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THE PIETY OF THE ENGLISH DEISTS: THEIR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH AN ACTIVE GOD

Joseph Waligore

Most scholars think that the English deists believed in a cold, distant deity uninvolved with his creation. Gerald R. Cragg expressed the common view when he said that the God of the English deists:

was abstract and remote [...]. Such a God stood entirely outside the drama of human history; he could not be connected with anything that happens on this insignificant planet. He built the machine, and set it in motion, but the machine now runs its predetermined course in complete independence of its maker.¹

This paper challenges the current consensus about the religious views of the English deists and will argue that they had a pious and personal relationship with a deity who repeatedly intervened in human affairs. My argument contributes to recent efforts that question whether the Enlightenment should be seen as an inevitable march towards secularization, in which the atheism of Parisian radicals like Baron d'Holbach and Diderot are taken as exemplary for defining the period.² My thesis is in line with the findings of B.W. Young, Roy Porter, and others that the English Enlightenment was not secular.³ While most other scholars who situate the English deists in a more pious Enlightenment see them as an outgrowth of Anglican rationalism,⁴ I agree with Justin Champion that the early deists were heavily influenced by the piety of the classical thinkers, especially Cicero and the Stoics.⁵

Even when scholars of the period have noticed that some of the English deists believed in miracles, they fail to see how active the deist God was. For example, Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth has recently argued that the English deists believed in miracles and divine

¹ G.R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason: 1648–1789* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1962), 237.

² A good review of the literature is Jonathan Sheehan, 'Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay', *The American Historical Review*, 108 (October 2003), 1061–80.

³ B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1998), 3, 14–15; R. Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, edited by R. Porter and M. Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 5–6.

⁴ J. O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins: The Man and His Works* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 43–50; R. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 272–6.

⁵ J. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 184–94, 210–12.

providence,⁶ but they ‘denied revelation’ and ‘denied contemporary active providence’.⁷ A similar view was expressed decades ago by A.R. Winnett.⁸ Winnett said the deists believed in miracles, but it was more congenial for them to see God as a First Cause, rather than believing in a deity ‘who is ever present and active in nature and history’.⁹ For both scholars, the deist God did not step entirely away from his creation, but kept a very careful distance.

This paper will demonstrate that a significant majority of English deists, far from believing in a remote, impersonal deity, had a pious and personal relationship with a deity actively involved in human affairs. As this paper will show, many deists prayed fervently to God, some thought these prayers influenced God’s behavior, and almost all of them believed in a deity who repeatedly intervened in human events through planting thoughts in our minds, performing miracles, and making revelations.

English deism is usually considered to have started with the publication of *De Veritate* by Herbert of Cherbury in 1624 and to have flourished until the middle of the eighteenth century; but just as the Enlightenment itself was not homogenous, we should remember that English deism was neither homogenous nor an organized movement. There were different kinds of deism, as Wayne Hudson says, and their various expressions ‘cannot be understood in terms of a single pervasive “deism”’.¹⁰ Jeffrey Wigelsworth is right that ‘broad brushstroke pictures of deism [...] obscures as much as clarifies’ and we need ‘nuanced studies that are sensitive to the individual characteristics’ of each deist.¹¹ If pressed, though, for a unifying theme, I would say that the English deists generally emphasized God’s goodness and fairness, not his power and sovereignty. They thought it was necessary to use their reason and not defer to religious or cultural authority. Many of them attacked the beliefs and practices of their Christian contemporaries because they thought these beliefs and practices were not reasonable, but while they criticized some aspects of received tradition, they remained deeply religious, affirming belief in miracles, divine interventions in human affairs, and the importance of prayer.

I include among the English deists all the thinkers generally considered deists by their contemporaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and who left a significant body of published pamphlets, tracts, and books. (I exclude Thomas Hobbes because contemporary scholars rarely consider him a deist.) Listed chronologically, the English deists were Herbert of Cherbury, Charles Blount, John Toland, Shaftesbury, John Trenchard, Anthony Collins, Thomas Gordon, William Wollaston, Bernard Mandeville, Thomas Woolston, Thomas Morgan, Thomas Chubb, Conyers Middleton, Bolingbroke, Henry Dodwell, and Peter Annet.

Various modern scholars have claimed that different thinkers in this list were not really deists. Most commonly, many scholars think Herbert of Cherbury was not a deist because of his strong piety and his faith in an interventionist deity. David A. Pailin said Herbert was not a deist because, unlike the other deists, his deity was not a ‘remote, uninvolved First Cause’ and ‘his remarks about God generally present the deity as an active Providence that is continually involved in

⁶ J.R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics and Newtonian Public Science* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 196.

⁷ Wigelsworth, *Deism*, 7, 207; J.R. Wigelsworth, “‘Their Grosser Degrees of Infidelity’: Deists, Politics, Natural Philosophy and the Power of God in Eighteenth-Century England”, PhD dissertation (University of Saskatchewan, 2005), ii, 1.

⁸ A.R. Winnett, ‘Were the Deists “Deists”?’, *The Church Quarterly Review*, 161 (1960), 70–7 (71–2).

⁹ Winnett, ‘Deists’, 76.

¹⁰ W. Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity: The English Deists and Reform* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 3.

¹¹ J.R. Wigelsworth, ‘The Disputed Root of Salvation in Eighteenth-Century English Deism: Thomas Chubb and Thomas Morgan Debate the Impact of the Fall’, *Intellectual History Review*, 19:1 (2009), 29–43 (43).

the processes of reality'.¹² This paper will show that the vast majority of deists believed in a deity who often intervened in people's daily affairs. Thus Herbert is legitimately characterized as a deist, and Pailin's resistance to do so highlights the problem this paper addresses.

David Berman has a more sweeping challenge to the question of who should be considered a deist. He argues that some of the deists did not even believe in God, and if we read them in the right way, we see they were signaling that they were actually atheists. Berman maintains that they hid their true beliefs because they were afraid of persecution and instead engaged in what he calls 'theological lying'.¹³

Certainly many people in early modern Europe engaged in dissimulation to avoid personal persecution and censorship. Perez Zagorin argues that this technique was 'so extensive it was like a submerged continent in the religious, intellectual and social life of early modern Europe'.¹⁴ Indeed, one English deist, John Toland, admitted to the necessity of dissimulation. Toland said the fear of persecution gave rise in his writing to 'shiftings, ambiguities, equivocation and hypocrisy in all its shapes'.¹⁵

While it makes sense that some deists might sometimes dissimulate, I find Berman's arguments that many of them were atheists unconvincing. First, his arguments are often based on what the deists' opponents say about them, and this is not a reliable source. Second, the deists make many statements that do not make sense if they were atheists. For example, Berman thinks Matthew Tindal was an atheist,¹⁶ yet Tindal waxed rhapsodically about how much God loved and cared for us. Tindal said that

from the Considerations of these Perfections [of God's] we cannot but have the highest Veneration, nay, the greatest Adoration and Love for this supreme Being [...] These Reflections [...] give us a wonderful and surprizing Sense of the divine goodness, fill us with Admiration, Transport and Extacy [...] and] Raptures of the highest Praise and Thanksgiving.¹⁷

Atheists are not known for this kind of praise of God, but it was not unusual among the deists.

The arguments Berman gives for why individual deists are atheists are also unconvincing. For example, he asserts that Anthony Collins must have been lying when he said he believed in the Trinity. Berman said 'a deist, it is agreed, must minimally, reject Christian mysteries', or those aspects of Christian faith that cannot be explained by reason such as the Trinity.¹⁸ The problem here is that Berman's premise is false. Many English deists did reject mysteries, but almost half accepted them. Bolingbroke said that once reason had established a revelation as divine, it was 'impertinent' for our understanding to question the parts of revelation our reason did not understand.¹⁹ Mandeville had a whole chapter on Christian mysteries in his *Free Thoughts*

¹² D.A. Pailin, 'Should Herbert of Cherbury be Regarded as a "Deist"?', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 51 (2001), 113–49 (137).

¹³ D. Berman, 'Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying', in *Deism, Masonry and the Enlightenment: Essays Honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge*, edited by J.A.L. Lemay (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 61–78.

¹⁴ P. Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 14.

¹⁵ J. Toland, *Clidophorus*, in *Tetradymus* (London, 1720), 68.

¹⁶ Berman, 'Deism, Immortality', 77.

¹⁷ M. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (London, 1730), 15. There is another 1730 edition with different pagination. This copy has 442 pages.

¹⁸ Berman, 'Deism, Immortality', 61.

¹⁹ Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, 5 vols (London, 1754), vol. 2, 346, 371.

on *Religion*. There he said that even though mysteries can shock our understanding, we have to humbly accept them.²⁰ Chubb, Woolston, Shaftesbury, and Dodwell also accepted Christian mysteries.²¹

Finally, Berman says that nothing else explains the hostility of their contemporary readers besides the fact the deists were signaling they were secret atheists.²² There are better explanations, though, for why many people greeted the deists with hostility. One is that the deists mercilessly ridiculed their opponents' positions. Another is that deists were not deferential to cultural authorities who felt they were entitled to this deference. A third is that the deists showed that beliefs which many people thought fit together well might not fit together at all. Some deists emphasized natural religion so much that they made revealed religion seem superfluous. Other deists said the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on *sola scriptura* was not consistent with the Church of England's reverence for the Church Councils and Fathers. Other deists said the Bible's miracle accounts could not stand up to reasonable examination. These thinkers were questioning the religious consensus of their day, but that did not mean they were not pious themselves.

Scholars who discuss the deist God focus on their belief or disbelief in miracles and revelation, but these basic Christian beliefs would be the ones a deist would most likely lie about if he wanted to maintain his good social standing or protect himself from prosecution. So instead of focusing on miracles or revelation, I will start with two points that non-pious people would have no obvious reason to discuss: God planting ideas into our minds and personal prayer. The significant majority of deists made pious statements about these points that went far beyond anything that would help protect them. These pious statements come from their published books and pamphlets, but there are also no private or scribal writings that contradict these statements. After establishing these points, I will then show that all the deists said they believed in miracles and all of them except one said they believed in revelation.

All these points show that the English deists in general did not have a remote, cold, or abstract God. Their God was very active in human affairs, and they often had a heartfelt, personal relationship with this deity.

THOUGHTS IMPLANTED INTO OUR MINDS BY DIVINE BEINGS

A very common scholarly conception about the English deists is that their deity was not involved in daily human life. William Lane Craig said 'the God of all deists, was the cosmic architect who engineered and built the machine, but who would not be bothered to interfere in the trivial affairs of men'.²³ S.J. Barnett said the deist God was one who 'no longer intervened in human history'.²⁴ In this section, I will demonstrate this widely accepted view is inaccurate.

²⁰ B. Mandeville, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness* (London, 1720), 67.

²¹ T. Chubb, *A Collection of Tracts on Various Subjects*, 2 vols, second edition (London, 1754), vol. 1, 257–60; Thomas Woolston, *The Exact Fitness of Time* (London, 1722), 1–3, 25–6; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols (London, 1711), vol. 3, 315; Henry Dodwell, *Christianity not Founded on Argument* (London, 1741), 69–70, 83–5.

²² D. Berman, *Berkeley and Irish Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), 163. See also J.A.L. Lemay in the introduction to Lemay, *Deism, Masonry*, 12.

²³ W.L. Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 95.

²⁴ S.J. Barnett, *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests: The Origins of Enlightenment Anticlericalism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 21.

From among seventeen English deists who left a significant body of published work, thirteen of them believed that God or the angels were so actively involved in our lives that they directly inspired us and guided us through thoughts planted in our minds. Seven of these deists thought these inspirations happened continually or frequently. Six others said these direct inspirations happened, but only on rare occasions. Another deist, Anthony Collins, said God might give people inspiration, but we could not be sure.

Charles Blount declared that God planted thoughts into our minds all the time. In his book *Religio Laici*, Blount described how God guided our behavior by influencing our thoughts. He told of a man who was traveling to London when God implanted the impression into his mind that the road was too dirty for him. So the man left the road he was on and took another road to London. Under God's guidance, the man then avoided some trouble on the first road or encountered some harm God meant for him on the second road. Blount said, 'here is *God's conduct* of him, either to his *Good* or *Harm*, leading him by that Idea of avoiding Dirt [...]. For thus *God* doth ever manage us by the Temper of our *Body*, with his inoperating Spirit therein'.²⁵

Blount generalized from this point, saying that God guided all our thoughts and actions in this way. He said that God guided us by 'such *Idea's* as he thereby sets before our Fancies. 'Tis apparent that he does thereby lead and guide all our Thoughts, Words, and Actions'.²⁶

William Wollaston thought divine beings frequently influenced us through direct impressions planted into our minds or through other kinds of suggestion. He said that God or the angels could influence us 'by means of *secret* and sometimes *sudden influences* on our minds', or by 'suggestion, and impulse, or other silent communications of some *spiritual being*'.²⁷ He said these direct influences caused a person to want to avoid a street where a building was about to fall or where a dangerous enemy was lying in wait for him. Through such divine communications, God or the angels care for us without altering any laws of nature. Wollaston thought these influences happened 'so frequently' that anyone who closely observed his thoughts and actions could observe them.²⁸ Wollaston also thought that these divine influences had important consequences in world history: he cryptically suggested that God planted the idea into Hannibal's mind to never directly attack Rome, and thus Hannibal lost his chance to destroy Rome.²⁹

Thomas Morgan went even further than Wollaston in discussing the impact of angelic inspiration on human history. Morgan said the angels often influenced world affairs by planting ideas in people's minds. Just as people can greatly influence each other, superior intelligence or angels 'have the same power and influence over us' to change our motives and thoughts. Morgan thought these angels influenced people so much 'there is scarce any great Discovery made, any great Turn in a Man's Sentiments, Thoughts, and Views, or any of the great momentous Changes and Revolutions of the World, and human Affairs' that was not influenced by angels planting impressions in people's minds.³⁰

Morgan also thought people could take steps to receive divine inspiration. To be receptive to inspirations, Morgan said a person must rein in his personal desires and abandon all concern for wealth, power, ambition, or physical gratifications. By abandoning worldly desires, a person

²⁵ C. Blount, *Religio Laici Written in a Letter to John Dryden* (London, 1683), 63–4.

²⁶ Blount, *Religio Laici*, 60.

²⁷ W. Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (London, 1724), 105–6.

²⁸ Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 106–7.

²⁹ Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 107.

³⁰ T. Morgan, *Physico-Theology* (London, 1741), 318–20.

might then enter into what he called the ‘silent Solitude of his own Mind’. This ‘silent Solitude’ opens the way for divine inspiration:

When a man does this, he converses with God, he derives Communication of Light and Knowledge from the eternal Father and Fountain of it; he receives Intelligence and Information from eternal Wisdom, and hears the clear intelligible Voice of his Maker and Former speaking to his silent, undisturb’d attentive Reason.³¹

Herbert of Cherbury agreed with Morgan that we could receive divine inspiration if we prepared ourselves for it. To begin with, said Herbert, ‘we must employ prayers, vows, faith and every faculty which can be used to invoke’ the divine. Then ‘the breath of the Divine Spirit must be immediately felt’ and the recommended course of action must be good. When these conditions were met ‘and we feel the Divine guidance in our activities, we must recognise with reverence the good will of God’.³²

Like Herbert and Morgan, Thomas Chubb thought people could take actions to cause God to give us inspiration. Chubb said that ‘*God does sometimes kindly interpose and by a supernatural operation bring [...] such motives to men’s minds as are necessary to excite to good actions*’.³³ According to Chubb, God is not the only supernatural being that can plant thoughts into our mind: the devil can too.³⁴ While the devil tempts us, Chubb said that if we make ‘most solemn addresses and applications to God’ in prayer, God will help us resist these temptations by presenting more positive motives to our minds.³⁵

Throughout his writings, Thomas Gordon was motivated by the desire to restore Christianity to its original simplicity, as it was before priests corrupted it. In one pamphlet, he praised the Quakers as the sect closest to original Christianity. He said ‘that if the Providence of God had not raised *them* up, we should have *no living Transcript of the pure, primitive, Christian religion left in the World*’.³⁶ The main reason he praised the Quakers was that they thought God was still actively inspiring people. He said they did not:

EXPLAIN AWAY the Spirit of God, by setting up *Distinctions* between the *Spirit in the Apostles*, and the Spirit of in a good Men at all Times; between *Inspiration* and *Illumination*; *extraordinary Assistances* of the Spirit, and *common Assistances*: *Distinctions*, which have no *Foundation* in the *Bible* or in *Reason*.³⁷

So Gordon thought both the Bible and reason showed that God still inspired people.

Henry Dodwell argued that the Holy Spirit continually puts impressions into our minds about the truth of the Gospel. He argued reason was ineffective compared to ‘*a constant and particular Revelation imparted separately and supernaturally to every Individual*’.³⁸ This divine revelation irradiates people’s souls with the light of God because the Holy Spirit dispenses ‘his certain Inteligences to the Soul’.³⁹ Dodwell is usually seen as just criticizing the inconsistencies of Christian

³¹ T. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 3 vols, second edition, corrected (London, 1738), vol. 1, 429–30.

³² Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate*, translated by M.H. Carre, third edition (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1937), 308.

³³ Chubb, *Collection of Tracts*, vol. 2, 152.

³⁴ Chubb, *Collection of Tracts*, vol. 2, 195.

³⁵ Chubb, *Collection of Tracts*, vol. 2, 168.

³⁶ T. Gordon, *A Vindication of the Quakers* (London, 1732), 31.

³⁷ Gordon, *Vindication of the Quakers*, 30.

³⁸ Dodwell, *Christianity Argument*, 112.

³⁹ Dodwell, *Christianity Argument*, 56.

theology, not presenting his own opinion. His contemporary deist, Thomas Chubb, however, did think Dodwell was presenting his own opinion. Even though he did not agree with Dodwell's argument, Chubb said it was 'masterly' and 'worthy the attention'.⁴⁰ Considering so many other deists emphasized divine impressions, it has to be taken seriously that Dodwell might be presenting his real opinion.

While the seven deists already mentioned thought divine beings frequently inspired us or planted ideas in our minds, the other six who believed in direct revelation thought it happened much less frequently.

Thomas Woolston thought God had inspired people throughout history through the gift of prophecy. He particularly praised the prophetic ability of the early Quakers and the spokesman for the French Prophets, John Lacy. Woolston said Lacy was an 'inspired Person [...] carried in a Trance, an Extasy, a Transport, or Divine Furour' to see the future.⁴¹ Such praise is surprising since almost every scholar assumes the deists were horrified by the enthusiasm exhibited by the French prophets. What is even more surprising is how Woolston thought he could tell who was a true prophet: he said he had been visited by an angel who explained the key to understanding prophecy to him. Through this key, he claimed he was the only person who truly understood the inspired writings of the prophets, evangelists, and apostles.⁴² He also claimed he possessed powers of divination and interpretation of visions and could see the past, present, and future.⁴³

Matthew Tindal also affirmed the reality of direct revelation, at least with respect to biblical figures. For example, he said Solomon was 'inspir'd with Wisdom from Above, had Conferences with God himself'.⁴⁴ Tindal, however, did not think this meant that we could now totally trust their inspirations because these inspirations were distorted by human passions. Worse, it was possible that 'evil Beings can impress Notions in Mens Minds' in order to mislead inspired people.⁴⁵ Thus, while Tindal believed some people received inspiration, he continually insisted that without natural religion, which carried its own marks of truth with it, there was no way to discern true inspirations from false ones.⁴⁶

Conyers Middleton thought God inspired people during biblical times.⁴⁷ While he ignited a considerable controversy when he said that miracles did not continue past the time of the apostles, he said that for at least fifty years after the death of the apostles, the Apostolic Fathers may have continued to receive divine impressions, visions, and extraordinary illuminations from God. The important thing for him was that these divine interventions were only meant to comfort the person receiving them; they were not meant for the Church in general.⁴⁸ Although he does not make his beliefs on this point clear, if Middleton thought these inspirations might have continued past the time of the apostles, he also might have thought they were still happening now to a small number of pious Christians.

⁴⁰ T. Chubb, *Enquiry Concerning Redemption* (London, 1743), 11–15, 15.

⁴¹ T. Woolston, *A Second Letter to the Reverend Dr. Bennet* (London, 1721), 16–17.

⁴² T. Woolston, *A Second Free-Gift to the Clergy* (London, 1723), 76.

⁴³ T. Woolston, *A Free-Gift to the Clergy* (London, 1722), 72.

⁴⁴ Tindal, *Christianity as Old*, 244.

⁴⁵ Tindal, *Christianity as Old*, 243.

⁴⁶ Tindal, *Christianity as Old*, 243.

⁴⁷ C. Middleton, *Miscellaneous Works*, 4 vols (London, 1752), vol. 2, 17, 80–2.

⁴⁸ Middleton, *Miscellaneous Works*, vol. 1, 8.

John Trenchard believed that God, in earlier times, sometimes impressed thoughts into people's minds and might still do it. He said, 'it is not to be denied but Almighty God has sometimes communicated himself to particular persons by secret impressions upon their senses and understandings, so I dare not affirm, that he may not and does not do so still'.⁴⁹

Shaftesbury wrote a long *Letter on Enthusiasm* in which he first defined enthusiasm as a mistaken feeling that one was divinely inspired. Rather than ruling out inspiration, however, he said that authentic revelations from God did occur; the challenge for people was to discern a divine inspiration from a false one. 'Nor can Divine Inspiration', he said, 'by its outward Marks, be easily distinguished from it [enthusiasm]. For Inspiration is a *real* feeling of the Divine Presence, and Enthusiasm a *false one*'.⁵⁰ To see if we have been inspired by God or not, we need to 'judge the spirits' by taking stock of ourselves to see that we are of sound sense, sedate and cool, and free of biasing passions and vapors.⁵¹

Bolingbroke had a twenty-page discussion of divine inspiration in which he argued that it did occur, but it was mistaken to think God did it directly. Rather, inspiration came from lesser spirits such as angels. Bolingbroke was influenced by Plato's analysis of how Socrates received divine inspiration; Bolingbroke considered this Platonic model superior to the Christian model of inspiration because the Platonic model made a distinction between the ethereal body and the elementary body. (These were two subtle energy bodies the later Platonists believed all humans had.) The elementary body was involved with inspirations from God, but our ethereal body was involved with inspiration from other, lesser divine beings such as guardian angels. It was the ethereal body that was the medium for Socrates's voices and visions. Bolingbroke said:

it was by this medium [the ethereal body] that SOCRATES was inspired by his demon, or guardian angel. He saw visions, and he heard voices: but how? Not by his elementary, but by his ethereal, senses. Thus an inferior spirit, and not the Supreme Being, is the immediate actor; and inspiration is no longer an unmeaning figure of speech.⁵²

For Bolingbroke, those who insisted it was God instead of angels who directly inspired people were arrogant; they raised humanity too high and debased God.⁵³

Anthony Collins can possibly be included among the deists who thought supernatural beings put thoughts or inspirations into our minds. In an eight-page discussion of whether God gives inspiration to people, Collins argued the position that miracles were not the only way that God manifested in the world. Collins argued that God could work in the world through inspiration. He said 'tho' I take the Way of *Inspiration* to be better than the Way of *extraordinary Works*', I cannot be sure God worked that way.⁵⁴

As I have shown, three quarters of the English deists who left a significant body of written work believed in a deity or angels that actively implanted thoughts in people's minds or inspired them. I know of only three of the deists – Mandeville, Toland, and Annet – who did not deal in a

⁴⁹ J. Trenchard, *Cato's Letters*, edited by R. Hamowy, 2 vols (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1995), vol. 2, 863. This is letter 124, dated 13 April 1723.

⁵⁰ Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 52–3.

⁵¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 54.

⁵² Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. 1, 157.

⁵³ Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. 1, 157.

⁵⁴ A. Collins, *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London, 1741), 26. There is more than one page 26 in this book. In the online version of this book in Eighteenth Century Collections Online, this is image 349.

meaningful way with the topic of direct inspiration. Clearly scholars have mischaracterized the English deists when they see them as having a remote deity who never intervened in people's lives.

PRAYERS AND PRAYING

A common conception many scholars have about the English deists is that their God was too removed and transcendent to be an object of personal prayer. Sir Leslie Stephen blamed the decline of the deists on their 'cold and abstract' conception of God. He said their God 'was not rooted in the deepest convictions, nor associated with the most powerful emotions of its adherents. The metaphysical deity was too cold and abstract a conception to excite much zeal in his worshippers'.⁵⁵ In a similar vein, Kerry Walters argued the deist conception of God was 'psychologically distressing' because 'such an abstract deity might meet the religious and emotional needs of a disembodied intellect, but it is scarcely sufficient for most flesh-and-blood humans, who long for and require a more personal relationship with the divine'.⁵⁶ Yet Stephens and Walters, and the many scholars who agree with them, are overlooking significant evidence of the deists' piety. The English deists in general had a very personal relationship with a deity who excited their zeal and love. Many of them prayed to God and gave instructions on the practice of prayer. Some of them thought prayers could cause God to intervene in the world, while others thought prayers only brought people closer to God.

Herbert of Cherbury, for example, was so sure God answered our prayers he said prayer was an idea God put into every human. He said that 'every religion believes that the Deity can hear and answer prayers; and we are bound to assume a special Providence – to omit other sources of proof – from the universal testimony of the sense of divine assistance in times of distress'.⁵⁷ For Herbert, this universal testimony of God answering our prayers was evidence that confidence in the efficacy of prayer was engraved into everyone's heart by God.

Herbert was speaking from experience. In his autobiography, Herbert said he once prayed for and received a divine sign. He had written a manuscript, *De Veritate*, and was wondering whether he should publish it. So he got down on his knees and prayed fervently to God for a sign instructing him what to do. Herbert wrote:

Being thus doubtfull in my Chamber, one fair day in the Summer, my Casement being opened towards the South, the Sun shining clear and no Wind stirring, I took my book, *De Veritate*, in my hand, and, kneeling on my Knees, devoutly said these words: 'O Thou Eternal God, Author of the Light which now shines upon me, and Giver of all inward Illuminations, I do beseech Thee, of Thy infinite Goodness, to pardon a greater Request than a Sinner ought to make; I am not satisfied enough whether I shall publish This Book, *De Veritate*; if it be for thy Glory, I beseech Thee give me some Sign from Heaven, if not, I shall suppress it.' I had no sooner spoken these words, but a loud 'tho yet gentle Noise came from the Heavens (for it was like nothing on Earth) which did so comfort and cheer me, that I took my Petition as granted, and that I had the Sign I demanded, whereupon also I resolved to print my Book.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ L. Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols, third edition (London: Smith, Elder & co. 1902), vol. 1, 169.

⁵⁶ K. Walters, *Rational Infidels: The American Deists* (Durango, CO: Longwood Academic, 1992), 287. Walters is primarily discussing the American deists in this book, but he sees the English deists the same way.

⁵⁷ Herbert, *De Veritate*, 292.

⁵⁸ Herbert, *The Life of Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (Dublin, 1771), 244–5.

Herbert here asserted that, after praying for a sign, he heard a ‘gentle noise’ that cheered and comforted him so deeply that he took it for a divine response to his prayer.

Modern scholars of deism often have difficulty fitting Herbert’s religious views into their scheme of what deists believed. For example, Peter Gay said that Herbert – who lived in the early seventeenth century – was atypical of the later deists because Herbert thought he had received a divine sign;⁵⁹ but, instead of saying Herbert was atypical of the deists, we should broaden our views about the importance of prayer to the deists.

Thomas Woolston was known for his attacks on the literal interpretation of Jesus’s miracles, a point which at first glance would seem to mean he was a secularist; but Woolston himself wrote that his motive for attacking Jesus’s miracles was that God had called him to do so. Like one of the reluctant biblical prophets, Woolston needed divine urging to deliver a message he knew would be deeply unpopular:

As often as I thought on this Work, which at Times I believed God would call me to, very melancholy Thoughts arose in my Mind; and I have prayed that God would pass me by, and take another to it: Nay, to the utmost of my Power, I have study’d how to avoid the doing of it: But God’s Will is irresistible, and therefore I humbly Submit to him, and by his Grace and Assistance will perform all that he shall enable me to do in the Work that is before me.⁶⁰

Woolston’s prayer that God choose someone else went unheeded, though, and he died in jail after having been convicted of blasphemy for attacking Jesus’s miracles.

Herbert and Woolston were not unusual among the deists. Many of them prayed very earnestly for divine guidance and inspiration. For example, Thomas Morgan wrote this prayer which emphasized his dependence on God and called on God to continually lead him:

O thou eternal Reason, Father of Light, and immense Fountain of all Truth and Goodness; suffer me, with the deepest Humility and Awe to apply to, and petition thee [...]. I own, therefore, O Father of Spirits, this natural, necessary Dependence upon thy constant, universal Presence, Power and Agency. Take me under the constant, uninterrupted Protection and Care of thy Divine Wisdom, [...] if I should err from the Way of Truth, and wander in the Dark, instruct me by a fatherly Correction; let Pains and Sorrows fetch me home, and teach me Wisdom; [...] for ever bless me with the enlightening, felicitating Influence of thy benign Presence, Power and Love.⁶¹

This type of long, devout prayer was not unusual amongst the deists: William Wollaston, Thomas Chubb, and Peter Annet had other notable examples of similarly long and devout prayers.⁶²

The writings of some English deists have long discussions about the theory of prayer and the manner in which we should pray. This point adds to the thesis that we need to adjust our understanding of their religious views.

Thomas Chubb discussed prayer more than any other deist, with his longest writing on the subject being a thirty-page pamphlet called *An Enquiry Concerning Prayer*. Here he began by insisting that prayer was a duty God required of us so we can achieve a closer relationship with him. Chubb said the purpose of prayer was to render someone ‘a suitable and proper

⁵⁹ P. Gay, *Deism: An Anthology* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand, 1968), 30.

⁶⁰ Woolston, *Free-Gift to the Clergy*, 4–5.

⁶¹ Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, vol. 1, 426–7.

⁶² Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 120–1; T. Chubb, *The Supremacy of the Father Asserted* (London, 1715), first two unnumbered pages after the title page; P. Annet, *A View of the Life of King David* (London, 1765?), 33–4.

object of God's special care and love', and defined prayer as 'an address or application of a dependant being to his supreme governour, and original benefactor'. Prayer, he writes:

naturally draws forth our souls in filial fear, in hope and trust, in love, delight, and joy in God; and creates in us a just concern to please him, and to approve ourselves in his sight; and consequently to put on that purity and piety, humility and charity which is the spirit and practice of true christianity.⁶³

Chubb advised frequent prayer, for 'it is when we forget God, when God is not in all our thoughts, that we do amiss; then our minds and lives are corrupted and defiled'.⁶⁴ Chubb believed that God heard all our petitionary prayers, and answered some of them, provided the requests were lawful, and we prayed earnestly 'with a modest resignation to God's will'.⁶⁵

In his work, *The Religion of Nature Delineated*, William Wollaston devoted ten pages to a discussion on the best way to pray. He discussed what times and places were best for prayer: times when there would be no interruptions and places where we would be away from other people, their bustle, and noise.⁶⁶ He considered how loud the prayers should be: if we were in private, the words should be no louder 'than just to make it audible to *our selves*'.⁶⁷ He discussed what words to say: 'the *best* and *properest* we can. This cannot be done in *extemporaneous*, effusions and therefore must be forms *premeditated*'.⁶⁸ He also declared what physical posture to assume: a posture which expresses humility, reverence, and earnestness. Finally, he discussed what our mental state should be when we prayed: humble, intent, and earnest. He ended this section by writing, 'I am not insensible how much I may expose my self by these things to the laughter of some, who are utter strangers to all this language. What a stir is here, *say they*, about *praying*'.⁶⁹ Wollaston was unmoved by the threat of mockery from skeptics because he believed prayer was a serious matter deserving of much careful attention.

Other deists argued that prayers could not change God's will, while at the same time they still strongly advocated the practice of prayer. Annet is the best example. He said prayer needed to be fervent and sincere, full of obedience and humble adoration.⁷⁰ Prayer, wrote Annet, 'keeps up a Dependence on Deity in the Minds of the People, and so may be a Means to help subdue the Mind to Virtue, and Submission to God's Will [... and] *Resignation* to the All-wise director'.⁷¹ Annet said prayer should be practiced like a sailor throwing an anchor to a rock: the sailors 'pull as if they would hale the Rock to them, but they hale themselves to the Rock'.⁷² Likewise, Tindal, Gordon, Trenchard, and Bolingbroke argued that prayer did not change God's will. Nevertheless, they all promoted prayer as a duty we owed to God in acknowledgement of God's constant benevolent care.⁷³ For example, Trenchard and Gordon said that reason shows 'Prayer itself becomes

⁶³ Chubb, *Collection of Tracts*, vol. 1, 288–9.

⁶⁴ Chubb, *Collection of Tracts*, vol. 1, 289.

⁶⁵ Chubb, *Collection of Tracts*, vol. 1, 293.

⁶⁶ Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 122.

⁶⁷ Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 123.

⁶⁸ Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 124.

⁶⁹ Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 125.

⁷⁰ P. Annet, *A Collection of the Tracts of a Certain Free Enquirer* (London, 1750), 144–7.

⁷¹ Annet, *Collection of the Tracts*, 146.

⁷² Annet, *Collection of the Tracts*, 147.

⁷³ J. Trenchard and T. Gordon, *The Independent Whig* (London, 1721), 435; Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. 4, 175; Tindal, *Christianity as Old*, 44.

chiefly a Duty, as it raises our Minds, by a Contemplation of the Divine Wisdom, Power and Goodness, to an Acknowledgment of his repeated Bounties to Mankind'.⁷⁴

The many English deists who had a serious concern for prayer contradict claims that the deists in general had a 'cold and abstract' concept of God. Instead, their writings suggest fervent piety and a close and personal relationship with God. Further, as the following two sections of this paper will demonstrate, all the English deists said they believed in miracles, and every deist except Annet said the Christian scriptures were divine revelation.

MIRACLES

Many scholars think all the English deists believed in immutable, natural laws that even God could not break. James Herrick, for example, said the English deists thought 'natural law is inviolable' and so 'not even the divinity is free to interrupt the rational laws governing nature'. For this reason, Herrick concluded, 'the rejection of miracle was true north on the compass of Deist rhetoric'.⁷⁵ The trouble with this view is it misses how the deists were generally followers of the Newtonian view of science (as Jeffrey Wigelsworth shows in his book on the subject),⁷⁶ and the Newtonians believed in a God who actively intervened in the world.⁷⁷

All the English deists made statements that God performed miracles. The question is whether we can believe these statements. Some may have dissimulated about their more radical religious views to avoid persecution. I agree with Wayne Hudson, however, that the English deists are situated in the English Protestant Enlightenment and did not follow Spinoza and his followers into radical ideas.⁷⁸ This makes it much more likely that they were sincere when they said they believed in miracles and the Christian revelation. The following survey begins with the deists we can be certain were sincere in their belief in miracles, and finishes with ones we have less certainty about.

Some English deists said God never contravened natural law to perform miracles. These deists, however, found ways around this position. Thomas Morgan is a good example of a deist who believed in immutable laws but also believed in miracles. In one of his later works, Morgan said God never subverted the general laws he made by performing miracles:

God governs the World, and directs all Affairs, not by particular and occasional, but by general, uniform and established Laws; and the Reason why he does not miraculously interpose, as they would have him, by suspending or setting aside the general, established Laws of Nature and Providence, is, because this would subvert the whole Order of the Universe, and destroy all the Wisdom and Contrivance of the first Plan.⁷⁹

Yet later in the same book Morgan wrote that miracles did occur in the form of angelic actions done in accordance with the general, established laws of nature.

⁷⁴ Trenchard and Gordon, *Independent Whig*, 435.

⁷⁵ J.A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 27, 140.

⁷⁶ Wigelsworth, *Deism*, 101.

⁷⁷ P. Harrison, 'Newtonian Science, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56 (October 1995), 531–53.

⁷⁸ Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity*, 3, 17.

⁷⁹ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 96.

Morgan sought to explain angelic miracles by a comparison to animal husbandry. He said that humans care for animals and control their lives without breaking general laws, and from the animals' point of view our work must seem miraculous or 'all particular Interposition, and supernatural Agency'.⁸⁰ In the same way, Morgan asserted, the angels can do what, to us, seem like miracles without breaking the uniform laws of nature. He said that if we could see the

other intelligent free Agents above us, who have the same natural establish'd Authority and Command over us, as we have with regard to the inferior Ranks and Classes of Creatures, the Business of Providence, moral Government, and particular Interpositions by general Laws of Nature would be plain enough.⁸¹

Angelic actions do not contravene the laws of nature but their operation is beyond our capacity to understand, and so they seem like miracles to us.

William Wollaston also emphasized immutable laws while saying there were 'most probably' miracles wrought by angels in accord with these immutable laws. Wollaston said there 'most probably are beings *invisible*, and *superior* in nature to us, who may by other means be in many respects *ministers* of God's providence, and authors under Him of many events to particular men, without *altering* the laws of nature'.⁸²

Thomas Woolston is best known for his attacks on Jesus's miracles. In these attacks he ridiculed many of them, saying they were 'full of Absurditys, Improbabilities and Incredibilitys'.⁸³ Nevertheless, in his lesser known works, he asserted that Jesus did perform miracles. Woolston, like almost all the deists, thought God was perfectly wise and good, and so God would always do things in the best possible way. From this basic assumption, Woolston then deduced that God would not have sent Jesus to perform miracles in the backwater province of Palestine. Instead, God would have sent Jesus to perform miracles in front of the Roman emperor Tiberius. God would do this to give Christianity the best chance to grow quickly, as it could be supported by the Emperor instead of being suppressed. Based on this line of reasoning, Woolston concluded that Jesus went before the Roman emperor Tiberius and performed miracles in his presence.⁸⁴ Woolston also thought Providence used the Roman Empire to foster the spread of Christianity and that God employed miracles to protect the Empire for as long as it served this purpose.⁸⁵

Thomas Chubb, like Woolston, carefully examined Jesus's miracles, and concluded that many of them never happened. Chubb rejected the authenticity of miracles he saw as immoral, such as when Jesus cast demons into innocent pigs or cursed a poor fig tree because it was not bearing fruit even though it was out of season. However, Chubb did believe in those biblical miracles which were done for a good purpose, such as feeding the hungry crowd with loaves and fishes when there was no food nearby.⁸⁶

Some deists made unequivocal statements that God had performed miracles in biblical times: John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, Henry Dodwell, and Conyers Middleton all clearly stated this

⁸⁰ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 317.

⁸¹ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 314–15.

⁸² Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 107–8.

⁸³ T. Woolston, *Discourse on Miracles* (London, 1727), 4.

⁸⁴ T. Woolston, *The Old Apology for the Truth of the Christian Religion* (London, 1705), 3–7, 27–30, 34–6.

⁸⁵ Woolston, *Old Apology*, 32–3, 317–24.

⁸⁶ T. Chubb, *Posthumous Works*, 2 vols (London, 1748), vol. 2, 179–93.

position.⁸⁷ Herbert of Cherbury was so sure God performed miracles that he thought this doctrine, and the related notion that God answered our prayers, was an idea God put into every human.⁸⁸ Matthew Tindal said that the apostles, including Judas, had the power of performing miracles, even to the extent of raising the dead.⁸⁹ Tindal also thought that it was possible that evil, supernatural beings as well as angelic ones could perform miracles. This meant that the other marks of a revelation, such as the goodness of its doctrines, were more important than the accompanying miracles in establishing its authenticity.⁹⁰

The position of Shaftesbury, Mandeville, and Bolingbroke on miracles is at first more difficult to understand. Each made statements about immutable natural laws, but then they qualified their position in ways which showed they believed in miracles.

Shaftesbury emphasized immutable, natural laws, while also discussing miracles seriously. He said miracles did not reveal the essence of God, as they only showed that some being had greater power than humans. Instead he emphasized that only just and uniform laws led to knowledge of a God that was worthy of our worship.⁹¹ However, he did say that once people knew the just, eternal God, they could receive a revelation or a miracle and that the vulgar may need these miracles to believe in God.⁹²

Bernard Mandeville, in his most famous work, *The Fable of the Bees*, has one character in a dialogue assert that it would be an inferior God that needed to patch up his own handiwork: 'you entertain Notions of the Deity that are unworthy of him [...] to make a Scheme first, and afterwards to mend it, when it proves defective, [this] is the Business of finite wisdom'.⁹³ In the same book, however, Mandeville has the character he said represented his views say that 'all true Religion must be reveal'd, and could not have come into the World without Miracle'.⁹⁴ In a later book, *Free Thoughts on Religion*, Mandeville wrote that Moses performed miracles as did Jesus and the apostles.⁹⁵ Here he explained his position on miracles by saying they were above reason but not against it. He said that God could do miracles, and only those suffering from 'Presumption' or 'the highest Insolence' did not believe in them.⁹⁶

In the last volume of his *Philosophical Works*, Bolingbroke had a ninety-page discussion of 'particular providences', a term which was often synonymous with miracles. Here he argued that God worked only through natural laws and never broke these natural laws in order to care for individual people.⁹⁷ However, in this long discussion, he also asserted that God performed miracles for the Jews,⁹⁸ and in other books Bolingbroke repeatedly affirmed that miracles happened in biblical times.⁹⁹ This may seem to be an inconsistency unless one realizes that, for

⁸⁷ Gordon, *Independent Whig*, 55, 178–9; J. Trenchard, 'Essay on Miracles', in *Essays on Important Subjects* (London, 1755), 4; Dodwell, *Christianity Argument*, 46; Conyers Middleton, *A Free Enquiry into the Miraculous Powers* (London, 1749), xi.

⁸⁸ Herbert, *De Veritate*, 292–4.

⁸⁹ Tindal, *Christianity as Old*, 245.

⁹⁰ Tindal, *Christianity as Old*, 192–3.

⁹¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 2, 332–3.

⁹² Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 2, 334.

⁹³ B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, edited by F.B. Kaye, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), vol. 2, 256.

⁹⁴ Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, vol. 2, 221.

⁹⁵ Mandeville, *Free Thoughts*, 37–8.

⁹⁶ Mandeville, *Free Thoughts*, 85–7.

⁹⁷ Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. 5, 14–99, 30, 35.

⁹⁸ Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. 5, 48.

⁹⁹ Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. 3, 147, 282, vol. 4, 145, vol. 2, 234, 259.

Bolingbroke, particular providences were not equivalent to miracles. All particular providences were miracles, but some miracles, like those in the Bible, were not particular providences in which God cared only for certain individuals. The whole discussion in which he emphasized natural laws was a long argument against theologians who complained that God did not perform particular providences to help good individuals. In this discussion, Bolingbroke argued that God did not have favorites, and so Bolingbroke stressed general laws God did not break to help particular individuals. However, considering that in this discussion, and many other times in his works, Bolingbroke affirmed the existence of miracles in biblical times, it is clear he believed in them.

Two other deists' positions on miracles are much harder to understand because they were not consistent. Charles Blount and Peter Annet sometimes said they believed in miracles and other times said miracles were impossible because God only worked through immutable, general laws.

In an early pamphlet, Blount said quite categorically that there were no miracles because nature was governed by immutable laws;¹⁰⁰ but a decade later, in a work published posthumously, Blount said God sometimes did perform miracles. He said that

God seldom alters or perverts the Course of Nature, however Miracles may be necessary sometimes to acquaint the World with his Prerogative, least the Arrogance of our Reason should question his Power; a Crime no wise Man can ever be guilty of.¹⁰¹

In two other places in this book, Blount also said he believed in miracles.¹⁰²

Peter Annet often said he did not believe in miracles because God was unchangeable and only worked through immutable, natural laws. He thought this was 'a demonstrative Proof of the Impossibility of Miracles *a priori*'.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, in the same book, Annet said that Jesus performed miracles, as did the apostles, and that these miracles ceased after the Apostolic Age.¹⁰⁴ In a posthumous work, Annet again said that he believed that Jesus and the apostles performed miracles.¹⁰⁵

It is hard to ascertain what Blount and Annet really believed. Blount had a deity who continually planted impressions in our mind, and he believed in the Christian revelation. So believing in miracles is consistent with other aspects of his thought. Moreover, Blount only focused on God not performing miracles in one of his writings. Thus I think it is likely he did believe in miracles. Annet, however, continually emphasized God's unchangeability. He did not think God answered our prayers or planted thoughts in our minds. He was also the only deist who did not believe in the Christian revelation. Thus I think his deepest position is probably that he did not believe in miracles.

The last two deists remaining out of the seventeen deists – Anthony Collins and John Toland – both stated that they believed in miracles.¹⁰⁶ Unlike all the other deists though, neither of these thinkers made statements showing they believed in a deity who often intervened in human affairs.

¹⁰⁰ C. Blount, *Miracles, No Violations of the Laws of Nature* (London, 1683), 9–11.

¹⁰¹ C. Blount, *The Oracles of Reason*, in *The Miscellaneous Works of Charles Blount* (London, 1695), 12.

¹⁰² Blount, *Oracles of Reason*, 134, 164.

¹⁰³ Annet, *Collection of the Tracts*, 128.

¹⁰⁴ Annet, *Collection of the Tracts*, 33–4, 72–3, 90.

¹⁰⁵ P. Annet, *Lectures on the Following Subjects* (London, 1769?), 12.

¹⁰⁶ A. Collins, *A Dialogue between Mr. Grounds and Scheme* (London, 1729), 35; J. Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious* (London, 1696), 156–7, (This copy is from Harvard University Library).

Neither of them was concerned about prayer and neither said God planted thoughts in our minds. Both of them were also connected to radical, continental groups which advocated atheism. These two thinkers could have been making these statements to maintain their standing in polite society.

All the English deists said God performed miracles. Except for Annet, Collins and Toland, there are very good reasons to believe they were sincere. As the next section will show, all of them except one also believed in divine revelation through the Holy Scriptures and the person of Jesus.

CHRISTIAN REVELATION

Most scholars believe that because many English deists emphasized natural religion, they denied the need for the Christian revelation. For example, James E. Force said ‘the characteristic element of mainstream deism is a negative rejection of revealed truth’.¹⁰⁷ While many of the deists did not give the same force to the Christian revelation as orthodox Christians did, all the English deists except Annet said they believed in it.

At least five deists maintained the orthodox Christian position about the necessity of revelation: these deists said that human reason was damaged because of the Fall, and so we needed Jesus to redeem us. Morgan, Woolston, Mandeville, Dodwell, and Middleton all believed this about revelation.¹⁰⁸

Four other deists said that the Christian revelation was necessary, but not because human reason was damaged in the Fall. Instead, these deists said pre-Christian people had been misled by greedy, ambitious priests, and thus had disregarded their reason. These deists said a divine revelation was needed to bring people back to their reason. Chubb, Tindal, Toland, and Trenchard all took this position that priests were the problem, not damaged reason.¹⁰⁹ Even though these deists did not have an orthodox position on the human condition, they still thought God had intervened in the world in the Christian revelation.

Other deists saw different purposes for the Christian revelation. Thomas Gordon said the Christian revelation enforced natural religion by annexing eternal rewards to it.¹¹⁰ Shaftesbury thought vulgar people needed the Christian revelation because it was enforced by miracles.¹¹¹ Herbert of Cherbury said his emphasis on natural religion did not mean revelation was superfluous. He said he thought the Bible was a ‘surer source of consolation and support’ than any other book and reading it stirred ‘the whole inner man’ to life.¹¹²

Bolingbroke had a position very common amongst the deists: he was an advocate of natural religion, but he also thought the Christian revelation was directly related to it. He said ‘the christian law is nothing else than the law of nature, enforced by a new revelation’.¹¹³ Many deists

¹⁰⁷ J.E. Force, ‘Biblical Interpretation, Newton, and English Deism’, in *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by R.H. Popkin and A. Vanderjagt (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 282.

¹⁰⁸ T. Morgan, *A Letter to Mr. Thomas Chubb* (London, 1727), 29–30; Woolston, *Exact Fitness*, 10–1; Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, vol. 2, 356; Middleton, *Miscellaneous Works*, vol. 2, 131, 166–7; Dodwell, *Christianity Argument*, 7, 30, 73 84, 102–4.

¹⁰⁹ T. Chubb, *A Discourse Concerning Reason* (London, 1731), 14–5; Tindal, *Christianity as Old*, 379; J. Toland, *A Collection of Several Pieces*, 2 vols (London, 1726), vol. 2, 130; Trenchard, *Cato’s Letters*, vol. 2, 770 (letter 109).

¹¹⁰ Gordon, *Independent Whig*, 431, dated 4 January 1720.

¹¹¹ Shaftesbury, *Ten Letters Written by ...*, third edition (London, 1746), 35.

¹¹² Herbert, *De Veritate*, 316.

¹¹³ Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. 4, 26.

agreed with Bolingbroke's position that revelation and reason were harmonious. William Wollaston thought rather than natural religion undermining revealed religion, it paved the way for it.¹¹⁴ Anthony Collins said that revelation could not contradict the 'Dictates of natural Light'¹¹⁵ and God 'speaks to us either by Reason or Revelation'.¹¹⁶ Charles Blount said that God revealed himself in the Christian revelation and 'the Holy Scriptures' were the 'sacred Repository of Truth'.¹¹⁷

While not all the English deists had the same regard for Christian revelation as did orthodox Christians, all of them except Annet said they believed in it.

CONCLUSION

Most scholars think the English deists generally believed in a deity who was remote from the world and did not intervene in it once the deity set up the universe's natural laws. I have demonstrated that this generalization is wrong: all English deists believed in a deity who intervened in the world through miracles, and all except one believed in divine revelation. Even more importantly, three quarters of them also believed God intervened in the world through implanting thoughts in people's minds or by giving them inspirations. A significant number of these thinkers also had a heartfelt, personal relationship with God as is shown by their deep concern for prayer.

Scholars of the Enlightenment once focused their narrative around secular *philosophes*. Understanding the period became more complicated when scholars realized the importance of religion in the Enlightenment. My findings complicate our view of the period even more by showing that the English deists, people often thought to be very secular and modern, were themselves much more pious than commonly thought, believing in divine inspiration, the importance of prayer, miracles, and revelation.

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¹¹⁴ Wollaston, *Religion of Nature*, 211.

¹¹⁵ A. Collins, *A Farther Discourse of Free-Thinking* (London, 1713), 5.

¹¹⁶ A. Collins, *A Letter to the Reverend Dr. Rogers* (London, 1727), 6. There are two versions of this. This one has 143 pages.

¹¹⁷ Blount, *Oracles of Reason*, unnumbered seventh page of the preface.