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Publisher: Routledge
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International Journal of Philosophy and Theology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpt20>

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Published online: 01 Oct 2014.

To cite this article: Joseph Waligore (2014): Christian deism in eighteenth century England, International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, DOI: [10.1080/21692327.2014.959543](https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2014.959543)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2014.959543>

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Christian deism in eighteenth century England

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(Received 17 January 2014; final version received 26 August 2014)

In eighteenth century England, there were thinkers who said they were Christian deists and claimed pure, original Christianity was deism. Most scholars do not believe these thinkers were sincere about their religious beliefs, but there are many good reasons to believe they were. Three English deists have the best claim to be considered Christian deists because they alone called themselves Christian deists or called their ideas those of a Christian deist. These three thinkers, Matthew Tindal, Thomas Morgan, and Thomas Amory, developed a theology in which Christianity was deism and natural religion. The important point, though, was that their version of natural religion included supernatural elements as well as true religious piety. When read closely, these three thinkers believed in miracles, revelation, prayer, and continuing direct divine inspiration. The Christian deists were neither conventional deists nor traditional Christians. Nevertheless, it is not legitimate to exclude them from either category as some scholars do. They cannot be excluded from the category of 'Christian' on the basis their contemporaries all saw them as non-Christian. They also cannot be excluded from the category of 'deists' because they were pious and believed in an active God.

Keywords: Christian deism; deism; Thomas Morgan; Thomas Amory; Matthew Tindal; enlightenment

In eighteenth century England, there were thinkers who said they were Christian deists and who claimed pure, original Christianity was deism. For example, the writer Thomas Amory (c. 1691–1788) asserted that he believed in 'original Christianity,' which was 'that *pure Christian deism*, which the Lord of life and glory preached to the world.'¹ Scholars have noticed that some English deists claimed to be restoring original Christianity, and some scholars call these deists *Christian deists*.² The vast majority of scholars, however, do not believe Christian deism was a viable theological option in the eighteenth century. One scholar, Peter Byrne, said the phrase *Christian deism* was an 'apparent oxymoron,' saying a thinker only labeled himself a Christian deist as 'a tactical move to deter accusations of heresy.'³ This article argues that there were thinkers in eighteenth century England who sincerely believed they were both Christians and deists. Christian deism was not an organized movement, and it did not have a leader, but it was an important theological movement.

The key to seeing how Christian deists could claim to be both *Christian* and *deist* is realizing that their deism was not a form of Enlightenment rationalism; these deists did not emphasize science and reason to such a degree that they denied any true religious feelings. Thus I disagree with the only two scholars, Hans Hillerbrand and Jeffrey Wigelsworth, who have written articles about Christian deism. These two authors both misunderstand the essentials of Christian deism by seeing it as Enlightenment rationalism that

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emphasized science. So Hillerbrand thought the Christian deists ‘employed the new methods of science to re-establish the meaning of the original Christian faith,’⁴ while Wigelsworth said deism ‘is best defined as the denial of supernatural involvement in the world in a manner occurring outside the regular order of things.’⁵ The Christian deists, though, did not base their theology on science and deny the supernatural. Instead, they based their theology on their belief that God was impartial and good to every person. This meant every traditional Christian doctrine had to be examined, and every doctrine that contradicted God’s impartial goodness had to be rejected. The Christian deists said such doctrines were not part of true Christianity, but had been added by conniving priests to increase their status and power. Because Christian deism was not based on science, but a different conception of God, it was a legitimate third way between clerical Christianity (Christianity as it was interpreted by a minister or a priest of any kind) and secularism (meaning atheism or the kind of deism which emphasized an inactive, withdrawn God).

It is much easier to accept the concept of Christian deism if one is aware of recent scholarship which has reconceptualized the Enlightenment and the English deists’ part in it. Recent scholars have shown that many thinkers in the Enlightenment did not fit into the once pervasive narrative that the period was a grand march from religious superstition to rational, scientific thought.⁶ In particular, scholars have shown that English thinkers were generally much more pious than French thinkers. In England, the ministers, while still being religious, also emphasized rationality and science. For this reason, some scholars say England had a ‘clerical Enlightenment,’ or Enlightenment led by clerics.⁷ Because of these changes in understanding the Enlightenment and English culture, some scholars have been re-evaluating English deism. These scholars, in particular Jeffrey Wigelsworth, Wayne Hudson, and myself, maintain that English deism needs to be seen more as an aspect of the English religious culture than as part of the irreligious, continental Enlightenment.⁸

As will be discussed in detail later, I have shown that almost all of the well-known English deists believed in an active God who performed miracles and revelations. The majority of these deists even believed in continuing direct divine inspiration or the belief that God led people through signs or placed thoughts in people’s minds. Thus a *deist* should not be defined as someone who believes in an inactive, distant deity. A better definition of a deist is a thinker who believed in God, but used reason to prove that clerical Christianity was wrong about God’s nature and the way God related to humanity. The vast majority of deists said natural religion was the true religion and thought it had more authority than the clerical interpretation of the Christian revelation. (Natural religion, or the religion of nature, is the religion people can arrive at through natural means alone, without supernatural revelation.) Because most of the deists believed Christian clerics were personally profiting by teaching a false kind of religion, they often viciously attacked priests and ministers as power-hungry, greedy hirelings who peddled superstition and fanaticism. The deists’ attack on *priestcraft* should not obscure the fact that many of them had deep religious feelings.

In eighteenth century England, Christianity was the legally established religion, and anyone who was seen as denying important Christian beliefs was subject to persecution or social ostracism. Thus it would be prudent for a non-Christian thinker to masquerade as a Christian by occasionally stating in his works that he believed in Christianity or admired Jesus. The category of Christian deism loses its value if any such dissimulators are included in it. Therefore, a Christian deist is defined as a deist who not only said he was restoring pure Christianity, but also showed his commitment to this project by focusing his theological works on his interpretation of Christianity. This definition

makes it more likely that only thinkers who sincerely considered themselves *Christians* are included.

This article focuses on three eighteenth century English thinkers, Thomas Morgan, Thomas Amory, and Matthew Tindal. Thomas Morgan (d. 1743) was a former minister who later became a doctor and a writer. Morgan labeled himself a *Christian deist*, and said Christian deism was the ‘original, real, and indisputable Christianity,’ which ‘was preach’d to the World by Christ and the Apostles.’⁹ Matthew Tindal (c.1653–1733) was a lawyer, a writer, and was elected to a fellowship at Oxford. He wrote several times that people with his ideas were ‘*true Christian Deists*.’¹⁰ Thomas Amory wrote theological novels in which his characters had extremely complex theological discussions. He is forgotten nowadays, but he was well known in the eighteenth century and was compared by one reviewer to Shakespeare and Richardson.¹¹ As I quoted at the very beginning of this article, Amory thought true Christianity was deism, and he called himself a ‘Christian deist.’¹² I focus on these three thinkers because they were the only eighteenth century English thinkers who explicitly called themselves *Christian deists* or said their ideas were those of a *Christian deist*. This means they have the best claim of any eighteenth century thinkers to be considered *Christian deists* and to have their view of Christian deism be accepted as a legitimate interpretation of Christian deism.

In order to show that Morgan, Amory, and Tindal had some justification to consider themselves *Christian deists*, it needs to be shown they were deists and their theology had at least some important similarities to Christian theology. All three of these writers emphasized knowing God by reason, and used reason to examine traditional Christian doctrines. They attacked the clerical interpretation of Christianity and argued for total freedom in religious matters. They did not agree that Jesus taught the traditional Christian doctrines of the Trinity, original sin, or the Atonement. Moreover, Morgan and Tindal were commonly considered important deists by their contemporaries and are considered deists by modern scholars. Thus, it is easy to show they were deists. The difficult point is to demonstrate that they had important enough similarities to Christians for these figures to have some justification to call themselves *Christian deists*. I will argue that their view of God had important similarities to the Christian view of God. Then I will show that, like Christians, they had a deep emotional relationship with a God they loved and prayed to.

Reasons to believe these thinkers were sincerely stating their religious beliefs

Many recent scholars do not believe there were Christian deists in eighteenth century England; these scholars, like Byrne, think any deists who claimed to be Christian were lying about their true beliefs to avoid persecution. These critics ignore the question of whether the Christian deists’ beliefs should be considered *Christian* or not. Instead, the critics are claiming that these deists were actually atheists and were only pretending to have some Christian beliefs in order to avoid persecution. The most prominent advocate of this position is David Berman, whose arguments I have critiqued elsewhere.¹³ Here I will instead state the major reasons why I think Morgan, Amory, and Tindal were stating their true religious beliefs.

First, the Christian deists were significantly different from the more radical English deists who traveled to the continent and had significant contact there with theological radicals. Tindal, Amory, and Morgan never visited the continent and had no connections with radical thinkers there. They also had no unpublished works with more radical ideas in them and never wrote (as John Toland did) that they were hiding their true opinions.

Instead, Christian deism developed in the English cultural milieu, which was much more pious than the continental milieu.

Second, these Christian deists used none of the techniques commonly employed by writers in the eighteenth century to signal their readers that they were dissimulating. So they did not use such techniques as epigrams referring to unorthodox views, errors corrected in the table of errata, voluntary mistakes in translations, internal inconsistencies, extreme praise of orthodoxy at the end of their books, or giving poor arguments for their pretended positions while giving much better arguments for their supposed opponents' positions.¹⁴

Third, the more closely one reads all the works of these thinkers, the more their similarities to modern secularism dissolve. For example, as will be discussed shortly, Thomas Morgan said God never contravened natural laws to perform miracles. While this makes Morgan seem like a secularist, later in the same book, Morgan said angels perform miracles to care for us.

Fourth, these three thinkers did not adopt authorial personas one would expect of secularists. Instead, they had a religious orientation that pervaded their works. For example, as will be shown later, two of these thinkers emphasized continuing divine inspiration; two said that in prayer we could become united with God; and all three thought God placed innate ideas in us.

Fifth, two of these three thinkers made significant personal sacrifices for their Christian deist beliefs: Amory was disinherited by his very wealthy father because he would not renounce his Christian deism and Morgan lost his ministerial position for his unorthodox religious beliefs.¹⁵

Finally, they were engaged in a theological project they cared deeply about: an attempt to reconcile Christianity with the idea of an active, good God who treated all individuals impartially. They were not just attacking their contemporaries' version of Christianity; they were forging an alternative interpretation of Christianity that was centered around natural religion's emphasis on God's goodness and fairness.

Thus, there are many good arguments to think the Christian deists were actually stating their true beliefs when they claimed to be Christian.

The Christian deist view of natural religion

Thomas Morgan, Thomas Amory, and Matthew Tindal all said true Christianity was natural religion. Amory said, 'Christianity is not a *new* religion, but is the old, uncorrupt religion of *nature* and *reason*, delivered and taught in the most rational and easy way.'¹⁶ In his later, mature writings, Morgan said Jesus taught only natural religion or the religion of nature, as Jesus' teachings were 'the best Transcript of the Religion of Nature.'¹⁷ Tindal's very title of his magnum opus, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, A Republication of the Religion of Nature*, shows that he identified Christianity with natural religion.

The question of whether it is in any way possible to think these thinkers were Christian depends on what they believed about natural religion. Unfortunately, their use of the word 'natural' has led modern scholars to believe deists were all Enlightenment rationalists who emphasized the natural while rejecting the supernatural. For example, Darren Staloff, in a recent article on deism, said that deism was the 'religion of nature,' and because the deists were 'devotees of natural religion, they rejected all the supernatural elements of Christianity.'¹⁸ Their belief in miracles, however, shows the Christian deists accepted the supernatural and so were not Enlightenment rationalists.

Thomas Morgan seems to flatly deny God ever broke his general laws by performing miracles. He said God ‘does not miraculously interpose, as they would have him, by suspending or setting aside the general, established Laws of Nature.’¹⁹ If a scholar only reads this statement, Morgan can seem to be a secularist who denied miracles ever happened. Nevertheless, later in the same book, Morgan said miracles were performed, but not by God; instead, they were performed by angels in harmony with the natural laws.²⁰ Morgan declared there were ‘superior, invisible Beings above us,’ and these angels ‘have Power to act upon the Elements, and direct natural Causes, by Ways and Means unknown to us.’²¹ These angels, according to Morgan, not only can make storms, but also take care of humans. Morgan said 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.²²

Morgan sometimes denied God performed miracles, but he was not a modern, secular thinker as he believed angels performed what we would think of as miracles.

While Morgan said God never contravened natural laws, his God was not withdrawn and inactive. Morgan thought that God directed all the actions of non-human animals by constantly impressing desires and appetites into them. He said of non-human animals, that ‘the Author and Director of Nature, constantly impresses, and impels the whole animal Creation to such Actions, as are most necessary and conducive to their own Preservation and Well-being.’²³ Morgan’s God was thus continually involved with his creation.

Thomas Amory also emphasized the supernatural aspect of miracles, saying that *everything* that happened in the natural world was done by God’s direct action. He said ‘it is a grievous mistake in our philosophical enquiries, to assign so much to second causes as the learned do.’ He said all natural phenomena ‘ought to be ascribed to the *immediate operation* of the *Deity*,’ as ‘he constantly interposes. The Divine Power is perpetually put forth throughout all nature.’²⁴ Amory went through a list of processes God was directly responsible for: gravity, tides, earthquakes, and even the movement of our muscles and stomach. He said, of God, ‘his *immediate* power, I think for myself, exerted not only in *earthquakes* and *tides*, but in the *circulations* of the blood, lymph, and chyle, in muscular motion, and in various other *phenomena* that might be named.’²⁵ He said all these and everything else that happened in the world was done by ‘a perpetual miracle.’²⁶

The last of these three Christian deists, Matthew Tindal, also believed in miracles. The apostles, according to Tindal, performed miracles, and they could even raise the dead.²⁷

Considering Morgan believed angels performed miracles, Amory believed God did everything by ‘a perpetual miracle,’ and Tindal also believed in miracles, the Christian deist version of natural religion clearly did not reject the supernatural.

So what did the Christian deists say natural religion was? Natural religion was the religion humans could understand with their own reason. It began by proving God existed because of the order in nature, but scholars make a mistake in thinking natural religion was focused on external, natural phenomena. For the Christian deists, natural religion had very little to do with our current idea of nature, meaning trees and rocks and other things in the natural world that scientists study. Instead, natural religion was primarily focused on understanding the nature of relationships between moral beings and the duties that resulted from those relationships. As Tindal said:

By *Natural Religion*, I understand the belief of the existence of a God, and the sense and practice of those duties, which result from the knowledge, we, by our Reason, have of him, and his perfections; and of ourselves, and our own imperfections; and of the relation we stand in to him, and to our fellow creatures.²⁸

We misunderstand the Christian deists' idea of natural religion unless we comprehend that it was not focused on nature, but morality.

The Christian deists connected reason to our relationships and our duties because they thought God had planted innate ideas about morality and religion into all of us. Morgan believed an innate idea of natural religion or the law of nature was 'originally written upon the Heart.'²⁹ Tindal agreed with Morgan, but went even further. Tindal asserted that God continually implanted this law of nature into us every day. This made the law of nature, which was natural religion, a daily revelation. Tindal said of the law of nature, 'he [God] continues daily to implant it in the minds of all Men.'³⁰ And, according to Tindal, when we think about moral truths, we clearly see their truth because of 'God himself, who immediately illuminates them.'³¹ Morgan and Amory agreed with Tindal that every person could clearly see the truth of these moral absolutes. In a paragraph Morgan wrote first and then Amory copied, both said that abstract math and physical truths may be above the reach of common people, but moral truths 'are as evident to the understanding, as light and colors are to the eye' because they were impressed 'upon every man's heart and conscience.'³²

Because God had planted in us innate ideas about natural religion, the Christian deists thought reason, which discerned these innate ideas, was an inner revelation from God. Morgan said that:

Reason itself is a natural Revelation from God to Man, and the Revival or Recovery of lost or neglected Truth, in Matters of the highest Importance to Mankind, may be properly call'd a particular Revelation, or extraordinary Manifestation of divine Truth.³³

It is impossible to understand Christian deism until we see that they thought reason had the power to discover important truths because it was a form of divine revelation. The Christian deists were thus very different from Christians who thought our reason had been corrupted by the results of original sin. According to the Christian deists, our reason was not corrupt, but divine. Hence, the Christian deists thought it was necessary to use reason to examine the Bible and Christian tradition.

This expansive conception of reason also meant the Christian deists were very different from John Locke and the Enlightenment rationalists. Locke discussed miracles in a similar way to the Christian deists, and his statements about reason being a revelation from God were even more similar to statements the deists made. He said that '*Reason* is natural *Revelation*' and that in reason God 'communicates to Mankind that portion of Truth, which he has laid within the reach of their natural Faculties.'³⁴ The English deists have often been seen as followers of Locke, but, the Christian deists, with their belief in innate ideas and morality being inherent in the reason of things, were much more rooted in the tradition of the Cambridge Platonists and the Latitudinarians than John Locke.³⁵ The majority of Enlightenment thinkers followed Locke's idea that our mind was a blank slate with no innate ideas of its own, and so the Christian deists' emphasis on a more expansive view of reason separated them from the Enlightenment rationalists.

The Christian deists believed these innate ideas informed us of the proper, moral way of relating to God and other people. They thought morality was not a social construct;

instead, morality was something naturally inhering in a relationship. They generally believed that moral beings (meaning people, angels, and God) could look at the nature of their relationship to another moral being and know how they should relate to the other being. For example, mothers were in a relationship of 'mother' to their children, and so it fit the nature of the relationship for a mother to be kind and caring to her children. The Christian deists used varying phrases to describe this naturally inhering property of a relationship, with the most important phrases being the 'reason and fitness of things,' the 'nature and reason of things,' 'the moral fitness of actions,' or natural law.³⁶

The foundation of Christian deist theology was their conception of the relationship humans have with God. St Paul, in the ninth chapter of his *Epistle to the Romans*, said God stands in relationship to humans as a potter to his pots. St Paul thought humans owe everything to their creator, and thus have no right to complain about how they were treated. John Calvin, in the *Institutes* (III.23.4), referred to this verse when he defended the notion of predestination. Calvin said predestination seemed immoral by our standards, but our view of justice and goodness could not be the measure of God's actions. The Christian deists, however, believed that God is in a different kind of relationship to us. They saw God as our parent, and this meant God had all the obligations to humans that parents had to their children. God was thus under a moral obligation to treat us very kindly. As Matthew Tindal said, 'Are not we, in a stricter sense, the Children of God. ... And is not God from his innate Goodness & Equity, under an obligation to treat us more kindly than earthly Parents do their best-beloved children?'³⁷

A caring, parental God, the Christian deists believed, could make some of us stronger or smarter. But, in the crucial matter of eternal salvation, God had to treat all his children equally and impartially. Tindal said that God had an 'impartial & universal goodness,' and thus it was not 'consistent with that impartiality which is essential to the Deity' to favor some people with an essential revelation while neglecting others.³⁸ Because the Christian deists were sure that God was impartially good to all, they were certain any supernatural revelation to a particular group of people could only be a republication of natural religion.³⁹ The defenders of clerical Christianity claimed God had revealed some specifically Christian teachings that no one could access through reason alone. These teachings include the doctrines of the Trinity, original sin, justification by faith, and the Atonement. The Christian deists rejected all these doctrines because they were not part of natural religion and contradicted their belief in God's impartial fairness.

While the Christian deists did not believe Jesus accomplished some significant spiritual event, such as bearing our sins, they did think Jesus transmitted a divine revelation – a revelation which republished to the world the message of natural religion. Tindal said, 'the business of the Christian dispensation was to destroy all those traditional Revelations, & restore, free from all Idolatry, the true primitive, and natural Religion, implanted in Mankind from the Creation.'⁴⁰ Morgan and Amory went a little further, saying that Jesus presented the truths of natural religion in a simpler, more compelling way.⁴¹

The Christian deists emphasized natural religion, but their view of natural religion did not exclude the supernatural. The foundation of their theology was their belief that God had to treat everyone in a fair and loving way. They rejected many Christian doctrines not because they were Enlightenment rationalists, but because these doctrines were inconsistent with what they saw as our innate moral standards implanted in us by God.

The Christian deists on prayer and direct divine inspiration

Another major reason it is hard for scholars to think of deists as Christians is because the deist God supposedly had no relationship with humans. Kerry Walters declared the deist view 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.’⁴² Most scholars assume every deist was an Enlightenment rationalist. If, however, we look closely at what the Christian deists said about their relationship with God, they had an extremely warm relationship with him. This warm relationship is best shown by the Christian deists’ view of prayer and direct divine inspiration.

Thomas Morgan thought we should pray as it develops a childlike trust and dependence on God. Morgan said that prayer was not about asking God for things,⁴³ and the prayer’s outer form did not matter. Instead, the essence of prayer was developing a childlike trust in and love for our Father. Morgan declared that ‘This filial Dependence on, Trust in, and Love of God as a Father, is what, I said, I take to be the Life, Spirit, or Soul of Prayer.’⁴⁴ To build this love towards God, Morgan thought we have to dedicate ourselves to him:

... offering up our Desires and Hearts to him, as the Father of Lights, the Fountain of all Truth, Order and Rectitude, and the Author and Giver of every good and perfect Gift, without whom we can receive or enjoy nothing...⁴⁵

God was the author of every good we enjoyed, and so Morgan thought we should offer our hearts and desires to him. Morgan included a prayer in his writings:

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 ... for ever bless me with the enlightening, felicitating of thy benign Presence, Power, and Love.⁴⁶

In his prayers, Morgan stressed our constant dependence on God and asked God to always protect him.

Morgan even thought sincerely religious people had such a close relationship with God that they could become united to him. He said that if people went beyond their carnal desires and withdrew ‘from the Noise, Darkness and Confusion of a busy distracted World,’ then they could be ‘united to, or consimilated with the Deity.’ He said that through this ‘consimilating Love of God,’ someone could experience a ‘Transformation into the Image and Likeness of the Deity.’⁴⁷

Morgan’s sense of relationship with God was so strong, that he believed God still gave messages and commands directly to individuals. In 1721, the conservative theologian Thomas Bradbury (1677–1759) argued that the deists so over-emphasized reason that they did not believe God ever communicated directly with biblical patriarchs such as Noah and Abraham.⁴⁸ Morgan disagreed. He accepted the premise that God talked directly with Noah, but disagreed with Bradbury that it was unreasonable for Noah and other people to follow divine messages. Instead, Morgan said it was very reasonable for Noah to obey a divine command as ‘Noah acted upon this eternal unchangeable Principle of Reason, *That God cannot lye*. Upon this rational Ground of Truth, his Understanding or Reason assented to what God had declared.’⁴⁹

Morgan even gave practical advice on how people could receive divine messages. Morgan said that a person had to restrain his sensual desires and his concern for wealth or power. After restraining his worldly desires, he should enter a quiet place of solitude. Then he could enter into the 'silent Solitude of his own Mind,' a state in which he is open to divine inspiration. After he did this, he could be divinely inspired. Morgan said:

When a man does this, he converses with God; he derives Communications 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.⁵⁰

Morgan thought people received divine inspiration through their rational faculties, and so reason and divine inspiration did not conflict.

Morgan's emphasis on prayer and his deep personal relationship with God should make scholars question their conventional account of deism. His prayers, though, seemed to be prayers to a generic God, and did not contain any specifically Christian elements in them. Thomas Amory, on the other hand, thought we should pray to Jesus. In a small part of a prayer, Amory asked for Christ to pray for us. He said, 'O Christ, our blessed mediator, pray for us, that our faith fail not, and through thy merits and intercession, Lord Jesus, let our prayer be set forth in the sight of Almighty God as incense.'⁵¹

Amory also shared with Morgan the belief that we could become Godlike. He said truly spiritual people could 'become *partakers of a divine nature, having escaped the corruption* that is in the world through lust.'⁵² He said holy people have the indwelling presence of God in them, and they become a visible epistle of Christ's glory to the world. He said:

The power and wisdom and goodness of God are displayed in the holy lives of men. Like the heavens they declare his glory, and are the visible epistle of Christ to the world, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the Living God.⁵³

Amory thought humans were in such a close relationship with God that the spirit of the living God was actually present in some people.

Amory thought that God reached into people's minds and changed their way of thinking by drawing attention to spiritual ideas. He said God 'by an *extraordinary agency* ... may waken a *dormant idea*, which lay neglected in the memory, with unusual energy ... so that a lustre before quite unknown shall be (as it were) poured upon it.'⁵⁴ Amory then said if we prayed, God often changed our thoughts in this way. 'I believe he often does [this changing of thoughts] by *interposition*, if in the spirit of Christ's doctrine we ask it of the great *Father of Lights*.'⁵⁵ Amory believed God responded to our prayers by reaching into our minds and changing our very thoughts.

Tindal had the least to say about prayer, but he believed we had a duty to pray because prayer acknowledges God's constant goodness to us and keeps us in a constant state of dependence on him. He said:

Prayer itself, God knowing beforehand what we will ask, chiefly becomes a duty, as it raises in us a due contemplation of the divine Attributes, & an acknowledgement of his great & constant goodness, and serves to keep up a constant sense of our dependence on him.⁵⁶

Tindal also believed God was in such close relationship with people that God had communicated with people in biblical times. For example, he said Solomon was ‘inspir’d with Wisdom from Above, & had Conferences with God himself.’⁵⁷

The Christian deists said they were Christians and said they were restoring true Christianity. This concern was so important to them that they dedicated their theological writings to it. They believed in miracles and thought the Christian revelation was a divine revelation. They all thought we had a duty to pray to God, and one thought we should pray to Jesus. They thought that God made an inner revelation to everyone of the truth of natural religion. Two of the three Christian deists believed people had such an intimate relationship with God that they could become like God, and all three believed God communicated with people.

The Christian deists were very different from the better-known deists who believed in a deity who made the universe and its laws and then withdrew from the world. My use of the term *Christian deist* is for the purpose of distinguishing these better-known deists, who were often very hostile to Christianity, from the deists discussed in this article who believed in an active God and were very positive towards Christianity (or at least their interpretation of it). These unconventional deists called themselves *Christian deists*, and they centered their theological writings on restoring what they considered to be original Christianity. Furthermore, as I have shown, their conception of God and his relationship to humanity had important similarities to the Christian conception of God. Therefore, I am willing to call them *Christian deists*. Having said this, if the reader wants to call them a more cumbersome name like *Christianish deists* or *deists who considered themselves Christian*, that is understandable.

Can the Christian deists be excluded from the category of ‘Christian’?

The Christian deists had a very different kind of deism from the common conception of it. Their interpretation of Christianity was also different from most people’s view of Christianity. In the next section, I deal with scholars who do not want to change their conception of deism to incorporate pious deists into it. These scholars practice a strategy of exclusion by arguing that pious deists should not be considered deists. In the present section, I argue against a scholar who tries to exclude the Christian deists from being considered *Christian* because he claims their contemporaries were united in seeing them as non-Christian.

Gregg Frazer is the best-known scholar trying to exclude thinkers like the Christian deists from being considered *Christian*. Frazer asserts that in the eighteenth century there was a remarkable unanimity about the basic core content of Christianity. These core, defining doctrines were clearly listed in the official creeds of the Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations. According to Frazer, these central doctrines were the Trinity, original sin, Virgin Birth, Jesus’ bodily Resurrection, hell, justification by faith, the Atonement, and the inspiration of all of Scripture. Frazer maintained belief or non-belief in these doctrines constituted a clear dividing line in the eighteenth century between Christians and infidels. He thus declared that thinkers like the Christian deists I am discussing should not be called *Christian* as they were considered infidels by all their contemporaries.⁵⁸

Frazer is focused on eighteenth century American thinkers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. By my definition given earlier that Christian deists were deists who dedicated their theological writings to restoring pure Christianity, I would include both of these thinkers as Christian deists. (Elsewhere I argue that both Jefferson

and Franklin were influenced by English Christian deists.)⁵⁹ Frazer says the thinkers I am calling *Christian deists* considered themselves Christian based on their ‘own definition of Christianity, which did not comport with the way every major church defined it.’ He goes further, saying these thinkers ‘appropriated the word *Christianity* and attached it to a belief system that they constructed and found more to their liking than authentic Christianity.’ He concludes by saying these thinkers ‘rejected Christianity. Consequently, it is improper and misleading to include a form of the word *Christian* in a term for those whom I describe as theistic rationalists.’⁶⁰

Frazer’s argument for the exclusion of the Christian deists from Christianity, and from using the name *Christian*, is based on the churches’ creeds establishing a strong dividing line between Christian and non-Christian in the eighteenth century. These creeds, however, did not actually perform this function in the eighteenth century. For example, in the most important English church, the Church of England, the church’s beliefs were legally encapsulated in the Thirty-Nine Articles, and every minister had to subscribe or say he believed in these articles. These articles clearly state that the doctrines Frazer mentions were the official doctrines of the Church of England. The problem for Frazer’s argument, though, was that during this time there were two main factions in the Church of England, and they had very different ideas about what subscribing to these Articles meant. One faction of the church’s clergy, the conservative, tradition-minded High Church faction, said that subscribing to the Thirty-Nine Articles meant believing in the traditional doctrines that Frazer mentions. The other faction in the Church of England, the Latitudinarians, did not agree.

The Latitudinarians emphasized reason and natural religion as well as the Bible. When scholars refer to an English clerical Enlightenment in which the ministers emphasized reason and science, they are primarily thinking of the Latitudinarians. Many of the Latitudinarian ministers were prominent figures in English science: one Latitudinarian, Joseph Glanvill, was a major apologist for the Royal Society and New Science; another, Samuel Clarke, was a collaborator with Isaac Newton on his scientific and mathematical works. As proponents of science, the Latitudinarians had a very positive attitude towards reason. One prominent Latitudinarian minister, Richard Bentley, said the Latitudinarians were ‘as much concerned’ as the deists ‘for the use and authority of reason in controversies of faith.’ He thought reason so supported Christianity ‘that the Christian religion is so far from declining or fearing the strictest trials of reason, that it every where appeals to it, is defended and supported by it.’⁶¹ The Latitudinarians also had a very positive attitude towards natural religion. One Latitudinarian bishop, Dr Sherlock, identified Christianity with natural religion, saying, ‘the Gospel was a Republication of the Law of Nature ... which was as old as the Creation.’⁶²

Many Latitudinarians, because of their emphasis on reason and natural religion, no longer believed in the doctrines contained in the Thirty-Nine Articles. They even openly announced that subscribing to the Thirty-Nine Articles did not mean they believed in the doctrines the articles said were the official church teachings. One of the Latitudinarian bishops, Gilbert Burnet, with the blessing and encouragement of many other Latitudinarian bishops, wrote a long book explaining the Latitudinarian way of interpreting the articles.⁶³ Burnet said the articles were deliberately written in such a way they ‘can admit of different literal and grammatical senses.’ He wrote that people could interpret the articles to contain the beliefs Frazer describes. But he also wrote the articles could be interpreted in a sense which contradicted some of its traditional doctrines. Burnet said that this meant people who did not agree with the traditional doctrines ‘may subscribe the Article with a good Conscience, and without any Equivocation.’⁶⁴

Leaders of the High Church faction accused Burnet, one of the foremost bishops of the Church of England, of heresy. In 1701, they even convened a formal investigation of his book by a committee of the lower house of convocation. The committee charged Burnet's book with endorsing positions that were 'contrary to the true meaning of them [the Articles] and to other receiv'd doctrines of our Church.' They argued his methods of interpretation stripped the creeds of any authority and encouraged people who did not agree with the creeds to subscribe to them. They further charged that Burnet's subordination of revelation to reason and natural religion logically led to deism.⁶⁵

The High Church faction was unable to have Burnet declared a heretic,⁶⁶ and they were unable to force the Latitudinarians to accept that subscribing to the Thirty-Nine Articles meant agreeing with the traditional church doctrines. In fact, Burnet's book became mandatory reading in the eighteenth century for future ministers during the process of their ordination, thus ensuring that future ministers of the Church of England were exposed to the Latitudinarian way of viewing the Articles.⁶⁷ A German visitor to England at the end of the eighteenth century, Gebhard Friedrich Wendeborn, described the results of the ministers' exposure to Burnet's views. Wendeborn said he heard that a great part of the English clergy were inclined to the heresies of either Arminianism or Socinianism. He said these ministers did not resign as they wanted a minister's salary, and 'they have even bishop Burnet for an advocate, who is of opinion, that every one who subscribes to the Thirty-Nine Articles, has a right to interpret their meaning as he thinks proper, and consistently with his private opinions.'⁶⁸

Official church creeds fail to give a clear dividing line between Christian and non-Christian for members of the Church of England. Creeds also fail to give this clear dividing line in the eighteenth century Presbyterian Church. Frazer is right that the Westminster Confession of Faith was the official creed of the Presbyterian Church. However, in the early eighteenth century, the Presbyterian ministers in England decided that their ministers no longer had to agree with this creed. After one prominent Presbyterian minister was accused of preaching Arianism, in 1719 the Presbyterian ministers held a synod in London at Salters' Hall to discuss whether it should be required that all ministers believe in the Trinity. The synod decided this important belief, and every other belief in the Westminster Confession, should not be required of English Presbyterian ministers. Instead, all Presbyterian ministers were free to believe and preach whatever they thought the Bible contained. As a result of the synod at Salters' Hall, one scholar said, 'the majority of Presbyterians were on the side of rejecting the authority of the Westminster Confession and the 39 Articles.' After this time, Arianism became an acceptable and even popular opinion among the Presbyterian ministers in England.⁶⁹

The Christian deists I have been discussing matured in a religious milieu in which many ministers emphasized reason and natural religion. Thomas Morgan was a Presbyterian minister previous to the Salters' Hall controversy. Afterwards, he wrote tracts against the Trinity and gradually moved into Christian deism. Matthew Tindal in his earlier books was allied with the Latitudinarians as a vigorous opponent of the High Church faction of the Church of England. Throughout his most important book, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, Tindal continually used quotes from the Latitudinarians to support his main points. Just to cite one example, on the unnumbered page after the title page, he quotes Samuel Clarke extolling reason. On the same page, he also quotes Bishop Sherlock identifying Christianity with the Law of Nature. One of Amory's theologically oriented novels was edited by the well-known dissenting minister Caleb Fleming,⁷⁰ and, like the Dissenters, Amory believed in the divine inspiration of the entire Bible and despised man-made creeds.⁷¹

In the eighteenth century, it was not just the ministers who did not see a clear dividing line between Christian and non-Christian; the laity did not see it either. In 1755, Thomas Amory's first book was reviewed by the establishment periodical the *Monthly Review*. The reviewer said that some readers claimed Amory was not a Christian. The reviewer disagreed, saying the term *Christian* was now so vague it had no real meaning to it, and thus there was no easy way to say who was a Christian and who was not. The reviewer said:

But as the term *Christian* is now become vague, and of indefinite signification; as sects are multiplied into a most astonishing variety; and opinions and doctrines are as numerous as the different complexions and tempers of men; so it is not always sufficient to say, a man is a *Christian*: for the faith of one believer in *Christ* differs not less from the faith of another believer in *Christ*, than both may differ from that of the *Mahomedan*.

The reviewer then said that Amory should be considered a Christian, and he was best categorized as 'a CHRISTIAN-DEIST.'⁷²

It is inaccurate to maintain that in the eighteenth century there was a clear dividing line between Christian and non-Christian, and the Christian deists were on the non-Christian side of that line. One cannot exclude the Christian deists from being called *Christian* by claiming their contemporaries all considered them non-Christian. Instead, the Christian deists' interpretation of Christianity had many important similarities to the Latitudinarians' interpretation of Christianity. One might argue that neither the Latitudinarians nor the Christian deists should be considered *Christian* but that is a much different argument, one that is no longer based on the religious milieu of the eighteenth century.

Can the Christian deists be excluded from the category of 'deists'?

Justin Champion points out that there is a significant disagreement amongst scholars about the nature of English deism. Some scholars see the English deists as primarily influenced by the pious English milieu of the Latitudinarians. These scholars think the English deists were sincerely religious when they claim to be Christian. Other scholars, who have been very influential recently, see the English deists as primarily being influenced by the more secular continental thinkers. These scholars see the English deists as non-Christians or even atheists who were only pretending to be Christian to avoid persecution.⁷³ The scholars who emphasize the influence of the secular continental thinkers realize that Herbert of Cherbury was often seen in the eighteenth century as the father of English deism.⁷⁴ These scholars agree that Herbert was very pious and believed God was actively involved with the world. Rather than changing their conception of deism to incorporate pious deists into it, these scholars, most notably David A. Pailin, instead argue that Herbert's devout piety and active God was proof that he should not be considered a deist.⁷⁵ Because Morgan, Amory, and Tindal were pious and believed in an active deity, scholars, rather than changing their conception of deism, might try to exclude them from being considered deists. Scholars could argue these three thinkers had surface similarities to the deists, but on a closer reading they should not be considered deists because they were too pious and believed in an active deity. I will show below, however, that many other English deists were pious and believed in an active deity. This means that scholars cannot exclude the Christian deists from being considered *deists* just because they were pious and believed God was still active in the world.

A. R. Winnet argued that many English deists believed in an active deity. In 1960, Winnet wrote an article, entitled, *Were the Deists 'Deists'?* In this article, he wondered if the most important English deists really believed God made the world and its laws, and then withdrew to let it run of its own accord. He showed that John Toland, Thomas Chubb, Thomas Morgan, and Charles Blount said they either believed in miracles or that God was still providentially active in the world.⁷⁶ One conclusion Winnet drew was that 'it is clear from their writings that the denial of providence and of a divine activity in the world was not a universal or characteristic deistic tenet.'⁷⁷

Winnet's position has recently been extended much further. My article, *The Piety of the English Deists*, has shown that almost every one of the most prominent English deists said they believed in miracles and revelation. The English deists who said they believed in miracles and revelation included Herbert of Cherbury, Lord Shaftesbury, Anthony Collins, Lord Bolingbroke, Thomas Gordon, John Trenchard, Thomas Morgan, Thomas Chubb, Matthew Tindal, Bernard Mandeville, Henry Dodwell, Conyers Middleton, and Thomas Woolston. Many of these thinkers also emphasized prayer.⁷⁸ The vast majority of these English deists said they were trying to restore pure, original Christianity, but unlike Morgan, Tindal, and Amory, they did not actually label themselves *Christian deists*. Thus while they were significantly different from the French deists, I did not discuss them in this article.

Scholars who see the English deists as primarily influenced by secular continental thinkers respond to these statements of belief in miracles and revelation by discounting them: they say these thinkers did not really believe what they said, they were merely trying to avoid persecution. This approach has some merit to it. Annabelle Patterson, an expert in interpreting writers in a society in which censorship exists, says modern readers who unquestioningly take statements of orthodoxy at face value risk 'damagingly ahistorical' readings of early modern writers.⁷⁹ She says that we have to learn to read between the lines of writers who lived with censorship. She then offered the deist John Toland's principle about how to tell if a writer is sincere. Toland said that if the writer agreed with what was established by law or what everyone else believed, we cannot be sure if he was sincere or not. On the other hand, Toland said that when a writer 'openly declares for what most others oppose, then there's a strong presumption that he utters his mind.'⁸⁰

Toland is right that a prudent eighteenth century English thinker might easily say he agreed with commonly accepted Christian beliefs even if he did not. This suggests that any deist's statement of belief in miracles and the Christian revelation might be insincere. But the second part of Toland's principle also applies to the English deists: Toland said a thinker was very likely sincere when he said something everyone opposed. It is almost always missed by scholars, but the vast majority of prominent English deists said they believed that God gave people signs and messages or planted ideas in their minds. After the English Civil War, believing God directly communicated with individuals was blamed for many of the period's troubles, and it was denigrated as 'religious enthusiasm.' Thus, by Toland's principle, we can presume that no deist would say he believed in continuing direct divine inspiration unless he really believed in it.

My article, *The Piety of the English Deists*, has demonstrated that 11 of the 15 most important English deists believed in direct divine inspiration. The best-known example is Herbert of Cherbury, who thought God gave him a direct sign to publish his first deist book. Charles Blount believed that God often guided people to avoid harmful events by planting ideas into their minds. Thomas Woolston said an angel had given him the key to understanding prophecy. Thomas Chubb, as well as Thomas Morgan, said that God

or angels planted thoughts into our minds. Lord Bolingbroke said it was not God, but only lesser spiritual beings that directly inspired people. Henry Dodwell believed the Holy Spirit directly communicated the truth of Christianity to people. Conyers Middleton thought many biblical figures had been divinely inspired and believed divine inspiration probably lasted past the Apostolic Age. Lord Shaftesbury and Thomas Gordon believed direct divine inspiration still happened. John Trenchard thought divine inspiration would explain many unclear parts of the Bible and believed it probably still happened.⁸¹

Considering it was an unpopular opinion, if these English deists did not believe in continuing direct divine inspiration, they would have no motivation to mention it. This is very strong evidence the majority of English deists believed in an active, caring deity. Therefore, scholars cannot exclude the pious Christian deists who believed in an active deity from being considered *deists*. Instead of saying pious deists were not really deists, scholars need to change their conception of deism and stop thinking all deists were Enlightenment rationalists. Scholars need to realize many English deists shared the values of the pious English Enlightenment, and these deists wanted to find a way to combine reason and natural religion with sincere religious piety.

Conclusion

Most scholars dismiss the very notion of *Christian deism* because they believe deism and Christianity are inherently incompatible. This is true if we assume every deist was an Enlightenment rationalist who denied God ever intervened in the natural world. The Christian deists, though, claimed God continually intervened in the world.

Three English deists have the best claim to be considered Christian deists because they alone called themselves *Christian deists* or called their ideas those of a Christian deist. These three thinkers, Thomas Amory, Thomas Morgan, and Matthew Tindal, developed a theology in which Christianity was deism and natural religion; they did not believe in traditional Christian doctrines such as original sin, the Trinity, or the Atonement. The important point, though, was that their version of natural religion was a supernatural variety of natural religion. When read closely, these three thinkers believed in miracles, revelation, prayer, and direct divine inspiration. They thought we understood natural religion by our reason, but also thought the use of reason involved innate ideas of morality and religion which God had implanted in us.

The Christian deists' interpretation of Christianity is very different from the traditional idea of Christianity, and their deism is significantly different from the conventional conception of deism. For this reason, some scholars try to exclude these thinkers from being in the category of either *deist* or *Christian*. One popular way of excluding these thinkers from the category of *Christian* is claiming their eighteenth century contemporaries had a firm dividing line between Christian and non-Christian, and the Christian deists were on the non-Christian side of this line. This contention was shown to be historically inaccurate. Recent scholarship has also shown that there were many other English deists who believed in miracles, revelation, and direct divine inspiration. Unless one is willing to say the majority of English deists were not *deists*, the Christian deists cannot be excluded on this basis from the category of *deists* either.

The Christian deists were a third way between clerical Christianity and secularism. The scholarly conception of *deism* needs to be changed to incorporate the Christian deists into that conception.

Notes

1. Amory, *Memoirs*, 61; Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:380, 1:451.
2. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 124; Pattison, "Tendencies of Religious Thought," 301.
3. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment*, 111.
4. Hillerbrand, "The Decline and Fall," 97–110; Hillerbrand, *A New History*, 219.
5. Wigelsworth, "The Disputed Root," 31.
6. A good review of the literature is Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion."
7. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, 3, 14–15; Porter, "The Enlightenment in England," 5–6.
8. Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity*; Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England*, 3; Waligore, "The Piety of the English Deists."
9. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 1:165, 1:439.
10. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 337, 340, 342.
11. Review of *The Life of John Bunclce, Esq.*, vol. 2, by Thomas Amory, 34.
12. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:380.
13. Waligore, "The Piety of the English Deists," 183–184.
14. The list is from Taranto, *Du deisme*, 99.
15. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:380.
16. Amory, *Memoirs*, 277.
17. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 1:439.
18. Staloff, 'Deism and the Founding of the United States,' paragraph 2.
19. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 96.
20. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 314–317.
21. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 301, 303.
22. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 314–315.
23. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 160.
24. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:173–4.
25. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:174.
26. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:174–87.
27. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 221.
28. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 11.
29. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 1:25.
30. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 51, see also 120.
31. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 10.
32. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 2:311–2; Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 235–236.
33. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 2:26.
34. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 698.
35. Humphreys, 'The Eternal Fitness of Things,' 188–198; Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning*, 47.
36. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 1:viii; Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:15.
37. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 25.
38. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 226, 177.
39. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 337, 176.
40. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 347–8.
41. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 271–272; Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 1:392.
42. Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 287.
43. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 1:183–184.
44. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 325.
45. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 324.
46. Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 1:427.
47. Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 157–8.
48. Bradbury, *The Nature of Faith*, 7–15.
49. Morgan, *Collection of Tracts*, 172.
50. Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 1:429–430.
51. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:254.
52. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 2:511.
53. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:393.
54. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:160.
55. Amory, *The Life of John Bunclce*, 1:160.
56. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 38.

57. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 221.
58. Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders*, 17–19.
59. Waligore, *Christian Deism*.
60. Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders*, 13.
61. Bentley, *The Works of Richard Bentley*, 3:222–223.
62. Sherlock, *A Sermon Preach'd*, 12.
63. Burnet, *Exposition*.
64. Greig, 'Heresy Hunt,' 580, 585.
65. Greig, 'Heresy Hunt,' 580, 583–586.
66. Greig, 'Heresy Hunt,' 591.
67. Muller, *Latitudinarianism and Didacticism*, 38.
68. Wendeborn, *A View of England*, 2:307.
69. Spalding, 'The Demise of English Presbyterianism,' 78, 78–81.
70. Holden, 'Memoir of the Life,' 411.
71. Amory, *The Life of John Bunce*, 1:14–15; Amory, *Memoirs*, 163.
72. Review of *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, by Thomas Amory: 203. Emphasis in the original.
73. Champion, 'Deism,' 437–438.
74. Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, 1:3.
75. Pailin, 'Should Herbert of Cherbury be Regarded as a "Deist",' 137.
76. Winnet, 'Were the Deists "Deists"?', 72–6.
77. *Ibid.*, 71.
78. Waligore, 'The Piety of the English Deists,' 189–197.
79. Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines*, 8.
80. Toland, as quoted in Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines*, 8.
81. Waligore, 'The Piety of the English Deists,' 184–190.

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