The modern, scientific and comparative study of religion as a cross-cultural phenomenon has its origins in the Enlightenment period. As intellectuals in the West simultaneously became increasingly familiar with other religious cultures and made Reason the measure by which the 'truth' of every religion was to be judged, they formulated pan-cultural notions of what constituted 'true' or reasonable religion, based not on their experience of those religions but on the representation of them in travel literature which was steeped with prevailing, Western and gendered, notions of the non-Western Other.

Historians who have documented the intellectual development of this representation of religion, as it began with the deists, continued with the encyclopedists, philosophers such as Hume, and a variety of anthropologists, mention only men in their histories. This is hardly an unusual story in intellectual history, where so often the ideas of one great man are seen to flow naturally towards the ideas of the next great man, but it leaves feminist scholarship with a question: did women make any contribution towards the ways in which 'religion' was

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1 See for example, Peter Harrison, 'Religion' and the religions of the English enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter Byrne, Natural religion and the nature of religion (London: Routledge, 1989) and David A. Pailin, Attitudes to other religions: comparative religion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Indeed it might be claimed that women seem to have made few contributions to modern philosophy of religion as it has developed from the early Enlightenment to the present; and only quite recently have scholars turned their attention to the writing of explicitly feminist philosophies of religion. See, for example, the forthcoming work of Grace Jantzen and Sarah Coakley.
conceptualized in philosophical and scientific terms in the Enlightenment period? Or, to ask two humbler questions: were eighteenth-century women influenced by new philosophical ideas about the ‘nature’ of religion, and if so, how did those ideas affect how they experienced and represented religious practices and ideas?

It is not, perhaps, surprising that women are apparently absent from this debate. Male philosophers of the Enlightenment frequently represented both ‘woman’ and certain religious ideas as irrational in an intellectual climate in which Reason was becoming central. At first glance, there seems, then, to be no place for women as participants in the philosophical debate, and no place for a positive notion of the ‘female’ or ‘feminine’ in the representation of ‘true,’ that is rational, religion. Londa Schiebinger has documented the hitherto forgotten contributions of women to many of the scientific and philosophical debates of this period, but she has also shown that the Enlightenment sowed the seeds of women’s exclusion from such debates, as notions of ‘sexual difference’ were sought in biological ‘evidence’ and then used to argue for and explain woman’s inability to engage in scientific and philosophical endeavours.

There were, of course, educated English women of the early Enlightenment period who wrote on theology and philosophy — for example, Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish, Catherine Cockburn Trotter, Mary Astell and Damaris Masham all wrote philosophical and theological treatises, often in response to male thinkers such as Descartes (Conway) and Locke (Masham) — but they seem not to have engaged with the ideas of the deists about the ‘nature’ of religion. These women — Conway, Astell, Masham, Trotter — present us with apparently obvious sources in that they wrote intellectual treatises. Yet, in thinking about, and indeed discovering, the place of women in intellectual history generally, and the intellectual history of religion and theology in particular, we may have to look at a rather wider variety of sources than that usually explored by intellectual historians. Women may have

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2 I follow the recent work of scholars such as Peter Harrison, Justin Champion and others who see the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment occurring in England quite early on — the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. This article will, for the most part, discuss only English sources.


5 For brief accounts of such women, see Schiebinger, *The mind has no sex?* and David F. Noble, *A world without women; the Christian clerical culture of Western science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
written about the new philosophies of religion and about the 'nature' of religion in the prevailing terms of the day, but in texts outside the canon traditionally studied by intellectual historians of the Enlightenment. They may have written about these subjects with great seriousness and insight — but in letters, diaries, and even poetry, novels and plays. It is to such sources that we might look in assessing whether and how any educated woman contributed to Enlightenment philosophies of religion: the Embassy letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu present a potentially fruitful source.

In 1716 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu travelled through Europe to Turkey, where she was to live for two years. She was accompanying her husband, Edward, who was appointed Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Turkey, and whose task it was to mediate between the Turks and Austrians to prevent them going to war (Turkey had been at war with the Venetian Republic since 1714, and Austria was bound by a treaty to come to Venice's assistance). Lady Mary wrote a series of letters about her travels, and residence in Constantinople, rich with descriptions of the cultures she encountered. She frequently discussed religion in these letters, the Roman Catholicism and Protestantism she encountered in different parts of Western and Central Europe, and Islam as she encountered it in Turkey.

Lady Mary presents us with a particularly interesting case in relation to her male counterparts for she actually travelled to Turkey, experienced and engaged with Islam. By contrast, the male philosophers of religion, such as the deists, constructed their philosophies of religion from accounts of other religious cultures which they read from the safety and comfort of their armchairs. Lady Mary's Embassy Letters, based on her first-hand observations and experiences of Moslem culture, therefore bring extra texture to questions about Enlightenment discussions of the 'nature' of religion. This becomes particularly interesting in the light of recent discussions of the Western bias of the comparative study of religion and its Enlightenment origins, and the 'Orientalist' frame of Western scholarship about Islam and the Middle East, as discussed most famously in Edward Said's Orientalism. In recent scholarship, then, the 'Orientalist' representation of non-western religions in Enlightenment philosophy of religion and the comparative study of religion have

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4 The status of these letters, including when they were written, will be discussed later in this article.

7 Edward W. Said, Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient (Penguin, 1995 (1978)). Said describes Orientalism 'as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'; he continues, 'without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period' (3).
been discussed by scholars such as Talal Asad, though without reference to gender,\(^8\) while Lady Mary’s Embassy Letters have been read in the light of Said’s work by literary critics, especially feminist critics, who have examined her ‘Orientalist’ representation of Turkish culture, though without reference to religion.\(^9\) But Lady Mary’s Embassy Letters provide an interesting point of intersection for these various questions about the representation of religion in Enlightenment thought, the Western framework of that thought and the place of gender in the history of that thought. This intersection is what makes the Embassy Letters so potentially interesting for a study of the representation and experience of gender and religion in the context of English Enlightenment ideas.

This article will examine the ways in which Lady Mary’s perspectives on other cultures, in particular her observations about other religious cultures, reflect and develop the terms of an intellectual development back in England — namely, the formulation of a pan-cultural philosophy of religion, particularly in the work of the deists. By looking at both the deist debates about natural religion and other religions, such as Islam, and Lady Mary’s use of the terms of this debate to understand the other cultures into which she came into contact, this article will explore how Lady Mary inscribes herself into that debate; by looking at her particular subject-position as a gendered viewer/interpreter, it will assess where and how she deviates from the terms of that debate. The article will then consider whether Lady Mary’s Letters from this period might be seen as a contribution to the early development of the philosophy of religion in Britain, and therefore ask how we might see Lady Mary herself as a significant figure in the early comparative study of religion.

**Shifting Attitudes Towards the Orient in the English Enlightenment**

Attitudes towards Islam had changed in England by the early eighteenth century, but not necessarily because there was more literature about the East; in the Elizabethan age of exploration and travel there had already been a profusion of such literature. Rather, two things occurred. First, the defeat of the Turks at Vienna in 1683 ensured that the Ottoman Empire in particular, and the rest of Islamic culture in general, came to be seen as less of a threat

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to Europe. Once this happened, the West could begin to 'Orientalize' the East, colonizing it, at least linguistically and rhetorically.

In the Middle Ages and on into the sixteenth century, Islam was seen as a heresy which had to be combated, not least because the Ottoman Empire represented a very real military threat to the West. For example, there were many fantastic stories of Mohammed's life, full of lurid details, which painted him as an impostor and heretic. This attitude of blatant intolerance of Islam continued into the last decades of the seventeenth century, affecting the ways in which Western intellectuals represented Moslem culture. For example, in 1649, the Koran was translated into French and English; the English translation was anonymous, but was attributed to one Alexander Ross, who, in his introduction to the text, compared the happy state of Christians with the horrible condition of Moslems, and explained that God permitted Islam to continue as 'a whip at hand to correct us'. Launcelot Addison in his First state of Muhametism, or an Account of the author and doctrine of that imposture, published in 1678, claimed that the book would let the readers 'know what manner of person Muhammad was, of whose Cursed Doctrine the greatest part of Mankind is at this very day so egregiously fooled'.

A book which was to become a standard work of reference was Humphrey Prideaux's The true nature of imposture fully display'd in the life of Mahomet. Although this work, published in 1697, argued and reasserted this intolerant line, it did so for a new reason. And that new reason is the second thing which contributed to the shift in attitudes towards Islam — namely, a new set of questions about religion, prompted primarily by the insights of the New Philosophy.

Prideaux was writing against the deists. He felt it was necessary to reassert to them that Christianity was not the imposture: Islam was. The deists sought to offer a new, naturalistic explanation of the variety of strange religious customs and practices which had been communicated to the West in travel literature since the 'discovery' of the New World and the East. They saw Man as essentially a rational being, and they wanted to understand the

11 For attitudes towards Islam in the second half of the seventeenth century, see N.I. Matar, 'Islam in Interregnum and Restoration England', The Seventeenth Century, vi, no. 1, Spring 1991. Matar sees this period as one in which English Christians were genuinely influenced by Islam once they had read the Koran. His evidence for this seems, to me, to be both scant and stretched, though I do not deny that the translation of the Koran into English had a considerable impact.
13 Ibid., 32.
rational foundations of religion. They sought a common denominator in all religions, a natural religious impulse, common to all places at all times. In doing this, they thus began to compare the belief systems and practices of different religions and laid the foundations for the modern comparative study of religion.  

After centuries of seeing Mohammed as the impostor, how did the deists see Islam and the Orient anew? For the most part, Islam — and other religions — were seen as just like Christianity, not least because they were monotheistic. Arthur Bury, Rector of Exeter College, Oxford, asserted that monotheism made Christianity like Islam. This common element was more important than any points of disagreement between the two faiths. Islam was to be tolerated because it was really the same as Christianity, which remained the norm, the standard against which all Others were to be measured. This is very clearly indicated in the work of the radical deist, John Toland. In Nazarenus, published in 1718, Toland maintained that since the Moslems revered the Gospel it was thus proper to speak of ‘Jewish, Gentile and Mahometan Christianity’. And in an earlier work, the Letters to Serena of 1704, Toland had written, ‘I see no reason a Christian shou’d fear to read the Alcoran [the Koran]; which is as true of all the Books in the world’. Other religions — past and present — were examined for the ways in which they really expressed the Christian message: Matthew Tindal, in a work published in 1730, Christianity as old as the Creation, or the Gospel a republication of the religion of nature, but expressing ideas which had been circulating amongst the deists for some time, maintained that the religion of nature was the common element of all creeds. He assumed that Christianity was the only true and perfect religion, and because it was that, it must have been created for all mankind from the beginning. The name ‘Christianity’ was of more recent origin, but the essentials of the Christian religion had existed in all times and places. In short, for many of the deists, other religious messages were seen as the same as, or ‘really’ Christianity, but the Christian message — or, we might say, what was represented as the Christian message by the deists — remained the most perfect version of the religious truth. This way of understanding the Other seems to exemplify one of Edward Said’s key definitions of the mentality of Orientalism:

Something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another, a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as

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14 For the detailed history of this development, see Harrison, ‘Religion’ and the religions in the English Enlightenment.
17 John Toland, Letters to Serena (London, 1704), 15.
completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things.  

But there were limits to what the deists could make familiar, and they wrote their philosophies of religion accordingly. In particular they took on the prevailing anti-Roman Catholicism of the time, as well as the fear of personal revelation and enthusiasm which haunted the English after the religious chaos or pluralism (depending on one's point of view) of the civil war period, and the resulting emergence of radical religious sects. Papists were seen by all rationalists — and latitudinarians — as embodying the worst of superstition and credulity. For the deists, Popery was the quintessence of corrupted religion. Some claimed that virtuous and rational pagans and Moslems could more properly be termed Christians than could Papists, for such rational men of other creeds more accurately reflected the true message of pure Christianity. Many of the deists thus came to believe that in all societies there were two sorts of religious cultures: the rational (monotheistic) for the elite, and the enthusiastic and superstitious (often polytheistic) for the people. Just as rational Islam was really 'just like' rational Christianity, so all superstition was the same wherever and when it cropped up. As John Toland wrote, 'it appears that in all Ages superstition is actually the same, however the Names of it may vary'.

The deists accordingly wrote histories of religion, and philosophical tracts about their own times, which divided the world (and its religious cultures) into two categories. As Frank Manuel writes of the deists: 'There were two religions in every society, one for the men of reason, and one for the fanatics, one for those who comprehended the marvellous order of the world and one for those who relied on gods for every event, the ignorant men full of terrors which they allayed with ludicrous rituals'. John Toland in *Pantheisticon* (1720) wrote of those ignorant and polytheistic masses: 'We shall be in safety if we separate ourselves from the Multitude; for the Multitude is a Proof of what is worst' and in *Letters to Serena*, he wrote of 'the contagion of the consenting Multitude'.

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19 Matthew Tindal, who had once been Roman Catholic, was particularly preoccupied with the evils of popery, especially clericalism.
'Irrational' religion was thus represented in terms of social status, and it was potentially contagious. It was also both explicitly and implicitly gendered, for the emotional components of enthusiasm and superstition made women particularly susceptible to such religion; women were thought to be more prone than men to religious folly. John Toland wrote of the transmission of superstition via women: Ignorant Women of the meanest Vulgar, ... infuse into us their Errors with their milk, frightening us into quiet with the menaces of Rawhead, Bloody-Bones and Bullbeggars. ... From our Nurses we are brought home, where we are still put into worse hands among idle and ignorant servants, whose chiefest Entertainments are Discourses of Fairys, Elves, Witchcrafts, Walking Ghosts, Fortune-telling, consulting Astrologers, or some such chimecial doings.24

(Of course, women were particularly prominent in religious groups dubbed 'emotional' because, as such groups often appealed to personal revelation, uneducated women could take part, and were often given roles as prophets and teachers, until the quest for respectability led such groups to give up such irregularities.) Similarly, when the deists wrote of the Roman Catholic priests leading the masses astray with their superstitious beliefs and rites, foolish and uneducated women were seen as particularly vulnerable to the machinations of such papists.

Lady Mary and Deism
As noted earlier, Lady Mary's Embassy Letters have been read by several literary critics in the light of Said’s work on Orientalism, but these critics have paid little attention to the intellectual culture of Orientalism in Enlightenment England. Rather, they have been interested in taking Said’s definitions of Orientalism and spotting them at play in certain literary texts in which the author engaged with the so-called ‘Orient’. But it is important for an historian to locate Said’s definition of Orientalism — of making the other familiar — in a set of particular texts and ideas, as it emerged in late seventeenth- and early-eighteenth century England. It seems clear that this notion of Orientalism was at play and was developed in particular by the deists in their philosophies of religion. In exploring Lady Mary’s engagement with the ‘Orient’, it is therefore important to place her in that specific intellectual context. How did Lady Mary use this deist philosophy, with its logic of making the Other familiar and its two-tiered system for categorising religions, to understand the strange lands and customs about which she wrote?

24 Toland, Letters to Serena, 4–5.
Lady Mary was a particularly learned woman. She knew Latin and Greek and was familiar with English literature; she was a periodical essayist; and her Court poems (Town ecologues) were published in 1716. Most importantly, perhaps, she lived a publicly social life in learned circles, and she believed that women should be educated. In these circles she came to know and, at least conversationally, engage in the major debates of the day. She was clearly familiar with the debates of the deists: her letters are peppered with references to famous deists and rationalist divines of the day, including John Toland and William Whiston. She explicitly employed their discourse in her understanding of, and writings about, religion. She writes of her stay in Belgrade with a Moslem scholar, an 'effendi': "the most prevailing opinion, if you search into the secret of the effendis, is plain deism. ... Sir Paul Rycaut [a popular travel writer of that period] is mistaken (as he commonly is) in calling the sect muterin atheists, they being deists'.

In speaking of Turkish poetry, she claims it is just like (Christian) scripture, much as the male deists might have, thus making the unfamiliar familiar: "they have what they call the sublime, that is, a style proper for poetry, and which is the exact Scripture style'. And she goes on to quote some Turkish verses which she considers to be 'most wonderfully resembling the Song of Solomon'.

In her discussions of both Islam and the varieties of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism which she encountered in different parts of Europe on her way to Turkey she expresses, wholesale, that split between the rational elite and the enthusiastic masses which is such a hallmark of deist writings of this period.

Mahometism is divided into as many sects as Christianity; and the first institution as much neglected and obscured by interpretations. I cannot here forbear reflecting on the natural inclination of mankind to make mysteries and novelties. — The Zeidi, Kudi, Jabari, &c., put me in mind of the Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist, &c. and are equally zealous against one another. But the most prevailing opinion, if you search into the secrets of the effendis, is plain deism. But this is kept from the people, who are amused with a thousand different notions according to the different interests of their preachers. [my italics]

In Vienna, on her way to Constantinople, Lady Mary had written: 'I might easily pick up wonders in every town I pass through, or tell you a long series of popish miracles; but I cannot fancy there is anything new in letting you know that priests can lie, and the

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25 The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, ed. Lord Wharncliffe (London: 1887) [hereafter referred to as MMW, L & W], 289. The deists used Rycaut's travel writings to formulate their philosophies. For example, Anthony Collins drew extensively on Rycaut's work on the Ottoman Empire in his writing about superstition in religion, especially miracles, in his A discourse on free-thinking (1713).
26 MMW, L & W, 304.
27 Ibid., 289.
mob believe, all over the world'. Lady Mary also expresses the prevalent anti-papist notions of her own society. Writing of a visit to a nunnery in Vienna, in October 1716, she writes of 'the only beautiful young woman' of Vienna whom she finds there:

I have been several times to see her; but it gives me too much melancholy to see so agreeable a young creature buried alive, ... and I never in my life had so little charity for the Roman-catholic religion, as since I see the misery it occasions; so many poor unhappy women! and the gross superstition of the common people, who are, some or other of them, day and night offering bits of candle to the wooden figures that are set up almost in every street.

This notion of priests filling the people with nonsense (and the people believing it because they are stupid or ignorant) is a common theme in her letters, just as it is a common theme in the male deists' writings. And it is surely worth note that she writes here of the women and common people who have fallen for the Roman Catholicism. From Belgrade, she wrote of the Rascians: 'They have a Patriarch of their own at Grand Cairo, and are really of the Greek Church; but their extreme ignorance gives their priests occasion to impose several new notions upon them'.

For Lady Mary, as for the male deists, the elite, learned Moslems belong alongside the rational Christians, for they share what is deemed, in Western terms, a common attitude towards religion — maybe, even, a common basic religion. She writes:

the Turks are not so ignorant as we fancy them to be ... The effendis (that is to say, the learned) do very well deserve this name : they have no more faith in the inspiration of Mahomet than in the infallibility of the Pope. They make a frank profession of deism among themselves, or to those they can trust.

Lady Mary extends this particular Orientalizing perspective, of making the Other familiar, in looking at things other than religion, as with a general comment such as this: 'Thus you see, dear sister, the manners of mankind do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe'. Visiting Kiyaya's lady, Fatima, in her harem, she remarks of her: 'I am persuaded, could she suddenly be transformed upon the most polite throne of Europe, nobody would think her other than born and bred to be a queen, though educated in a country we call barbarous'. Here, she simultaneously puts into question the notion of the Turks as barbarous and retains the European standard of what is civilized or polite.

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28 MMW, L & W, 264.
29 Ibid., 250–1.
30 Ibid., 277.
31 Ibid., 372.
32 In a letter to her sister from Adrianople, 1 April, 1717, MMW, L & W, 300.
33 MMW, L & W, 318.
Later, when Lady Mary meets the same Fatima, she declares that she is so beautiful, she must be Christian, and that there is a rumour to that effect about her background. Remarking on the procession of women at the presentation of a young bride, she writes: 'the Turkish ladies have at least as much wit and civility, nay liberty, as ladies among us ... 'Tis not easy to represent to you the beauty of this sight, most of them being well proportioned and white skinned' [my italics]. And in her famous, or infamous, description of the women in the baths, she compares these white skinned beauties to both Eve and Greek goddesses — that is, to some of the icons of Western female beauty.

The first sofas were covered with cushions and rich carpets on which sat the ladies; and on the second, their slaves behind them, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, plain English, stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed. Yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. They walked and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes of our general mother. There were many amongst them as exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, — and most of their skins shinningly white ... perfectly representing the Graces. [my italics]

Lady Mary carries the deist two-tiered system to its logical conclusions, in this realm of race and beauty. The white-skinned Turkish women may be 'just like us' (even if they are comfortable being naked together, unlike English women), but there were those who could not be made to fit into European standards of beauty and Lady Mary speaks of those with the same abhorrence she felt for the superstitious, nonsense-believing masses. The black women she saw in Tunis were so different that they seemed animal-like to her.

Their posture in sitting, the colour of their skin, their lank black hair falling on each side of their faces, their features, and the shape of their limbs, differ so little from their own country people the baboons, 'tis hard to fancy them a distinct race; and I could not help thinking there had been some ancient alliances between them.

The mulattoes she encountered were 'the most frightful creatures that can appear in a human figure'. Indeed, race mixing seems to have been particularly loathsome to Lady Mary who, throughout her letters, writes about national characteristics, suggesting that she held a belief, almost, in a certain kind of national 'purity'; phrases like 'the Turkish women', 'the Viennese women' abound. These black and mulatto women were so very

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34 MMW, L & W, 362.
36 Ibid., 384.
37 Ibid., 383.
much Other to Lady Mary that she could not incorporate them into her cultural system in any way, so that their specific cultural practices became unintelligible and upsetting to her: 'the women have their arms, to their very shoulders, and their necks and faces, adorned with flowers, stars and various sorts of figures impressed by gunpowder: a considerable addition to their natural deformity'.

Is Lady Mary's Use of the Deist Perspective Gendered?

What, then, is the significance of Lady Mary's use of these deist categories? Her letters indicate the ways in which someone in the field, so to speak, might employ the theoretical and representational categories being developed in his or her intellectual circles back home; and, as noted, this use of such categories 'in the field' stood in direct contrast with the philosophers of religion, deists such as Toland, most of whom had not visited the cultures they wrote and theorized about. Furthermore, because all of these armchair philosophers were men, the question of Lady Mary's gendered position, as the user of such categories, is raised. The male philosophers back home were writing in a culture in which rational observers were masculine, well-educated and gentlemanly.

Lady Mary's position is interesting then, because in these Embassy Letters she takes up the position of the rational observer of the Other, as it was defined in her culture. This subject position was not one she would have been automatically ascribed in her own society, for it was gendered as 'masculine', though, undoubtedly, educated women such as Conway, Astell and Masham deliberately assumed forms of rational subjectivity in their writings. By taking up the perspective of the (all male) group of deists, Lady Mary inscribed herself into a debate in which she would not necessarily have been either automatically or formally engaged when at home, except as the exception. (It is worth note that Lady Mary did not feel able to publish anything that she wrote under her own name in her lifetime.) Here she assumed a subjectivity which was that of the rational, scientific (as it was then understood) viewer, and when women did this it was on the terms that they were the educated and elite exceptional woman.

Toland's representation of the educated woman in his writings, especially in the Letters to Serena, is worth note here. In the Preface to his Letters, addressed to a gentleman who, because of his prejudice, could not believe that Serena was a real person, Toland argued for the education of ladies:

38 MMW, L & W, 383.
39 Steven Shapin presents the idea of the gentleman rational observer as the primary (believable) figure in the foundations of modern science and philosophy. See his A social history of Truth: civility and science in seventeenth-century England (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
I won’t repeat what I demonstrated to you (for I thought it worth the Pains) about the purity of the intellectual Organs in both sexes, and that what puts ’em both on the same foot in Discourse of ordinary Business (which is deny’d by no body) makes ’em equally capable of all Improvements, had they but equally the same Advantages of Education, Travel, Company and the Management of Affairs.

He notes the exceptional educated woman such as the case of Catherine Cockburn Trotter, ‘absolute Mistriss of the most abstracted Speculations in Metaphysics’ and contrasts such an educated woman with the vast majority of women.

If I had the making of a Woman according to my own Fancy, she sh’d be quite another thing from those vain, giddy, affected, prattling and giddy things, who are as cheap as they are common and who, as nothing but Outside themselves, value nothing but Outside in others; being strangers to all good Qualities, void of solid vertue and true Merit; fit only for an hour’s Diversion or Amuzement, but not for the Principal Delight and Indissoluble Society of Life. 40

In this sense, then, Lady Mary was able to take up the subject-position of male, rational observer precisely because she was the exceptional woman, and it is not surprising that she represented women, in her writings, in exactly the same terms as her male (deist) counterparts, dividing them into acceptable, ‘white-skinned’ Turks, and the unacceptable ‘mulattoes’ just as Toland divided women into acceptable ladies worthy of education and the unacceptable ‘giddy, affected, prattling, and gawdy things’.

So did Lady Mary’s gender cause her to see different things — and things differently — from a male, rational observer? Where is the ‘slippage’ in a woman taking up a subject-position which is constructed as masculine? Where do the areas of negotiation arise, in how she perceived the Other/the Orient, and are these areas of negotiation related to her gender? And did she, therefore, develop this philosophy of religion, based on difference as sameness, in different ways?

As demonstrated above, it is in terms of beauty and race that Lady Mary’s perspective, of tolerating or ‘understanding’ the Other by making it familiar, breaks down when there is too much Otherness, as it does with the deists in their philosophical schemes of natural religion. On the other hand, when she is writing about women whom she can incorporate into her system, namely, the rich, fair skinned women of Turkey, and their cultural practices, we find the area in which she was able to stop embracing/appropriating the Other as familiar and see differences genuinely as differences. Frequently, this led her to take those differences into her own life (as different cultural practices) because she saw how beneficial they could be to her — often because she saw how

40 Toland, Letters to Serena, 10, 12, 21.
they enabled her to escape some of the confining prescriptions of her own culture about how a woman should behave and be. For example, after the birth of her daughter Mary in February 1718, she remarks on the freedom of the childbirth process in Turkey, and notes that she shortened her lying-in period after the birth, in accordance with Turkish customs. She writes of this:

I was brought to bed of a daughter five weeks ago. I don't mention this as one of my diverting adventures; though I own that it is not half so mortifying here as in England, being as much difference as there is between a little cold in the head, which sometimes happens here, and the consumptive coughs, so common in London. Nobody keeps to their house a month for lying in; and I am not so fond of any of our customs to retain them when they are not necessary. I returned my visits at three weeks' end. [my italics]41

Similarly, she took on the Turkish practice of inoculation on seeing its practical value, and consequently had her son, Edward, inoculated against smallpox. 42 She took on the custom of wearing the veil, on realizing that it gave her freedom to travel around. A common theme of her letters is the freedom Turkish women really have (though her implicit suggestion here that the veil can be used as a way of protecting ones identity and thereby committing adultery suggests, perhaps, a rather superficial understanding of that aspect of Islamic culture):

Now I am a little acquainted with their ways, I cannot forbear admiring the exemplary discretion or extreme stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of them. 'Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have. No woman, of what rank soever, being permitted to go into the streets without two muslin's; one that covers her face all but her eyes, and another that hides the whole dress of her head ... You may guess how effectually this disguises them, [so] that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave. 'Tis impossible for the jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her; and no man may dare either touch or follow a woman in the street. 43

She frequently argues that Western male accounts of female Turkish life (as confined and far worse than the lives of English women) have been utterly wrong, because those men have had no access to Turkish women, in Islamic societies the sexes being very separated.44 She therefore took advantage of her position as a

41 MMW, L & W, 342-3.
42 MMW, L & W, 352. On her return home, she contributed to the public debate on smallpox inoculation by writing an essay for a newspaper, in 1722, in the guise of a Turkish merchant, passionately defending inoculation and attacking the physicians who were against it.
43 MMW, L & W, 298-9.
44 In the last few decades, feminist anthropologists have found similar absences and mistakes in anthropological work by men, because men have not had access to the lives of women in the cultures they have been studying. For a summary of this research, see Henrietta L. Moore, Feminism and anthropology (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), especially, 1–8.
woman who had access to Turkish female domains to give what she claimed and hoped would be a more accurate account of Turkish women's lives and customs. After writing at length about the inside of the women's home — the harem — she comments:

You will perhaps be surprised at an account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common voyage-writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don't know. It must be under a very particular character, or on some extraordinary occasion, when a Christian is admitted into a house of a man of quality; and their harems are always forbidden ground. Thus they can only speak of the outside, which makes no great appearance; and the women's apartments are all built backward, removed from sight, and have no other prospect than the gardens, which are inclosed with very high walls.\textsuperscript{45}

In writing about religion, her concern with the position of women in Islamic theology — and with correcting the incorrect notions of writers such as Rycaut — allowed her to abandon the deist perspective, and talk about Islam on its own terms:

When I spoke of their religion, I forgot to mention two particularities, one of which I read of, but it seemed so odd to me, I could not believe it; yet 'tis certainly true: that when a man had divorced his wife in the most solemn manner, he can take her again upon no other terms than permitting another man to pass the night with her; ... The other point of doctrine is very extraordinary. Any woman that dies unmarried is looked upon to die in a state of reprobation. To confirm this belief, they reason, that the end of the creation of women is to increase and multiply.... Our vulgar notion, that they do not own women to have any souls is a mistake. 'Tis true, they say they are not of so elevated a kind, and therefore must not hope to be admitted into the paradise appointed for the men, who are to be entertained by celestial beauties. But there is a place of happiness destined for souls of the inferior order, where all good women are to be in eternal bliss.\textsuperscript{46}

Lady Mary assumed the position of 'objective' narrator when she corrected such misconceptions about women and she was thus able to provide more reliable information about eighteenth-century Ottoman culture. She was also able to see (at least some) women and their place in Islam, in a way that the male deists could not.

\textit{Lady Mary's Letters and their Place in Intellectual History and the Philosophy of Religion}

Lady Mary's Embassy Letters are generally read as fascinating literary pieces about Ottoman culture at that time.\textsuperscript{47} Occasionally they are read by historians as useful documents about that culture, but literary critics have generally dashed historians' hopes of extracting too much information or evidence from them by

\textsuperscript{45} MMW, \textit{L & W}, 313.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 329.
\textsuperscript{47} Many critics also ignore the 1716 letters from Europe, focusing on the rather more 'exotic' letters from Turkey. For example, Lisa Lowe does this.
pointing out their semi-fictional status. While Lady Mary did indeed write and send letters to her friends and acquaintances during her travels in Europe and Turkey (that is, from 1716 to 1718), very few of those letters (probably only five) actually survive. The letters we know as the Embassy Letters were actually written after Lady Mary's return to England, from notes she kept in her diary while in Europe and Turkey (the diary was later destroyed by her daughter). She addressed them to the people who had been her actual correspondents and dated them in a roughly accurate manner. She clearly intended them to be published, though they were not published until after her death. This has led many critics to describe the letters as 'partially fiction' and sometimes to compare them with the then developing genre of the Oriental tale (Arabian Nights was translated into English in the early eighteenth century, Montesquieu's Persian Letters in 1714, while Johnson's Rasselas came out in 1759). The description of the baths has caused particular consternation in this respect. Bryon Porter Smith, writing (in the 1930s) says, 'Lady Mary sometimes lets her imagination run away with her, as when she tells of visiting a Turkish bath and seeing two hundred naked women there'. He goes on to argue that maybe 'Lady Mary's pleasure in telling a good story was greater than her respect for the naked truth'. [my italics].

My purpose here is not to argue for the truth, or not, of Lady Mary's descriptions of the baths or anything else. Rather, I want to see the Embassy Letters as evidence of the influence of some particular ideas, those of the deists, on a woman; and as evidence of a traveller reflecting the intellectual shifts of her own English culture towards the so-called 'East', in the employment of those categories of analysis and representation which marked those intellectual shifts, as she observed and experienced those cultures which were strange to her. Lady Mary's position as a gendered viewer, a female deist, suggests that her Embassy Letters have something to contribute to the history of early eighteenth-century philosophies of religion which the works of the male deists 'back home' do not. By her simultaneous engagement both with the Ottoman culture at first hand and with male travellers' accounts of Islamic societies, she is able to go beyond the two-tiered orientalising system of the deists, at least with regard to some aspects of Ottoman culture, and see some things as having value and worth because they are different, a perspective on the Orient which was not common at the time in her own culture. As the wife of the English ambassador, she had access to many situations

49 Ibid., 259.
closed to other travel writers; as a woman she had access to many private and all-female public spaces which were closed to men; as an educated woman, she not only learnt Turkish as soon as she arrived to give herself greater access to the culture, but she also employed the latest categories of analysis from her own intellectual culture, often with a critical stance, as she sought to understand and write about different religious cultures.

For this reason, Lady Mary’s Embassy Letters belong in the — expanding, I hope — canon of texts to which we can turn when we try to sketch out a history of the contributions of women to theology and philosophy of religion, especially in periods when women were neither formally trained nor defined as theologians or philosophers. While literary critics have tended to point to the fictional quality of Lady Mary’s letters because they were written after the fact, I want to read them as carefully written essays, developed from ‘field notes’, into which Lady Mary put a good deal of thought. Lady Mary’s Embassy Letters provide a rich commentary on the influence of deist philosophies of religion; an early example of the practice of the comparative study of religion — by a woman; and an insight into the ways in which the rational, abstract philosophy of religion of Enlightenment England was employed and developed by a woman who was engaging with other religions in their context.