Mary Astell’s *The Christian Religion*: Life, Liberty and Happiness as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England

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I. The intellectual context: Norris and Astell, Locke and Masham

Mary Astell (1666-1731), daughter of a Newcastle coal merchant, is celebrated by George Ballard as the “great ornament of her sex and country” in his pioneering early study of female authors, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752). Already by mid-century the details regarding Astell’s life were sparse, perhaps indicating that she was no longer much remembered despite her early reputation. And despite Ballard’s efforts to publicize learned women, Astell herself remained relatively obscure till the twentieth century. Florence Smith’s monograph, *Mary Astell*, appeared in 1916, but it was not until Ruth Perry’s *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (1986), that the entire breadth and range of Astell’s oeuvre came to be known. Perry’s invaluable work of scholarship has given rise to a veritable renaissance in Astell studies, further fueled by growing interest in early modern political thought as it impacted
the plight of women.\textsuperscript{1} Astell can be characterized as philosopher, feminist and political pamphleteer, but she was first and foremost a Christian theologian whose passionate involvement in her religion led her to become a writer on such a wide range of topics as the history of the Civil War, religious toleration, marriage, women’s education, and modern liberal thought. As Michal Michelson has recently stated, “Political, personal and spiritual ‘Liberty’ and ‘Integrity’ conflate in Astell’s thought in her vision of a state, a world, of untainted reason ruled by Godly virtue” (133).

Though widely recognized as her major work, Mary Astell’s \textit{The Christian Religion, As professed by a Daughter of the Church of England} (1705)\textsuperscript{2} has not received much critical attention, perhaps because it is her most overtly Christian text. The book’s credo is that true life, liberty, and happiness are spiritual, not worldly goods.


\textsuperscript{2} No modern edition existed until Jacqueline Broad’s 2013 edition was published by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and ITER. All references to \textit{The Christian Religion} in this article are to the 1717 edition with Appendix (London: printed by W. B. for R. Wilkin), made available through Gale ECCO Print Editions. All page references are to this edition, hereafter cited as \textit{CR}. 