

INTRODUCTION

There exists a Supreme Mind, which is the cause and foundation of the universe. Those who hold this, and who also hold that the human mind can become possessed of necessary truths, if they are asked how it is that these necessary truths are universally verified in the material world, will reply, that it is so because the Supreme Creative-Mind has made it so to be:—that the truths which exist or can be generated in man's mind agree with the laws of the universe, because He who has made and sustains man and the universe has caused them to agree:—that our ideas correspond to the Facts of the world, and the Facts to our Ideas, because our Ideas are given by the same Power which made the world, and given so that these can and must agree with the world so made.

WILLIAM WHEWELL, 1860

The subject of this book is a quest, by a group centered on Trinity College, Cambridge University, to ground a human purity informed by divine faith directed by the Established Church. This was, certainly at a socially elite level, fundamental to objectivity and came from within and not from outside. It was also a fierce critique of the rise in utilitarianism and individualism, in short a now largely forgotten theological condemnation of values associated with a rapidly colonizing capitalism in nineteenth-century England.

The words in the opening epigraph were written by William Whewell, son of a Lancaster house carpenter and a mother who annually contributed enigmas and charades to the *Lady's Diary*.¹ The argument was the mature articulation of several decades of intellectual reflection behind the walls of his beloved alma mater.² In a sense, it was a traditional English variant on a prevailing German idealist argument, which emphasized that true understanding was only possible because certain ideas explaining the universe were somehow within us. To be sure this was very much

an English hybrid version in which natural philosophy was subsumed to religion; access to underlying ideas of the world could be sourced only via true religious faith—more Lutheran than Kantian—guided by a state-supported National Church. For Whewell, such truth was a divine sensory-metaphysical synthesis.³ An “Idea” represented “those inevitable general relations which are imposed upon our perceptions by acts of the mind, and which are different from anything which our senses directly offer to us.” Examples included “space and time, number and figure, cause and resemblance,” which Whewell termed “*Fundamental Ideas*.”⁴

The place where the “Supreme Mind” could be mirrored was the apex of Anglican education, Cambridge, and especially Trinity. Any notion of a recognizably modern science was still at least nearly a century off. Religion still infused, directly or indirectly, all the ways of elite knowing. Even those that denied the relevance of religion had to labor extremely arduously to do so.

The rise of secular faith, political radicalism, science, commerce, and industry was, as it seemed to Anglican critics, undermining this spiritual world and challenging it with a superficial material one: a human-centric rationalist society hell-bent on measurable betterment via profit, consumption, and a prevalent notion of progress. There was no room in this movement for the soul. This was an entity distinct from your body—the seat of your mind, character, thoughts, and feelings. Without a soul, you were incapable of redemption from the power of sin through divine grace. Salvation was fundamental to interpreting the world. The absence of the soul, for people at the center of this book, created a false dialectical relationship between the human inner domain and the outside creation; the result was a cold mechanical world devoid of a divine spirit. For others it was simply a sign of ignorance. The harbingers of this new, purely materialistic world wanted the social system and political constitution to be reformed, with the old certainties such as the state and Church of England coupled with the traditional sinews of political power reformed. For Whewell, the potential collapse of the prevailing creation was a chilling vision he shared with several close friends at Trinity and beyond.

This book tells the history of a struggle, spearheaded from Cambridge by a Trinity Circle (TC), between faith in God versus trust in pure human reason (a priori deduction) and/or human sensory empiricism (experience)—both of the latter two approaches, for the TC, were devoid of God; faith purely in human sensory observation and/or abstract human-centric rational intelligence sent you down the path to perdition, a false world via an illusory logic. Authority came from above and not below. An emphasis on certain innate ideas was informed by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant; reason could not work without ideas (for

example space and time), and ideas were not, contrary to John Locke and David Hume, simply derived through the senses. Divinely planted ideas, for the TC, were the foundations to true knowledge. This was the attraction to Kant's transcendental idealism and emphasis on Euclidian geometry; our understanding of the nature of the world was not possible without both innate ideas and experience. Central to this Kantian belief was an emphasis on a morality informed by beauty, feelings, and the imagination. This, for Kant, was the recipe for genius.⁵ The TC, of course, shared overlaps with peoples and groups beyond the college's boundaries. However, they were a distinct and significant intellectual circle in defining an important English nineteenth-century view toward a notion of knowledge.

The term *Trinity Circle* (TC)—rather than, say, *ideology* or *philosophy*—is deliberately coined for the following reasons. Despite the varying intellectual tools adopted by the leading protagonists of this book, they all sought to defend and strengthen the Church of England. All agreed that the base of knowledge was God and that the only way to preserve this divine centrality to life was via a robust Established Church and accompanying Anglican education. As such they all aggressively disliked the new abstract deductive (Ricardian) political economy, growing materialism, Benthamite utilitarianism, abstract French algebraic mathematics, evolution, and a growing faith in human logic. In short, they sought to crush anything that challenged traditional social authority and the Church of England. They all had, to begin with, overlapping and different approaches to how best to achieve this objective but were all united in their attempt to do so. This is hardly surprising at the commencement of the nineteenth century since tensions were high after the French Revolution and the disruption of the rise of an industrial society. Questions concerning the nature of knowledge and traditional authority were in a state of flux.

A unified Established Church was the solution to the socioeconomic instability of the post-Napoleonic War crisis. The commercial spirit, political radicalism, and a swath of blasphemous and seditious publications needed to be stopped. The traditional alliance between the Church, Constitution, and landed classes needed to be bolstered. This alliance was the true guardian of cultural authority and desperately needed to reassert itself. The TC would draw on anything they thought would further this quest. The organic unity of society was being destroyed by a false empiricism and deductive logic that had no basis. The question of how best to do this haunted numerous Anglicans, but there was no consensus in the Church of England on how to achieve it. This was also reflected in the approaches taken by the TC. Nonetheless, all were unit-

ed in the belief that truth came only via knowing God from within. They were determined to defend the prevailing cultural authority and underline the divine origin of the human species.

The journey for Whewell began in October 1812 when he arrived in Cambridge to commence his university education at the bottom of the social scale for entrants, namely a subsizar (literally a subsidized student). At the top of the social scale were noblemen, who were admitted due to their background rather than academic ability.⁶ Whewell seemingly overcame any worries concerning his social roots and forged a close friendship with another Trinity student, Julius Charles Hare. By contrast Hare came from a very wealthy aristocratic family; he was the son of the famous historian Francis Hare-Naylor and the painter and cousin of the Duchess of Devonshire Georgina Shipley. Hare was born in Vicenza, Italy, before being educated at Charterhouse School (then based in Smithfield, London), and came to Cambridge with the more typical, privileged status of a middle-ranking pensioner who paid full tuition fees.⁷ It was while in Italy that he was greatly informed by Clotilde Tambroni, an Italian philologist, linguist, and poet. Between 1793 and 1798 she was a professor of Greek language at the University of Bologna, and from 1800 a professor in Greek and literature.⁸

The following year Whewell and Hare bonded with Hugh James Rose who also entered Trinity as a pensioner. He was educated at Uckfield School in Sussex where his father was headmaster. Already by the age of four he could recite the Greek alphabet after private lessons from the former Uckfield pupil and Jesus College, Cambridge, student Edward Daniel Clarke.⁹ They were joined a year later by Connop Thirlwall, son of a clergyman, who came from East London, again as a pensioner. Thirlwall already knew Hare from his time at Charterhouse, and it was not long before they were reacquainted. The school, particularly under the auspices of its headmaster, Matthew Raine, a former Trinity fellow, had become a prominent feeder of boys to his former college. Whewell, Hare, Rose, and Thirlwall went on to forge a distinct TC. To be sure there were levels of disagreement but enough shared family resemblances to shape a coherent and important group. Their glue, as opposed to approach, bonded them to safeguard the Church and not break away from tradition in the sense of the later Oxford Balliol idealists. The emphasis of the TC was on the next world and not this one.¹⁰ Last, many of their views were shared by a slightly older Trinity fellow, the Yorkshire son of an Anglican vicar, Adam Sedgwick, who was educated at Sedburgh School in Cumbria—the same seminary where the Romantic poet William Wordsworth sent his sons. We shall see that the sinews of this core circle, and indeed other Trinity graduates, stretched far and wide.¹¹

All the TC came to be united in their quest to demonstrate that “mankind,” with an accompanying evangelical emphasis on human reason, was secondary and always dependent on an all-powerful and actively interventionist God. This had clear implications for the nature of religious faith, knowledge, and traditional social authority. Access to genuine understanding, they believed, was only possible to those with a soul; this could not be easily articulated but was crucial to comprehending God’s world—be it knowledge, social structure, the economy, or, crucially, morality.

The TC were all united in their defense of the Church of England. This manifested in a shared view toward many issues they believed were highly significant, particularly concerning the future of the Church, knowledge, and the status quo. However, in terms of how best to preserve the Church they often greatly differed. At one end of the spectrum was Rose and the other Thirlwall. The former fervently disliked the early enthusiasm by the latter for German scriptural criticism and toleration of religious Dissenters. Here Rose was far more representative of the prevailing Anglican High Church status quo than Thirlwall. Since the French Revolution there had been a reaction against anything foreign. German biblical scholarship was now associated with a threat to the truth and validity of the Bible—thence Christianity and the Church of England. Since the late 1790s journals like the *Anti-Jacobin Review* slammed German scholarship as antireligious and a threat to the divine inspiration of the Bible. It was important to underline stability and at the heart of this was the Bible. In 1804 the British and Foreign Bible Society loudly asserted it only recognized the King James Bible as “the translation of the Scripture established by Public Authority,” that is, the Church of England.¹²

By the 1850s Thirlwall would be much closer to Rose’s tough and uncompromising stance toward the divine basis of Scripture. The use of such German criticism came at a particular instant in their debates, but by the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, it had become an adverse source. Ironically the young Thirlwall and Hare’s promotion of German biblical scholarship would by this time be seen, as Rose predicted, as deeply erosive to the Church and Christian religion. This was typical of the TC, all of whom tended to abandon any resource their enemies found helpful—from German criticism to, as we shall see, mathematical algebraic analysis and human logic.

The Trinity Circle engages with the TC’s concerns and how they attempted to promote a historicist version of the Anglican faith. This in turn had to somehow be embodied within the academic curriculum at Trinity and then Cambridge. One general feature of this was working

out how to put the right moral philosophy, which mirrored this quest, into such a syllabus. For spatial and archival reasons Whewell represents the spine of this history. First, he was the only one of the TC who spent his whole life at Trinity and, indeed, literally became the outward embodiment of the college as master in 1841. Moreover, his records, letters, and output have been by far the best preserved. In this sense Whewell is the hub and the rest are spokes within the following history. This is not to detract from the others, but for these reasons Whewell was at the geographical and intellectual heart of the TC. Nonetheless, this is not a biography of Whewell or indeed the TC. Rather, it is a moment that illuminates a controversy over both the nature of religion, scientific belief, and an emerging capitalism. Far from being an age of improvement, it was an age of anxiety for these men.

To be sure, the TC was not always a perfect circle and their views clearly differed in how to achieve a National Church. Nonetheless their differences tended, wherever possible, to remain private. On the occasion they did go public, such as Thirlwall's vocal support for Dissenters to be allowed into Cambridge, a solution of sorts would be found. Rose stayed resolute in his doctrinal beliefs all his life. From the 1820s Whewell also became far more static and defined in his outlook. Hare, Thirlwall, and Sedgwick were perhaps the most liberal during this decade. However, after the Great Reform Act of 1832 this started to change, with Hare taking up his family clerical living at Herstmonceux, Sussex. Here he became far more anti-change and suspicious, if not fearful, concerning the future of the Church, the Anti-Corn Law Movement, and Chartism. Thirlwall and Sedgwick continued to support the move to allow Dissenters to take a degree at Cambridge and Oxford. However, by the 1850s they had also become much more conservative and reactionary toward ecclesiastical and social reform. By this point Thirlwall had assumed one of the top positions in the Church when he was appointed bishop of St. David's.

As well as seeking to preserve a National Church, by the 1820s all the TC were suspicious of human-centric rational reformers, especially revolutionary French philosophers, abstract analysts, and British utilitarians. These people were selfish individualists and dangerous radicals committed to tearing up Albion's organic structure and severing the sacred relationship of the Church and state. Established religion should always have the upper hand, correctly taught via an accompanying doctrine, over all other forms of belief. The National Church was the standard of measurement (knowledge, morality, and authority) that secured social order from political chaos and insubordinate challenge; moreover, it was the key vector in ensuring the safe passage from this temporary

world to the eternal future in the next. This theology, and an accompanying hierarchical social and moral structure, needed credibility and obedience. However, the means to protect these essential axioms would come to divide nineteenth-century England and, for a time, the TC. There is no doubt that it was during the volatile and divided 1830s that much of all this came to a head; it is no exaggeration that the future of the social hierarchy was at stake.

The traditional Anglican relationship with the state was under mounting threat, and as such, the nation's Constitution and the Established Church needed to be revitalized by spreading an authentic religious temperament. This, it was hoped by many fearful of radical reform, would ensure that the prevailing quest for change—built on false and godless principles—would become redundant. Severing the dominant role of the Church and its educational seminaries, Oxford and Cambridge, had to be rigorously guarded against. The prevailing “steam intellect” that was dangerously heating up the country should not be allowed to enter Anglican seats of learning.¹³ Instead the emphasis had to be on finding one's soul—preparing for the next world—and not materialistic ambition in this one; this was the bond of Church unity and security for the country's ruling elite.

Whewell later confessed to his brother-in-law, James Marshall, his love for “our National Constitution and in our National Religion. I believe that these embody more of the truth, are better approaches to the true form of Church and State, than have ever yet been established.” The National Church and Constitution were “living things” and not “mere formulae”; the implicit relationship between the Church of England and the Constitution was not negotiable. Reform should, and could, take place only within Anglican terms.¹⁴ Along with the contrasting Oxford University theological movements such as the Oriel Noetics and later the Tractarians, the work of the TC was popular with a vast respectable swath concerned with theology, epistemology, morality, and social authority.¹⁵ There was much overlap but also huge differences in such perspectives, in particular “the Noetics' logical speculative approach to political economy.”¹⁶ Although the two groups shared the same objective of preserving the Church, their approaches were antithetical to each other.¹⁷

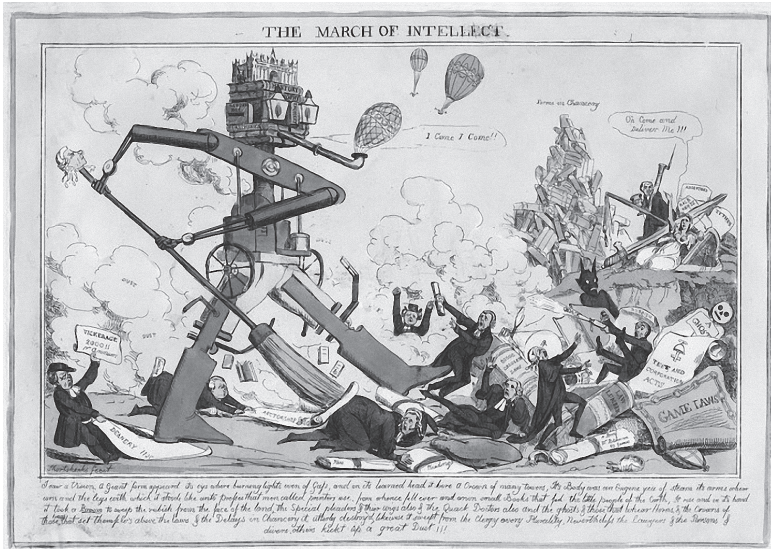
Chapter 1 looks at Cambridge and the environment the TC was entering in the early nineteenth century. This was an exciting and turbulent time, and proof of the vulnerability of the Church of England and God's rule was not difficult to see. For the first half of its first decade the British were still waging war with the godless Napoleonic regime. France's traditional establishment had been stripped away and replaced by an ahistori-

cal and, for many frightened English people, false human-centric rational structure. The French Revolution (1789–1799) had released a hurricane of change with competing forms of knowledge challenging traditional theological teachings. For Anglicans in England the indigenous equivalent meant—most threateningly—utilitarianism, die-hard empiricists, the importation of French algebraic mathematics, a priori logicians, religious dissenters, and a radicalized working class; it spelled the possible end of the Established Church, morality, and traditional authority.¹⁸

Ecclesiastical reform had been debated for several years, and its importance was magnified during the French Revolutionary (1792–1799) and Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815). The privileges and monopoly of the Church had given rise to a large wave of critical condemnation. To add to the woes, a strong Christian evangelical movement had also taken root, insisting that the Church desperately needed to reform. For example, they insisted that clergymen who did not stay in residence where they worked should be prosecuted—this was subsequently legislated in 1803. Moreover, they challenged the need for the Church's doctrines and practices to be codified in the 39 Articles.¹⁹

The Anglican Church's clergy saw their role as thwarting the rise of French radicalism and religious nonconformity. However, they themselves had become a source of contempt for many residing in the country. For example, the tithe—a Church tax—had especially become a source of rural dislike. This led to another parliamentary bill in 1808 to improve the maintenance of the Church's clergy. The situation was seemingly irresolvable, since resources to provide an adequate stipend for a curate to live in an appropriate dwelling and have a married life were already hard. Hatred of the tithe led, two decades later, to the clergy being attacked during the Swing Riots.²⁰

Threats were also coming from elsewhere. Cheap and accessible publications drawing on astronomy and new disciplines like chemistry, biology, and geology were harnessed to aid the march of political reform. For example, aspects of the work of the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck were harnessed by the London medical and penny presses to demonstrate that we had all transmuted from self-acting matter devoid of any divine intervention. This, as Adrian Desmond puts it, raised “the spectre of design without a designer.”²¹ Accompanying this was also the breakdown of the organization of natural philosophy from its traditional institutional home at the Royal Society of London (est. 1660) to satellite specialist groups like the Geological Society of London (est. 1807) and the Astronomical Society of London (est. 1820). A few years later the reformers gained a breakthrough in higher education with the creation of London University in 1827. Henry Brougham two years earlier had



Robert Seymour, “Satire against corruption: A huge automaton representing the new London University (from 1836 University College, London and, finally, from 1907 University College London) tramples over greedy clerics, doctors, lawyers and the crown,” 1828.

predicted to the radical MP Sir Francis Burdett that such an event would crush “the High Church Bigots.”²²

Just as religious sectarianism had triggered an English Civil War in the mid-seventeenth century, for many Anglicans something similar was brewing in the early nineteenth century. Knowledge based primarily on human reason was, more than ever, challenging traditional *theological* teachings and with it the sacred alliance between Church and state.

The unified eighteenth-century trinity of politics, religion, and knowledge was under critical scrutiny like never before; the monopoly of the Church of England, with its rituals and Prayer Book as a binding force, was being challenged, leading in many ways to its revival within a deluge of social upheaval and accompanying notions of knowledge and authority. For many it reached a crisis point when the Test and Corporation Acts were repealed in 1828; the following year Dissenters and Catholics were placed on the same level as Anglicans. The 1832 Great Reform Act further expanded Parliament and threatened its essentially Anglican makeup. If the National Church was eclipsed it would open the path to diverse religious sectarianism, the tyranny of democracy, moral decay, the rise of the working classes, and possible revolution. Democracy then, as opposed to now, was for most in social authority a derisory concept. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was fearful: “The Church is the last relic of our

nationality,” and its fate dominated his thoughts.²³ Chapter 2 deals with these themes and the attempt by the TC to thwart materialism and retain the soul within the university’s teaching curriculum; human feelings ran much deeper than mere human reason and sensory perception. Ultimately epistemology was divine and could be revealed only by someone with the right religious demeanor.

Boundaries were being remade at every level—from society, the workplace, and politics to education and knowledge. The TC was one elite group caught in this growing environment of uncertainty and change. In 1810 Thirlwall described French poetry as “tedious and insipid” and condemned home-produced radicals such as Burdett and the corrupted thinking of the Etonian, rational etymologist, and former St. John’s student Horne Tooke. The French Revolution, he hissed, had simply “produced wretches hardened by crime” who convinced “themselves into the idea of a disbelief of a future state of existence.”²⁴ All the TC were quickly dismayed at the emphasis they found placed at Cambridge on the works of Locke and Paley.²⁵

Hare told Whewell in 1822: “Plato is worth ten thousand Aristotles & Locke’s.”²⁶ Tooke drew on an extreme Lockean version of language that reduced all cerebral action to human linguistic activity devoid of any divine input.²⁷ Locke essentially saw religion as a private matter that should be separate from a National Church and state. More precisely, Locke did not object to established religion per se but did not think it had any special legitimacy (as against the various other sects), and he did not think it was in any way identified with the state. The Church of England, of course, insisted that only via its 39 Articles could religious interpretation take place. Where the source of understanding came from within for the TC, it was external for Locke and comprehended by human sensory-based reason. This latter argument was also established by the works of prominent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists such as the Irish freethinker John Toland and Matthew Tindal.²⁸ Such deism had declined but took new forms from the second half of the eighteenth century in Socinianism, Arianism, and Unitarianism. Cambridge was still reeling from the controversy aroused after the expulsion of the King’s School-educated Unitarian and onetime student of Paley, William Frend, on religious grounds in 1788 just before the French Revolution.²⁹ Frend was first deprived of his tutorship in 1788, but the real crisis came in 1793–1794 during the French reign of terror, regicide, and war. Within this context Frend was expelled, though he continued to derive his fellow’s stipend until he married.

Paley’s work, primarily his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), supported utilitarian morality and placed the emphasis on

man's sensory reason to detect design. It was this that was examined at Cambridge and not Paley's theology, which argued for the authenticity of the Bible, Jewish prophesy, God, and miracles. In his empirical evidence of Christianity, *Natural Theology or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802), Paley placed a human-centric reason at the core of Christian morality and described a contented world filled with more happiness than pain. A legalistic and empirical view of theology, in which evidence of God was simply found in nature, revolted men like Coleridge and the TC.³⁰ As Robert Hole neatly summarizes, both Jeremy Bentham and Paley "pushed men down a secular road which replaced divinely imposed duty with selfish calculation."³¹ Competitive individualism was replacing the moral duty imposed by God. This was a short step away from what Samuel Clarke had much earlier, in his public scrap with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, condemned as materialism: "The notion of the world's being a great machine, going on without the interposition of God, as a clock continues to go without the assistance of a clockmaker; is the notion of materialism and fate, and tends (under pretense of making God a *supra-mundane intelligence*), to exclude providence and God's government in reality out of the world."³² Self-interest was no basis for the organization of society and was a fiction rather than based on facts. Indeed, it was deliberately setting up a false divide between the landed interests and everyday folk.³³ The TC hated this perspective.

There were equally theological disputes erupting over the credibility of the gospels underpinning the Christian doctrine. This is the subject of Chapter 3, as well as the TC's response to this fraught situation. The key to survival for the established clergy was to resist sectarian schools of conflicting theological wrangling and become united through nurturing one's soul via the divine belief prescribed by the National Church. The traditional emphasis upon natural theology as a way of uniting different views had now, for Anglicans like the TC, become subversive and closer to materialism and a world without God. This issue would continue to dominate the lives of the TC throughout the nineteenth century. To substantiate the truth within the gospels, Hare and Thirlwall applied controversial German biblical criticism to create a credible doctrine for the National Church; a doctrine that could embrace an array of dissenting views. These two men were then at the forefront of importing German critical studies into England. Hare confessed to his mother in 1820 that he owed German literature "my ability to believe in Christianity."³⁴

By this point, the TC was becoming divided. Rose, now an orthodox Tory member of the High Anglican Church, condemned the German approach as no better than any other godless rational philosophy; all the gospels came directly from the word of God and were beyond human

questioning. Whewell increasingly agreed with his old strict and stiff friend. This disagreement within the TC came to a head in the refusal to allow Rational Dissenters into Trinity during the early 1830s. This event forms the subject of Chapter 4.

Thereafter, however, even Thirlwall started coming around to Whewell's Anglican conservatism and Rose's fear of German biblical studies. Ironically, just as the most fervent advocate of German biblical scholarship was turning his back on it as a threat to the Church of England and Scripture, the rest of the country was beginning to embrace it.³⁵ All the TC feared the growing dominance of a new political economy and utilitarian philosophy, which was emerging as a doctrine of legitimation for the materialistic world of profit and consumption. This was an abstract, human-centric, political economy that legislated axioms without any historical foundation based on inductive scrutiny. The former Caius graduate Richard Jones, hounded by Whewell, set about providing an alternative economics that he preferred to call an "ethical economy," based on historical facts spread across space and time. This ethical approach was closely tied to bolstering the Church of England—particularly its close relationship to the state and as a large landowner. Although Jones was not a product of Trinity, he was extremely close to all the TC and probably Whewell's closest friend. The attack on political economy is the theme of Chapter 5. Consequently the works of Jones and Sedgwick are also incorporated, as their labor on educational apologetics and moral economics made them important and useful to the TC but not necessarily as equal members.

The new rational knowledge was based, as far as the TC thought, on un-credible grounds and was penetrating too many institutions—including Cambridge, Oxford, the Church, and the Constitution. Someone had to make a stand and prevent such knowledge from entering the Anglican university's curriculum and the Church's teachings. Great scientific discoveries ultimately came from those in touch with innate divine ideas and manifested in the genius of pious heroes exemplified by the Trinity don Isaac Newton. This required a higher morality derived from within. We engage with these themes in the final three chapters.