AMERICAN DEISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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CHAPTER I

ENGLISH BACKGROUND

As was true of most intellectual trends in colonial America, deism originated in England and spread to the colonies. To understand deism as it developed in eighteenth century America, one must examine the roots and mature status of deism in England. Deism did not emerge as an entirely new system of thought in seventeenth century England. The disputes, schisms and wars of the Reformation laid a negative foundation for its appearance. The counter-accusations of the clergy of different sects provided ammunition for its anticlerical campaign. The Reformation itself, by its rejection of the ritualism and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, its teaching that in matters of religion each individual should use his own reason, and its putting greater stress on the ethical element in religion, was a movement in the same direction as deism. It did not, however, advance as far. To replace the authority of the Catholic Church, the Protestants substituted the Bible. During the century succeeding the Protestant revolt, Thomas Hobbes and other philosophers insisted that the Scriptures be subjected to an historical and rational criticism. The deists, who existed by name as early as 1563, went further
and, so they thought, deeper. They asserted that the basis of authority could be found in reason, and in the resultant universal rational beliefs.¹

Among the first to adopt such a stand was Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1581-1648), who attempted to state these universal beliefs, and who became known as "the Father of English Deism." Serving as a leading diplomat, Herbert represented England in the French court. While still a young man and a short time before he wrote his first deistic book, he was knighted for his diplomatic service. In this first work he formulated five fundamental articles. His creed consisted of a belief in the existence of God, the worship of this God, the practice of virtue, repentance of sin, and faith in immortality. Herbert believed these tenets were self-evident and equally available to all ages and every nation. He was very pleased with his five innate principles and regarded them fully sufficient and beyond improvement. Referring to his discovery, he wrote, "I found those five articles . . . and thought myself far more happy than Archimedes."² These articles constituted the foundation


of the author's new religion, deism. Most succeeding deists followed Herbert in making these articles, with the exception of the last one, the basis of deistic religion. Because four of the five articles expressed the essential content of deism, they require careful examination.

The first article asserted the existence of God; all deists unhesitatingly made this declaration, which sharply distinguished deism from atheism and agnosticism. When Herbert and most deists spoke of God, they meant God the Creator whom they presented as distinct from His creation. This concept distinguished deism from pantheism.3

In the second and third articles, Herbert stressed the ethical character of natural religion. This resulted in his opposition to all religions employing rites and sacraments in worship. His anticlericalism, which characterized all later deists, was apparent when he wrote: "Rites were invented by priests that worship might not seem bare and naked." The priests, Herbert believed, sought by means of these rites to eradicate the principles of deistic religion and to establish their own power.4

The discussion of the fourth article, "that we ought to be sorry for our sins and to repent of them," gave Herbert an opportunity to express his views on repentance and sacrifice. While he differed from later deists by his emphasis

3Ibid., pp. 3-4.
4Ibid., pp. 281, 318.
on repentance, he gave birth to a fundamental position of deism, namely, a rejection of sacrifices in religion as cunning priestly inventions. Herbert insisted that the priests invented bloody sacrifices to terrify people and to cause them to depend upon the clergy's services.\(^5\)

Herbert as well as eighteenth century deists openly attacked the concept that the Bible was a special revelation of God. Anyone who claimed this Book to be a special revelation would have to prove that God was accustomed to "speak with an articulate voice," that he who heard was fully convinced it was God speaking, that in hearing he was not "delirious, or between sleep and awake" and that a faithful report was recorded. No book in existence he concluded, met these conditions. To him, being a true deist, reason was the test of the validity of all considered revelations.\(^6\)

A factor favoring the spread of deism was the latitudinarian movement. It originated in an attempt to broaden the Anglican Church to admit to its communion a large proportion of nonconformists. Latitudinarianism was more than a church policy; it was a mode of thought which emphasized rational religion as a basis of agreement and tended to minimize the importance of revelation. The movement's founding conviction was twofold: the greatest possible freedom of discussion

\(^5\)Ibid., pp. 3-4, 318, 320-321.

should prevail in nonessentials and the basic principles of Christianity should be few. Liberty of expression was advocated because it was believed no one generation or church had fully attained divine truth. The net result of this rationalistic movement was an exaltation of a secular and rational religious life at the expense of spiritual fervor. Emphasizing reason, the latitudinarians investigated the Bible to ascertain the basal tenets of Christianity as well as the divine authenticity of Scriptural revelation. By declaring the essential articles of the Christian religion synonymous with the religion of nature, they unconsciously popularized the positive aspect of the deistic faith. Although they agreed with the deists in their advocacy of natural religion, the latitudinarians rejected any attack on the validity of the Bible.7 The origin of the latitudinarian movement was an evident testimony to how influential the deistic movement was on the English religious climate. Not only did deism prosper from this movement but latitudinarianism owed its birth in part to deism.

Archbishop of Canterbury John Tillotson and the famous philosopher John Locke were latitudinarians who exercised a significant influence upon the development of the deistic movement. Tillotson (1630-1694) was a representative of the

moderate latitudinarianism shared by many churchmen of the seventeenth century. Even though the deist Anthony Collins asserted that Tillotson was the head of all freethinkers, the Anglican archbishop fought the deists with reasonable arguments. Being a rationalist, Tillotson was ready to accept the tenets of natural religion but held that these must be supplemented by the Christian revelation. The religion of nature was defined by Tillotson as "obedience to Natural Law, and the performance of such duties as Natural Light, without any express and supernatural revelation, doth dictate to man..." Natural religion consisted of a belief in God, in the immortality of the soul and the practice of virtue. Natural religion, the root of revealed faith, needed the aid of the Christian revelation to strengthen its moral precepts. To Tillotson, the divine origin of Christianity was attested by its fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, its miracles and its consistency with the nature of God.8

John Locke (1632-1704) adopted these same latitudinarian views. In The Reasonableness of Christianity he endeavored to prove the rationality of the Christian religion when it was combined with divine confirmation. According to Locke, two things were necessary for salvation: "faith and

repentance, that is believing Jesus to be Messiah, and a good life..." This twofold doctrine was the groundwork of the Christian system and wholly consistent with reason. If a person tried to live virtuously and believed in the divinity of Christ, allowances would be made for his imperfections. Locke was convinced that the miracles performed by Jesus proved the divine origin of Christianity.9

Locke, though not a deist, undoubtedly exercised a greater influence on the deistic movement subsequent to his time than did any other writer. This is evidenced by the numerous times the succeeding deists quoted him in support of their reasonings.10 The deists simply extended the role of human reason to make revelation unnecessary.

Locke's most significant contribution to deism was his emphasis upon empiricism, the theory that all knowledge has its source in experience. This marked an important change in deism because Herbert of Cherbury had presented his five articles of deism as innate ideas. All deists after Locke


10 John Toland, Christianity Not Mysterious; or a Treatise shewing that there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason (London, 1707), pp. 9-19, 429-430; Matthew Tindal, Christianity as Old as Creation; or the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature (London, 1730), pp. 3-4, 23, 27, 163; Charles Blount, Miscellaneous Works of Charles Blount, Containing: Oracles of Reason (place of publication not given, 1695), p. 181; Collins, A Discourse, pp. 52-53, 85, 177.
were empiricists. The first striking illustration of Locke's influence came with the publication of John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* in 1696—one year after the publication of Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Toland read Locke's works and built his deistic philosophies on the Lockian method.¹¹

Later deists were indebted to Locke for their arguments on how men came to have an impression of God. The idea of God's existence, Locke theorized, was not innate but occurred as a result of reason built upon the solid foundation of experience. Denying that Jesus Christ was true deity, Locke was a unitarian Christian. Deists frequently quoted him to justify their opposition to trinitarianism.¹²

Even though Locke believed the Bible was written by God and was truth without error, succeeding deists misquoted him as having supported their rejection of the Bible as God's truth. They established their citations on what Locke taught. Since the precepts of natural religion were very intelligible to all men whereas the truths of the Bible were liable to difficulties of interpretation, Locke deducted, men should give more heed to observing the dictates of reason and

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natural religion. In imposing their own interpretations of revealed religion, men should be less dogmatic. The Bible should be freely investigated to ascertain whether its statements are in accord with, above, or contrary to reason. Locke's enlargement on the interpretation difficulties because of language, customs and the vagueness of Biblical authors was employed by the deists in their attacks upon revelation. Like Locke, they rejected everything in the Bible that was contrary to reason, but the deists were also unwilling to accept anything in the Bible which was miraculous or above reason. If God gave a revelation, they contended, it surely should be clear. In contrast to Locke, they insisted that instead of the Bible being needed to settle points of dispute in natural religion, reason must be supreme over revelation. What claimed to be revelation was too mystical and open to disputed interpretations.

Since post-Lockian deists built their natural religion on the foundation of Locke's empiricism rather than Herbert's innate ideas, it might seem that Locke and later deists concurred on the subject. This assumption is false because deists placed far greater faith in natural religion.

13Locke, Works, III, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 22-23; IV, Replies to the Bishop of Worcester, 341; Tindal, Christianity as Old as Creation, p. 23.

14Tindal, Christianity as Old as Creation, p. 23; Toland, Christianity Not Mysterious, pp. 429-430; Locke, Works, VII, The Reasonableness of Christianity, 135-180.
Locke argued natural religion was weak because of ignorance, superstition and priestcraft; it did not sufficiently recognize or provide for human weakness.\textsuperscript{15}

It pleased the deists to have Locke on their side in their struggle for religious freedom, and they utilized arguments that he developed. To Locke, a church was a voluntary organization with no control over the religious beliefs of nonmembers. Striving for such control was usurpation and not in harmony with the purposes for the formation of the church. In his arguments for religious freedom, Locke attacked the clergy of non-Christian and Christian religions. Religious leaders were often corruptors and oppressors of the people and the hinderers of progress. They kept people ignorant to retain their obedience, and their interest was more in politics than in religion.\textsuperscript{16}

Besides the latitudinarian writings of Christian rationalists, Newton's cosmic philosophy contributed to the greater dissemination of the deistic philosophy. \textit{The Principia Mathematica}, written by Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), was to the Age of Reason what the \textit{Origin of the Species}

\textsuperscript{15}Locke, \textit{Works}, VII, \textit{The Reasonableness of Christianity}, 11-12, 103-111, 149-151, 155-156.

has been to the twentieth century. To the great English scientist, the universe resembled an infinite cosmic ocean containing island planets held in space by natural laws. In this cosmic sea, revolving about the sun, was a relatively small planet inhabited by man. The entire machine was created at one stroke by a brilliant master craftsman who bestowed upon it a set of excellent edicts and who was able to mend and control His machine. Newton accepted without doubt the hypothesis of God's existence. This cosmic philosophy emphasized an aspect of theology which the deists made central. It provided the concept of the Supreme Being as an efficient cause of the universe. Newton believed the Great Mechanic would tinker with His machine to perform miracles; the deists rejected this contention because such interference would imply divine imperfection.17

Chronologically, the next important deist after Herbert of Cherbury was Charles Blount (1654-1693). The critical aspect of deism was much more prominent in his writings. When comparing the stories of the birth of Christ and Apollonius, he wrote, "To believe any stories that are not approved by the . . . church, is superstition; whereas to believe them that are, is religion." Blount, unlike Tillotson

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and Locke, rejected any miraculous element in the birth of Christ. "'Tis well known to all men who have searched into the record of ancient time, how necessary it hath ever been esteemed for heroes to have birth no less miraculous than their life." His attitude toward leading Bible characters was decidedly unfriendly. He depicted Abraham and Moses as impostors who had learned the tricks of the Egyptians priests. After expressing contempt for David, he sneeringly referred to him as "the man after God's own heart." Saying that Biblical stories exceeded the poet's fables, he ridiculed and rejected most of them. He was critical of the homocentric character of much human thinking in the light of the Copernican astronomy.18

The positive element of Blount's writings laid stress on the ethical foundation of religion. "Our religion," he wrote, "must necessarily be this, to do good to His Creatures; for therein we concur with the will of God..." He was a firm believer in reason, "the greatest gift of Deity." Deism was "a good manuring of a man's Conscience," and if sowed with Christianity, would produce the most profitable crop.

He added strength to several tenets of the deistic creed—the existence of God and the immortality of the soul—and tied these beliefs to reason, not revelation.¹⁹

Blount climaxed the formative years of English deism and prepared the way for its flourishing period during the eighteenth century. He revived interest in deism that had somewhat subsided since the time of Herbert of Cherbury. The transition from the rationalistic basis of a doctrine of innate ideas to the empirical basis provided by Locke's philosophy occurred during his era. Being the first deist to openly attack Christianity and the Bible, his fundamental argument became a standard contention among deists. "Any rule which is necessary to our future happiness, ought to be . . . made known to all men; no rule of revealed religion ever was or could be so revealed to all men, and therefore no revealed religion is necessary to future happiness."²⁰

Late in the seventeenth century, changes in the political situation and in the press laws of England encouraged deism. The restoration of the Stuarts had brought a reaction against both the strict morals and theology of the Puritans. The growth of sentiment in favor of toleration had caused the modification in 1695 of the press law, allowing greater freedom of the press. Deistic books and pamphlets appeared in quantities.

¹⁹Blount, Miscellaneous Works: Oracles of Reason, pp. 91-97, 126.
²⁰Ibid., pp. 2-11, 162-163.
Many of them called forth replies from anti-deists until England was flooded with the controversial literature. Early eighteenth-century England became a debating society, the subject being deism versus orthodox Christianity.²¹

Locke's suggestion to investigate the Bible and Christianity in a rational manner was taken by one of his disciples, John Toland (1670-1722). At the publication of his most important book, Christianity Not Mysterious, Toland claimed not to be an enemy of Christianity but a Christian reformer. He pledged partial loyalty to the Bible and the Church of England. However, his teachings indicated that historical Christianity had been greatly corrupted by Jewish rabbis, Gentile mythology, clergy and priests. Church ceremonies were condemned as anti-Christian. If a miracle contained a logical contradiction, it was false. Consequently, it could not be regarded as part of Christianity. Anything beyond the reach of rationality was not to be included, for whatever the Deity did not desire to reveal clearly was not worth knowing. Because it contradicted reason, a fictitious miracle like the birth of Christ was to be rejected. Toland believed clergymen championed the mysterious elements in Christianity to preserve their own influence. It should be observed that he rejected the distinction between Locke's "above reason" and "contrary to reason." Locke had insisted

²¹ J. B. Bury, A History of Freedom of Thought (New York, 1913), pp. 139-140; Leland, Principal Writers, pp. 23-29.
things contrary to reason could not be accepted but that things above reason, termed mysteries, should be accepted when found in the Bible.\(^{22}\)

Toland's anti-mystical emphasis was his main contribution to the development of deism. Others were the establishment of deism on the foundation of a Lockian theory of knowledge and criticism of the canon of Scripture. Yet, his book, "the first important representative of the deistic school," was so objectionable that it was condemned to the flames by the Irish House of Commons and declared to be a nuisance by the Grand Jury of Middlesex.\(^{23}\)

Still more outspoken in his attack upon traditional Christianity was another disciple of Locke. Anthony Collins' (1676-1729) discourse stimulated thirty-five polemic answers. Because of his intense dislike of clerical activities, he penned, "Ecclesiastical history consists of nothing but the wickedness of the governing clergy." The clergy were criticized for teaching that God had favorite nations. He tried to disparage the influence of religious teachers by saying, "A layman wants to know the truth, and a priest desires to have him of his opinion." In order to strip the


priestly classes of their pretension to authority, he proposed to examine the Bible and its prophecy. In an effort to weaken the credibility of the Scriptures, he dwelt on the pious frauds and the gullibility of early Christians. The Old Testament text was depicted as corrupt; over fifty ancient scholars were cited to support his thesis. Differences of readings in ancient Biblical texts were shown.²⁴

Having sought to discredit the Old Testament, Collins advanced to the next step in his argument by maintaining that the New Testament and Christianity were founded on the Old Testament. Therefore, they were frauds. Collins contended that Old Testament prophecies were not literally fulfilled in the New Testament. They could only be considered consummated by the use of an allegorical method of interpretation, a method used extensively by early Christians. If the Old Testament was faulty as Collins presented it, Christianity was without a firm foundation. In attacking the inspiration of the New Testament, Collins questioned the value of miracles as a proof of the Christian religion. Jesus Christ and his apostles were deceivers because they taught that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Collins denied the virgin birth of Christ and supported his denial by saying the Siamese claimed one of their heroes was virgin born and was mankind's messiah.²⁵


Collins' only positive contribution to deism was an attempt to demonstrate that natural religion encouraged high morals. His writings helped circulate deistic teaching and increase the intensity of deistic agitation in England.  

Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), was the next writer whose works constituted an important contribution to the English deistic movement. Because he discussed religion by projecting his views into a dialogue between two fictitious characters, there has been disagreement about Shaftesbury's classification as a deist. His profession of orthodox Christianity, teamed with his minor attack on deism, has caused some critics not to classify him as a deist. However, most writers who have made a special study of deism have called him a deist. When deistic agitation was flourishing in 1736, a contemporary author named Shaftesbury and Matthew Tindal "the two oracles of deism." Alexander Pope was quoted to have said that Shaftesbury's Characteristics did more harm to revealed religion that all other works of infidelity combined.  

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26 Ibid., pp. 120-121; Leland, Principal Writers, pp. 107-109.  
his classification should be determined by examination of his writings.

In his most popular work, right and wrong were distinguished by reason. The sense of right and wrong had its source in man instead of any divine writings. Men were shown the need of doing good not because of the fear of future punishments but for the promotion of their own happiness. His writings contained deism's manifesto to establish morality independent of religion, and allowed no place in morality for Biblical revelation. Ethics and morality were considered to be more important than organized religion. Like his whole moral system, virtue was defined on the basis of individual affection. It was by affection only that a creature was esteemed good or bad. Virtue consisted of the affections directed toward that which reason teaches is good. The natural sense of right and wrong itself was the root of Shaftesbury's ethics. Since this sense was a first principle in man's constitution, Shaftesbury declared "there is no speculative opinion, persuasion, or belief, which is capable . . . to exclude or destroy it." Therefore, neither religion nor atheism would have any direct influence upon human virtue. The moral nature of man, Shaftesbury concluded, supersedes religion itself.

In true deistic fashion, Shaftesbury was vindictive against the Bible and Christianity. He subjected the Bible to ridicule by attacking the Biblical accounts of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan by Joshua, Jonah, the birth of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. In reference to the rite of circumcision, he charged the Bible with contradiction and historical inaccuracy. The tradition that Abraham received knowledge of the rite as a symbol of divine favor was scorned. Authorities were cited to prove circumcision was practiced in Egypt before Abraham's time.\(^{29}\)

Shaftesbury's purpose in investigating the Pentateuch was to reveal "the strange adherence and servile dependency of the whole Hebrew race on the Egyptian nation." He insinuated the traditions of Christianity were established upon the occult sciences, judicial astrology and other arts proper to the Egyptian magi. The exodus under Moses was examined. Shaftesbury asserted cynically that in spite of the aid and revelations from God, the Israelites were "inclined so strongly to the manners, the religion, rites, diet, customs, laws . . . of their tyrannical masters" that Moses and God were almost defeated in delivering them from Egypt. To support his position, Shaftesbury quoted ancient historians. The Israelites did not depart voluntarily as

\(^{29}\)Ibid., I, 229-232; II, 189-194, 198, 229-231.
reported in the Bible but were forcibly expelled because of leprosy. Shaftesbury alluded to another unsavory circumstance of the exodus, the retreat of Moses "by the assistance of an Egyptian loan." 30

Using analogies between acknowledged superstitions and established Christian doctrines, Shaftesbury suggested that the wisdom of Moses and other Hebrew leaders lay in their knowledge of magic and sorcery derived from Egyptians priests. The rise of Joseph was described; he became "so powerful in this kind of wisdom, as to outdo the chief diviners, prognosticators and interpreters of Egypt." Joseph was presented as an opportunist, sycophant and exploiter of the underprivileged. Shaftesbury added that Moses emulated his predecessor's policy of alliance with the Egyptian priesthood. Moses' political leadership rested on the skills of divining, soothsaying and magic. This uncomplimentary allusion was followed by the assertion that although Moses was described as "the meekest man on earth," he enforced the observation of religious duties with blood and massacre. 31

Ridicule was heaped on the prophet Jonah. He was described as "pettish, . . . unlike a man, and resembling . . . some refractory boyish pupil," who was humored by God, as a loving tutor. Shaftesbury's ostensible purpose in the introduction

30 I<ref>Ibid., I, 189-190, 230.</ref>
31 I<ref>Ibid., II, 193-195, 227.</ref>
of the story of Jonah was designed to expose the primitive anthropomorphism of the Scriptures. Undoubtedly this was his intention when he referred to the "popular pleasant intercourse, . . . between God and man [Gen. 3:9]; I might add, even between man and beast [Num. 22:23]; and . . . still more extraordinary, between God and Satan [II Chron. 18:18-19]."

Shaftesbury attacked the authenticity of the Bible with greater vigor than he did its stories and characters. His attitude toward the "manners, actions and characters of Sacred Writ" was revealed in this passage, "The Bible deals with matters incomprehensible in philosophy; . . . above the pitch of the mere human historian, the politician, or the moralist and must be rejected as the best of all truth."

This generalization was prefaced with a vivid description of David. Shaftesbury affirmed it would be impossible with all the art of poetry "to make that royal hero appear amiable in human eyes, who found such favor in the eyes of Heaven." This deist accused "the sacred volumes" of crudity and moral simplicity. The Bible portrayed human morals on a low level. An attempt was made to prove miracles could not attest to the existence of God or His revelation. Shaftesbury contended that the rational "contemplation of the universe, its laws and government" is the only means of discovering God.

Miracles, far from attesting to God's rule in the universe,

\[32\text{Ibid.},\ II, 229-234.\]
would actually assert the opposite if they existed. A miracle would inject confusion into the order and beauty in which God is seen. Teaching the existence of miracles, he argued, would only lead to atheism.³³

Shaftesbury continued his attack on the Bible by demonstrating the unreliability of the text. He tried to convince his readers to reason independently of clerical authority when they considered the validity of the Scriptures. The idea that the Bible written in human language should be considered above human criticism was said to be absurd. The "Divine Author and Founder of our religion" took no part in the composition of the New Testament; the reputed author of the Pentateuch purportedly recorded his own "death, burial and succession." To Shaftesbury, the most persuasive argument against inspiration involved the variations in the Biblical text. It left Christian doctrine without a foundation. Even judicious clergymen condemned fanatics who based their religion on the "obvious form of their vulgar Bible" and who "plead the sufficiency of a reiterate translated text, derived to them through so many channels and subjected to so many variations, of which they are wholly ignorant." Belief in God, then, should rest on reason, not the Bible.³⁴

³³Ibid., I, 183-184, 230; II, 93-95, 123.
Like other deists, Shaftesbury was very anticlerical. Ridiculing Christian preachers, he wrote, "their froth abounds." They insist "that there be no answering to whatever is argued or advanced . . . [---] the law of a sermon." Pastors were accused of seeking their own worldly fame through persecutions. Clergymen were depicted as a vested interest established upon privilege, wealth and heredity. They subdued the masses by appealing to their emotions and religious tendencies. The priests' parasitic control of society could be maintained by their privileged position. The law stated "they might retain what they could get" and receive voluntary contributions of estates which "could never afterwards be converted to other uses." The evil to which Shaftesbury objected was not the sinecures of the priesthood but the errors and superstitions which they originated and perpetuated. In every nation, he declared, "the quantity of superstition . . . will, in proportion nearly answer the number of priests, diviners, soothsayers, prophets, . . . who gain their livelihood or receive advantages by officiating in religious affairs." 35

Shaftesbury's skill in the utilization of ridicule as a weapon against organized religion left a great mark on deism. No other deist utilized it as extensively as he did. Ridicule was viewed as a test of truth, and gravity was declared to be

35 Robertson, Characteristics, I, 111; II, 61, 183-184, 226-228.
the "essence of imposture." True religion, he taught, would stand the test of humor and be strengthened, whereas a spurious religion would be exposed. He told his readers how his own use of ridicule should be interpreted; "If men are forbidden to speak their minds seriously on certain subjects, they will do it ironically. . . . 'Tis the persecuting spirit has raised the bantering one. . . . The greater the weight is, the bitterer will be the satire."36

William Wollaston (1659-1724), a retired clergyman of the Church of England, published in 1722 a positive delineation of deism which was void of attacks on Christianity or the clergy. Its appeal was to those whose faith in Christianity and the Bible had been shaken by the deists' attacks and who needed a positive religion. A seventh edition issued in 1746 indicated how influential the book was.37

Earlier Locke suggested it would be possible rationally to devise a moral system that would have a certainty like mathematics. Because the Bible provided a sufficient system of ethics, Locke decided such a work was unnecessary. Wollaston attempted to accomplish what Locke had suggested could be done. By a process of reasoning, he worked to establish a natural, ethical religion. The content of his ethical religion was very similar to Herbert's of Cherbury

36Ibid., I, 10, 24-25, 44, 50-51.

given a century earlier. A belief in God as the uncaused first cause was included, along with the immateriality and immortality of the soul. For those who did not receive their just deserts in this world, Wollaston provided a future state where all would be compensated for their goodness.\textsuperscript{38}

In his writings, Wollaston expressed that all sin was ultimately the result of fallacious logic. So firmly convinced was he that correct reasoning equaled truth and was basic to true religion, that he made it the essence of natural religion. Natural religion was defined as "the pursuit of happiness by the practice of reason and truth. . . ." As all transgression was ultimately error, so the substance of religion was the rational worship of God.\textsuperscript{39}

One of the most important writers of the deistic school was Matthew Tindal (1657-1733), a fellow at Oxford. His work, \textit{Christianity as Old as Creation}, was regarded as "the deist's Bible." It condensed the cardinal views of most deists. The extent of its influence was phenomenal; it called forth one hundred fifty replies and marked the highest point of excitement over deism in England.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{39}Wollaston, \textit{The Religion of Nature Delineated}, pp. 25, 40, 52, 126, 203, 219.

\textsuperscript{40}Leland, \textit{Principal Writers}, pp. 86-87; Robertson, \textit{A Short History of Free Thought}, p. 312.
To Tindal, both revealed and natural religion aimed to advance "the honor of God and the good of Man . . ." but the former differed from the latter because it was not founded upon the "Nature and Reason of things, but . . . on mere will and pleasure. . . ." If the Bible varied from natural religion even in the most minute detail, the variation alone was sufficient reason for condemnation. Tindal argued for this position on the following reasoning. God is perfect; therefore, any religion he gives men must be perfect and beyond improvement. No later revelation like the Bible could improve on the religion of nature given to man at creation. God is immutable and cannot be conceived as changing the religion first given. God is impartial and would not reveal Himself to one race or age at the exclusion of all other men. Having concluded that the natural religion given by God at the creation was perfect and unchangeable, Tindal reasoned that any religion revealed by God could only be a republication of this original religion of nature and must be identical in content. The deistic religion of nature was superior to the accepted supernatural evidences of Christianity. Serious questions could be raised concerning the truth of Christianity since there was always the possibility that it was falsified by its disciples and changed through Biblical translation errors.41

41Tindal, Christianity as Old as Creation, pp. 2-3, 52, 60, 115, 118, 127-131, 163-173, 363.
The title of Tindal's work may suggest that he would admit the Bible contained articles of natural religion. However, he depicted the Bible as worthless and damaging to mankind. In contrasting the law as given through reason with the law of Moses, he found nothing helpful in the latter. The genuineness of the Bible was ridiculed by pointing to the numerous works claiming to be revelation. He disagreed with Locke's contention that miracles constitute credentials of bearers of revelation. By citing parallels for many Bible miracles in pagan myths and by quoting "Miracles for fools, the reasons for wise men," he tried to discredit miracles. Ridiculing Bible narratives, he accused them of teaching low morality and vice through heroes like David. The cruel orders God gave to Joshua and Saul proved to Tindal that God as depicted in the Bible was an unholy tyrant. Fault was found with the Bible and Jesus Christ Himself for making salvation depend upon beliefs to which most of mankind are strangers. Enraged by the doctrine of original sin as taught by the Bible and the Christian church, he said, "This irrational doctrine . . . which declares an innocent baby a sinner causes my face to become red with anger and is not divine in its origin, but is a lie which has been enforced on mankind by power and religious leaders." Disagreements between science and the Bible were well designed to discredit the latter. Tindal urged Christians to rid their religion
of superstitious additions so that the true religion of Jesus—the religion of nature—might be restored.42

Tindal's desire to return to the simple teachings of Jesus was echoed by Thomas Chubb (1679-1747). Unlike most deists, who were drawn from the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie, Chubb was an artisan. His background influenced his position. His views embodied the practical stand of a worker who saw in the deistic gospel a simple and hopeful creed stripped of all speculative niceties. To him, the unadorned teachings of Jesus had been perverted by an emphasis upon established beliefs, rites and ceremonies as well as the growth of an ecclesiastical organization most interested in temporal matters. True religion consisted of three things: the practice of an eternal rule of conduct based on reason, a repentance of and reformation from sin and a belief in immortality. Chubb, like Tindal, fearful that "virtue and religion were in danger of being plucked by the roots," desired to save both by returning to the simple gospel of Jesus. This gospel was founded on reason and warmed by love.43

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42 I bid., pp. 2-9, 52, 54, 60, 163, 170, 185, 220, 222-223, 225, 229, 337-340, 349.

The disputation that miracles demonstrate the Bible's divine authorship was vigorously attacked by Thomas Woolston (1669-1733). In his writings he was coarse and ruthless. One author described him as "poor mad Woolston, most scandalous of the deists." A. S. Farrar believed his abuse of Christianity was the most open since the early days of pagan opposition. Even J. B. Bury, whose attitude toward deists was friendly, thought Woolston's writings were blunt.\textsuperscript{44} Because of the vindictiveness of his work, Woolston was fined and imprisoned for blasphemy.

To prevent the clergy from hiding behind the miracles of Jesus Christ, he proposed to show from a rational viewpoint that Christ's miracles were "full of absurdities, improbabilities, and incredibilities. . . ." Just as Collins cast doubt on a literal explanation of prophecies, so did Woolston debase miracles. In retrospect of these men's work, the clergy relied on miracles and prophecies more cautiously.\textsuperscript{45}

Without realizing it, Alexander Pope (1688-1744) in his \textit{Essay on Man} reproduced Lord Shaftesbury's deistic position. Literary success in London gained him membership in the


Scriblerus Club. A friend, Lord Bolingbroke, suggested he write a philosophic poem; Pope consented, and the outcome was his Essay on Man. The arguments were probably furnished by Bolingbroke. In this work, Pope maintained that personal virtue resulted in the felicity of all. Good deeds were not always rewarded in this world, and virtue was too noble an object to be rewarded in temporal goods. All was right in this best of all possible worlds where everything fits into its place, all "parts of one stupendous whole, whose body nature is, and God the soul."

The last leading English deist was Henry St. John, Lord of Bolingbroke. Voltaire charged Bolingbroke with holding the "Christian religion in horror." But his high rank in society, brilliant mind and literary ability made his writings influential. The positive element of deism was not prominent in his works. He professed a belief in God based on reason. Although he made no direct reference to Herbert's first three articles of natural religion, perplexity was expressed about his article on a future life. Future punishment was harshly denied.

Bolingbroke's works abounded with cutting criticism of the Bible, historical Christianity and the clergy. Reasoning

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that Christianity must stand or fall as an historical
religion, his attack was in the form of a critical philosophy
of history. He dwelt especially on Biblical history and the
history of the transmission of the Bible to modern times.
Biblical authors and the clergy responsible for its trans-
mission were labeled frauds. Thus, Bible history was
untrustworthy. The concept of the universe given by Kepler,
Copernicus, Galileo and Newton was far more worthy of the
wisdom and power of God than that given by Moses. Bible
stories of the creation, the flood, Jacob and Esau, and the
conquest of Canaan were pictured as full of errors. Tagged
utterly irrational was the concept of the Bible being
inspired by God. Men who thought themselves inspired were
insane and dishonest. Even though Bolingbroke praised Locke
more highly than any other writer and built upon his theory
of knowledge, he condemned Locke for his defense of the need
for the Bible. While he called the apostle Paul rational
and superior to other Biblical writers, he accused him of
being "a loose paraphraser, a cabalistical commentator."
According to Bolingbroke, Paul's literary style and the
substance of his writings disproved inspiration.48

He not only attacked Christianity because of the
unacceptable character and history of its Bible but because

48St. John, The Works of Lord Bolingbroke, II, 231, 490;
III, 15, 17, 23, 32-33, 35-38, 138, 142, 234, 319, 381, 384-
385, 393, 406, 427, 429-431.
of its corruption by philosophers, particularly Platonic scholars. Of Christian theology, a product of philosophical influence, he wrote: "Theology has made Christianity ridiculous to men of sense." He thoroughly objected to the trinity, the divinity of Christ, the atonement and election.49

Bolingbroke ranked high socially and had prominent friends; nevertheless, his political activities and social life distracted from his influence as a writer. Speaking about him, Samuel Johnson expressed his feelings as well as those of the more orthodox element of English society. "He was a scoundrel and a coward; a scoundrel for charging a blunderbuss against religion and morality; a coward because he had no resolution to fire it off himself."50 Bolingbroke left his works to be published after his death. Since interest in deism declined before the publication of his works, his influence in England was greatly lessened.

Although deistic literature was read during the latter half of the eighteenth century, deism ceased to be a dangerous rival of orthodox Christianity. Among the upper classes, however, it effected a cautious and tacit compromise whereby aristocratic freethinkers were allowed to let their friends know quite openly their deistic opinions on revelation. But publication of writings which attacked Christianity

49Ibid., III, 201, 207-216, 438; IV, 6-7, 9, 306, 491.

50Ibid., I, 16-17, 83; II, 53; Quoted in George Park Fisher, The History of the Christian Church (New York, 1903), pp. 606-607.
were discouraged. So rapid was the decline of interest after 1750 that before the end of the century Edmund Burke asked, referring to the deists, "Who ever reads them now?" Yet, deism made too profound an impression to disappear entirely.

The reasons for the decline of English desim vary according to the viewpoint of the one questioned. Orthodox Christians who published replies to and attacks on deism gave much credit to the apologetical works which deism called forth. But many times polemical writings advertise what is attacked. Benjamin Franklin stated it was reading answers to deists that led to his acceptance of deism. Deism failed to appeal to the masses in England. Because deistic speculation was vague and its composition was poorly defined, the possibility of a mass movement was negligible. To replace Christianity, the deists had very little concrete dogma to offer. They urged the people to follow nature, the guide of true religion. This indefinite call scarcely impressed the public mind, which desired an explicit set of rules and beliefs.

Such a message was extended by John and Charles Wesley's evangelical movement, which gathered momentum after 1740. This was not a confrontation of deism with argumentation but with an emotional religion directed at the hearts rather than


the minds of men. While their deistic rivals rendered lip service to the gospel of nature, the Wesleys worked among the new industrial classes. Deism found itself not only confronted by emotionalism in religion but surrounded by extreme rationalistic skepticism. Such doubters as David Hume felt the deists were too moderate in their treatment of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. Deism, caught between two uncompromising currents, was unable to defend itself successfully.
CHAPTER II
DEISM IN COLONIAL AMERICA (1713-1763)

The importation of English rationalistic works was a major cause of the inception and spread of deism in British America during the colonial period. Jeremiah Dummer, an agent of the Connecticut colony, sent seven hundred books to America in the early eighteenth century. Donated by men like Elihu Yale and Isaac Newton, these volumes constituted the foundation of a library at Yale. Among these works were writings of Lord Shaftesbury, a deist, and John Tillotson, a follower of revelation and rational, natural religion. At about the same time, the Englishman Thomas Hollis, a liberal Baptist minister, sent to Harvard an ample literary collection containing many religious tracts. English theological works, including Tillotson’s, were carried to the Virginia colony for utilization by the Anglican clergy. Individuals in the colonies established private libraries which included deistic works. For example, James Logan, a statesman, scholar and scientist, collected from two to three thousand books. Most of them were purchased in England, and all were willed to his native city, Philadelphia. William Adams, a leading minister in New England, possessed deistic books in his college years. A book dealer, Samuel Sewall, recorded
in his diary a book order requesting from the president of Harvard John Toland's deistic book *Amyntor*.¹

English deistic works were read by the educated colonists but were not widely circulated among the masses. The literary contributions of such English defenders of the Christian faith as Tillotson, John Locke, Samuel Clark and George Cheyne and deists such as Herbert of Cherbury, Charles Blount, William Wollaston, Lord Shaftesbury, Anthony Collins and Lord Bolingbroke were frequently referred to in colonial periodicals, books and sermons.² Colonial deism undoubtedly


progressed because of these rationalistic works. They informed readers of the new movement's principles. Writings of the latitudinarian school of English theology afforded an opportunity for American readers like Benjamin Franklin to accept natural religion and reject Christian revelation. In addition to the importation of rationalistic works, the introduction of Newtonian cosmography opened the way for the ascendance of deistic speculation in the colonies. Colonial literature of the early eighteenth century presented the universe as a vast machine set in motion by an Efficient Cause and controlled by immutable natural laws. Awed and fascinated by the idea of an infinite universe with countless globes secured by the law of gravity was Cotton Mather, a representative of the conservative Calvinists. A college president praised "the glorious art and contrivance of this admirable frame of nature. . . ." A liberal minded preacher, Jonathan Mayhew, expounded on the regularity, beauty and harmony of nature. As a young deist, Benjamin Franklin


commented on the infinitesimal nature of "this little ball on which we move..." John Adams, who as a lad showed deistic inclinations, noted that the "solar system was but one very small wheel in the great, the astonishing machine of the world..." To Samuel Johnson, president of King's College, the cosmos appeared fixed with stars, and our sun was surrounded by the "noble and splendid Chorus of Planets, Satellites and Comets..." William Smith, a liberal Anglican and president of the College of Philadelphia, thought it ridiculous to observe "the atom-lords of this atom world...strut about in pride..."4

Newton's *Principia Mathematica* and explanatory tracts occupied a prominent space in colonial libraries. One colonial scholar, Cadwallader Colden, even criticized and enlarged Newton's work. Cotton Mather and Samuel Johnson advised American students to read Newton, "our perpetual dictator..." Thomas Clap, Rector of Yale, described the celebrated Englishman as a "great Genius." Prior to becoming governor of New Jersey, William Livingston expressed in song the "Immortal Newton; whose illustrious name will shine on

records of eternal fame." Since the Newtonian system was based on the Copernican theory, this theory was generally accepted. In 1714, Mather preached the theory from his Boston pulpit; this sermon distressed Sewall, who thought it was anti-Christian.5 While the theory was popularized in colonial almanacs, the writings of its chief exponents -- Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler, René Descartes and Robert Boyle--were either placed in provincial libraries or referred to in the literature of the period. The cosmic philosophy furnished the colonial deists, as it had the English, with their central concept of God: a passive policeman over the universe. Intellectually, it was convenient to rule out miracles; such a position was adopted by colonial deists. Newton had demonstrated that the Supreme Being always acted according to general edicts. Why, questioned the deists, should men think God was obliged to reveal Himself to a

particular group through the Bible since he had already revealed Himself to all men through nature?  

In still another way the empirical psychology of John Locke enhanced the advent of colonial deism. His Essay Concerning Human Understanding enjoyed great popularity in provincial America, for it was on library shelves and was alluded to in literary works. When he made reason the final standard of appeal, Locke supplied American deists with a weapon to destroy the validity of Biblical evidence. 7  

The introduction of empiricism, Newtonian cosmography and the importation of English rationalistic works constituted a tremendous challenge to orthodox Calvinism in New England.  

The Puritan ministers' participation in the unfortunate Salem  


witchcraft trials of 1692 lessened clerical influence. It provided liberals with a handy citation to illustrate the dangers of ecclesiastical bigotry and superstition. Cotton Mather, prominent in the Salem affair, felt the power slipping from "the hands of godly men."  

To protect the theocratic heritage of the Bay colony, Mather advocated a closer union of Puritan churches. A proposal was made for ministerial associations to advise pastors, license clerical candidates and examine all charges against clergy. In addition to this Mather suggested that the lay and ministerial delegates constitute standing councils to consider all matters arising within their limits. Their decisions were to be final. Opposition to these proposals came not only from within the colony but from the mother country, where the Puritan commonwealths were very unpopular. When the suggestion was made to call a synod to determine church policies, the British government would not consent. The hopes of Mather were ruined by imperial intervention, but concessions for those dissenting from the congressional order were secured. An act of 1727 allowed Anglicans partial exemption from taxes to support a state church in the Bay colony. Ministerial rates were to be collected, and the taxes of those who lived

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6The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle; for all the British Plantations, June, July, August, 1743; Cotton Mather, The Deplorable State of New-England, by Reason of a Covetous and Treacherous Governor, and Pusillanimous Counsellors (Boston, 1720), pp. 8-29.
within five miles of an Anglican church were to be turned over to Anglican ministers. By 1728 Quakers received exemption provided they attended their church regularly, dwelt within five miles of a worship house and declared their faith in the doctrine of the trinity and divine inspiration. 9

With the church and state cooperating, a consolidation plan similar to Mather's was adopted for the Connecticut colony. Here the old order was more firmly entrenched. A church synod designed a proposal in 1708 which provided for the organization of the Congregational churches through associations and consociations. Pastors and elders in an extended territory composed the associations. Union of churches within more limited areas made up the consociations. That same year a toleration act was passed which purported to give more religious freedom. The act was weak because one of its provisions stated that it must not be interpreted to hurt the established church or exclude any individual's ministerial or town dues payments. Baptists, Quakers or Anglicans hardly benefited from the act; for as they increased in numbers, they demanded and worked for greater freedom. By 1727 Anglican churchmen were exempted from taxes used in

the construction of churches. The other two groups received exemption two years later. But this did not mean toleration for all religious groups; the act of 1708 was temporarily repealed in 1742 but enforced again eighteen years later.10

Beginning in 1734, the Great Awakening highlighted the religious life of provincial New England. It originated with the preaching of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts, and was reinforced by the famous Methodist preacher, George Whitefield. These men attempted to draw individuals from the surface aspects of traditional dogma and formal observance to a deeper spiritual experience. This movement effected two important tendencies in religious thought--revivalism and rationalism--which opposed the old Puritan system. Edward Wigglesworth, a leading Calvinist minister, defended the old ecclesiastical order. He condemned evangelicalism, saying it was subversive of Christianity because it equated emotional impressions with the voice of God. Engrossed by the emotional appeal of preaching, revivalists split from the established churches. They were bitterly assailed by rationalists, who were supported by the sophisticated society of the old towns. For the most part, the rationalistic movement was liberal; the principal tenets of the orthodox

10 The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle; for all the British Plantations, August, September, October, 1743; Maria L. Greene, The Development of Religious Liberty in Connecticut (Boston, 1905), pp. 138-143, 147, 154.
Puritan creed—original sin, predestination and the trinity—were criticized, if not rejected. To humanize faith, rationalists represented God as a benevolent Being and man as a responsible agent. A Boston rationalistic clergyman, Charles Chauncy, beseeched his clerical associates to eradicate threatening tendencies. These included itinerant preaching, "uncomfortable . . . animosities" and physical agitations. To check the trend toward revivalism, he proposed the exclusion of the "New Lights" from the pulpits of organized churches, the examination of ministerial candidates and the acceptance of basic doctrines after rational investigation. The work of Whitefield was denounced as "a Dishonour to true Religion. . . ."

Representing the old Puritan system, Cotton Mather not only condemned revivalism, but rationalism as personified in Chauncy. By 1724 he believed Harvard students were reading rationalistic books fit for "Satan's library."¹¹

Not until the middle of the eighteenth century did deism become widely known. It was then preached openly in Massachusetts. Ebenezer Gay, a leading pastor in New England, held opinions clearly distinct from Calvinism. In complete sympathy with the rationalistic spirit of his age, he opposed all creeds and desired free inquiry. As Dudleian lecturer

¹¹Charles Chauncy, Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England (Boston, 1743), pp. 36-40, 55, 78, 334, 336, 340-341, 397, 414-415, 422, 424; Edward Wigglesworth, A Letter to the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, By Way of Reply to His Answer to the College Testimony Against Him and His Conduct (Boston, 1745), pp. 3-4, 5, 9, 18.
at Harvard in 1759, he addressed the students on Natural Religion as Distinguished from Revealed. His definition for natural religion was anything which reason alone discovered. Anything which God had made known to man through immediate inspiration or prophetic teachings constituted the revealed religion. The religion of nature consisted of adoration toward God and assistance to His creatures. Because the average man's reason was not commensurate to the task of discovering natural religion, the Christian revelation was necessary. Yet, if the attestations of Christianity were inconsistent with "the possibility of things," they were to be discarded.12

Lemuel Briant, pastor of the largest church at Braintree, reacted against traditional Calvinism and repudiated the accepted doctrine of predestination. To him, "the pure and perfect Religion of Jesus" was established upon the assumption that man was a responsible agent whose personal actions effected his happiness. Advancing the happiness of men was God's central aim. Disparaging moral goodness meant promoting infidelity, encouraging vice and removing divine comfort. Although this pastor realized his position reflected neither "popular applause nor priestly Favors," he believed his stand would endure forever if it were true.13

12Gay, Natural Religion as Distinguished from Revealed, pp. 6-7, 21-22, 29-30.
The reaction against traditional Calvinism evidenced by Gay and Briant loomed forth in the writings of Jonathan Mayhew and Charles Chauncy. Influenced by milder English deists, Mayhew, according to John Adams, "was a smart man, but embraced some doctrine not generally approv'd." He sought the advancement of tolerance and rationalism. The Deity, in his thinking, ruled according to standards of benevolence and wisdom. Obedience to the Creator was not through fear but love. By believing in divine goodness, he rejected the concept of mankind's condemnation to everlasting sufferings. Responsible for his moral actions, man was answerable to God alone. Mayhew highly esteemed the teachings of Christianity, whose good ends were distinctly discernible.¹⁴

Carrying on Mayhew's work was Chauncy, a man well versed in the deistic speculation of England. He reflected the rationalistic, humanitarian and unrestricted spirit of the new liberalism. Convinced that God was the epitome of love, he stated that the eternal damnation of sinners contradicted divine plans. Because man had the capacity to do good, he could attain happiness. These doctrines sounded unusual when voiced from a Calvinistic pulpit, and for some time Chauncy hesitated to declare them openly. When he finally did, bitter attacks resulted, and he was labeled a deist by some clergymen.

But Ezra Stiles, president of Yale, discarded this description and acknowledged that this "Learned Character" possessed "some Singularities in Theology." 15

Another group not only reacted against Calvinistic doctrines but embraced deism to the exclusion of the Christian revelation. It included Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Hawley, John Adams and William Bliss. Benjamin Franklin left a full and frank statement of his own religious experiences and views in his Autobiography. Franklin's father, a strict and narrow Presbyterian, possessed a library of polemic theological works. Being a great student, young Benjamin read many of these works but never developed a taste for them. Later in life, he regretted that he had been obliged to spend so much of his youth reading polemic literature. 16

By the time he was sixteen years old, Franklin had read the works of leading deists like Collins and Shaftesbury. As a result he began to doubt many aspects of orthodox Christianity. He admitted weakening the Christian faith of some of his companions. To him, theology was a mortal enemy of mankind, and religion was a useful ally if it were not utilized to support tyranny and superstition. For posterity,
Franklin released a concise explanation of how he became a deist.

My parents had early given me religious impressions, and brought me through my childhood piously in the Dissenting way. But I was scarce fifteen, when, after doubting by turns, of several points, as I found them disputed in books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself. Some books against deism fell into my hands; they were said to be the substance of sermons' preached at Boyle's Lectures. It happened that they 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.

In this quotation the English source of Franklin's deism is evident; the fact that he became a thorough deist in his youth is clarified.\(^\text{17}\)

At seventeen Franklin moved from Boston to Philadelphia, where he met William Keith, the audacious, deistic governor of Pennsylvania. Franklin's religious views shocked the colony's Quaker element. Taking the advice of Keith, Franklin journeyed to London, met David Hume, along with other liberals and deists who influenced his thinking, and worked as a printer. This occupation gave him an excellent opportunity to review the latest books on the deistic controversy, which was reaching its peak. One day, while setting up Wollaston's *Dissertation on Natural Religion*, he noticed the statement: "The base of all religion is the

\(^{17}\text{Ibid.}, \ pp. \ 23, \ 51, \ 79-81.\)
difference between the acts of men, be they good, bad or indifferent." Franklin eagerly wrote an answer to this sentence which revealed his penetrating mind. His treatise, *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* contained one hundred axioms. To his own satisfaction he proved that sin, liberty and personal immortality did not exist. An "all-wise, all-good and all-powerful God" allowed only virtue to prevail. So the entire question of evil was foolish. Everyone acted in accordance with the edicts of the Deity. If a thief stole, God had to find the guilty party as virtuous as his victim. "I would not be understood . . . to encourage or defend theft," Franklin cautiously wrote; "'tis only for the sake of the Argument and will certainly have no ill effect. . . ." Since no disparity existed between virtue and vice, the favorite deistic argument supporting immortality—a future state existed so that the Supreme Being might make amends for injustices suffered by the good in this life—was rejected. Franklin printed one hundred copies of this work, but in later life he earnestly tried to suppress this "clever . . . performance" of his youth.¹⁸

Franklin was willing not only to be critical of some tenets of English deism but to be less critical of the Bible than English deists were. This criterion constituted a major

difference between the deists of the two countries. Best expressed in a pamphlet was his attitude toward the Bible. "Revelation had no weight with men . . . though certain actions might not be bad because . . . forbidden by it, or good because it commanded them, yet . . . those actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial. . . ." This writing contained no hostile attitude toward the Bible. In his early life, Franklin appreciated the Bible's practical worth even though he dissociated it from divine authority.\textsuperscript{19}

Franklin was not necessarily against church attendance. While residing in London, he liked meeting the church people to exchange ideas. According to a leading biographer, the services helped maintain his image as a stable individual and his reputation as a Christian. In Philadelphia his church attendance was spasmodic because he found the preachers dry and polemic, not morally helpful. These actions manifested a basic tenet of deism, namely, an emphasis on morality rather than doctrine and ceremony. Unlike English deists, he believed in the propriety of public worship, financially supported the Presbyterian church at Philadelphia and concluded that all religious sects had some good in them. Although he thought existing religion often served to divide men into fighting factions rather than to promote morality,

\textsuperscript{19}Montgomery, \textit{Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin}, pp. 79-81.
he avoided speaking against any sect. Anticlericalism, which typified the English deists, was rejected by Franklin. He never scattered charges of selfishness, dishonesty and corruption against the clergy. But he criticized ceremony and doctrinal preaching which lacked practicality. John Hemphill, a young Presbyterian, was one of the few preachers who pleased Franklin. In 1734 Hemphill came from Ireland to Pennsylvania and preached with an emphasis on morality; Franklin heard him regularly. George Whitefield, also, was deeply appreciated by Franklin.20

In London Franklin wrote a pamphlet designed to induce immigration to the colonies. The content enlightens one on his religious attitude and religious conditions in the colonies. "Religion, under its various denominations, is not only tolerated, but respected and practised. Atheism is unknown there; infidelity rare and secret." Thus on the basis of his experience in the colonies, Franklin assured the English that orthodox Christianity held the loyalty of the masses in America.21

Like most American deists, Franklin was prudence personified. As a prototype of his own Poor Richard, he did not

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21Smyth, The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, VIII, 613-614.
jeopardize his political and social influence by espousing views which the general public abhorred. Corresponding with his daughter in 1764, he wrote that his political enemies were many. He urged her to continue attending church. If she failed to do so, her indiscretions would be "magnified into crimes in order the more sensibly to wound and afflict me. . . ." For practicality, Franklin seldom expressed publicly his views on religion. His desire to maintain prestige among his peers was as important as his growing indifference to metaphysical disputation. He came to regard theological discussion as arguing for argument's sake. Doing good came to be far more important than proving a contention by theological subtleties.\textsuperscript{22}

In spite of his reticence on deism, Franklin asserted enough, chiefly in his private correspondence and writings, to warrant his being classified as a deist. Franklin's religious creed did not stress the negative attacks on miracles, prophecy and the Bible, but the positive elements of deism. His mature religious views were adequately expressed in a letter written to Ezra Stiles. In this letter Franklin, like Herbert, saw reason as the means to ascertain the basic principles of sound religion. He believed in one God who created the universe and deserved to be worshipped. Virtue, the most important aspect of religion according to

\textsuperscript{22} Montgomery, \textit{Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin}, pp. 104-107, 122-126.
Franklin, could be demonstrated by doing good to one's fellow man. The concept of the immortal soul was embraced, and these feelings grew stronger as he drew nearer the grave. Man's conduct in this life determined his condition in eternity. So that they might secure happiness, men in all ages accepted the existence of a good, wise God who created them. Felicity was achieved through the good life, which was more important to the success of religion than orthodoxy. Franklin agreed with Herbert in regard to the significance of the Bible. Although he did not desire to see Christian influence diminished, he thought his creed did not require the support of supernatural evidences. To him, Jesus of Nazareth was not God in the flesh, as Calvinists taught, but a great teacher and moralist. Unlike English deists, he believed the divinity of Jesus was not to be minimized especially if it led to good consequences. He regretted that contemporary Christian churches had been so perverted as to hold "outward appearances and Profession" in higher esteem than the simple teachings of Jesus.23

Franklin's deism was a reaction against the stern Puritan environment of his childhood. Stating its inconsistency with the goodness and wisdom of God, he repudiated

the doctrine of Calvinistic predestination. He reacted
cynically to the strictness with which New Englanders
observed the first day of the week. He cited the freedom
of worship prevalent in France and commented sarcastically
that because of his knowledge of Puritanism he expected to
find God's judgment on that country. Instead, he found "the
cities . . . well built . . . the markets filled with plenty,
the people well . . . clothed . . . which makes one suspect
that the Deity is not so angry at that offence [Sabbath
breaking] as a New England Justice." 24

In his mature life Franklin was not so thorough a deist
as he had been in his youth. The unworthy conduct toward him
from those whom he had influenced to become deists and from
other deists whom he knew, including himself, caused him to
doubt the usefulness of the deistic doctrine. His more
orthodox religious views and modified deism were demonstrated
by his leadership after he was chosen honored Nestor of the
constitutional convention of 1787. When the convention
failed to progress, he made a plea for opening the meetings
with prayer and expressed his mature views on providence and
prayer. He depicted God as the one who was interested in
human affairs and willing to answer prayer: "How has it
happened . . . that we have not hitherto once thought of
humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our
understandings?" What a sharp departure this was from

24Smyth, The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, IV, 185-186.
English deists. They envisioned God as the Creator of the world who left it to operate without His control. Although Franklin became more orthodox in his religion as he grew old, he never became an orthodox Christian. Because of his literary skills, intellectual wit and popular appeal he did more than any colonial leader to popularize deism.25

Joseph Hawley, a cousin of Jonathan Edwards and a member of his church, was a prominent colonial lawyer who ventured into ideas of skepticism. In 1744 while studying theology at Cambridge, he came into contact with "a most dangerous and Corrupt Book," *Grace Defended in a Modest Plea for an Important Truth*. The author reasoned that even though salvation was only possible through the grace of God, man needed to be active in the reception and improvement of this grace. Having imbibed "wicked principles" at Cambridge; Hawley refused to accept "any Doctrine upon the mere authority of God's Word." By his unwillingness to accept supernatural revelation without its consistency with the "Divine Light of Natural Reason," he manifested a pronounced deistic trend. Ten years after he studied in Cambridge, he began to retract his ideas. But not until an attack of religious melancholy did he discard the deistic infatuation of his youth.

His conversion to orthodox Christianity can be attributed in part to the efforts of the Reverend Thomas Hooker, a Puritan clergymen.  

John Adams was tolerant toward skeptical opinions. In the temper of deistic speculation, the future United States President believed in the existence of God and a future state. He read with great admiration Lord Bolingbroke's works and espoused his belief that Christianity was corrupted by synods, confessions and subscriptions. In his judgment, the Christian churches did not produce good citizens; they concentrated on the education of the proficient in the solution of riddles. Adams was convinced God ruled the world with universal laws, but he conceded to the possibility of Christian miracles. Remaining a critical and cautious thinker and scholar throughout his life, he disagreed with outstanding liberal philosophers and deists as well as the Calvinistic clergy of New England.  

In addition to Adams, the Reverend William Bliss, a prominent Calvinist clergymen, became a skeptic during his

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youth. Ezra Stiles ascertained that Bliss was "connected with deistical acquaintances, read deistical authors, and was deeply plunged in their system for many years." By 1765, Bliss repented for his evil and became a firm believer in the Bible and orthodox Christianity.\(^2^8\)

A man well qualified for detection of the intellectual vagrancies of Christian clergy was Ezra Stiles who traversed from faith to doubt. He exchanged views with another young man who raised skeptical questions about the truth of the Biblical revelation. These observations caused Stiles, the future president of Yale College, to call the Scriptures "a fable and delusion." Yet, these perplexities did not deter him from the ministry. Finding no peace as a clergyman he turned to the study of law. After taking the attorney's oath, he returned to his theological interest and again studied the Bible. Resolving his doubts in the next three years, he became a steadfast believer in the Christian revelation.\(^2^9\)

Another New Englander beguiled by deistic philosophy left the pulpit for the bar. Jeremy Gridley, well known for his defense of the Writs of Assistance, was assailed by his contemporaries for supporting British policies against

\(^{2^8}\)Dexter, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, I, 566.

colonial pretexts and for entertaining deistic ideas. Chauncy thought Gridley had no religion, while Stiles said he was "a disciple of Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke." From 1743 to 1746, Gridley published The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle; for all British Plantations. It presented Voltaire's less controversial works "with the gracious attitude of one deist to another." Occasionally, anonymous authors were allowed to use his magazine to spread deistic ideas. In one issue a writer completely ignored the Christian revelation and persuaded the readers to follow nature, the guide to God and happiness. Deity intended to make men happy; therefore, felicity could be achieved in this life and the after-life if people lived virtuously. In thinking similar to Alexander Pope's, the writer urged that if any individual contemplated the universe he must believe everything was excellently arranged. The prevalence of folly and vice benefited people because these evils gave force to moral laws among "grosser minds." A few months later, another author wrote "The Unreasonableness of Persecution." He indirectly attacked Christianity, maintained that pure religion promoted brotherly love and contended that the Christian religion encouraged strife and had "prov'd as brutal, bloody and inhuman as Mohametanism." Unless a tolerant
attitude was adopted toward all religions, he argued, men would be driven into infidelity.\textsuperscript{30}

Contemporary observers saw the seeds of deism being sown in New England soil. In 1755 John Adams noted that the deistic principles were making progress in Worcester. The \textit{Moral Philosopher}, written by the English deist Thomas Morgan, was circulated widely in this country town. Adams overheard one conversation where individuals lightly dismissed many miracles of Jesus as mere stories indulged in by "enthusiasts." When he preached one sermon, Jonathan Mayhew felt compelled to omit certain Biblical proofs. The compelling force was the unwillingness of some members of his audience to accept the authenticity of the Christian revelation. By 1759 Stiles reported the expansion of "vitiated morals of Deism." To stem the rising tide of infidelity, he advocated man's defense of Christianity through its rationality. The progress of deism was ascribed to the French and Indian War. Through this conflict, he alleged, Americans came into contact with English officers of deistic proclivities. The skeptical disposition of the British militia in America was also exaggerated by Stiles. The officers read military history books, not deistic works. Even though some commanders were intimate friends of leading deists, this fact alone did not

\textsuperscript{30}Lyon N. Richardson, \textit{A History of Early American Magazines,} 1741-1789 (New York, 1931), pp. 44, 48; The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle; \textit{for all the British Plantations,} December, 1744, January and June 1745.
prove the source of their skepticism. The correspondence between David Hume and James Abercrombie, commander of the Anglo-American forces, did not contain serious subjects—God and immortality—but witty observations, personal references and schemes for practical jokes.31

Defenders of orthodox Christianity in New England attempted to stop deism's growth. In addition to circulating pamphlets, they produced newspaper and magazine articles. A Yale Rector, Thomas Clap, wrote that he was "strenuous for orthodoxy" and would have supported it with the "Inquisition and Arms" if he had been "a cardinal or Pontiff." His An Essay on the Nature and Foundations of Moral Virtue defended Christian revelation. He claimed that divine evidences of Christianity showed men the attributes of the Deity, the true basis of moral duties and the salvation plan. To combat skepticism and furnish young ministerial students with correct thinking on the essential tenets of Christianity, one magazine correspondent advised a study of the New Testament. Another article, "Some Thoughts on Infidelity," appeared in the same magazine. Deistic principles, this writer earnestly declared, must be withheld from the "Rabble; who are kapt orderly by the impact of religious teachings. He requested sensible men to hold infidels, the "Idols of the Mob,"

in contempt. Still another correspondent asserted that un-
belief would lead to injustice, tyranny and fraud. With
lamentation, he spoke of the anti-Christian tendency of the
day and advocated a rejection of skepticism to make the
country prosperous and to achieve liberty. These articles
illustrate how cautiously the eighteenth century liberals
 toyed with deism. The spreading of deistic principles among
"the sober and respectable" element of society caused no
objection. But the aristocracy feared that the masses' re-
ception of deism might result in social revolution. To
the upper class, any intellectual popularizing deism labeled
himself an enemy of society.\(^3\)\(^2\)

From a literary viewpoint, the middle colonies, where
many religious sects existed, evidenced less deistic thought.
The Calvinists, the most important religious segment of these
colonies, included members of the Dutch Reformed, Presbyterian
and German Reformed churches. Because the people generally
accepted toleration, no serious efforts to establish any one
church originated. One exception was New York where, because
the majority belonged to churches other than the Anglican,
the attempt failed.

Amid existing tolerance, religious liberalism was bound
to emerge. At the College of Philadelphia (later named the

\(^{32}\)Clap, An Essay on the Nature and Foundation of Moral
Virtue, pp. 47, 47, 53, 57-59; The American Magazine and
Historical Chronicle; for all the British Plantations,
January, 1745, and September, 1746.
University of Pennsylvania) rationalism flourished. The college was founded by Franklin and administered by a liberal Anglican, William Smith. Smith's views were tantamount to the philosophy of English latitudinarians. He designed *General Idea of the College of Mirania and Philosophical Meditation, and Religious Address to the Supreme Being* for the advancement of natural and revealed religion. To him, Deity, a wise and good father of all, supplied men with "the noble Faculties of reason and understanding." The progression of truth and happiness depended upon the advancement of these capacities; so they must be cultivated and expanded. God desired men to improve their mental powers and to love Him plus His creatures. The teaching of natural religion inculcated this goal. Smith also advocated a closer examination of revealed religion by testing its tenets with rational criticism.\footnote{Smith, *Discourses on Public Occasions in America*, pp. 45, 88-89, 101, 149, 152-155; William Smith, *General Idea of the College of Mirania and Philosophical Meditation, and Religious Address to the Supreme Being* (New York, 1753), pp. 4-23.}

The head of King's College (now Columbia University), Samuel Johnson, entertained similar ideas in his youth. In 1714 while a Yale student, he heard of the deistic philosophy in vogue. Because the new metaphysics was bound to bring "a new divinity and corrupt the pure religion of the country," a warning was given to him to shun the movement. After graduation Johnson remained as a tutor at Yale, where his
most celebrated pupil was Jonathan Edwards. By 1720 he was forced to resign his teaching position because of his involvement with and investigation of deism. But he was able to continue studying at his alma mater since he filled a pulpit in West Haven. Through all of this he read the works of prominent Anglican clergy. Gradually he began to doubt the validity of his Congregational, Calvinistic ordination. Determined to take orders in the Anglican Church, he traveled to England, where he communicated with leading Anglican prelates and eventually became an Anglican minister. This church satisfied him, for he found freedom to investigate deism.34

Young Johnson was receptive to Locke’s and Newton’s philosophies. Although Wollaston’s Religion of Nature greatly benefited him, Johnson realized it was "a great stumbling block to many" who were incapable of reconciling reason with the Christian religion. Anthony Collins’ greatest work challenged him to query the evidences of the Christian faith. His conclusion included sorrow over the "deplorable progress of infidelity" from "the well meaning but too conceited Mr. Locke, down to Tindal, and thence to Bolingbroke . . ." Although liberality and heterodoxy

34Herbert W. Schneider and Carol Schneider, editors, Samuel Johnson, President of King’s College; his Career and Writings, 4 vols. (New York, 1929), I, 6, 11-12, 15, 17-18.
characterized his youth, conservatism and orthodoxy defined his position by the time he became a college president.35

During his life Johnson perceived what he believed was the inevitable, the degeneration of latitudinarianism to deism and deism to atheism. This observation did not prevent him from espousing latitudinarian views. To this leader there was no conflict between old revealed truths and the new sciences. Like Tillotson, he combined the principles of natural religion with the divine origin of the Bible. In 1727 he delivered a sermon illustrating the need of Christianity. His argument ran as follows: "the light of nature" was insufficient; reason needed to be supplemented by divine revelation, it taught the average man equitable ideas about God. Christianity was the truest supernatural disclosure. Its fortification was strengthened by an excellent system of morality, and its genuineness attested by miracles and prophecies. Johnson believed men should accept the Bible as a real support to "mere unassisted reason." Although it was still insufficient, man's rational analysis was to be utilized for discovering and knowing the truth. True happiness was contingent upon cultivation of reason, the guide to virtuous practices. Promotion of the individual and public welfare composed the good life. The determination of man's

position in the future world lay in personal conduct. His immortality views developed from the pretext that God existed.\textsuperscript{36}

William Livingston established a law practice in New York in 1741 and assisted greatly in the establishment of King's College. When the Anglican Church made a bid for the control of the new college, Livingston entered the battle and attempted to liberalize the institution. He opposed a privately supported institution, sectarian education and a limited curriculum. His suggestion called for the establishment of the college by a legislative act. The power of appointing trustees who in turn would elect a president was to be delegated to the legislature. Even though he did not achieve a complete victory, a governing board representing other denominations besides the Anglican was appointed.\textsuperscript{37}

Meanwhile, Livingston became magazine editor of \textit{The Independent Reflector}. Opposing intolerance, he proclaimed that a man could be a good Christian without denominational affiliation. Christianity was authoritative, but it needed to be freely investigated and tested by reason. To mean anything, religion must be simple, intelligible and purged of

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{36}Samuel Johnson, "The Necessity of Revealed Religion," manuscript, Columbia University Library, 1727, pp. 6-12, 15; Johnson, \textit{An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy}, pp. 5-7, 20, 25.

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{37}Theodore Sedgwick, \textit{A Memoir of the Life of William Livingston, Member of Congress in 1774, 1775, and 1776} (New York, 1833), p. 249; \textit{The Independent Reflector}, January and February, 1752.
all superstitions and priestly inventions. His religious articles stimulated hostility of the clergy, who labeled him an atheist and deist. Neither title properly defined him, for he believed in the existence of God and pledged partial loyalty to the Bible.  

Not only did the Anglicans of New York oppose him but his friends forsook him. James Parker, influential editor of The New York Gazette Revived in the Weekly Post-Boy, would not support Livingston because he feared the loss of the government's printing business. Yet, the orthodox Christians attacked Parker for an allegorical article which popularized deistic principles. According to the account a Swedish missionary strived to convert some Indians. In doing so he asserted that God revealed Himself in the Bible. If His Book were not accepted, eternal damnation followed. Allocations of future rewards and punishment, the Indians replied, were in proportion to the good and evil accomplished in one's life. If their forefathers had not recognized this concept, they believed it was infixed in their own natures. By power and without a book, the Supreme Being revealed Himself to all men. Hence, the supernatural testimony of Christianity held no advantage over theirs. Religion which taught a special revelation represented God as a tyrant who

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condemned His innocent creatures to eternal punishment. Such a religion was blasphemous. Supposing the origin of the Bible was divine, the Indians were still thankful God did not force it on them. Finally they prayed for salvation from certain Biblical beliefs.\footnote{39}

The article's implied rejection of the Bible brought an immediate answer from a defender of the faith. In writing to the newspaper, a correspondent indicated that the narrative was misleading because the missionary was not presented "as a faithful minister of Christ." The defender called upon "our able Divines, who were better able . . . to take the Author of the Paper to Task. . . ." In a footnote, the editor expressed to his readers the desire to grant a fair hearing to the adversaries of Christianity. But this answer left the Christian element of New York dissatisfied. Their displeasure necessitated Parker's request for Benjamin Franklin to compose a defense. Parker's public apology for his "impious work" and his assertion of belief in the Trinity to appease the orthodox demonstrated how unpopular deism was as late as 1752.\footnote{40}

On behalf of Parker, Franklin approached Cadwallader Colden, a prolific writer and student who had few peers in the

\footnote{39}{The New York Gazette Revived in the Weekly Post-Boy, January and February, 1752.}

\footnote{40}{Ibid., April 27, May 4 and August 3, 1752; Smyth, The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, III, 87-88.}
colonies' intellectual world. Colden was not only influential in politics but was a skeptic. In one of his controversial tracts, he attempted to defend Parker on the premise that his views on religion were in harmony with science. He continued the composition by proving his materialistic orientation and incorporating basic deistic assumptions. Although this treatise elicited discussion in Europe, it was not read widely in America and did little to benefit Parker. It was a combination of originality and an enlargement of Newton's work. To Colden three kinds of matter existed: the resisting force opposing or suppressing motion, the self moving power constantly ready to change its position and the elastic force reflecting any action from an agent. The three had no power to attract each other. Intrinsic power, the result of joint actions of the resisting, moving and expanding powers, performed the apparent gravitation. Philosophically, Colden was a deist when he implied that motion was inherent in matter and believed matter was empowered with inherent motion by God in the unknown past. This concept made miracles needless and irrational. In regard to right and wrong, Colden reasoned that man had ability to follow his inclinations, that moral guidance was not found in the Bible and that morality resulted when one lived to achieve happiness.41

According to contemporary observers, deism enjoyed growth in the middle colonies in the mid-eighteenth century. A Philadelphia newspaper article expressed concern over the growth of deistic skepticism which poisoned young minds. George Whitefield believed deism poisoned adults as well and said Philadelphia was full of deists. During one visit there he delivered a sermon which stirred the emotions of some "most marvellous Offenders against the Great God." One was a notorious deist, Clifford Brockden, who throughout his life zealously propagated deism among his Christian friends. Through the influence of another deist, Brockden attended Whitefield's meeting and was converted. In his diary Whitefield penned an experience of preaching to a gathering of "Reasoning unbelievers" who were unfavorably impressed with his offense against human reason. Another clergyman, Jonathan Dickinson, commented on the indulgence in skeptical conversations by frequenters of inns and coffee houses. In correspondence dated 1764, Franklin sarcastically remarked: "If you had Christian Faith, quantum suff., [a proof of immortality] might not be necessary, but as matters are, it may be of some Use."42

To check the progress of deism, the apologists vindicated the truth of Christianity and the Bible. Dickinson published

42George Whitefield, A Continuation of the Rev. Mr. Whitefield's Journal (London, 1744), pp. 56-57; Jonathan Dickinson, Familiar Letters to a Gentleman, upon a Variety of Seasonable and Important Subjects in Religion (Boston, 1745), p. 2; Smyth, The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, IV, 250.
The Reasonableness of Christianity. It proposed to show Jesus as the divine Messiah and son of God and to prove His religion only could be attested by miracles. "The Patrons of Infidelity" could produce the "fabulous Histories" of Mohammed and the "infamous legends" of the Popes, but these stories were "the bare reports of . . . unknown Authors . . ." The deists were challenged to devise a system to explain man's lost innocency and to keep man's submissiveness. Dickinson stated the deists even admitted the religion of Jesus was worthy of God and man. To prove the revelation from God, this "great Divine, who was not much of a Scholar," according to Ezra Stiles, explained the fulfillment of prophecies in Christ, the performance of miracles by Christ and the practical morality given through Christ.43

Magazine editors and contributing authors aided in the defense of Christianity. One Philadelphia correspondent supported the excellence of the gospel, the superiority of Christianity and the existence of a miracle-working God. Another issue of a periodical carried a communication from a minister who dogmatically stressed that all followers of Christianity had the assurance of eternal salvation. The weakest Christian's death, a writer noted, was superior to the death of a Socrates.44


44The American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle for the British Colonies, March and September, 1758.
In the Southern colonies the deistic movement was less prominent. A general indifference if not hostility to organized religion prevailed in North Carolina, but this did not provide fertile soil for deism's growth. In 1758 Colonel William Byrd, II of Virginia, educated in England and member of the Royal Society of London, stated that North Carolina had not one church nor place of worship. According to him, the people were opposed to clergy, ceremonies and sermons. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, found the Southern people "cold and heartless" to religious concerns. In only one Southern state, Georgia, did he find evidences of deism. To him it appeared to be spreading rapidly; so he presented a series of sermons designed as "a timely antidote against the Poison of Infidelity, which was now with great Industry among us." He feared deism was more dangerous to the existence of the new colony than Roman Catholicism. This was probably an exaggerated judgment of the deistic influence in Georgia.45

In the other colonies, the established state churches were fairly effective. The absence of strong anticlericalism and the presence of indifference to theological speculations gave little opportunity for deism to attract adherents. Bishop William Meade, a contemporary clergyman in the Anglican church, said the lay people only read orthodox sermons dealing

with moral virtues, which did not stir the hearers' hearts. James Blair, president of William and Mary College, stated that the Anglican clergy in Virginia had "little occasion in sermons to enter the lists with . . . Deists . . . ." The colony was not "infested with the enemies of the Christian faith . . . ." The friends of Sir John Randolph, a prominent Virginia leader, reproached him for his reputed deistic opinions, but his public will showed how far he was from being a deist. He professed his faith in Christianity, denounced deism and believed Christ was born miraculously and entered the world to persuade men to love their neighbors. He condemned the clergy for striving to make the religion of Jesus mysterious; this was the only tenet of deism he embraced. But the Calvinistic emphasis on man's judgment for mistakes in speculation was rejected by him. He believed individuals would be judged in the future by the present life. Even the newspapers reflected the unpopularity of deistic speculations. One anonymous writer argued that God's action in commanding the sacrifice of Isaac was inconsistent with His character. This narrative exemplified faith, obedience and a prediction of Christ's future life. An answer was advanced against deistic contentions that Abraham was acting contrary to natural law in offering his son. The patriarch, it was
reasoned, motivated by reasonable and moral considerations acted accordingly. His actions were justifiable.46

It is evident that prior to 1763 the American deistic movement made no real effort to examine the Bible openly and critically. During the colonial period deists were satisfied with the harmless approach of Christianity. They made no attempt to popularize their views; rather than air their observations they confined them to letters and diaries. Fearful of social ostracism, many of the early disciples of deism, such as Joseph Hawley, William Bliss and John Adams, disavowed their "youthful fancies." The introduction of English rationalistic works, the cosmic philosophy of Newton, the empirical psychology of John Locke, the appearance of a liberal theological movement and some anticlerical feelings prepared the way for a more militant advent of deistic speculation in America. Its progress, however, was very slow during the provincial period. Up to 1726 deism was still an aristocratic cult confined to a few intellectuals residing in relatively large towns. During the Revolutionary era, however deism became somewhat bolder in its attempt to win converts.

46Meade, Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia, 355-363; History of the College of William and Mary from its Foundation, 1660 to 1874 (author not given)(Richmond, 1874), p. 45; The General Magazine, and Historical Chronicle, For all the British Plantations in America, May, 1741; The Maryland Gazette, November 22-29, 1734.
CHAPTER III

DEISM IN THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA (1763-1789)

While the American colonies were gaining their independence from the mother country, the deists were proclaiming their liberty from a miracle-working Deity, expanding significantly in number and demonstrating an increasing aggressiveness. They emphasized the fundamental tenet of English deism, namely, God's providence in the universe which functioned according to universal laws. This tenet differed greatly from the Calvinists' view of God's providence. Calvinists believed God was the ultimate cause of all history, He was personally controlling the universe and He worked miracles which violated the natural laws of the universe. In the minds of the deists, God's providence did not necessitate a personal involvement in the affairs of men or in the operation of the physical universe. They believed God originally created the universe and endowed it with natural laws which in their operation constituted God's providence in nature. God endowed man with reasoning power, and as man exercised that power he lived in accord with God's providence.1

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Logically derived from this basic premise was the deduction that if God ruled the universe according to general edicts, He would not attempt to reveal Himself by supernatural means (miracles) to any particular people. A letter published in a Philadelphia periodical defended this concept. Since worldly evils might be for the best, the writer contended, man did not need God's particular interventions. "Why then should God interpose to alter the determinations of human will, more than the operations of nature?" The author wondered, "Cannot man be happy unless his liberty be over-ruled?" Any evidence of personal intervention by God was only assertions. If such events occurred, no criteria were available to judge their reliability. The writer cautiously concluded that his statements did not preclude the feasibility of God revealing Himself by temporarily withholding His edicts if He so desired. The rejection of the Bible and miracles projected in this article provoked an immediate answer. A defense of the Calvinistic view of providence appeared in the next issue of the periodical. Since the editor, Lewis Nicola, made it a policy to publish nothing "derogatory to the principles of the Christian religion," other controversial articles did not appear in this periodical.2

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2 The American Magazine, or General Repository, June, August and September, 1769.
Moved by anticlerical feelings, Nathaniel Ames, a prominent publisher of almanacs, embraced deistic concepts. To him, true religion was the ultimate of correct reasoning, and the vital spark of all faith was morality. "To defend the Christian religion was one thing and to knock a man on the head" for his disbelief constituted quite another in his thinking. He though hypocrisy abounded under the cloak of orthodoxy.4

Another well-known printer and influential colonial leader, Theophilus Cossart, was regarded as a deist by his contemporaries. Ezra Stiles stated that Cossart thought "the Morals of the Mohametans were superior to those of the Christians..." Deists frequently employed this argument to indicate their dislike for Christianity. Having lived in Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, Newport and Boston, this printer had excellent opportunities to propagate his heterdox views.4

As a result of deism's aggressive nature apparent in the work of men like Ames and Cossart, religious liberalism, a mixture of deism and Christianity, grew rapidly in the Northern colonies from 1763 to 1789. From this liberalism emerged two new theological systems, Unitarianism

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and Universalism. These systems challenged orthodox Christianity and popularized basic tenets of deism. A consideration of these new theologies is important in a study of deism because they not only originated in deism but contributed to its spread.

The major doctrines of Unitarianism were either similar or identical to those of deism. The deity of Christ was denied, resulting in the rejection of Christianity's trinitarian concept of God. Believing God revealed Himself in nature rather than in the Bible, the unitarians rejected the authority of the Scriptures. Unlike deists, however, the unitarians were willing to participate in organized religion. In New England the appeal exerted by the unitarian tendency caused a discussion of the divinity of Christ to be considered obsolete in some circles.5

The principal center of the anti-trinitarian movement was in Massachusetts, as evidenced by the religious views of some of its leading citizens. Simeon Howard, successor to Jonathan Mayhew as minister of the largest Congregational church in Boston, rejected the doctrines of the trinity, predestination and the total depravity of man. James Freeman, an Anglican clergyman, revised the Prayer Book by removing from it all references to trinitarian beliefs. Influenced by English deism, Freeman came to believe that

Jesus was not God in the flesh. Another leading citizen, Joseph Ward, president of Harvard College, became a unitarian after extensive communication with English deists. Salem merchants involved in commercial contacts with the Orient welcomed the liberal, unitarian doctrines of the Reverend William Bentley, pastor of the largest church in Salem. Twenty of Salem's twenty-four eminent families were unitarians.6

Although Bentley preferred to be called a unitarian, he aided the deistic cause by owning and circulating deistic works. One friend to whom he lent Matthew Tindal's Christianity as Old as the Creation promised to read it privately. Bentley embraced major tenets of deism, for he believed that those who genuinely felt Christianity was wrong brought honor to God by renouncing it. In one sermon he argued for the excellence of natural religion and rejected the Calvinistic doctrine of election. In his thinking all men of all nations were and still are able to attain salvation. God, he maintained, accepts more readily "the honest devotion of the heathen" than "the hypocrisy of a Christian." The religion of nature, the most excellent of all religions, involved performance of the will of God

6Ibid., pp. 187-193, 426-429; The American Magazine, or General Repository, June and October, 1769.
revealed through man's reason. Christianity to him was not an enemy but a supplement to natural religion.7

Universalism, like Unitarianism, enjoyed substantial growth during the revolutionary period. But this new religion did not completely reject the doctrine of the trinity or the authority of the Bible. Universalism embraced all the Christian doctrines except the Calvinistic doctrine that only the elect would be saved; these people believed that all men of all religions would eventually be saved because Christ died for all men. The Englishman John Murray, who came to America in 1770, was partly responsible for the rise of Universalism. Because its members expressed universalistic sentiments, he was called to pastor one of the leading churches in Gloucester. He thought man's participation in evil was paid for by his belief in Christ; hence future punishments were not necessary. According to him, men who never heard of Christ were assured a position in heaven on the basis of Christ's death on the cross.8

Another universalist of this period was the eminent and intellectual Elhanan Winchester. Division in his Baptist church at Philadelphia resulted in his organization

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7 Simeon Howard, A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Mrs. Elizabeth Howard (Boston, 1777), pp. 8-16; James Freeman, Extracts from a Liturgy, Collected Principally from the Book of Common Prayer (Boston, 1793), pp. 6-28; William Bentley, A Sermon Preached at the Stone Chapel in Boston, September 12, 1790 (Boston, 1790), pp. 8-11, 15, 17.

8 John Murray, Universalism Vindicated (Charlestown, 1798), pp. 26-34, 39-42.
of the dissenting members into the Society of Universal Baptists. In 1789 the universalists of Philadelphia wrote to similar societies of other cities and asked them to meet in a convention. The next year they met in Philadelphia and formulated articles of faith including the belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible, the existence of one God, the excellence of natural religion, the benevolence of God who created everything and the salvation of all through the death of Christ.⁹

Religious liberalism, as typified by Unitarianism and Universalism, was clearly an amalgamation of deism and Christianity. Just as liberalism was largely indebted to deism for its origin; so was deism indebted to liberalism for its increased popularity. In spite of the expanding liberalism, deism on the eve of the Revolution still remained a cult of intellectuals and leading citizens residing in the larger towns. People in rural areas were hardly aware of the philosophy. John Leland, a Baptist minister living in one village forty miles from Boston, reported that the people there had never heard of Universalism or deism. Citizens of his community all believed in revelation. Efforts to bring deistic philosophy to these areas were viewed with suspicion. When Joseph Clarke, a Northampton

minister, requested that a Boston bookseller send him David Hume's *Essays* and John Leland's *A View of Principal Deistical Writers*, precautions were taken to insure secrecy in delivering the books. Such measures, explained Clarke, were necessary because of the "bigoted attachment of the people in this part of the country to the particular principles in Religion that they had been educated in." To have had his friends discover deistic books in his library would have caused them to disgrace his name publicly.10

The Pennsylvania Convention of 1776, called to devise a state constitution, reflected the unpopularity of deism. Franklin presided. But he was unable to keep the delegates from passing a resolution which stated that every representative must declare his belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible. When corresponding with an English unitarian, he related his opposition to this provision and wrote that parts of the Old Testament could not possibly have been inspired. Though no record of the voting was kept, no doubt the religious conservatives of the Scotch-Irish element favored the provision. William Findley, a candidate to the convention, typified this attitude by his bitter opposition to deism. The delegates passed another resolution which showed their piety. It provided for the initiation of

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divine services at the convention to praise "Almighty God . . . for the peculiar interposition of his special providence. . . ."11

That same year the American colonies dissolved their political connections with England and became free states. The majority of the signers of the Declaration of Independence agreed on the desirability of "sour freedom," but their views on other religious ideas varied greatly. Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia were deists. Hopkins, a prominent Revolutionary leader who served as governor of Rhode Island, was described as a deist. Convinced that the description was correct, Ezra Stiles commented on Hopkins after his death: "He was a glorious Patriot!—but Jesus will say unto him I know you not."12

Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, third president of the United States and revered founder of what became the Democratic party, believed deism and Christianity were compatible. His position typified the American climate of deistic opinion which desired the reformation rather than the destruction of Christianity. He is,


12The Pennsylvania Magazine; or American Monthly Museum, June, August and September, 1776; Dexter, The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, III, 172.
however, best known for his political writings and activities rather than his religious philosophy. Because he sought to avoid religious controversy, his deistic views were expressed mostly in private memoirs and correspondence. The only deistic principle for which he publicly contended was religious toleration, but the deists did not hold a monopoly on this principle.\footnote{13}

Through reading the works of English and French deists, Jefferson became a thorough deist. Because he belonged to a family of wealth and culture, he had the opportunity of satisfying his thirst for knowledge through books and cultural associations. Early in life he became acquainted with Francis Fauquier, a liberal Frenchman who was lieutenant governor of the province of Virginia and who introduced into the colony the writings of Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire. As a result of reading these writings, Jefferson became steeped in the philosophy of Rousseau. Although a dislike for things English characterized Jefferson, he read, appreciated and embraced many ideas from Bolingbroke, Shaftesbury, Bacon, Newton and Locke. One of his most vigorous arguments for toleration was nearly identical in though and language with Locke's arguments; he may have gained these thoughts from Locke. Also he read with approval the work of English deists

Conyers Middleton and Joseph Priestley and recommended their religious writings to Madison.  

The positive aspects of Jefferson's position on religious matters were similar to those of other deists. He endeavored to bring Christians back to the simple gospel first expounded by Jesus. To him, Jesus' gospel was more like deism than Calvinism. He believed the good news which Christ preached originally consisted of a belief in God (conceived in the unitarian and not the trinitarian way), the practice of virtue and the existence of a future state. Even though he realized Jesus of Nazareth opposed materialism, Jefferson embraced the concept. Later, Priestley led him to believe Jesus was also a materialist. Believing that reason was superior to the Bible as a guide for life, he was a thorough rationalist. Although he found many profitable things in the writings of all great men of the ages including the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament, he was convinced that no writings were absolute truth or a revelation from God. Jesus' teachings were not above criticism. Disagreeing with Jesus' teaching that a man by simple repentance and faith could be forgiven for his sins in the sight of God, Jefferson taught that to be saved man must perform good works toward his fellow man.

This open attack demonstrated how Jefferson was an even more thorough deist than Franklin. The latter strongly disagreed with Jefferson's doctrine of good works when he wrote:

"He that for giving a draught of water to a thirsty person, should expect to be paid with a good plantation, would be modest in his demands, compared with those who think they deserve heaven for the little good they do on earth."\(^{15}\)

Employing his belief that deism and Christianity were compatible, Jefferson placed reason first in the task of purging the Christian religion of its existing corruptions. The first source of corruption was found in the Bible, with its authors and characters. Far from believing in the supernaturalness or inspiration of the Bible, he spoke degradedly about its most prominent writers. He charged Moses with corrupting the true religion of nature with idle ceremonies not serviceable to virtue. Jesus was depicted as a great reformer and the God of the Old Testament as "a Being of terrible character, cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust."

To Jefferson, the authors of the New Testament were not inspired but ignorant men who corrupted Jesus' teachings. The biographers of Jesus, he taught, injected "supernatural foolishness" into the story of his life. His disciples caused

unknown multitudes to reject Him, the "most eloquent and sublime character that has ever been exhibited to man. . . ."

About the apostle Paul, Jefferson wrote: "Of this band of dupes and imposters, Paul was the great Coryphæus, the first corrupter of the doctrine of Jesus." In other words, the Bible gave an inaccurate picture of Jesus and his teachings. Jefferson's position on Paul stemmed from English deists like Locke, while his position on the New Testament stemmed in part from Bolingbroke.16

Like English deists, Jefferson held an inconsistent view of Jesus of Nazareth. On one hand he would call Him "the most eloquent and sublime character that has ever been exhibited to man" and the founder of deism. At another time he would make derogatory and contradictory remarks about Him, such as accusing Him of false teachings. This apparent contradiction might be understood by remembering that in Jefferson's thinking Jesus was only a man; therefore, because all men make mistakes, Jesus' false teachings would not be hard to condone. Probably the most irrational aspect of Jefferson's view of Jesus was his claim that He was a deist or a teacher of natural religion. Yet, Jefferson never offered any documentation to support his contention.17


Another source of corruption in Christianity, in Jefferson's thinking, was the influence of the clergy. Convinced that the real enemies of Jesus were the clergy, he proposed to strip them of their power. Like English deists, he was bitterly anticlerical, accusing the clergy or priesthood of selfishness, greed, stupidity, bigotry, dishonesty and the perversion of the originally pure deistic religion of Jesus. Unlike Franklin, he offered no praise for any of them. He called the theologians of orthodoxy "crazy theologists" and accused them of causing bloodshed and divisions of mankind into sects. The precepts of Jesus were debased with their "casuistries" and especially with their mysticism and faulty Plétonic reasoning. So anti-clerical was Jefferson that he favored a ministerless form of religion like that of the Quakers.18

Other endorsers of the Declaration of Independence, like John Adams of Massachusetts and George Wythe, law professor at William and Mary College, held many deistic ideas. According to Jefferson, Wythe remained silent on religion because he trusted no one with such serious matters. Because so many of his contemporaries labeled him an infidel, a friend stated after Wythe's death that as a believer in the Christian religion, Wythe "often prayed to Jesus Christ

his Saviour, for relief." Wythe, however, did not accept the validity of Christianity until he was near death.\textsuperscript{19}

Additional signers of the Declaration of Independence showing deistic tendencies were Robert T. Paine, Josiah Bartlett, Benjamin Rush and Matthew Thornton. Paine, the son of a Massachusetts minister, was interested in theology and even did some preaching in his teens. To him Christianity, a system of moral truths given to man by God, was not beneficial if it did not make men virtuous. He rejected orthodox Calvinism and refused to accept the Bible as a book from God. While an adolescent, Bartlett, who later became a governor of New Hampshire and a physician, utilized the library of a liberal clergyman in Salisbury. Through his reading, he eventually developed misgivings about the traditional doctrines of Calvinism and came to believe man was a free moral agent and responsible for his actions. Bartlett was positive that God was revealed in nature more clearly than in the Bible. A more widely known physician was Rush of Pennsylvania, a friend of Franklin and Jefferson. Jefferson discussed his advanced religious views with Rush because he knew the physician understood and would sympathize with his ideas. \textit{The Age of Reason}, on the other hand, was so repugnant to Rush's principles that he broke his friendship

with Paine. Even though Rush was unwilling to accept the deistic title, he held some of its teachings, namely, the rule of God in the universe by natural laws. Matthew Thornton, another New Hampshire physician, refused to affiliate with any religious denomination and encouraged anticlericalism. Although he rejected the basic doctrines of Christianity, he preferred to be known as a Christian.20

Along with being a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Roger Sherman of Connecticut was a member of the committee which devised this document. Through his own initiative and without any formal schooling, he became knowledgeable in science, law and theology. He displayed his wisdom when he developed into a skilled debater on the theory of "disinterested submission." That man would not give up his interest in salvation for the good of man or the glory of God was Sherman's contention. Accepting the Bible as God's revealed word, he believed in the sinfulness of all men and a judgment day when evil men would be doomed to everlasting punishment and the good would gain life eternal. Intensely disliking irreligious man, he disapproved of Gouverneur Morris becoming minister to France because Morris frequently spoke "irreverently of the Christian religion..."21

20 Josiah Bartlett, An Address (Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1797), pp. 4-8; Benjamin Rush, Sermons to Gentlemen Upon Temperance and Exercise (Philadelphia, 1772), pp. 11-13; (Philadelphia, 1772), pp. 11-13; Sanderson, Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence, II, 211-214; III, 136-137; IV, 283; V, 67.

Another group of signers were orthodox in their religious beliefs but tolerant toward those who disagreed with them. Sherman's colleague, Oliver Scott, future governor of Connecticut, and William Williams of the same state were in this group. From New Jersey came Richard Stockton, who reflected his strict Calvinism by calling to his children's remembrance the fact that the fear of God was the beginning of wisdom and by adhering to the doctrine of human depravity. Carter Braxton, an educated, influential man, supported religious liberty in Virginia even though he was an active member of the Anglican church. Like him, Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey was an Anglican interested in ecclesiastical affairs.

The signers who were very orthodox Christians included Samuel Huntington, Philip Livingston, John Witherspoon, Abraham Clark and James Smith. Huntington, later a governor of Connecticut and a member of the Congregational church, was called a friend of religion and possessed unshakable faith in Christian principles. Livingston of New York was a zealous Christian who spoke publicly of his love for Jesus Christ. Along with Clark of New Jersey, Witherspoon, president of Princeton, was a strict Presbyterian whose orthodoxy was unquestioned.

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Smith of Pennsylvania frequently joked but never used his wit on religious matters.\(^{23}\)

Largely responsible for the momentum of deism after 1783 was an intensified anticlerical feeling. Since state churches and religious discriminations existed, it appeared in the eyes of deists and liberals that liberty meant freedom not only from English but from ecclesiastical interferences. To them, the clerical pretensions to authority needed to be undermined; so they adopted two methods to attain their purpose. They attempted to demonstrate that the real deistic teachings of Christ had been replaced by rituals, creeds and churches which resulted in bloody struggles among Christians. To eliminate the strife, they advocated the destruction of the power of the priesthood and a restoration of the simple teachings of Jesus which were synonymous with deistic, natural religion. Motivated by a more intense anticlerical feeling, a far more militant second approach gained fewer supporters. These supporters directed destructive criticism toward clerical authority, which rested on Christian revelation. Once the Bible was exposed as a humanly written book, this group was thoroughly convinced the power of the clergy would be disrupted forever and the new era of rational, deistic religion would begin.\(^{24}\)

\(^{23}\)Ibid., IV, 104-105, 126-127; VII, 182, 235.

\(^{24}\)This summarization was formulated on the basis of all the documents investigated in this chapter.
In 1783 an appeal for a bolder deism was subtly introduced through "A Disquisition on Rational Christianity," an anonymous article in a leading Boston periodical. First written in England, this article was an attack on the Christian religion and was one of the first attempts by American deists publicly to challenge Christianity. The author viewed the Christian drama of salvation as "adverse to all the principles of human reason, that if it were brought before her tribunal, it must be inevitably condemned." Because its implications extended above the rational, revelation could not be based on reason. Since deism was not as disgraceful to a virtuous man as Christianity, the writer concluded, "the religious and moral deist" must declare his faith publicly. Representing the resentment of many Christians, Aaron Dexter, professor of chemistry at Harvard, answered the article in a typical Calvinistic manner under the pseudonym of "a Rational Christian." 25

Responding to this challenge boldly to identify publicly with deism, a deist abruptly proclaimed his faith. Ethan Allen, a revolutionary leader at Ticonderoga, published a distinctly anti-Christian work, Reason, the Only Oracle of Man, to show how the clergy utterly ruined the "religion of Reason, Nature and Truth." Early in life Allen had become

acquainted with the English physician Thomas Young, who in turn introduced him to Blount and other English deists. At first Allen and Young decided to combine their efforts in the authorship of a deistic work. But later they agreed that the last one living would publish both of their deistic thoughts. This was Allen, who composed a lengthy discussion repudiating the tenets of the Christian creed by his rejection of the deity of Christ, condemnation of the trinitarian doctrine and discard of the original fall of man. To Allen, who rejected them, prophecies were vague, questionable and contradictory while miracles implied that God created an imperfect machine. After adverting to the fallibility of the Scriptures, he rejected their divine origin.26

The concept of the sufficiency of natural religion led Allen to replace Christianity with reason, the basis of true religion. Through reason, he theorized, man practiced morality and thus exalted God. Virtuous living produced happiness and was rewarded in this life and the after-life. Since this religion was rational, it was "universally promulgated to mankind..." Like other deists, Allen

26John Pell, Ethan Allen (New York, 1929), pp. 16, 226; Gustav A. Koch, Republican Religion; The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason (New York, 1933), pp. 31-32; Ethan Allen, Reason, the Only Oracle of Man or a Compendious System of Natural Religion (Bennington, Vermont, 1784), pp. 72, 81-95, 104-119.
admitted the existence of one God and consented to the duty of His worship.  

One observer described Allen's book as "a work valuable for its own intrinsic merits." Although it was neither original nor an intellectual stimulant, the book attracted attention because it was among the first definitely anti-Christian works produced in America. The poet Timothy Dwight of Yale pictured Allen as follows:

In vain thro realms of nonsense . . . ran
The great clodhopping oracle of man.
Yet faithful were his tools: What could be more?
In Satan's cause he bustled, bruised and swore.

A defender of the faith depicted Allen as "an ignorant and profane deist . . . who died with a mind replete with horror and despair. . . ." Ezra Stiles recorded in his diary that there "died in Vermont the profane and impious Deist Gen. Ethan Allen, Author of the 'Oracle of Reason,' a book replete with scurrilous Reflexions on Revelation. . . ." Piously he commented, "'And in Hell he lift up his Eyes being in Torments.'"


29 Dexter, The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, III, 345.
Although a fire in the printer's attic destroyed many copies of Allen's work, the few remaining copies were widely circulated and helped publicize deism. An article in a popular journal evidenced the circulation of Allen's book. The article's author compared Rhode Island to the Barbary States. The two organized communities, he thought, had similar principles "except in religion, and in this they may become nearly so by ... adopting the 'Oracle of Reason' for an Alcoran. ..." Secretly William Bentley loaned his copy of Allen's work to friends. After reading the book, one man became an infidel; his relatives discovered the book in his home after his death. Since Bentley's initials were in this copy, he was charged with encouraging skepticism.30

Called "an enemy of religion" was another Revolutionary leader, General Charles Lee. But in correspondence with Benjamin Rush, he denied the label and asserted in contemporary deistic style that "no Society could exist without religion." If it were "unincumbered of its sophistications," Christianity would be "the most excellent" faith. Lee related to Rush his desire to embrace orthodox Christianity. For this reason, he read the divine laws of Moses. But the reading resulted in his detestation of "the God of the Jews." Then he wanted Rush to "recommend him to some other

Apothecary. . . " For posterity Lee expressed his deistic dispositions in his will.

The Creator . . . of all creatures; who must from his visible attributes, be indifferent to their modes of worship or creeds, whether Christian, Mahometans or Jews; whether instilled by education, or taken up by reflection; whether more or less absurd; as a weak mortal can no more be answerable for his persuasions, notions, or even skepticism in religion, than for the colour of his skin.

Lee refused a grave in a churchyard, for he did not want to keep "bad company" after death.\footnote{The Lee Papers (editor not given), 4 vols. (New York, 1872-1875), III, 408; IV, 31-32; Edward Langworthy, editor, Memoirs of the Life of the Late Charles Lee (New York, 1792), pp. 6-11.}

A less outspoken deist was Willie Jones, a merchant and planter in North Carolina and a member of the Continental Congress who hated clergymen so vigorously that he directed his relatives to allow no minister to perform a ceremony at his death. To him, life after death depended not on Christianity or any other religion created by man but on the deistic religion sufficient not only for life but death.\footnote{The Boston Magazine, July and September, 1784; Green, The Writings of John Leland, I, 56-62, 71, 108; II, 111-113.}

Neither Edmund nor John Randolph, prominent Virginia statesmen, remained loyal to the deism of their youth. Edmund was influenced by his college professor to read deistic writings. But this deistic tendency at William and Mary College was opposed by the orthodox, who favored Christian leadership. Edmund's father was twice refused a
teaching position there because he was regarded as a deist. Edmund was such a confirmed deist by 1776 that without his wife's piety he probably would have never denounced his deistic views. According to his testimony, her devotion to the Bible eventually converted him to Christianity, and in later years he found comfort in Christian sermons. John Randolph, influenced by Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke, championed deism in his youth. He vocally condemned Christianity but never wrote about his deistic thought as Ethan Allen did. By 1817 he was reconciled to Christianity and according to his testimony made peace with God.33

During the careers of these men, Boston and New York periodicals reproduced the writings of leading European deists. A deistic prayer addressed to the "God of all beings, of all worlds and all ages" was republished. An anonymous deistic author was requested to explain discrepancies in the New Testament. The accounts involved the genealogy of Jesus, His anointment by a woman, His being revealed on the cross by the two thieves, and His crucifixion. Anyone who harmonized the accounts of the gospels, the writer ironically stated, deserved the praise of his Christian friends. Another anonymous

writer answered the article by attempting to resolve his opponent's doubts and advising deists to review books on the evidences of Christianity.\textsuperscript{34}

Increased activity among the deists caused the spread of deism among the masses. Deism became not only a common topic of conversation but a religion espoused by some of the common people. Francis Asbury, a Methodist-Episcopal minister, met a group of Pennsylvania men from the lower social class whom he viewed as "stupidly ignorant, sceptical and deistical. . . ." One New York correspondent informed his readers that he and a minister discussed the strengths and weaknesses of revealed religion. Another writer lamented the manner in which people were publicly attacking Christianity. On one occasion that this correspondent witnessed, young men presented arguments against Christianity to an elderly man who was shocked by their deistical views.\textsuperscript{35}

Aware of the social and political explosiveness intrinsic in the spread of deism among the masses, the authorities intervened at times to halt the progress of deism. John Dickinson, president of Delaware, issued a proclamation against deism. When it was reprinted in \textit{The Pennsylvania Gazette and Weekly Advertiser}, the editor lauded

\textsuperscript{34}The \textit{Boston Magazine}, June, 1784; \textit{The American Magazine}, May and June, 1788.

him for advocating revealed religion. A pronouncement from a distinguished personage, the editor believed, would help greatly to stop wickedness and infidelity. Dickinson exhorted all rational creatures to abide by the laws of God, to exercise Christian virtues and to attend church. That the authorities should prosecute and punish those guilty of blasphemy or profanity was proclaimed by the governor. Written by prominent citizens, numerous periodical articles designed to check deistic speculation among the masses followed Dickinson's proclamation. Particularly warned were the young people. A work of the English Dissenter Doctor Isaac Watts was reprinted. He advised against gambling "eternal interests in the world to come, upon the mere light of nature" and irrational rejecting of "the blessing of divine revelation and grace." Likewise the readers of a Boston newspaper were warned that "the cool and deliberate villainy of infidels" did not compare with the Christian's blessings in this life and after death.36

William Livingston's "Thought on Deism" repeatedly appeared in newspapers under the pseudonym of Hortensius. Emphasizing the vagueness of the irrational and immoral deists, he asserted that their shallow reasoning resulted in presenting a morality inferior to that exercised by a horse. When one dealt with salvation, he contended that the light of

nature was inadequate. Had "the unphilosophical philosophy of a Bolingbroke, or a wretched pun or threadbare jest of a Voltaire" destroyed the moral precepts of Christianity? Livingston thought no one could believe this.

A series of newspaper articles defended the necessity of the truth of Christianity. In the writers' thinking, they answered deism by a rational defense. The deistic contention that God created the universe and left it to operate by itself was ridiculed on the basis of the Bible. From this it was concluded that a miracle-working God who was active in the universe was more rational. Christianity could be proven true on the basis of miracles, its moral excellence and its rapid growth.

Not only periodicals but lectures were utilized in the Christian defense. William Hazlitt, who styled himself as a Unitarian Christian, delivered lectures in Boston and Philadelphia. In his well-received presentations he connected the prosperity of Americans with their beliefs in the Bible and instructed them to teach the Scriptures to their entire households. Another lecturer, Ezra Stiles, preached more orthodox sermons which supported the Bible. In an election day sermon he preached against the arguments


38 New York Packet, August 29, September 19, October 3 and 10, 1785.
of Hume, Tindal and that "amiable Confucius of Deism" Shaftesbury. He condemned deists for their glorification of all religions except Christianity. Because he believed deism could be stopped by refuting deistic works, he encouraged his students to debate controversial religious questions. Divine inspiration in the historical portions of the Bible, Biblical concepts in conflict with reason and man's benefit from religion were discussed.39

The defenders of Christianity tried to strengthen their defense by investigating the beliefs of men whose orthodoxy was questionable. For example, Stiles requested Franklin to declare openly his religious views, particularly his view of Jesus. Franklin refused to make his views public. In private letters to Stiles, he reaffirmed his faith in the deistic creed, subscribed to the basic tenets of natural religion and denied any need for revealed religion. He maintained his earlier position that Jesus' original system of morality and religion before it was corrupted was "the best the world ever saw or is likely to see." As an elderly gentleman Franklin wasted no time pondering his doubts about the divinity of Christ, for he speculated that he soon would have an "Opportunity to know the truth with less trouble ..."

39William Hazlitt, A Thanksgiving Discourse, Preached at Hallowell, 15 December, 1785 (Boston, 1786), pp. 8-17, 13-17; The Boston Magazine, June, 1783.
It was, however, very evident that he did not believe his destiny in life after death depended on his view of the divinity of Christ.40

Patrick Henry, a revolutionary orator and statesman, bitterly opposed deism and considered himself among the few who realized its undermining force. To curb this force, he spent his own money to print and circulate Soame Jenyns' *View of the Internal Evidences of the Christian Religion*, a work devastating to deism. Henry also wrote an answer to Paine's *Age of Reason* but discarded it before his death.41

Samuel Adams was not only a great revolutionary patriot but a great defender of orthodox Christianity. He wanted the state government to supervise morals and desired that the citizenry of Boston follow in the traditions of their Puritan forefathers. Without question he accepted the Bible as divinely inspired and the validity of miracles. By suggesting that he direct his talents into a more worthy cause than the destruction of Christianity, Adams tried to persuade Thomas Paine to abandon deism.42

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Although the work of Timothy Dwight was to defend orthodoxy, it resulted in promoting deism because he degraded the deists with such sharp, bitter language. In his *Triumph of Infidelity* the English deists Lord Herbert and Bolingbroke were portrayed as leaders in "Satan's cause" to take men to hell. If these deists gained a large following in America, Dwight contended, usury and immorality would be widely accepted, for deists freed themselves from virtues and principles. After cursing the Chinese heathenism, he attacked deists who praised Chinese religions rather than Christianity. Dwight concluded his satire by prophesying that virtue and Christianity would be victorious over wickedness and infidelity.\(^4\)

The *American Magazine* editor, Noah Webster, reviewed Dwight's work. Criticizing his sharp satire and abusive description of the Chinese religion, Webster thought Dwight was a theological dogmatist not destined for a heaven prepared for love and benevolence. This editorial did not demonstrate the editor's orthodoxy. Reared in a Calvinistic home, Webster embraced evangelical Christianity and even contributed to an orthodox magazine, *The Panoplist*, and *Missionary Magazine United*. In a pamphlet he penned a defense of the doctrines of predestination and election, an affirmation of his belief in the Bible and his acceptance

of the miracles of Jesus. He expressed regret that "a large portion of the world [was] so inattentive to religion."

In the South deistic speculation generally remained in the shadows. But anticlericalism, stimulated by the struggle for the disestablishment of the Anglican church, made speculation more prevalent in Virginia. What started as a battle for religious toleration ended in a fight for religious liberty. In 1776 the salaries of the Anglican clergy were suspended by law, and they were forced to leave their churches. Eight years later the defeat of the general assessment bill for the state support of religious teachers along with the passage of the act for establishing religious freedom brought victory for the dissenters. Presbyterians and Baptists of Virginia who struggled in the dissension were helped by deistic Thomas Jefferson and liberal James Madison. Stimulated by an anticlerical spirit, these men objected to using public funds for religious purposes. Their opponent, Patrick Henry, associated the movement with moral depravity. The disestablishment struggle aroused an interest in religious questions and forced advanced thinkers to react so strongly against Christianity that they were absorbed into the deistic camp.

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45For a series of articles on religious freedom in Virginia, see The American Magazine, March, May, June and September, 1787.
Several prominent Virginia statesmen, including George Washington, George Mason and James Madison, espoused major tenets of deism. Great popularity brought acclamation to Washington by both friends of Orthodoxy and deism. As proof of his orthodox Christianity, the defenders of Christianity cited testimonies of his contemporaries, high religious motives which prompted his military leadership and his church activities as a vestryman. Friends of deism, on the other hand, classified the father of this country as a deist. They referred to the fact that Washington refrained from expressing affirmative statements which supported Christianity. When speaking about God, he utilized deistic rather than Biblical phraseology. By 1800 Jefferson stated that according to Gouverneur Morris the first United States president did not assent to the Christian religion. Thirty years later Francis Wright, a deist, proclaimed that "Washington was not a Christian--that is he believed not in the priest's God, nor in the divine authority of the priest's book." Washington refused to kneel for prayer or to request a minister at his death bed.46

It is apparent, however, that Washington embraced tenets of both Christianity and deism. Yet it can be maintained that he was more orthodox than deistic. His reference to the

"benign influence" of revelation and his favorable attitude toward religious denominations support this contention. His consistent demand for public worship services in an accepted orthodox manner among the troops of the Continental army demonstrated his outward compliance with Christianity. Orthodox sympathies were revealed in his statement that "of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensible supports." Anyone who attacked these "great pillars of human happiness," the general believed, was neither patriotic nor a lover of freedom. In traditional Christian fashion, Washington believed morality had its origin in religion, whereas deists believed religion was the fruit of morality. In spite of his orthodox manifestations, those who argue that the first United States president was not an orthodox Christian have a strong point in their favor. Washington never put in writing his definition of true religion.47

The liberal George Mason was never called a deist by his contemporaries; he supervised the construction of a church, attended church regularly and served as a vestryman. Firmly standing for religious liberty, he actively participated in the disestablishment of the Anglican church. By granting

complete religious freedom, the Virginia Declaration of Rights reflected his liberal religious views. Some assert that Patrick Henry composed its religious clauses, but the available evidence indicates Mason composed them. His philosophy of religion involved man's duty to his Creator. One discharged this duty by the dictates of his reason and convictions. To him, love toward one's fellow man conveyed the ultimate in religion.48

In the middle of deistic currents was the Virginian James Madison. This ardent advocate of religious liberty perceived with disgust the "diabolical, hell-conceived principles of persecution" prevailing among Christian sects. To them the clergy added "their quota of imps. . . ." Involved in the disestablishment controversy, Madison delivered a speech on the assessment bill. The court's problem over what constituted Christianity provoked him to raise skeptical questions. Was the entire Bible inspired? What translation or edition of the Bible should be used? His critical questions are indicative of his not being a Calvinist. Because he left the questions unanswered, the extent of his deistic tendencies remains debatable. In 1832, however, he described Christianity as "the best and purest religion."49


49Ibid., I, 21; II, 88-89; IX, 485.
During the 1770's deism still was not a religion of the masses. The emergence of liberalism in religion, best typified by Unitarianism and Universalism, aided the popularization of deism. Some Revolutionary leaders accepted deism while others embraced only several of its basic tenets. Jefferson, Franklin and Samuel Hopkins, signers of the Declaration of Independence, espoused deism. Yet many signers of the famous document entertained some deistic views, and a few signers held to the traditions of orthodox Christianity. Because most deists of this era guarded their public image and political availability, they preferred not to make their deistic views public. The attempt by Allen to produce a more militant deism was effectively defeated by the defenders of orthodoxy. The anticlericalism prevalent in this period lacked the power to produce an aggressive deistic tendency. Ethan Allen's *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man*, nevertheless, gave deism a bolder tone and paved the way for a militant deism in the 1790's.
During the early national period the deistic movement not only aggressively attacked the supernatural revelation of Christianity but influenced a wider range of society. Men like Thomas Paine, Comte de Volney and Elihu Palmer popularized the idea that traditional Christianity would inevitably disappear. Paine and Palmer attempted to discredit the clergy and strip them of their power by demonstrating that Biblical revelation, the authority of the clergy, was not a divine but a human document. Their militant attack may be attributed in part to the clerical opposition to the philosophy of the French Revolution. Paine led in this attack because he wanted to preserve the equal rights of the people, the republican form of government and deism—the only true religion. To him atheism was endangering deism because men, disgusted with the clergy's fanatical ideas and reactions, disbelieved in God and a future life. The publication of Paine's *The Age of Reason* and Volney's *Ruins: or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, plus the establishment of deistic newspapers, lectureships and societies brought deism from the confines of the wealthy and influential class to the urban and rural masses.
Migrating from England in 1774, the internationally known Paine played an active role in colonial agitation for independence. Later he hurled himself into the activities of the French Revolution, but following the Revolution he returned to the United States for the remainder of his life. Since Paine was born in England, lived as an international figure and published his most influential book in France, it may seem questionable to classify him as an American deist. It may be justified, however, because he and his writings performed a major role in the American deistic movement. Today, Franklin's and Jefferson's views on religion would probably be unknown if it were not for their fame in other fields. But Paine is remembered as a deist and for his deistic writings. He became the most controversial writer for deism in America.¹

His early pamphlets were very popular among the masses. The Age of Reason was in practically every village and was said to be shaking the faith of nominal Christians. Men from all walks of life were reading, discussing and applauding the work. Paine's attack on the dogmas common to all denominations was revolutionary. Why was Paine's work so widely circulated? Along with his utilization of the English language so that an average man could understand his concepts, the forcefulness of his style probably helps explain the

perpetuation of his book. Newspapers introduced their readers to the work while deistic organizations distributed it without charge.  

The Age of Reason was devoted to a generalized attack upon revealed religion, with a particular stress on the Bible. Being more like the English deists than American deists, Paine emphasized public attacks on Christianity. In the opening chapters he rejected all books that claimed to be special revelations, saying bluntly that he "disbelieved them all." The revelation of God, he argued, cannot be found in any spoken or written expression but in creation itself. "It would be more consistent that we call it [the Bible] the word of a demon, than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my own heart, I sincerely detest it, as I detest anything that is cruel." According to Paine future generations could not be bound by the Bible because it was not authoritative but merely a "collection of the most paltry

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2Charles Francis Adams, editor, The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations, 10 vols. (Boston, 1850-1856), IX, 627; David Levi, A Defense of the Old Testament, in a Series of Letters, Addressed to Thomas Paine (New York, 1797), pp. 5-9; David Nelson, An Investigation of That False, Fabulous and Blasphemous Misrepresentation by Thomas Paine, in His Age of Reason (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1800), pp. 10-17, 41, 45; Uzal Ogden, Antidote to Deism, 2 vols. (Newark, 1795), I, 15, 18, 122; Jared Sparks, editor, Life of Gouverneur Morris, with Selections from His Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, 3 vols. (Boston, 1832), II, 409; III, 46; The American Mercury, July 21, 1794; The Massachusetts Spy: or, the Worcester Gazette, November 19, 1794.
and contemptible tales." Because impostors invented them, miracles were false and detracted from God and His nature.
In the same manner he considered prophecies incorrect and indefinite. To him these clerical proofs added to the "fabulous [Christian] religion" were frivolous for the true religion, deism.³

Paine utilized the dictates of reason to attack the Bible and discover its unworthiness. By declaring that these men's credibility relied upon the certitude of their authorship, he endeavored to disprove that Moses, Joshua, Samuel and Solomon authored Old Testament books bearing their names. To this deist the Pentateuch was written "by some very ignorant and stupid pretenders to authorship, several hundred years after the death of Moses..." and men of that day like the prophet Isaiah were unimportant impostors. Of his success in proving the Old Testament to be a fraud, Paine wrote, "I have now gone through the Old Testament, as a man would go through a woods with an ax... and fell trees. Here they be, and the priests, if they can, may replant them. They may perhaps stick them in the ground, but they will never make them grow."⁴

His even more bitter attack on the New Testament involved the labeling of its writers as unknown perjurers and

the apostle Paul a fool. Paine placed the authorship of the Gospel writings centuries after the death of Christ. The account of the virgin birth of Christ was derided and debased to correspond with Greek stories of gods cohabiting with men. On the deity of Christ he wrote, "He was a Jew by birth and by profession; and he was the son of God in like manner that every other person is, for the Creator is the Father of all." Jesus was a great human figure but not God in the flesh. Jesus' life and his resurrection were depicted as blasphemous fables. His lineage was only fiction; his immaculate conception was an impossible fraud.

Although Paine believed Christianity had to be replaced by deism, he, like most English deists, stressed the negative and failed clearly to present the positive aspects of deism. Describing historical, institutionalized Christianity as too "absurd for belief, too impossible to convince ... too inconsistent for practice" and not divine in origin, he rejected it. As "an engine of power," organized Christianity served as "a species of Atheism" and a tool of absolute rule. Paine also thought that by instituting the necessity of a Redeemer, Christianity denied God. A concise statement of his positive beliefs appeared in his famous work. "I believe in one God and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life,—My own mind is my own church."  


After he had, in his own mind, satisfactorily theorized away Christianity Paine attacked deism's other opponent, atheism. He addressed a Paris organization which denied the Bible's divine origin but accepted the existence of God and a future state. In speaking to them he attacked the atheists for their concept that the universe came into being without a Creator. Since matter does not possess motion, he argued, the rotation of the planets through an External Cause is essential. Because the age of Christian persecution, which according to Paine created atheists, was closing, this second foe would subside. Besides being circulated in the United States, this address was reprinted in a popular deistic newspaper, *The Temple of Reason*.7

Paine's writings set off additional deistic dynamite which disturbed the complacency of the orthodox Christians. The shock they and conservative politicians experienced effected a deep hatred for Paine, who was labeled a "filthy little atheist." Because Paine was carrying deism to the masses, he was violently degraded. His opponents described him as a superficial reasoner, a blasphemer and a habitual drunkard. Reflections of their thought that nothing less than a miracle could save orthodoxy appeared in an appeal in 1798. Written by the New York Missionary Society and

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addressed to sincere Christians, the appeal stated, "Infidelity abounds. It hath assumed an imperious air, and glories in the expectation of a speedy extermination of the religion of Jesus. To confound its vain hopes, we are called upon to shew that Christ is still supreme." Thinking they were battling at Armageddon for their Lord, the leaders rationally defended the Christian faith. Through apologetic works, they attempted to demonstrate the irrationality of Paine's arguments.8

Since Joseph Priestley was converted from deism, he not only understood it thoroughly but led in the rational defense against Paine. In Priestley's mind Paine assailed a passé Christianity, for "intelligent Christians" no longer held such doctrines as trinitarianism. Priestley agreed that the supernatural mythology needed to be removed, but Christianity was not to be replaced by deism as Paine advocated.9

The rational defense was strengthened by the scholarly work, Apology for the Bible. Written for the masses by the English Bishop of Llandaff, Richard Watson, it became popular in America. Attempting to answer Paine's charges that the


Old Testament was not divine revelation, he designed a book by book study of the Old Testament to prove God's authorship. He concluded the work by pleading with God to forgive this deist for infidelity.  

A Jewish theologian entered the defense against Paine and attacked deists for presenting Jews as ignorant and barbarous people. David Levi pictured his people as superior to other ancient races in religious and moral principles. His desire was to rescue the masses from disbelief in divine revelation which, he believed, could abolish Judaism as well as Christianity.

In 1802, when Jefferson invited Paine to return to this country, deistic newspapers applauded the move, but the conservative papers bitterly regretted it. Samuel Adams wrote Paine and pleaded with him not to publish further infidel works. The ingenious Paine answered by saying that if "infidelity" meant accepting the existence of God, he considered himself an infidel. In spite of Adams' letter, Paine continued to write deistic tracts in America. One newspaper article by Paine conveyed the main difference between a deist and a Christian as being the use of reason. Deism, not Christianity, was consistent with reason. To him, because it

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championed the murder of Jesus to redeem men from the sin of Adam, Christianity was "the strangest system of religion ever set up."\textsuperscript{12}

Depleted in finances and poor in health, Paine lived out his later years in poverty. He was forced to leave the farm given to him by New York state and lodge in a miserable dwelling house in New York City. Before his death in 1809, two ministers questioned him about his religious opinions. His only reply was "Let me alone; good morning." His will showed that he had been ready to publish the third part of The Age of Reason and a reply to Bishop Watson, but Jefferson had discouraged him. Most of his works, however, were printed after his death. A deistic New York newspaper printed Paine's Answer to Bishop Watson's Apology for the Bible. Here he contended that Genesis was taken from other people and was the last book of the Pentateuch to be written and that a Gentile work, Job, was composed before Genesis.\textsuperscript{13}

The Frenchman Comte de Volney, a member of the Estates-General and Constituent Assembly in France, militantly

\textsuperscript{12}Paul L. Ford, editor, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 10 vols. (New York, 1892-1899), VIII, 79; The Temple of Reason, November 6, 1802; The Republican; or Anti-Democrat, November 26, 1802; The Balance and Columbian Depository, November 30 and December 7, 1802; Moncure D. Conway, editor, The Writings of Thomas Paine, 4 vols. (New York, 1894-1898), IV, 201-202, 205; The Prospect, or View of the Moral World, February 8, 1804.

supported deism. In 1795 he journeyed to America where he spent several years. The popularity in America of Volney's \textit{Ruins} alarmed orthodox Christians who stated that it "unchristianized thousands." Even though this evaluation was exaggerated, the work significantly contributed to the militant deistic movement of this era. Along with penning a lengthy discussion on the causes for the fall of empires, the writer questioned divine revelation and the status of the clergy. Finding it impossible to determine a religion with true evidences, he rejected all supernatural records, ridiculed the divinity of Jesus and original sin, degraded the gospel of Jesus and New Testament passages thought to be harmful to God's character. Anticlericalism inspired his prediction that the final union of all religions would be in deism and his writing that clergy and priests had universally found the secret of living in tranquility amidst the anarchy they occasioned; secure under the despotism they sanctioned; ... and in abundance in the very bosom of scarcity; and all this, by ... selling words and gestures to the credulous. ...14

Joseph Priestley, who had been converted from deism to orthodoxy, charged Volney with inaccuracy and misrepresentation in handling the Hebrew religion and Jesus. He demanded an answer from the Frenchman, but when the two met in Philadelphia, ...

Volney refused to discuss seriously the matter with Priestley. That Priestley did not answer the arguments of the *Ruin*s but attacked him personally was Volney's feeling.¹⁵

Another individual militantly involved in the destruction of traditional Christianity was Elihu Palmer, one of the most important American deists. This minister, born in Connecticut and educated at Dartmouth College, became blind from yellow fever at an early age. His heterodox views plus the hostility of the clergy toward him effected his resignation from the pastorate of a Baptist church in Philadelphia. After his resignation he attempted to popularize what he believed the American and French Revolutions should accomplish. To save liberalism from despotism, he proposed the destruction of the powerful clergy. To accomplish this he thought, like Paine, that revealed religion must be abolished. One Independence Day he delivered an address in which he made strong declarations that despotism was banished and democracy was sovereign. Stressing the religious and social implications of revolutions, he placed superstition and fanaticism in their last days. To Palmer, the French Revolution presented "the consoling hope of sufferings alleviated or wholly destroyed" while both revolutions assured men of eventual freedom from institutions which had been corrupted.

by priests. He referred to organized Christianity as the most corrupt institution and the greatest cause for evils in the social and moral order.16

Palmer's deism resulted from his reaction to harsh Calvinistic doctrines. Because Calvinism stressed man's sin and God's vengeance on sinners, he came to view it as an evil influence which caused the adherents to be miserable in life and overly concerned with death and its consequences. His hatred for organized religion and the clergy motivated him to destroy their authority—the Bible. To call the Bible the Word of God, Palmer contended, was to attribute to God the authorship of that which no rational author would consider. Organized religion, the product of "ambitious, designing and fanatic" clergymen took advantage of ignorance and forced a false symbol of authority upon humanity. He doubted "that independent of . . . the power of eloquence, there ever was a reasonable thinking man, who felt a sufficient internal evidence to convince him of the reality of the whole of its [Bible] doctrines." He claimed a modern author would be condemned for such "obscenity, incredibility and obscenity." Similar to Paine, he thought prophecies were indefinite and incapable of literal fulfillment. Miracles were

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called "specimens of that miserable and disgusting extra-
vagance with which the . . . Bible is everywhere replete." 17

Palmer believed that proud and vain authors of the Bible,
unsatisfied with the natural phenomena, violated the harmony
of nature and embraced a supernatural religion.

The idea of associating with heaven, and holding
on intercourse with celestian powers, was a
circumstance of extravagant and delicious enjoy-
ment, with a privileged order, and laid the
foundation of that terrifying severity of
judgement contained in the gospel declaration,
He that believeth not shall be condemned. 18

Palmer asserted that Jesus, Mohammed and Moses "cost the
human race more blood, and produced more substantial misery,
than all the other fanatics of the world." Jesus was
described as an impostor and murderer whose salvation was
contradictory and whose falsely devised virgin birth made
Him "nothing more than an illegitimate Jew, and their
[Christians'] salvation through him rest on no better founda-
tion than that of fornication or adultery." 19

Since Palmer's Principles of Nature divorced morality
from Christian theology, it paved the way for more attacks
on Christian dogma and divine revelation. In it he utilized

17The Massachusetts Spy: or, the Worcester Gazette,
November 28, 1801; The Temple of Reason, February 29, 1803;
Elihu Palmer, Principles of Nature; or, a Development of the
Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery Among the Human Species
(London, 1819), pp. 8, 10-16, 30-33, 67-70; Elihu Palmer,
The Examiners Examined: being a Defense of the Age of Reason
(New York, 1794), pp. 7-10.


19Ibid., pp. 19, 25, 166-167.
the nature of man for the foundation of his ethical system, illustrated in the "pure and holy religion" of deism. Deism, the belief in "one God . . . [and] the practice of a pure, natural uncorrupted virtue," would prosper after "Christian superstition and fanaticism" were long outdated.20

The ultimate goal of the whole deistic movement in this era was to replace the Christian religion with natural religion and its creed—God, virtue and immortality. Of the means established to supplement and propagate the deistic writings, societies were the most important. Through them came the distribution of skeptical treatises, the initiation of discussions and the establishment of funds.

One such society began in 1790. Thoroughly disgusted with the Methodist denomination, John Fitch left this church and organized the Philadelphia Universal Society. Fitch provided the leadership for the Society's weekly discussions through which he raised skeptical questions. Was there a Divine Guide? Was any religion useful for society? The thirty charter members adopted a strict moral code as their guide, and Elihu Palmer became their minister. The influential Episcopal Bishop White was so aroused by their activities that he prevented further meetings at their particular meeting house. This move not only put an end to the society but

20 Ibid., pp. 8, 10-16, 42.
brought public indignation which forced Palmer to flee the city to escape physical violence.\textsuperscript{21}

It was not long, however, until another deistic organization appeared in Philadelphia. The Theophilanthropic Society displayed the active skepticism prevalent in the current deistic movement. One of their meetings included a lecturer who emphasized the need for more deistic societies where skeptics could rescue their friends from the bonds of superstition. This society distributed deistic pamphlets among the masses and organized sixty-three societies in rural areas.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1794 an organization designed to spread French revolutionary principles was organized in New York. Members of an old democratic order, founded to support democracy, joined this new group. When the two groups merged, they asked Palmer to address their radical society. Impressed with him, they desired to help him spread deism among the lower classes. This aim resulted in the formation of a deistic society in late 1796. It was specifically called a deistic society, not a theophilanthropic society, because Palmer did not want to hide behind a harmless name of good will. He devised its constitution which proclaimed the


\textsuperscript{22}The Temple of Reason, May 27 and June 3, 1801.
existence of God, man's moral and intellectual sufficiency, political and religious freedom and a universal natural religion. At closed meetings Christianity was ridiculed and Principles of Nature read. Members were asked to oppose "all schemes of superstition and fanaticism, claiming divine origin." Because it did not attract influential people and suffered financially, the society was not very successful. Yet it did for some time publish The Temple of Reason, a deistic newspaper. The society collapsed with Palmer's death in 1805, but some members formed a society of theo-philanthropy which published Paine's works.\textsuperscript{23}

An interesting outpost of Palmer's New York deistic society was established in Newburgh about sixty miles up the Hudson River. This Druidical Society gained its members from the more influential and wealthy people and developed from a more conservative masonic group formed during the French Revolution. These unorthodox Masons thought that they were reverting to the pure worship of the sun. Like the New York group, they openly ridiculed the Bible and had Palmer lecture to them. The Age of Reason and Christianity as Old as the Creation was reprinted and circulated by them. Palmer's Fourth of July oration, the only speech in Newburgh

\textsuperscript{23}Palmer, Posthumous Pieces, pp. 8, 9, 12, 26-29, 81-86; Gustav A. Koch, Republican Religion; The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason (New York, 1933), pp. 76-77, 80, 84-85, 98-100, 103.
that Independence Day, proclaimed deistic principles and reflected their dominating influence in 1799.24

Being a superb speaker and attracting enthusiastic audiences, Palmer not only formed deistic societies but acted as a lecturer. His lectures, another means of publicizing deistic writings, were filled with militant attacks on orthodoxy. In one New York speech he rejected with colorful language the divinity of Jesus and discarded the immoral and unintelligible doctrines of atonement, faith and regeneration. This missionary of deism intimated that Jesus was born in adultery and attempted to prove in other speeches, as he did in his writings, that a miracle-working God was inconsistent with God's nature and that "Christian superstition" was one of the worst curses in human history. Condemning Jesus for crying out that God had forsaken him at the cross, Palmer claimed that Jesus' action evidenced his inability to work a needed miracle and his loss of composure at death. For his anti-Christian attitudes Palmer once was banned from delivering a speech in Philadelphia. A large crowd gathered at a Universalist church before city officials, who were pressured by orthodox ministers, prevented the address.25


25Palmer, Posthumous Pieces, pp. 7-9, 131-137, 156-159; The Temple of Reason, July 4, 1800, July 18, August 12, 26, 1801; The Temple of Truth, September 5, 12, 1801.
Along with lectures, newspapers were utilized to transmit deistic ideas to the masses. The Temple of Reason carried an announcement in 1800 that it would show the soundness of deism by "exposing . . . the corruption of those of our adversaries [Christians] . . . ." To fulfill the proposal, the editor printed numerous attacks on Christian dogmas and urged all deists to support the cause and to join deistic societies for the revival of true morality. Since this newspaper originated during the campaign of Jefferson, religious and political conservatives seized the opportunity to circulate the rumor that a prearranged plot to stamp out religion was apparent. After the election they accused the paper of seeking the patronage and protection of Jefferson, the new "atheistic President." The editor denied the accusation and asserted that deism differed from "a religion of dreams and fables, of whales and asses" and could gain success without political aid.26

Because The Temple of Reason refused his orthodox Christian articles, John Hargrove, a Baltimore minister, published The Temple of Truth as an antidote to the deistic paper. His articles emphasized the advantages of Christianity over deism. But lack of support forced the paper to discontinue publication after three months. Explaining his

26 The Temple of Reason, November 8, December 6, 13, 29, 1800; January 6, February 8, 1801; January 7, July 24, 31, 1802.
failure, Hargrove said the truths were too rational for the orthodox and too spiritual for the deists. The editor of the opposing paper reported jubilantly, "We fear that faith has fled the land, and that infidelity is going to take her place!" 27

For monetary reasons, The Temple of Reason was also discontinued two years later, only to be revived by Palmer and called The Prospect, or View of the Moral World. He aimed to investigate the divine origin and nature of Christianity; therefore, he wrote articles criticizing every book of the Bible. Through the paper Palmer popularized a plan for a temple of nature where one God would be worshipped. Meetings were held to establish funds for its construction in New York; Paine was a substantial supporter, but the project never came to fruition. Although the paper was circulated in nine states, it suffered financially and was discontinued in 1805. 28

As was mentioned before, Jefferson was elected president of the United States at the zenith of militant deism. In the campaign of 1800 religious and political conservatives charged that Jefferson and the Republican Party wanted to overthrow Christianity. To them Jefferson was the American symbol for the principles of the French Revolution. The campaign induced

27The Temple of Truth, August 1, 15, 29, October 31, 1801.
28The Prospect, or View of the Moral World, August 18, 25, 1804.
political sermons. One preacher typically stated, "I dread the election of Mr. Jefferson, because I believe him to be a confirmed infidel." After enumerating Jefferson's disbeliefs, he called him an atheist in practice. His morals were described as "the morality of devils."\(^29\)

These accusations from the conservative clergymen and politicians could not have been all true, for the leadership of the Republican Party represented many variations in religious opinions. Far to the right were Samuel Adams of Massachusetts and William Findley of Pennsylvania, religious conservatives, whose orthodox stand and political liberalism were not questioned. Between the right and the left were James Sullivan and Joel Barlow. Sullivan influenced the appointment to his home church of a Unitarian pastor whose convictions corresponded with his own. To him the common beliefs of churches were much more significant than their disagreements. The American poet Joel Barlow was made a citizen of France for his active role in the French Revolution. In Europe he helped publish *The Age of Reason* and translated Volney's *Ruins*. After returning to the United States, he published *The Columbiad*, a newspaper which printed all religious viewpoints. For all these endeavors, Noah Webster labeled him an atheist and forced him to state his

religious views. He denied being a deist or atheist or that the purpose of his work was to ridicule the Christian religion. He replied that he was educated among Puritans and still was a Presbyterian. 30

On the left were Jefferson, 31 Willie Jones 32 and Philip Freneau, who refused to join publicly the militant, deistic attack on Christianity. As a good Republican, Freneau, editor of The National Gazette, felt compelled to defend the principles of the French Revolution. He condemned the clergy but did not specifically reject the scriptural basis for clerical authority. To him discord resulted from religious dogmas, and the changing views of the clergy made the practice of orthodox Christianity impossible. He sarcastically referred to the two centuries of prayers by the clergy for the Pope's downfall which followed suddenly by their concern for his restoration to power in France. That Calvinistic men should preach the gospel to the lower class Frenchmen was his advice. 33

30 James Sullivan, Thoughts Upon the Political Situation of the United States of America (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1788), pp. 8-11, 23-27, 96-99; Joel Barlow, The Political Writings of Joel Barlow (New York, 1796), pp. 3-7, 26-33, 41, 50, 83.

31 See pages 82-87.

32 See page 96.

33 Philip Freneau, Letters on Various Interesting and Important Subjects (Philadelphia, 1799), pp. 35-36, 72-75, 79; The National Gazette, August 6, 13, September 19, 1791.
The diverse religious views were not peculiar to the Republican Party. Federalist party members, John Jay, Fisher Ames and Alexander Hamilton, espoused Christianity and opposed deism. Jay became the first president of the American Bible Society, whose influence hastened the decline of deism. To him Bible mysteries, not human reason, could be accepted as sufficient in discovering the present life or life after death. Ames believed Christianity was "excellent and Benign," whereas Hamilton maintained that the cause of religion was essential to a stable government.  

Three distinguished Massachusetts Federalist leaders espoused some basic tenets of deism. Timothy Pickering, a minister to Great Britain and a Massachusetts senator, read the latitudinarian views of Tillotson at Harvard. Even though he was cautioned to avoid its heretical teachings, Pickering began to doubt his Puritan theology and eventually espoused Unitarianism and came to believe only parts of the Bible were divinely inspired. In spite of the fact that John Adams rated nature above Biblical miracles and prophecy, he supported Christianity as an indispensable stabilizer in government and opposed deism for its promotion of "the cause of revolution...." As with George Washington, the political

conservatism of the second president of the United States overshadowed his intellectual tendencies toward religious liberalism. The third Massachusetts Federalist, Josiah Quincy, held distinct deistic and Unitarian views. Like Freneau, this president of Harvard felt theological controversies divided Christianity. In his thinking virtue was the most important tenet of Christianity; it led to freedom, and freedom produced happiness. Man's beliefs were irrelevant if he performed Christian needs. Furthermore, true religion harmonized with the laws of nature and human reason, not the Bible.35

More deistical in his thinking than these three New Englanders was the Federalist Charles C. Pinckney. He was accused of being a deist not only in the campaign of 1800 but when he was the Federalists' presidential candidate in 1804 and 1808. Some arguments revealing him as a deist included his rejection of the Bible as ultimate truth, his dislike for the clergy and his elevation of reason above revelation. Another Southerner and prominent Federalist, William Davie, took a conservative political position even though he openly embraced basic deistic doctrines.

He was raised by a Presbyterian minister, distinguished himself in the Revolutionary militia, became a leader in the North Carolina Federalist Party and contested Jefferson's Republican principles. To him morality outweighed doctrines in significance; so he opposed Calvinistic ministers, who preached doctrines, and advocated the study of nature for ministerial students.36

In spite of the various religious ideas prevalent in both parties, the common contemporary belief, particularly in New England, made Jeffersonians champions of deism and Federalists defenders of orthodoxy. One newspaper reported that the republicans were "philosophical infidels" conspiring to bring about "the heretic 'Age of Reason'..." Yet republicans in Connecticut and Massachusetts were primarily supported by Baptists and Methodists who even attacked the Federalists for supporting a state church. One prominent Baptist minister, John Leland, advised the people to renounce state religion and show the world that the church could stand alone. This step was his only alternative for arresting the growth of deism. Republicans in the Scotch-Irish section of Western Pennsylvania were represented by William Findley and John Simile. Though radical in politics, these men were stern orthodox Presbyterians. Findley would have bolted

36 Marcus Brutus [Anonymous author], Serious Facts, Opposed to "Serious Considerations:" or, the Vice of Warning to Religious Republicans (New York, 1800), pp. 20-22, 14; William R. Davie, An Address to the People of North Carolina (Newbern, North Carolina, 1788), pp. 6-8, 17-19.
the Jeffersonian Party rather than support a deistic gubernatorial candidate. 37

Another contemporary opinion in New England associated deism with a French influence. Although it was true that an interest in the French was effected by the French Revolution and characterized the Jeffersonians, deism was not strengthened as much by this influence as contemporaries claimed. This may be seen by the fact that many Republicans apologized for or condemned the religious experiments of the revolution. There was, on the other hand, some truth in the Federalists' evaluation. A small faction of the American public agreed with the religious attacks executed by the French Revolutionary leaders. Led by Paine and Palmer, this group took advantage of the American interest in things French to promote deism. They reprinted the works of Voltaire and Rousseau in deistic newspapers. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these writings advanced deism. No doubt American radical deists were aroused by these works, for to preserve the revolution's principles, these deists discredited clerical aristocracy. The editor of The National Gazette found deism or atheism much less harmful than the aristocracy. Moreover, he argued, deism did not oppress man's moral and physical

faculties or require rich and cruel priests. The influence of French deists was exaggerated by loyal Federalists like Timothy Dwight and Seth Payson, pastor of the largest Congregational church in Philadelphia, who tried to decrease the effectiveness of the opposing party by associating it with religious radicalism.38

New Englanders also viewed Freemasonry as a powerful force which enhanced the growth of deism. This secret society first appeared in the colonies in the early eighteenth century. Due to the infiltration of French societies and the membership of revolutionary heroes, the society grew significantly late in the same century. But French infiltration plus increased membership meant increased influence and opposition. The guardians of American institutions warned the masses that deism was corrupting Freemasonry. A newspaper editorial cautioned the public that "a secret conspiracy of the deists [was] in league with corrupted Masons" which intended to uproot religion in both the United States and Europe. Paine was credited with the origin of the masonry doctrine. Seth Payson warned the youth of the pitfalls of deism and exhorted parents to instruct their children in "the fear of God ... and the evidence of the Christian faith."

38Timothy Dwight, A Discourse on Some Events of the Last Century (New Haven, 1807), pp. 19, 32; Seth Payson, Proofs of the Real Existence, and Dangerous Tendency of Illuminism (Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1802), pp. 204-211, 226; The National Gazette, March 27, 1793.
Since he believed Freemasonry was stimulating the growth of deism and seventeen hundred agents of deism were at large in the United States, he wanted to temporarily suspend masonic lodges.39

Even though the above evidence reveals exaggerations, Freemasonry did possess distinct deistic tendencies. In masonic prayers and addresses God was called "the Great Architect" and the virtues of natural religion were indirectly mentioned. The fact that members had to accede to the "essentials of religion" left room for them to espouse deism. As was discussed earlier in the chapter, a few masons formed deistic societies. Yet the masonic movement considered itself more Christian than deistic. A challenge was issued by the movement to "the most severe critic, the most precise moralist, the most perfect Christian to point out anything in Masonic ideals inconsistent with ... pure religion."

To protect themselves from being labeled deists, some lodges required each member to pledge his belief in the divine revelation of the ten commandments; and some leaders

answered the critics by citing the respectable Christian and political citizens who belonged to the lodge.  

There was some evidence that people from all walks of life embraced the deistic religion. A young New York physician was "personally acquainted with Thomas Paine and had embraced his infidel sentiments"; a teacher won the reputation of "a zealous opposer of the gospel and a universal seducer of unwary" youth. After dining in Jefferson's home, John Trumbull, an artist, reported high society's open ridicule of Christianity. The offended artist remarked to his host, "Sir, this is a strange situation in which I find myself; in a country professing Christianity, and at a table with Christians, as I supposed, I find my religion and myself attacked with severe and . . . irresistible wit and raillery. . . ."

Federalist James Kent expressed deistic principles at another party and commented that knowledgeable men were free from the "vulgar superstitions" of Christianity. Guests like William Dunlap, a playwright, William Johnson, a lawyer, and Elihu Smith, a physician, approved Kent's comments. But when Smith died suddenly his parents anxiously inquired about whether he was a deist.  

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40The Temple of Reason, October 2, 1802; Thaddeus M. Harris, Ignorance and Prejudice Shewn to be the Only Enemies to Free Masonry (Leominster, Massachusetts, 1797), pp. 23-27.

41The National Gazette, March 27, August 6, 1793; The Temple of Reason, December 3, 1800; The Massachusetts Spy: or the Worcester Gazette, August 13, 1800; Rufus W. Griswold, The Republican Court or American Society in the Days of Washington (New York, 1856), pp. 82-83.
As deistic pamphlets circulated through the various cities, they spread similar deistic attitudes. In one New York town the small number who espoused the divine origin of the Scriptures thought the "fundamental [Calvinistic] doctrines of religion were disgustful." The majority of one Connecticut county upheld deism. Likewise the citizens of a community in Vermont refused to profess Christianity. Philadelphia and New York were described as centers of deistic influence. One writer attributed to deism the death of hundreds in a yellow fever epidemic.42

The college campuses were also strongholds for deism in the 1790's. A student at Yale reported that the majority of one class were skeptics or deists and that they called each other by names of leading deists. Since the "Deistic controversy was an existing thing, and the battle was hot, the crisis exciting," debates over Christianity permeated not just the classroom but the entire campus. Even those who were students of theology discussed controversial religious questions. A deistic spirit prevailed at Harvard, where student William Channing, later a leading Unitarian clergyman, observed a marked tendency toward deism. Paine's philosophy progressed so rapidly that the school's officials gave Richard Watson's Apology for the Bible to each student. One special lecturer, Nathan Fiske, warned the students not

to read *The Age of Reason* because the author was an unlearned researcher and a "daring insurgent" prepared to disturb the peace. According to Fiske deism would not succeed; in spite of the contemporary popularity of the imported deistic doctrines, Christianity has "been, and ever will be, under the patronage of the Almighty. . . ." At Dartmouth the scene was similar, for only one member of the class of 1799 publicly professed Christianity. Not until 1801 was a permanent students' religious society established there. On the campus of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University) reports showed a widespread deistic influence. Prayer meetings were attended by "none except the tutors and three or four students." Debates were popular, and deists usually won the arguments. David Ker, the first president of the University of North Carolina and a Presbyterian minister, was forced to resign from the University for his outspoken deism. His orthodox Christian wife burned his writings so others would not be contaminated. The next president, Charles W. Harris, was removed within a year for his deistic tendencies. His successor, Joseph Caldwell, a staunch orthodox Christian, discovered deists on his faculty and dismissed them. The student body entertained deistic thoughts as well, enjoyed *The Age of Reason*, purchased other deistical works and debated the validity of Christianity. One student group
concluded that the Christian principle to love one's enemy was not consistent with reason.43

On some campuses the authorities attempted to combat the spread of deism. In 1797 Yale's president, Timothy Dwight, warned the students against the deceitful and contradictory deistic philosophy. Its doctrines, he told them, were "gross and monstrous" and its authors were wicked and depraved. Although he acknowledged the ability and knowledge of some deists, he concluded that they would never equal the outstanding Christians and that Christianity would triumph because the "weight of virtue has been on her side." In the same year the trustees at the College of New Jersey, when opening a fund drive, announced that the college would become "an asylum for pious youth, so that in this day of general and lamentable depravity, parents might send their children to it with every . . . expectation of safety."

These men full realized their intention would produce many enemies. Provost John Mason, a man with no patience for rationalists and their light of nature, attempted to preserve

Columbia University from deistic influence by a rational presentation of Christianity.44

Most contemporaries envisioned a rapidly engulfing deism which would devour Christianity. Timothy Dwight was confident Christians outnumbered the skeptics, while the alarmed Priestley published Observations on the Increase of Infidelity to defeat the tide of deism. To him the absence of an established church and the inactivity of the masses would eventually destroy deism. The Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches were alarmed by the immediate danger of deism. They recommended fasting and prayer to halt the advance of deism and to prevent the wrath of God from visiting them. So extensively was deism reported to be adopted by the professional people of the South, especially North Carolinians, that the Presbyterians rejoiced over a "few repentant souls." One prominent North Carolinian reported that politicians denounced Christian doctrines to win votes. When a Federalist newspaper described Jefferson as "a second-handed varnished Deist," a Republican paper defended Jefferson's deism. An anonymous writer argued that "there [was] not one community in this great land which was not being threatened by deists who hate the Blessed Book and all that is Christian." If deism were not defeated

immediately, the writer continued, the whole continent would become characterized as a center of deism.45

These alarming accounts given by orthodox Christians and the deists' inspiring reports would lead one to believe deism had overpowered Christianity in the 1790's. Contemporary accounts, however, were undoubtedly exaggerated. Because of the noise made by a few militant deists and the clergy's defense, the deistic movement attracted attention out of proportion to its actual strength. Deism still had not reached a majority of the masses.

During the height of deism the orthodox Christians were setting into motion an evangelical movement. It appealed to the masses and effectively helped to curtail deism in the early nineteenth century. Missionary societies were established by Christian groups in the East to spread orthodoxy to the West and South. Religious periodicals, Bible associations and religious educational institutions began as segments of the evangelical movement. Eager volunteers from all denominations distributed religious tracts and joined Bible organizations. The American Bible Society, founded in 1806, published and distributed Bibles without charge. Newly organized divinity schools trained the ministers to defend Christianity more adequately. The Sunday school movement was launched.

45Dwight, The Nature, and Danger, p. 64; Priestley, Observations, pp. XV (preface), 143-144; The Massachusetts Spy: or, the Worcester Gazette, August 20, 1793; The Temple of Truth, June 18, 1801.
through which the Bible was presented as God's infallible
word and the merits of Christianity were praised. 46

Many victories were reported by the evangelicals. In
New Jersey some "chiefs of the devil's kingdom" embraced the
gospel. In New York reports showed that "many of its [deism]
hearer, (or rather its dupes) fell prostrate at the feet of
the Redeemer whom they had impiously denied and blasphemed!"
In Vermont skeptics were embracing Christianity while in
Rhode Island the "Deists [were] bowing to Jesus Christ as King
and [were] hailing Jesus as their rightful Lord." Timothy
Dwight announced in 1800 that New England had been delivered
by God's grace from the plague of deism. 47

By the early nineteenth century the forces of deism
gave way to the advancing evangelicalism and new political
alignments. After the election of Jefferson in 1800, republi-
canism began to lose its association with deism and became
associated with Christianity and the new revivalism. Deism,
therefore, lost its political ally. Although the deistic
movement was eventually defeated, many deists joined the

46 Dwight, A Discourse, pp. 31-35; The Temple of Truth,
November 6, 13, 1802; The Massachusetts Spy: or, The
Worcester Gazette, November 18, 1801; Alfred H. Newman, A
History of the Baptist Churches in the United States (New
York, 1894), p. 385.

47 The Temple of Reason, November 20, 1801; L. W. Bacon,
History of American Christianity (New York, 1891), pp. 233-
245; Williston Walker, A History of the Congregational
Churches in the United States (New York, 1894), p. 313.
utopian socialists, and basic tenets of deism were absorbed by various protestant denominations.
CHAPTER V

THE TENOR OF DEISM IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

In the early eighteenth century the deistic movement, a vital part of the contemporary liberalism, possessed a cautious and non-revolutionary spirit. Most deists refused to assail the Biblical authority upon which Christianity was built; they were satisfied with the harmless approach of setting forth some basic tenets of deism. Their non-aggressive attitudes may be explained by the intellectual trends which caused them to accept deism without completely realizing its social and political implications. Many deists came to fear the loss of social respectability and political availability. John Adams, the second president of the United States, Joseph Hawley, a prominent colonial lawyer, and John and Edmund Randolph, Virginia statesmen, embraced deistic views but eventually publicly rejected deism. Clergymen Ezra Stiles and William Bliss abandoned their skeptical ideas and returned to Christianity.¹ The deists' nonaggressiveness may have resulted from their fear of the loss of peace and order if deism were spread among the masses. This fear may have helped orthodox Christianity remain

¹See pp. 55-57.
victorious over deism. One deist believed the upper classes utilized Christianity's superstitions to enslave the masses. Clergymen praised English deists for disseminating their ideas only among the upper classes, and most leading thinkers opposed the spread of deism among the masses. The more militant deism of the 1790's disturbed the cultured and wealthy deists who shared Palmer's and Paine's beliefs that Christianity was a superstition but distrusted their faith in republicanism. These wealthy deists were still more interested in preserving the status quo.

Deists of the eighteenth century may be classified into three general groups. The first and most numerous group accepted basic tenets of deism but rejected the label "deist." Many of them attempted to reform Christianity so it would be more compatible with deism and human reason. The second group embraced the basic aspects of deism but avoided publicly attacking Christianity or spreading it to the masses. A more limited number constituted the third group, which was initiated by Thomas Paine and Elihu Palmer. Their work involved militant public attacks on organized Christianity and attempts to circulate deistic principles among the masses.

Prior to 1784 the conflict between orthodoxy and deism was not explosive. Deists executed their criticism in the guarded phraseology of reformers and simply emphasized their

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2The Temple of Reason, November 27, 1802; Gustav A. Koch, Republican Religion; The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason (New York, 1933), pp. 75-76.
creed, namely, a first cause, a future existence and a virtuous life. Rationalistic clergy of that day accepted this creed but did not go as far as the deist who rejected the authority of the Bible and the necessity for the clergy. Most deists presented Jesus as the first great deistic preacher while Jefferson exhorted men to return "to the principles of a pure deism . . . to reform their moral doctrines to the standards of reason, justice and philanthropy. . . ." Jesus' teachings, the deists purported, had been corrupted by rituals, creeds and churches and needed to be stripped of these useless additions. Their hope was to restore the "pure and simple teachings" of Jesus, "the best the World ever saw or [was] likely to see."3 Some signers of the Declaration of Independence like Benjamin Franklin, Stephen Hopkins and George Wythe, espoused deistic ideas but remained publicly silent on the issues. Other Revolutionary leaders emphasized God as revealed in nature rather than the Bible. Two new theological systems, Unitarianism and Universalism, emerged in the Revolutionary era. They resulted from the religious liberalism of the era and aided the cause of deism. Besides the liberal theological movement, the introduction of English rationalistic works, Newton's

cosmic philosophy and Locke's empirical psychology prepared the way for a bolder deism.4

After 1784 the deists attempted to popularize their views which previously had been confined to letters and diaries. Ethan Allen publicly challenged Christianity in his Reason, the Only Oracle of Man, which expressed a need for freedom from ecclesiasticism. According to him this liberty could only be attained by attacking the Bible--the authority of the clergy. Thomas Paine, in his Age of Reason, openly attacked Christianity and rejected divine revelation. Both Paine and Elihu Palmer, the most militant American deists, wanted to strip the clergy's power to preserve the equal rights of the people, the republican form of government and deism. Their militant activities were enhanced by the activities of clergymen, which increased anticlericalism. Allen was labeled by his opponents as "an ignorant and profane deist" destined to burn in hell. In spite of his statement "I believe in one God and no more," Paine was accused of infidelity. The aggressiveness of Palmer was described as superficial and vain.5

Although orthodox Christians gave alarming accounts about the spread of deism in the 1790's and deists inspiringly reported their progress, the deistic movement was far from

4See pp. 74-90.

5See pp. 95-106; Koch, Republican Religion, p. 144.
reaching a large number of the masses. The noise created by the militant deists and the clergy's defense attracted attention, but this attention did not represent deism's true influence. The deistic movement gradually gave way to a Christian evangelical movement which more effectively appealed to the masses.
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