DR. JOHNSON AND THE DISSENTERs

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Relations between Dr. Johnson and Protestant Dissent have long been dominated by perceptions of mutual hostility, and it is not difficult to see why this should be so. Johnson, the Anglican and high Tory who never entered a nonconformist chapel, and even when in Scotland would not attend Presbyterian worship, was hardly likely to approve, or be approved by, those of ‘sectarian’ religious and Whiggish political traditions, to many of whom he was a bogey figure as ‘Jacobite’ and ‘Pensioner’. The impression has been reinforced, perhaps indelibly so, by apparently uncompromising statements on each side. To Lord Eldon we owe the anecdote which above all has been taken to encapsulate Johnson’s prejudices against Dissenters:

When I was at Oxford, I had a Walk in New Inn Hall Garden with Dr. Johnson, Sir Robert Chambers, and some other Gentlemen. Sir Robert was gathering Snails and throwing them over the Wall into his Neighbour’s Garden. The Doctor reproached him very roughly and stated to him that this was unmannerly and unneighbourly. Sir, said Sir Robert, my neighbour is a Dissenter—oh, said the Doctor, if so, Chambers, throw away, as hard as ever you can².

Such prejudices were reciprocal. Here, for instance, is the view of one of the most popular Dissenting writers of the period, Mrs. Barbauld. Relegating Boswell’s newly-published biography to “idle moments”, she saw Johnson as both over-rated and self-contradictory:

¹ This paper is based upon a lecture delivered to the Johnson Society of London on 16 February 1985. I am grateful to Dr. J. C. D. Clark, Dr. M. H. Fitzpatrick, Professor M. Kinkead-Weekes, Mr. S. Lutman and Dr. J. D. Walsh for valuable comments on an earlier draft of my paper and to the Librarian and Trustees of Dr. Williams’s Library, London, and the John Rylands University Library of Manchester for permission to consult and quote from manuscripts in their possession.

Johnson, I think, was far from a great character; he was continually sinning against his conscience, and then afraid of going to hell for it. A Christian and a man of the town, a philosopher and a bigot, acknowledging life to be miserable, and making it more miserable through fear of death; professing great distaste to the country, and neglecting the urbanity of towns; a Jacobite and pensioned; acknowledged to be a giant in literature, and yet we do not trace him, as we do Locke, or Rousseau, or Voltaire, in his influence on the opinions of the times. We cannot say Johnson first opened this vein of thought, led the way to this discovery or this turn of thinking.3

Her brother, Dr. John Aikin agreed, adding “He had not, indeed, a grain of the noble enthusiasm, the calm simplicity, the elevated purpose of a great man”.4 In similar, if rather less measured, tones, was the verdict of the Unitarian Samuel Kenrick in 1785, responding with incredulity to the first indications of Johnson’s posthumous fame:

But how comes it to pass that this man who made no great noise when alive should now have so many panegyrics heaped on his tomb? One wd. think that Genius, Piety & Virtue were no more. His industry was great, witness his dictionary. But I do not think Ainsworth’s was short of it—or that of Chambers & Hill, & yet their names are forgot. His critical abilities were great, but sullied wth partial prejudice—wth indeed tainted all his writings ... We have certainly many superiour to him still in every walk of literature.5

Three years earlier, while Johnson was still alive, the Scottish radical squib-writer and Dissenting sympathiser James Thomson Callender had denounced him in ludicrously exaggerated terms in a work whose title, Deformities of Dr. Johnson, renders quotation from it superfluous.6

3 Memoir, Letters and a Selection from the Poems and Prose Writings of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, ed. Grace A. Ellis (2 vols., Boston, 1874), i. 195.
4 Ibid.
Attitudes of this kind may help to anticipate and explain the comparative decline of Johnson's reputation in the nineteenth century. Johnson featured in an unsympathetic and reactionary way to the Whig, liberal and dissenting writers of the early nineteenth century, to whose newly victorious causes he had been strongly opposed. Macaulay was only the most memorable of Johnson's critics in the era of reform, when the Anglican Constitution, which Johnson had valued so highly, was dismantled. Then it became easy to present Johnson as an anti-democrat, who had sought to block the religious and political advancement of the people. William Blake, observing that "The Beauty of the Bible is that the most Ignorant and Simple Minds understand it best", even asked "Was Johnson hired to pretend to Religious Terrors while he was an Infidel or how was it?" It is true that Johnson had nineteenth-century admirers, including Carlyle and Thackeray, but in general that century came to regard his achievement with coolness, and it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the advances of Protestant Dissent in numbers, political strength and cultural influence had much to do with that process. For behind these manifestations of mutual hostility, it would seem, lay a fundamental gulf. Johnson's eighteenth-century Toryism involved a deep veneration for the Anglican Church as a highly-privileged national institution, from which any estrangement was schismatical and potentially subversive—in marked contrast to the appeal to individual conscience and liberty which lay at the centre of the essentially voluntarist Dissenting ethos. The clash between the two was starkly expressed in Johnson's famous conversation with the Quaker Mrs. Knowles on 15 April 1778 and in his claim that "In adhering to the religion of the state as by law established, our implicit obedience therein becomes our duty" lay assumptions which were unacceptable, and perhaps even threatening, to Dissenters. It is not surprising that versions of this conversation in which Johnson appeared to be confuted were published in an early nineteenth-century Dissenting periodical, as an illustration both of the strength of his feelings and of the ways

8 Gentleman's Magazine, lxi (1791), 501.
in which they could be presented as easily-conquerable survivals of a fading age.9

It will be suggested here, however, that a closer examination of the relations between Johnson and Dissent in his own time reveals a far more complex picture. By considering their perceptions of each other, one might hope to learn something of both. Nor is this simply a case of Johnson enjoying cordial personal relations with individual Dissenters. Of course he did, just as the author of Gulliver's Travels enjoyed good relations with individual members of the human race. Indeed Johnson himself applied to one branch of Dissent the obvious distinction between personal approval and collective disapproval when he told Boswell that "he liked individuals among the Quakers, but not the Sect".10 It would have been difficult to avoid such an approach since many Dissenters moved, and held positions of influence within, Johnson's own literary world; in his view, for instance, the "authours of the Monthly Review were enemies to the Church".11 With some such "enemies" Johnson conducted a long-standing working relationship. Edward and Charles Dilly, the booksellers and publishers in the Poultry, were his close friends and he was frequently their guest; both were Dissenters, whose publishing firm specialized, to quote the obituary of Charles Dilly in the Gentleman's Magazine, in "the line of American exportation and in the writings of the good old school of Presbyterians—Doddridge, Watts, Lardner, & c".12 Those who study the wider ramifications of Johnson's prejudices can appreciate the irony whereby the great biography was written by a Scot (Boswell) and published by a

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9 Monthly Repository, vi (1811), 519 sqq., reprinted the version of the conversation between Johnson and Mrs. Knowles which first appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine, lxi (1791), 500-502. It did so in response to the account of the conversation which reflected rather less harshly on Johnson in Letters of Anna Seward written between the years 1784 and 1807, ed. A. Constable (6 vols., Edinburgh, 1811), i. 97-103.


11 Life, ii. 40.

12 Gentleman's Magazine, lxxvii (1807), pt. i, p. 478. The quotation is a neat illustration of the contemporary confusion of dissenting denominational labels, since Doddridge, Watts and Lardner all came from Congregational, or Independent, backgrounds, although Lardner spent his last years with a Presbyterian flock.
Dissenter (Dilly). Individual Dissenters appeared agreeably throughout Johnson’s life, from the Quaker Olivia Lloyd, for whom he is said to have entertained youthful amorous feelings, via the Presbyterian minister Roger Flexman, who indexed the *Rambler*, to Dr. William Heberden, a member of the Unitarian congregation in Essex Street, who ministered without fee to Johnson in his last illness and received the bequest of a book in his will.\(^\text{13}\)

This paper will seek to pursue the subject under three themes and in so doing will propose three broad contentions. They may be set out as follows. Firstly, Johnson’s own attitudes towards Dissenters, and theirs towards him, varied enormously between different sections of Dissent, which was a highly fragmented religious entity. Secondly, for one so allegedly prejudiced, Johnson, in his dealings with Dissenters, was able to achieve a remarkably wide degree of separation between judgments which were cultural or aesthetic and those which were political—and the same was true of some (although, as we have seen, by no means all) of his Dissenting critics. Thirdly, Johnson shared with his contemporaries among the Dissenters a series of important assumptions which placed them, so to speak, on the same side over many issues, if not always consciously so.

For the purposes of this paper ‘Dissent’ is most appropriately considered under three broad sub-divisions: ‘Old Dissent”—old, that is, in the sense of pre-evangelical and pre-Unitarian; ‘New Dissent’, evangelically inspired and manifesting itself principally after 1740; and ‘Rational Dissent’, or Unitarianism.

Old Dissent, in the eighteenth century, was well aware, as was Johnson, of its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan heritage: the Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist denominations, which formed the backbone of the Old Dissent, were all descended, with varying degrees of directness, from Tudor and Stuart Puritanism. With not dissimilar historical origins, we may add to them Scottish Presbyterianism, whose adherents were Dissenters in England, though members of an established church in Scotland, and Quakerism. Johnson knew many Dissenters who belonged to these traditions. Several Dissenters, including Samuel Dyer and John Ryland, were among his fellow-members of the

\(^{13}\) *Life*, i. 92; iv. 325, 399, 402 n. 2.
Ivy Lane Club in the 1750s. Others he met at the house of Charles Dilly. Johnson thought highly of the Congregational minister and hymn-writer Thomas Gibbons, a tutor at the Homerton Academy, whose disappointingly laconic diary reveals a series of social contacts with the Great Cham. Johnson "took to Dr Gibbons", invited him to "dawdle over a dish of tea in an afternoon" and drew on him for the Life of Watts. He knew, and in 1773 was honoured by, numerous distinguished Scottish Presbyterians some of whom, notably Robertson, Beattie and Blair, joined his circle on their visits to London. Nor would it be difficult to list members of the Society of Friends who won Johnson's acceptance and approbation: Tom Cumming, John Cator the associate of Henry Thrale, Dr. John Coakley Lettsom, John Scott of Amwell, the poet and pamphleteer.

Johnson was most at ease with educated, urban Dissenters, clergy or laity, who had some literary conversation, who did not urge the promotion of Dissenting causes in politics and whose Calvinism had lost some of its extreme rigour without being replaced or superseded by Arianism or its variations. Practically all of Johnson's acquaintances among the Old Dissent were theologically orthodox, notably in the Trinitarian sense, enabling him to observe, in a benign mood, that "differences among Christians are really of no consequence". These acquaintances tended mainly to be English Congregationalists, Quakers or Scottish Presbyterians, rather than English Presbyterians (who were moving towards Unitarianism) or Baptists, since the General Baptists, too, showed a tendency to move towards Unitarianism, while the Particular Baptists remained determinedly Calvinistic and had the least educated ministry of the old dissenting sects.

17 Life, iii. 188.
These extensive connections of clubs and literature, however, cannot conceal Johnson's deeper reservations about Old Dissent. One may concede that Johnson was not entirely serious when he told Boswell that he preferred Popery to Presbyterianism, for such comments have to be set against remarkably strong denunciations of Catholicism on other occasions, such as that of 10 October 1779, and his subsequent complaint that an "obstinate rationality" prevented him from becoming a Papist. But some measure of suspicion remained, and it explains why his attitude towards Old Dissent as a whole was one of watchful correctness rather than wholehearted warmth. In showing what the suspicion consisted of, however, it is also possible to show that it was for the most part subterranean and rarely had cause to rise completely to the surface.

Dissenters would always pose some kind of threat to an Anglican of Johnson's kind because of their regicide past. The memory of the 1640s died hard in the minds of eighteenth-century Tories. In the Dictionary Johnson defined "Puritan", unflatteringly, as "a sectary-pretending to eminent purity of religion". If such men obtained power again, might they not repeat their destructive behaviour? But although the legacy of rebellion could never be completely cast off, it was becoming more remote by Johnson's middle years. One of its early aspects had been a comparatively democratic form of church government which had thrown down a challenge to traditional ecclesiastical authority. This was something of which Johnson strongly disapproved, but not something which contained immediate menace in the later eighteenth century. Although he scorned the idea of popular election of ministers in the Church of Scotland, that idea did not prevail, and lay patronage, which he defended, survived him by almost a century. Much has been written of the "transition from sect to denomination" experienced by radical religious groups after the cooling of their initial proselytising eruption, and the accelerating process of social conformity with which it is often accompanied. In England, certainly, changes of generation,
combined with growing material prosperity, led the internal church government of the Dissenting denominations to acquire more of an oligarchic than a democratic character.

Johnson's defence of existing form and convention as the accumulated wisdom of the ages led him to distrust challenges to accepted styles of outward ceremony: Mrs. Thrale recalled his answer to what she called "the arguments urged by Puritans, Quakers &c. against showy decorations of the human figure:"

Oh, let us not be found when our Master calls us, ripping the lace of our waistcoats but the spirit of contention from our souls and tongues! Let us all conform in outward customs, which are of no consequence, to the manners of those whom we live among, and despise such paltry distinctions.  

For all his understandable empathy with eccentricities of dress or behaviour, Johnson retained a distrust of such eccentricities when they had a religious motivation: knowledge of the early Puritan movement had taught him how apparently marginal disputes over vestments and ornaments could symbolize profound challenges to authority. Just as he thought it absurd and unnecessary for anyone to leave the Church of England and join a Dissenting sect—hence the altercation with Mrs. Knowles—so he regarded nonconformist behaviour over dress as absurd and unnecessary. Yet for the most part, in the middle and later eighteenth century, such oddities seemed more amusing than threatening, and Johnson could join Boswell in laughing at the "good Quietist" Dr. Rutty and his artlessly self-revealing diary.  

The greatest problem for Johnson in his relations with Old Dissent was not theological but concerned the assertion of Whiggish issues in politics. As a defender of the Anglican near-
monopoly of public life, including the English universities, Johnson was not sympathetic towards Dissenting aspirations for civil equality. But, with the exception of the subscription debate in the 1770s, these issues were not brought to the centre of politics between the early 1750s and the end of Johnson’s life. Hence he was perfectly able to argue coolly with the Congregational minister Dr. Henry Mayo about the principles and theory of toleration: the significant feature of their discussion is not their disagreement over the practical extent to which freedom of worship and teaching might be granted by the state but their ability to discuss the subject calmly and with some concurrence as to the rights of individual conscience. It was not usual, however, for representatives of Old Dissent whom Johnson knew to raise such claims in an aggressive, public way, although most of the educated élite retained Whiggish attitudes. John Scott of Amwell was untypical both of Quakerism and of the older Dissent more generally when he replied in print to two of Johnson’s political pamphlets with The Constitution Defended and Pensioner Exposed: in Remarks on the False Alarm (1770) and Remarks on the Patriot (1774). These productions certainly appealed to Whiggish and even at times to radical notions in politics, although their tone towards Johnson personally was less harsh than that of some of his other political critics in the 1770s. It was quite possible, moreover, for Johnson and Scott to disagree over Wilkes but to remain on good social terms; after all, Johnson actually met Wilkes himself. Johnson rather liked Scott and considered him worthy of a biographical essay, which he apparently planned, but never executed.

Hence, when political claims were not aggressively asserted, Johnson could turn a civil, and indeed friendly, countenance towards scions of the Old Dissent, especially if they could offer literary conversation. Scott of Amwell, for instance, was a poet, although not one whom Johnson greatly admired. This was not Dissent in its most politicised form: the felicitous phrase of John Brooke that orthodox Dissent in the later eighteenth century amounted to a “tolerable eccentricity” rather than “a danger to

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24 Ibid., ii. 249-252.
25 Lawrence D. Stewart, John Scott of Amwell (Univ. of California Press, 1956), pp. 6, 92-3.
26 Life, ii. 318, 518.
the state” might well be applied to Johnson’s attitude towards the Old Dissent.

Rather different, and far more cordial, were Johnson’s relations with what was to become known as ‘New Dissent’. In Methodism, its principal form, ‘New Dissent’ did not have a sectarian past nor, in Johnson’s lifetime, could it be condemned as schismatical. John Wesley, like Johnson himself, remained a loyal (and Oxford educated) member of the Church of England until his death. For Wesley, despite his unclubbable habits, Johnson retained a high personal esteem. “Whatever might be thought of some methodist teachers”, he told Dr. Maxwell, “he could scarcely doubt the sincerity of that man, who travelled nine hundred miles in a month, and preached twelve times a week; for no adequate reward, merely temporal, could be given for such indefatigable labour”. He commended Wesley’s attempt to revive support for the Church among the lower orders, shared his interest in ghosts, introduced him to Boswell and was on social terms with his sister, Mrs. Hall.

Although he defined “enthusiasm” in the Dictionary as “a vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication” and had serious reservations about its claims to “inward light”, Johnson frequently praised Methodist preaching as socially valuable. The “plain and familiar manner” in which its practitioners expressed themselves was “the only way to do good to the common people” and Johnson added that only a Methodist preacher or a Popish priest would be able to impress the minds of the “unhappy convicts” at Newgate. On one occasion he described the Methodists as less hypocritical than the Non-Jurors, and, inasmuch as he complained of the conduct of the six Methodists expelled from St. Edmund Hall in 1768, his complaint centred upon their implicit challenge to the authority of Oxford University rather than the nature of their devotions. It is true that he was more cautious in his attitude towards his fellow-collegian George Whitefield, whom he saw as something of a

28 Life, ii. 123.
29 Life, iii. 394; iv. 92.
30 Ibid., i. 459; iv. 329.
31 Ibid., ii. 321, ii. 187.
mountebank, and that he had more in common with Wesley than with the predominantly Calvinist followers of Whitefield. But in general, Johnson, like most of his contemporaries, found it difficult to regard Methodism as 'Dissent' in the old sense, and that favourably influenced his judgment of it.

For two clear reasons this is not surprising. In the first place, some affinity between High Church Anglicanism and evangelicalism has been convincingly demonstrated by Dr. Walsh. The movement, over generations, of members of the same family between the two has been recognized, as has the contribution of High Church and Non-Juror theology and worship to the evangelical revival. There was a common emphasis on asceticism, piety, regular devotions, demands for high moral standards from the clergy and a dislike of Whig domination over the Church of England. These were all ideals which Johnson shared. As an undergraduate he had read William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, which he described as "the finest piece of hortatory theology in any language". He retained his admiration for its precepts, even if at times deeply depressed by his own personal failure to live up to them. Secondly, Methodism found more favour in Johnson's eyes than Old Dissent because it was politically more conservative. Methodists did not have a regicide background and they tended not to be Whigs. The Tory party of the mid-eighteenth century had some sympathy and a measure of political agreement, with the New Dissent. Methodism did not support the Dissenting application for relief from subscription to the Articles in the 1770s. In particular, of course, Johnson found a receptive audience for his American opinions in John Wesley, who followed, and some would say plagiarized, the argument of *Taxation No Tyranny* in his *Calm Address to our American Colonies*. "I have thanks ... to return to you for the addition of your important suffrage to my argument on the American question", wrote Johnson to Wesley in 1775, "To have gained such a mind as yours may justly confirm me in my own

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33 *Life*, ii. 122.

opinion".35 As opponents of the American claims, Johnson and Wesley were both attacked by Dissenters such as Joseph Towers, who upheld those claims, and Wesley himself incurred the wrath of Caleb Evans over this issue.36

For similar reasons Johnson could extend his approbation to an important branch of continental evangelicalism, the Moravian Church, which made its first appearance in England during the middle years of the eighteenth century and clearly belonged to the 'New' and not the 'Old' Dissent. It was doctrinally akin to the Church of England, could point to a distinguished antiquity of origin and was governed by an episcopal order the validity of which had been recognized by the Anglican hierarchy.37 An important patron of Moravian work in England and North America was Johnson's friend General Oglethorpe, to whom he paid the rare compliment of urging that "he should give the world his life".38 Johnson knew two Moravians particularly well, James Hutton and the Rev. Benjamin La Trobe. Hutton belonged to the Burney circle and referred to Johnson in 1792 as "my dear Respected Friend ... dear, great, good Dr. Johnson to whose Imperfections I was no stranger, much less to his brave Virtues".39 Despite some characteristic scepticism as to their extent,40 Johnson accepted Hutton's invitation to contribute to Moravian missions and received from him the "Greenland testament and Hymns" which Moravian missionaries had prepared for some of their remoter converts.41 La Trobe and Johnson had both, in different ways, come to the aid of Dr. Dodd in 1777 and their acquaintance developed during the last few years of

36 See Caleb Evans, A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, occasioned by his Calm Address to the American Colonies by 'Americanus' (i.e. Caleb Evans) (1775) and A Reply to the Rev. Mr. Fletcher's Vindication of Mr. Wesley's Calm Address to our American Colonies (Bristol, 1776), in which Wesley's debt to Johnson did not pass unnoticed.
38 Life, ii. 351.
40 Life, v. 391.
41 Hutton to Boswell, 29 Jan. 1792 (loc. cit., p. 467).
Johnson's life. Although the story that Johnson underwent some kind of evangelical "conversion experience" upon his deathbed is rather discounted by modern scholarship, it has been suggested that his undoubted conquest of "the secret horror of the last" and the calm resignation with which he met death could to some extent be attributed to La Trobe. John Hoole and Hannah More testify to the frequency of La Trobe's visits to Bolt Court in 1784 and Miss More believed him partly responsible for the dissipation of that gloom and fear of death by which Johnson had been tormented for so long. In 1828 La Trobe's son Christian Ignatius testified that his father had been Johnson's intimate friend during these last months and further evidence of such a close connection has been unearthed by Professor Quinlan. If, indeed, Johnson in his final months was visited by a "quasi-mystical experience", it seems to have amounted to a sharper personal awareness of the prospect of salvation, the type of personal awakening to the atoning sacrifice of Christ which Wesley had discovered among the Moravians in 1738. That, however, is as far as one may legitimately go without straining the available evidence, for modern research has shown that, far from having taken place on his deathbed, Johnson's attainment of religious calmness really began with his sudden, albeit temporary, recovery from illness in February 1784, an event which he ascribed to divine favour and which inclined him to believe that his life and faith might, after all, find divine acceptance.

Of course it would be wrong to describe Johnson either as a Methodist or of the Evangelical 'wing' of the Church of England although he was on good terms with many who were. It is true that his rigorously self-critical concern for his own religious life led Boswell to observe that "Johnson himself was, in a dignified manner, a Methodist", but the qualification is significant.


Johnsonian Miscellanies, ii. 158, 205.

C. I. La Trobe, "The Last Hours of Dr. Johnson", Christian Observer, xxviii (January, 1828), 32, supported by a letter from "Zenas", ibid., xxxvii (1837), 684-5. For a further note on the friendship of Johnson with Benjamin La Trobe see Maurice J. Quinlan "An Intermediary between Cowper and Johnson", Review of English Studies, xxiv (1948), 141-7.


Life, i. 458 n. 2.
“Dignity” in religious observance was all-important to Johnson and in his comments on Methodist preaching lies a clear indication that he felt that it was most appropriate for those less well educated than himself. Johnson did not attend Methodist meetings. Nor did he share, at least until the last year of his life, the evangelical notion of the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit in the “conversion experience”. But he did share many of the moral priorities of the evangelicals, including a detestation of slavery. In these respects the most remarkable feature of Johnson’s religious life was its consistency, and Pierce is undoubtedly correct in stressing the way in which Johnson’s final religious experience took the form of “an affirmation of an old dispensation ... a lifelong desire to believe in the truth of Christianity”. Far from being struck by some new truth, Johnson became more personally receptive to truths which he had long acknowledged.

It has been suggested that Toryism became more hostile towards ‘New Dissent’ as the ranks of Methodism were enlarged by members of the older nonconformist sects and as Methodist preachers were accused of ‘poaching’ adherents in the parishes of the Anglican clergy. But one factor worked in the opposite direction as far as Johnson was concerned. Methodism had repelled numerous potential sympathisers because of the ‘convulsions’ and ranting which accompanied so much of its early worship. Perhaps in some quarters it even had the appearance of a mid-seventeenth century radical sect. It was this very early form which Johnson had in mind when, in his Dictionary, he defined “Methodist” as “One of the new kind of Puritans lately arisen, so called from their profession to live by rules and in constant method”. But after Wesley’s denunciation of ‘convulsions’ as the work of the devil and as a subsequent generation increasingly abandoned them, their damaging effects declined. Indeed, Wesley’s definition of “enthusiasm” as “religious madness, fancied inspiration” is similar to Johnson’s own. Johnson came to appreciate that a Methodist was a “Kind of Puritan” only in what

47 Pierce, Religious Life, p. 53 n.
48 Ibid., p. 163.
50 T. B. Shepherd, Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century (New York 1966), p. 86. John Wesley himself did not incur the criticisms which Johnson made of some aspects of Methodism.
to him was its least harmful, least political and most pious sense. His praise for Methodism really dates from this slightly later period, after about 1760; thereafter he disapproved of Methodism only when it was at its most unwesleyan. His later years ran parallel to the interval between the relaxation of Methodism's initial controversial outpouring and the emergence of Primitive Methodism, with its radical connotations, in the 1800s. Johnson, moreover, could at times display a curiously indulgent attitude towards eccentric forms of piety, notably in the impromptu prayers and other oddities of Kit Smart. And, amidst some criticisms of Johnson in evangelical publications at the turn of the century and later, one also finds a degree of cautious admiration and certainly a more sympathetic approach than that shown to Johnson in the journals of the older Dissent. The latinized dignity of his writing was acknowledged, though compared unfavourably with the "plain native style" of Wesley.\(^{51}\) The usual line, however, was not to depict Johnson as an alien figure nor to condemn his Tory politics, but to lament that he did not go quite far enough in his Christian beliefs and practices and was hence beset by an "unhappy hypochondriasm":

The Doctor lost all the comfort and instruction which he might have derived from the doctrine of the atonement, because he saw not the way by which its benefits were to be personally appropriated.\(^{52}\)

Despite the "conversion stories", not all evangelicals were anxious to claim Johnson as their own. On the other hand, anecdotes of his life were reprinted as morally improving to their readers,\(^{53}\) and the evangelical attitude to Johnson is perhaps best expressed by the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* of 1833 with the words "had he been happier, he would have been holier, too".\(^{54}\)

It was in the case of rational dissent that Johnson's relations with nonconformity were at their most frigid. Johnson was a strictly orthodox Christian, while rational dissent made a fetish of theological speculation, notably over the doctrine of the Trinity. For eighteenth-century purposes, anti-Trinitarianism is best described as a way of thought which was fashionable in some intellectual circles, rather than a fully-fledged denomination;

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\(^{52}\) "Religious Principles of Dr. Johnson" (ibid., 3rd ser., xii (1833), 96).

\(^{53}\) For example, *Evangelical Magazine*, vi (1798), 508; xvi (1808), 529.

\(^{54}\) *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, 3rd ser., xii (1833), 97.
Unitarian worship was not legalized until 1813. In its Arian, and still more in its Socinian form, it insisted on the worship of God the Father only and denied the divinity of Christ. Rational Dissent was a curious compound of adherents within the Old Dissent, especially among the English Presbyterians and General Baptists, together with a few sympathisers inside the Church of England. The latter were prominent, via the Feathers Tavern petition, in seeking relaxation of the Thirty-nine Articles test, and some of them resigned from the Church when their application was rejected by the House of Commons.

Most of the celebrated animosity and many of the most acerbic comments between Johnson and Dissent emanated from this quarter. For, above all, Unitarianism was widely regarded as heretical. On 7 May 1773 Johnson was so shocked when Bennet Langton asked him whether it would “be wrong in the magistrate to tolerate those who preach against the doctrine of the Trinity”, that he replied “I wonder, Sir, how a gentleman of your piety can introduce this subject in a mixed company”. Although on another occasion he could observe that all Christians agreed “in the essential articles” and that their differences were “rather political than religious”, Johnson did not include Unitarianism within his definition of Christian. He took it for granted that Arianism amounted to “heresy” and since Unitarians in this period were correctly seen as the most politically radical of all Dissenters, Johnson’s disapprobation was complete. He snubbed the Unitarian Edmund Barker at the Ivy Lane Club, treated Joseph Priestley with the utmost wariness and spoke dismissively of Dr. Harwood, who had produced what Boswell called “a fantastical translation of the New Testament, in modern phrase, and with a Socinian twist”. It is perhaps worthy of note that the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, a leading anti-Trinitarian writer and Anglican seceder, was, in his capacity as minister of the Essex Street chapel, Johnson’s near neighbour for some ten years, yet they do not seem to have met.

Nor would it be difficult to assemble a series of rational dissenting critiques of Johnson. To Sylas Neville he was the “vile pensioner”; James Losh expressed “disgust” at his life of Milton;

55 Life, ii. 254.
56 Ibid., i. 405.
57 Ibid., iv. 32.
58 Clifford, Dictionary Johnson, p. 34; Johnsonian Miscellanies, ii. 427-30.
and Henry Crabb Robinson was ashamed to recall that he had once been "much better acquainted with the Rambler than the Spectator", though, characteristically for one writing in the Victorian age (1843), he added that his "disgust" for Johnson's writings did not extend to the Johnson of Boswell.\(^5\) In the 1770s Johnson was strongly criticised by the Unitarian minister Joseph Towers in *A Letter to Dr. Samuel Johnson, occasioned by his late political publications*. Towers wrote of Johnson as an enemy to liberty, castigating his scorn for the "popular party" of the late 1760s, and his defence both of the Quebec Act and of the ministry's handling of the Middlesex elections. "It is a misfortune which has attended your political writings", claimed Towers, "that they have degraded your own character without rendering much service to those by whom you were employed".\(^6\) Even in his *Essay on the Life, Character and Writings of Dr Samuel Johnson*, written eleven years later and a much more temperate literary effort, which requires further consideration in this paper, Towers repeated the standard rational dissenting response to Johnson's four major political pamphlets of 1770-75. They were "inconsistent with the principles of the English constitution and repugnant to the common rights of mankind" and replete with "malignity of misrepresentation".\(^7\) There was only a brief and passing nod of approval for the anti-war arguments which Johnson deployed in his tract on the Falkland Islands. This element of Dissent was quickest to rush into print against Johnson's political writings; it also included Priestley, of whom Johnson was extremely suspicious. He complained that Priestley's


\(^7\) Joseph Towers, *An Essay on the Life, Character and Writings of Samuel Johnson* (1786); re-published in Towers, *Tracts*, iii. 348, 352. The 1796 edition of the *Essay* indicates that Towers had read Boswell's *Life of Johnson*; he also took the opportunity to reply to Arthur Murphy's *Essay on the Life and Genius of Johnson* (1792).
theological works "tended to unsettle every thing and yet settled nothing" and in 1783 was persuaded only with difficulty to acknowledge his scientific merits.62 Priestley's claim that he and Richard Price each, separately, enjoyed a civil and sociable meeting with Johnson is not corroborated, although Boswell was perhaps a shade intemperate in his assertion that Johnson would not have remained in the same room with either.63 Johnson's belief in free will pre-disposed him to abhor Priestley's materialistic determinism just as firmly as Calvinistic predestination. Determinism constituted a threat to Johnson's belief in a benevolent God.64

Here, both in theological and political terms, lay the widest chasm between Johnson and any group of Dissenters. They were at odds over theological speculation, which Johnson saw as dangerous and unorthodox, and which his opponents held to be liberal and inquisitive; they were at odds over Wilkes, America and the subscription issue. With his defence of order and antipathy towards parliamentary reform, Johnson felt more threatened by rational Dissent than by the Old Dissent in England or by Scottish Presbyterianism. For this was Dissent in its most politicised form and at its most aggressive against religious establishments. Yet even this depiction of enmity requires two important qualifications. Firstly, Unitarianism, in its several theological varieties, was a small and unrepresentative minority of English Dissent as a whole. It disrupted congregations and helped to cause secessions. Many orthodox dissenters did not side with the American colonists or Wilkes. Many loathed the Unitarian "heresy" as much as Johnson did. Some even shared his opposition to the subscription campaign; Calvinistic Dissenters in 1773 petitioned against the move for relief and engaged Johnson's

63 For Johnson's relations with Priestley, see Life, iv. Appendix B, 434-5; for Priestley's claim to have met Johnson "at Mr Paradise's" see his Appeal to the Public, part ii, (1792) in Priestley, Works, xix. 502, published immediately after the Birmingham riots; for subsequent testimony from others, including Samuel Parr and Samuel Rogers, as to this meeting, see Gentleman's Magazine, lxv (1795), 179, and Christian Reformer, N.S., ix. 171-5. This testimony, however, is derived from Priestley's own claim and does not include independent corroboration of the meeting.
64 Pierce, Religious Life, p. 41. For Boswell's hostile comment on Priestley's materialism see Life, iv. 238 n. 1; for Johnson's belief in free will see ibid., iii. 290-1.
friend Sir Robert Chambers, snail-thrower and Vinerian professor of Law at Oxford, as their parliamentary counsel. It would be wrong to conclude that Johnson's relations with rational Dissent were anything other than an untypical sub-division of a much broader subject. Secondly, even here, there is some evidence of good personal relations. Johnson was, for instance, more amused than angered by the "levelling" principles of Catherine Macaulay, with whom he was on terms of hospitality. He viewed with a surprising good humour the pro-American "strenuous Whig" Thomas Hollis who, in 1760, enlisted his literary talents in the preparation of an introduction to "the proceedings of the Committee for cloathing the French prisoners" and of whom Johnson's harshest comment was to call him a "dull, poor creature". The pamphleteer Capel Lofft met him quite agreeably in 1784 and it has been reported that he was friendly with the Unitarian minister John Ward. On 3 June 1781 Johnson dined in company, with no hint of controversy, with Thomas Fyshe Palmer, then a Fellow of Queens' College, Cambridge, but subsequently a Unitarian minister at Dundee, ardent reformer and victim of the "repressive" policy of the 1790s to the extent of seven years' transportation.

It should be acknowledged that relations here would have been strained, perhaps intolerably so, had Johnson lived into the 1790s. Was rational Dissent's view of Johnson subsequently clouded by the French Revolution? Some might suggest that he did play a posthumous part in the politics of that decade, since Boswell in his "advertisement" to the second edition of the Life hoped that Johnson's thoughts would "prove an effectual antidote to that detestable sophistry which has been lately imported from France". Certainly Samuel Kenrick, one radical Dissenter who sympathized with the French Revolution, found Boswell's copious illumination of Johnson's character to be unacceptable at a politically sensitive time. Johnson died before rational Dissent

66 For Johnson on Catherine Macaulay's levelling views see Life, i. 447, iii. 77; for his view of Thomas Hollis see ibid., iv. 97.
67 Ibid., iv. 278; Protestant Dissenters' Magazine, iv (1797), 242.
68 Life, iv. 125.
69 Ibid., i. 11-12.
70 Samuel Kenrick to James Wodrow, 10 April 1792 and 24 June 1805 (Kenrick Papers).
at the end of the century helped to bring the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts back to the centre of politics and promoted a petition for Unitarian relief in 1792. One need not doubt that Johnson would strongly have opposed such campaigns, perhaps in a public way. He could describe Charles James Fox as his friend in 1784, but that friendship, like the one between Fox and Burke, could hardly have survived the succeeding ten years. Similarly endangered would have been Johnson's liking for the Foxite M. P. John Courtenay, whose flattering verses about the members of the Literary Club are quoted at length by Boswell, but who was to write a bitterly sarcastic tract against the defenders of the Test Act in 1790. Nor would the French Revolution have improved Johnson's opinion of Priestley. Dissenters who knew Johnson personally did so without knowledge of the French Revolution either as inspiration or menace. One must always remember that, in his own lifetime, Johnson's relations with Dissent were conducted against the uninterrupted background of the ancien régime in Europe.

II

Despite his forays into political writing, Johnson was best known to eighteenth-century Dissenters as essayist and critic. In this capacity, he displayed a remarkable ability to separate cultural or aesthetic judgements from what might be termed political judgements in his observations on Dissent. Although religious considerations strongly influenced Johnson's critical writing, those considerations did not descend to the narrowly sectarian. This is particularly true of his attitude towards the literature of the Old Dissent. For in the case of "New Dissent" this separation in Johnson's mind was less obviously necessary and was much more easily attainable, as is clear from his frequent appreciations of the works of John Wesley, while much of the literary, as distinct from the purely doctrinal or political, flowering of the rational dissenters appeared after 1784.

His works, life and conversation provide unmistakable evidence that Johnson maintained the highest respect for the cultural achievements of the Old Dissent. He upheld the merits of

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, praising its "invention, imagination and the conduct of the story"; described as "one of the finest pieces in the English language" the *Spectator* essay on "Novelty" by Henry Grove, whom he called a "dissenting teacher" while denying him the title of clergyman; had words of approbation for Defoe; and commended Doddridge's epigram "Live while you live" as one of the most excellent of its type. But that respect is perhaps most fully developed in his poetical criticism. We know that he was moved to tears by reading *The Hermit* by the Scottish Presbyterian James Beattie and in the *Lives of the Poets* it received its most complete expression.

Few features of this work are more familiar than the depiction of Milton's political notions as those of an "acrimonious and surly republican". Yet for all Johnson's dislike of Milton's character and detestation of all that Milton stood for in politics, he took a detached view of his poetry. He criticised *Lycidas* but graced *Paradise Lost* with the palm, according it the "first place" in its design and second place (yielding only to the *Iliad*) in performance. Milton the poet soared above Milton the politician in Johnson's mind; there are more than 2000 quotations from Milton in the *Dictionary* and in later life Johnson supported a benefit to raise funds for Milton's grand-daughter and in 1773 backed the proposal to raise a monument to his memory.

Similarly, after having written disapprovingly of the dissenting background of Mark Akenside, Johnson proceeded to insist that "to his versification justice requires that praise should not be denied". On another occasion he declared Akenside as a poet to be "superior to Gray and Mason", though not in the first rank, and he confessed to Boswell that he had been unable to finish "Pleasures of the Imagination". This is not the place to analyse the criteria which governed Johnson's ideals of literary excellence; purely sectarian or political criteria, however, were not among them and Dissenters were not treated differently from non-

72 *Life*, ii. 238; iii. 33, 267; v. 271.
73 Ibid., iv. 186.
75 *Lives*, i. 163, 170.
76 *Life*, i. 227, 230; ii. 239.
77 *Lives*, iii. 417.
78 *Life*, iii. 32; ii. 164.
Dissenters in his assessment of their work. If he criticised the poetry, as distinct from the lives, of Milton and Akenside, it was for other reasons, notably, of course, his disdain for blank verse and preference for the rhymed couplet of his own age. When taking Johnson severely to task for his treatment of Milton, Joseph Towers conceded that full credit had been granted to the poetry and that the fault, in his eyes, lay elsewhere, namely in Johnson’s inability to “endure those high sentiments of liberty which Milton was so arduously desirous to propagate” and in the way in which Johnson “very injuriously misrepresented his character and conduct as a man”.79

Furthermore, in the Life of Isaac Watts, Johnson evinced an esteem for nonconformist literature equal to that of any Dissenter. It was at his own initiative that Watts was included in the list of English poets whose biographies he was to undertake80 and such a decision was entirely in accordance with a long-standing admiration of that writer who, in Johnson’s words, “was one of the first who taught the Dissenters to write and speak like other men, by shewing them that elegance might consist with piety”.81 It was the piety of Watts which most won Johnson’s favour; in its exemplary nature and in that “simplicity, sobriety and measure” which Professor Davie regards as the supreme virtue of early eighteenth-century Dissenting literature,82 it was widely accessible, especially to the young. This, more than the quality of the verse itself, gave Watts so elevated a station in the Lives of the Poets. Johnson cited Watts frequently in the Dictionary and believed his prose works to be superior to his poetry. He shared with the Sandemanian Michael Faraday an admiration for The Improvement of the Mind.83 Johnson concluded his life of Watts with words which neatly encapsulate his attitude towards the literature of the Old Dissent:

Happy will be that reader whose mind is disposed by his verses, or his prose, to imitate him in all but his nonconformity, to copy his benevolence to man, and his reverence to God.84

80 Johnson to William Sharp, 7 July 1777 (Letters, ii. 525).
81 Literary Magazine (1756), quoted in Life, i. 312.
83 Ibid., p. 72; Life, iv. 311.
84 Lives, iii. 311.
The same qualities of exemplary piety drew from Johnson a corresponding regard for some of the devotional writing of Dissent. Hawkins relates that in his final years, confronted by increasing ill health and the prospect of death, Johnson sought comfort from "the writings of Baxter and others of the old Puritan and non-conforming divines".85 He had long admired Richard Baxter, using him as a model for his own sermons; he drew on *Reliquiae Baxterianae* for the *Rambler* no. 196 on the response to experience of human opinions, commended all his works to Boswell as good, held that *Reasons of the Christian Religion* "contained the best collection of the evidences of the divinity of the Christian system" and asked Dilly to send him a copy of "Baxter's Call to the Unconverted" on 6 January 1784.86 Of contemporary writers, Johnson particularly lauded the sermons of Hugh Blair. Congratulating himself, with a cheerful self-knowledge, on his "candour", he declared "Though the dog is a Scotchman and a Presbyterian and every thing he should not be, I was the first to praise them", and he wished that Blair would come over to the Church of England.87 Johnson's critical approval could even extend to a hero of rational dissent, Dr. Samuel Clarke; that Clarke was a "heretic" on the Trinitarian question did not blind Johnson to his merits as an expositor of other Christian themes.88

To Hawkins it was "a circumstance to be wondered at" that such a high churchman as Johnson should be "driven to seek for spiritual comfort in the writings of sectaries".89 Of course Johnson was highly selective in this quest. He chose the most moderate and least aggressively "Protestant" of Dissenters, admiring their uncomplicated piety and scriptural knowledge as much as any depth of learning. Baxter offered a sympathetic understanding to Johnson's doubts and fears, together with a reassurance to his faith; Blair provided "warmth without fanati-

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87 *Life*, iv. 98; iii. 339.
The most rational transport. They could never challenge the pre-eminence in Johnson's mind of the great seventeenth-century "fathers" of the Anglican tradition, Hooker, Ussher, Hammond. But if dissenting theologians could concentrate upon the central doctrines of Christianity in a way which strengthened the belief of one whose own faith was precarious; if they could eschew "fanaticism", "heresy" and political special pleading; if they could refrain from promoting to excess their peculiar ideas of church government; and if they could do all this with a literary style which matched his own dictum—"the end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing"—then their works would find favour with Dr. Johnson. Certainly their writings are frequently cited in the Dictionary as illustrations of the meanings of words.

It is possible to detect elements of the same ability to separate aesthetic appreciation from political prejudice in at least some of Johnson's dissenting readers. Amid the well-known deprecation may be found Dissenting respect for Johnson's literary career, and some acceptance of Johnson as a cultural critic. Dr. Kippis in the Biographia Britannica quoted with approval Johnson's verdict on the abilities of John Gilbert Cooper. Another rational Dissenter, Samuel Rogers, was consciously drawn to Johnson as a model for his early poems. The Unitarian lawyer and Rockinghamite M. P. John Lee cited Johnson as an acceptable authority on legal ethics, while Titus Hibbert, merchant, member of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, and trustee of the Dissenting academy which was to become Manchester College, regularly purchased Johnson's works. Even Samuel Kenrick's Scottish correspondent, the

90 Pierce, Religious Life, pp. 141-4; Life, iii. 338.
92 Biographia Britannica, or the Lives of the most eminent Persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland (5 vols., London, 1778-93), iv. 264.
95 "Household Expenses of Titus Hibbert, 1770-95" (Rylands English MS. 989). On 15 June 1786 Hibbert bought "Dr Johnson's poems" for Is. 4d; on 28 April 1791 he paid £1.17.0 for "Johnson's Dictionary, Harrison's folio Edition"; on 6 September 1792 he bought the Lives of the Poets for one guinea (ff. 86, 111v, 118).
Rev. James Wodrow, a Presbyterian minister in Ayrshire, felt an 
admiring incredulity at the breadth of Johnson’s literary talents96 
and so unlikely a figure as Samuel Taylor Coleridge admired 
_Taxation No Tyranny._97 To some extent, of course, the approval, 
where it existed, was conferred upon Johnson’s literary expression 
and felicitous skill with words rather than the content of what he 
wrote. As Mrs. Barbauld conceded:

In his style he is original, and there we can track his imitators ... He 
seems to me to be one of those who have shone in the *Belles lettres*, rather 
than what he is held out by many to be, an original and deep genius in 
investigation.98

Mrs. Barbauld herself produced an essay “On Romances” 
which is deliberately and cleverly modelled on Johnson’s style and 
Johnson in 1777 pronounced her to be the best of his imitators.99 Perhaps one detects here the first stirrings of that Victorian view 
of Johnson as the eccentric, warm Englishman, the great talker, 
whose attitudes did not need to be taken too seriously, and could, 
in time, arouse affectionate amusement once they could no longer 
be dangerous, This, in some ways, is the Johnson who emerges at 
the very end of Macaulay’s celebrated essay. It is also the Johnson 
depicted by William Hazlitt who, writing of his prejudices, 
declared “I do not hate him, but love him for them”.100

This section, however, is most appropriately concluded with 
two quotations, from very different dissenting sources, which 
indicate the manner in which, at and immediately after his death, 
Johnson stood as a literary colossus to many Dissenters, as well as 
non-dissenters, of the late eighteenth century. The first took the 
form of the sixth and last of the *Addresses to the Deity* composed 
in 1785 by Dr. James Fordyce, a Scottish Presbyterian and

96 James Wodrow to Samuel Kenrick, 23 March 1792 and 19-24 October 
1805 (Kenrick Papers).
97 Donald J. Greene, introduction to *Political Writings* in _Yale Edition_, x 
(1977), xxxv.
98 Mrs. Barbauld to Dr. John Aikin, May 1791, *Memoir ... of Anna Laetitia 
Barbauld*, i. 195. Nineteen years later, Mrs. Barbauld expressed similar views 
when commenting upon *Rasselas* in _The British Novelists_; see Johnson. *The 
99 *Memoir ... of Anna Laetitia Barbauld*, ii. 181-5.
100 William Hazlitt, “Lectures on the English Comic Writers”, Lecture v, 
Howe (London 1931), vi. 104.
minister to the congregation in Monkwell Street, London, who saw much of Johnson in the early 1780s. Entitled “On the Death of Samuel Johnson” it presents its subject as an outstanding moral exemplar:

I praise thee, the God of thy late Servant, that “being dead he yet speaketh”, in those lasting Productions which abound with the purest morality; where the conclusions of experience are added to the researches of learning, and to the fruits of meditation; where the secret recesses of the heart are explored, imagination is rendered ministerial to reason, and the reluctant passions compelled to acknowledge the claims of Religion.\textsuperscript{101}

The second, from an author who lacked personal acquaintance with Johnson but who displayed a familiarity with his writings, is drawn from the Unitarian Joseph Towers and surveys the whole range of Johnson’s literary career:

The faults and the foibles of JOHNSON, whatever they were, are now descended with him to the grave; but his virtues should be the object of our imitation. His works, with all their defects, are a most valuable and important accession to the literature of England. His political writings will probably be little read, on any other account than for the dignity and energy of his style; but his Dictionary, his moral essays, and his productions in polite literature, will convey useful instruction, and elegant entertainment, as long as the language in which they are written shall be understood; and give him a just claim to a distinguished rank among the best and ablest writers that England has produced.\textsuperscript{102}

One could hardly find a sharper distinction between political and cultural judgements, and this from the pen of a Dissenter of the type most likely to disapprove of Johnson. Observations of this kind make it clear that there is more to Johnson’s relations with Dissent than a mere catalogue of hostility.

III

Some measure of proximity, then, some shared assumptions, existed between Johnson and Dissent. Apart from the Unitarians, both accepted the main principles of the Christian revelation; both had some stake in the existing society. Furthermore, it is

\textsuperscript{101} James Fordyce, \textit{Addresses to the Deity} (London, 1785), pp. 227-8.
\textsuperscript{102} Joseph Towers, \textit{Essay}, p. 431.
possible to suggest that there were other areas in which the familiar perceptions of mutual hostility require qualification.

Common ground, for instance, clearly existed in attitudes towards commerce and material improvement. The indelible image of the eighteenth-century lay dissenter is that of a businessman, and we are familiar with theories of economic growth which connect industrial and commercial enterprise with reformed Protestantism. But Johnson, too, held views on commerce which are by no means inconsistent with those frequently attributed to Dissenters. For all his fears that the power of money would "confound subordination", and despite his defence of agriculture, Johnson admired and favoured the advancement of commerce. He did so as one with a deep interest in technical processes and mechanics, as an observer of different crafts and skills, as in the Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland. He was always ready to observe, and express authoritative opinions about, industrial processes. At the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, the Dissenter Andrew Kippis heard Johnson deliver a speech "upon a subject relative to mechanics, with a propriety, perspicuity and energy which excited general admiration". In one such industry, brewing, he was deeply involved, as friend and counsellor to Henry Thrale; several Dissenters also, notably Samuel Whitbread, were brewers. Johnson, moreover, was directly involved in the dealings and mentality of commerce. He was an active agent in industrial speculation with his promotion of the spinning machine of Lewis Paul. His own literary career was dominated by transactions with booksellers and publishers. He was well aware of the financial and market ramifications of publishing and enjoyed advising others as to their pitfalls. According to Boswell, "Johnson loved business" and regarded himself as an expert in its application. His enthusiastic work in the sale of Thrale's brewery, and his writings upon commercial subjects, are well

103 Life, iii. 262.
104 Biographia Britannica, iv. 266.
107 Life, ii. 441.
known. They indicate Johnson’s approval of wealth as providing the scope necessary for moral improvement and the development of virtue, though of course he recognized, and at times worried over, the moral dangers with which wealth was fraught for those who acquired it. But on the whole Johnson looked with favour on material improvement and frequently defended luxury as economically beneficial and likely to increase employment.\(^{108}\)

As Professor Mathias has observed, these were “not the most natural opinions at first glance for the hammer of the Whigs”\(^{109}\)—or, one might add, for the hammer of the Dissenters. For in all these respects Johnson identified himself with what has rightly been regarded as a prime feature of Dissent in eighteenth-century society, namely commerce and industry. It was the age of great dissenting entrepreneurs—Darby, Strutt, Wedgwood. According to a sample analysed by Everett E. Hagen, Dissenters in c. 1770 formed only some 7 per cent of the population of England and Wales, yet contributed no less than 41 per cent of the English and Welsh entrepreneurs, providing about nine times as many entrepreneurs, relative to their numbers, as Anglicans, a predominance particularly marked in manufacturing industry.\(^{110}\)

Yet Johnson himself, in his own way, was just as much an entrepreneur in literature as any Dissenting banker or manufacturer in counting-house or factory. His success, too, was achieved in a self-made way, via the market; he, too, rejected the “servility” of patronage and what has come to be termed the “client economy”.\(^{111}\) Though self-confessedly idle, Johnson vigorously preached the work ethic.\(^{112}\)

For all the gloom and pessimism of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and *Rasselas*, Johnson was something of an optimist in his

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view of progress, which he accepted and at times even welcomed. His defence of the spread of literacy and knowledge is one example of his belief that improvement could be reconciled with subordination.\textsuperscript{113} In writing of the “barbarity” and widespread illiteracy in the age of Shakespeare, Johnson was implicitly commending the progress achieved by his own day in the public access to literature and in the human capacity for self-analysis.\textsuperscript{114} In this spirit, in 1766, he wrote vehemently in defence of a proposal to make the Bible more widely available in rural Scotland by translating it into Gaelic, an action which subsequently won approval even from the Unitarian \textit{Monthly Repository}.\textsuperscript{115} Indeed Johnson recognized that material and intellectual improvement was the foundation of his own fame and drew a vivid portrayal of his fate without it:

Had I been an Indian I must have died early; my eyes would not have served me to get food ... had I been an Indian, I must have starved, or they would have knocked me on the head, when they saw I could do nothing ... Depend upon it, Sir, a savage when he is hungry will not carry about with him a booby of nine years old, who cannot help himself.\textsuperscript{116} 

Of course Johnson and the Dissenters did not share quite the same concept of “progress”. It has been suggested that this difference underlay the political divergencies of Johnson and John Scott of Amwell in the early 1770s.\textsuperscript{117} Certainly, to Johnson “progress” meant something less immediate, less utopian, less applicable to politics, constitutions, institutions, less open to immediate human agency and far more gradual, than it did to those of his Dissenting critics who actively pursued political reform in the last third of the eighteenth century. Radical Dissenters such as Priestley and Fell challenged Johnson’s view of the stability of language, though even here there was some measure of implicit agreement about custom and usage and a recognition—regretful to Johnson, hopeful to Priestley and Fell—that language could not be fixed.\textsuperscript{118} But that all Dissenters were forward-minded, prophetic advocates of “progress” and that

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., iii. 37.
\textsuperscript{115} Life, ii. 26 ff., \textit{Monthly Repository}, x (1815), 370-1.
\textsuperscript{117} Stewart, \textit{Scott of Amwell}, pp. 84-5.
Johnson was its reactionary opponent, is a highly untenable proposition, invalidated by the theme of material improvement alone, and Boswell asserts that Johnson refrained from condemning his own age in comparison with the past.\textsuperscript{119}

From such a broad area it is possible to turn to a much more specific issue. Johnson was strongly opposed to the Slave Trade and Slavery; it was a subject upon which he and Boswell disagreed. No doubt Johnson intended to shock his Oxford audience when he exclaimed “Here’s to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies”,\textsuperscript{120} yet this outburst is by no means inconsistent with the views which he regularly expressed on the Slave Trade. He followed with sympathy the progress in the courts of the cases of escaped slaves in Britain, notably that of Joseph Knight in Edinburgh.\textsuperscript{121} Similarly, it is widely recognized that English nonconformity was in the forefront of the campaign for Abolition and subsequently for Emancipation in 1833. The motives for Johnson’s anti-slavery sentiments were admittedly different from those of many Dissenters. Slavery to him was associated with Americans and with Caribbean planters, branches of humanity which he did not regard highly and in whom he saw wealth at its most corrupting. Unlike many Dissenters, he viewed the existence of Slavery as a powerful argument against the claims for independence of the American colonies, and he took full advantage of their inconsistency in \textit{Taxation No Tyranny}.\textsuperscript{122} To Johnson, Slavery was an obstacle to the moral development of those who lived under its yoke, and an impediment to the spread of Christianity. Here he was much closer to the evangelical anti-slavery impulse than to that of the rational Dissenters, who pursued Abolition and Emancipation as part of a process of constitutional reform and political liberalisation which Johnson would not have accepted. But Anti-Slavery achieved a wide enough range of support for reformers and anti-reformers to unite under its banner: in this respect Johnson and all branches of Dissent were in agreement. Of course, Johnson died before the great public and parliamentary agitation against the Slave Trade really began. But he was part of those changing religious and

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Life}, iii. 3.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., iii. 200.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., iii. 86, 200, 202, 212; F. O. Shyllon, \textit{Black Slaves in Britain} (Oxford, 1974), pp. 177-83.

\textsuperscript{122} Samuel Johnson, \textit{Political Writings, Yale Edition}, x. 454.
cultural attitudes which made that campaign possible, and one may speculate that had he lived, and written specifically on the Slave Trade in, say, the late 1780s, his reputation amongst early nineteenth-century Dissenters would have been higher.

However, despite the undoubted concurrence over the Slave Trade, Johnson and much of Dissent held apparently different views of the nature of that central eighteenth-century political concept, "liberty". In most of the hostile comment from Dissenting sources, Johnson was portrayed as an enemy of "liberty". This is explained by four connected political developments of the eighteenth century.

The first is the alienation of much early eighteenth-century Toryism from the Hanoverian order. After 1714 the Tory party was excluded from office, proscribed and purged at local level: it saw the Church of England, which it had striven to protect, dominated by a Whig-appointed episcopal bench. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the survival of Whig-Tory conflict, and the endurance of the Tory party, until the 1750s. Although there is disagreement as to whether or not its raison d'etre was Jacobitism, historians take Toryism seriously as a parliamentary and electoral force with an oppositional mentality. Indeed, so accustomed to the practice and rhetoric of opposition did the Tory party become that it found itself increasingly concerned about corruption and the alleged growth of the executive power under Walpole, and despite deep-rooted ideological differences, Tories in Parliament could at times combine tactically with opposition Whigs over "country" issues which claimed that government was acquiring excessive influence, arrogating patronage to itself and threatening to subvert the independence of the House of Commons. Johnson grew up with this oppositional mentality; it was a crucial formative political influence upon his mind and it reinforced the


124 There is a convenient summary of Johnson's views on slavery in Life, ii. Appendix A.

bitterness of his own early struggles. It was natural for Tories to view the Hanoverian succession as the harbinger of deterioration and, with the Septennial Act and the prospect of a long period of Whig rule, as a menace to what they saw as “liberty”.

The second development was the accommodation of the Old Dissent to the existing order under the early Hanoverians. To many Dissenters the year 1714 represented a deliverance from danger. Thereafter, the Toleration Act was secure; the Riot Act included a clause to protect Dissenting chapels; the Schism and Occasional Conformity Acts were repealed, and the amendment to the Corporation Act in 1719 gave Dissenters a back door into the local government of several towns. The respectability of Dissent was acknowledged by the Regium Donum in 1723 and the Protestant Dissenting Deputies had the ear of Walpole. For the old Dissenting denominations the period 1714-60 was one of growing material prosperity, social conformity, literary achievement, internal doctrinal controversy and waning political radicalism. This was a marked contrast indeed with the “heroic” years of the later seventeenth century and although successive Indemnity Acts did not give them full civil equality, most Dissenters in the early Hanoverian years experienced a sharp decline in persecution, an increase in security and that distinct sense of improvement which was manifested in loyalty to the first two Georges and willingness to defend the Hanoverian succession during Jacobite rebellions.

The third development is the accommodation of post-1760 Toryism to the Hanoverian succession and the decay of its oppositional mentality. With the accession of George III, the age of proscription and the Tory association with Jacobitism was gone. Tories were once more loyal subjects, received at Court and candidates for office. Although Johnson himself was wary in his

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attitude to the Great Commoner,\textsuperscript{128} the Pitt-Newcastle ministry won Tory support; the Whig-Tory alignment of the earlier eighteenth century did not outlive the complex manoeuvrings which led to the formation of that ministry and some would date its demise rather earlier.\textsuperscript{129} And parallel to this process lay the fourth development, which might be described as the partial alienation of some elements of Dissent in the reign of George III. In the age of Wilkes and the American Revolution one finds Dissenters such as Scott of Amwell and Joseph Towers writing of their fears for "liberty" and of the threat of arbitrary power in a way which had not been seen since the Tory ministry of 1710-14. Although this "alienation" of Dissent must not be exaggerated, particularly as it did not really affect the "New Dissent" and as Dissenters retained a substantial stake in the existing social order, the change was detectable to many contemporaries. No one sensed more acutely the altered fortunes of Toryism and Dissent after 1760 than Johnson in \textit{The False Alarm}; indeed he claimed to detect it more quickly than did some of those country gentlemen in Parliament whom he still regarded as Tories:

A few weeks will now shew whether the Government can be shaken by empty noise, and whether the faction which depends upon its influence, has not deceived alike the public and itself ... None can indeed wonder that it has been supported by the sectaries, the natural fomenters of sedition and confederates of the rabble, of whose religion little now remains but hatred of establishments, and who are angry to find separation now only tolerated, which was once rewarded; but every honest man must lament, that it has been regarded with frigid neutrality by the Tories, who, being long accustomed to signalize their principles by opposition to the court, do not yet consider that they have at last a king who knows not the name of party, and who wishes to be the common father of all his people.\textsuperscript{130}

The cumulative result of these four political developments was a lack of chronological congruence of political experience between Johnson's Toryism and Dissent; when one was alienated, the

\textsuperscript{128} Life, ii. 134 n. 4, 314.
\textsuperscript{129} J.C.D. Clark, "The Decline of Party, 1740-1760". \textit{English Historical Review}, xciii (1978), 499-527.
\textsuperscript{130} Johnson, \textit{Political Writings}, p. 344 and n. 2. The "frigid neutrality" of the Tories is interpreted by Donald J. Greene as the almost equal division for and against the ministry of the "country gentlemen" in the vote in the House of Commons over General Warrants on 18 February 1764.
other could be accommodated; in Johnson's alienation lay Dissent's accommodation, and vice-versa; in the alienation of one lay the potential for the accommodation of the other. Yet this lack of coincidence in timing should not conceal at least some underlying libertarian assumptions which both shared. Both had some experience of insecurity, exclusion and opposition. Perhaps one should not be entirely surprised that at least some of the proscribed Tories of the early eighteenth century sought alternative incomes from industry when the path to office was closed to them, just as Dissenters are often said to have turned towards science and industry because of their exclusion from the mainstream of political life. Johnson imbibed the "excluded" attitude of early Hanoverian Toryism: he retained, and frequently expressed, a detestation of George II, against whom he "roared with prodigious violence" as late as 6 April 1775. The friend of Savage and author of *Marmor Norfolciense* actually dined with the eccentric Staffordshire Dissenter Edward Elwall, whose claim to notoriety lay in his issuing an insolent invitation to George II to engage in a personal disputation. In *The Bravery of the English Common Soldiers* (1758), Johnson extolled traditional English liberties. The first fifty years of his life left Johnson with libertarian values which he never entirely abandoned: on 6 July 1763 we find him defending the right of revolution against tyranny and on 6 April 1781 we find him relieved that Lord George Gordon had been acquitted, since "hanging a man for constructive treason ... would be a dangerous engine of arbitrary power". Johnson, as an early eighteenth-century Tory, adopted oppositional or "country" notions of liberty under the Hanoverian succession and Whig administration, at the very time when Dissent was said to be accommodating itself to the existing order under the first two Georges.

But in Johnson's later years Tories were no longer proscribed and the Church of England was far less conscious of immediate danger; hence, ironically, there was less need for an organised, old-style Tory party to defend it. Johnson's later years were passed

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132 *Life*, ii. 342.
133 Ibid., ii. 164.
134 Ibid., i. 424 and iv. 87.
in the hiatus between the end of a perceived threat to the Church of England from an erastian Whig ministry and the renewed threat to it posed by the wider implications of the French Revolution. In the later eighteenth century Johnson himself arrived at a personal accommodation with the Hanoverian order. He accepted a pension from George III in 1762, conversed respectfully with his new sovereign in the royal library five years later and wrote favourably of him in *The False Alarm*. The irony of these events did not escape the attention of his Dissenting, as well as his other, critics when he wrote on political subjects in the early 1770s. For now, to his readers, Johnson was clearly on the side of the Court and the ministry. Accordingly, Joseph Towers quoted the early Johnson against the later Johnson, asking what had changed, apart from the award of a pension; Scott of Amwell reproached him for “malignity against the mean”, while he had, as one of the “mean” himself, previously “discovered as much malignity against the great”. This was the attitude of a small but highly articulate number of old and (especially) rational Dissenters who began to show some signs of disaffection from the Hanoverian order in and after the 1760s and certainly gave others the impression that this was so. The process was quickened by theological unorthodoxy over the doctrine of the Trinity, and corresponding attacks upon that unorthodoxy. Much evidence connects Dissent with reforming movements, and sometimes with radicalism, in the reign of George III.

By a curious paradox, many later eighteenth-century rational Dissenters, Johnson’s sternest critics, were heirs to the oppositional mentality espoused by early eighteenth-century Tories, and especially by those, like Johnson himself, with Jacobite sentiments. Such a mentality could turn itself to country purposes, acceptable to Tories, to rid Parliament of “corruption”, or subsequently be adapted for radical purposes. Johnson himself,
on the other hand, was the heir, after 1760, to that very accommodation and reconciliation experienced by Dissenters of the generation of Watts and Doddridge under the first two Georges. Hence Johnson, the opponent of Walpole, author of London, who with Savage talked of standing by their country, could after 1760 come to regard talk of liberty and alleged dangers to it as foolish. Early signs of this development may be seen in the Idler, No. 47, and the plaintive appeal of "Deborah Ginger".

I would gladly, Mr Idler, be informed what to think of a shopkeeper, who is incessantly talking about liberty; a word which, since his acquaintance with polite life, my husband has always in his mouth: he is, on all occasions, afraid of our liberty, and declares his resolution to hazard all for liberty. What can the man mean? I am sure he has liberty enough? It were better for him and me if his liberty was lessened.

Similarly, in the Lives of the Poets, Johnson condemned Akenside for retaining "an unnecessary and outrageous zeal for what he called and thought liberty". On 7 May 1773 he dismissed the memory of Edward Elwall with contempt. Boswell records a number of occasions on which Johnson equated "liberty" with licentiousness and irresponsible indulgence; "all boys love liberty", he sneered in 1779. In the earlier eighteenth century the main threat to what Johnson held dear came from above; in the later eighteenth century it came from below. In the age of Walpole he feared corruption and arbitrary power; in the age of Bute and North he feared speculative reform, anarchy and the mob, asserting that "the Crown has not power enough". These changes, and the attendant chronological incongruity, explain why Johnson was a target for Dissenting writers who were intellectually more influential than their numbers might suggest. This, in turn, is a prime reason for that perception of mutual hostility which still surrounds Johnson's relations with Dissent.

on the ideological origins of English radicalism", English Historical Review, lxxxvi (1971), 719 sqq.

139 Life, i, 164.
141 Lives, iii. 411.
142 Life, ii, 251.
143 Ibid., ii. 130; iii, 383.
144 Ibid., ii. 170.
For the obsession with “liberty” among “rational Dissenters” and the heavy concentration accorded to them by many historians—a tendency from which this paper is not exempt—have tended to emphasize the antipathy rather than the common ground between Johnson and Dissent as a whole. Johnson’s real objections to Dissent lay in his view of the anti-Trinitarian doctrines espoused by a minority of its numbers, and in the implicit threat which its very existence seemed to pose to the authority of the Church of England. Consequently he felt more seriously challenged by Protestant Dissent than by Catholicism, but also more by some Dissenters than by others. His anxiety lay in the aggressive assertion of Dissenting claims in politics and their menace to the church establishment, of which there was comparatively little in the last thirty years of his life. In these views many eighteenth-century English people agreed with him and reinforce the impression of Johnson as that characteristic figure of his century in which role he is so often depicted. “Johnson’s England”, “Johnson’s London” and “The Age of Johnson” have rolled from the presses; most recently Professor Wain in his admirable catalogue to the Bicentenary exhibition of 1984 described him as the “single greatest representative” of the eighteenth century. Yet what did he represent? His relations with Dissent suggest that he represented that century in all its complexity and its resistance to easy generalisations. So often we have Johnson to thank for fending off the glib imposition of convenient labels. “The Age of Reason” is a label arrested by Johnson’s morbid fear of death; “The Age of Corruption” by his defiance of patronage; “The Age of Elegance” by his habits at the dining table. Similarly, any portrayal of eighteenth-century Toryism purely as a declining, backward-looking, squirearchical, dissent-loathing phenomenon is checked sharply by Johnson’s career and attitudes. There is more to it than that; and there is more to Dissent than an obsession with “liberty”; not all Dissenters were so obsessed, and those who were did not always find themselves in total disagreement with Johnson. Johnson’s relations with Dissent cannot simply be written off as a blind hostility between mutual antagonisms. Traditionally, their differences have been more familiar than their affinities. This paper has been a modest attempt to redress the balance.