

The Religious Thought of James Anderson, Minister of the Gospel

In 1720 an audible snicker rippled across London, as a controversial Presbyterian clergyman was mocked in two scurrilous pamphlets: *Priapeia Presbyteriana: The Presbyterian Peezle*, rapidly followed by *Anti-Priapeia Presbyteriana: Or an Answer to the Priapeia Presbyteriana*.<sup>1</sup> In each, James Anderson (1679-1739), minister to the Scots Presbyterian Church in St. James is named and in one, he is chastised as if in mid-sermon while in his pulpit:

Quit, quit, for Shame thy canting Stuff,  
...  
Quit thy feign'd Extasies and Raptures,  
And thy Burlesquing of Scriptures  
Quit thy Tub-Rapsodies and Nonsense,  
And thy protesting, on thy Conscience;  
...  
Quit thy down Looks, and squee'd out Tears  
And thy long, long Blasphemous Prayers.  
Quit thy pretensions unto Grace,  
Thy Hems, and Ha's, and set form-face,  
Thy Snivelling Nose and Lubber-Lips,  
And thy Communion-sitting hips....<sup>2</sup>

Even if one does not follow the period slang in its entirety, the message is plain: Anderson is a spiritual fraud, guilty of the worst sort melodramatic posturing. Further, the pamphlet titles are evidence that he was accused of some sexual offense. But was he really an egregious cant with a bad case of syphilis, as the pamphlets claim? This is an attack on a man, who perhaps more than anyone else at that time, was a visible representative of the Scottish Kirk in London. The pamphlets mock Anderson, whom one calls the Kirk's "Missionary at London," for rampant sexual improprieties, but their focus is also on his alien nationality and foreign church. He is a *Scottish Presbyterian*—a *Nonconformist*—camped out in the shadow of the Church of St. James,

Westminster—a person to be feared and distrusted. He is out to seduce a neighbor’s wife and his *Book of Constitutions* is coming to your masonic lodge in the very near future.

The *Priapeia* pamphlets belong to what was by then already an old and not terribly clever literary trope, and one which incidentally figures in Anderson’s personal experience.<sup>3</sup> In 1697, while still a student in Aberdeen, he was summoned to testify against William Abercrombie, minister at Lauder, who had asserted in Anderson’s presence “that the way to be a Presbyterian minister was to speak nonsense with confidence.”<sup>4</sup> Now the tables were turned, and it was Anderson who was accused of spouting nonsense. What exactly was he saying, in his sermons and publications, to attract such venom? More to *our* point, what were James Anderson’s religious beliefs, and how are they reflected in his published works, including the masonic *Book of Constitutions*?

I will examine this question through the lens of Anderson’s three most significant books of the 1730s: *Royal Genealogies* (1732), *Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity* (1733), and the second edition of the *Masonic Book of Constitutions* (1738). All are the result of work begun in previous decades, and are firmly grounded in Anderson’s education, various intellectual engagements, and Calvinist theology. I argue that he was in many ways a typical, or at least consistent, Scottish Presbyterian clergyman of his time, and at the same time a significant though largely unrecognized figure in the early Scottish Enlightenment.

Anderson was educated in Aberdeen between 1690 and 1702, attending both King’s and Marischal College. There, as in all the ancient Scottish universities, the curriculum was updated by educational reforms introduced to Scotland by of a dense web of personal and institutional connections to the largely Continental Republic of Letters, as detailed by Esther Mijer in her useful study of the ties that bound Scottish scholars to the Netherlands between 1650 and 1750.<sup>5</sup>

At every juncture in his education and career as minister, Anderson was examined for theological orthodoxy, and swore fidelity to the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>6</sup> This foundational Calvinist document, written in 1646 in England and reaffirmed in Scotland in 1690, was the Kirk's standard for faith and practice, subordinate only to the Bible, which was of course considered infallible. Anderson's assimilation of its tenets profoundly informed all his published works.

The first of the three books I will consider is *Royal Genealogies: or, The genealogical tables of emperors, kings and princes, from Adam to these times: in two parts*.<sup>7</sup> It is a massive work (854 pages), and undoubtedly took longer than the seven years Anderson admits to—and which is likely an allusion to his Old Testament namesake, Jacob.<sup>8</sup> *Royal Genealogies* embodies Anderson's claim to be a trailblazer of the Scottish Enlightenment, often located after the 1760s and 70s, but which Anderson demonstrates appears much earlier in the century. Anderson's work is characteristic of much of the writing of the Scottish Enlightenment that comes afterward. It is a **comprehensive history** of his topic, resorting to **conjecture** where evidence is lacking, and reliant on the work of sixteenth and seventeenth century **chronologers** to synchronize the ages and dynasties of man together into a coherent whole.<sup>9</sup> Chronology focused on **reconciling Biblical and secular sources** to establish a true timeline of human history—but it was fraught with religious implications, as non-Christian narratives began to establish events demonstrably prior to Biblical creation. Anderson owned several works by Joseph Scaliger, whose 1583 *Opus Novum de Emendatione Temporum* did just that—and caused reverberations that lasted through the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Anderson's connection in print to Scaliger and other scholars is reflected both in the Preface of *Royal Genealogies*, in which he thanks the aristocratic owners of

several important London libraries such as that of the Spencer family at Sunderland House, and the contents of the posthumous sale catalog of his own working library.<sup>11</sup>

Anderson's genealogy project began as a translation of an index to contemporary works of genealogy by German chorographer and genealogist Johann Hübner (1688-1731).<sup>12</sup> Given Anderson's obsessive approach to scholarship, the work soon turned into something larger and more ambitious than its inspiration.<sup>13</sup> Anderson's style was in his words, "copious and plain," assimilating all the sources he could acquire or to which he could gain access.<sup>14</sup> He makes it clear in the Preface and elsewhere that he sees this project as an ongoing concern—a body of scholarship he can use in the future to compose family histories for British aristocrats willing to pay handsomely.<sup>15</sup> Anderson focuses on *Chronology* and her twin, *Genealogy*—because the ages of man were measured in the reigns and dynasties of kings. Combined, the two disciplines form the structure of *History*, and Anderson argues that his finished work is an "*Abridgement of Universal History*," and may be used as an "Index or Dictionary to all History." He offers the work as a concordance for students and scholars, and a corrective to other works "whose Authors have been either ignorant or negligent of *Chronology* and *Genealogy*, without which any *History* is deficient, imperfect and perplexing."<sup>16</sup> Anderson hoped this publication would validate his stature as an intellectual, and that it would sell well. It needed to sell, because he owned the copyright and was responsible for all the costs associated with publishing it. Anderson reassures those who peruse the Preface that he,

. . . has avoided all Terms and Expressions that may give Offense to any Nation or Family, to any Party or Person; having nothing to do with the *National Controversies of Historians*, nor with the *Ecclesiastical and Religious Debates of Theologians*, nor with the Politics of *Statesmen*.

Instead, Anderson promises to allow "every Nation enjoy its own Fable," within the safe confines of the widely-approved chronology devised by Bishop James Ussher (1581-1656),

which begins sensibly with the Creation, at approximately 6 pm on 22 October 4004 BCE.<sup>17</sup> Even though Anderson lined up an impressive list of booksellers, sales were disappointing.<sup>18</sup> In the end, Anderson was acknowledged by an eulogist as, “a Gentleman who, by more than *twenty years study*, gave the world a book of inconceivable labour, and universal use. . .”<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the expense of researching and paying for publication also sent him to the Fleet prison for three years, which was sad recompense.<sup>20</sup>

The year after *Royal Genealogies* was published, Anderson produced his main religious work, *Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity*, a copy of which he presented to Marischal College library in gratitude for an honorary doctorate in divinity he was awarded in 1731. For those unfamiliar with the Westminster Confession, a brief description of some of its primary points is a help for what follows. In common with many Protestant confessions, the Westminster version lists as essential belief in the Trinity, *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*.<sup>21</sup> And, as was also common, the Westminster Confession states that the Pope is the anti-Christ, that the Catholic mass is idolatry, and prohibits marriage to Catholics. More controversially, the Confession requires belief in predestination, both to salvation and damnation. In either case, life after death is eternal. Finally, even believers destined for salvation, or “election,” are totally depraved by reason of Original Sin. They achieve salvation through God’s grace and Christ’s sacrifice—the sinner himself has nothing to do with the outcome. If that sounds a bit harsh, many of Anderson’s contemporaries, even in Dissenting circles, heartily agreed.

In 1719 Anderson was involved in the Salters’ Hall Debates, which were symptomatic of ever-widening disagreements between English Nonconformists on basic tenets of Christian orthodoxy.<sup>22</sup> The primary focus of the debates was whether belief in the Trinity was justified by Scripture, and if so, whether it was permissible to require Nonconformist ministers to

“subscribe” to it? Tempers ran high. A probably apocryphal account divided the ministers into those who were against persecution (their own), who went up to the gallery, and those who favored the proposed requirement, who stayed below, each shouting at the other. Anderson stayed below, but when the voting went to a second round, he was on the losing side.<sup>23</sup> He pursued that point for rest of his life, defending it in *Unity in Trinity* (1733), and in the changes he made to the first masonic charge in the 1738 edition of the *Book of Constitutions*.

Anderson took his time mulling over the problem of non-Trinitarians. Then in 1733 he published *Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity*.<sup>24</sup> This work is tedious and thorough and serves to dispel the notion that Anderson was sympathetic to any position other than strictly orthodox Trinitarianism. The structure of the work is modeled on the way Biblical proofs are included in the Westminster Confession, but he does not limit himself to Scripture to support his argument.<sup>25</sup> This is a demonstration of his theological and historical scholarship, with flourishes toward erudition. Anderson cites all manner of sources, Greek, Roman, Biblical, Talmudic, the Apocrypha, early Church fathers...he even praises Muslims for respectful treatment of Jesus in their teachings.<sup>26</sup> Anderson denounces all the wicked “Christian” polytheists; from Catholics and Arians to Socinians, Unitarians, misers, voluptuaries, ambitious men, and those who fear Satan so much that they raise him up to rival God. He then goes on to deflate the confidence of mathematicians, natural philosophers, and all who believe that reason is a sufficient guide to religious truth.<sup>27</sup> It is not. Anderson affirms the principle of election twice in this treatise but declines to argue that only Reformed Christians will be saved, asserting, “Secret things belong to God.”<sup>28</sup> In this work, Anderson was not an innovative theologian, but he did not need to be. Everything necessary had already been revealed and proved—he was just there to reiterate that orthodoxy was unassailable.

Anderson addresses another preoccupation of the Scottish Enlightenment in this work, the **problem of origins**. While this fascination could be imposed on any historical topic—his brother Adam wrote a comprehensive history of British commerce and empire, from the very beginning (1,000 pages)—James fixes on the origin of true religion.<sup>29</sup> In the process, he explores and defines a term many will recognize from his masonic writings: “the religion in which all men agree.” Unsurprisingly, Anderson demonstrates that this is the religion of the patriarchs and that debased traces of it can be found in the world’s religions even now. In his estimation, only orthodox Protestant Christians have returned to the core beliefs of the true religion which remain unchanged from the days of Noah—who in Anderson’s hands bears an uncanny theological similarity to contemporary Scottish Presbyterians. Anderson arranges these beliefs in three interrelated groups, foreshadowing the “3 Great Articles of Noah” of the 1738 *Constitutions*. These are belief in the Trinity, and since the Trinity cannot be discerned by reason, the necessity of Revelation contained in Scripture as the infallible rule of life and faith. Finally, Immortality of the soul, though whether this is eternal bliss or torment depends on election. Anderson argues that this is what the patriarchs believed, apart from the necessity for Scripture, since they had revelation directly from God which he terms “traditional Revelation.”<sup>30</sup>

Anderson is far from unique in his search for the original religion of mankind. He shares a fascination with the origins of true religion with many other Early Modern scholars, and they are amply represented in the catalogue of his library.<sup>31</sup> This obsession with origins is what led to the Early Modern focus on the ancient art of chronology in the first place, as already noted. Anderson’s education and the contents of his library argue that he had the historical, genealogical, philological, mathematical, and even astronomical skills and reference works to verify a given reconciliation between Biblical and secular or gentile dating—which is what

chronology was all about, but he spared himself the heavy lifting required to propose an original system of reconciliation, as did Isaac Newton, albeit posthumously.<sup>32</sup>

The place Anderson was compelled to innovate was the *Book of Constitution*, because he was the originator of that genre of printed masonic handbooks. While that freed his hands somewhat, he was also bound to produce what the new Grand Lodge requested, which John Theophilus Desaguliers reports in the Dedication to the 1723 edition was to compile,

. . . and digest[ing] this Book from the old *Records*, and how accurately he has compar'd and made every thing agreeable to *History* and *Chronology*, so as to render these New Constitutions a just and exact account of *Masonry* from the Beginning of the World to your *Grace's* Mastership, still preserving all that was truly ancient and authentick in the old ones.<sup>33</sup>

Nothing about Anderson's relationship with freemasonry or composition of the *Book of Constitution* was straightforward, and here is neither the time nor place to try to straighten the story out—suffice it to say that when Anderson was forced to innovate, the results were mixed. Weaving together an “authentic” history of freemasonry from Adam to the present would have been beyond anyone's abilities, especially given what Anderson had to work with: “General Records,” Traditions, and the Old Charges he could get his hands on, especially the Cooke Manuscript.<sup>34</sup> He brought to the task his knowledge of history and chronology, and fashioning a document that twinned the evolution of architecture with the lineage of Grand Masters of freemasonry, he hoped for the best. What Anderson produced in 1723 was conjectural history at its most conjectural—early in the account hardly a sentence is not qualified by supposition.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1738 edition of the *Book of Constitution*, the historical section increases from around 10,000 words to 200,000. Anderson accomplished that by a wholesale importation of material from *Royal Genealogies*, a much fuller use of other documentary evidence, and a greater attention to style and structure. He also embellished freely and apparently at whim,

sometimes clearly following an agenda of his own, and sometimes for reasons that I cannot discern from this distance. Ironically, then, it is the historical section of the 1738 *Constitutions* that stands as Anderson's most famous and influential historical writing. It is also the fullest example of his credentials as a participant in the early Scottish Enlightenment, as he brings together that movement's characteristic obsessions with **stadial history** [in clear stages or eras], **chronology, origins, philology, antiquarianism** and a willingness to substitute **conjecture** for factual evidence when it seems essential to the flow of the account.<sup>36</sup> And through the *Constitutions*, Anderson transmitted those same methods and obsessions to millions of freemasons the world over, encoding the DNA of the Scottish Enlightenment into English freemasonry and its offspring for the rest of masonic time.

I digress. Anderson's handling of religion in the *Constitutions* is equally interesting, but probably did not have the impact he intended. The majority of interpretations of Anderson's version of the first masonic charge, "Concerning God and Religion," are entirely opposite to what he meant. Anderson was briefer and more circumspect when he composed the 1723 *Constitution*—he was working under deadline and, if his claim is to be believed, under supervision. The first charge obliges the brethren to be moral, and neither an atheist nor anti-Trinitarian. At that time, and in a religious context, "libertine" means a religious freethinker, someone who is not an orthodox believer.<sup>37</sup> Remember Anderson's obsession with the Trinity and orthopraxis. He goes on in this charge to assert that within that compass, denomination and persuasion are immaterial. You could be Anglican, Huguenot, Presbyterian, Independent, Dutch Reformed.... your choice.<sup>38</sup>

By 1738, seeing all too clearly that the libertines were gaining the upper hand, Anderson was more explicit. In the first charge he repeats the earlier injunctions against atheists and

libertines, but now he introduces the “3 Great Articles of Noah,” which has consternated readers ever since. What the devil did he mean? Theological literature and more recent analyses of Anderson’s text are replete with the *Seven Laws of Noah*, but Anderson is very clear, repeating virtually the same phraseology in the historical section on Zoroaster, saying, “we leave every Brother to Liberty of Conscience; but strictly charge him carefully to maintain the *Cement of the Lodge*, and the 3 Articles of Noah.”<sup>39</sup> What are the three articles? Anderson tells you, in *Unity in Trinity*, that the core of Protestant Christian belief, as well as that of the patriarchs, is the original religion: Belief in the Trinity, Revelation as contained in Holy Scripture, and an Immortal Soul. No one else need apply.

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., *Priapeia Presbyteriana: The Presbyterian Peezle: Being a Short and True Account of Mr. An----n’s Knight-Errantry*, (London: 1720); Anon., *Anti-Priapeia: Or an Answer to the Priapeia Presbyteriana*, (London: n.d.) 2 pence.

<sup>2</sup> *Priapeia Presbyteriana*, 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Jacob Curate [Gilbert Rule], *The Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence Displayed*, (London: Randal Taylor, 1692). A full discussion is in G.D. Henderson, *Religious Life in Seventeenth-Century Scotland*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, first ed. 1937), 130.

<sup>4</sup> This is widely reported, but this version is in A. L. Miller, “The Connection of Dr. James Anderson, of the ‘Constitutions,’ with Aberdeen and Aberdeen University,” *AQC*, 36 (1923), 97.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Mijers, “News from the Republick of Letters,” *Scottish Students, Charles Mackie and the United Provinces, 1650-1750*, (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> And, while he was separated from his congregation in 1734, it was not on theological grounds.

<sup>7</sup> J. Anderson, *Royal Genealogies: or, The genealogical tables of emperors, kings and princes, from Adam to these times: in two parts*, (London: James Bettenham, 1732).

<sup>8</sup> J. Anderson, *Royal Genealogies*, Preface.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Ahrent,

<sup>10</sup> FILL IN HERE

<sup>11</sup> J. Anderson, *Royal Genealogy*, Preface; Joseph Scaliger, *Opus de emendatione temporum*, (Geneva: Rovere, 1629); BL SC 303, *A Catalogue of Curious and Useful Books in Divinity, History, Physick, Surgery & C. in Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French and English. Being the Libraries of the Late Dr Anderson, and of an Eminent Surgeon...Monday the 27<sup>th</sup> of this instant, 1739, and continue daily until all are sold, by Thomas Payne*; Manchester University Library Catalogue, Sunderland House Library, second quarter of eighteenth century, GB 133 Eng MS 62, <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/8a1d95ac-75e8-3bc4-bfc5-f64ef3660fa7>. Accessed 5/10/2022.

<sup>12</sup> Johann Hübner, *Bibliotheca Genealogica, Das ist: Ein Verzeichniß aller Alten und Neuen Genealogischen Bücher von allen Nationen in der Welt*, (Hamburg: Brandt, 1729).

<sup>13</sup> The obsessive reworking and embellishment of projects was a recurring theme in Anderson’s work, and led, on the one hand, to the abandonment of *Interviews in the Realms of Death*, and on the other, to the doubling of the length of the *Book of Constitutions* from the 1723 edition to that of 1738. Anon., (J. Anderson), *Interviews in the realms of death*, (London: printed for J. Hooke, R. Ford and J. Graves, 1723). This work was reissued after Anderson’s death, in 1739, with a new title page, by John Cecil and Francis Noble.

<sup>14</sup> J. Anderson, *Royal Genealogies*, Preface.

<sup>15</sup> J. Anderson, *Royal Genealogies*, Preface. Only one aristocrat took him up on it, John Perceval, who had recently been created the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Egmont. Anderson died before it was complete, and the work was passed on to another

author to finish. It was finally published in 1742 as *A genealogical history of the house of Yvery*, (London: H. Woodfall, 1742). Reviews were not favorable.

<sup>16</sup> J. Anderson, *Royal Genealogies*, Preface.

<sup>17</sup> J. Anderson, *Royal Genealogies*, Preface; E. Mijer, *Republic of Letters*, 171.

<sup>18</sup> E. Symon and J. Clarke; R. Ford ; A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch, J. Osborn and T. Longman ; R. Gosling ; A. Millar, and N. Prevost ; T. Green ; J. Jackson ; and J. Stagg,

<sup>19</sup> *The Scots Magazine*, (4 June 1739).

<sup>20</sup> TNA, PRIS 1/5 f. 212 (old pagination 353).

<sup>21</sup> The Bible is the only infallible source of authority for Christian life and practice, and that believers attain forgiveness for their transgressions through their faith (justification by faith), and not good works.

<sup>22</sup> David Wykes, "Subscribers and non-subscribers at the Salters' Hall debate," (act. 1719). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 6 May. 2022, from

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-95681>

<sup>23</sup> *A true relation of some proceedings at Salters-Hall by those ministers who sign'd the first article of the Church of England* (London: J. Clark, 1719)

<sup>24</sup> James Anderson, *Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity: A Dissertation Shewing Against Idolaters, modern Jews, and Anti-Trinitarians, How the Unity of God is evinc'd, with an Account of Polytheism, Antient and Modern. . .*, (London: Richard Ford, 1733).

<sup>25</sup> Westminster Assembly (1643-1652). *The Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechism, First Agreed upon by the Westminster Assembly of Divines at Westminster. and Now Approved by the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland, to be a Part of Uniformity in Religion between the Kirks of Christ in the Three Kingdomes* (Edinburgh: Evan Tyler, 1660). <https://www.proquest.com/books/confession-faith-larger-shorter-catechism-first/docview/2264178227/se-2?accountid=14952>.

<sup>26</sup> PUT THIS IN

<sup>27</sup> AND THIS.

<sup>28</sup> J. Anderson, *Unity in Trinity*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Adam Anderson, *An historical and chronological deduction of the origin of commerce, from the earliest accounts to the present time. . . With an appendix, containing the modern politico-commercial geography of the several countries of Europe. In two volumes*, (London: Printed for A. Millar, J. and R. Tonson, J. Rivington, R. Baldwin, W. Johnston, L. Hawes, W. Clarke and R. Collins, T. Longman, J. Dodsley, and R. Horsfield, 1764).

<sup>30</sup> J. Anderson, *Unity in Trinity*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> BL SC 303, *A Catalogue of Curious and Useful Books in Divinity, History, Physick, Surgery & C. in Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French and English. Being the Libraries of the Late Dr Anderson, and of an Eminent Surgeon...Monday the 27<sup>th</sup> of this instant, 1739, and continue daily until all are sold, by Thomas Payne.*

<sup>32</sup> See Jed Z. Buchwald & Mordechai Feingold, *Newton and the Origin of Civilization*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> J.T. Desaguliers in J. Anderson, *Constitutions*, 1723, Dedication.

<sup>34</sup> PUT IN SOMETHING HERE

<sup>35</sup> J. Anderson, *Constitutions*, 1723, 1-48.

<sup>36</sup> See detailed studies of these characteristics and their place in the Scottish Enlightenment and the transition from the Scientific Revolution to Enlightenment: Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690-1805*, (New Haven: Yale, 2014); Jed Z. Buchwald & Moredechai Feingold, *Newton and the Origin of Civilization*, (New Haven: Yale, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> "libertine, n. and adj.". OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/107892?redirectedFrom=libertine> (accessed May 10, 2022).

<sup>38</sup> J. Anderson, *Constitutions*, 1723, 50.

<sup>39</sup> J. Anderson, *Constitutions*, 1738, 23