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The Influence and Legacy of Deism in Eighteenth Century America

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The Influence and Legacy of Deism in Eighteenth Century America

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Liberal Studies

by

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May 2011

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The Influence and Legacy of Deism in Eighteenth Century America

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INTRODUCTION

During the Age of Enlightenment, changes occurred in nearly every system in Europe, including politics and theology. After the Protestant Reformation, Christianity experienced a period of upheaval. As religious wars spread into several countries, people began to turn to other systems that could provide a healthy alternative to orthodox Christianity. Deism, a philosophy which had existed since ancient times, endorsed a reason based system that looked to the natural world for answers about God, life, and death. Rejecting Christianity and other organized theologies, deism appealed to individuals seeking a philosophy that promoted Enlightenment principles such as rationality, tolerance, and freedom. Initially enjoying success in Europe, deism eventually appeared in America during the eighteenth century before disappearing entirely in the following century. Since then, British and French deism has been readily covered by historians for its impact on European theology and philosophy. But widely ignored is American deism; a topic that has either been dismissed altogether or only briefly mentioned when exploring the Enlightenment period.

A main reason for this oversight is that American deism had to function within the confines of a period that was largely dominated by orthodox Christianity. Because deism was associated with atheism, an often punishable offense, the movement remained largely underground until the mid-eighteenth century. When deism did finally appear in the public arena around 1750, it suffered from disorganization. Also, its followers came from a variety of different backgrounds. While some were well educated, others were barely literate. As many deists worked in trade occupations, some were influential political and theological leaders. Therefore, deism's main tenets were interpreted in a

multitude of ways. There were deists who were liberal and then there were deists who considered themselves Christians. This confusion over doctrine contributed to many of its followers never officially declaring themselves deists. And then, as the century closed, deism suffered from the appearance of new theological and philosophical systems that were appealing to a new generation of Americans. By 1810, deism had nearly disappeared. Left behind was a body of work that had already become irrelevant in a new century. All of these issues have generally led historians to doubt deism's overall impact on American life in the eighteenth century.

In the following thesis paper, I will present information that deism, while only appearing for a brief period, had an important impact on culture and life in eighteenth century America. Throughout the paper, several questions are addressed such as: What is deism? What factors contributed to deism's first appearance in Europe? How did deism enter America in the eighteenth century? Who were the first American deists? What was the reaction from the church and other members of society? How did deists spread their theology? What factors contributed to deism disappearing in the nineteenth century? And what was deism's overall legacy? These issues are addressed by examining the historical, social, political, and philosophical structures of eighteenth century America. Important figures are also analyzed along with a wide variety of documents such as journal and newspaper articles, books, sermons, and private letters and speeches.

Specifically, each chapter of the thesis addresses an important issue or period of the deist movement. Starting with chapter one, a historical overview of deism is provided. This includes defining and analyzing deism's main tenets. In chapter two, the history of natural religion is explored in detail. Here, important figures such as Galileo, Francis

Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke are discussed and their contributions explained in terms of its relationship to Enlightenment thought. Next, an overview of deism's development as a theological system is provided. Looking at the first generation of deists and their works, their arguments are defined in relation to the overall changes occurring as a result of the Scientific Revolution and other intellectual or theological developments. Moving onto chapter three, America's diverse religious history is explored in terms of how it influenced and impacted the period of Enlightenment.

Chapters four and five examine the earliest works of deism in America and how they contributed to a growing environment of skepticism. Next, chapters six and seven focus on the Christian church's reaction to deism. Detailing their campaign to curb the influence of deism, this section reveals how deism was indeed believed to be a threat to orthodox theology systems. Chapter eight is entirely dedicated to the period of militant deism, which saw an increase in deist members. Finding its first official leaders, such as Ethan Allen, Thomas Paine, and Elihu Palmer, deism became more organized and vocal in its attacks on Christianity. Chapter nine addresses the founding fathers and answers the popular question as to whether they were practicing deists or committed Christians. In the last chapter, deism's eventual downfall is explained in detail and its overall legacy examined. Overall, in my thesis paper, I present an argument that deism, while often discounted by historians, had an important role in eighteenth century America.

SECTION I: BACKGROUND

CHAPTER ONE

DEISM DEFINED

In the eighteenth century, known as the Age of Enlightenment or Age of Reason, deism emerged as a theological position that attempted to define the natural world and man's relationship to God through the application of Enlightenment ideals such as reason, rationality, and order. While deism did not flourish as a theological movement until the eighteenth century, its origins can be traced to the philosophy of ancient Greece. Derived from the Latin word *deus* and the Greek root word *theos*, which both mean God, deistical thinking appeared in the work of philosophers such as Heraclitus who used *logos* to explain man's understanding of reason and knowledge, and Plato who defined his God as a demiurge or craftsman.

Until the sixteenth century, deism was often used interchangeably with theism, but this was altered with Pierre Viret's (1511-1571) 1564 work titled *Christian Teaching on the Doctrine of Faith and the Gospel*.¹ As a reformed preacher and close friend of John Calvin, Viret separated deism from theism and defined deists as persons who "... profess belief in God as the creator of heaven and earth, but reject Jesus Christ and his doctrines."² A century later, Viret's definition was republished in Pierre Bayle's (1647-1706) 1697 *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, which became widely popular in Europe

¹ Pierre Viret was born in a small Swiss town in 1511. Raised as a devout Roman Catholic, Viret was converted to the Reformed faith after attending school in Paris at College de Montaigu with John Calvin. Soon after returning home, Viret became a popular preacher. Traveling throughout Europe, Viret was dedicated to the Reformed faith his entire life and maintained a close friendship with Calvin. Avoiding assassination attempts, Viret died in April 1571.

² Robert Corfe, *Deism and Social Ethics: the Role of Religion in the Third Millennium* (New York: Arena Books, 2007), 54.

following its English translation in 1710.³ In fact, Bayle's work possibly "... regenerated the existing interest and debate on deism."⁴

Even though deistical thinking existed since ancient times, it did not develop as a movement until after the scientific revolution, which began in the mid-sixteenth century. As the work of scientists such as Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton "... fostered the belief that this is an intelligible world that may be understood through the determined application of the human mind," traditional views of the natural world were permanently altered and social and political institutions reexamined.⁵ Particularly affected by the changes occurring in Europe were matters concerning theology. Until the Protestant Reformation, which began with Martin Luther in 1517, Catholicism was the dominant Christian faith system. As Christianity divided into several different sects, including Lutheranism, Calvinism, Puritanism, Anglicanism, etc., religion became widely diverse. As theological doctrine, the interpretation of Scripture, and the structure of churches was continuously debated, natural religion, such as deism, developed as an important theological movement and eventually spread into several countries in Europe.

Deism, like Christianity, was also widely diverse in definition and structure. Because factors such as geographical location and social structure influenced the way deism was interpreted and understood, deism in the eighteenth century did not have a specific definition that could apply to all its different followers. Further complicating the problem was the absence of a holy book, set creed or articles of faith. But despite these

³ Pierre Bayle was born in France in 1647. As a philosopher and dedicated Protestant, Bayle was largely responsible for the development of the Encyclopédistes during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. His *Historical and Critical Dictionary* influenced the work of Voltaire and was listed by Thomas Jefferson in the first collection of books in the Library of Congress. Bayle died in Rotterdam in 1706.

⁴ Corfe, *Deism and Social Ethics*, 54.

⁵ Donald H. Meyer, *The Democratic Enlightenment* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976), xiv.

issues, there were a few important factors that were generally accepted by all deists. First, a majority of deists proclaimed a belief in a God who both created and governed the universe. This God was known by several titles, including “Supreme Being,” “Divine Watchmaker,” “Nature’s God,” and “Grand Architect.” For deists, the existence of God was indisputably proven through the observance of the natural world, which also revealed God as a “rational and benevolent deity.”⁶ Furthermore, with the creation of the universe, God set into motion laws of nature, which are “. . . universal, immutable, and absolute . . .”⁷ Through the laws of nature, God’s creation is revealed. Not only must human beings observe the laws of nature, but God is also defined by the same laws he set into motion. Secondly, God bestowed on all human beings a divine gift, which is the ability to reason. In particular, this factor was extremely important in how deists understood themselves and the surrounding world. As deist John Toland explained in his work titled *Christianity Not Mystrious* (1696), “. . . we hold that reason is the only foundation of all certitude . . .”⁸ Therefore, it is only through the exercise of reason that human beings are able to “. . . gain a deeper appreciation of the Divine Architect’s character . . .” and “. . . explain the working of the universe . . .”⁹ Thirdly, deists also believed that God wanted human beings to behave morally. Morality is closely connected to reason because it is only through the implementation of reason that human beings can distinguish a moral action or behavior from an immoral one. Also, the practice of moral behavior allows human beings to form a closer relationship with God because God is revealed to human beings as they use reason to understand themselves and the world.

⁶ Kerry S. Walters, *Revolutionary Deists: Early America’s Rational Infidels* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 7.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ John Toland, *Christianity Not Mystrious* (London: Sam Buckley, 1702), 6.

⁹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 7 and Meyer, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 14.

Even though there are only three specific positions that the majority of deists adhered to, several other principles were debated among deists and either fully accepted or rejected. The first of these concerns revealed religions, meaning religions whose foundation is inspired by divine or supernatural revelation. This includes faith systems such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam whose holy books (the Bible, Torah, and Koran) were believed to be inspired or revealed to its founders and followers through direct communication with God. For the most part, deists rejected religions founded on revelation because it contradicted their position that reason was the only logical method that could reveal both God and His creation. Deists who rejected revealed religions and their holy books believed that “such doctrines . . . violated ordinary human experience and was antithetical to the dictates of reason. Belief in them, they said, not only kept mankind in the shackles of superstition and ignorance but also insulted the majesty and dignity of God.”¹⁰ Pointing out contradictions and inconsistencies found in holy books such as the Bible, for example, many deists concluded that any book whose text was described as being inspired by revelation could not possibly have originated from the Word of God.

While a majority of deists rejected revealed religions, there were some deists who believed that holy books, when properly interpreted, did follow the dictates of reason and reveal God’s work. In fact, some deists considered themselves Christians, but the term was usually applied to a belief that Christianity was a pure religion until man, and particularly the Church, were distracted by greed, power, and materialism; vices which eventually corrupted the core of Christian teaching. For those who labeled themselves as

¹⁰ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 8.

Christian deists, their efforts were dedicated to purging Christianity of its false doctrines and beliefs, while purifying the religion to its original state. And for those who displayed their outright disdain for Christianity, they believed that:

. . . the Christian religion exerted a pernicious moral influence upon humankind. It vitiated virtue by convincing humans that they were utterly corrupted by original sin and hence incapable of improving themselves through their own efforts. It encouraged intolerance and the persecution of dissent by claiming to be the one true religion. It hampered progress in the sciences as well as retarded social justice by doctrinally promoting ignorance and institutionally repressing freedom of thought and expression.¹¹

Regardless of whether deists were attempting to restructure Christianity or have it eliminated entirely as a credible faith system, both positions held that Christianity in its current state was corrupt and leading its followers down a misguided path that restricted reason and discouraged individual thought.

Also widely debated among deists was a belief in miracles, superstitions, and other mysteries. Because a majority of deists rejected revealed religions and their holy books, they also remained suspicious of claims of supernatural elements having a role in the workings of the natural world. For many deists, God and His creation could only be revealed through man's exercise of reason, which was viewed as the only path to understanding. Therefore, superstitions and other mysteries were rejected because they did not allow man to discover truth. Instead, they hampered man's progress by creating a state of confusion and uncertainty. But, there were also some deists who did not outright deny the possibility of miracles or other supernatural elements. This was mainly connected to other positions concerning prayer, rewards and punishments, an afterlife, and a view of God as an intervening, active force in the natural world.

¹¹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 8.

In general, deists believed that the laws of nature prevented God from participating as an active force in daily life. Serving as a “watchmaker,” God created the universe, but then allowed the laws of nature to dictate the functioning of the world. For others, God’s intervention in world affairs was not viewed as a contradiction to either nature or reason. Prayer, even though usually not interpreted as a means to ask God for favors, miracles or other requests, was accepted by some as a source of comfort and also as a way to thank God for His creation. Additionally, deists also debated the concept of rewards and punishments. While some deists believed that God issued rewards and punishments while human beings were still alive on earth, others believed that this was reserved strictly for the afterlife. This supported different positions concerning an intervening God, afterlife, and immortality of the soul. Furthermore, some deists who accepted rewards and punishments on earth rejected the notion of an afterlife, while others accepted an afterlife or immortality of the soul. These varying positions were widely debated among deists and depending on factors such as location, exposure to deistic thinking, and interpretation of deistic writings, there was no single answer that satisfied all deists.

Finally, the role of Jesus Christ remained an important issue for deists. For the most part, deists accepted the existence of Jesus as a person and even respected his role as a moral teacher. But this represented the only position that deists agreed with Christians in regards to the life of Jesus. As to Jesus’s divinity, deists rejected the common Christian belief that Jesus was the Son of God who was sent to earth and sacrificed for man’s original sin, which was related in the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, also popularly known as The Fall. Original sin was a

point of debate for deists, but many decided that the use of reason led them to the conclusion that there was no credibility to Biblical claims of original sin. Moreover, even if deists were willing to agree that the story of Adam and Eve was true, they refused to accept the belief that one person's sin tainted the entire human race. Therefore, if original sin only applied to Adam and Eve, there was no need for God to send Jesus to earth to save mankind. Distrusting the notion of original sin, deists generally believed that the story was created by the Church as a means to control the actions and behavior of men. Ultimately, the deist belief that reason revealed to man knowledge of moral and immoral actions supported their conclusion that there was no need for original sin. This position further led deists to accept Jesus as a moral teacher rather than as a prophet. Rejecting the idea of the Christian Trinity, deists preferred to view the life and sayings of Jesus as a moral guide to support their belief that God wanted man to behave morally. Overall, Jesus remained a topic of debate for deists and while a majority rejected his divinity, some famous deists, such as American founders Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, struggled with this issue their entire lives.

Deism, which developed as a theological movement after the scientific and religious revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was largely inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of reason, rationality, and order. In a period of radical transformation and change, deism attempted to redefine traditionally accepted systems of faith. In fact, "deists were champions of a rational and humanistic religion, and prophets of a coming age of reason in which humans would finally liberate themselves from the shackles of tradition and enjoy the fruits of progress."¹² Like other faith systems, deists

¹² Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 9.

were divided about certain issues, but they generally accepted the belief that God created the universe, instilled in human beings the ability to reason, and wanted man to follow a moral guideline. In general, deists and other members of the eighteenth century were attempting to understand their position in the world as well as the changes occurring around the globe.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RISE OF NATURAL RELIGION AND DEISM IN EUROPE

When deism developed as a theological movement in the eighteenth century, it represented the culmination of more than three centuries of radical changes that occurred throughout Europe. Starting with the Renaissance period, which began in the fourteenth century, Europe experienced a cultural revolution that affected everything from science, politics, and religion down to transportation and the arts. Particularly important was the humanist movement, which reintroduced the classic works of ancient Greece and Rome into mainstream European education. With an emphasis on poetry, history, philosophy, grammar, and rhetoric, the humanist movement applied Greek and Roman concepts to daily life and restored ancient scientific theories, philosophical debates, mathematical formulas, and literary works.

Also impacted by events such as the Black Death and later the Protestant Reformation, the flaws and failures of traditional authority systems (i.e. the state and Church) were exposed. As Europeans became increasingly suspicious of their political and theological leaders, they turned to the natural world, which became a credible source for man to define himself and his faith. In fact, as man discovered nature, “. . . all systems, human and divine, were called upon in the name of nature and reason to give an account of themselves . . . men felt that they must be able to give a reason for the faith that is in them in terms of the thought of the age in which they lived . . .”¹³ Discouraged by frequent political and theological conflict, the natural world represented order and

¹³ S.G. Hefelbower, “Deism Historically Defined,” *The American Journal of Theology* 24.2 (April 1920): 218.

stability. Overall, the Renaissance period contributed to an important shift in the social, political, and theological structure of Europe. Turning to nature for inspiration, man embraced newfound individualism, while relying on personal experience and observation to understand God, creation, and human nature.

As man turned to the natural world for authority during the Renaissance period, advancements in scientific theory and knowledge also contributed to an emerging conflict with theological doctrine. For centuries, the Church had remained the sole authority on explaining the operations of the universe. Relying on a combination of Biblical scripture and ancient theories to define the structure of the earth and the biological makeup of human beings, the Church emphasized a geocentric belief that the earth was the center of the universe, that Aristotelian concepts concerning motion or the elements (earth, aether, water, air, and fire) were valid, and that all life could be explained by the Biblical description of God's creation.

But in 1610, when Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) began promoting the Copernican theory that the sun, rather than the earth, was the center of the universe, he was met with outrage and criticism. Describing the Church's reaction to the heliocentric theory, Galileo wrote in his 1632 work, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* that "several years ago there was published in Rome a salutary edict which, in order to obviate the dangerous tendencies of our present age, imposed a seasonable silence upon the Pythagorean opinion that the earth moves."¹⁴ Threatened by Galileo's heliocentric theory, which conflicted with the Biblical interpretation of the creation, the Church attempted to silence the work of Galileo and other scientists who questioned the authority

¹⁴ Edgar E. Knoebel, ed., *Classics of Western Thought: The Modern World*, 4th ed., *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, by Galileo Galilei (London: Thomson Learning, Inc., 1992), 2-3.

of the Bible. Despite the ongoing threat of excommunication and imprisonment, Galileo remained dedicated to his position the remainder of his life. He explained that he had “. . . taken the Copernican side in the discourse, proceeding as with a pure mathematical hypothesis and striving by every artifice to represent it as superior to supposing the earth motionless . . .”¹⁵ Furthermore, Galileo stated that those who denied the heliocentric theory, “. . . are content to adore the shadows, philosophizing not with due circumspection but merely from having memorized a few ill-understood principles.”¹⁶ Even though Galileo’s theories were dismissed by the Church and he was eventually tried and found guilty by the Inquisition, his work inspired a legion of followers to continue his quest for knowledge. Representing the beginning of a revolution known as the Scientific Revolution, the work that succeeded Galileo would further complicate the relationship between the Church and the individual as well as promote alternative sources for discovering truth.

Two of the most important figures that followed Galileo were Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Isaac Newton (1643-1727). Bacon, who was known as the “father of experimental philosophy,” introduced the Baconian or scientific method in his 1620 work titled *Novum Organum*. Prior to Bacon’s work, scholasticism was the primary method employed by universities to confirm Church doctrine. Scholasticism, which had existed since ancient times, worked by utilizing dialectical reasoning and the deductive method, both of which entailed examining textual evidence and supporting documents to reach an agreement among opposing positions. For example, if the authority of the Bible was called into question, the work would be thoroughly examined along with supporting

¹⁵ Knoebel, *Classics of Western Thought*, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

evidence such as church documents or other works that reinforced both positions. As each argument was debated and resolved, a definitive conclusion could be reached that satisfied the dispute. Ultimately, Bacon rejected scholasticism as a valid method of reasoning and explained his position by writing, “the logic now in use serves rather to fix and give stability to the errors which have their foundation in commonly received notions than to help the search after truth. So it does more harm than good.”¹⁷ Instead, Bacon proposed the scientific method, which relied on inductive reasoning to reach a valid conclusion. The scientific method worked by proposing a hypothesis that could be tested against other hypotheses. As the results were examined, the false hypotheses could be rejected and a conclusion reached based on the testing results. Bacon supported his method by writing, “for experience, when it wanders in its own track, is, as I have already remarked, mere groping in the dark, and confounds men rather than instructs them. But when it shall proceed in accordance with a fixed law, in regular order, and without interruption, then may better things be hoped of knowledge.”¹⁸ Hoping to dismiss centuries of flawed scientific experiments and reasoning based entirely upon observation, Bacon intended to use his scientific method to expand man’s knowledge and understanding of the natural world.

When Isaac Newton’s work *Principia* was published in 1687, it was quickly established as one of the most important books of science to examine a variety of topics concerning the functions of the world, reasoning, experimental methods, and mathematics. Like Galileo and Bacon, Newton endorsed a heliocentric view of the universe and promoted a more diverse method of experimentation to discover truth and

¹⁷ Knoebel, *Classics of Western Thought*, 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

knowledge. In fact, Newton was so concerned with the methods used for reasoning and understanding that he decided to include a section in the third book of his work titled “Rules of Reasoning in Philosophy.” This section was intended to clarify the methods most effective for classifying unknown phenomena. For instance, the first and second rules state that “we are to admit no more causes of natural things such are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances,” and “therefore to the same natural effects we must, as far as possible, assign the same causes.”¹⁹ The first rule demonstrates that natural effects, such as breathing or the movement of the sun, for example, do not require additional causes or explanations beyond what we already know. This rule prevents the use of superstition to explain normal actions and behavior. The second rule, much the same as the first, jointly states that the same causes must be applied to the same effects. Overall, these two rules ensure that mysteries and unsolved phenomena are explained using rational methods rather than relying on skeptical opinions or observations.

Newton’s third rule states that “the qualities of bodies, which admit neither intensification nor remission of degrees, and which are found to belong to all bodies within the reach of our experiments, are to be esteemed the universal qualities of all bodies whatsoever.”²⁰ This rule further confirms Newton’s position that phenomena must be explained through credible scientific experiment and testing. Results that are gathered through other methods are not only inaccurate, but misleading. The last rule states that “in experimental philosophy we are to look upon propositions inferred by general induction from phenomena as accurately or very nearly true, notwithstanding any contrary hypothesis that may be imagined, till such time as other phenomena occur, by

¹⁹ Isaac Newton, *Principia*, Trans. Andrew Motte. Los Angeles (University of California Press, 1962), 398.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 398.

which they may be made more accurate, or liable to exceptions.”²¹ All four of Newton’s rules ensure proper scientific testing and conclusions. In his *Principia*, Newton argued that credible scientific experiments were significant to the accuracy of testing results. These results not only proved a hypothesis correct or incorrect, but promoted a more thorough understanding of the natural world.

While the scientific community evolved in the centuries leading up to the Age of Enlightenment, a variety of other areas were impacted by widespread changes in the social, political, and theological structures in Europe. The field of philosophy, for example, was altered with the Protestant Reformation, which allowed philosophers to embrace diversity and independence. Rejecting the confines of the Church, philosophers began to reinterpret traditional views of theology and the natural world. One of the most influential and prolific philosophers of the period was John Locke (1632-1704), who earned the title “father of liberalism.” Along with Bacon and Newton, Locke “. . . defined the parameters of the Enlightenment ethos by introducing a new way of looking at reality- the so-called New Learning- which would serve as the eighteenth century’s standard of investigation as well as appraisal.”²² In three of his most notable works, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke explored everything from the doctrine of the Church to the social contract theory and human knowledge.

Even though Locke maintained a devout dedication to his faith, years of religious war between the Catholic Church and the new Protestant religion deeply influenced his views on theology. When *A Letter Concerning Toleration* was published in 1689, Locke

²¹ Newton, *Principia*, 400.

²² Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 29.

hoped his work would provide a solution to the religious strife in Europe. Instead, it would have an unexpected impact on the development of a variety of faith systems in the eighteenth century, including deism. Also, the work was particularly influential on the spheres of public and private worship. For centuries, worship was entirely controlled by the Church on a public stage, while private worship was either deeply discouraged or prohibited. But when the liberal philosophy of writers such as Locke circulated Europe, worship transformed into a personal matter of conscience. This effectively removed worship from the power of the church to the private world of the individual. This is confirmed by Locke in the opening lines of his work when he immediately states that toleration is the most important virtue of the church. He writes that, “the toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion is so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it in so clear a light”²³ Toleration, therefore, should be promoted by the church because it follows the dictates of reason and the teachings of Jesus.

In addition to Locke’s emphasis on toleration, he also focused on the relationship between the church and civil government. Locke, who argued strongly for a strict separation between the church and state, had a profound influence on the American colonies when the Amendments to the U.S. Constitution were debated. Locke explained his position by writing:

I esteem all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies

²³ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ed. John Shapiro (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 217.

that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men's souls, and on the other side, a care of the commonwealth.²⁴

Also, Locke provided three arguments that further explained why the church should not be allowed to control the civil government. First, Locke stated that “. . . the care of the souls is not committed to the civil magistrate, any more than to other men . . . because it appears not that God has ever given any such authority to one man over another as to compel anyone to his religion.”²⁵ This connects to the eighteenth century debate on freedom of religion because Locke argues that faith cannot be dictated to a person by either the will of the state or by an individual. Ultimately, because faith is personal, the choice to worship a particular faith must remain a private matter.

Next, Locke argued that, “. . . the care of the souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force; but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God.”²⁶ This also confirms Locke's position that religion must remain a separate and personal decision for the individual. Locke further believed that if the state attempted to dictate the faith of its citizens, it would be a direct action against the will of God. Lastly, Locke stated that, “. . . the care of the salvation of men's souls cannot belong to the magistrate . . . what hope is there that more men would be led into it if they had no rule but the religion of the court and were put under the necessity to quit the light of their own reason.”²⁷ Therefore, the duty of the church must be confined to the members of its faith

²⁴ Locke, *Two Treatises and Letter Concerning Toleration*, 218.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 218-219.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

or congregation, while the duty of the civil magistrate must be confined to the welfare of the commonwealth.

While Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* addressed the duties of the commonwealth, his 1689 work, *Two Treatises of Government*, provided an extensive overview of the rights and obligations of both the individual and the government. The ideas contained in Locke's work, mainly "arguing for the centrality of human reason, the natural rights of life, liberty, and property, and the idea that the authority of the state should come from the 'consent of the governed,'" would appear less than a century later in the American colonies.²⁸ Documents such as the Declaration of Independence, for example, clearly invoked Locke's writing and in several instances, directly quoted him. Throughout Locke's work, he supported his arguments by using the theory of social contract. The social contract theory, which first appeared in the writings of Plato, became a popular philosophical term in the seventeenth century with the publication of Thomas Hobbes's book, *Leviathan*, in 1651. The premise of the social contract theory was that individuals agree, upon mutual consent, to enter society and create a government. This government, having been created by the people, is therefore obligated to protect the life and possessions of its citizens, usually through the enforcement of laws and regulations.

In the opening pages, Locke stated that human beings are initially in a state of nature where they have "... a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature ..."²⁹ Here, Locke diverges from Hobbes, who believed that the life of man was

²⁸ Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006), 61.

²⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises and Letter Concerning Toleration*, 101.

“solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”³⁰ Instead, Locke believed that “the state of nature has a law of nature to govern it . . . and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind . . .”³¹ Even though man has the freedom to control his actions when in a state of nature, reason can guide moral behavior. Next, Locke argued that while man has perfect freedom in a state of nature, his life and property remain vulnerable because there are no laws or punishments in place to protect him. It is this uncertainty that ultimately forces man to agree to enter civil society. Also, Locke clearly stated that “the only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another . . .”³² Of course once man agrees to enter civil society, he relinquishes the freedoms he enjoyed while living in a state of nature and is bound by the laws of the society he joins.

In *Two Treatises*, Locke never argues that a democracy, for instance, is the best form of government, but he does criticize the concept of the divine right of kings, which was a position largely influenced by Locke’s own conflict with the English monarchy during the Glorious Revolution of 1688.³³ In fact, Locke dedicated the entire first treatise to disproving the divine right of kings, an argument that he supported by examining Biblical scripture. In the section, Locke stated that monarchical power is generally established in the Old Testament when Adam received divine authority over his

³⁰ Knoebel, *Classics of Western Thought*, 34.

³¹ Locke, *Two Treatises and Letter Concerning Toleration*, 102.

³² *Ibid.*, 141-142.

³³ The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was the overthrow of King James II by English Parliamentarians. This effectively ended Catholicism’s dominance in England and the unlimited powers of the monarchy. Locke’s involvement was limited to an accusation of being involved in the Rye House Plot, an assassination plot against King James. He fled England shortly thereafter and did not return until after the Revolution had ended.

descendants from God. Furthermore, this power, which was passed down through the generations, is absolute because it was established through divine authority. Ultimately, Locke dismissed this argument by stating that Adam's line is ". . . utterly lost," and therefore, ". . . it is impossible that the rulers on earth should make any benefit, or derive any the least shadow of authority from that, which is held to be the fountain of all power . . ." ³⁴ This argument is particularly significant to Locke's overall work because if monarchical power is not absolute, then the decisions of the monarchy can be challenged by members of the commonwealth.

Locke further elaborates on this notion when he discusses the right of the people to rebel against the government or ruling body. First, Locke is adamant that rebellion only occurs when ". . . a long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people . . . it is not to be wondered, that they should then rouse themselves . . ." ³⁵ But Locke is careful to state that unwarranted rebellion, usually committed without the consent of the other members of the commonwealth, places the person or persons ". . . into a state of war . . ." ³⁶ Therefore, rebellion is only permitted when the actions of the ruling body works towards the disinterest of the commonwealth. This includes altering the legislation without consent or relinquishing authority to another person or country. Ultimately, Locke's arguments with regard to rebellion and limitations on monarchical power had a great impact on the American colonies. While Locke's name and work was never mentioned in the sessions

³⁴ Locke, *Two Treatises and Letter Concerning Toleration*, 100.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

of the Continental Convention, his ideas “. . . had great weight in the minds of the men who assembled in 1787 at Philadelphia to frame a new constitution . . .”³⁷

Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* and *Two Treatises of Government* were both influential in the eighteenth century in regards to issues such as separation of church and state, freedom of religion, natural rights, and social contract theory. But his 1690 work titled *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was especially recognized and favored by deists. In general, the work “. . . fed the springs of deism, inasmuch as its plea for reliance on sensory experience and reflection rather than on innate ideas and the ‘mysterious’ . . .”³⁸ The concept of innate ideas, which argued that human beings are born with knowledge, became a popular belief in the seventeenth century. The work of the philosopher Descartes, for example, contributed to the acceptance of innate ideas as a credible theory. Locke, on the other hand, rejected this view and instead argued that man was born with a clean slate, also known as *tabula rasa*. Locke wrote that the purpose of his work was to prove that “. . . men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any inborn impressions . . .”³⁹ According to Locke, the only way man could obtain knowledge was from observation and experience.

For deists, this argument was particularly appealing because it appeared to embrace their acceptance of reason as the only credible method to understand God and the natural world. Locke further explained this by writing, “. . . the mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it either through the senses by outward objects, or by its

³⁷ Merle Curti, “The Great Mr. Locke: America’s Philosopher, 1783-1861,” *The Huntington Library Bulletin* 11(April 1937): 135.

³⁸ Ibid., 115.

³⁹ Knoebel, *Classics of Western Thought*, 60.

own operations when it reflects on them. This is the first step a man makes toward the discovery of anything.”⁴⁰ Also appealing to deists was Locke’s argument about the existence of a deity. He explained that “Thus, from the consideration of ourselves, and what we infallibly find in our own constitutions, our reason leads us to the knowledge of this certain and evident truth, that there is an eternal, most powerful, and most knowing being; which whether any one will please to call God, it matters not.”⁴¹ This statement supported the deist view that reason reveals truth and allows man to know God. While John Locke remained a fervent Christian throughout his life, the ideas and arguments contained in his work were interpreted by deists in the eighteenth century as proof that Christian superstitions and mysteries were not only outdated, but were against the foundation of reason, which was accepted as the one true path to knowledge.

While the theories contained in the work of John Locke profoundly impacted natural religion and particularly deism in the eighteenth century, it was the contributions of a minor seventeenth century British soldier and poet named Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648) that had the single greatest influence on deistical thinking.⁴² Earning the title “father of English deism,” from the deist community, Lord Herbert published one of the first books entirely focused on the promotion of the principles of deism, *De Veritate* (On Truth as It Is Distinguished from Revelation, the Probable, the False, and the False) in 1624. In the book, Lord Herbert, who was a disciple of Descartes’s theory of innate ideas, compiled a list of five truths or virtues that form true religion. These virtues stated,

⁴⁰ Knoebel, *Classics of Western Thought*, 64.

⁴¹ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Black Swan, 1721), 241.

⁴² Lord Herbert of Cherbury was born in Britain. He attended college at Oxford and was trained in music, riding, and fencing. After being knighted by King James I, he eventually served as a soldier under the Prince of Orange. He later served as an ambassador to France and was widely popular at the French court, being fluent in the French language. He was imprisoned in Britain after stating that the king had violated his position by declaring war on Parliament. Surrendering his title and property, he died in poverty.

“firstly, that there is one Supreme God; secondly, that he ought to be worshipped; thirdly, that virtue and piety are the chief parts of divine worship; fourthly, that man ought to be sorry for his sins and repent of them; and fifthly, that divine goodness dispenses rewards and punishments in this life and after it.”⁴³ Lord Herbert never officially attached himself to deism, but he remained critical of the Christian religion and especially the Church. Suspicious of revealed prophecy, Lord Herbert believed that corruption in the Church was proof that Christianity was a flawed faith system. Therefore, his five virtues provided man with an alternative path to God.

Also included in *De Veritate* was a four step process largely influenced by Descartes and his theories on truth and knowledge. In Lord Herbert’s work, he divided his methodology into four classes that he titled “. . . Natural Instinct, Internal Sense, External Sense, and *Discursus*, or Reason.”⁴⁴ The first three classes supported the theory that human beings are born with common notions or innate ideas. Rejecting observation and experience as the only methods that lead to truth, Lord Herbert believed human beings were born with a natural intuition and instinct. Furthermore, this intuition is a divine gift from God. In the last notion, Lord Herbert argued that natural intuition awakens in man a thirst for knowledge, which is further supported by the exercise of reason. Even though Lord Herbert believed reason contributed to man’s understanding of truth, he argued that, “man’s capacity for religion distinguishes him from animals rather than reason.”⁴⁵ Lord Herbert never used the term deism to define his views on religion, but his ideas about morality, truth, and reason became widely popular among deists from

⁴³ Corfe, *Deism and Social Ethics*, 53.

⁴⁴ Sidney L. Lee, *The Autobiography of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1886), xxxviii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xl.

the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. His work was not only quoted in other deist works, but was used for defining the tenets of deism.

Following Lord Herbert was the Irish philosopher and freethinker John Toland (1670-1722), whose 1696 work, *Christianity Not Mysteriorious*, served as an early deist manual. Raised as a devout Catholic and eventual convert to Protestantism, Toland studied at the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh. Financially supported by the Christian group, the English Dissenters, who funded his education, the Dissenters hoped that Toland would spread the word of the Bible and tour Europe as a minister for the faith. Instead, Toland became gradually more radical in his approach to religion and eventually produced *Christianity Not Mysteriorious*, which forced him to flee Ireland and settle in England for the remainder of his life. In Toland's book, he “. . . opposes not only Biblical mysteries, but also challenges the validity of the Biblical canon and identifies corruptions in Biblical texts. Toland mocks the implicit faith of the Puritans and their Bibliolatry, and censures the vested interests of priests from all denominations.”⁴⁶ Using reason as his guide to truth, Toland states in the preface of his work that, “I hope to make it appear, that the Use of Reason is not so dangerous in Religion as it is commonly represented,” and that “. . . the true Religion must necessarily be reasonable and intelligible . . .”⁴⁷

Throughout the work, Toland attempted to rid Christianity of superstitions and mysteries, which he argued was contrary to reason. He explained this by writing, “the first thing I shall insist upon is, that if any Doctrine of the New Testament be contrary to

⁴⁶ Corfe, *Deism and Social Ethics*, 55.

⁴⁷ John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysteriorious*, vii-viii and xxv.

Reason, we have no manner of Idea of it . . .”⁴⁸ In general, Toland hoped to convey the message that reason was not an enemy of religion, but rather a gift from God that was intended to be used for knowledge and truth. He further argued that:

. . . those, who stick [choke] not to say they could believe a downright Contradiction to Reason, did they find it contain'd to the Scripture, do justify all Absurdities whatsoever; and, by opposing one Light to another, undeniably make God the Author of all Incertaintude. The very Supposition that Reason might authorize one thing, and the Spirit of God another, throws us into inevitable Scepticism; fro we shall be at a perpetual Uncertainty which to obey: Nay, we can never be sure which is which.⁴⁹

Most disturbing to Toland was a belief that mysteries could be accepted as truth without investigation or inquiry. In the conclusion of his work, Toland stated, “The New Testament (if it be indeed Divine) must consequently agree with Natural Reason, and our own ordinary Ideas . . . what is reveal'd in Religion, as it is most useful and necessary, so it must and may be as easily comprehended, and found as consistent with our common Notions . . .”⁵⁰ Even though Toland’s book was burned and he was tried by a grand jury in London, he never declared himself an enemy of Christianity nor rejected the Bible as a holy book. Instead, he insisted that religious doctrine found contrary to reason, such as unfounded miracles, prophecies, and unexplained mysteries, must be refuted because there was no logical or scientific way to prove their validity. Toland further believed that if mysteries were accepted as truth, then reason might be misapplied to the discovery of knowledge. This would create a conflict between faith and reason, which could potentially keep man shrouded in darkness and ignorance. Overall, Toland’s work was appealing to deists because it provided a strong argument against the mysteries of Christianity and hailed reason as the true path to understanding God.

⁴⁸ Toland, *Christianity Not Mysteriorous*, 28-29.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 204 and 79.

Lord Herbert of Cherbury and John Toland were both early promoters of deistical thinking, but no single person had as much influence on deism in the eighteenth century than the British writer Matthew Tindal (1657-1733). His controversial 1730 book, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, quickly became known in Europe as the “Deist Bible.” Unlike previous deist writers, Tindal’s work established deism as an entirely separate belief system from Christianity. While Lord Herbert and Toland remained committed to a reformed version of Christianity and did not reject the Bible, Tindal was more vocal in his attacks on the Christian religion. Even though he shared some of the same views expressed by Lord Herbert and Toland, mainly in regards to reason and corruption in the Church, Tindal ultimately rejected the theory of innate ideas and relied solely on John Locke’s arguments to define the relationship between reason and religion. In general, Tindal:

. . . denied the divinity of Jesus, claiming that the notion was an invention of priestcraft. He insisted that the Scriptures demanded veneration of an ethically unworthy deity who displayed caprice, jealousy, and arbitrary cruelty in his dealings with humans, and he concluded that true religion- the religion of nature, stripped of all priestly superstition- was both logically and ethically superior to Christianity.⁵¹

For the first time, deism was acknowledged as a positive alternative to Christianity; a faith now regarded by deists as utterly corrupt and contrary to all uses of reason. Furthermore, the arguments expressed in Tindal’s work helped define both deism as a system and the deist as a person.

Immediately, Tindal established reason as the only means of acquiring knowledge. He defined reason by writing, “And if God designed all Mankind should at all times know, what he wills them to know, believe, profess, and practice; and has given

⁵¹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 32-33.

them no other Means for this, but the Use of Reason; Reason, human Reason must then be that Means . . .”⁵² Because reason is the only means of acquiring knowledge and is defined by the laws of nature, there is no need for God to reveal truth to man. Here, Tindal rejects revelation as truth and presents his opposition to the Christian religion as it was taught in the eighteenth century. He wrote “that they who, to magnify revelation, weaken the force of the religion of reason and nature, strike at all religion . . .”⁵³ Also, he further argued that Scripture, “. . . must not stand in competition with what our reason tells us of the nature and perfections of God . . . there are things either commanded, or approv’d of in the Scripture, which might be apt to lead men astray . . .”⁵⁴ Tindal’s entire argument is founded on the concept that reason is superior to all other forms of knowledge. Therefore, any claim that God revealed his intentions to man, as found in Biblical Scripture through stories such as the life of Jesus or Moses, for example, is not only contrary to reason, but unnecessary. Tindal’s conclusion is that revealed religion is dangerous because it encourages man to discount the power of reason. Ultimately, Tindal believed that the superstitions and miracles confirmed by the Church as truth should be questioned because reason reveals them to be highly unlikely and contrary to all natural law.

As the Age of Enlightenment entered Europe in the eighteenth century, natural religion, such as deism, was encouraged by the era’s emphasis on freedom of thought and rejection of traditional authority systems. Plagued by “centuries of superstition, error, and strife . . . most of the medieval ghosts had been laid; a revolutionary era had been

⁵² Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (London: 1730), 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 262-263.

successfully weathered; liberty and philosophy and the arts were raising their heads once more . . . most of the English writers of the time felt that they were living in an age of enlightenment . . .”⁵⁵ Starting with the Renaissance period, deism gradually developed as an alternative belief system to Christianity, which had been the dominant faith in Europe for centuries. Rejecting revelation and reliance on the Bible and church leaders for authority, deism turned to nature and reason for knowledge. As the atmosphere of the Enlightenment was welcoming to an age of “New Learning,” deism thrived throughout the century. After deism became a popular alternative to traditional Christianity in Britain, it quickly spread to France, where it also experienced success. Like British deist writers, French philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau began promoting deistic thinking through their writings. They emphasized many of the same arguments presented by the British deists, such as reliance on reason, rejection of mysteries and prophecies, and a belief that God can be understood through the natural world. The eighteenth century “. . . thought well of human nature, and it was generally believed that men were ‘by nature’ sociable, sympathetic, and benevolent.”⁵⁶ As deism continued to thrive, it found its way into a wide variety of countries, changing the social and cultural makeup of the institutions. Particularly affected were the American colonies, which embraced deism at a critical point in the century as they declared independence from Britain and created a new system of government.

⁵⁵ Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

CHAPTER THREE

AMERICA'S RELIGIOUS HISTORY AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Prior to the founding of the British North American colonies in the seventeenth century, the earliest generations of European colonists transported the political and religious conflicts of Europe to the New World. With movements such as the Scientific Revolution altering the understanding of the natural world and various wars creating widespread disease and poverty, the Protestant Reformation vastly transformed the entire structure of European life. With religious strife spreading throughout Europe, religious persecution of groups such as the Quakers and Anabaptists, for example, increased in the sixteenth century and even appeared in the first American colonies. For example:

the first permanent European settlement in the United States, St. Augustine, in modern-day Florida, was founded in 1565, 48 years after the start of the Reformation. Shortly afterward, the Spanish commander Pedro Menéndez de Avilés attacked a settlement of French Protestants (Huguenots) near the mouth of the Saint Johns River in Florida. Slaughtering the inhabitants after their surrender, he later excused his actions saying he did it 'not as to Frenchmen, but as to Lutherans.'⁵⁷

Representing one example of religious persecution, incidents such as the one in St. Augustine continued well into the eighteenth century.

In fact, when Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in 1831, he reflected that, " . . . for the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other . . . religion, which never intervenes directly in the government of American society, should

⁵⁷ *Encyclopedia of American Religious History*, Eds. Edward L. Queen II, Stephen R. Prothero and Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr. 3rd Edition (Boston: Proseworks, 2009), 5.

[nonetheless] be considered as the first of their political institutions.”⁵⁸ Therefore, de Tocqueville believed that religion, even when undergoing radical transformation and experiencing a period of discontentment, remained a form of identity for the American people. Encouraging a commitment to religious unity, widespread persecution was an unfortunate consequence of local laws targeting morality. For example, in 1658, “the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony enacted an anti-Quaker law that mandated ‘No Quaker Rantor or any other corrupt person shall be a freeman of this Corporation.’”⁵⁹ Instead of promoting religious freedom, a common notion associated with the founding of the American colonies, strict laws regarding faith were enforced on those who did not conform to the accepted religion of a colony.

To briefly summarize the religious affiliations of the American colonies, the Massachusetts Bay Area was settled by the English Puritans or Congregationalists, Pennsylvania by the British Quakers, Maryland by the English Catholics, and Virginia by the English Anglicans. Other southern states such as North and South Carolina and Georgia were also dominated by the Anglican Church. Jews, Baptists, and other groups also settled throughout the colonies. The Puritans, who settled in America beginning in the late 1620’s, “. . . believed that the Church of England was so corruptly entangled with Catholicism that nothing short of a clean break would suffice.”⁶⁰ Intending to “purify” the Church of England, Puritans thrived economically after their great migration. Quakers, founded in England in the 1640’s as the Religious Society of Friends, began immigrating to America to escape religious persecution. Originally settling in the

⁵⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Penguin Books, 2003),

⁵⁹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 18-19.

⁶⁰ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: How Our Founding Fathers Forged a Radical New Approach to Religious Liberty* (New York: Random House, 2008), 7.

Massachusetts Bay Area, Quakers were regularly subjected to beatings and imprisonment. This mainly occurred because, unlike the Puritans, who relied on church leaders for guidance, Quakers insisted that “. . . each person had to rely for spiritual guidance on the Inner Light more than scripture. The Congregational Church viewed this as blasphemous.”⁶¹ With the persecution of notable figures such as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, William Penn eventually founded Pennsylvania as a haven for Quakers to practice their faith. In Virginia, the Church of England dominated the culture of the Planter population. In fact, “by the 1740’s, the church had become a place of spiritual nourishment for the gentleman farmers who came to run the colony . . . Anglicanism remained the legally established, official religion of the colony.”⁶²

Despite a diverse range of faith systems, a common feature in several colonies was laws that enforced worship. For instance, “in the early eighteenth century, Virginian legislators decreed that disbelief in the authority of the Bible was illegal, and disqualified non-Christians from holding public office. Blasphemy, which included as minor a transgression as the profession of doubt about scriptural authority was a jailable offense.”⁶³ Even Pennsylvania, which was established on the principle of religious freedom, enacted laws that dictated worship. One act, “. . . passed in 1700 required inhabitants to either attend church services on Sundays or show they worshipped privately in their homes. Violators of this early ‘blue law’ risked a hefty fine.”⁶⁴ The legality of these laws and the general debate on specific details of worship would continue well into the

⁶¹ Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 10.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶³ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

eighteenth century when natural religion and other ideals of the Enlightenment entered America.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, religion was predominately controlled by an individual colony's established church. Dictating the practice of morality and worship, the power of the church was usually unlimited. But in the 1730's, a virtually unknown minister from Connecticut, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), created a religious revolution that forever transformed public worship. Troubled by the authority of the churches, particularly the influence of Calvinism, Edwards began preaching for a more personal and private form of worship. Calvinism, which entered the colonies with the Puritan migration in the 1620's, spread with the large influx of Dutch Reformed, German Reformed, and French Reformed immigrants entering the country. The tenets of Calvinism promoted a belief in:

total depravity (human beings are wholly sinful and incapable of saving themselves), unconditional election (God predestined some human beings for salvation without regard to their individual merits or possible good works), limited atonement (Christ suffered and died on the cross to save only those whom God had already chosen for salvation), irresistible grace (God's chosen ones can never reject salvation), and perseverance of the saints (the chosen will never fall away from their state of grace) ⁶⁵

Remaining popular in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Calvinism was the dominate system of worship in the colonies until Edwards began promoting his version of a reformed Christian faith. Particularly concerned with Calvinism's emphasis on predestination and total depravity, Edwards began preaching that good works and repentance of sin could lead to salvation. Rejecting the formalities promoted by Calvinism in regards to worship, Edwards instead encouraged a more unorthodox and

⁶⁵ *Encyclopedia*, 228.

personal path to God. Redefining faith as a personal spiritual journey, Edwards's reformed faith took hold in the colonies. Instead of worship being confined to the walls of a church, services were held outdoors and people from all backgrounds were encouraged to participate. As the first example of evangelicalism in America, Edwards's Great Awakening redefined the relationship between the individual and God.

Following Edwards's early success, the British preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770), emerged as the most powerful leader of the Great Awakening movement. Unlike Edwards, who rejected much of the tenets of Calvinism, Whitefield accepted predestination and total depravity. But even though he promoted a more moderate version of Calvinism, his influence on the American colonies would have an unexpected impact on worship in the eighteenth century. Arriving in America in 1738, his sermons attracted thousands of listeners, including Benjamin Franklin. In fact, Franklin was so impressed with Whitefield's influence that he printed several of Whitefield's sermons. Overall, the Great Awakening was significant to American worship because:

. . . it was through revivals that colonists gained practice in challenging authority in general . . . theologically, average colonists were taught that they needn't rely on experts to translate their conversations with God; they had the insight, and right, to connect directly and interpret God's will . . . it was in part from the evangelicals that many colonists learned how to be revolutionaries.⁶⁶

The Great Awakening redefined faith as a personal spiritual journey and the church was no longer hailed as the sole authority of teaching and preaching religion. Any person could pick up the Bible and read the word of God. This was particularly important to the rise of natural religion in America because faith was no longer confined to the church. People were encouraged to look within and at the surrounding world to find answers to

⁶⁶ Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 31.

their faith. This created an environment that promoted diverse systems of faith, which contributed to natural religion and Enlightenment ideals spreading in America.

When the Enlightenment spread across Europe in the eighteenth century, its progress was often met with resistance from established authority systems, such as the monarchy or the Church. But when the Enlightenment finally entered America, its ideals were quickly embraced by the colonists. The Enlightenment's quick success in the colonies was most likely due to "America's lack of longstanding traditions and institutions . . ." which meant that ". . . the political program of the Enlightenment would have smoother sailing in this country than abroad, and the Americans could accomplish things in areas like self-rule and religious tolerance that would seem like impossible dreams to most Europeans."⁶⁷ Also, the American Enlightenment differed from the European Enlightenment because rather than relying solely on its own theories and accomplishments, America implemented ideas from overseas and interpreted them in ways that benefited the colonies.

The noted historian Henry May argued in his book *The Enlightenment in America*, that there were four periods of Enlightenment. The first was a moderate Enlightenment, which ". . . preached balance, order, and religious compromise . . ."⁶⁸ The second was a skeptical Enlightenment, which promoted ". . . wit . . ." and ". . . its dogmas were usually elliptically stated and often mere negotiations . . ."⁶⁹ The third was a revolutionary Enlightenment, which May described as a ". . . belief in the old

⁶⁷ Meyer, *Democratic Enlightenment*, xxi.

⁶⁸ Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), xvi.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

possibility of constructing a new heaven and earth out of the destruction of the old.”⁷⁰

And lastly, there was a didactic Enlightenment, which was “. . . a variety of thought which was opposed both to skepticism and revolution, but tried to save from what it saw as the debacle of the Enlightenment the intelligible universe, clear and certain moral judgments, and progress.”⁷¹ These different stages of the Enlightenment were significant to the intellectual development of America and changes in traditional political and theological systems. America, as a relatively new country and despite its European ancestry and allegiance to the British crown pre-Revolution, was able to embrace new systems of thought that were often resisted in Europe. While America also challenged radical positions and leaders throughout the eighteenth century, its youth ensured that diversity in opinion and practice had a greater chance to take hold and influence policy in both public and private matters.

Also important to the spread of freethinking in America was an increase in both education and literacy. As a middle class emerged in America, “. . . literacy was more widespread than on the European continent.”⁷² With the first widespread newspaper, the *New England Courant* circulating the colonies in 1721, colonists had access to printed documents. Libraries, both public and private, also became popular in the eighteenth century. But no institution had as much influence on thinking in America as the university. In 1714, “the famous Dummer gift of books delivered to Yale College . . . introduced the New Learning to a curriculum that still focused on instruction in classical languages and taught a meager natural history comprised of undiluted Aristotelianism.

⁷⁰ May, *Enlightenment in America*, xvi.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁷² Meyer, *Democratic Enlightenment*, xxii.

But after the Dummer gift, the New Learning quickly spread throughout colonial colleges.”⁷³ Jeremiah Dummer (1681-1739), a native of Massachusetts, traveled to Europe and was introduced to the New Learning philosophy. Even though he was a Harvard graduate, Dummer worked on securing book donations to Yale College. When he acquired the collection that became known as the Dummer books, it had an immediate impact on the curriculum. Samuel Johnson (1696-1772), the famous American clergyman and educator, graduated from Yale College in 1716, and stated that the Dummer books introduced him and his friends to “. . . the works of our best English poets, philosophers, and divines . . . I was wholly changed to the New Learning.”⁷⁴

At Harvard University, which was established in 1636, the original intention of the university was to train and educate the ministry. Controlled by the Puritans, the college enforced strict college laws. In 1642, for example, the college laws stated that:

(No. 1) ‘Every student shall consider the mayne end of his life and studyes, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternall life.’; (No. 2): ‘Seeing the Lord giveth wisdom, everyone shall seriously, by prayer in secret, seeke wisdom of him.’; (No. 3): ‘Everyone shall so exercise himselfe in reading the Scriptures twice a day that they be ready to give an account of their proficiency therein, in theorettical observations of Language and Logicke and in practicall and spirituall truthes’; (No. 4): ‘All Sophisters and Bachellors (i. e. seniors and graduate candidates for the ministerial M. A.) until they themselves make commonplace (i.e. prepare their own sermons) shall publicquely repeate sermons in the hall when they are called forth.’⁷⁵

But when the Calvinists gained control of Harvard in 1672, the new college headmaster and the hired tutors were more sympathetic to learning that contradicted or at least questioned the authority of the church. When the Great Awakening spread in the

⁷³ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 34.

⁷⁴ Theodore Hornberger, “Samuel Johnson of Yale and King’s College,” *The New England Quarterly* 8.3 (Sept. 1935): 379.

⁷⁵ Charles Lyttle, “A Sketch of the Theological Development of Harvard University, 1636-1805,” *Church History* 5.4 (Dec. 1936): 309.

colonies, it also had a tremendous impact on the thinking of the students. While the Great Awakening created “. . . emotional fervor,” it also produced the “. . . theological discord and even gross immorality among the students.”⁷⁶ Later in the eighteenth century, the four Dudleian lectures of 1755 officially introduced natural religion into the college curriculum. The lectures focused on:

(1) the principles of Natural Religion; (2) the confirmation, illustration and improvement of the great articles of the Christian religion; (3) the detection, convicting and exposing of the idolatry, errors and superstitions of the Romish Church; (4) maintaining, explaining and proving the validity of the ordination of ministers or pastors of the churches, and their administration of the sacraments or ordinances of religion as the same hath been practiced in New England from the first beginning of it, and continued to this day.⁷⁷

With the changes that occurred at Harvard, incoming university students were encouraged to attend Yale University, which was believed to hold morality and religion in greater regard than Harvard. As education and literacy rates increased throughout the century, a diverse range of ideas and works from notable writers and philosophers circulated the colonies. This exposure to the New Learning encouraged individual thought and reflection, which was an ideal setting for the arrival of deism.

⁷⁶ Lyttle, “Harvard University,” 325.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 328.

SECTION II: AMERICAN DEISM

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PLAIN-DEALER, AMERICA'S FIRST DEIST AND EARLY DENIALS OF DEISM

Deism's influence in eighteenth century America is often debated among historians. Included in this debate is the exact date deism appeared in America, which figures were influenced or subscribed to deism, and how widespread deism's impact actually was. Starting with the date deism actually first appeared in America, an overwhelming majority of historians argue that deism did not take hold in the colonies until after 1750. In fact, many historians argue that committed deists only became vocal in the latter decades of the century. But in 1728, a series of articles were published in the *Maryland Gazette* by an anonymous writer known as the Plain-Dealer. Promoting philosophical doubting, the Plain-Dealer articles were later reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* by Benjamin Franklin. In Nicholas Joost's article, "'Plain-Dealer' and Free-Thinker: A Revaluation," he examined the Plain-Dealer articles and concluded that while Enlightenment ideals of freethinking and rationalism are discussed, ". . . not all rationalists ended in deism."⁷⁸ Joost is correct that the Plain-Dealer never invoked the term deism to describe the philosophy presented in the articles, but he failed to acknowledge how the Plain-Dealer promoted deistic principles, while conforming to the expected social standards of the period.

⁷⁸ Nicholas Joost, "'Plain-Dealer' and Free-Thinker: A Revaluation," *American Literature* 23.1 (March 1951): 37.

For instance, in the December 17-24th issue of the *Maryland Gazette*, the Plain-Dealer wrote in the fifth article of the series that:

To conclude my two lectures upon philosophical doubting, and to show the main advantages of such a habit to mankind in general; I must once again remind my readers, that it is impossible to think freely, and to come at truth without this disposition. In the next place, I shall observe, that this habit of doubting, will teach us to be modest in our opinions, and ready to retract our errors; not to be positive in our ignorance, but inquisitive and desirous of instruction; to be moderate towards those who differ from us; and to suffer all men, who live in submission to the civil laws of their country, to enjoy their persuasion quietly, without attempting to convince them of any error, but by cool and temperate reasoning.⁷⁹

Here, the Plain-Dealer is promoting doubt and reason as the main path to truth. Doubt and reason not only reveal truth, but also teach acceptance and respect for the ideas and beliefs of others. The Plain-Dealer is not referencing outright deism with this article, but the emphasis on reason and doubt is an early allusion to the type of skepticism that deists embraced later in the century. Also, when the articles were written, an accusation of deism had severe consequences in the community. Often equated or undistinguished from atheism, which was condemned by established churches as blasphemous and heresy, charges of deism could lead to punishments as severe as imprisonment and death. Choosing to publish the articles as an anonymous writer, the Plain-Dealer avoids association with deism, a belief system deemed dangerous by the Christian churches, and simply evokes ideas contained in the works of European philosophers.

A further example of the Plain-Dealer's writings is the December 10th-17th issue of the *Maryland Gazette*, which states that:

There are persons, who have as great a facility in doubting, as others have in believing: the one affect singularity; the other popularity. Whereas the man who

⁷⁹ *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), 17-24 December 1728.

thinks freely, whose heart is set upon truth, doubts only in order to be certain; removes his doubts by doubting; and believes or disbelieves a proposition, in proportion to the evidence that appear to him for it or against it. The extremes of credulity and incredulity, do often proceed from an equal positiveness of temper. And the only cure for these two imperfections in the understanding is a rational doubting; such as will make us wary in receiving new opinions, and not unwilling to part with old ones.⁸⁰

The Plain-Dealer emphasizes that the freethinker, the person who chooses to doubt, is searching for truth. But the Plain-Dealer calls for a “rational doubting” instead of a radical doubting. Rational doubting not only allows an individual to accept new beliefs and ideas, but to also let go of the ones that are outdated. Also, the Plain-Dealer argues that investigation and inquiry are the only credible methods to discovering truth. Again, even though the Plain-Dealer does not proclaim open deism, his articles promote deistical thinking. Even though Joost believes that the Plain-Dealer articles are not deistic, he admits that, “of eight *Free-Thinker* papers reprinted in the *Maryland Gazette*, four deal with problems that concerned the deists. Nos. 3, 5, and 9 deal with metaphysics, specifically with ‘philosophical’ doubting . . . in ‘Plain-Dealer’ No. 3 this appeal to doubt is evidence of deism . . .”⁸¹ The Plain-Dealer articles promote doubting and skepticism while avoiding an endorsement of open deism. It is true that the Plain-Dealer was not an open deist, but because his articles contain the first traces of deistical thinking in America, he earns the title as one of the first deists in eighteenth century America.

While the Plain-Dealer articles were significant because they were published in a popular colonial paper and later re-printed in other papers such as Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette*, there were other appearances of deism in the early eighteenth century. In fact, in 1725, Benjamin Franklin printed a document in London that

⁸⁰ *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), 10-17 December 1724.

⁸¹ Joost, “Plain-Dealer,” 34.

responded to the English philosopher, William Wollaston's (1659-1724) 1722 work titled *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*. In Franklin's work,

he argued, that if, as Wollaston and others contended, an all-powerful, all-wise, and all-good God has constructed the universe, it follows that there can be no such thing as evil and there can be no free will for men. How could philosophers claim omnipotence and wisdom for God, and at the same time contend that man is free to go his own way, to do his own thing? No sane clockmaker would (if he could) build a watch with a mind of its own; nor would an all-wise god design a world that could function independently of His plans for it . . . ⁸²

In the later years of Franklin's life, he regretted his freethinking and inquiry into areas such as metaphysics. Even though the work was printed in 1725, it was not generally well known until well after Franklin's death in 1790. But in 1734, the founder of the *Virginia Gazette*, William Parks, published several articles and excerpts from various works that attacked deism and proclaimed the Christian faith as the path to truth. This reveals that, "the fear of deism in Maryland and Virginia was evidently strong enough to warrant a reprint by William Parks of Charles Leslie's famous tract against deism." ⁸³ Leslie (1650-1722), an Irish Anglican nonjuring divine, wrote several pamphlets and works dedicated to attacking deism and other Christians such as Roman Catholics, Quakers, and Jews. In the May 24, 1734 issue of the *Maryland Gazette*, it states that, "Lately published, *A Short and Easy Method with the Deists*. Wherein the certainty of the Christian Religion is demonstrated by infallible Proof, from Four Rules, which are incompatible to and Imposture that ever yet has been, or that can Possibly be." ⁸⁴ These types of articles confirm that deism was popular enough in America in the early years of the eighteenth

⁸² Meyer, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 9-10.

⁸³ Elizabeth Christine Cook, *Literary Influences in Colonial Newspapers, 1704-1750* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 172.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

century for newspapers to offer arguments that attempt to disprove deism in favor of Christianity.

With laws still in place in the early eighteenth century dictating acceptable faith systems, proclaims of open deism or freethinking could be dangerous. This continued throughout most of the eighteenth century despite the changes that occurred during the Revolutionary period. When Sir John Randolph (1693-1737), a former Virginia Attorney General and Speaker at the House of Burgesses died in 1737, his will specifically outlined his religious beliefs. Accused of deism while he was active in politics, his will stated that, "I have been reproached by many people . . . and drawn upon me names very familiar to blind zealots such as deist heretic and schismatic."⁸⁵ Denying the accusations of deism, Randolph further stated in his will that, ". . . to vindicate my memory from all harsh and unbrotherly censure of this kind, Jesus was the Messiah who came into the world in a miraculous manner . . . I am also persuaded . . . that the dead shall rise at God's appointed time."⁸⁶ Randolph's will reveals that deism was believed to be such a serious accusation that he felt compelled to protect his family and the Randolph name by using his final document to proclaim his dedication to the Christian faith. It is unclear whether Randolph was a deist, but his adamant denial of the accusation shows that at least deism was widely enough known in the colonies that it frightened people into silence or forced them to openly support the accepted faith of the colony they lived in.

⁸⁵ James Breig, "Deism: One Nation Under a Clockwork of God?" *Colonial Williamsburg* (Spring 2009): 2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

CHAPTER FIVE

AMERICA'S COLLEGES: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FREETHINKING AND THE CHURCHES

As stated in chapter three, American colleges made a significant contribution to the spread of freethinking. After the Dummer Books entered Yale College in 1714, liberal philosophy from Europe began spreading throughout the university system. Because the majority of universities were controlled and often funded by the state's established church, a conflict quickly emerged between college curriculum that taught liberal philosophy and churches who wanted students to have a solid education in Christian theology. Samuel Johnson, a Yale graduate experienced the conflict firsthand and it was reported that:

as an undergraduate at Yale, he was warned against reading Descartes, Locke, and Newton; becoming a tutor, he introduced these works into the college library. As a theological student he was cautioned against a certain new philosophy that was attracting attention in England, being told that it would corrupt the pure religion of the country and bring in another system of divinity.⁸⁷

With colleges such as Harvard, for example, experiencing power shifts between Christian factions, liberal books and courses had a greater chance to spread in the universities. With the Great Awakening of the 1730's and 1740's, students were inspired to explore new ideas and philosophies rather than conform to a strict Christian curriculum.

While liberal education became widely popular in American colleges, the churches did not give up hope that reforms would curtail the radical thought being passed on to students by instructors. Efforts to reform the college curriculum often began with

⁸⁷ Woodbridge Riley, "The Rise of Deism in Yale College," *The American Journal of Theology* 9.3 (July 1905): 475.

the presidents of the colleges. Starting with the mid to late century, colleges elected presidents who were either preachers or had a background in theology. Presidents, such as Yale's Ezra Stiles (1727-1795), began introducing policies that enforced Christian teachings and limited works that would be considered too liberal or radical. Stiles, who was born in New Haven Connecticut, was not only a Yale graduate, but he also worked as a tutor from 1749-1755. Graduating with a degree in theology and becoming an ordained minister the same year he graduated in 1749, Stiles admitted that he experimented with natural religion when he was a student and was persuaded by the works he read. His described his foray into natural religion and stated “. . . how he was allured by the inviting circumstances of the college library, how he was led into the darkness of skepticism, and how he finally emerged from deism.”⁸⁸ Returning to his faith, Stiles spent years preaching to the local community, but he began to shift his focus to education. In 1764, Stiles helped found the College in the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, eventually known as Brown University. But his most important role came in 1788 when he was elected the president of Yale College. Besides introducing the first Hebrew studies program and serving as the first professor of Semitics, Stiles began to reform the studies at Yale, particularly focusing on the curriculum's inclusion of liberal works.

Starting in 1959, Stiles began to express his concerns about Yale's curriculum. In a private letter from September 24, 1959, Stiles addressed the spread of deism by stating:

And this will have an unhappy Effect on a sudden to spread Deism or at least skepticism thro' these Colonies. And I make no doubt, instead of the Controversies of Orthodoxy & Heresy, we shall soon be called to the defence of

⁸⁸ Riley, "The Rise of Deism," 477.

the Gospel itself. At Home the general grand Dispute is on the Evidence of Revelation- some few of your small Folks indeed keep warming up the old Pye, & crying Calvinism, Orthodoxy &c- these are your Whitefields, Romaines, &c that make a pother . . .⁸⁹

Admitting that deism had already taken a stronghold of the American colonies, Stiles argued that Christianity would have to be defended. Endorsing the approach of George Whitefield and others of the Great Awakening, Stiles believed that presenting a positive alternative to deism would counter its influence. Further discussing deism, Stiles also wrote in another letter in 1759 that:

Deism has got such Head in this Age of Licentious Liberty, that it would be in vain to try to stop it by hiding the Deistical Writings: and the only Way left to conquer & demolish it, is to come forth into the open Field & Dispute this matter on even Footing- the Evidences of Revelation in my opinion are nearly as demonstrative as Newton's Principia, & these are the Weapons to be used. Deism propagates itself in America very fast, & on this Found, strange as it may seem, is the Chh of Engld built up in polite Life.⁹⁰

This letter is of particular significance because Stiles's emphasis on using revelation as an argument to counter deism became the key method employed by churches in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Instead of allowing deism to simply attack Scripture to convert its followers, Christians would have to fight back and use the Bible as their weapon. Presenting passages of Scripture that provided a positive alternative to deism, Christianity could win the battle against systems of thinking that were immoral and blasphemous.

Even though Stiles argued that hiding deistical works would not aide Christianity's attempts to defeat deism and other freethinking groups, measures were taken to restrict the influx of liberal materials entering Yale. An example of this is the

⁸⁹ Riley, "The Rise of Deism," 480.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 482.

story of Henry Collins, a merchant from Newport, Rhode Island. It is stated that he “. . . had offered a dozen books to the college library on the condition of their being deposited there for the free use of the students. He had, however, been informed that Rector Clap would not suffer the volumes, because they contained heresy.”⁹¹ Attempting to curb the influence of liberal materials, Stiles’s tenure as president was dedicated to confirming the strength of the Christian faith. When he delivered his election day sermon on May 8, 1783, he once again discussed his years as a skeptical student. Stiles stated that he had “. . . passed thro the cloudy darksome valley of skepticism, and stood on the precipice . . . of deism.”⁹² Calling again for Christians to engage in open debate with deists, Stiles “. . . argued that the Christian character of the United States would continue in future generations because of demography, support from the state, Christians’ control of public institutions, and the persuasive abilities of the Protestant leadership . . .”⁹³ This and other attempts to control education created an open debate between Christians and deists. Ultimately, the battle for control of the colleges was made further difficult by the demand from students for liberal materials and the conflict between both conservative and liberal administrators. In fact, at the College of William and Mary, Thomas Jefferson eliminated the chairs of divinity, which opened the door for liberal studies to be integrated into the curriculum. As colleges became more liberal throughout the eighteenth century, the churches slowly began to lose its grasp on American education. This conflict between the church and deism in the colleges reveals that deism was indeed widely acknowledged by influential leaders as a serious problem that needed to be curbed.

⁹¹ Riley, “The Rise of Deism,” 481.

⁹² Christopher Grasso, “Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution,” *The Journal of American History* (June 2008): 64.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

CHAPTER SIX

THE STORY OF WILLIAM BEADLE: TRAGEDY USED AS PROPAGANDA

On December 11, 1782, the community of Wethersfield, Connecticut was stunned when they discovered that a local merchant named William Beadle murdered his wife and four children before committing suicide. In the early hours of that December morning, Beadle awoke the maid and asked her to seek the local physician. During the period he was alone, Beadle murdered his family by smashing their heads in with an ax and slitting their throats. After covering their bodies with blankets and laying them out in a row on the floor, he shot himself in the head with two pistols. When the tragedy was discovered by the maid and physician, a suicide note was found that stated, “I choose to leave this World as I found it, honestly confessing that I know not what to make of it nor ever did, nor never will any man that thinks, know what to make of it while he stays in it.”⁹⁴

The murder/suicide received widespread coverage across the colonies. After the *Hartford Connecticut Courant* printed the first story about the Beadle tragedy, it was reprinted several times in other newspapers. There was even a book published in 1783 titled *A Narrative of the Life of William Beadle*. Written by Stephen Mix Mitchell, the book detailed every gruesome detail of the murders/suicide, while also explaining Beadle’s motives for the crimes. The cover included a full illustration that was “headed ‘A Horrid Massacre.’”⁹⁵ The illustration “. . . consisted of three pictorial frames vertically stacked: at the top was a large coffin adorned with a black heart (Lydia), in the

⁹⁴ Grasso, “Deist Monster,” 56.

⁹⁵ Richard Wightman Fox and T.J Jackson Lears, *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 88.

middle were four small coffins with black hearts (the children), and at the bottom was a supine body with a hatchet, knife, and two pistols floating above (Beadle himself)” (Fig. 1).⁹⁶ As the story garnered attention, myths and theories about William Beadle’s life and the motives behind the murders/suicide began to spread across the colonies, all of which created a firestorm of controversy that continued for decades. And at the very center of the Beadle controversy was deism.

William Beadle was born in London in 1730. Before immigrating to America in 1762, it was reported that he “. . . frequented a club of deists.”⁹⁷ Before settling in Wethersfield, Beadle became a successful merchant in each of the American towns he lived in. Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), president of Yale College from 1795-1817, was a close acquaintance of Beadle and stated that, “he possessed good sense, loved reading, and delighted in intelligent conversation . . . his manners were gentlemanly, and his disposition hospitable.”⁹⁸ When he eventually settled in Wethersfield, Beadle opened a country store and was described by customers as an honest businessman. While Beadle ran a successful business for years, his fortune was permanently altered when the Revolutionary War began. During the war, Beadle gradually sold off his stock and transferred his money to continental currency. But when the money depreciated after the war, Beadle was left broke and desperate for cash. Recording his personal thoughts in his journal, Beadle confessed that he was suffering from depression and also expressed feelings of hopelessness.

⁹⁶ Fox and Lears, *The Power of Culture*, 88.

⁹⁷ Daniel A. Cohen, “Homicidal Compulsion, and the Conditions of Freedom: The Social and Psychological Origins of Familicide in America’s Early Republic,” *Journal of Social History* 28.4 (Summer 1995): 729.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 729.

When Beadle lived in London, he had been inspired by deism and he continued reading deistical works while in America. Struggling with his thoughts on God, life, and death, Beadle concluded that every man had a right to take his own life. But Beadle also concluded that every man had the right to take the lives of his family, which were his possessions to dispose of as he saw fit. Battling feelings of shame and humiliation for his failures, Beadle found it impossible that “. . . a man who had ‘once lived well, meant well and done well,’ should fall ‘into poverty’ and submit ‘to be laughed at.’”⁹⁹ Beadle further believed that he would not be punished for his crimes on earth and that God would welcome him and his family into heaven because their deaths would prove that they were eager to meet their maker. Struggling with his ideas on life and death, Beadle spent three years debating the plan to murder his family. But as he convinced himself that death was the only escape, Beadle furiously recorded his justifications for the forthcoming murder/suicide. He wrote that:

any man that undertakes any great affair ought to be very deliberate indeed; and think and reflect again and again . . . I was determined not to hasten the matter, but kept hoping that yet Providence would turn up something to prevent it . . . I seem to be convinced in a calm, steady and reasonable way that it is appointed for me to do it- that it is my duty and must be done. That it is God himself that prompts and directs me, in all my reflections and circumspection, I really believe.
100

According to Beadle’s journal, there were at least three failed attempts to murder his family. But on December 11, 1782, Beadle followed through with his plan. Leaving behind his personal writings and letters, the media and community would spend years trying to decipher and understand why Beadle had committed the crimes.

⁹⁹ Cohen, “Homicidal Compulsion,” 729.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 730.

Of particular importance was the discovery of Beadle's views about life, death, and faith, all of which were deistic in nature. Owning books that contained deistical thinking, Beadle's commitment to deism provided Christian preachers a very powerful weapon to counter the growing influence of deism in America. The entire Beadle affair:

. . . offered Christian writers a graphic warning about a threat to the nation. Beadle seemed to demonstrate that subjectivity cut loose from the guidance of the scriptures would lead to madness and bloodshed; the tragedy served to illustrate the need to make the Christian Bible the bedrock of citizenship, governance, and morality in every state.¹⁰¹

Ignoring other possible reasons for the Beadle tragedy, such as depression, isolation, and mental instability, Christian preachers and writers honed in on deism as the culprit for the murders/suicide and began circulating literature that blamed the influence of deism for the incident and proclaimed the Bible and the Christian faith as the path to salvation. In the original article in the *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, the article stated that:

. . . His business, which was that of a trader, declining some years since, he betook himself more to books than usual, and was unhappily fond of those esteemed Deistical; of date he rejected all Revelation, as imposition, and (as he expresses himself) 'renounced all the popular religions of the world, he intended to die a proper Deist.' Having discarded all ideas of moral good and evil, he considered himself, and all the human race, as mere machines; and that he had a right to dispose of his own and the lives of his family . . .¹⁰²

The article was followed by a broadside article in both Providence and Boston that reprinted the *Courant* article with illustrations and an eight stanza poem (Fig. 2). In the poem, the readers were instructed to "Detest the errors, to this deed him drew . . . Come pure religion, of heav'nly birth, dispel these glooms, and brighten all the earth; drive these destructive errors from the land, and grant that truth as a sure guard may stand . . ."

¹⁰¹ Grasso, "Deist Monster," 45.

¹⁰² *Hartford Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), 17 December 1782.

¹⁰³ Criticizing deism by emphasizing words such as “detest the errors,” and “destructive errors,” Christianity is hailed as the “pure religion” and “truth.” This would become a popular method of attack for preachers and writers when referencing the Beadle affair in later years.

When the funerals were held for the Beadle family on December 13, 1782, the local Wethersfield reverend, John Marsh, delivered the sermon. Besides proclaiming, “what a monster of a man was this,” Marsh’s sermon claimed that “. . . anyone who could reject the ‘infallible evidence’ of Christian truth could as easily reject the conscious mind’s awareness of its own free agency, pervert the natural affections for his family, and extinguish natural conscience and reason. It was obvious that men of such principles were unfit ‘to be entrusted either with private or public important affairs . . .’”¹⁰⁴ Shortly thereafter, more sermons and writings referenced Beadle and the dangers of deism. For instance, the Calvinist preacher George Beckwith and the New Light Presbyterian preacher John “Damnation” Murray dedicated entire sermons to discussing the matter. Murray even wrote a book in 1783 titled *Bath-Kol*, which chronicled religion in America. An entire section of the book was dedicated to the Beadle affair and more specifically, deism.

In Murray’s book, he called deism “the grand patron of wickedness and debauchery of the present time.”¹⁰⁵ Murray claimed that deism had become particularly popular in the colonies after the American Revolution. He further argued that “. . . important governmental posts in some provinces had been filled by deists. Officers in

¹⁰³ *A Poem, Occasioned by the Most Shocking and Cruel Murder*. Anonymous writer. Circulated in Boston in 1782. Article courtesy of *Connecticut Historical Society*.

¹⁰⁴ Grasso, “Deist Monster,” 43 and 51.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

some of the forts bragged of having read deists tracts and found them persuasive. In principal towns . . . many leading lawyers were deists, and physicians brought the contagion to the sickbeds of their patients.”¹⁰⁶ Alluding to a deist conspiracy, Murray believed that deism had infected America and that deists were committed to converting good Christians to their evil and heretical beliefs. Murray further wrote that deism was:

. . . the arch-murderer that, having made its votaries the pests of society, while they lived, hurries them on to be their own butchers at last. To the spreading of this principle we may ascribe the overgrown wickedness of AMERICA at this unhappy period. This is the monster that threatens to extirpate all the remains of virtue and piety from among us: And has already actually hardened so great a part of this generation at once, to cast off the fear of God and the regard of man; that we are now habituated to the news of self-murders, committed in the shade of these principles with the greatest deliberation, yea, of the husband and the father imbruing his hands in the beloved wife and all the tender offspring, to give a sanction to their theme.¹⁰⁷

Referencing the Beadle murder at the end of his statement, Murray purposely draws a connection between the evils of deism and the results of that evil, which is an incident like the Beadle affair. Even attacking Universalism as a shelter for deists, Murray claimed that the strategy implemented by deists to infiltrate society was by using “. . . satiric sneers, low puns, and malicious innuendos dropped casually in private clubs, while the deists themselves conformed publicly to the Christian forms of their society.”¹⁰⁸ In *Bath-Kol*, Murray outlined every conceivable myth about deism. Using fear, exaggerated truths, and outright lies, his book worked as a propaganda piece directed at limiting the spread of deism in America.

Even though the Beadle family was given a proper funeral and burial, it was reported that when William Beadle was removed from the home, the people “. . . stuffed

¹⁰⁶ Grasso, “Deist Monster,” 46.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 47.

the body out a window, tied the bloody knife to Beadle's chest with cords, took the corpse to the banks of the Connecticut River by a horse-drawn sled, and dumped it into a hole by the water's edge, 'like the carcass of a beast.'"¹⁰⁹ After that, the story of what happened to Beadle's body remains uncertain, but writers called for the community to desecrate his body. For instance, "a correspondent signing as 'A humble professor of Christianity' linked the public exposure of Beadle's literary remains to the public display of his corpse . . . as an 'example for all atheists and deists' . . . 'A Friend to Justice' also called for Beadle's body to be exhumed and hung on a gibbet to 'make a spectacle of horror to infidels.'"¹¹⁰ Here, atheism and deism are referenced together, which suggests that they share the same tenets of belief. Generally, the accepted story about Beadle's burial is that he was eventually buried, but not within the town limits of Wethersfield. Instead, the neighboring town of Glastonbury was chosen as the location, but when the townspeople discovered the identity of the body, they ". . . felt themselves insulted by the burying of such a monster" and demanded he be exhumed and relocated.¹¹¹ Beadle's body was then moved to another location, which was also discovered. It is believed that sometime before the body could be moved again, ". . . water exposed Beadle's skeleton . . . the curious came and some of 'the bones were broken off and scattered through the country.'"¹¹²

The Beadle affair "was embedded in both the eighteenth-century New England's religious and intellectual history and in the ideological contests of the new American

¹⁰⁹ Grasso, "Deist Monster," 49.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 50-51.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹¹² Ibid., 51.

nation.”¹¹³ First, it is undeniable that Beadle was inspired by deistical writing and even justified his actions based on his interpretation of the tenets of deism. This evidence, provided in Beadle’s personal writings, was used by the church to condemn freethinking and particularly deism’s growing influence in America. But overlooked is the fact that Beadle also expressed feelings of depression and hopelessness, which was triggered by the collapse of his financial stability. Further ignored by the church was Beadle’s confession that his partiality to deism actually contributed to his feelings of isolation. It was only in personal letters that “Beadle tried to express his beliefs to his friends.”¹¹⁴ In fact, Beadle’s conflicted feelings about worship were even hidden from his wife. Expressing his feelings of isolation and confusion, Beadle privately suffered with his personal beliefs for years before the murders/suicide.

Furthermore, in his letters, Beadle also carefully defended his deistic beliefs. He “. . . denied that deism could be equated with atheism . . .” and also argued that reason “. . . allows the scales of fantasy and superstition to drop from our eyes. Only the ‘Deist truly sees God through that Book of Nature and is contented for Himself and rejoices that he can discover the springs of all other Religions which the Populace tumble about just as Babies do their play things.”¹¹⁵ When examining Beadle’s early letters and personal reflections, they reveal that his interpretation of deism does not differ from other deist writers of the period. In fact, Beadle only began to dramatically change his views on life and death after he suffered the collapse of his business and financial stability. Of course, these factors were entirely ignored by those who chose to use the Beadle tragedy as

¹¹³ Grasso, “Deist Monster,” 45.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 56.

propaganda for their own beliefs. Even when examining Beadle's later letters, they do not reveal that his faith drove him to commit murder/suicide. Instead, the letters only prove that Beadle's humiliation and shame was largely driven by his financial failures. Possibly suffering an emotional breakdown, it was ultimately Beadle's inability to cope with his losses that contributed to his thoughts of suicide and feelings of hopelessness and isolation. Also, despite Beadle's claims that deism allowed him to execute the murder of his wife and children as well as his subsequent suicide, his confessions of depression and isolation cannot be overlooked as the driving factor for his actions. Unfortunately, the Beadle tragedy was successfully used by Christian writers and church leaders to warn against the influence of deism. Referred to by one writer as "this stupid, this detestable doctrine, which annihilates all restraints, insults common sense, and introduces a kind of insanity . . ." deism was portrayed as an evil and blasphemous system that would lead its followers straight to the confines of hell.¹¹⁶ Inspired by the Beadle affair, which was referenced decades after the original tragedy, Christian leaders began to fervently attack deism in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

¹¹⁶ Grasso, "Deist Monster," 55.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTIANITY VS. DEISM: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN BOTH THEOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

The William Beadle tragedy serves as one example of how deism was perceived in America in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Drawing a parallel between Beadle's actions and his practice of deism, church leaders created a propaganda campaign that used fear to portray deism as a dangerous system. Threatening eternal damnation, blasphemy, and penalties such as imprisonment and death, organized religion attempted to destroy the growing influence of deism and confirm Christianity as the dominant faith system in America. The active campaign initiated by church leaders included everything from sermons to published articles in newspapers, the distribution of pamphlets, and even published books devoted to disproving the tenets of deism and restating the story of the Christian faith. Even anonymous writers contributed to the commentary by publishing their opinions on deism and Christianity. Some writers also used more creative methods to attack deism. For instance, one such writing was "purportedly a pamphlet about the dangers of adulterous sex," but instead ". . . turns out to be a tract that insists on a concept of education conservatively cordoned off from either deism or revivalism."¹¹⁷

The educator and author, Parson Weems (1759-1825), who wrote the popular 1800 biography, *The Life of Washington*, which included the famous story of the cherry tree, wrote several morality books that had thinly disguised themes, some of which

¹¹⁷ Shirley Samuels, "Infidelity and Contagion: The Rhetoric of Revolution," *Early American Literature* 22 (1987): 185.

included attacks on deism. For example, in his 1815 book titled *God's Revenge Against Adultery*, Weems relates two stories of infidelity. The one character, Dr. Theodore Wilson, is described as being “infected with that most shameful and uneasy of all diseases, an incurable lust or itching after strange women.”¹¹⁸ But of course, Dr. Wilson's disease was not contracted by natural causes. Instead, “. . . this elegant young man owed his early downfall to reading (Thomas) Paine's *Age of Reason*. This ‘libertine publication’ sets loose Wilson's ‘boundless ardor for animal pleasures’ and encourages him with ‘bold slanders of the bible’ so that Wilson ‘threw aside his family's good old family bible, and for a surer guide to pleasure took up the *Age of Reason*!’”¹¹⁹ Therefore, the overall moral of Weems's book is that reading blasphemous works such as Paine's *Age of Reason* will contribute to a pattern of deteriorating moral judgment. The disease that infects the human body is corruption of the soul as it turns away from the Bible and the Christian faith. Several more of these “morality” books were published in the latter half of the eighteenth century, which were directed at deism and other types of freethinking deemed dangerous by the church.

It is important to note that the deist fear referenced by Christian writers and leaders in the latter half of the century was not entirely mythical. Deism, which was referenced in the early part of the century only through vague descriptions by anonymous writers, such as the Plain-Dealer, was not defended passionately by its followers. In fact, the laws that regulated worship often prevented many people from professing their deist beliefs. Even though deism was still treated as a blasphemous and evil belief system in the last half of the eighteenth century, its followers were slowly becoming more vocal. In

¹¹⁸ Samuels, “Infidelity and Contagion,” 184.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 184.

fact, newspapers served as one of the first real platforms that deists could use to describe their beliefs, while also attacking Christianity. For the first time, the American public began to engage in open debate about religion. Even though the writers often remained anonymous, they wrote articles and letters that explained misconceptions about deism and pointed out important Biblical contradictions and other corruptions they found within the Christian faith. In the last decade of the century, the deist response would turn particularly militant in its approach to Christianity, but beginning in the 1750's, deists were finally opening up about their beliefs. This change is most likely due to a few different factors which includes "... the Calvinist tradition against which it reacted, the steady infiltration into North America of French Enlightenment ideals, and the experience of national independence."¹²⁰

As stated in chapter three, Calvinism had initially dominated faith in the American colonies until Jonathan Edwards introduced a reformed religion that rejected ideas about predestination and total depravity. With the Great Awakening, the colonies began to reform their views on traditional Calvinism. But when the American Revolution began, the war had a profound impact on the religious structure of the colonies because "the need to rally all segments of the population to support the war weakened the religious establishments. The hostility to the established churches by nonconforming groups and the growing influence of Enlightenment ideas strengthened this tendency."¹²¹ Also, during the Revolutionary period, there was growing hostility towards the Church of England. In fact, after the Revolution, the Church of England was divided into different sects. While this allowed other religions to flourish and spread in the colonies, there was

¹²⁰ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 35.

¹²¹ *Encyclopedia*, 256.

an overwhelming attitude of discord and disunity in reference to faith. Of course when the American colonies won their independence, the creation of a new federal government and local state governments contributed to new laws that were inspired by Enlightenment ideals such as freedom and tolerance. Particularly influential was the French Enlightenment, which contributed to an evolving attitude about religion in general. In the 1790's, the militant deist writers incorporated French Enlightenment ideas about established religion in their attacks on Christianity.

All of these changes allowed deists in America to become more vocal in their approach to defending and stating their beliefs. Looking at newspaper articles and letters in the latter half of the century, there are a variety of references to deism. First, there are minor letters that condemn the practice of deism and also accuse people of practicing deism or defend them from the charges. One such example is a letter in the *Virginia Gazette* from May 20, 1763. The letter, written by a Joseph Kidd, is addressed to a Reverend Mr. Henley, who was supposedly accused by Kidd of practicing deism. Kidd's letter states that, "Whereas it is publicly reported that I accused the Reverend Mr. Henley of Deism, and a Disbelief of the Thirty Nine Articles of our Church, I do hereby, out of Justice to Mr. Henley's Character, declare that I never had Reason to believe that such were his Principles."¹²² Another article from the *Virginia Gazette* on March 2, 1753 relates a request to the printer of the paper. The letter states, "Having Reason to fear Deism has some Adherents in Virginia, I desire you to publish, in your Paper, some Reasons I have transferred from an eminent Author, to show that the Scriptures are the Word of God. Tho' they may not convince Infidels, yet they may be of some Use to

¹²² *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), 20 May 1773.

Believers; and your making 'em known will oblige.”¹²³ Following the letter is a series of arguments that defend Biblical Scripture.

One of the most interesting set of articles on deism appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* in January and February of 1767. In the first article, which was printed on January 8, 1767, a letter references an article from the previous week that accused an unknown person of tearing pages out of a Bible. This letter, which was written by an anonymous author, but addressed to the editor, Mr. Purdie, states that:

Was he a Methodist, or Deist, that is said to have tore the Bible, in your last paper? If the former, we may conclude that he was out of his senses, by reason of his destroying that which declared for him; if the latter, we may suppose the only dislike which he had to it was that it declared against him. Who but a Deist would ridicule the words (St. Luke, iv. 14.) of the only one that can save him from his sins?”¹²⁴

It is interesting that the author accuses both a Methodist and a deist of the deed. But the author is careful to excuse the Methodist of his/her actions by arguing that they must be mentally unstable. The deist, on the other hand, is not defended from their actions because, as the author states, only a deist would “ridicule” the words of the Bible.

In the next issue of the *Gazette*, another anonymous author addresses the accusations, but presents a different argument. In the article, the author writes:

In answer to the queries in your paper of the 8th instant, it will be acknowledged by every one, who knows any thing of the Deists, that it cannot reasonably be supposed to have been one of them that tore the Bible, as they care no more for what it may declare than for a bundle of old almanacs; but that it may be a Methodist, out of his senses, may be readily granted, ‘For whoever knew one of that tribe in his senses?’ Commend me to the sober Churchman; and away with all

¹²³ *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), 2 March 1753.

¹²⁴ *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), 8 January 1767.

the different classes of furious, ignorant, and illiberal zealots, with which the Mother Country, and its Colonies, are too much infested.¹²⁵

This author clearly defends deism by arguing that a deist would never purposely tear a Bible because the book holds no value for them. Instead, the author supports the conclusion that a Methodist was responsible for the deed. Attacking Christianity, the author declares that churchmen are generally lacking in sense. But the author reveals their own conclusions about Christianity when declaring committed churchgoers as “furious, ignorant, and illiberal zealots.” This letter presents a strong defense of deism, which is one of the first examples of the changing attitude of deists in the latter section of the eighteenth century.

In the final article of the series, another response is issued by a Christian who writes:

The writer of your paper of January the 22nd showeth his opinion as to the Deists, that they care no more for the holy bible than for an old almanac; if so, may this their grand mistake be removed. The contents of the bible continue (seeing what the words thereof bind on earth will be so in Heaven, even that remission of sins annexed to repentance, &c. See Matt. Xviii. 18. St. Luke xxiv. 47.) longer than years last; the contents of the other, no longer than one year.¹²⁶

Once again defending Scripture, the author simply states that the Bible will forever remain imbedded in society while deism will only survive for a short period before disappearing. Surprisingly enough, the author of this letter would be correct in his estimate about deism fading. Overall, this series of articles reveals the conflict between Christians and deists during the latter half of the century. Deism was not a theological system that could be easily dismissed by Christians. Instead, its emergence as an

¹²⁵ *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), 22 January 1767.

¹²⁶ *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), 5 February 1767.

influential system of thought in the century was a real and serious threat to Christians everywhere.

The response from church leaders included several of the same measures employed by deists to defend their own beliefs. For instance, besides the publication of books such as the Parson Weems works, which presented morality tales aimed at portraying deism as a life threatening disease, a popular method of attack was to preach against freethinking from the pulpit. Dedicating entire sermons to the threat of deism, preachers could effectively present the evils of deism, while also promoting the Christian faith. This allowed the leader of the church to speak publicly about deism in front of a gathered group of faithful followers. Also, Christian leaders used ridicule to counter the arguments of deists. Using the medium of the press to print articles and letters in newspapers and magazines, their arguments could reach a large percentage of the population. For example, in *The Providence and Gazette and Country Journal* issue of September 24, 1785 (No. 1134), an article written by an Englishman, Dr. Watts was particularly directed at the youth who were “. . . warned against the pitfalls of deistic speculation.”¹²⁷ In the article, which was titled “Advice to a Young Man, upon His Entrance to the World,” “he counseled his readers against gambling their ‘eternal interests in the world to come, upon the mere light of nature . . .’”¹²⁸ In an article in *The Continental Advertiser* on January 5, 1786 (No. 515), the readers were warned that “the cool and deliberate villainy of infidels (could not) be compared with one hour of conscious rectitude, far less than with their felicity, who, at their last moments, have

¹²⁷ Herbert M Morais, “Deism in Revolutionary America (1763-89),” *International Journal of Ethics* 42.4 (July 1932): 449-450.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 449-450.

witnessed in what peace a Christian (could) die.” Labeling deists as “infidels” and their actions as “villainy,” the author clearly believes them to be enemies of the Christian religion. This is further supported by a reference to Christ’s death, which is an event the author argues reveals the superior righteousness of Christians.

Also in an essay written by the governor of New Jersey, William Livingston (1723-1790), titled “Thoughts on Deism,” “he ridiculed deistic learning and speculation. He thought deists were ‘superficial reasoners’ and disciples of a morality which did not surpass in practice that exercised by a horse . . . in conclusion, Livingston implied that all deists were simply blockheads.”¹²⁹ Essays written by political figures were especially influential in the campaign to curb deism. Because elected officials on local, state, and even national levels had the power to introduce legislation geared at limiting what they deemed as immoral behavior, they could control the overall influence of deism. An example of this is a proclamation issued by the president of the State of Delaware, John Dickinson, whose edict was intended to “. . . stem the progress of infidelity . . .” and was “. . . reprinted in *The Pennsylvania Gazette and Weekly Advertiser* for June 23, 1782.”¹³⁰ Of course, the same could be said for deists or other freethinkers. In fact, parties belonging to both Christianity and deism would be integral in issues such as freedom of religion and church/state issues.

Also involved in the campaign against deism were notable Christian leaders who also served as important educators in the country. Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), who was the president of Yale College from 1795-1817, published an influential poem titled *Triumph of Infidelity* in 1788. Written as a satiric commentary on deism, Dwight

¹²⁹ Morais, “Deism in Revolutionary America,” 450.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 449.

addressed his poem to Voltaire, a great satirist writer, “. . . who had taught that “the chief end of man was to slander his God, and abuse him forever.””¹³¹ In the poem:

Dwight described such English deists as Herbert of Cherbury and Bolingbroke as the leaders in ‘Satan’s cause.’ Moreover, he held that these thinkers had been aided in their inquiry by such lesser lights as Toland, Collins, Chubb, Morgan, and Woolston, all of whom ‘help’d rakes to sin.’ If these deists were to win the day, usury and immorality would be widespread, since modern infidels were free from all principles and virtues . . .¹³²

This poem was reprinted and reviewed in the July 1788 issue of *The American Magazine*.

The reviewer, a deist, heavily criticized the poem and concluded that “. . . it could never pass for either true wit or good satire.”¹³³ Even Ezra Stiles, the previous Yale College president, believed that Dwight’s poem may have done more harm than good because of the language he used to attack deists. Stiles believed that Dwight “. . . had gone so far as to vilify them with an acrimony that was decidedly un-Christian.”¹³⁴ It is interesting that Stiles believed that Dwight’s language was too harsh considering the variety of articles aimed at deists in the eighteenth century. But Stiles’s endorsement of a more civil method of attack would become significant in the last decade of the century when a militant form of deism arose across the country.

Besides Dwight’s *Triumph of Infidelity*, he also delivered a sermon titled “A Discourse on Some Events of the Last Century” in 1801. Even though this sermon appears at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, it continues a diatribe that became more organized during the last half of the eighteenth century. In the sermon, which was written in response to Paine’s *Age of Reason*, Dwight continued his aggressive

¹³¹ Morais, “Deism in Revolutionary America,” 452.

¹³² Ibid., 452.

¹³³ Ibid., 452.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 452.

language towards deism by declaring that deism was an “. . . opposition to Christianity, devotion to sin and lust, and a pompous profession of love to Liberty.”¹³⁵ Here, Dwight compares deism to a sexual perversity that can corrupt the home and the state. Claiming that deism hides behind its supposed commitment to liberty, Dwight implies that deism is an organized conspiracy seeking to evade every facet of society. He further confirms this by stating, “. . . Infidels have neither labored, nor wished, to convince the understanding, but have bent all their efforts to engross the heart . . . their writings have assumed every form, and treated every subject of thought.”¹³⁶ Dwight believed that deists had purposely targeted the emotions of readers and listeners and used that vulnerability as a powerful conversion tool.

After 1750, the conflict between deists and Christians became more intense as both sides became more vocal in defending their beliefs. Before 1750, deists had mainly used the media as a means to present subtle messages of deism. But as the century progressed and the country began to change, deists felt more comfortable defending their beliefs. Examining the reaction of church leaders, politicians, and Christian writers, it is undeniable that deism was considered a serious and dangerous threat to the institution of Christianity. With everything from published articles, letters, books, sermons, pamphlets, and legislation appearing in the last half of the century, it is clear that there was an active campaign to curb the influence of deism and in most cases, right out destroy deism as a credible system. Using fear to convince people that deism was immoral and blasphemous, the church worked actively to portray deism as an evil institution. In a sermon written by Timothy Dwight, he summarized the feelings of the church by passionately declaring:

¹³⁵ Samuels, “Infidelity and Contagion,” 186.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 186.

Is it that our churches may become temples of reason, our Sabbath a decade, and our Psalms of praise Marsailles hymns? Is it that we may change our holy worship into a dance of Jacobin frenzy and that we may behold such a strumpet personating a goddess on the alter of JEHOVAH? Is it that we may see the Bible cast into a bonfire? . . . Shall our sons become disciples of Voltaire and the dragoons of Marat?¹³⁷

Dwight's sermon is an example of the fear expressed by church leaders during the century. Referencing the French Enlightenment, Dwight confirms that the influence of the Enlightenment was considered a factor in the spread of deism. For the most part, deist writers used many of the same methods to attack Christianity. They printed letters, articles, and works that attempted to prove reason as the true method for acquiring truth. Reason, when implemented properly, could reveal Christianity as a false and harmful system. In general, the conflict between Christians and deists became increasingly more passionate as devoted followers of both systems defended and expressed their beliefs. Previously, historians have discounted the influence of deism in the eighteenth century, but the overwhelming amount of works dedicated to both sides of the conflict confirms that deism was indeed a real threat to the continued dominance of Christianity in America. This threat would continue throughout the remainder of the century and eventually morph as the nineteenth century approached.

¹³⁷ Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defense of the Secular State* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 89.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MILITANT DEISM IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The conflict between the church and deism existed well before the eighteenth century, but by the mid-century, faithful followers of deism became more vocal in expressing their beliefs and attacking the flaws and contradictions of Christianity. As America continued to evolve as a result of the Revolution, laws at both the local and national level began to protect freedom of religion and freedom of expression. These laws and the overall changing attitudes towards different Christian sects, such as the Church of England and Calvinism, for example, contributed to an evolved form of deism that was not only vocal in its attacks on Christianity, but actually militant in its call for the elimination of the Christian faith. These deists, commonly known as the militant deists, engaged in an active campaign directed at spreading their beliefs across the states and curbing the influence of Christianity. With important deistic leaders emerging to help organize followers, deism became a serious threat to Christianity. Described as a “. . . ship, deism was put out to sea during an age characterized by revolt. Driven rapidly forward by the aid of a favorable current, it became so confident that it continued boldly on its course under full sail. With its sheets of canvas catching the propitious winds, it raced seemingly in pursuit of the uncharted seas beyond the horizon.”¹³⁸

An early example of the changing tone of deism in the late century is an anonymous work from 1771 titled *Sermon on Natural Religion by a Natural Man*. Published as a pamphlet in Boston, “the *Sermon* entirely denies supernatural inspiration, defines natural religion as equivalent to deism, completely rejects the doctrine of original

¹³⁸ Morais, “Deism in Revolutionary America,” 454.

sin and individual salvation, and considers polytheism a rational belief.”¹³⁹ In the opening lines, the author addresses God in a prayer and quotes Corinthians I, 2:14. The author states:

O Jehova, Elohim Adonai! Thou incomprehensible, deign us to adore Thy perfections; let us admire Thy wisdom, power and goodness: We praise Thee, almighty GOD, and give thee Thanks, for forming us in the manner Thou hast done: Glorified be Thy name: Every creature existing shews Thy glory. Thy might, and Thy bounty. Amen.¹⁴⁰

Even though the author quotes Scripture, he is actually criticizing the verse when he writes, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

¹⁴¹ Immediately, the author sets the tone for his pamphlet by attacking the notion that God and his creation can be comprehended through revelation or supernatural forces. Instead, the author argues that reason is the only method by which man can know God. He writes that reason is, “. . . that power in the human mind, whereby it compares its several sensations, ideas &c either immediately one with the other, or mediately by some common measure.”¹⁴² This argument closely follows the deist view that reason is the most important faculty that allows man to gain knowledge.

Throughout the work, the author also defines deism and natural religion. He states that:

a Deist (I comprehended in this list Arians and Unitarians) is a person who acknowledges, adores, and reveres an all-powerful wisdom and director of all the immensity, who admires the stupendous efforts of his consummate productions, and who with astonishment takes a survey of the marvelous symmetry and

¹³⁹ A. Owen Aldridge, “Natural Religion and Deism in America before Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 54.4 (October 1997): 839.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 840.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 840.

¹⁴² Ibid., 840.

surprising order, wherewith all these immense bodies are directed in a most perfect regularity.¹⁴³

The author was particularly offended by clergy who stated that deists rejected all forms of revelation. The author wrote that, “. . . no Deist or Naturalist denies an inspiration of the spirit of God, or that *summum* and *perpetuum mobile* . . .”¹⁴⁴ Specifically addressing the conflict between the church and deism, the author attempted to define the struggle of natural religion. He adamantly declared that deists are left with two options, which includes, “. . . ‘submit to an absolute implicit faith,’ contrary to his reason and thereupon become a hypocrite or fall into a greater danger by asserting that Moses wrote like Ovid in a ‘mystical, figurative, and hyperbolical style,’ mixing the real with the fabulous and by this assertion open himself to ‘ecclesiastical ban, excommunication and inquisition.’”¹⁴⁵ Overall, the author of the pamphlet clearly addresses the struggle between the emergence of deism as a credible and influential system versus the widely accepted and traditional Christian faith. His declaration that deists would have to decide whether they wanted to commit to deism or conform to Christianity is an accurate statement regarding the conflict between both faith systems. The author’s tone also captures the general tension and emerging anger that deists were expressing towards the end of the century. Furthermore, the pamphlet is an early example of the type of militant approach deists would continue to use when defending their beliefs against the criticisms of the clergy. Directly attacking Christianity, militant deists incorporated aggression and anger in their written works, which fueled the conflict with Christian leaders as deism was viewed as a serious and dangerous threat to the traditions and origins of American faith.

¹⁴³ Aldridge, “Deism and Natural Religion,” 841.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 842.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 842.

Shortly after the *Sermon* appeared in print in Boston, a local physician named Thomas Young (1731-1777) wrote a letter to the *Massachusetts Spy*. Born in Connecticut, Young was a patriot in the American Revolutionary War and a member of the Boston Tea Party. Active in Boston politics his entire life, Young became a doctor, which was a perfect blend of incorporating his spiritual beliefs and his commitment to the human race. Responsible for naming several cities in New York and even naming the new state of Vermont, Young traveled frequently throughout the states. Always open about his deist tendencies, Young influenced several important eighteenth century figures, including Samuel Adams (1722-1803) and Ethan Allen (1738-1789). Especially forming a close relationship with Allen, their friendship produced an important collaboration that resulted in a book dedicated to promoting deism. Professing his deism to those who would listen, Young remained a controversial figure. In fact, in 1756, he was accused of blasphemy in Dutchess County. The charges read that he did “speak and publish these wicked false Blasphemous Words concerning the said Christian Religion (to wit) Jesus Christ was a knave and a fool,” and that he declared that “. . . the said Jesus Christ of whom he then and there spoke was born of the Virgin Mary.”¹⁴⁶ Even though Young pleaded not guilty to the charges, he eventually changed his verdict to guilty and admitted that he had indeed, “. . . abused the character and person of Jesus Christ and said such things as were unworthy of him inadvertently and in Passion and fully clearly and absolutely renounce that opinion humbly begging the pardon of God Almighty the world of Mankind and the present Court of Sessions.” Even though Young confessed his crime and expressed remorse, he continued to reject the Christian faith his entire life.

¹⁴⁶ Pauline Maier, “Reason and Revolution: The Radicalism of Dr. Thomas Young,” *American Quarterly* 28.2 (Summer 1976): 235.

When Young submitted his letter to the *Massachusetts Spy* in 1772, it was an accurate description of his commitment to deism. Published as a creed, the letter outlines Young's beliefs. The creed states:

I believe in one eternal God, whose being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice and beneficence are altogether inconceivable to such atoms of animated matter as are yourself and I.

2ndly. I believe that this God possessing infinite space with all its amazing furniture of habitable mansions, created forth beings as we are, that they might enjoy the bounties of his grace which must otherwise have run to waste or at least have existed for no purpose.

3dly. I believe that the happiness of his creatures being the concern of the supreme God himself, might in consequence be the concern of every intelligent (being?) under his government.

4thly. I believe, that in order of nature and providence, the man who most assiduously endeavors to promote the will of God in the good of his fellow creatures, receives the most simple reward of his virtue, the peace of mind and silent applause of a good conscience, which administers more solid satisfaction than all of the other enjoyments of life put together.

5thly. On the other hand I believe, that the man who endeavors to build up his fortune or fame on the ruin of the estate or character of his neighbor, acts contrary to the rule of right, and in consequence must fall short of that approbation from God and his own conscience, which the performance of his known duty would have ensured him of.

6thly. I, most explicitly believe that all men shall be rewarded for deeds done in the body, whether they be good or evil, according to the eternal rule of right, by which the sovereign judge of the universe squares all decrees.¹⁴⁷

Young's pamphlet, like the *Sermon*, is significant because his arguments in favor of natural religion and a commitment to reason was a radical departure from the tenets of Christianity. Both authors openly reject the very concept of "... immortality or the doctrine of rewards and punishments in a future state."¹⁴⁸ Even though Young's creed

¹⁴⁷ Aldridge, "Deism and Natural Religion," 846-847.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 848.

garnered written responses from the Christian community, he was defended by people such as Samuel Adams who was a close friend despite their differences in beliefs. This most certainly reveals that “. . . the climate of Boston was not absolutely hostile to deistical ideas . . .”¹⁴⁹

Despite Thomas Young’s important contributions to Boston politics and the spread of deistical thinking in the eighteenth century, he remains a relatively unknown figure. In fact, his collaboration with Ethan Allen on the book titled *Reason as the Only Oracle of Man* (1785), is widely unrecognized. Even though Young worked closely with Allen on the project, he died in 1777 before it could be completed. When Allen recovered the manuscript and completed the work, it was published in 1785 and Allen was rewarded the majority of credit for authoring the work. Allen, who was born in Connecticut, is one of the most interesting deist figures of the late century because he defied the accepted descriptions and characteristics of deists. It is stated that:

Unlike his fellow American deists, Allen was a genuine pioneer, a son of the frontier who disliked and distrusted city folk and city ways with the intensity only a born-and-bred man of the country can feel for the town. He was never happier than when roaming the wilderness or navigating the lakes and rivers of what is northern Vermont. He disdained the pleasantries and conventions of polite society, exulting in rough, full-blooded frontier living. He drank like a demon, swore more often (and more inventively) than any other Yankee of his time, and reveled in styling himself an unsophisticated backwoodsman.¹⁵⁰

Therefore, Allen defied the stereotype of the eighteenth century deist. Generally, historians limit the influence of deism to the intellectual elite society in America. This is mainly due to the infiltration of deism in the colleges and the general perception that large American cities were the only locations where deist works could be readily found.

¹⁴⁹ Aldridge, “Deism and Natural Religion,” 848.

¹⁵⁰ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 87-88.

This, of course, is a misconception. Deism not only trickled down to the general population, but was eagerly followed by a mixture of persons, some of whom lacked formal education. As stated in Chapter Three, middle class Americans were generally better educated than the European middle class. With the assistance of libraries and newspapers that were widely circulated, Americans from all different backgrounds had access to books and other published works.

Ethan Allen, who was raised in Cornwall, Connecticut, received no formal education at home. In fact, “. . . there was no school in Cornwall prior to 1759 . . . what he had learned of words and numbers had come to him through his parents and his own efforts.”¹⁵¹ As a young teen, Allen was tutored by a local minister who taught him passages from the Bible and Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*.¹⁵² In particular, the Biblical teachings Allen received would benefit him in later years when he debated his Christian opponents. Memorizing entire passages of Scripture, he could easily recite pages of the Bible, an ability which always surprised his opponents. Unfortunately, Allen’s formal education halted at seventeen when his father died. As the eldest son, Allen was responsible for the care of his family. Leaving behind his aspirations of college, in 1757 Allen joined the American campaign in the French-Indian War. Only serving in one military campaign, he returned home to tend his farm. When Allen relocated to Salisbury, Connecticut in 1763, he opened his own business. It was through his work that he met Thomas Young who would first introduce him to natural religion. While Young inspired

¹⁵¹ Charles A. Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel*. Syracuse (Syracuse University Press, 1969), 5.

¹⁵² Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* examined the lives of famous Greek and Roman figures. Grouping the figures in twenty-three pairs of two, Plutarch compared and contrasted the lives of famous figures such as Cicero, Julius Caesar, Theseus, and Alexander the Great. The work particularly focused on the characters of each pair of figures rather than basic historical facts. The original text is dated from the 10th and 11th centuries.

Allen to convert fully to deism, Allen had already held doubts about the Christian faith. It is believed that during his brief military stint, he may have “. . . discussed free thought with several French prisoners of war he encountered during this time; he was impressed by their cavalier dismissal of Christian doctrine as well as by their scathing contempt for the clergy.”¹⁵³ Becoming instant friends, Allen and Young decided to collaborate on a work that would celebrate deism. Working on the book for a number of years, Allen moved to Vermont in the late 1760’s. Forming the Green Mountain Boys in 1770, which was a “militia organized to protect the rights of Grants settlers from the encroachments of New York,” Allen and the other members became eager participants in the War for Independence.¹⁵⁴ Becoming a popular figure in the Revolutionary War, Allen was eventually captured and held as a prisoner of war. Even though George Washington negotiated his release, Allen was excluded from further involvement in the war. Eventually retiring in the early 1780’s, Allen focused his efforts on completing the manuscript he started with Thomas Young.

Reason as the Only Oracle of Man was finally published in 1785. The book is important mainly because it was “. . . the first systematic defense of natural religion written by an American.”¹⁵⁵ In the text, Allen provides “a critique of revealed religion, an examination of proofs for the existence of proofs for the existence of God, discussions of divine nature, analyses of natural law and reason, reflections upon ethical and social issues . . .”¹⁵⁶ It is interesting that Allen states in his preface to the work that, “. . . I have generally been denominated a Deist, the reality of which I never disputed, being

¹⁵³ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 40.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 95.

conscious I am no Christian, except mere infant baptism make me one; and as to being a Deist, I know not, strictly speaking, whether I am one or not, for I have never read their writings . . .”¹⁵⁷ This statement is particularly interesting because Allen proclaims he cannot know whether he is a deist due to his lack of education. Of course, his relationship with Young would have confirmed his suspicions that he was not a Christian as well as provided him with a tutor who was familiar with deistic writings. In the opening pages of the work, Allen sets the tone for the piece by stating that “the bulk of mankind . . . are still carried down the torrent of superstition, and entertain very unworthy apprehensions of the BEING, PERFECTIONS, CREATION and PROVIDENCE of God, and their duty to him.”¹⁵⁸ This statement represents a common theme that appeared in numerous deist writings. The majority of deists rejected revelation because they believed it was a false superstition created by the church to control the behavior and actions of the masses. Allen also rejected the concept of original sin, which he argued was contrary to reason and also detrimental to man’s view of himself. Allen wrote that, “. . . admitting the depravity of reason, the consequence would unavoidably follow, that as far as it may be supposed to have taken place in the minds of [theologians], they could be no judges of it, in consequence of their supposed depravity.”¹⁵⁹ Throughout the text, Allen was adamant that age old superstitions had to be rejected in order for man to truly understand God and acquire knowledge.

¹⁵⁷ Ethan Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (Boston: J.P. Mendum, Cornhill, 1854), i.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

Allen argued that reason is the most important gift given to man by God. Through reason, man can seek truth and avoid being tempted by the superstitions of Christianity.

Allen argued that:

those who invalidate reason, ought seriously to consider, whether they argue against reason with or without reason; if with reason, then they establish the principle, that they are laboring to dethrone; but if they argue without reason (which, in order to be consistent with themselves, they must do), they are out of the reach of rational conviction, nor do they deserve a rational argument.¹⁶⁰

Allen followed up this argument by directly confronting how Christians interpreted their faith. For Allen, he believed that faith could be understood simply by applying the inductive and deductive methods of reasoning. He explains this by writing:

faith is the last result of the understanding, or the same which we call the conclusion, it is the consequence of a greater or less[er] deduction of reasoning from certain premises previously laid down; it is the same as believing or judging of any matter of fact, or assenting to or dissenting from the truth of any doctrine, system or position; so that to believe, or to have faith, is in reality the same thing, and is synonymously applied both to writing and speaking.¹⁶¹

Therefore, a belief in miracles and the divinity of Jesus were impossible because no reasoning person could conclude that they were agreeable to reason. Allen also believed that if miracles existed, they would be contrary to natural law. Allen stated that, “any supposed miraculous alteration of nature, must imply mutability in the wisdom of God.”

¹⁶² Confirming an often repeated argument of other deists, Allen rejected many of the main tenets of Christianity.

Lastly, in Allen’s book, he focused on proving the existence of God. In earlier deist writings, proving the existence of a deity was not a primary objective of a deist

¹⁶⁰ Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle*, 36.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 113.

¹⁶² Ibid., 62.

author. Instead, deist writers generally focused on arguing that natural religion should be the preferred system of belief over Christianity because of its dedication to reason and nature, both of which reveal truth. Deists generally believed that the existence of God was clearly supported by the creation, which included nature, human beings, and natural law. This was considered an obvious fact that did not warrant further investigation. But Allen dedicated a section of his book to this very issue. Allen attempted to explain why the existence of a deity must be true by stating that, “nothing from nothing and there remains nothing, but something from nothing is contradictory and impossible.”¹⁶³

Therefore, the very existence of the natural world and man proves that there is a higher power responsible for creation. Referring to a “self-existent cause” that is “independent,” Allen concludes that this must be God.¹⁶⁴ This supports his earlier argument that miracles do not exist because Allen believed that his God was controlled by rationality and reason. Overall, Allen’s work is significant to American deism in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Writing the first American work entirely focused on the promotion of deism, the work was referenced by later deists and viewed a sort of anthem or bible for deism.

When Allen’s book was published in 1785, Christian church leaders labeled the work as heresy and launched a personal attack on the Allen’s character. For example, Timothy Dwight stated that “when it came out, I read as much of it as I could summon patience to read, but the style was crude and vulgar, and the sentiments were coarser than the style. The arguments were flimsy and unmeaning, and the conclusions were fastened

¹⁶³ Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle*, 14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

upon the premises by mere force.”¹⁶⁵ Allen’s work was not only a threat to the Christian faith because of the ideas it expressed, but also because it received coverage from newspapers around the states. In one article that appeared in *The Country Journal and the Poughkeepsie Advertiser* on September 12, 1787, the author praised Allen’s work. The negative response from the Christian community did not surprise Allen. True to his reputation as a frontier rebel, he never apologized for his beliefs or attempted to conform to accepted social standards. When Allen died in February 1789, Christian leaders celebrated his death. Ezra Stiles reflected that “he could think only of his ‘scurrilous Reflexions on Revelation’ and imagine Allen suffering in hell.”¹⁶⁶ More specifically, Stiles recorded the death in his diary and wrote that, “Died in Vermont the profane and impious Gen. Ethan Allen. And in Hell he lift up his eyes, being in Torments.”¹⁶⁷ A reverend in Newark named Uzal Ogden told his congregation that “Allen was an ignorant and profane Deist . . . who died with a mind replete with horror and despair.”¹⁶⁸ Even a reverend from Vermont named Nathan Perkins journeyed through Vermont and visited Allen’s grave. He commented that Allen was “one of the wickedest men that ever walked this guilty globe . . . I stopped and looked at his grave with pious horror.”¹⁶⁹ Ethan Allen was clearly considered an enemy of the church. His work, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, was a threat to Christianity because it arrived in a period of discontent in America. After the Revolutionary War, America was establishing its government. Transitioning from a British colony to an independent nation, the young country was defining its values and its position in the world. Allen’s work confirmed that deism was becoming an

¹⁶⁵ Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel*, 310.

¹⁶⁶ Grasso, “Deist Monster,” 66.

¹⁶⁷ Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel*, 331.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

influential system among the states. As the first American deist writing, it represented the beginning of a new form of deism, which was both vocal and militant in its approach to attacking Christianity.

As Ethan Allen became the first widely known published American deist, a British born writer named Thomas Paine (1736-1809) would become one of the most celebrated and reviled figures in America during the last half of the eighteenth century. Born in the small English town of Thetford-on-Norfolk, Paine was raised in a relatively stable home where his father worked as a corset maker. Growing up in a religiously diverse family, Paine's father was a Quaker and his mother was an Anglican. Even though Paine was baptized and confirmed in the Church of England, he attended Quaker meetings with his father. Paine recalled from an early age that he had first-hand experience of discord within Christianity. Paine claimed that his early exposure to the "latent cruelty in orthodox Christianity" would lead him to question the religion and eventually dismiss it altogether.¹⁷⁰ Paine, like Ethan Allen, received little formal education as a child. Briefly schooled, Paine had to quit his studies to help his father at work.

The early years of Paine's life was filled with numerous personal and professional failures. He regularly switched occupations, some of which included joining a ship crew and working as an excise officer for the government. When he finally settled in England full-time, Paine began to focus on his education, which was mainly enhanced through his professional and personal relationships. Benefiting from his time as an excise officer, Paine became interested in politics and even wrote a pamphlet addressed to Parliament in

¹⁷⁰ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 115.

reference to the pay and benefits of excise workers. Even though his petition was dismissed, Paine was able to “. . . renew and enlarge his scientific and literary circle of acquaintances.”¹⁷¹ Meeting Benjamin Franklin during this period, Paine was encouraged to travel to America to start a new career and life. Arriving in Philadelphia at the end of 1774, Paine immediately immersed himself in American politics. Particularly disturbed by Britain’s treatment of the colonists, Paine joined the American campaign to seek independence. In January 1776, Paine published a pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which would become one of the most important documents to clearly state the American case against the British monarchy. In the pamphlet, Paine attacked King George III by writing that the invention of kings was, “the most prosperous invention the devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry,” and that a monarchy “opens the doors to the foolish, the wicked, and the improper.”¹⁷² Writing the pamphlet as “An Englishman,” the document easily sold 300,000 copies within its first three months. Even though historians debate whether *Common Sense* influenced the proceedings at the Continental Convention, the pamphlet was widely distributed and read by many of the colonists, which undoubtedly included members of the Convention. When Paine was eventually recognized as the author, he became a hero in the colonies. Donating much of the pamphlet’s profits to the American cause, Paine was rewarded with an ambassadorship position in France.

When Paine arrived in Paris in 1781, he also became involved in the political climate of France. When France entered its own Revolutionary period in 1789, Paine felt compelled to write a document defending the French people’s right to revolt. Publishing

¹⁷¹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 117.

¹⁷² Thomas Paine, *The Thomas Paine Reader*. Eds. Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 72.

Rights of Man in 1791, the document was “. . . one of the most ardent and clear defenses of human rights, liberty, and equality in any language.”¹⁷³ This work led to Paine being appointed to the French National Convention in 1792. In *Rights of Man*, Paine argued that the Revolution “was not against Louis XVIth, but against the despotic principles of government . . .”¹⁷⁴ Therefore, when the Convention wanted to execute Louis XVI, Paine voted against the measure. Angering Robespierre, he was imprisoned and scheduled to be executed. It was here, during his stay in prison, that Paine produced the work that would permanently alter his image in America from a patriotic hero to an evil heretic. Believing he would become a victim of the guillotine, Paine decided to document his views on religion; views which he had mainly kept hidden during his years in America. Titled *Age of Reason*, Paine produced an honest and direct deist manifesto that documented his uncensored criticisms of Christianity as well as his acceptance of deism. Immediately, Paine begins his work by declaring:

I do believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy. I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit. I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Jack Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994), 225.

¹⁷⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, 1791, 208.

¹⁷⁵ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 1794, 400-401.

This early admission of faith sets the tone for Paine's entire work. He not only states his rejection of revealed religion, but also briefly outlines his belief that faith comes from within. His statement, "my mind is my own church," is the clearest example of his personal faith.¹⁷⁶

A large portion of Paine's work is dedicated to disproving revealed religion. When he first addresses the subject, he writes, "every national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God . . . each of these churches show certain books, which they call *revelation*, or the Word of God . . . each of those churches accuses the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all."¹⁷⁷ Paine goes on to explain why he cannot believe in revealed prophecy. Here, he is careful to admit that he does not deny that God can communicate with man, but Paine ultimately concludes that reason proves that revealed prophecy is impossible. He writes, "it is revelation to the first person only, and *hearsay* to every other, and consequently they are not obliged to believe it."¹⁷⁸ Further attacking revealed religion, Paine also discusses the Bible and the widely accepted belief that the text is the Word of God. Paine denounces this belief by writing that the book, ". . . has every mark of fraud and imposition stamped upon the face of it. Who were the authors of it is as impossible for us now to know, as it is for us to be assured that the books in which the account is related were written by the persons whose names they bear . . ."¹⁷⁹ Paine further supports this statement by also referencing the Council of Nicaea. He writes that the Council, ". . . decided by *vote* which of the books out of the collection they had made should be the

¹⁷⁶ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 400.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 401.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 402.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 405.

Word of God, and which should not.”¹⁸⁰ For Paine, this and other contradictions confirmed that Christianity was an irrational system that was contrary to reason.

After his section on revealed religion, Paine outlined his own faith. He stated that, “it is only in the Creation that all our ideas and conceptions of a *Word of God* can unite. The Creation sparks a universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they be. It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read.”¹⁸¹ This statement evokes deism because the Word of God Paine is referencing is natural religion. It is a belief that truth can be found in the natural world, which is God’s creation. Paine further states that this religion “. . . cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed.”¹⁸² Paine believed that true faith was discovered through God’s creation rather than found in books written by man. When Paine concluded his work, he once again outlined his beliefs. He wrote that:

. . . the idea or belief of a Word of God existing in print, or in writing, or in speech, is inconsistent in itself for reasons already assigned . . . that the creation we behold is the real and ever-existing Word of God, in which we cannot be deceived . . . that the moral duty of man consists in imitating the moral goodness and beneficence of God, manifested in the creation towards all His creatures.¹⁸³

In *Age of Reason*, Paine calls for a new age that uses reason to define the relationship between God and man. For Paine, he believed that the natural world was the only verified path that revealed truth and knowledge. Using reason as the main factor in determining truth, Paine could not believe that revealed prophecies, miracles, or books could possibly

¹⁸⁰ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 409.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 420.

¹⁸² Ibid., 420.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 450-451.

contain the Word of God. This was contrary to his understanding of reason and therefore, had to be rejected.

When Paine wrote his deist manifesto, he believed that he would not live to see its publication, but when Robespierre was usurped, he was released from prison. When *Age of Reason* circulated through Europe and eventually made its way into America shortly after the publication, Paine became an enemy of the church. Once hailed as a hero and patriot, Paine was labeled a heretic. Even though the ideas presented in his work were not original and had appeared in the works of British and French deists a century earlier, Paine's contribution was significant because of the period in which his work appeared. America had survived its Revolution and was accepting of new ideas and theories and France's Revolution had further exposed liberal philosophy and theology into mainstream culture. Because Paine was a popular figure in the late eighteenth century, his work was particularly influential with American deists. In general, his work summarized a centuries old argument against Christianity and other organized religions. Unfortunately, Paine's work would ultimately lead to his demise. Dying virtually penniless, Paine's legacy was marred by his last work. But his cause would be taken up by American deists who were determined to reveal Christianity as a false and fraudulent religion.

With the contributions of Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine, deism in America dramatically shifted its strategy in the last few decades of the eighteenth century. Growing increasingly militant, those who were committed to the cause attempted to spread deism by engaging in an endless campaign against Christianity. Using media

sources to their advantage, deists published articles, journals and even gave public speeches in which they condemned Christianity and praised natural religion. With deist clubs springing up in a variety of cities, the movement was in desperate need of a leader to organize and unite its followers. The man who embraced this task was a blind minister named Elihu Palmer (1764-1806) who dedicated his life to promoting the deist cause. Publishing his own deist work, *The Principles of Nature* in 1801, Palmer was most effective in his interaction with others and in his ability to convey his message through his published articles. In fact, “between 1793 and 1806 he tirelessly stumped from Maine to Georgia, preaching the religion of nature, castigating Christianity, and hurling anathemas at the ‘double despotism’ of church and state.”¹⁸⁴ Palmer, who was born in Connecticut, grew up relatively poor in a family of eight children. Raised Presbyterian, Palmer only attended college at Dartmouth when he turned twenty-one. Sponsored by a Christian charity, Palmer initially showed interest in Christian studies. Receiving tutelage under a Reverend John Foster of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Palmer began to develop his own interpretation of the Christian religion. Almost immediately, Palmer began “. . . moving away from Calvinism toward a humanistic natural religion.”¹⁸⁵ Traveling through the states, Palmer’s reformed version of Christian doctrine disturbed both listeners and colleagues who began to view him as a threat.

In his travels, Palmer met Dr. Ledyard who was “. . . a freethinking and somewhat disreputable physician,” and also was considered “. . . Newtown’s village atheist . . .”¹⁸⁶ Engaging in debate about Scripture, Palmer eventually conceded that the Biblical

¹⁸⁴ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 179.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 181.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 182.

contradictions presented to him made it impossible for him to further endorse revelation. While staying in Newtown, Palmer delivered several sermons that deviated from traditional doctrine. This disturbed churchgoers who decided to relieve him of his preaching duties. As Palmer's reputation spread, ". . . invitations to speak at local Presbyterian churches dwindled and ultimately ceased altogether."¹⁸⁷ Palmer later reflected that he was, "disgusted with preaching from pulpits where the morose, vindictive, and uncharitable tenets of Calvinism were generally inculcated and expected by hearers."¹⁸⁸ From this point on, Palmer fully devoted himself to his deist tendencies. As he attempted to move into other fields that were non-theological based, he read the works attributed to the New Learning. This convinced him that his calling in life was to help promote deism in America. Almost immediately, Palmer once again threw himself into preaching, but this time he began to passionately promote deism and attack Christianity from the pulpit. Quickly enough, Palmer was accused of heresy by devout Christians and earned his reputation as a meddling and somewhat dangerous pest.

After losing his eyesight from a yellow fever epidemic in 1793, Palmer went on a relentless rampage of speeches geared towards promoting deism. Approaching ". . . his campaign for deism with all the evangelical zeal of any early apostle," Palmer added much needed energy and passion to the deist movement. He proved himself a capable leader and always expressed qualities such as ". . . fervor for proselytizing, eloquence, intelligence, and militant courage," which was ". . . needed to transform American deism from the philosophical orientation of a handful of intellectuals into a widespread popular

¹⁸⁷ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 183.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

crusade that spoke to the common man and woman.”¹⁸⁹ Frequently traveling, Palmer was responsible for forming some of the first openly deistic societies in cities such as New York and Philadelphia. He also founded two deist newspapers, *The Temple of Reason* in 1800 and *Prospect, or View of the Moral World* in 1803. Contributing hundreds of articles, Palmer helped both publications gain a large number of subscribers. Looking specifically at Palmer’s book *The Principles of Nature*, he provided an easily accessible work that focuses on both his criticisms of Christianity and his acceptance of natural religion. Like other deist writers, Palmer argued that reason is the only reliable faculty that allows man to understand the natural world. Christian supernatural elements, such as miracles and prophecies, are dangerous because they “. . . contradict the testimony of our senses; we abandon the instructive guide of our own experience, and affirm that the testimony of a few men has more weight than our own positive knowledge.”¹⁹⁰ Palmer believed that if miracles were removed from Christianity, the entire faith would be dismissed entirely because supernatural elements were crucial to its Scripture and doctrine.

Also addressing revelation, Palmer, like Paine before him, rejected this concept because he believed that revelation was only authentic to the original receiver of the prophecy. If the message was passed on to others, Palmer believed that it became hearsay and therefore, could not be accepted as truth. Palmer also rejected ideas about original sin and eternal damnation, both of which he believed promoted human guilt and failure. Explaining why the church continued to promote ideas that were unethical and cruel, Palmer argued that:

¹⁸⁹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 186.

¹⁹⁰ Elihu Palmer, *The Principles of Nature* (London: R. Carlile, 1823), 86.

first, it teaches that humans without exception are, to use Jonathan Edwards's phrase, 'sinners in the hands of an angry God,' thereby cowering frightened laymen into submitting to ecclesial authority as their only chance for salvation. Second, the Church recognizes the advantages of keeping its followers ignorant and confused about the nature of the Deity; it thereby maintains its own position as the sanctioned interpreter of God's way.¹⁹¹

Viewing Christianity as a form of slavery which commands its slaves into submission, Palmer called for the human race to break the bonds of superstition and embrace freedom. In detail he explains this by writing:

If the passions of man and the impulses of his nature have frequently produced a moral eccentricity in his conduct, it is certain that a corrupt government and a corrupt religion have rendered him habitually wicked, perverted all the conceptions of the mind upon moral and political subjects . . . but efforts tending to make the individuals of a nation virtuous and happy, will never succeed extensively till the civil and religious tyranny under which they groan shall be completely annihilated . . . if civil and ecclesiastical despotism were destroyed, knowledge would become universal, and its progress inconceivably accelerated.¹⁹²

Here, Palmer is calling for the destruction of Christianity. He is warning his readers that if Christianity is allowed to prosper, that they will become victims of the system and fail to discover truth and knowledge.

Lastly, Palmer also provides a detailed description of deism that was intended to convince the reader that natural religion is the true path to faith. He writes:

Deism declares to intelligent man the existence of one perfect God, Creator and Preserver of the Universe; that the laws by which he governs the world, are like himself immutable, and, of course, that violations of those laws, or miraculous interference in the movements of nature, must be necessarily excluded from the grand system of universal existence; that the Creator is justly entitled to the adoration of every intellectual agent throughout the regions of infinite space; and that he alone is entitled to it . . . Deism also declares, that the practice of a pure, natural, and uncorrupted virtue, is the essential duty, and constitutes the highest

¹⁹¹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 193.

¹⁹² Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 134-135.

dignity of man; that the powers of man are competent to all the greater purposes of human existence; that science, virtue, and happiness are the great objects which ought to awaken the mental energies, and draw forth the moral affections of the human race.¹⁹³

Palmer's description of deism presents a rational and kind God that can be discovered if man embraces reason. He also states that if man commits to natural religion, he must reject other faith systems that corrupt the definition of God and faith. Overall, Elihu Palmer's work represents American deism in its most significant period in the eighteenth century. Palmer's work is both organized and bold. He passionately states his case for natural religion, which is an evolved form of deism from the early years of the century. Funding his publications and ventures, Palmer bankrupted himself as he remained committed to deism. He inspired deist followers to become vocal and organized and to use their efforts to eliminate the Christian faith in favor of deism. His efforts to spread deism allowed the movement to enjoy its greatest period in America during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. With deist societies and deist newspapers, Christian leaders took notice that deism was a threat to their faith. In fact, an unexpected consequence of Elihu Palmer's efforts was a reformed effort by Christian leaders to curb the spread of natural religion in America. When Palmer died in 1806, deists lost their leader and never fully recovered. Without the passionate efforts of Palmer keeping the movement organized, deism began to slowly crumble under the pressure of Christian leaders.

¹⁹³ Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 241.

CHAPTER NINE

THE FOUNDING FATHERS: DEISTS, CHRISTIANS OR SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN?

Through the years, everyone from historians to politicians to religious leaders has engaged in an endless debate about the lives of the American Founding Fathers. Offering a wide range of opinions about significant events, documents, and decisions, details about the founders' public and personal lives have been thoroughly scrutinized. This, of course, has created a great deal of controversy. Who were our founders? What events influenced their choices? What were their contributions to America and what legacy did they leave behind? These represent just a few questions that come to mind when discussing the founders. First, it is important to note that the American founders were members of the Enlightenment. They lived in a period in American history when traditional institutions and ideologies came under attack. Experiencing discontent between the American colonies and Great Britain, they found themselves at the center of a revolution. Forced to choose sides, some founders remained loyal to the crown, while others took up the banner for independence. Participating in the sessions that would lead to the Revolutionary War, they were also committed to creating a new government that encompassed all the lessons they had learned from the conflict with Britain. Relying on their education and experience, they introduced ideas such as freedom of religion, equality, tolerance, and freedom. Overall, the founders were “. . . politicians and philosophers, sages and writers, churchmen and doubters. They knew history and literature, theology and business, statecraft and soldering. They could be vain yet selfish, shortsighted yet shrewd and far-

seeing, temperamental yet forbearing, bigoted yet magnanimous.”¹⁹⁴ Representing ideals and beliefs that continue to be lauded and criticized, the American Founding Fathers contributed to the creation of a new and independent America.

One of the more controversial topics surrounding the founders is the issue of personal faith. For decades, there has been an ongoing debate about categorizing the founders according to a specific faith system. Once again, at the very center of this debate is the conflict between deism and Christianity. While many historians classify several founders as either fully practicing deists or at least as holding some deistic beliefs, this view has been criticized by others who proclaim that the founders were devout Christians. Today, the question still remains: were the American founders’ deists or Christians? While the answer to this question is quite complex, the simplest and perhaps most thorough response is to state that the founders were neither fully deistic nor fully Christian. Instead, they were influenced by both belief systems. Generally, the founders were inspired by orthodox Christianity because of its emphasis on morality. But they also found deism appealing because it embodied Enlightenment ideals that were relevant to their culture. For instance, there were founders such as Thomas Jefferson who rejected organized religion, while others such as Benjamin Franklin struggled to define their personal faith. Always influenced by the events and important figures of their society, the founders “. . . questioned each and every received idea they had been taught. They were deeply read in political philosophy, interested in science, and well versed in theological matters. They consistently challenged the religious dogma they heard from the pulpit,

¹⁹⁴ Meacham, *American Gospel*, 8.

both openly and in private, among friends.”¹⁹⁵ The American Founding Fathers were a product of the age they lived in. While it is true that they were not fully deistic or fully Christian, they incorporated elements from both systems. This enabled them to evolve beyond the outdated institutions inherited from Europe and create a nation that embraced freedom and tolerance.

Out of all the American founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) may be the most well-known and celebrated. Known as a “. . . self-made man, model American, natural scientist, writer, moralist, philanthropist, politician, and diplomat . . .” Franklin has become a mythical figure in American history.¹⁹⁶ His contributions include serving as the first American postmaster, ambassador to France during America’s conflict with Britain, founder of the first fire station and public library, and inventor of the lightning rod and bifocals. But an overlooked aspect of Franklin’s life is his struggle with personal faith. Franklin, who was born in Boston in 1706, was raised Puritan and baptized at Boston’s South Church. His father, Josiah, was a soap and candle maker who emigrated from England to America in the 1600’s. His mother, Abigail Folger, belonged to one of the first British families to travel to America. As a child, Franklin’s parents related stories of the religious persecution they encountered in England because of their Puritan faith. In his own *Autobiography* (1788), Franklin recalled that his family was “. . . sometimes in danger of trouble in account of their zeal against popery,” and when they read the family Bible, “one of the children stood at the door to give notice if he saw the apparitor coming,

¹⁹⁵ Brooke Allen, *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), xiii.

¹⁹⁶

who was an officer of the spiritual court.”¹⁹⁷ These stories would have an impact on Franklin’s own views towards religious freedom when he served as a member of the Continental Convention.

Even though Franklin received a formal education until the age of ten, he had to take control of his own education when he went to work for his father. Reading a variety of philosophical, theological, and political themed works, such as John Locke, the deist writer Anthony Collins, and Isaac Newton, Franklin was exposed to concepts that conflicted with his Puritan background. In fact, by the age of fifteen, Franklin admitted that he had fully converted to natural religion. Detailing his transformation in his *Autobiography*, Franklin explained that books written to dispute deism and natural religion “. . . wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough deist.”¹⁹⁸ Of course, Franklin did not publicly proclaim his support of deism due to the general hostile attitude towards natural religion in that period, but there is evidence in Franklin’s early writings that he was fully committed to his new beliefs.

When Franklin’s brother James founded *The New-England Courant*, which was the first independent newspaper in the colonies, Franklin worked side by side with him. When James refused to allow Franklin to serve as a journalist for the paper, he decided to submit a series of letters using the pseudonym of “Mrs. Silence Dogood.” These letters, which used satire to mock colonial life, are the first examples of Franklin’s increasing

¹⁹⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), 8.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

disillusionment with conventional Christianity. For example, in the fourth letter, Franklin mocks Harvard and its clergy by telling a story of Silence arriving at the college. Silence observes the local townspeople and states:

every peasant, who had wherewithal, was preparing to send one of his children at least to this famous place; and in this case most of them consulted their own purses instead of their children's capacities: so that I observed, a great many, yea, the most part of those who were traveling thither, were little better than dunces and blockheads. Alas! Alas! ¹⁹⁹

As Silence enters the college, she describes a great temple, which is the temple of learning. Inside, she finds thrones with the titles "Madam *Idleness*" and "Maid *Ignorance*." ²⁰⁰ As people climb the steps that lead to the thrones, Silence observes that when they reach the top, "every Beetle-Scull seemed well satisfied with his own portion of learning, though perhaps he was *even just* as ignorant as ever." ²⁰¹ This type of satiric article, which mocks the wisdom of the educated clergy, is an early example of Franklin's evolving view of religion.

The most important document from Franklin's early life is one that remains relatively unknown. In fact, the document was not even published in America until several decades after his death. *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, published in 1725 while traveling in London, is Franklin's greatest attempt to define his deism and other beliefs. In later years, when Franklin once again embraced his Puritan roots, he expressed regret at even having written the pamphlet. Even though the document is deistic in several ways, it does deviate from some of the more important

¹⁹⁹ Jerry Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 240.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 240.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 240.

elements of deism. The pamphlet, which was a response to William Wollaston's 1722 work, *The Religion of Nature Delineated*, combines humanism with natural religion, producing a unique understanding of the natural world. In the pamphlet, Franklin immediately responds to Wollaston's ideas on free will. Franklin concedes that Wollaston is correct when he states that ". . . first, God as the First Mover exists; second, that this deity is 'all-wise, all-good, all-powerful.'" ²⁰² But Franklin deviates from Wollaston's arguments when he states that if God is omnipotent, that:

. . . all events occur in the natural realm are the results, directly or indirectly, of divine will. The second is that all of these events, set in motion as they are by a supremely good deity, are themselves good, since an omnibenevolent God who is also all-knowing and all-powerful is incapable of willing and bringing about acts that are evil. ²⁰³

Here, Franklin is basically denying the claim that human beings have free will. This statement is especially radical even for a deist because the majority of deists believed in free will. Franklin further describes his position by stating:

If God permits an Action to be done, it is because he wants either Power or *Inclination* to hinder it; in saying he wants Power, we deny Him to be *almighty*; and if we say He wants *Inclination* or *Will*, it must be, either because he is not God, or the action is not evil (for all Evil is contrary to the Essence of *infinite* Goodness). ²⁰⁴

Franklin's belief that all human actions were derived from divine will also led him to conclude that evil could not exist simply because God, as a being of "infinite goodness," could not possibly sanction or permit evil deeds. Overall, Franklin's *Dissertation* reveals that he had strayed far from his Puritan background. Several of his arguments invoke concepts that he learned from the New Learning writers. Though the work is not fully

²⁰² Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 56.

²⁰³ Ibid., 56.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 57.

deistic, it does represent Franklin's first theological transformation, which is one of a skeptic testing the atmosphere of traditional institutions and beliefs.

By 1728, Franklin's beliefs had already evolved from the *Dissertation*. Writing "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion," Franklin presented ". . . the catechism of a man who has renounced orthodox Christianity as well as dogmatic materialism."²⁰⁵ In the document, Franklin immediately writes:

I believe in one Supreme most perfect Being, Author and Father of the Gods themselves. For I believe that Man is not the most perfect Being but One . . . And since Men are endued with Reason superior to all other Animals that we are in our World acquainted with; Therefore I think it seems required of me, and my Duty, as a Man, to pay Divine Regards to SOMETHING.²⁰⁶

Here, Franklin is stating his case for the existence of a deity. Invoking the deist argument that man has the ability to reason, Franklin simply states that reason is the one faculty that allows man to know God. Next, he writes:

For I conceive that he has in himself some of those Passions he has planted in us, and that, since he has given us Reason whereby we are capable of observing his Wisdom in the Creation, he is not above caring for us, being pleas'd with our Praise, and offended when we slight Him, or neglect his Glory. I conceive for many Reasons that he is a *good* Being . . . I *love* him therefore for his Goodness and I *adore* him for his Wisdom.²⁰⁷

This article is perhaps the best representation of Franklin's acceptance of deism. Starting with his belief in a single God, Franklin also states that he believes God has provided man with a gift, which is reason. This reason, which allows man to seek God, also commands him to follow a moral code. Also, Franklin argues that God is a benevolent

²⁰⁵ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 65.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

being that loves his creation. Here, Franklin deviates from the popular image of God as wrathful or vengeful. Instead, his God is presented as both understanding and proud.

While Franklin held many of his deistic beliefs for the majority of his life, he did regress to some of his childhood teachings, which may lead some historians or other important theological leaders to assume he returned fully to his Puritan background. It is true that Franklin struggled more than any of the founders with his personal beliefs. In the very last years of his life, he especially became more dedicated to a traditional theology than he had for much of his adult life. But despite small deviations, Franklin remained largely suspicious of orthodox Christianity. One area in particular that Franklin struggled with was in reference to Calvinism's endorsement of special providences, a belief which states that God can intervene in special circumstances. Of course, for the majority of deists, they found special providences impossible since they believed that God also had to follow natural law. Deists believed that when God created the universe, the laws of motion became active and God had to observe those laws. This meant that God could not intervene under any circumstances. But for Franklin, he refused to deny the possibility that God may intervene in human affairs. In 1790, Franklin attempted to outline his beliefs in a letter to Ezra Stiles, who had asked him to confess his religious tendencies. In the letter, Franklin wrote:

I believe in one God, creator of the universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we can render to him is doing good to his other children. That the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental principles of all sound religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever sect I meet with them. As to Jesus of Nazareth . . . I think the system of morals and his religion as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw, or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has reduced various

corrupting changes, and I have . . . some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon as opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble.²⁰⁸

The letter, which was written the same year Franklin died, is an honest confession of his personal faith. Simple but thoughtful in meaning, Franklin professed absolute belief in a single God, but he refused to deviate from his declaration that the church had corrupted the teachings of Jesus Christ. This statement was actually quite common to many deists who attempted to reconcile Christian teachings with natural religion. For instance, Thomas Jefferson dedicated much of his studies to this very issue. Franklin accepted Jesus as a profound moral teacher, but questioned whether he was actually a messiah figure. In his *Autobiography*, he discussed in detail his admiration of Jesus's teachings when he described his dedication to following a strict moral code. Creating a list of virtues, which included temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility, he attempted to master each virtue so that he would become a better person. Quoting James 2:15-17, which states that, "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself," Franklin believed that his list of virtues would allow him to become a more righteous and honorable person.²⁰⁹

Also contributing to a contemporary misinterpretation of Franklin's personal beliefs are a few well publicized events. The first of these is Franklin's relationship with

²⁰⁸ Meacham, *American Gospel*, 22.

²⁰⁹ James 2.15-17 (AV).

the evangelical preacher George Whitefield. When Whitefield first arrived in America, Franklin had the opportunity to hear him speak in Philadelphia in front of a gathered crowd. Impressed by his ability to regularly attract thousands of enthusiastic listeners:

. . . Franklin was full of admiration for Whitefield's oratorical powers. These appealed, finally, not to his religious impulses but to his scientific ones, and with typical Enlightenment skepticism he determined to find out just how Whitefield pulled off the trick: there must be a scientific explanation for his successes in the pulpit.²¹⁰

Attempting to capitalize on Whitefield's success, Franklin decided to publish several of his sermons. Not only did Franklin become financially stable from the Whitefield sermons, but he also developed a genuine friendship with him. Even though Franklin generally disagreed with Whitefield's dedication to his faith, he did admire his charitable work, which included funding orphanages and providing support for those living in abject poverty. Charity, of course, was an important part of Franklin's list of virtues.

Another important event occurred in 1787 during the Continental Convention when Franklin “. . . moved that the daily sessions, which heretofore been decidedly acrimonious, be opened with a prayer. The words of his motion were specifically nondenominational, referring to God, the Father of Lights, and Providence interchangeably; the name of Jesus Christ was certainly not mentioned.”²¹¹ The measure was rejected, but the meaning of Franklin's call to prayer has been distorted in recent years. The God Franklin invoked was not the God of Christianity, but rather the God of all humanity. He saw an opportunity to unite the Convention members through common prayer, an act often repeated by other Convention members who were seeking

²¹⁰ Allen, *Moral Minority*, 19.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

compromise so that the progress made during the sessions could be continued. Examining Franklin's involvement in legislation, there is no doubt that he did not support measures that would limit the practice of faith to any one person or sect. In fact, in 1787, he fought to eliminate a law that would have required ". . . all voters and officeholders to declare a belief in God and in the divine authority of the Old and New Testaments."²¹² He eventually agreed to a compromise, but this one act reveals that Franklin believed that religion should remain a personal matter. He also believed that people should be protected from persecution if they did not comply with the popular faith of a particular state.

Benjamin Franklin is an ideal representative of the Enlightenment. Self-educated and self-made, Franklin used his experience to define his values and personal beliefs. Even though his Puritan upbringing remained somewhat relevant to his adult life, Franklin's faith evolved as he was exposed to the concepts of other writers and as he traveled the world and witnessed great tragedies and triumphs. Declaring himself a deist early in life, Franklin remained largely deistic in his beliefs until his death. Always struggling to define his faith, Franklin explored a variety of different ideas about life, God, love, and death. Dedicated to public service, he worked tirelessly to ensure an alliance with France and also participated in the Continental Convention sessions. Never obtaining a position higher than president of Pennsylvania, he left behind a large legacy that has earned him a position as one of the most recognized Founding Fathers in American history. Earning the title "First American," Franklin continued his pursuit for truth and knowledge until his death in 1790.

²¹² Allen, *Moral Minority*, 22.

While Benjamin Franklin remains one of the most popular founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) is certainly one of the most controversial. As the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States, Jefferson's life was continuously plagued by scandal. Besides the now infamous rumors about his relations with slave Sally Hemings, Jefferson's personal faith and opinions on a variety of topics made him an easy target for political rivals. For example, during Jefferson's presidential campaign in 1800, supporters of opponent John Adams published numerous pamphlets and articles which attacked Jefferson's character. Particularly emphasized in these works was Jefferson's religious life. Early statements by Jefferson, such as those written in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781), would haunt him during the campaign. For instance, Jefferson stated that "Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity."²¹³ This and several of Jefferson's other statements on religion were used against him in the election.

Particularly involved in the slander campaign were Christian leaders who feared the policies Jefferson could implement as president. For example, a Dutch Reformed Reverend from New York, William Linn, published a pamphlet which stated that Jefferson must be feared because of his "disbelief of the Holy Scriptures; or in other words his rejection of the Christian Religion and open profession of Deism."²¹⁴ If elected, Linn believed that Jefferson would "destroy religion, introduce immortality and

²¹³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 160.

²¹⁴ Kramnick and Moore, *Godless Constitution*, 89.

loosen all the bonds of society.”²¹⁵ A New York clergyman, Dr. John Mason, also wrote that Jefferson was a “confirmed infidel,” and lacked “so much as a decent respect for the faith and worship of Christians.”²¹⁶ In the *New England Palladium*, an anonymous writer stated, “should the infidel Jefferson be elected to the Presidency, the seal of death is at that moment set on our holy religion, our churches will be prostrated, and some infamous prostitute, under the title of Reason will preside in the sanctuaries now devoted to the worship of the Most High.”²¹⁷ In a pamphlet written by “A Christian Federalist,” the author wrote:

can serious and reflecting men look about them and doubt, that if Jefferson is elected, and the Jacobians get into authority, that these morals which protect our lives from the knife of the assassin- which guard the chastity of our wives and daughters from seduction and violence- defend our property from plunder and devastation, and shield our religion from contempt and profanation, will not be trampled upon and exploded?²¹⁸

In the *Gazette of the United States*, an article was printed which boldly proclaimed, “THE GRAND QUESTION STATED. At the present solemn moment the only question to be asked by every American, laying his hand on his heart, is ‘shall I continue in allegiance to GOD- AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT; or impiously declare for JEFFERSON- AND NO GOD.’”²¹⁹ And finally, in South Carolina, the anti-Jefferson rhetoric stated that “it was in France, where he resided nearly seven years . . . that his disposition to theory and his skepticism in religion, morals, government, acquired full strength and vigor . . . Mr. Jefferson is known to be a theorist on politics, as well as in philosophy and morals- He is

²¹⁵ Kramnick and Moore, *Godless Constitution*, 89.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

a *philosophe* in the modern French sense of the word.”²²⁰ Labeled anti-religion, a deist, a French infidel, an atheist, and a Jacobin, Jefferson was forced to defend his faith for the majority of his public life. The presidential campaign of 1800 is just one further example of the conflict between Christians and other faith systems such as deism in the late eighteenth century.

Jefferson’s life began in Shadwell, Virginia. His father, Peter, was a moderately successful planter and his mother, Jane Randolph, was born into one of the more prominent families in the state. Raised in a devout Anglican home, Jefferson’s earliest memories included reciting prayers with his sister and attending church services. In fact, his first formal education was provided by a Calvinist reverend named Douglas A. Scot and later, by an Anglican clergyman named James Maury who taught him “. . . basic science, mathematics, and ‘other species of polite but useful learning.’”²²¹ When he was seventeen, Jefferson attended William & Mary College and studied a variety of subjects including mathematics, philosophy, and law. Even though these years were not well documented, Jefferson’s private letters and journals provide some insight into his experience at college. For instance, in a letter to his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, Jefferson instructed him on his studies. Focusing on theology, Jefferson wrote, “your reason is now mature enough to examine this object . . . fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God;

²²⁰ Kramick and Moore, *Godless Constiution*, 95.

²²¹ Norman Cousins, “*In God We Trust:*” *The Religious Beliefs and Ideas of the American Founding Fathers* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), 115.

because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.”²²² Discussing the Bible, Jefferson told Carr:

but those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces . . . do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, & that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a God, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love. In fine, I repeat, you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject anything, because any other persons, or description of persons, have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision.²²³

While this letter was written some years after his experiences in college, it reveals Jefferson’s evolved view of religion. Invoking the use of reason, Jefferson’s arguments are more closely related to deism than to his Anglican upbringing. When Jefferson discussed his own years in college, he acknowledged that he was first introduced to the works of Enlightenment writers at William & Mary. He stated that “when I was young . . . I was fond of speculations which seemed to promise some insight into the country of spirits, but observing at length that they left me in the same ignorance in which they had found me, I have ceased to read concerning them.”²²⁴ In journals from his college years, Jefferson discussed his growing skepticism. Particularly fascinated with the lectures of a Scottish professor named Dr. William Small, Jefferson was first introduced to the works of Locke, Bacon, and Newton. More than any of the other works he read, these three writers would have the most profound impact on his thinking. In fact, throughout his life,

²²² Cousins, “*In God We Trust*,” 128.

²²³ Ibid., 128-129.

²²⁴ Charles B. Sanford, *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 9.

Jefferson proudly displayed portraits of all three men in his home at Monticello. He was even quoted as saying that these three “. . . were the greatest men that have ever lived, having laid the foundation of the physical and moral sciences.”²²⁵ Even though he admired each of the three men for their separate accomplishments, reason was a unifying element that Jefferson found especially appealing. For Jefferson, “reason was banishing ignorance and superstition and leading to knowledge and the advancement of progress in both science and religion.”²²⁶ Jefferson’s commitment to reason would influence every aspect of his public and private life.

When Jefferson graduated from William & Mary in 1762 with honors, he proceeded to study law at a local Virginia firm before obtaining admission to the Virginia bar in 1767. Immersing himself in local politics, Jefferson enjoyed a successful career as an attorney and represented the most prominent and wealthy families in the state. While practicing law, Jefferson continued his education and read as many books as possible on everything from philosophy to science to history. In 1769, when Jefferson represented Albemarle County in the Virginia House of Burgesses, he produced one of the first important documents of his career, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, in 1774. Written in response to the Coercive Acts, a document which signifies the beginning of the colonists’ revolution rhetoric, this work confirms that Jefferson remained committed to Enlightenment ideals. In the document, Jefferson focused his entire argument on the idea that God provided man natural rights, including self-government. Referencing reason, nature, freedom, and equality, Jefferson invoked ideas presented by John Locke in *Two Treatises of Government*.

²²⁵ Sanford, *Religious Life*, 9.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

When he was elected as a delegate to the Continental Convention and later asked to join the five man committee responsible for producing The Declaration of Independence, Jefferson continued using the arguments he presented in the *Summary*. In the most famous passage of the document, which states “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” Jefferson’s entire thought is summarized in this one statement.²²⁷ Once again alluding to arguments presented by Enlightenment writers, Jefferson refuted the idea that certain people, such as King George III, were endowed with rights that were not available to the common man. Jefferson believed that God had provided all men with certain natural rights that could not be violated or refused by another person. This thinking was significant to the overall argument of the American colonists because in order to start their revolution, they had to justify their actions. It is important to note that while the final version of the Declaration included terms such as “appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world,” and “Divine Providence,” Jefferson’s original draft included no references to any particular faith. Therefore, it is likely that these statements were later added by Congress. When Jefferson referenced “Nature’s God,” he was not referring to the God of Christianity. Instead, his language was taken directly from the Enlightenment writers. Because the Convention was represented by members from a variety of faiths, which included, “Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Universalists, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, and even

²²⁷ Declaration of Independence, 1776.

a Catholic,” a compromise in language allowed the Convention to unite in their cause for independence.²²⁸

Both the *Summary* and the Declaration are important to understanding Jefferson’s early thinking because the language and concepts used in both documents are found in the works of Enlightenment writers. Terms such as reason, nature, tolerance, and freedom are explored in the work of Locke, Hobbes, and other political philosophers. While these concepts certainly influenced Jefferson’s understanding of political theory, no area was more impacted by his exposure to the Enlightenment than matters of faith. In 1786, the state of Virginia enacted a document Jefferson had written in 1776 titled “Act for Establishing Religious Freedom.” This document reveals some of Jefferson’s first public thoughts on worship. In the document, Jefferson opens by stating, “Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion . . .”²²⁹ He also goes on to state:

Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in nowise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.²³⁰

In the Act, Jefferson is arguing that religion should be left to the private conscious of men rather than dictated by the state or any other legal body. Also, the Act implicitly

²²⁸ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 90.

²²⁹ Cousins, “*In God We Trust*,” 125.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

states that laws may not restrict either the free exercise of faith or other civil liberties. At the time this document was written, Anglicanism was the dominate faith in Virginia. Even though there were no actual laws in regards to the exercise of religion, minority groups such as Quakers and Jews had suffered persecution for decades. Of course, the Act was controversial and rejected by people and groups from all sides of the debate. Many of Jefferson's friends, who were Anglicans, disagreed with him. In one letter written by a Dr. James Currie, he tells Jefferson, "the other Religionists are damned mad at the Establishment and Anathematise the Assembly . . . but I don't care who preach or pray."²³¹ The Anglican Church also feared that the passage of the law would lead to disestablishment, which could have a financial impact on their earnings. Not surprisingly, religious groups that were regularly persecuted supported Jefferson's Act in hope that they would receive fair treatment and be allowed to practice their faith openly. Overall, the Act revealed Jefferson's passion for religious freedom. In letters, he expressed his belief that religious freedom was one of the most important of man's natural rights. Jefferson believed that "people are 'accountable for their principles' . . . not to creed or party, priest or state, but to 'God alone.'" Moreover, man also received from God the inspiration for his religious beliefs. 'God is the only rightful and competent Judge of creeds . . .'"²³² Religious freedom remained one issue that Jefferson was most passionate about for the remainder of his life.

While all of these early documents reveal that Jefferson was at least fully committed to many of the Enlightenment concepts he learned in college, they do not fully address Jefferson's own personal faith. What is known of his early years is that his

²³¹ Sanford, *Religious Life*, 31.

²³² Ibid., 23.

exposure to the New Learning certainly made him question the Anglican faith of his childhood. This is confirmed by Jefferson's reflections in personal journals that were written during and after his years at William & Mary. Introduced to a wide array of philosophy, Jefferson read works written by deist writers that criticized Christianity and organized religion as well as stated why natural religion was the only true path to God. But what impact did this have on his faith? Did he convert to deism or remain somewhat devoted to his Anglican roots? There really is no easy answer to these questions. Because Jefferson spent much of his life creating his own system of faith, it can be stated he was neither a full practicing deist nor a full practicing Christian; or at least not in any traditional understanding of those terms. Instead, Jefferson blended ideas that he learned from both systems. Faith was deeply personal to Jefferson and he spent his entire life exploring topics related to God, life, and death.

Throughout his life, Jefferson was often accused of being an atheist by clergy and fellow politicians, a charge he often repudiated. In fact, Jefferson often distinguished himself from atheism. In a letter to John Adams, Jefferson stated that those who accused him of being an atheist, namely Calvinists, were truly atheists themselves because they gave “. . . a great handle to atheism by their general dogma that proof of God depended on revelation' and not reason.”²³³ When asked about his faith, Jefferson actually always proclaimed himself to be a Christian, but only in “. . . the sense of believing and following the simple teachings of Jesus.”²³⁴ Basically, what Jefferson meant by this statement is that he believed Jesus was a profound moral teacher, but not necessarily the Messiah. After Jesus died, Jefferson believed that the first followers of Jesus corrupted

²³³ Sanford, *Religious Life*, 83.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

his message for personal greed and power. Building churches to establish their control, the clergy used the Bible, whose authority Jefferson always disputed, as the official word of God. Often dictating worship, the church could then interpret Scripture to correlate with any particular policy or demand they wanted fulfilled. These views are perhaps the most deistic of all of Jefferson's beliefs, but he never professed that he was a fully committed deist.

Instead, Jefferson more than likely believed he was not a deist at all, even though his beliefs closely aligned with Christian deism. Generally, this meant that Jefferson believed in using Jesus's teachings as a moral guide, but he mainly relied on reason for truth. But Jefferson also believed that God could intervene in human affairs, which was a departure from the majority of deists who believed in a non-intervening Creator who was restricted by natural law. He stated, "we are not in a world ungoverned by the laws and the power of a superior agent. Our efforts are in his hand, and directed by it; and he will give them their effect in his own time."²³⁵ It is also stated that his ". . . public addresses are studded with references to 'that overruling Providence which governs the destinies of men and nations,' and 'watches over our country's freedom and welfare.'"²³⁶ The culmination of Jefferson's faith is found in a work that was not widely known until well after Jefferson's death. For years, Jefferson had considered writing an extensive revision of the Bible. In this revision, Jefferson intended to present the teachings of Jesus by removing the miracles and prophecies from the text. Like the majority of deists, Jefferson generally rejected supernatural occurrences. Even though he believed that God could intervene in human affairs, the life of Jesus represented something entirely different.

²³⁵ Sanford, *Religious Life*, 93.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

Because Jefferson did not believe that Jesus was the son of God, he also could not believe that he performed miracles or had prophetic powers. Ultimately, Jefferson deeply respected Jesus and actually believed him to be the most significant moral teacher in human history, but he could not endorse his status as the Messiah.

The book, which was originally titled *The Philosophy of Jesus* and later as *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels* was not actually published until 1903, but Jefferson's closest friends knew of his project and discussed it with him in letters and in person. In a letter to friend Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1803, Jefferson wrote:

they are the result of a life of inquiry and reflection, and very different from that Anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other.²³⁷

The book is a retelling of the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Cutting verses out of each Gospel, Jefferson arranged them chronologically, creating a single narrative. Removing all miracles and prophecies, Jefferson's Bible does not include the Immaculate Conception, the virgin birth, the Resurrection or Jesus's miracles.

At the very beginning of the work, Jefferson included a Syllabus which explained how Jesus's teachings were corrupted by his earliest followers. Starting with a section on philosophers, Jefferson stated his initial admiration of the early poets and writers, but he ultimately criticized them because "in developing our duties to others, they were short

²³⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 7.

and defective . . . still less have they inculcated peace, charity, and love to our fellow-men, or embraced with benevolence the whole family of mankind.”²³⁸ Jefferson believed that the teachings of the early philosophers failed because they were too focused on the individual rather than the overall community. Next, he wrote about the Jews and also criticized them by stating:

their system was Deism, that is, the belief in one only God; but their ideas of him and of his attributes were degrading and injurious. Their ethics were not only imperfect, but often irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason and morality, as they respect intercourse with those around us; and repulsive and anti-social as respecting other nations.²³⁹

Jefferson viewed Jews as early deists, but believed that they were misguided in how they applied reason and morality to their thinking. Therefore, for Jefferson, Jesus’s appearance came at a significant moment in Jewish history when reform was needed.

In the last section of the Syllabus, Jefferson addressed the life and doctrines of Jesus. First, he compiled a list of the disadvantages Jesus encountered during his life. He described this in detail by stating, “his parentage was obscure; his condition poor; his education null; his natural endowments great; his life correct and innocent. He was meek, benevolent, patient, firm, disinterested, and of the sublimest eloquence.”²⁴⁰ Jefferson followed this up by explaining why Jesus’s doctrines were also at a disadvantage. The reasons for this was mainly due to the fact that Jesus wrote nothing himself and did not have a writer with him, he died before he could reach his maximum potential, his doctrines came to others incomplete and fragmented, and finally, his followers corrupted

²³⁸ Jefferson, *Life and Morals of Jesus*, 9.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

his doctrines. But Jefferson provided four main contributions that Jesus left behind. These were that:

he corrected the Deism of the Jews . . . his moral doctrines, relating to kindred and friends, were more pure and perfect than those of the most correct of the philosophers, and greatly more so than those of the Jews . . . he pushed his scrutinies into the heart of man; erected his tribunal in the region of his thought, and purified the waters at the fountain head . . . he taught emphatically the doctrine of a future state, which was either doubted or disbelieved by the Jews; and wielded it with efficacy as an important incentive, supplementary to the other motives to moral conduct.²⁴¹

The Syllabus is an important introduction to Jefferson's work because it immediately provides insight into his understanding of the Christian religion. In this introduction, he states several times that he believed Jesus's teachings were corrupted by the earliest followers of his doctrine. Therefore, when writing his version of the Bible, Jefferson intended to eliminate the passages that he believed were falsely attributed to Jesus's life.

Overall, Jefferson believed that his Bible was so significant that he spent years writing and revising the work. Aware that the publication of his Bible could destroy his public reputation, he hid the document and only discussed it with his most trusted acquaintances. Even though Jefferson was often labeled an atheist and infidel by church clergy and political opponents, he actually considered himself a Christian and proudly announced his commitment to the doctrines of Jesus whenever asked about his personal faith. In fact, in a letter to Mr. Charles Thompson, Jefferson wrote that his Bible was “. . . proof that I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call me infidel and themselves Christians and preachers of the Gospel, while they draw all their characteristic dogmas from what its author never

²⁴¹ Jefferson, *Life and Morals of Jesus*, 10-11.

said nor saw.”²⁴² In the last line of the letter, he wrote that if Jesus returned to earth and examined Christianity, he probably “. . . would not recognize one feature.”²⁴³ Thomas Jefferson dedicated his entire life to developing his own faith, while also navigating the world of politics. Creating a blended faith that incorporated elements from both his Anglican upbringing and his commitment to Enlightenment ideals such as reason and rationality, Jefferson believed he was a true Christian. Of course, his version of Christianity differed from traditional church doctrine. While expressing his admiration of Jesus and his belief in an intervening God, Jefferson rejected supernatural elements and relied on reason for knowledge. Combining what he believed were the best elements of both Christianity and natural religion, Jefferson fit the description of a Christian deist. Concerned with morality and the future of America, he relished his role as a public figure until his death in 1826.

In general, the majority of the American Founding Fathers embraced the ideals of the Enlightenment. Sharing similar family and educational backgrounds, they were able to unite and create an independent nation that incorporated Enlightenment concepts such as freedom, equality, and tolerance. In fact, many of these concepts had never been fully implemented by the European nations where they originated. Of course, one of the most important aspects of the founders’ lives was religion. In regards to faith:

. . . each felt religion was extremely important, at a minimum to encourage moral behavior and make the land safe for republican government; each took faith seriously enough to conscientiously seek out a personal path that worked for him; each rejected major aspects of his childhood religion; and none accepted the full bundle of creeds offered by his denomination. In other words, they were spiritual

²⁴² Ibid., 12.

²⁴³ Ibid., 12.

enough to care passionately about religious freedom, but not so dogmatic that they felt duty-bound to promote a particular faith.²⁴⁴

Besides Franklin and Jefferson, who both professed deist tendencies, other founders such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, also explored deism. While none of the founders actually fully converted to deism, the majority was aware of deism and even accepted some of its tenets, mainly the use of reason and rationality. While open expressions of deism could lead to condemnation from church leaders, as seen in Thomas Jefferson's presidential campaign of 1800, other founders were able to avoid criticism by concealing their true beliefs. Despite the restrictions placed on minority faith systems, several of the founders focused on passing laws that ensured freedom of religion to all American citizens. Deism and natural religion played a key role in the passage of these bills because its growing influence in the latter half of the century highlighted the intolerance of the Christian churches and their cruel treatment of minority religious groups. Overall, the American founders were molded by the period of Enlightenment. Influenced by the lives of the Enlightenment writers and their works, the founders were encouraged to question authority figures and traditional institutions. This led to the invocation of reason and rationality, both of which had a profound impact on the formation of an independent America.

²⁴⁴ Waldman, *Founding Faith*, xv.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LEGACY AND DOWNFALL OF THE DEIST MOVEMENT

Even though deism had existed for many centuries, the movement did not gain momentum until the eighteenth century. Peaking in popularity from about 1750-1810, deism was considered a threat to Christianity and the response from church leaders was to launch a fervent campaign to curb its influence. Therefore, it may be surprising to discover that by 1810, deism's popularity had started to wane and all but virtually disappeared from the scene of American religion. Of course, this brings up several questions. For instance, how could deism, which became better organized and more militant in the late century, suddenly vanish? What factors led to this downfall and what legacy did it leave behind? First, deism's downfall was not caused by one single factor, but actually by several that coincided with each other during a very short time span. In the late eighteenth century, America was undergoing important changes. The influence of the Enlightenment was fading and being replaced by philosophical systems such as transcendentalism. Also, American Christianity experienced a second Great Awakening that increased church membership and encouraged revivals to stir up emotional fervor. Also, the effects of the French Revolution would have far reaching consequences on American liberalism. All of these events combined with changes occurring within the system of deism would contribute to its eventual disappearance.

First, looking at the changes in philosophical systems, deism began losing its influence as transcendentalism arrived on the stage in the early nineteenth century. Transcendentalism, which focused on using sensual experience to derive truth, urged its

followers to embrace their inner spirituality. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), one of the founders of the movement, stated in his 1788 work, *Critique of Practical Reason*, that “I call all knowledge transcendental which is concerned, not with objects, but with our mode of knowing objects so far as this is possible *a priori*.”²⁴⁵ Deism, which focused on reason and rationality to discover truth, was criticized by transcendentalists for being too mechanical in its approach to faith. While the principles of the Enlightenment complimented deism, transcendentalism exposed flaws that could not be overcome in the nineteenth century. Deism’s “. . . worldview, founded squarely upon the New Learning’s allegiance to mechanism and rationalism, began to be perceived as too simplistic, and hence a distortion of reality.”²⁴⁶ Also troublesome to transcendentalists was deism’s emphasis that God created the universe, but then served only as a watchmaker that did not intervene in human affairs. This was troubling for many reasons. Using a mechanistic view of the world, deism came to be viewed as “. . . austere, cold, lifeless, and generally forbidding.”²⁴⁷ This was particularly unappealing to transcendentalists because they encouraged a personal relationship with the Creator. Also, deism’s endorsement of the Newtonian machine metaphor, “. . . reduced humans to unimportant units in the machine, describable in impersonal, mathematical terms . . .”²⁴⁸ In the nineteenth century, faith gradually became more personal. Ultimately, deism suffered because it was now criticized for discouraging its followers to form a personal relationship with God. Even though this claim misrepresents deism, it became an accepted belief and contributed to people turning away from deism in favor of a more personalized faith.

²⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1879), 7.

²⁴⁶ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 249.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 252.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 253.

Besides the rise of transcendentalism in the nineteenth century, Christianity also experienced a period of revivalism that became known as the Second Great Awakening. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the movement was “. . . characterized by an emphasis upon personal piety, salvationism, and anti-intellectualism,” and “was led by charismatic men accomplished in organization and rhetoric . . . it strategically targeted and relentlessly attacked what it considered to be the enemies of true piety, virtue, and social order.”²⁴⁹ When Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield brought the First Great Awakening to America, it actually had several positive and negative effects on the spread of Christianity. While it created a revival that inspired people to convert and recommit to their faith, it also contributed to people rejecting Christian doctrine in favor of natural religion. In fact, deism became popular as a result of the Great Awakening. But the Second Great Awakening had a different effect altogether because “its anti-intellectualism was appealing, and so was its insistence that an unemotional, rationalistic religiosity was antithetical to Christianity.”²⁵⁰ Even though deism did trickle down to a larger percentage of the population than many historians have acknowledged, it still had a stigma of intellectualism that was unappealing to the uneducated and poor. The Second Great Awakening was able to better penetrate all social classes because it thrived on people’s emotions rather than their intellect. Also, its doctrine was simple: accept Christ as your savior. While deism’s theories could be complex, Christianity was easy to understand and generally allowed people to feel more comfortable. The greatest proof of the Second Great Awakening’s success is the fact that church membership boomed during its greatest period of influence. For instance:

²⁴⁹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 247.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 248.

between 1820 and 1830, for example, Methodist membership doubled. In the three decades following the American Revolution, Baptist membership increased tenfold, and the number of Baptist congregations mushroomed from five hundred to over twenty-five hundred. The number of preachers per capita exploded in the same time period, swelling from some eighteen hundred in 1775 to almost forty thousand by 1845.²⁵¹

Even though deism initially experienced significant growth during the first Great Awakening, it could not counter the methods used by Christian leaders during the second revival movement. Americans were pulling away from intellectual movements such as deism and moving towards faith systems that stirred emotional fervor. Because deism was founded on a commitment to reason and rationality and avoided preying on emotion, it failed to appeal to those seeking a more personalized form of worship.

Also connected to the downfall of deism was the French Revolution. When deism turned more radical in the late century, Christian leaders believed that “. . . the deistic writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, Condorcet, and Volney had quite a vogue in America during this period.”²⁵² Book catalogues and newspaper articles from the late century confirm that French writings were indeed sold in bookstores. The infiltration of French writings in America was generally viewed “. . . as a potentially revolutionary force that threatened to undermine the established social order. It is not surprising that the later American deists were sometimes referred to as Jacobins by their political and religious opponents.”²⁵³ So when the French Revolution began in 1789, Christian leaders used the event to demonstrate how radicalism could destroy an entire country. Even though America experienced its own revolution in 1776, many believed that what separated it from the French Revolution was that America introduced democracy and freedom, while

²⁵¹ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 248.

²⁵² Morais, “Deism in Revolutionary America,” 440.

²⁵³ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 43.

France became violent and implemented an atheistic national religion. This created an atmosphere that was, “. . . anti-French, anti-deist, and indeed anti-Enlightenment . . .”²⁵⁴ Sermons were even delivered warning Americans not to be persuaded by the literature and actions of the French infidels. It is stated that the sermons “almost all connect Voltaire with the French Revolution and with Paine, and many bring in Hume, Godwin, Helvétius, and others. Especially in New England, some are surprisingly specific in their political partisanship, not only lamenting the death of Washington but praising Adams, damning his opponent . . .”²⁵⁵ The French Revolution served as a propaganda piece for Christian leaders who wanted to instill fear. This campaign was successful mainly because it occurred at a time in American history when people were beginning to turn to Christianity for comfort.

Besides the influence of transcendentalism, the Second Great Awakening, and the French Revolution, there were other factors that contributed to the downfall of deism. When Elihu Palmer became the leader of the militant deist movement in the late century, he was responsible for producing the majority of deistic literature. For instance, his journal, *Prospect, or View of the Moral World*, was one of the more popular of Palmer’s publications. Lasting only fifteen months, the journal’s articles attacked Christianity, with specific reference to Biblical Scripture, and described why a rationalistic and reason-based religion was more appealing than Christian dogma. Looking at both the language and the arguments presented, the *Prospect* is an example of why deism began to fail in the early nineteenth century. First, “. . . the journal reflects a fixation with the negative aspects of Christianity as perceived by the deists, rather than the immediate concerns of

²⁵⁴ May, *American Enlightenment*, 267.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

contemporary life.”²⁵⁶ Basically, the *Prospect*’s articles focused on attacking Christianity rather than building an argument for why people should choose deism. Also, because the *Prospect* was published with no official response from a Christian group or publication, the journal “. . . stands as a negatively opinionated and dogmatic discourse which proceeds tediously and which neglects to establish a sufficient contrast between the deistic and Calvinistic position.”²⁵⁷ Instead of presenting a positive alternative to Christianity, the *Prospect* came across as long-winded and dogmatic in its arguments. Also, the journal was not accessible to people who were not well versed in philosophy and science. Often complex, the arguments were hard to follow, which made the journal unappealing for the common reader. These problems also applied to the overall deistic movement, whose leaders and works began to be viewed as negative and argumentative in a new century that was becoming optimistic and accepting of a positive faith system.

Lastly, as deism’s first leaders passed away, no one attempted to replace them and keep the movement organized. Even though deism always lacked organization and unity, which is another flaw that contributed to its downfall, leaders such as Elihu Palmer and Thomas Paine attempted to encourage deists to support each other and stay devoted to the deistic cause. But once they both passed away, there was a void left that was never filled. For awhile, “a sprinkling of deistical societies founded in several states by Paine and Palmer continued for a time, but their older members gradually died off and there were few or no new recruits.”²⁵⁸ Without a leader to keep the movement motivated, its members became disinterested and over time, they turned to other theologies to satisfy

²⁵⁶ Richard S. Rogers, “The Rhetoric of Militant Deism,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 54.3 (1968): 249.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 250.

²⁵⁸ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 246.

their religious needs. All of the deistical journals and clubs began to shut down and by 1810, deism was no longer relevant.

While deism ultimately ended up failing in its mission to overtake Christianity and spread natural religion, it did have a lasting impact on American theology and philosophy. Besides adding energy to the Christian movement, it also contributed to the rise of Unitarianism in the nineteenth century. Unitarianism, which was imported from Britain, became a popular alternative to evangelical Christianity. Taking hold in the New England states, Unitarianism rejected the concept of the Trinity. Instead, Unitarians believed that there was only one God. Therefore, Jesus was not viewed as the son of God, which was a similar belief that the majority of deists also held. When the American Unitarian Association was formed in Boston in 1825, it helped establish Unitarianism as a rival to other Christian sects. Because deism was one of the first organized movements to challenge Christianity in the eighteenth century, Unitarianism was able to learn from the mistakes of deism and present a theology that was more appealing to the mass population. In fact, “in the years immediately following (deism’s downfall), Unitarianism with its more moderate approach to liberal religion found a receptive audience in New England and rapidly grew to considerable prominence and influence . . . the American deism of Paine’s day was decorously transformed into the latter Unitarianism . . .”²⁵⁹ Therefore, even though deism faded in the nineteenth century, some of its tenets were transferred to Unitarianism, which continued deism’s campaign to challenge traditional religion.

²⁵⁹ Rogers, “Rhetoric of Militant Deism,” 251.

Even though deism only enjoyed a brief success in America in the eighteenth century before virtually disappearing, it did leave behind an important legacy. To begin with, it was one of the first alternative theologies to successfully challenge Christianity. Ultimately, deism was appealing to Americans because it exuded Enlightenment qualities such as reason, order, and rationality. Also, the Age of Reason encouraged people to explore the natural world and question traditional authority systems. Deism, which also challenged its followers to scrutinize institutions such as Christianity, was appealing to those seeking a system that embraced intellectualism and science. Unfortunately, deism's attempts to become militant and organized at the end of the century coincided with a Christian revival movement. Encouraged by the optimism and energy of the evangelical preachers, deism's mechanical approach to theology became tiresome and overstated. As the nineteenth century began, people were looking for new philosophical and faith systems to embrace. Unable to revamp its image and arguments, deism became a victim of the French Revolution and other liberal philosophy. Labeled dangerous and outdated, deism disappeared entirely by 1810, leaving behind a small, but important legacy. But it can be stated that “. . . for almost one hundred years, deism spread in America the message of religious toleration and rational inquiry with a vigor, conviction, and dignified eloquence that could not help but influence the subsequent course of American thought.”²⁶⁰

²⁶⁰ Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 273.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the thesis, deism's role in eighteenth century America has been examined. As stated in the introduction, deism has often been overlooked and dismissed for its limited appearance in America, lack of organization and/or effective leaders, and limited number of open, committed members. Deism, which was a product of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, arrived in the midst of religious wars between various Christian factions. Endorsing a reason and rational based system, deism offered an alternative to Christianity. Also, the Enlightenment contributed to changes in the sphere of politics, theology, and culture. This created an environment that was ripe for deism and other liberal theological and philosophical systems to spring up in different sections of Europe. Starting on the British mainland, deism developed its first set of principles, namely its reliance on the natural world and reason to acquire truth and knowledge. The earliest deist writers, such as John Toland, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and Matthew Tindal, were well versed in ancient philosophy as well as Biblical theology; a combination that became a weapon for deists against their opponents. As deism began to spread in Europe, it finally made its way into American culture starting as early as the late seventeenth century.

When deism first arrived in America, it faced many obstacles. Christianity had become the dominant theological system and controlled virtually all aspects of colonial life. For example, through the use of legislation, laws prevented non-Christians from practicing their faith or openly discussing their beliefs. This hindered deists and others from confessing their true religious tendencies. Also, Christian leaders had a profound

influence on the curriculum in colleges and even had an influence on politicians, the majority of which were proclaimed Christians. But deism found a way, mainly through newspapers and reforms in the colleges, to slowly spread its message. Early deists preferred to remain anonymous, but some were willing to confess their beliefs openly. Looking at early documents from some of the American Founding Fathers, like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, they too expressed skepticism of Christianity and explored deism. When deism first became noticed by the Christian churches, the immediate response was to attack deism by using fear and a well-constructed propaganda campaign. This presented an image of deism as a dangerous system whose followers were evil. For a period in the eighteenth century, deism was not able to make much ground against Christianity. But surprisingly, the First Great Awakening and American Revolution both had a profound impact on Americans. People were gradually becoming more non-religious. The First Great Awakening, which did inspire some to reengage with the Christian faith, actually inspired others to convert to natural religion to avoid the hysteria associated with its revivals. Church membership numbers also plummeted as the colonists were more concerned about the war with Britain than personal faith. When America came out of the Revolution as an independent nation, deism finally began to spread in the states and become influential in a number of ways.

First, deism benefited from the general atmosphere post-Revolution. When Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, and tolerance appeared attainable for all Americans. With Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and Franklin fighting for the passage of bills that guaranteed religious freedom to every American, deists could finally practice their beliefs and feel protected from

persecution. Of course, the issue of religious freedom or freedom in general was a lot more complex. For instance, freedom, equality, and tolerance did not apply to slaves or the Native Americans, but the idea of those rights provided inspiration. Deism also continued to be plagued by persecution from Christian churches, but it became more mobilized in the late century. As Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen, and Elihu Palmer became its proclaimed leaders, deism began to spread rapidly in the states. For example, deistic societies formed in major cities such as New York and Philadelphia, journals were created that were entirely dedicated to the deist cause, and deist themed books were published. Becoming more militant in tone, deism enjoyed a period of success.

But at the end of the century, deism began to lose its appeal to Americans. First, the French Revolution was used as an example of the effects of liberal philosophy. Also, new philosophies in the nineteenth century, such as transcendentalism, became popular. Christianity also experienced reform with the Second Great Awakening, which was more successful than the first. And finally, as deism's first leaders passed away, their void was never filled. Therefore, by 1810, deism had virtually faded from American life. But despite deism's small period of success, it had an important role in American culture. For one thing, the deist movement appeared in a century when Enlightenment ideals were embraced by people from all classes and social structures. It not only provided comfort for those seeking an alternative faith system, but contributed to a period of skepticism and reform. Traditional authority systems were now examined objectively and questioned for its relevance in a century dictated by radical change. Because deism inspired some of the important American founders, its influence also found its way into the bills and documents that were enacted. Even though the conflict with Christian churches hindered

the movement, it did create an open debate about theology. People from both sides printed articles, journals, and books defending their faith and condemning others that were different. All in all, deism had a wide impact on American culture and life.

For decades, deism has been generally ignored for its influence on eighteenth century American life. But the evidence presented in this thesis reveals that it was an important movement that inspired Americans to question everything about their world. Deism appeared in an ideal period of history because reform and outright rejection of traditional systems was supported by deist theology. Americans, while engaging in a Revolution and creating an independent nation, were inspired by liberal philosophy and theology. As many of the founders were well educated and well read, they implemented ideas from the Enlightenment works. Therefore, even though deism's success was brief, it was important in a period so focused on dissent, freedom, tolerance, equality, and justice. Disappearing after almost a century of influence, deism's ideas about the natural world continue to survive today. And for that one fact alone, deism deserves recognition for its brief, but significant place in American history.

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APPENDIX

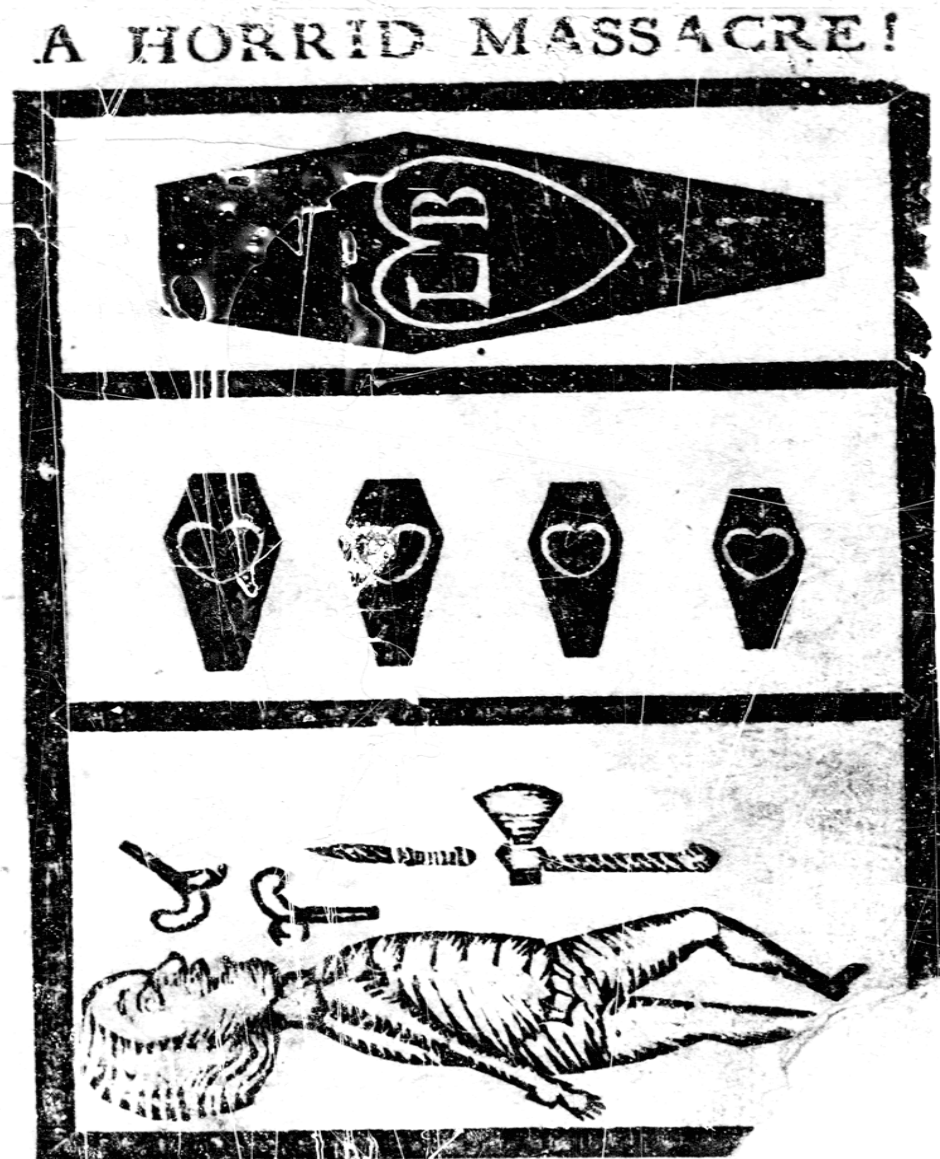


Figure One: 'A Horrid Massacre.' An illustration that accompanied Stephen Mix Mitchell's 1783 book titled *A Narrative of the Life of William Beadle*. Image courtesy of *American Antiquarian Society*.



POEM,

CRUEL MURDER

Occasioned by the most shocking and
That ever was represented on the Stage; or the most deliberate MURDER that ever was perpetrated in
Human Life.—"He violated Nature's great origin Law, defy'd eternal Justice, and seal'd his own Perdition."

I.
A BLOODY scene I'll now relate,
Which lately happen'd in a neighb'ring state,
A murder of the deepest dye, I say,
O be amaz'd! for surely well you may.

II.
A man, (unworthy of the name) who slew
Himself, his consort, and his offspring too;
An amiable wife, with four children dear,
Into one grave was put—Oh drop a tear!

III.
Soon in the morning on that fatal day,
BEADLE, the murderer, sent his maid away,
To tell the awful deed he had in view;
To their assistance the kind neighbors flew.

IV.
It truly gives me pain for to pen down,
A deed so black, and yet his mind was found.
Say he, "I mean to close six persons eyes,
"I thro' perfect fondness, and the tender ties."

V.
Detest the errors, to this deed him drew,
And mourn the helpless victims whom he flew;
And pray to God that Satan may be bound,
Since to deceive so many he is found.

VI.
Come pure religion, of heav'nly birth,
Dispel these glooms, and brighten all the earth;
Drive these destructive errors from the land,
And grant that truth as a sure guard may stand.

VII.
Hasten, our God, the glorious times,
When thou thyself shall reign;
And virtue and peace thro' all our climes,
Their triumph shall maintain.

VIII.
Fly swiftly round ye circling years,
Hail the auspicious day!
When love shall dwell in ev'ry heart—
Nor men their offspring slay!



HARTFORD, December 17, 1782.
ON the morning of the 11th instant, about sun-
rise, at Wethersfield, a deed was perpetrated,
of the most extraordinary and astonishing na-
ture:—WILLIAM BEADLE, a native of South Bri-
tain, who has resided in that town nearly ten, and in
America, about twenty years, who became acquaint-
ed with, and married (at Fairfield, in this State, about
14 years since) an amiable woman, of a reputable fam-
ily, by whom he had four lovely and promising
children, one son and three daughters, whose educa-
tion he superintended with great care and seeming
solicitude, and was apparently an affectionate hus-
band.—His business, which was that of a trader, de-
clining some years since, he betook himself more to
books than usual, and was unhappily fond of those
esteemed Deistical; of late he rejected all Revelation
as imposition, and (as he expresses himself) "renounc-
ing all the popular religions of the world, intended to

be a proper Deist." Having discarded all
ideas of moral good and evil, he considered
himself, and all the human race, as mere
machines; and that he had a right to dis-
pose of his own and the lives of his family.
Letters and papers he left, addressed to sundry
persons of his acquaintance, wrote a short time
before his death, he declares he has had in con-
templation for three years past the awful tra-
gedy he now proceeds to act, with all imagi-
nable deliberation and composure of mind.
About sun-rise he sent his servant-maid (the
only person of the family who survived) with
a letter to a friend in the neighborhood, therein
announcing his dreadful purpose, and declaring
that before his friend should read the letter he
and his family should enter into a happier state,
and desiring him to call two persons and come
to his house, gently to arm the neighbors, and
advise them to be as collected in their minds and
reason as he then was. Upon receipt of this
line the house was instantly opened; but too
late! All was over—He had made ready the
knife, the ax and pistol, as weapons of death;
the latter he made use of upon himself, the two
former upon his family; these instruments he
had carried with him to his bed-chamber for
some weeks under pretence of defending him-
self against thieves.—With the utmost secrecy,
unperceived by any, he destroyed a worthy and
beautiful wife, in the midst of life, and four
pleasant children, sleeping in their beds, the el-
dest about 12 years of age, who the evening
preceding were like olive branches around his
table—He closed the awful scene by destroying
himself. Some circumstances render it pro-
bable that he had given an opiate to the fa-
mily before they retired to rest.
Speaking of this catastrophe in one of his let-
ters, he says, "I mean to close the eyes of six
persons, through perfect humanity and the
most endearing fondness and friendship; for
never mortal father felt more of these tender
ties than myself." Having become reduce
in some degree in his circumstances, he reject-
ed his former ideas of divine Revelation and
belief of a future state of misery: He adopted
this new theoretic system which he now put
in practice.
The Jury of inquest, were of opinion, that
he was of sound mind, and returned their
verdict accordingly. It is difficult to deter-
mine where disaffection begins. It is very
evident he was rational on every other sub-
ject; on this no one conversed with him.
The corpse of the murderer was laid on
two barrels and exposed to shame, with the
bloody knife fastened on his breast, after
which it was placed on a horse sled, dragged to
an obscure place and buried with every mark of
infamy.
On Friday the unfortunate woman, with
her children by her side were interred in one
grave, with every mark of respect: When a
sermon was preached suitable to the occasion,
to a large concourse of people, and grief mingled
with pity, displayed itself in every countenance,
on the unusual and melancholy occasion.

Sold near LIBERTY-STUMP and next the SWAN-TAVERN, South-End.
will be immediately printed as soon as it comes to Hand. (single.)—The Sermon refer'd to above

Figure Two: A Poem, Occasioned by the Most Shocking and Cruel Murder.
Image courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society.