

George Berkeley and Thomas Secker: A Note

Tom Jones

Thomas Secker, successively bishop of Bristol (1735), Oxford (1737), Dean of St. Paul's (1750), and Archbishop of Canterbury (1758), is mentioned by Alexander Campbell Fraser, A. A. Luce, and David Berman as one of Berkeley's close associates, often with the citation from Pope's *Epilogue to the Satires*, "Dialogue II." lines 70-73, where Secker is decent and Berkeley has every virtue under heaven.¹ Fraser reproduces many of the letters from Secker to Berkeley that are preserved in the Berkeley papers in the British Library. There is a general recognition that Secker, who later patronized Berkeley's son George, is a long-standing and important connection for Berkeley. Yet there has been no attempt, as far as I can tell, to explore Secker's career and relate it to Berkeley's, and that is what I shall attempt briefly here. I want to suggest that after moving to Cloyne, Berkeley did not become a recluse or interest himself only in Irish national issues (as some accounts suggest), but was participating in a broader effort of the Anglican episcopate to promote the place of the church in national and civic life by means of challenging secular political authority and promoting residence and activity from local clergy. This effort appealed to Berkeley's already developed opposition to free-thinking and irreligion. I will revisit the Berkeley-Secker correspondence and look at Secker's ambitions for the church in order to explore this effort. I will also suggest that some passages from *The Querist* encourage one to see Berkeley's life at Cloyne in this way, and that the clerical and socio-economic aspects of Berkeley's time at Cloyne are closely related.

In August 1766 Secker began writing an autobiography in response to comments made about him by Francis Blackburne in publications relating to the controversy over the institution of Anglican bishops in America, a scheme Secker vigorously supported.² In this apology Secker mentions his friendship with Berkeley, reporting their first acquaintance and his later patronage of George Berkeley Junior: "Somewhat before I went into Orders, I became acquainted with Dr Clarke of St James's, & with Dean Berkeley, afterwards Bishop of Cloyne" (9). "My good Friend Bishop Berkeley dying at Oxford in January, his Widow & Son & Daughter spent the Summer with me, [and I gave his Son, after I was made ABp, the Chancellorship of Brecknock, the Vicarage of Bray, & the Rectory of Acton, 3 of my options]" (33).³ The *Autobiography* provides evidence

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¹ *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One Volume Edition of the Twickenham Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Routledge, 1963), 697.

² See *The Autobiography of Thomas Secker Archbishop of Canterbury*, eds. John S. Macauley and R. W. Greaves (Lawrence: University of Kansas Libraries, 1988), xii-xiii. Further page references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

³ The matter in square brackets indicates footnote additions Secker made to his text.

of the friendship between Berkeley and Secker. It is a principal source for the biographical review introducing the posthumous edition of Secker's works, which elaborates and expands upon it: "He now [1721/2] spent a considerable Part of his Time in *London*, where he quickly gained the Esteem of some of the most learned and ingenious Men of those Days, particularly of Dr. CLARKE, Rector of *St. James's*, and the celebrated Dean BERKELEY, afterwards Bishop of *Cloyne*, with whom he every Day became more delighted and more closely connected."⁴

The *Autobiography* also provides a scrap of hitherto unrecognized information concerning Berkeley's whereabouts between winter 1727 and spring 1728. Fraser notes that there is nothing indicating Berkeley's location at this time.⁵ Luce approaches the period with wariness, recognizing that Berkeley is making many complex and some secretive arrangements: "An air of mystery surrounds his movements in 1727 and 1728 (early), probably connected either with the Bermuda business or with his approaching marriage or with both." Luce suggests a trip to Dublin and notes that Berkeley is back in London in February 1728.⁶

Secker's *Autobiography* provides an answer to the mystery of Berkeley's location. Secker travelled from London

to Bath in the <End of August,> where I { was in the beginning of September, & } stayed there till { Spring } <Apr.8.1728>. There I became acquainted with Mr Ralph Allen, afterwards so noted; & with Dean Stanhope, by whose Bedside I stood at his Death, in March 1727..⁸ [³ & with Mr, afterwards Sir John, James; & with Mr Dalton; who, with Dean Berkeley, were here a considerable Part of the Winter.] (11-12)

I have uncovered no evidence of what Berkeley was doing in Bath at this time, but perhaps, given that Dalton and James both accompanied him to America, he was involved in Bermuda business. Perhaps Berkeley is in Bath partly to discuss Bermuda and other religious matters with Secker?⁷

Pursuing the connection between Secker and Berkeley allows for a change of emphasis in the description of Berkeley's tenure of his bishopric. Fraser (233-34) and Luce (173) respectively describe this period as one of reclusion and active retirement. Luce notes that Berkeley "exchanged episcopal confidences with English bishops, with Gibson of London, Secker of Oxford, and Benson of Gloucester." that he was concerned with the economic condition of Ireland, and that he hardly left Cloyne in eighteen years. Luce acknowledges that Berkeley "had been an absentee dean [having spent much of his time

⁴ "A Review of the Life and Character of Archbishop Secker," in *The Works of Thomas Secker, LL.D.*, 3rd ed., ed. Beilby Porteous and George Stinton (6 vols.; Dublin: J. Williams, 1775), 1: vi.

⁵ A. C. Fraser, *Life and Letters of George Berkeley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), 147.

⁶ A. A. Luce, *The Life of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), 106, 107.

⁷ I owe this suggestion to M. A. Stewart.

as Dean of Derry in London and America], but he atoned as a bishop, for he hardly ever left his diocese” (173). Luce is keen to point out, however, that, at least in relation to Berkeley’s social life, “Fraser’s picture of Berkeley as ‘the recluse of Cloyne’ may be dismissed as a caricature” (186). I would like to suggest that Berkeley’s dedicated residence at Cloyne, his correspondence with English bishops, and his social and economic thought in this early episcopal period are connected. I will do this by looking at one letter from Secker to Berkeley that Fraser for some reason does not print in the run of letters between Berkeley and these English bishops (235-60), and suggesting that Berkeley and Secker share a sense of the importance of resident clergy for achieving the moral resuscitation of communities.⁸

On 29 June 1737 Secker wrote from Gloucester to Berkeley in Cloyne, thanking him for a congratulatory letter on his appointment as bishop of Oxford. He says he is able to avoid thinking about church-state relations, but digresses on precisely those worries:⁹

My very good Lord

I return you my hearty thanks for your friendly letter of Congratulation. I have made an exchange, to accommodate other persons, which I never thought an advantageous one to my self in point of interest and begin to fear too late it will prove the contrary. But I have some advantage in situation by removing from your neighbour-city of Bristol: and a good situation I think is well worth purchasing. But then one should stay in it and I assure you my Lord I have no views of removing. To tread in the steps of my predecessor is to be Bishop of Oxford two and twenty years. What fancies one may come to have by the end of that time I cannot foretell but when the Bishop of Gloucester and I were at the late Archbishops funeral we were clearly of opinion that breathing the air of Lambeth and being buried in the Church of Croyden are neither of them felicities that one would much disquiet ones self to attain. And now I have mentioned my Lord of Gloucester I should tell you in the next place that I and my family are at present his guests. My poor wife was most deplorably ill all the last year at Bath and had too frequent occasion to practice your Lordships rule of early rising, the disorder of her Spirits not permitting her either to sleep or lie in bed awake. She is now recovered enough to take small journeys and I have bought her from Bath hither in hopes she may receive great benefit from the neighbourhood of her native air and the chearfull Hospitality of our good brother. We have been here as yet somewhat less than a week but so far the experiment succeeds very well: and we enjoy bright days and cool evenings in a very entertaining tranquillity, quite

⁸ Fraser had, of course, studied the Berkeley papers and prints most of the letters to and from Berkeley. He had also seen the Secker MSS. The details I present here are merely things he does not mention or seems to have overlooked.

⁹ British Library MS Add 39311, fols. 37-38. I am grateful to the British Library for allowing me to reproduce this letter. The letter from Secker to Berkeley in response to Berkeley’s congratulations on Secker becoming bishop of Bristol makes the point that Bristol and Cloyne are “neighbour cities.” and so links these two letters clearly. See Fraser, *Life and Letters*, 235-36, and B. L. MS Add 39311, fols. 27-28. I reproduce the final stratum of the letter as neither of the two small corrections Secker made merit recording.

unconcerned about what may befall either Church or State the next Session. The ministry I believe mean us of the Clergy neither any harm nor much good. Many of those who would be thought their best friends indeed are vehement against us and so are many also of their most determined enemies. It doth not seem therefore that our strength lies in adhering to either party; as indeed I think it never can: but in the honest policy of acting uprightly between both and joyning with neither to do wrong. They who act thus will either stand or fall with honour. I see very little prospect that any thing in the Established Church will be altered for the better: for Ministers are against all changes and they who complain would be very sorry to see the things which they complain of, mended. Nor doth there appear any immediate danger of alterations for the worse. And yet considering the increasing disregard to Religion and every thing that deserves the name of principle, together with the strange growth of that wild Spirit which calls it self zeal for Liberty there would be no reason to wonder at any shock how great or sudden soever which might happen either to the Ecclesiastical or the Civil part of our Constitution. But sufficient for the day is the Evil thereof. May the calm which you seem to have at present in Ireland continue and may we none of us ever needlessly bring storms upon our selves. The Clergy might do much towards laying those which are raised already if we had not our share of faults as well as our Adversaries. But enough of these matters. Miss Talbot whom you are so good to mention particularly is grown a very fine Girl and continues a very good one. Her Mama and she, the Prelate and his sister desire you and Mrs Berkeley to accept their compliments and best wishes to you both and your whole family: With which I beg leave to joyn those of

My Lord

Your sincerely affectionate brother
and faithfull servt
Tho. Oxford

This is an episcopal confidence, but what are the problems in church-state relations that Secker is talking about, and is there any particular reason for him mentioning them to Berkeley?

Secker was newly translated to Oxford when he wrote this letter. He was to stay there for 22 years (as punishment, he suspected, for knowing Frederick Prince of Wales and occasionally voting against the government) before becoming Archbishop of Canterbury. He writes from Benson's seat in Gloucester. He was friendly with Gibson of London. He is at the center of church life, but is to some degree controlled by court patronage. Gibson had become ecclesiastical counsellor to the government in 1723 and is known to have entertained a strong desire to reform certain aspects of church administration and increase the standing of the church in relation to government and to the daily life of the population. He proposed revising the distribution of parishes amongst the bishoprics in order to make residence and the execution of full parochial duties possible. Secker recorded Gibson's proposals in his MSS, and Secker's time as archbishop of Canterbury has been interpreted by church historian Norman Sykes as carrying on Gibson's project through "oversight, by visitation, confirmation, ordination and pastoral counsel to the

clergy in the discharge of their parochial ministry.”¹⁰ Sykes summarizes the relationship between Gibson and Secker in the following terms: “With the failure of Gibson’s thorough-going project, Secker strove to maintain the position of the established church by diligence and devotion to episcopal duties along conventional lines, accepting the suspension of Convocation and the impossibility of carrying through a programme of change.”¹¹ Secker sees Gibson attempting to increase the stature of the church through collaboration with the government, with the hope of stamping out the irreligion of the population and the government itself. He sees Gibson split from Walpole in the winter of 1735 over the rejection of the Quaker Bill: “On this occasion Bp Gibson broke with Sr Robt Walpole: & Bp Potter came into Favour.”¹² In the next session Potter becomes Archbishop of Canterbury and Secker is sent to Oxford. At this point he writes the letter to Berkeley I have presented. He pursues his course of strict diocesan discipline in order to place the church as prominently in the daily and moral life of the nation as possible, having seen the failure of political collaboration in achieving the same ends.¹³ Berkeley felt extreme disappointment with the government earlier than Secker, realizing by March 1730/31 that he would never receive the funds for his Bermuda project promised by the King. He felt “absolutely abandoned” by his supporters, and considered the abandonment of his project part of a larger social and moral problem: “What they foolishly call free thinking seems to me the principal root or source not only of opposition to our College but of most other evils in this age.”¹⁴ Berkeley would have been very familiar with the disillusion expressed by Secker.

This letter from Secker to Berkeley, as so many of the letters between the bishops, is not just an exchanged confidence. It is part of a concerted effort to confound the rise of dangerous libertinism, irreligion and free-thinking by insisting on disciplined ecclesiastical conduct, full residency, and impassioned argument for the rational necessity of the Christian revelation. Berkeley’s interest in residence and clerical activity on his arrival at Cloyne, for him a new response to the problem of irreligion that had been motivating him at least since his *Guardian* essays in 1713,¹⁵ can be related to Secker’s response to his appointment in Oxford. Luce reproduces a passage from Joseph Stock’s 1776 *Life of Berkeley*, noting that Berkeley “applied himself with vigour to the faithful discharge of all episcopal duties. He revived in his diocese the useful office of rural dean which had gone into disuse, visited frequently parochially, and confirmed in the several

¹⁰ Norman Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker: Aspects of English Church History 1660-1768*. The Ford Lectures 1958 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), Chapter 6, “*Quieta non Movenda*.” 188-224, quotation from 216.

¹¹ Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker*, x.

¹² *Autobiography of Secker*, 17.

¹³ See *The Correspondence of Bishop Secker*, ed. A. P. Jenkins, The Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 57 (Far Thrupp, Stroud: Alan Sutton for the Oxfordshire Record Society, 1991), xvii-xxvi. Jenkins quotes from the letter to Berkeley in his introduction, xiv, but does not include it in his text or note its addressee. For a general discussion of “Lay People and Morality” in relation to the Church of England, see W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124-54.

¹⁴ Berkeley to Percival, 2 March 1730/1, in *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (9 vols.; London: Thomas Nelson, 1948-57), 8: 212.

¹⁵ See *Works* 7: 179-228.

parts of his see.”¹⁶ Luce also notes that Berkeley corresponded with Benson on the question of reviving rural deaneries (175). There is, unsurprisingly, a degree of collaboration and consultation amongst the bishops concerning clerical activity that amounts to more than an exchange of confidences.

The Querist's ironic presentation of absenteeism in contrast to clerical residence provides some evidence of the social and moral aims of Berkeley's attempt to increase the presence of the clergy in Cloyne. Berkeley's criticism of absenteeism is relatively mild and oblique, perhaps in part because he was himself an absentee for so long, appointed Dean of Derry in 1724, and never taking up residence there. Nonetheless, absentees are presented as drawing coin out of Ireland (Q.32), and a decrease in their numbers is to be sought through the improvement of the real estate of Ireland (Q.408).¹⁷ *The Querist* also asks if those who spend their money on foreign imports “are not so far forth to be reckoned absentees?” (*Querist* 134, Q.104). The economic problem of absenteeism is contrasted to the civic influence of clerical residence, in the context of complaints about the privileges of the clergy: “What is there in the clergy to create a jealousy in the public? Or what would the public lose by it, if every squire in the land wore a black coat, said his prayers, and was obliged to reside?” (*Querist* 154, Q.342). The presence of these queries amidst considerations concerning the nature and purpose of monetary tokens, the benefits of a national bank, and the necessity of balancing import and export suggests that Berkeley conceived of his residence at Cloyne as part of a broader social project that incorporated the provisions for local industry he and his wife established there, such as the spinning school and workhouse.¹⁸ Berkeley's project, I suggest, is related to Secker's desire to re-establish the church in the moral and civic life of the population through clerical presence rather than through central government, and the bishops encourage one another in this project through their correspondence. Berkeley's residence at Cloyne is not just a period of concentration on Irish issues enlivened on a personal level by correspondence with English bishops. Berkeley's correspondence with Secker nourishes and supports Berkeley's activities. Berkeley's activities of this period coincide with the interests and concerns of Secker in a much closer way than I think has been recognized. Reconsidering Berkeley's correspondence and broader relationship with his episcopal colleague Secker adds to an understanding of his residence at Cloyne and the activities he engaged in there.

University of St. Andrews
tej1@st-andrews.ac.uk

¹⁶ Luce, *Life of Berkeley*, 173.

¹⁷ *Bishop Berkeley's Querist in Historical Perspective*, ed. Joseph Johnston (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1970), 127, 159.

¹⁸ See Luce, *Life*, 180, 189.