturer in 1832 and, from 1836, Oxford's Regius Professor of Divinity: how different from a maverick Essex rector. 'The Apostles' Creed', contended Hampden, 'states nothing but facts. The transition is immense from this to the scholastic speculations involved in the Nicene

⁹⁴ *ODNB*, s.n. 'Wyvill, Christopher (1738–1822)'.

⁹⁵ NYCRO, ZFW 7/2/215/7, 19; 7/2/243/1.

⁹⁶ See Lindsey's criticisms of *Call to the Jews*: Lindsey, *Letters*, ed. Ditchfield, 1: 383. Stone directly attacked Arianism and Socinianism, besides Athanasianism, in the work: *Call to the Jews*, 21, 105, 107, 248.

⁹⁷ William Turner, for example, did not include Stone in his *Lives of Eminent Unitarians*, 2 vols (London, 1840–3), although he included Edward Evanson.

⁹⁸ Sufficient sources survive to make possible the writing of a full biography of Stone; and certainly his *ODNB* entry needs further revision.

and Athanasian Creeds.⁹⁹ Dogmatic statements were human deductions from Scripture, not (necessarily) Christian truths. Hampden's doubts, like Stone's, were productive of clear reasoning. Regarding the Church's Articles and 'in particular ... the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, as they stand in our Ritual, or are adopted into our Articles', Hampden argued, if 'it be admitted that the notions on which their several expressions are founded, are both unphilosophical and unscriptural; it must be remembered, that they do not impress those notions on the Faith of the Christian, as matters of affirmative belief'.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, he advocated the abolition of Oxford's subscription at matriculation.

In 1865, a general 'assent' was substituted for clerical subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles.¹⁰¹ Then came the full Victorian controversy over the Athanasian Creed. The Royal Commission on Ritual, appointed in 1867, issued its final report in 1870 and recommended the creed's retention. By contrast, Archbishop Tait wished to discontinue its use and Dean Stanley to relax it: stances deplored in turn by E. B. Pusey and Canon Liddon. Its place in the Church's worship was hotly debated in Convocation: if it were not to be omitted, should it be retranslated, or its anathemas' force moderated by some explanatory formula? However, the Lower House rejected any change, and none was effected, although a declaration on the creed's content was constructed. Partial adjustment came in the Revised 1928 Prayer Book, with a new translation, permission for the omission of the anathemas and the making of the recitation optional.¹⁰² In the twentieth century, the Church of England silently but overwhelmingly abandoned the use of the Athanasian Creed.¹⁰³

In the mid-1930s, the influential Dick Sheppard, then a canon of St Paul's, threatened to throw himself from the Whispering Gallery during the saying of the Athanasian Creed.¹⁰⁴ He did not follow that imprudent course, but, in his lifetime, the creed was plainly withering on the vine. Had Francis Stone appreciated that *quieta non movere* was

⁹⁹ R. D. Hampden, *The Scholastic Philosophy considered in its Relation to Christian Theology*, 2nd edn (London, 1837), 544 n. H.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 378.

¹⁰¹ A less rigid form was introduced in 1975.

¹⁰² R. C. D. Jasper, *Prayer Book Revision in England 1800–1900* (London, 1954), 103–14.

¹⁰³ Kelly, *Athanasian Creed*, 49.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Burns, 'From 1830 to the Present', in Derek Keene, Arthur Burns and Andrew Saint, eds, *St Paul's: The Cathedral Church of London, 604–2004* (New Haven, CT, 2004), 84–110, at 97.

sometimes a wise strategy, not necessarily dishonourable, the likelihood would have been a satisfactory old age with his young family, and the avoidance of a snap petrification of Anglican doctrine which halted, albeit temporarily, fundamental thinking in the Church: the very opposite of his intended achievement.¹⁰⁵ Piecemeal modifications, omissions, compromises, fudges were the most viable, if imperfect, salves for the (ultimately irresolvable) doctrinal doubts which so vexed Stone. But, as Lindsey observed, he was 'too hasty' a man for those.

¹⁰⁵ Sadly, he here resembled Luther less than K. B. McFarlane's Wycliffe, who 'did little or nothing to inspire [the English Reformation] and in effect everything possible to delay' it: *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London, 1952), 186. Ironically, in the year of Stone's death, Parliament formally legalized Unitarianism by the Doctrine of the Trinity Act, 53 Geo. III c. 160 (an attempt to do so in 1792 had failed). Stone's plans for reform of the Church prefigured some debated in the 1830s (although they more strikingly resemble the ecclesiastical reforms implemented in France in 1789 and 1790). Parts of his political and social vision were gradually realized.