When the word Unitarian first appeared in print as an English term it was used not simply as a label for someone who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity but also as a reference to a Christian sect, or Church. It is in this sense that the modern reader, following the development of the Unitarian Church in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, understands the word. However, during the period examined in this article the connotation of the term was not so fixed. Among Unitarians themselves it was argued on the one hand that they could be comprehended within the Church of England, and on the other that they fundamentally disagreed with Anglican doctrine and should form their own Church.

It is the purpose of this article to explore how those who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity perceived the relationship between Unitarians and the Anglican Church over twelve years at the end of the seventeenth century. This task is not straightforward: for much of the period discussed the toleration that the law extended to dissenting Protestants was withheld from those expressing Unitarian beliefs. This naturally led Unitarians to be cautious in the expression of their views. Accordingly it is not possible to determine the author of most Unitarian publications. The course of the debate among Unitarians can then, in the main, only be traced from publication to publication, and not from author to author. Further, the effect of the social pressure, particularly on those ordained, to remain within the Church of England cannot be ignored. Clearly this pressure should qualify the use of biographical information. However, in so far as an analysis of the Unitarians' arguments is concerned a careful balance must be maintained. The Unitarians did not generally need to publish and there is little reason to suppose that they would write hypocritically when they could

have remained silent. Yet, deliberate deception aside, the nature of religious toleration at this time had a profound effect on the development of Unitarian thought.

The way I attempt to explore the relationship between Unitarians and Anglicans, while giving regard to these difficulties, is by combining a brief account of the ecclesiastical policy of James II and William III, as that which set the legal framework within which Unitarianism existed, with a cursory consideration of the effect of the personal history of the most important Unitarians of this time, and, as the main body of my argument, an exploration of the debates about the doctrine of the Trinity through which the Unitarianism of this time was expressed and modified.

On 4 April 1687 James II issued a Declaration for the liberty of conscience, commonly known as the Declaration of indulgence. In this Declaration he suspended the execution of all penal laws in ecclesiastical matters, dispensed with the tests which had been required of anyone taking up a civil or military office, and pardoned all the non-conformists and recusants who were being imprisoned for religious offences. The Declaration was intended to serve two purposes. First, it eased the condition of Roman Catholics, James's co-religionists. Secondly, James hoped it would divide the Protestant opposition to his rule. In establishing a policy of toleration James created a place for Dissenters outside the Anglican Church, thus reducing the need for Dissenters to compromise over their differences with Anglicans.

With respect to the second purpose the Declaration was unsuccessful. Dissenters were unhappy with the way James had used the royal prerogative to by-pass parliament, and although ultimately there was no comprehension of Dissenters within the Anglican Church, the perceived threat of Catholicism was sufficient to unite Dissenters and Anglicans in defence of the Protestant cause. However, regardless of the success of James's policy, the generous religious toleration that it led to brought forth the publication of the first of the tracts in what was to become the Unitarian Controversy. Albeit anonymously, in 1687 there appeared A brief history of the Unitarians called also Socinians.

Coming at the beginning of the debate the Brief history is in many ways the defining document of late seventeenth-century Unitarianism. It is written in four letters: the first explains what Unitarians believe, the other three defend these beliefs by reference to the Old and New Testaments and the Epistles. There is then a further letter, purportedly by 'a Gentleman, a Person of excellent Learning and Worth' with whom the 'Publisher' left the four letters; this letter comments on the other four.\(^2\) The three characters mentioned in the final, extra letter – the principal author, the

\(^2\) [Stephen Nye], A brief history of the Unitarians called also Socinians (London, 1687), 167.
publisher, and the learned gentleman – are three of the most significant Unitarians of this period. Stephen Nye was the principal author. He was the only one of the three who was too young to have been involved in the religious controversy of the Commonwealth period. Although the grandson of the independent divine Phillip Nye, he remained within the Anglican Church throughout his adult life. In 1679, eight years before the publication of the Brief history, he was made rector of Little Hormead, a small living in Hertfordshire, and remained there until his death in 1719.

The publisher, in the seventeenth-century sense of the word, was Thomas Firmin. He, it appears, provided the energy and the money not only behind this work but much of the rest of the controversy examined in this article. Burnet wrote of him that, 'He studied to promote his Opinions, after the Revolution, with much heat; Many Books were printed against the Trinity, which he dispersed over the Nation, distributing them freely to all who would accept of them'. Firmin was a successful mercer who is remembered as much for his philanthropic work as for his Unitarianism. That he had doubts about the doctrine of the Trinity was well known at the time. These doubts predated his acquaintance with Nye. During the Commonwealth period he had been a friend of John Biddle, who had publicly disputed orthodox Trinitarianism, and had acted on Biddle's behalf after Biddle had been confined to the Isle of White. Following the Restoration Firmin attended Anglican services and, despite his views, was on good terms with many important members of the Church. It is recorded that Queen Mary, knowing John Tillotson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was a friend of Firmin's, 'spoke to Archbishop Tillotson and earnestly recommended to him to set Mr. Firmin right in those weighty and necessary points' relating to the doctrine of the Trinity. Tillotson is said to have answered 'that he had often endeavour'd it; but Mr. Firmin having so early and long imbibed the Socinian Doctrine was now not capable of a contrary impression'.

The learned gentlemen was Henry Hedworth. Less is known about him than Firmin or Nye. It has been suggested that he served in the Parliamentary army, because he was sometimes given the title Captain; it is certain that, like Firmin, he was a friend of Biddle and had his experience of religious controversy shaped as much by Commonwealth as Restoration debates. It is not known whether Hedworth was in communion with the Church of England, but it appears that he was less concerned with conforming than either Nye or Firmin.

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3 Gilbert Burnet, Bishop Burnet's history of his own time, 2 vols (London, 1734), vol. ii. 211.
That the religious toleration which permitted the publication of the Brief history resulted from the machinations of a Catholic king seeking to advance Catholicism is of more than incidental importance to the work. A great deal of care is taken in the construction of the History's arguments to make Unitarianism appear a natural extension of Protestantism. In the conclusion to the fourth letter Nye argues that the doctrine of the Trinity has exactly the same grounding as the doctrine of transubstantiation: namely, Church authority and an over literal interpretation of a few equivocal texts. With the rejection of transubstantiation, he maintains, should go the rejection of the Trinity.

The Brief history attempted to use the fear and hostility generated by the threat of Catholicism to advance Unitarianism. Nye quotes from 'An English Author of the Romish Perswasion' the assertion that

Christ is the Pope’s God. For if he had not been, or had not been so vigilant and resolute a Pastor as he is; (he means such a Persecutor) Christ whom the Pope both worships himself, and propounds to the world to worship as the very true God, that made all things, Christ I say had not been taken for any such person, as this day we believe him to be.6

The Catholic writer had argued that since faith in Christ's divinity is grounded upon the Pope we ought to accept the Pope as the true spokesman of Christ's message. Nye, on the contrary, argues that since 'Christ is the Pope's God', he is no God. Hedworth in his letter at the end of the Brief history goes further. He argues that persisting in Trinitarian beliefs leaves Anglicans vulnerable to the arguments of Roman Catholics. He takes as conclusive the arguments against scriptural support for the doctrine of the Trinity which Nye had presented in the four letters. He asserts that the primary axiom of Protestantism is that the Bible contains all that men need to know. So then, he maintains, to assert that the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to Christianity is contrary to Protestant belief. To prove his point Hedworth relates an encounter that took place 'in the present Reign':

A certain great Lord was assaulted in his Faith by a Jesuit or other Seminary, who began with him thus: My Lord, I know you believe the Creed of Athanasius: to which the Lord (wisely perceiving what he would build upon that concession) answer'd who told you so? Which quick Answer by Question did so surprize and disappoint the Seminary, that he had no more to say.7

A consequence of the fragility of toleration for Unitarians at the time of the publication of the Brief history was the extensive

6 [Nye], A brief history of the Unitarians called also Socinians, 161–2. Nye is quoting from Fiat lux (1661) attributed to John Vincent Canes.
7 [Nye], Brief history, 170.
consideration within the work of the place that Unitarianism ought to be accorded in a predominantly Trinitarian society. The attitude governing Hedworth’s letter is that Unitarians constitute a separate sect that the established Church ought to tolerate. He wrote, ‘the Trinitarians ought to own the Unitarians for Christian Brethren, and behave towards them as such’. He agrees with Trinitarians that the beliefs of Unitarians differ significantly but asks for them to be allowed a place within a Christian society.

Nye’s position is more ambiguous. His History is not an account of a religious movement, detailing people and places, but an argument justifying one side of a dispute. This makes Unitarianism appear to be an opinion rather than a church. The conflict is reflected in the use of the word Unitarian. It had been Hedworth who first used the term in print. He did so to link the beliefs of Biddle and Socinus and to connect his beliefs to the Unitarian Church of Transylvania. Nye deliberately uses the term to avoid the opprobrium which to an Anglican ear was conveyed by the word Socinian. Moreover, he uses it to draw the reader’s attention away from the body of religious beliefs expressed by Socinus, focusing their attention instead on the one question of how many persons there are in God.

The different desires for the place of Unitarianism expressed by Hedworth and Nye fit with one being a survivor of the Commonwealth and the other an Anglican minister. That, at this stage of the debate, Hedworth’s desire for a separate church dominated attempts to represent Unitarianism as a dispute which could be contained within the Church of England, despite the fact that Nye was an ordained member of that Church and Firmin in communion with it, can be explained as a consequence of James’s religious policy. The suspension of penal laws in ecclesiastical matters meant that, though there were many in the Anglican Church who would have resisted any weakening of the Church’s insistence on belief in the Trinity, there was nothing to stop Unitarians forming their own organization. James had successfully fostered toleration and discouraged comprehension.

Following the Glorious Revolution the conditions of religious worship were significantly altered. The Act for exempting their Majesties’ Protestant subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the penalties of certain laws of 1689, known as the Toleration Act, only extended religious toleration as far as Trinitarian Protestants. The act specifically stated that it should give no ‘ease, benefit or advantage’ to ‘any person that shall deny in his preaching or writing the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity’. At the same time as the

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8 See McLachlan, Socinianism, 312.
introduction of the act withdrew toleration for Unitarians outside the Anglican Church. The chance of Unitarians finding a place within the Church grew. A turning point at the end of James's reign had been his demand in May 1688 that the clergy of the Church of England read out his Declaration of Indulgence. James knew the clergy would resist this demand because to submit would be tantamount to accepting the authority of the monarch over Parliament and Church. He had hoped that a substantial number of clergy would object to the liberty which the Declaration allowed Dissenters. The effect of the clergy's refusal, if everything had gone according to James's plan, would have been to draw Dissenters into supporting him and opposing the Church of England. James had been outmanoeuvred. The churchmen had consulted with leading Dissenters before they rejected the King's command. With the Dissenters' support, they then proclaimed that though they would not publish the Declaration it was not 'for any want of due tenderness towards the Dissenters'. Far from dividing Dissenters and the Church, James's attempt to use the royal dispensing power had united them before the threat of Popery. 10

After the Revolution the spirit of co-operation between Dissenters and the Church led many to make a genuine effort to relax the various points of ritual and dogma of the Church to which Dissenters objected. At the instigation of William the House of Lords passed a Comprehension Bill. The Commons, however, decided that alterations to the Church were more appropriately debated by Convocation and referred the matter to them. It is not clear whether William actually desired the passing of a Comprehension Act. Jonathan Israel has recently argued that toleration for non-Anglicans was William's first priority and that he was happy to see the Comprehension Bill fail so long as the Toleration Act was passed. 11 It is however agreed that as soon as the matter was referred to Convocation it was doomed. A peculiar collusion of views among the clergy of the Lower House ensured that, regardless of the wishes of the bishops in the Upper House, any measures to widen entrance to the Church would be rejected.

Many clergy were unhappy with their relation to the new monarchs. They did not like the way James had been treated. They were concerned about the vows of allegiance they had sworn to him and were now expected to abandon in favour of William and Mary. Simultaneously they distrusted William: he was Protestant but he was not Anglican. It was thought that he would side with the

Dissenters at the expense of the Church of England. He had been seen to favour latitudinarian clergy, advancing them to bishoprics; it was suspected that the attempt to widen the entrance to the Church was the second part of a plan to weaken Anglicanism in order to destroy it.

In September 1689, regardless of the hopelessness of the cause, William set up an Ecclesiastical Commission with directions to prepare such alterations in the liturgy and canons of the Church of England as were appropriate to bring about a desirable comprehension. The recommendations of the Commission were to be laid before Convocation. If they were approved they would be returned to Parliament to be enacted. Some commissioners, notably Dr Jane, the Oxford Professor of Divinity, believed that no changes were desirable so refused to meet at all. Others, however, met frequently and attempted to solve problems such as whether Presbyterian ministers needed to be re-ordained if they were to be accepted as part of the Anglican Church. Importantly for the Unitarians the commissioners also turned their attention to the Athanasian Creed. Amongst some commissioners there was a strong desire to reject the Athanasian Creed outright. Tillotson, for instance, commented five years later, when he was writing to Burnet about his *Exposition of the Thirty Nine Articles*, that, ‘The account given of Athanasius’s creed seems to me nowise satisfactory. I wish we were well rid of it’. The Commission did not go so far. Thomas Birch records that they came to the following conclusion:

lest the wholly rejecting it should be imputed to them as Socinianism, a rubric shall be made setting forth, or declaring the curses denounced therein not to be restrained to every particular article, but intended against those, that deny the substance of Christian religion in general.

Now, the Athanasian Creed was the basis for the Trinitarian doctrine in the Church of England. If it were rejected a Unitarian would have had little cause to dissent. Any weakening of the Creed’s authority was, so far as Unitarians were concerned, a step in the right direction.

Two anonymous works were produced at this time with the object of encouraging Convocation to drop the Athanasian Creed. One, *The naked gospel*, was written by Arthur Bury, Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford. Once it was known that he was the author of this work the University’s Convocation condemned it and

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14 Ibid., 195.
ordered that it be burnt in the Schools' quadrangle. Bury was ejected from Lincoln. However, he did not consider himself a Unitarian. In the second edition of his work he affirms his belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. The other work was by Nye. Not only did it fail to persuade the Lower House to drop the Athanasian Creed, it so angered that House that the Prolocutor protested to the Upper House that it was a dangerous book, the circulation of which ought to be prevented.

Nye's work, *Brief notes on the creed of St Athanasius* was brief. The title, however, does more than describe; it deliberately marks the work as kin to the *Brief history*. Yet despite this the *Brief notes* was written to achieve a different end. The ambition of the work is not toleration for Unitarianism as a separate church but an alteration in the liturgy and doctrine of the Church of England so as to enable comprehension for Unitarians. Nye attacks the Athanasian Creed on several grounds. He claims, for instance, that leading a good life is more important than believing the right things, so no one ought to be damned simply because of their beliefs. Accordingly he gives details from Athanasius's life, showing what a disreputable character he was. The principal argument, however, is that the doctrine of the Trinity, as described in the Creed, is nonsense and contrary to Scripture. Nye writes:

> I appeal to all men, that have any freedom of Judgment remaining; whether this Creed is fit to be retained in any Christian much less Protestant and Reformed Church? Since it subverts the Foundations, not only of Christianity, but of all Religion; that is to say of Reason and Revelation: there being no Principle in Reason and Scripture more evident than *God is One*.15

There are occasions in the *Brief notes* when Nye writes about the Unitarians as a religious group separate from Anglicans, but only so as to stress the similarity between Unitarians and Anglicans. For instance, Nye rejects the accusation commonly levelled that Unitarians set up reason as an authority above revelation. He argues that there is no difference between Anglicans and Unitarians in the epistemology of religion; both believe in the same route to religious knowledge: there is no 'Clash of Reason with Scripture'.16 In this representation Unitarians are distinct from the Anglican Church only in so far as they disagree over the doctrine of the Trinity. The Athanasian Creed is an embarrassment that prevents them being at ease in the Church.

Two prompt responses were made to Nye's *Brief notes*. They are worth considering because the arguments of these works and,

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15 [Stephen Nye], *The acts of great Athanasius with notes, by way of illustration on his Creed: and observations on the learned vindication of the Trinity and incarnation* by Dr. William Sherlock (n.p., 1690), 16. This is an expanded second edition of the *Brief notes*.

16 Ibid., 18.
more particularly, the way Unitarians criticized and redeployed them is of central importance to the Unitarian’s definition of their own position. The two responses appeared to come from opposite sides of the Church of England: one from William Sherlock the other from John Wallis. Sherlock was initially perceived as a spokesman for those in the Anglican Church who were uncomfortable with the change in sovereign and were opposing attempts to relax the Church’s dogma. In 1684, before the Glorious Revolution, Sherlock had published *The case of resistance to the supreme powers stated and resolved*, in which he argued that subjects had no right to resist their monarch. At the time of his first response to the Unitarians he was still refusing to swear an oath of allegiance to William and Mary. Sherlock, however, was to disappoint his natural supporters.

The attacks on the Athanasian Creed, Sherlock is clear, are motivated by straight-forward Unitarianism. Implicitly criticizing the ecclesiastical commission he wrote that all men ‘who would be thought neither *Arians* nor *Socinians*’ must be ‘cautious how they would express the least dislike of the *Athanasian Creed*’. Such dislike displays ‘some secret dislike to the Doctrine of the Trinity’. All the ‘spight against *Athanasius’s Creed* ... is not so much against the Creed, as against the Doctrine of the Trinity and Incarnation’. Sherlock therefore set about vindicating Athanasius’s Creed by vindicating the doctrine of the Trinity. First he attacked what he perceived to be the Unitarian’s epistemological position. Human knowledge, he maintained, is too limited to be able to judge whether the doctrine of the Trinity contains a contradiction. It is narrow even with respect to the most mundane things: at best men can only know a few of their properties. The essences of things, their true natures are unknowable. He wrote:

*It is so far from being a wonder to meet with anything, whose nature we do not perfectly understand, that I know nothing in the World, which we do perfectly understand: It is agreed by all Men, whoever considered this matter that the essences of things cannot be known, but only their properties and quantities.*

This being so, it is, Sherlock asserted, a ridiculous presumption to complain that the doctrine of the Trinity is unintelligible. It concerns something we do not understand and so cannot judge by our rational faculties.

Sherlock misrepresented Nye’s method of interpreting the Scriptures. He claimed Nye had asserted, ‘that the Holy Scriptures

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18 Ibid., 21.

19 Ibid., 7.
do not compel us to accept the doctrine of the Trinity ‘because it is a contradictory acknowledgement’. Nye had asserted the contrary: that the Scriptures should be believed even if they disagreed with reason. Nye’s argument was based on what he had understood Scriptures to have said. Sherlock knocks down the paper man of his own construction with the simple argument that ‘it is impossible to know, what is a Contradiction to the Nature of Things, whose Natures we do not understand’.20 Sherlock’s work became controversial because of the explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity it contained. Instead of presenting a traditional explanation of the doctrine Sherlock invented an entirely new account. The explanation starts with a consideration of ‘what it is, that makes any substance numerically one’. In ‘Organical Bodies’, he determined, it is the ‘union of parts’. In ‘finite Created Spirits’ it ‘can be nothing else but Self-consciousness’. Sherlock suggested that ‘if there were Three created Spirits so united as to be conscious to each others Thoughts and Passions as they are to their own, I cannot see any reason, why we might not say, that three such persons were numerically One’.21 This, Sherlock believed, can give us a notion of the unity of the three persons in the Trinity. Instead of three finite spirits they are three infinite spirits, but the principle of mutual consciousness remains. He wrote: ‘Three Divine Persons, who are intimate to each other, and if I may so speak, as mutually conscious to each other, as any One Person can be to itself, are truely and properly numerically One’.22

John Wallis was Savillian Professor of Mathematics at Oxford and an illustrious member of the Royal Society. He was well acquainted with many of the leading members of the Church whose latitudinarian views had helped them to advancement under William. It would have been expected that his defence of the doctrine of the Trinity would speak for that side of the Church. Wallis attacked the Unitarians in a series of published letters. Like Sherlock, to the arguments of Unitarians that the doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible he objected that ‘we who know so little of the essence of anything, especially of spiritual beings, though finite, need not think it strange that we are not able to comprehend all the peculiarities of what concerns that of God, and the blessed Trinity’.23 Wallis does not argue as Sherlock had that the Unitarians reject the Scriptures in favour of reason, but that, because they misuse reason to examine the nature of the Trinity they deny the

20 Ibid., 41.
21 Ibid., 48–9.
22 Ibid., 49.
obvious sense of the Scriptures, claiming that in it there is an 'impossibility and inconsistence'. Unitarians then bend Scripture's sense to fit with their own reasoning. Wallis wrote 'though they do not as yet think fit to give us a barefaced rejection of Scripture; yet they do (and must they tell us,) put such a forced sense on the words of it, be they never so plain, as to make them signify somewhat else'. It was however, as with Sherlock's work, not the attack on the Unitarians but the account of the doctrine of the Trinity offered which drew most attention. Its looseness took many by surprise. 'What is it', Wallis asked, that the Socinians pretend 'to be impossible? It is but this, that there be three somewhats, which are but one God: and these somewhats we commonly call persons. Now what inconsistence is there in all this?' There is no difficulty he argued in considering 'that, what in one regard are three, may in another regard be one'. Several examples are given to illustrate this, one of which was the way the dimensions of a cube may be considered separately, as length, breadth and height, or as united in one cube.

These two responses played into the Unitarian's hands. With Convocation's rejection of the Ecclesiastical Commission's recommendations the chance to reform the liturgy of the Church of England had passed. However, the appearance of two accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity which differed so greatly and were both liable to charges of heterodoxy allowed the Unitarians to argue that the Church was confused about the doctrine it sought to impose. Edward Wetenhall, Bishop of Cork and Ross, a Trinitarian but an urger of 'Latitude and Simplicity', recognized this danger. He wrote a pamphlet in 1691 asking churchmen to forebear adding to the Unitarian controversy. Wetenhall is 'well assured', he tells the reader, that

some late Pamphlets had died away, or been now in few mens Hands, had not divers Persons of great Names, and deservedly of no less esteem in the Church, taken on themselves the labour to confute them; which in the Judgment of some it is to be wish'd they had done without running into those very Absurdities, to which the Adversaries would reduce them.

Wetenhall's plea was probably prompted by the publication of a collection of Unitarian tracts which utilized responses made to Unitarian arguments. The collection, which turned out to be the

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24 Ibid., 6.
25 Ibid., 9.
26 Ibid., 10.
27 [Edward Wetenhall], *An earnest and compassionate suit for forbearance: to the learned writers of some controversies at present* (London, 1691), 1.
28 Ibid., 3.
first in a series, is a curious work. A substantial part of it is taken up with reprints of Biddle even though his views have little pertinence to the debate in hand. Their inclusion tells us more of the affection and regard Firmin and Hedworth felt for Biddle than of the direction in which Unitarian thought was moving. Of more immediate relevance the collection included second editions of Nye’s \textit{Brief history} and \textit{Brief notes}. The \textit{Brief notes} are contained in a new work replying to the objections Sherlock had brought against the first edition. There are also several further works responding to Sherlock and Wallis. It is not clear whether these works had appeared separately, or whether they were purposely written for this volume of tracts. Each tract has its own series of printer’s signatures, suggesting it was printed separately, but each is presented in the same double-columned format, suggesting they all form part of the same project.

The first piece in the volume, \textit{An exhortation to a free and impartial enquiry into the doctrines of religion} serves as a preface. It may be used therefore as a guide to the criteria governing the selection of tracts in the volume. The principle stressed in it is that the Holy Scriptures by themselves are clear enough to teach men everything they ought to believe. No other authority but these texts, admittedly interpreted by human judgement, is required to bring men to God. This principle, it is claimed, is the distinguishing feature of Protestantism. The author writes, ‘the Truth is’, the Holy Scriptures ‘are so clear and express’ that

the first Reformers, and after them the Protestants of all Denominations and Sects, whenever they argue against the Papists, lay it down as a Principle, that none are to follow their Teachers with an implicit or blind Faith. Everyone, say they, is to use his own proper Judgment of Discretion; the Gospel being plain and easy in all necessary points of Faith and Manners.  

If one forms one’s religious belief according to this method it is impossible, the author maintains, to sustain faith in the doctrine of

\footnotesize{29} There were eventually five collections. This article shall deal with the first three. These share the same title and are doctrinally and stylistically similar. Except for the republication of some pieces by Biddle and one by Marvell, they are composed of short, topical, controversial pieces. Although all the contemporary tracts are anonymous, many have been attributed to Nye. The first three volumes are thought to have been funded by Firmin. The fourth and fifth volumes were published some years after Firmin’s death. Though claiming to be a continuation of the Unitarian series, they have different titles and a different nature. For instance, they contain extended arguments on both sides of the debate on the Trinity, they include pamphlets which are neither historical or immediately topical, and they attend to the debate on the doctrine of the Trinity which was taking place within tolerated dissenting groups. The most detailed account of the Unitarian Tracts can be found in H. McLachlan. \textit{The story of a Nonconformist library} (Manchester, 1923), 53–88.

\footnotesize{30} Anon., \textit{An exhortation to a free and impartial enquiry into the doctrines of religion} ([London, 1691]), 4.
the Trinity. By arguing in this way, the author intended to convey the impression that Unitarianism is a form of thorough Protestantism. To support this there is a list of Reformation heroes who the author believes to be Unitarians; the list includes Erasmus, Grotius, Episcopius and Chillingworth.  

Unitarianism is presented in this way in most of the tracts in this volume. For instance, in a work credited to Nye, Doctor Wallis's *letter touching the doctrine of the blessed Trinity, answer'd by his friend*, it is insisted, contrary to what Wallis and Sherlock had asserted, that the Unitarians' argument is not based on the unreasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity but plain scriptural evidence: 'It's the contradiction of that Doctrine to a Thousand clear places of Scripture which they insist upon'.  

The author of *A defence of the brief history of the Unitarians*, also in this volume, offers a different account of the way human judgement should interpret the Scriptures. It is the author's purpose to defend Nye from Sherlock's accusation that he 'impudently brings Revelation down in such sublime Mysteries to the level of our Understanding'. Instead of simply denying the charge and asserting that Nye had done no more than follow the Scriptures, the author argues that any intrinsically contradictory doctrine is necessarily none-scriptural. He writes 'is this Impudence to say, Transubstantiation cannot be contained in Scripture because it implies a Contradiction? I hope not . . . if the Trinity be also a plain Contradiction to our Reason, why shan't we be allowed to say, that it cannot be contained in Scriptures?' The author agrees with Sherlock that we cannot reject a doctrine proposed in the Scriptures simply because it is unintelligible. He asserts that he believes the Resurrection even though he cannot understand how it was performed. He argues, however, that there is a difference between a contradiction and unintelligibility. Contradictions, he maintains, can never be believed. So, he argues, 'the Trinity being not only Unintelligible but Contradictious; we deny it is taught in Scripture, which is altogether free from Contradiction'. It seems likely that the author of this tract is acknowledging that his opinion about the relationship between reason and the Scriptures differs from Nye's when, at the end of the work, he writes: 'the Historian himself, might, upon some Texts, and to some of our Author's [Sherlock's] Objections explained or defended himself, otherwise than is here done'.

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31 Ibid., 3.  
32 [Stephen Nye], *Doctor Wallis's letter touching the doctrine of the blessed Trinity, answer'd by his friend* ([London, 1691]), 7.  
33 Anon., *A defence of the brief history of the Unitarians, against Dr. Sherlock's answer in his vindication of the holy Trinity* (London, 1691), 6.  
34 Ibid., 7.  
35 Ibid., 55.
Now, the most likely explanation of the different weight that this author and Nye give to reason is the different value they put on acceptance within the Church of England. The defender of the History is keen to be marked as a Protestant, but appears happy to be considered as more extreme in his application of reason to the understanding of the Scriptures than would be acceptable to the Church of England. By stressing that he is following the Scriptures rather than his own reason Nye is doing his best to conciliate Anglicans who fear Unitarianism is a step on the road to Deism. In other works in this volume the writers are eager to present Unitarianism as part of Anglicanism. In Observations on four letters of Dr. Wallis, the author draws attention to a place in Wallis’s fourth letter where Wallis makes the phrase, ‘a different Person’ mean, in relation to the Trinity, only ‘a different Consideration or Respect’. If this is Wallis’s belief, the author argues, then there is no real difference between him and the Socinians. He writes:

Now how can he, who believes such a Trinity of Somewhats or Persons as this is, write against the Socinians? They believe the Trinity as much as Dr. Wallis. They allow there are in God three Somewhats and Persons; meaning thereby, as Dr. Wallis there explains them, three Names or Titles, three Capacities or Respects, three Relations, three Considerations, three Modes.  

Wallis’s account of the Trinity, it is here stated, is entirely acceptable to the Socinians. The writer proposes that since it would be below Wallis’s character and dignity to allow himself to be called a Socinian, the Socinians, ‘in honour of him’ should content themselves with being called ‘Wallisians’.  

The author who writes against Sherlock in Some thoughts upon Dr. Sherlock’s vindication of the doctrine of the holy Trinity, is more explicit in his assertions that he is part of no sect distinct from the Church of England. Although it is clear that he rejects the divinity of Christ, he claims that he has ‘no share in those factions, which most pitifully tear in pieces Christianity’. ‘I am’, he writes, ‘neither a Papist, nor a Lutheran, nor a Calvanist, nor a Socinian, &c. I am a Christian I thank God’. Moreover, ‘I . . . heartily embrace the Communion of the Church of England, independently upon any Faction whatever’. He makes clear that it is not ‘against her’ that he writes, ‘but only against the Doctor’s Three Gods’.  

Despite the efforts the authors of the tracts in this volume make to present a sympathetic front to the Church of England they do not

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37 Ibid., 10.
38 [Stephen Nye?], Some thoughts upon Dr. Sherlock’s vindication of the doctrine of the holy Trinity (London, 1691), 18.
39 Ibid., p. 19.
restrain their attacks on Sherlock. Part of *The acts of the great Athanasius*, the work which contained the second edition of the *Brief notes*, consists of observations on Sherlock’s vindication of the doctrine of the Trinity. The author, who we may assume is Nye, allows this vindication no credence. ‘Mutual-consciousness’, he declares, ‘makes the Beginning, Middle and End of Dr. Sherlock’s Answer to the Brief Notes’. This notion however has no use: either mutual-consciousness unites the three members of the Trinity in such a way that they are ‘as much one with one another, as any Spirit or Man is one with himself’, in which case there is, properly speaking, only one person in the Godhead; or, each divine spirit or person is separately conscious of their own thoughts and actions, in which case though there are three persons, there are also three Gods. Both ways the doctrine of the Trinity falls. 40

However, the most telling attack brought in this volume against the doctrine of the Trinity is not specific to either Sherlock or Wallis. As Wetenhall observed the difference between the two accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity is exploited and taken as evidence of a general confusion in the Church. The author of *Observations on the four letters of Dr. Wallis* writes of Trinitarians:

One would expect, that since they say, that the Trinity is the Doctrine of the Catholic or Universal Church, and necessary to be believed in order to Salvation; that at least they know and were agreed what this Trinity is, or what is thereby meant, else we are required to believe no Body knows what in order to Salvation. But so it is; there is as much Confusion, in declaring what this Catholic necessary Doctrine is, as there was at the building of Babel, when no one understood another . . . they have nothing left in which they agree but only the word Trinity. 41

Neither this observation nor Wetenhall’s warning did anything to stem the Trinitarian replies to the Unitarians. Wallis continued to write letters expounding his opinion of the nature of the Trinity; in 1693 Sherlock published *An apology for writing against Socinians*; and, later in the same year, Robert South, another churchman, entered the controversy with a witty and bitter attack on Sherlock’s account of the doctrine of the Trinity, *Animadversions upon Dr. Sherlock’s book entituled a vindication of the holy and ever blessed Trinity*. South accused Sherlock of tritheism. South considered Sherlock a traitor, one who had betrayed the Church of England from within. He linked Sherlock’s explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity to the attempts made to alter the liturgy of the Church: while some were ‘attempting to give up her Rites and Liturgy’ South

40 [Stephen Nye], *The acts of the great Athanasius with notes, by way of illustration, on his Creed; and observations on the learned vindication of the Trinity and incarnation, by Dr. William Sherlock* ([London], 1690), 25.

41 [Stephen Nye?], *Observations on four letters of Dr. Wallis*, 8.
wrote, others were 'deserting her Doctrine'.\(^{42}\) In his defence of the doctrine of the Trinity, Sherlock, South maintains, has 'let the world see that the Truth cannot be so much shaken by a direct Opposition, as by a Treacherous and False Defence'.\(^{43}\) One would think, South writes, that Sherlock's vindication of the Trinity was written by a Socinian, so readily does it fall to their purpose of exposing confusion and tritheism amongst Trinitarians.\(^{44}\)

In contrast to Sherlock's individual account of the doctrine of the Trinity, South gave what he considered to be 'the commonly received Doctrine of the Church and Schools'. He stressed that each person in the Trinity has no being separate from the unified Godhead. The Church has laid everything on the foundation that 'there is but One God' and therefore has determined that 'there can be no Composition in the Deity with any . . . Positive, Real Being distinct from the Deity it self'. However, having found 'in Scripture mention of Three, to whom distinctly the Godhead does belong' it has, whilst never forgetting that God is one, 'by warrant of the same Scripture . . . expressed these Three by the name of Persons'.\(^{45}\)

A 'person', in this sense, should not be understood to be an independent real being, but a mode of being. A 'mode', South explains, 'in Things Spiritual and Immaterial seems to have much the like reference to such kind of Beings, that a Posture has to a Body, to which it gives some distinction, without superadding any new Entity, or Being to it'.\(^{46}\) South did not appear to realize that by attacking Sherlock and by putting forward yet another account of the doctrine of the Trinity, albeit in the name of the commonly received doctrine of the Church, he was giving the Unitarians yet more material with which to attack the Church.

In 1693 a second volume of Unitarian tracts was published. In the last tract in this volume, Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity, South's explanation, like Wallis's is represented as differing from the Unitarian position only nominally. The tone of the tract however is not one of simple reconciliation; the writer takes pleasure in mocking the fuss which South has made about something he considers to have no 'real being'. The author comments that South has 'taught us, that all the Difference is indeed nothing: both parties confess one self-same Substance, Essence or Godhead, only the Orthodox contend for three Postures in the Substance; and the sullen, conceited Socinians hitherto seem

\(^{42}\) [Robert South], Animadversions upon Dr. Sherlock's book entituled a vindication of the holy and ever blessed Trinity (London, 1693), 1.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 1.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., viii.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 240.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 241.
unwilling to allow of more than one *Mode* or Posture*. The writer of this tract adopts the same tone when dealing with Wallis's account of the Trinity. He remarks that 'a very surprising thing has happened'. Despite it having been preached without exception to the University of Oxford, and having been 'applauded by a great number of Learned Men who profess to be Trinitarians' Wallis's defence of the doctrine of the Trinity has proved so agreeable to the Unitarians that they 'profess that they are of his Mind; they even say that in Honour of him they are content to be called Wallisians'.

The bantering tone suggests that despite significant surface differences there is agreement about fundamentals. This tone is employed because the author is wishing to present the difference between Unitarians and Trinitarians such as Wallis and South - those, in the writer's terminology, who are 'nominal Trinitarians' - as one of language. The author's argument is that Wallis and South have ridiculously redefined their words so as to appear to be Trinitarian even though the substance of their belief is Unitarian. The author writes of Wallis's account of the Trinity that "tis a Trinity only of three Denominations or *Names*, and of *Predications* purely *Accidental*; and besides that, 'tis no manner of *Mystery* but the most intelligible and obvious thing in the World; nor was it ever denied by Sabellians or Socinians'.

This understanding of the explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity given by Wallis and South is explored more critically in another work in the second volume. In *The unreasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity briefly demonstrated, in a letter to a friend*, the author gives a brief account of the nature of language. He believes that words should communicate ideas. He argues, according to this model, that nominal Trinitarians break the rules of good language usage. They use the word 'person' to signify something other than what it usually does, but not only have they not told those they are communicating with what they mean by it, even when they use the word themselves they are unable to define it. The word is being used with no idea attached; and so is ultimately meaningless. The author castigates Wallis for his talk of three 'somewhats' in the Godhead. He complains that the doctrine of the Trinity, as it is explained by Wallis, cannot be judged until he fixes a definite idea to the term 'person'. Sherlock's doctrine, that of 'real' Trinitarians, though this writer believes it to be tritheistical, is praised for at least being meaningful.

The writers of this volume however are careful not to let their disagreement with the Church go any further than this. As in the

47 [Stephen Nye], *Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity* ([London], 1693), 22.
48 Ibid., 8.
49 Ibid., 9.
first volume of tracts, there are many places in the second volume where the charge of setting reason above the Scriptures is rebutted. In *A letter of resolution concerning the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation*, the first piece in this volume, the author writes that the Trinitarians continually charge the Unitarians with exalting reason above revelation, and that they 'pretend' Unitarians believe 'a force, how great soever, is to be put upon the Words of Revelation rather than ... admit of any Doctrine which is contrary to Reason'. The author denies this. "'Tis not true, that we prefer our Reason before Revelation: On the contrary, Revelation being what GOD himself hath said, either immediately, or by inspired Persons; 'tis to be preferred before the clearest Demonstration of our Reason'. 50 Another tract in this volume, *The Trinitarian scheme of religion*, contains a section concerning the authority Unitarians attribute to the Scriptures. The author assures the reader that were the theoretical problem of a clash between revelation and reason to be posed then 'we think 'tis clear, that Human Reason must needs be referred to Divine Revelation'. However, the author points out that though Trinitarians would make this question "the Hinge on which these Controversies turn" the Unitarians believe that they are basing their argument on 'the obvious, natural sense of Holy Scripture'. 51 It is the explicit argument of some of the tracts in this volume that it is possible to be Unitarian and a member of the Church of England simultaneously. The author of *The belief of the Athanasian Creed not required by the Church of England* argues, somewhat implausibly, for the statement declared in the tract's title. It is asserted that the Church does not have one faith for the clergy and another for lay members. It is noted that only those who are being ordained need to proclaim belief in the Athanasian Creed. And it is thereby deduced that belief in the Athanasian Creed is not essential even for the clergy of the Church. There is a second argument that the demand on ministers to govern their faith by Scripture takes priority over the Athanasian Creed. Since, in the author's opinion, Scripture supports a Unitarian faith, the Athanasian Creed is discounted.

In the conclusion to *The Trinitarian scheme of religion* the author writes that the 'Unitarians have not separated' from the Church. It is accepted that they are not in complete agreement with her, but so far as they differ they should be considered as wishing to 'reform our FAITH' rather than as 'Enemies to the Church, or as seeking to undermine her'. Unitarians, he writes

50 [Stephen Nye?], *A letter of resolution concerning the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation* ([London, 1693]), 1.
place not Religion in worshipping God by ourselves . . . We approve of known Forms of praising and praying to God; as also in administering Baptism, the Lord's-Supper, Marriage, and the other Religious Offices; we like well the Discipline of the Church by Bishops and Parochial Ministers; we have an Esteem for the eminent Learning and exemplary Piety of the Conforming Clergy. For these Reasons we communicate with that Church as far as we can, and contribute our interest to favour her against all others who would take the Chair. 52

In the two years between the publication of the second volume of Unitarian tracts and the third, in 1695, the latitudinarian bishops of the Church of England moved to the defence of the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1693 Tillotson published a work entitled, Sermons concerning the divinity and incarnation of our blessed saviour. These sermons, preached some years before, were revised to silence the 'importunate clamours and malicious calumnies' which were being brought against the Archbishop's orthodoxy. 53 In 1694 Edward Fowler, Bishop of Gloucester, published Certain propositions by which the doctrines of the h. Trinity is so explained . . . as to speak it not contradictory to natural reason, and Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury, defended the doctrine of the Trinity in a discourse addressed to the clergy of his diocese. Not only Anglicans were moved to write in defence of the doctrine. A senior Presbyterian minister, John Howe, published a Calm and sober enquiry concerning the possibility of a Godhead in direct response to the Unitarian tract, Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

These responses caused a change in tone in those pieces which made up the third volume of Unitarian tracts. In the main the arguments are the same as those used in the second volume but here they are presented with more respect, presumably because they are now being employed against the leading member of the Church to which many Unitarians belonged. The attitude to Tillotson taken by the author of a second work entitled Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity illustrates this 'As for the Archbishop, the Socinians are concerned for their own Reputation to reverence his Person, and Admonitions: because 'tis agreed among all good men, or those that but profess to be such, that he is respected and lov'd by All, but those that are known to hate their Country'. 54 The method that Unitarian writers use to vindicate their position in this volume is to point out the divisions among Trinitarians. They answer the argument of one Trinitarian by the argument of another. For example, one writer comments that 'nominal' Trinitarians 'demonstrate the Real or Substantial

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52 Ibid., 28.
53 John Tillotson, Works, 9th edn (London, 1728), vol. i, 408.
54 [Stephen Nye], Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity ([London], 1694), 43.
Trinitarians are direct Polytheists, and on the contrary, the Real prove the Nominals no other, I mean in their writings, than disguised Unitarians, and that they really destroy the Persons and confound the Trinity’. This method not only counters the Trinitarian arguments, it enables Unitarians to substantially reduce the appearance of their own separation from the Church by showing the distance between the different types of Trinitarian within it. For instance, the author of A discourse concerning the nominal and real Trinitarians writes that

the Ideas they [Trinitarians] have of the Trinity, and consequently their Faiths concerning this (pretended) Mystery, are so many and so contrary; that they are less one Party among themselves, than the far more Learned, and far greater Number of them (I mean hereby the Nominal Trinitarians) are one Party with Us. As much as the Socinians are clamour’d on, for (abominable, intolerable) Hereticks, there is nothing more certain than that the Nominal Trinitarians, who are truly and properly the Church, and who are much the Majority of Christians, are altogether in the same Sentiments concerning Almighty GOD, and the person of our Saviour, that we are.

Gilbert Burnet’s defence of the doctrine of the Trinity was based on a notion of religious ‘mystery’. In responding to it, and to a sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity that had been preached in 1691 by Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, the Unitarians developed a distinction between a mystery and a contradiction. The author of the Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, accepts that there are mysteries. He believes that ‘we converse every day with very many things none of which we comprehend’, and cites a seed as an example. However, he argues that the Unitarians do not reject the doctrine of the Trinity because they cannot understand it. They reject the articles of the ‘Athanasiac Religion’ which encode the doctrine of the Trinity, ‘because we do comprehend them; we have a clear and distinct Perception, that they are not Mysteries, but Contradictions, Impossibilities and Pure Nonsense’. Men, he believes, can distinguish between a Mystery and a Contradiction. A mystery is something that may be; we can believe it though we do not understand it. A contradiction is nonsense; we understand that it cannot be.

55 [Matthew Tindal], A letter to the reverend the clergy of both universities concerning the Trinity and the Athenasian Creed ([London], 1694), 31.
56 Anon., A discourse concerning the nominal and real Trinitarians ([London], 1695), 3.
57 Edward Stillingfleet, ‘Sermon XXVIII preached at St. Lawrence Jewry, April 7, 1691’, Works (London, 1709), vol. i, 457 ff.
58 [Stephen Nye], Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity ([London], 1694), 4.
59 Ibid., 17.
On this subject there emerges a discordant voice. In a tract entitled, *A letter to the reverend the clergy of both universities concerning the Trinity and the Athanasian Creed*, attributed to Matthew Tindal, an effective but ultimately dangerous argument is brought against mysteries. Tindal considers the nature of belief from the point of view of the functioning of the mind. In his opinion, if we are to believe something we must first have an idea of it. He writes that

the subject of any Man's Belief are those Idea's he has in his Mind concerning any thing; and he believes a thing to be true, when he supposes those Idea's he has of it are agreeable to, or represent the thing as it is: we can have no Belief when we have no Idea's to exercise our Belief about; and if we have but a few or Imperfect Idea's, our Belief can be extended no farther than those few or imperfect Idea's.60

As we will necessarily have no ideas corresponding to something which is a mystery we cannot possibly believe it. Indeed, Tindal points out that by this reasoning it is more possible for us to believe a contradiction, of which at least we have ideas, than a mystery.

It is strange that this argument should be included in the Unitarian tracts. It very effectively destroys the defence of the doctrine of the Trinity based on mystery, but at the same time it threatens most of the rest of revealed religion. The full extent of the consequences of this description of the nature of belief were masked to the Unitarians, and perhaps even to Tindal himself, by the abstractness of the discussion. Certainly there is no hint here of the deism the argument were to have led Tindal to by 1730, the year he published *Christianity as old as creation*. In the *Letter* Tindal reproduces statements common to the other tracts about the closeness of Unitarian beliefs to those of a standard Trinitarian. For instance, he writes that

there are a great many Trinitarians who no otherwise differ from the Unitarians than in Name, whose Trinities they not only allow but contend for. Some of them say, (and Dr. W[allis]. hath writ in defence of it) that the three persons are only three external Denominations of God, according to the different Operations of his Goodness towards his Creatures, in creating, redeeming and sanctifying them . . . What Christian ever denied that God is our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier?61

In the third volume of tracts the Unitarian writers are more insistent than they had been in the second volume that the only difference between them and nominal Trinitarians is linguistic. This representation of the difference presents them with the problem of justifying their requests for alterations to the liturgy and dogma of the Church. Why, one might wonder, do they not just accept that

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60 [Matthew Tindal], *A letter to the reverend the clergy of both universities concerning the Trinity and the Athanasian Creed*, 32.
61 Ibid., 14.
when used with reference to the Trinity the word 'person' does not mean what it usually does? The answer given is that the doctrine of the Trinity is a remnant of priestcraft and Popery. The Unitarians, the author of *A discourse concerning the nominal and real Trinitarians* writes, in seeking to explode the doctrine of the Trinity 'have endeavoured to perfect that Reformation; that was so happily begun by Dr. M. Luther, Mr. J. Calvin, and here (in England) by Archbishop Cranmer'. The nominal Trinitarians, according to the author of *Considerations upon the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity*, have applied the same Reformation thinking to the doctrine of the Trinity as Unitarians, and have come to the same conclusions. The nominal Trinitarians have hidden their beliefs in order to preserve their positions within the Church. The author writes that 'if all Awes and Bribes were removed; the Nominal Trinitarians would forthwith profess, to believe as we do. And in the mean time, though they dare not say it; unless it be here and there an heroical Dr. S[ou]th: they reckon as much as we do; that all the Real Trinitarians are Tritheists and Pagans'. It is argued that, though the 'Doctrine of the Church, meaning by the Church the Nominal Trinitarians, is sound', the continued use of old words is 'very Dangerous'. The words are without scriptural authority and because of them 'the Vulgar have such a conception of the Trinity, as is certain Tritheism'.

After the publication of the third volume of Unitarian tracts efforts were made to halt the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1695 Joseph Bingham, a fellow of University College, Oxford, preached a sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity which was thought to defend Sherlock's opinions. The Heads of Colleges were so alarmed by this that the hebdomadal council condemned Sherlock's system as false and impious. It forbade all members of the university to affirm it by preaching or otherwise. In 1696 William III, following the advice of Thomas Tenison, Tillotson's successor as Archbishop of Canterbury, issued *Directions to the archbishops and bishops, for the preserving of unity in the church and the support of the Christian faith concerning the holy Trinity*. These directions ordered that 'no preacher whatsoever, in his sermon or lecture, should presume to deliver any other Doctrine concerning the Blessed Trinity than what is contained in the Holy Scriptures' and is agreeable to the creeds and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church. In any 'explications of this doctrine' it was laid down,

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63 [Stephen Nye], *Considerations on the explications of the doctrine of the Trinity*, 67.
64 Anon., *A discourse concerning the nominal and real Trinitarians*, 39.
preachers ‘should carefully avoid all new terms, and confine themselves to such ways of explication as have been commonly used in the Church’.

Then, in 1697, Parliament followed advice from the Bishops and passed An Act for the more effectual suppressing of blasphemy and profaneness. This made it illegal for anyone who had professed Christianity to deny ‘any one of the persons in the Holy Trinity to be God’ or to assert that ‘there are more Gods than one’ whether by ‘Writing, Printing, Teaching, or Advised Speaking’. A first time offender was to be disqualified from office; a second offence carried a penalty of three years imprisonment. There was a falling off in the Unitarian debate about this time, though to what extent it was caused by these measures is not clear. Burnet, in his History, ascribes the change to a combination of the measures taken by the King and the death of Thomas Firmin. He writes that the ‘Injunctions . . . put a stop to those Debates as Mr. Firmin’s Death put a stop to the printing and spreading of Socinian Books’.

Firmin’s death would undoubtedly have hindered the dissemination of Unitarianism. However, a change had occurred in the Unitarian position before Firmin died. In 1697 there was published a work entitled, The agreement of the Unitarians with the catholick Church. This work, attributed to Nye, not only argued that there was no difference in point of substance between Unitarians and nominal Trinitarians, it claims that the linguistic difference is unimportant. The author boldly declares, ‘we accord with the Catholick Church, in the Article of the Trinity; so also in that of the Incarnation, or the Divinity of our Saviour’. The differences which had occurred were due, it is argued, to confusion within the Anglican church. These were resolved by ‘the Sagacity and Dexterity of English Unitarians’. Their clear perception led to the Church being divided into nominal and real Trinitarians. Following this division the nominal doctrine was approved and the real, in particular Sherlock’s doctrine, was ‘directly censured and condemned’.

In the accounts of Firmin’s life and religion which appeared after his death the writers, apparently Unitarian, recount the Unitarian controversy as something which had been concluded. The author of The life of Mr. Thomas Firmin relates that following Tillotson’s death, in 1694, ‘the Controversie concerning the Trinity and the depending Questions, received an unexpected Turn’. The

68 Gilbert Burnet, Bishop Burnet’s history of his own time. vol. ii, 214.
69 [Stephen Nye], The agreement of the Unitarians with the catholick church (London, 1697), 19.
70 Anon., The life of Mr. Thomas Firmin, 17.
author tells of the division that the Unitarians discovered among the Trinitarians. All they ever meant to oppose, he writes, was ‘a Trinity of (infinite) Minds or Spirits’. Once it became apparent that the bulk of the Church opposed this as fully as they did they decided to drop their protests. The author writes that when they saw plainly ‘that the difference between the Church and the Unitarians had arose [sic] from a meer mistake of one another’s meaning: ... They resolved, that it behave them, as good Christians, to seek the Peace of the Catholick Church, and not to litigate about Terms’. 71 The author of An account of Mr. Firmin’s religion and of the present state of the Unitarian controversy writes that ‘There is now no Socinian Controversy’. The ‘misunderstanding’, he tells us, that was ‘common to both parties’ has been ‘annihilated’. 72 The beginning of the controversy is positioned by this author in the efforts made to bring about comprehension after the Glorious Revolution. At that time, he tells the reader, even the learned men who were searching for some ‘degree of accord’ between the Church and the Dissenters supposed that Unitarianism was ‘a departure from the Christian Doctrine, so far and in so many points, that no Coalition, in Communion, much less in Doctrine, might ever be hoped’. However, as the Unitarians were ingenuous and of free mind, ‘after 8 or 9 years late conflict with the principal Divines of this Nation . . . they seem to have accommodated’ the differences between them and the Church.73 The author of The grounds and occasions of the controversy concerning the unity of God, who claims to be a clergyman of the Church of England, also believes that the controversy is over. He considers an argument that since the Unitarians at first withdrew from the Church they should not now be allowed to be members of it. He answers:

The Unitarians now living being lately satisfied that the Majority of the Doctors of the Church, do not mean by their Scholastic Terms still retain’d, any such Tritheism as is plain Tritheism, but such a Nominal Trinity as the Bishop of Sarum and Dr S lou[th] have explain’d ... and having therefore publickly profess’d their Agreement with the Church of England on this and other disputed Articles, I ought not in reason but to look upon them as sound and orthodox Members of the Church of England.74

Unitarianism then, in this phase, would appear to have been absorbed into the Anglican Church. Such an end to the debate lends weight to the interpretation of the Unitarian movement that is

71 Ibid., 19.
72 Anon., An account of Mr. Firmin’s religion and of the present state of the Unitarian controversy (London, 1698), 48.
73 Ibid., 5.
74 Anon., The grounds and occasions of the controversy concerning the unity of God (London, 1698), 21–2.
most consistently presented in the tracts, that of a body seeking to reform Anglicanism from within. However, it ought not to conceal that, even within the first phase of Unitarianism there were those, such as Hedworth, who were fully prepared to separate from Anglicanism and who might, had not the attitude towards religious comprehension and toleration altered with the change of monarchs, have directed Unitarianism down a separatist path from its beginning.