DEISM #2

THE SECOND AND THIRD GENERATIONS OF DEISTS

Prayer
Scripture:
Hymn: 530  "When All Thy Mercies"

The latter part of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century witnessed the rise, the spread, and the decline of the partly religious and partly philosophical phenomenon known as Deism. The watch words of the movement were "nature" and "reason." The new science and new philosophy furnished the atmosphere for this rather unorthodox outlook that was one of the chief features of England from 1689 to 1742. It began with Lord Herbert of Charbury (1583-1648) and ended with Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751). It was the product of the free thinking made possible by the Edict of Toleration of 1689. Deism was a quest for a rationality in religion that would bring to an end all intolerance, persecution and wars of religion that had been the curse of the Reformation period. The Deists held that the universe as depicted by the new science clearly pointed to a reasonable, powerful and good Creator. The Creator was the author of a simple, natural, primitive religion practised by the first man. Lord Herbert's five innate religious ideas were the basic ingredients of this natural religion: (1) God exists, (2) it is the duty of man to worship Him, (3) the practice of virtue is the true mode of honoring Him, (4) man is obligated to repent of his sins, and (5) there will be rewards and punishments after death. Human reason is sufficient to discover this natural religion unaided by revelation. However, the attributes of God as discovered by reason in nature make it reasonable to assume that this God would reveal himself to his creatures. This revelation is found in the Bible. Christianity is the republication of this original, simple, natural religion. The early Deists sought to establish the reasonableness of Christianity.

Deism was well established in England by the end of the seventeenth century. It enjoyed considerable growth in the first half of the eighteenth century. Many churchmen were caught up in the Deist spirit and devoted great energies to detailed elaborations of natural theology, making particular use of the argument from design in nature. John Ray's Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation (1691) passed through many editions.

DEVELOPMENTS IN SECOND AND THIRD GENERATION DEISM

Deism was not a single sect nor a united movement. It was highly individualistic. Samuel Clarke in his Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God (1704-6) distinguished four classes of Deists: (1) Deists who held that God is only the Creator with no further interest in the world; (2) Deists who admitted a Divine Providence, but only in the material, not in the moral and spiritual order; (3) Deists who believed in certain moral attributes of God, but not in a future life; and (4) Deists who accepted all the truths of natural religion including belief in a life to come, but rejected
revelation.

There was an increasing emphasis on nature and reason with a corresponding neglect of and even growing skepticism of everything connected with revelation. Natural religion was all sufficient. It was that which all religions had in common. It was the basic truth available to all men and on which all could unite. It could be discovered by reason. Revelation was unnecessary. There was a growing militant negativism toward revealed religion.

THE GOD OF THE DEISTS

Deists maintained belief in God as Creator but tended to limit the knowledge of God to what reason could discover in the Creation. Deists proofs for God were elaborations of the argument from design. The Deist God tended to become a distant, limited, personless God who was without passion. Their opponents charged the Deists with believing in a God who had created the world, established the laws to govern it, and who had retired from his Creation. They charged the Deists with believing in an absentee landlord, a retired God, a God who lived in idleness. The Deists denied such charges. Only the more radical Deists would admit to an inactive God but there was a growing skepticism in Divine Providence, in revelation, and in any supernatural scheme of salvation. The more radical Deists considered Divine Providence and revelation an affront to the omnipotence and changelessness of God.

Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, 1671-1713) did much to popularize Deism. His writings were influential not only in England but also in France and Germany. In his Letter Concerning Enthusiasm he strongly opposed all fanaticism and religious extravagance as perversions of true religion. False prophets had turned benign religious emotions into the wrong channels producing great evils. Extreme asceticism, self-torture, and religious persecutions were evidences of psychological illness and had nothing to do with authentic religion. He considered it blaspemous to ascribe to God vengeance, vindictiveness, jealousy, and destructive cruelty. God was very gentle, loving, benevolent, and intended for men to behave toward one another in the same kindly and tolerant fashion. In his Characteristics (1711) he strongly denied the common Deist conception of a law of nature imposed upon His creatures by the Creator, and enforced by means of rewards and punishments. Ethical standards were determined by the dictates of an intuitive moral faculty that is a part of the essential endowment of human nature. The capacity to distinguish right and wrong, like the capacity to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly, is inborn in human nature. This moral sense can be reinforced by theistic belief, but is not dependent on it. He denied that the sense of moral obligation is derived from the recognition by man of his relation to his Maker. He was critical of the idea of revealed religion and had a strong antipathy to priests as corrupters of religion.

DEISTS ON CHURCHES AND PRIESTS

By the end of the seventeenth century the Deists were militantly attacking the churches--the Catholics, the Church of
England, and the dissenters. The more elaborate and exclusive the religious establishment, the more bitterly they attacked. Deists hated the passionate excesses of Protestant fanatics. They denounced all intolerance maintaining there was no place for any intolerance since the core of the various religions was identical. The simple, primitive monotheism of the original natural religion had no temples, churches, synagogues. Man should return to this primitive simplicity and dispense with all pomp and ceremony in religion. Deists were quite negative toward all religious institutions and the clergy directing them. Religion had become filled with superstitions and many crimes had been committed in the name of God. Deists tended to blame the corruption of religion on (1) the weakness of human nature that caused man to fall into errors and (2) on a conspiracy of priests who had intentionally deceived men with a riot of ceremonials in order to maintain power over them. Among Deists there was increasing hostility toward all church tradition and theology.

A significant portion of Deist literature was devoted to a description of the noxious practices of all religions of all times but more especially to those of churches. Deists liked to emphasize the similarities between pagan and Roman Catholic rites.

THE ATTACK ON REVELATION AND THE EXALTATION OF REASON

For the Deists the only true religion was natural religion. They believed in the rationality of the universe and the power of human reason to grasp this rationality. The Light of nature and reason was sufficient to guide men in doctrine and practice. The more radical Deists became skeptical of any idea of revelation. Revelation was not needed and was considered even impossible in a world of natural law. They sought a philosophical and ethical substitute for revelation, based on human reason. There was no room for revelation to add to or improve on the religion of nature. That which was true in revelation was that which coincided and agreed with the religion of nature. Where revelation differed from natural religion it represented the corruptions added by the priests.

Deists became increasingly skeptical of and hostile to Scripture. They attacked the literal interpretation of Scripture and tended to accept the findings of seventeenth century biblical criticism that questioned the authorship and inspiration of the prophets.

THE DEIST ATTACK ON CHRISTIANITY

Christianity increasingly became a problem to many Deists. To the end some Deists tried to preserve the unique position of Christianity as a divine revelation. They considered such a revelation consonant with the goodness of God. More extreme Deists maintained such a revelation would have been an impossible and unwarranted interference and intervention into the affairs of men in a world of natural law. Natural religion was sufficient and that which was true in Christianity was identical with natural
religion. Hence any revelation was unnecessary. Anything beyond natural religion was a corruption added by the priests.

For Deists John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) became the classic expression of the Deist denial of revelation and the supernatural. Christians, Jews, and pagans all shared the simple natural religion. Any esoteric and distinctive practices were condemned as the machinations of priests. Christianity was valuable as the publication anew of the primitive natural religion.

Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730) represented the climax of the Deist attempt to defend Christianity as consisting solely of what nature and reason teach unaided. The parts that contradict natural theology are untrue and are the work of the priests who have added myths, miracles, ceremonies and superstition.

There was a growing tendency among Deists to try to save Christian morality but to deny the historical reality of the reports of miracles. Deists became more hostile in their attacks on fulfilled prophecy and miracles as evidences of the truth of Christianity. They became increasingly hostile to Christian faith. They tended to emphasize the inhumanity of historic Christianity and to question whether Christianity had made any significant contribution to the moral improvement of mankind.

**THE LONDON PHAMPHETEERS**

The second and third generation Deists carried on a bitter attack on Christianity. In the 1720's and 1730's they tried to undermine the accreditation of the authority of Jesus attempted by John Locke and the early Deists who had been his admirers. These anti-Christian Deists are known as the "London Phampheteers." They were not highly trained men of great ability. They could be most sarcastic and crude in their attacks.

**ANTHONY COLLINS (1676-1729)**

Anthony Collins was a Deist who represented the epitomy of free thinking. He had studied at Eton and King's College, Cambridge. In 1707 he published his *Essay Concerning the Use of Reason* in which he attacked the idea of truths that are above human reason. In his *Priestcraft in Perfection* (1709) he claimed to find fraudulent additions to the Thirty Nine Articles. In 1713 he published *A Discourse of Freethinking* in which he attacked the ministers of all denominations and argued for free inquiry. In his *Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty* (1715) he continued his attack on churchmen and argued for Determinism.

The most revolutionary of his works was his *Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) in which he denied that the Old Testament contained Messianic Prophecies of the coming of Christ. He maintained that the only possible proof of the validity of Christianity was the argument from fulfilled prophecy. He denied the possibility of prophecy in a world of natural law. The so-called Messianic Prophecies referred to David, Solomon, Hezekiah and the men of the prophet's time and made no reference to
Christ. The prophecies had not been literally and exactly fulfilled by Jesus. He also denied the canonicity of the New Testament and the immateriality and immortality of the soul.

After Collins' attack on prophecy, prophecy, which had been the big gun in the arsenal of the church from the beginning, had to be defended. Collins had great influence in Deist circles. Rational supernaturalists gave up the argument from prophecy and tended to stake everything on the miracles of Jesus.

THOMAS WOOLSTON (1670-1733)

Thomas Woolston was a popular pamphleteer among free thinkers. He had been educated at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. In a succession of tracts he attacked the argument from miracles. There was no place for miracles in a world of natural law. He charged that miracles are the mark of the sorcerer. Miracles could prove nothing concerning the Messiahship of Jesus. He charged the evidence for miracles is suspect.

Woolston went on to attack the Virgin Birth of Jesus and his resurrection. Both were impossible in a world governed by natural law. He impugned the evidence. He charged that both Virgin Birth and Resurrection were allegories and that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus.

For Deists Woolston largely destroyed the value of miracles as a proof of Christian revelation.

DAVID HUME (1711-1776)

Skepticism was heightened by the work of David Hume after the heyday of Deism had passed. Hume shocked both Deists and the attackers of Deism. In 1748 he published his Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding which contained his "Essay upon Miracles." Hume denied the possibility of miracles. There could never be enough evidence to establish a miracle. The presumption would always be that the witnesses were mistaken. From Hume's time on there was a widening gap of skepticism and doubt between universities and the churches.

In his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion published in 1779 after his death, Hume denied that there was any foundation for either natural or revealed religion. There was no more evidence for natural religion than for revealed religion. He denied that the existence of God can be proved by reason. He declared the immortality of the soul doubtful. There is no such science as metaphysics. All human knowledge comes from experience. He denied the possibility and validity of arguments from cause to effect. Causality cannot be proved. All that is possible is to assert that things are connected by association. He denied all real knowledge and taught pure skepticism.

BERNARD DE MANDEVILLE (1670-1733)

The English philosopher and satirist, Mandeville, shocked England and showed there was no stopping place, by calling in
question the validity of Christian morality. Most Deists had a sincere desire to advance the cause of morality. Most of the Deists were remarkable for moral excellence and eminently respectable. But as skepticism increased there was growing difficulty in keeping disciples in the path of virtue. Mandeville first published his Fable of the Bees in 1705 as The Grumbling Hive. It was republished in 1714. He was cynical and gave great offence. He declared that the higher life of man is a fiction of philosophers and rulers. The higher virtues are mere hypocrisy. All social laws are the results of selfish aggrandizement and protective alliances among the weak. All virtues arise from self-preservation. The church drew back in horror from where skepticism was leading.

LORD BOLINGBROKE (1678-1751)

Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, was a witty, frivolous popularizer. His pompous volumes made it clear that Deism was decaying and to all intents and purposes defunct. He was a libertine and free thinker with little conviction. He did win the admiration of the Frenchman, Voltaire.

DEISM ABROAD

When Voltaire visited England he was greatly impressed with Deism. On his return to France he declared that England was the most godless nation on earth. Not one in twenty went to church. He boasted that he would make France even more godless. He would free men by bringing the Age of Reason. When the last king had been strangled with the guts of the last priest, then men would be free. Through Voltaire and his associates Deism exercised great influence on the development of French Naturalism and its atheism.

Both English Deism and French Naturalism were important factors in the rise of the German Enlightenment. English Deism became a force in Germany after it had ceased to be a vital movement in England. Shaftesbury was translated into German. Tindal and Collins became favorite reading among the officers in the army of Frederick II of Prussia.

By the end of the eighteenth century Deism was a major force among upper class Americans.