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Deism

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Consulting John Leland's influential *A View of all the Principle Deistical Writers* (2 volumes, 1754, 1755) deism was founded by Herbert of Cherbury and carried through to eighteenth century intellectual culture by a lineage of radical English thinkers: Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Charles Blount (d. 1693), John Toland (1670-1722), Anthony Collins (1676-1729), Thomas Woolston (1670-1733) and Matthew Tindal (1657-1733). The thrust of Leland's historical account is straightforward: 'deism' was fundamentally an English movement of ideas that denied the value of Christian revelation and promoted a naturalistic understanding of religion, theology and ethics. Deism, then, had its heyday between 1640 and 1730 in England. Historians since Leland have been less confident and unanimous about both identifying the philosophical content of deism and the continuity of its proponents. Indeed historians have been in disagreement about whether to categorise 'deism' as a movement in the history of the secularisation of western philosophy (a preamble to the more fully fledged atheism of the High Enlightenment), or on the other hand, whether it should be understood as a minor theological strand of thought on the parochial margins of Anglican orthodoxy. The most prevalent historical understanding of deism has suggested, mirroring Leland's account, that in English deism lay the roots of the continental impiety of the eighteenth century. So for example from Voltaire to d'Holbach, French *philosophes* drew upon the texts and arguments of men like Blount, Toland and Tindal, to indict the fictions of priestcraft and Christianity. Indeed research has shown how, whether by clandestine manuscript circulation or the more public form of literary review, the pamphleteers and polemicists of the Continental Enlightenment were infused with such writings. This 'deism' was radical and secular. Starting from a baseline of an anthropological understanding of religion it promoted a complete (if sometimes covert) materialism: providence, revelation, priesthood and an afterlife were all rejected. In the writings of the most advanced proponent of this radical

perception of English deism, this profound religious scepticism was compounded with a radical democratic political philosophy.¹

The alternative account of 'deism', rather than looking forward teleologically to the Age of Reason emphasises the religious infrastructure of the deists' context. In this historiographical tradition deism is understood as part of a theological worldview: it is continuous with the religious discourse of the seventeenth century rather than oppositional. This characterisation consequently underscored different intellectual components of the deistical mentality: indeed although deists laid stress upon natural theology and religion this was not to map out a pathway to a secular and anthropological account of religion, but simply to reinscribe a Thomist tradition of the relationship between 'reason' and revelation. Deists were then thinkers who had taken up the reins of the latitudinarian theologians: men who sought for the foundations of some eirenic, moralistic and universal form of religious expression and institution. Thus the deist position was moved much closer to the theological liberalism of leading Churchmen such as Archbishop Tillotson, or John Locke's great antagonist Bishop Edward Stillingfleet. The deist hostility towards sacraments, spirits and mysteries was not impiety and irreligion, but part of a rhetoric for the moral reformation of the Church. In this interpretation the deism of a Charles Blount or a John Toland was simply making explicit what many liberal Churchmen wished to reform. In one sense such historiography has taken seriously the deists' own claims to religious authenticity: this claim to theological sincerity was one very much disputed by contemporary orthodox clergymen.

In order to illuminate with some historical precision what deism was then, it is worth turning to the languages and arguments that both deists and their opponents used during the late early modern period. 'Deist' was a pejorative label first coined by Pierre Viret in the context of mid sixteenth century confessional debate to indict those, on authority of their own consciences took it upon themselves to challenge the articles of Calvinist orthodoxy. As a brand of theological abuse it became part of mainstream anglophone discourse after the turbulent years of the English Revolution in the 1650s. As with many of the labels assigned to theological heterodoxy (Puritan, Popish, Atheist) the precise meaning of the category was vague. Indeed one of the major historiographical problems in the history of ideas in the early modern period is

¹ Jacob (1981).

separating coherent philosophical positions from the fictional projections of anxious orthodoxies. As Michael Hunter has shown in a seminal piece the language of 'atheism' was part of a discourse that exposed the doubts and fragility of orthodox certainty: atheists might be any who threatened the theological status quo.² Similarly 'deists', depending upon who used the word about whom, did not necessarily have any precise content. There is no doubt however that the leaders of the established Church identified a threat from all sorts of radical heterodoxies and unbelievers. Heresiographers like Alexander Ross and Thomas Edwards had documented in precise and neurotic detail all of the theological and moral deviancies engendered by the fall of monarchy and the disestablishment of the Church of England in the 1640s and 1650s. This fear of religious diversity persisted after the restoration of Church and State in the 1660s. Compliance with the edicts of confessional conformity was, given the memories of the world turned upside down, the premise of political order: theological deviance was a badge of political subversion. Although statutes enforced Church attendance and subscription to the doctrinal articles of the established church on pain of imprisonment and ultimately banishment, religious dissidence of all varieties within and without the Anglican establishment persisted. It is worth underscoring this point about the confessional foundation of political order because it is the precise context which deism addressed. Under the rubric of the various anti-blasphemy acts from the 1640s to the 1690s it was illegal to challenge any of the doctrinal, ecclesiastical and scriptural dogma of the National Church establishment. It was criminal to worship in any other form than the prescribed liturgy: gathering together to read scripture or worship was punished with draconian severity. Even after the misnamed Toleration Act of 1689, which merely withdrew the penalties against a very narrow set of Protestant dissidents, any public assault on the shibboleths of Trinitarian orthodoxy was liable to prosecution. Thomas Aikenhead, an heterodox Scottish student was executed in 1697 for ridiculing the person of Christ and the Scriptures.³ Imprisonment, fines and the pillory were not infrequently used against religious dissidents in the eighteenth century. The deists were men who attempted to revise the confessional foundations of the political status quo: clearly delicacy and a careful eye turned towards the inclinations of the censor and the magistrate was important to preserved the integrity of these men. The point to stress here, is that any figure or group of thinkers and writers that attempted to re describe

² Hunter (1985).

³ Hunter (1992).

or undercut the values of orthodoxy were perceived as dangerous threats to order who would, in shaking the pillars of religious orthodoxy, return England to the Babylon of disorder and impiety of the interregnum. This anxiety was expressed not just in the legal language of statutes but in the massive anti-dissident apologetics and polemics of the 1660s, 1670s and early 1680s. While the focus of much of the orthodox writing of the first thirty years of the Restoration was directed against the illegality and irreligion of Protestant schismatics and non-conformists there was a coda that underlay much of this argument that insisted that Protestant dissidence was the starting point for much more dangerous and corrosive form of enthusiasm and impiety. Indeed the high point of this anxiety co-incided with the legal relaxation of laws against Protestant dissent in the early 1690s and found cultural form in the series of public lectures and sermons founded by Robert Boyle that ran from 1692, that in the provision of Boyle's will, were intended to secure the Christian religion 'against notorious infidels, viz. Atheists, Theists, Pagans, Jews and Mahometans'. Throughout the 1690s and 1700s the focus of this orthodox hostility bracketed Deism with Atheism: in other words for the anxious clergy there was very little distinction between the two intellectual positions which were both equivalently destructive of true religion. The core of infidelity, as Edward Stillingfleet noted, in his *Letter to a Deist* (1677), lay in a 'mean esteem of the Scriptures and the Christian Religion'. Indeed Stillingfleet devoted much of his polemical writing to rebutting deistical assaults upon the truth and accuracy of both the Old and the New Testaments. It is these two points, the confessional consequences of the English Revolution and the attack upon the truth of revelation, which can provide the context for understanding the purpose and meaning of English deism.

Turning to explore in detail the life and thought of Charles Blount (1654-1693) will encapsulate the philosophical and polemical contribution of 'deism' to English and Continental intellectual culture between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Blount is, and was, a seminal, transitional and ultimately deeply elusive figure. He has very infrequently troubled the pages of histories of philosophy, more commonly being dismissed as a plagiarist, more notorious for his suicide than his speculative opinions or scholarly contributions. But Blount straddled the worlds of renaissance scepticism and *philosophie* irreligion. In his work we can find the mixture of natural theology, radical Biblical criticism, classical mythology and sceptical epistemologies that contributed to the world view that could be called deism. In one

commonplace historical account Blount's religious thought has been portrayed as a deviant and more radical re-working of (Lord Edward) Herbert of Cherbury's (1583-1648) system of philosophy as promoted in *De Veritate* (1624), *de Religione Laici* (1645) and *de Religione Gentilium* (1663). On the other hand Blount's works were perennially popular amongst Continental eighteenth century freethinkers and atheists: Baron d'Holbach himself was involved in the translation and publication of extracts of his essays. American deists, such as Ethan Allen (1737-1789), were drawing inspiration from Blount's collected works *The Oracles of Reason*, as late as the 1780s. If, briefly, Blount's social and intellectual milieu is considered it is possible to explore how multifaceted deism was, to unpick how many different intellectual traditions were melded and re-invented. Blount's intimacy with the thought of Herbert of Cherbury is well documented but he was also a friend of Thomas Hobbes: he liberally cited his works and promoted the irreligious and sceptical portions of Books III and IV of *Leviathan* (1651). In Blount's *Elegy* (1680) for Hobbes and the *Last Saying and Dying Legacy*, (1680) Hobbes' materialism, mortalism and anticlericalism was promoted in bold and aggressive language. Blount was also an associate of the wit and libertine poet Rochester, and the radical republican Henry Stubbe. Blount was the first to translate portions of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* into English in 1683. Similarly he acted as a literary conduit for the works of renaissance sceptics like Machiavelli, Vanini, Pomponatius, Campanella, Montaigne, Charron, as well as more modern writers like Isaac Le Peyrere, Francis Bacon and Thomas Browne. An examination of the extracts in his private commonplace book shows how he was steeped in all forms of classical, post-Renaissance, and late seventeenth century impiety: he also recorded many oral comments of dubious orthodoxy from men like Hobbes. It was from these intellectual resources that Blount's (and men following in his footsteps like John Toland, Anthony Collins and Matthew Tindal) deism can be constructed.

Traditionally Blount has been represented as a pale imitator of Herbert of Cherbury. Indeed Blount published a version of Herbert's *de Religione Laici* in 1683, although close textual examination of his edition would indicate that he turned Herbert's eirenic propositions on the five universal notions common to all natural religion into a scheme for deconstructing all of the central claims of revealed religion. Providence, the immortality of the soul, the utility of worship, and salvation through Christ were all rebutted. Blount's *A Summary*

Account of the Deists Religion (1693) presented a system of theology that stated simply that 'the morality in religion is above the mystery in it'. In other works such as *Great is Diana* (1679) and *Anima Mundi* (1680) Blount indicted all organised religion as the product of corrupt priestcraft by constructing histories of fraud and doctrinal variation. In his edition of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* (1680) Blount ridiculed the miracles of Christ by parallel accounts of Apollonius. For his efforts the book was burnt upon command of the Bishop of London. A later commentator described the latter work as 'the most dangerous attempt, that have been ever made against revealed religion in this country'. Blount's crime was to have brought 'to the eye of every English reader a multitude of facts and reasonings, plausible in themselves, and of the fallacy of which, none but men of parts and learning can be proper judges'. Blount's deism was then erudite, learned and radical. Importantly it was also eclectic, rhetorical and unsystematic.

One of the dangers of attempting to categorise deism as a philosophical system is that such a process misses the polemical point of many of the writings of the deists. Men like Blount and John Toland were not attempting to describe and promote a new set of philosophical or theological propositions. Although it is clear from their writings that their understandings of matters sacramental, providential and ecclesiastical were profoundly unorthodox, it is similarly clear that the evangelism of such writings was not directed at establishing new theological shibboleths. It is possible to reconstruct deist attitudes to providence or pneumatology, but the importance of deist contributions does not lie in such a legacy. The more profound achievement of these men can be found in their critical and methodological discourses designed to undercut priestcraft. The deist authors were engaged in a polemical and ideological war against a prevailing system of authority and cultural power represented by the *de jure divino* institutions of Church and State.

Deists like Blount and Toland were not then merely involved in constructing new theologies or philosophies; they were engaged in public strategies of persuasion. They were not simply engrossed in articulating ideas, but more importantly in attempting to change the discursive foundations of political order: this involved both rhetorical and philosophical polemic. The deist writers did not simply advance new propositions, they sought also to convince, not just churchmen, but the literate orders of the necessity of

reform. This meant that they were not just an oppositional movement but that they participated with the discourses that they were attempting to change: so they engaged with theological concepts rather than simply rebutting them. One of the key cultural foundations of the infrastructures of the early modern confessional state was the authority of the vernacular Bible. Authorised in 1611, the Bible was the religion of Protestants, a hand book not only of religious belief and practice, a guide to salvation and redemption, but also a text that reinforced and inscribed the structures of both social and political hierarchy. It is at this point that the connection between deism and politics is crucial: it is a connection that has been frequently ignored. Rather than considering deists as a variety of radical Christian theologians, or as a point on some evolutionary vector in the history of ideas from Christian certainty to modern atheism, it would be more fruitful to consider the deists as the first critics of cultural authority. It was the deists who made the connection between epistemological and political concepts of authority: drawing from Hobbes' critique of language and power, the deists took the sceptical questionings of certainty out of the latin folios of the schools and universities and into the public sphere. The target of this cultural critique was the priesthood but the means of assault was achieved by concentrating on the key text: Scripture and revelation.

Indeed part of the established clergy's antagonism against the deists was that they self consciously adapted their arguments to the language of the public sphere. Men like Blount, Toland and others were criticised for talking theology in the alehouses and coffee houses of London. Works like John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696) were composed not only to advance a sceptical deconstruction of trinitarian mystery, but also to enfranchise free inquiry, untrammelled by priestly authority, into religious belief. Again, this was a theme echoed and extended in Anthony Collins's *Discourse on Freethinking* (1714) a pamphlet that encouraged the practise of critical inquiry amongst the laity, much to the horror and disgust of his clerical contemporaries. The point of much of the deistical writing was not just to challenge specific Christian theology (the Trinity) or belief (miracles), but to suggest that the very notion of establishing a conformity in articles of belief was corrupt. In writing pamphlets, histories and longer critical investigations into the propagation and history of mystery, miracles and priestcraft the deists hoped to enfranchise the capabilities of a public reason. This is not to argue that the deists were fledgling democrats: they did not value all opinion in

itself. Ignorance was anathema whether it was clerical or popular: critical reason was their normative model.

Taking Lefevre's, still pertinent, point that early modern minds found it very difficult to think in any other terms than the religious, understanding how the deists revised their own beliefs about religion is clearly important. Revising the commonplace reception of Scripture was the starting point for the deist critique of contemporary theocratic power. Revisionist biblical criticism was not a singularly secularising project. Here the twofold legacy of Erasmian humanism was importantly turned into a critical tool against priestcraft. The first strand of Renaissance culture that was adapted to a more cutting purpose was the whole Erasmian enterprise of the *philosophia christi*. Erasmus had suggested that Scripture was a means of conveying a message, a philosophy of life: his criticism had concentrated upon the meaning of this spirituality at the expense of the convoluted doctrinal and metaphysical dogma of the schools. In works like *Christianity Not Mysterious*, Toland adopted this hermeneutic position: scripture had simple and clear messages, anything beyond such reasonable clarity was mysterious and jargon. 'Mystery' was the spawn and instrument of priestcraft: by manipulation of scriptural language the priesthood had foisted a false and perverted theology upon an ignorant world. This aspect of deist thought looked to many contemporaries such as Edward Stillingfleet, John Edwards and others, very close to theology of the Socinians who elevating reason in their hermeneutic denied key mysterious doctrine like the Trinity. It was for this misunderstanding that radical lay theologians like John Locke were tarred with the deist brush: an association that Locke did his best to deny. But importantly, for writers like Toland, the attack upon mystery was only one part of the critical enterprise. Attempting to discern some simple truths from the text of Scripture was also combined with a profound and radical consideration of the nature of the Holy text itself. Again this tradition was an inheritance of the Erasmian emphasis upon philological scholarship melded with the more radical treatment of Scripture found in Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1671). For both of the earlier thinkers there was a radical separation between knowledge and revelation: scripture could not teach philosophy. Moreover, the books of the Old and New Testament were historical, as well as sacred, texts. Avoiding any profound discussion of the intricate meanings of scripture both Hobbes and Spinoza were more concerned to address the question of the authority and

authenticity of the written word. How could the script of the Bible be proved authentic? Mistranscriptions, interpolations and grammatical mistakes, as humanist scholarship from Erasmus to Usher had shown, were rife in the received versions. Hobbes suggested that the Pentateuch might not have been written by Moses, Spinoza suggested most of the prophets were inspired by their own imaginations rather than God. Most Anglican Biblical scholars were horrified by such suggestions: Hobbes and Spinoza were reviled as atheists because they had struck at the heart of the cultural authority of the Church. It was precisely this challenge that the deists took forward into the eighteenth century. The arch proponent of the Spinozist critique of the Bible was John Toland.

Traditionally deist attacks on scripture have been decried as a secular project: the Holy text was cast aside to be replaced by the language of nature or philosophy. The attack upon the Bible was central to the deist contribution. Far from abandoning a concern with Scripture, moving from the time of Hobbes to the days of Toland actually denotes an increasing concentration on the nature of the Bible. In order to critique sacred writings, deists like Toland became immersed in the technicalities of scholarly criticism. Toland was educated at Glasgow, Oxford and Leiden. He was a capable linguist and, in a profound way an original scholar of Classical, Celtic and Biblical learning. His art was to communicate the detailed findings of patristic and humanist learning to the public sphere. While Hobbes embedded his thoughts on the authority of Scripture within a complex texture of arguments about the nature of knowledge and power, Toland adopted a more accessible and transparent tactic of displaying the doubts many learned men had voiced about various sections of both the Old and New Testaments in weighty Latin volumes in the form of short vernacular publications. The high point of this strategy for unpicking the scriptural foundations of *ancien regime* political order can be found in his meditations upon the canonicity of received scripture. Importantly Toland published the first moves against the authenticity of the Bible in his edition of the Republican poet John Milton's works. Meditating upon the dubious authorship of the key monarchist works of the mid century the *Eikon Basilike* (1649) Toland pondered that if it was easy to foist a sham upon the reading public in such recent times how much easier it must have been in the case of Scripture. Here, very carefully and very precisely, Toland made the link between the critique of Scripture and of the shibboleths of political order. The *Eikon* was regarded as sacrosanct, written by the pen of the royal martyr

Charles I. Singlehandedly Toland undercut the sanctity of both Church and State. Indeed Toland capitalised upon the cultural fragility of the authenticity of Scriptural text first by publishing a *Catalogue* of spurious and apocrypha scriptural texts which put into simple format the more arcane latinate scholarship of the Churchmen. The orthodox reaction to this publications was semi-hysterical. Rebutals, refutations and learned rebukes were publish in throngs from 1699: writings were still countering Toland's assertions in the 1720s. The Irishman's reputation as 'Mr Gospelscorn' was further enhanced with the publication of the fruits of all his biblical researches, *Nazarenus* (1718), which proffered a new gospel to the public. It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of this work. Toland using the full powers of his university educations, discussed two unorthodox and unknown biblical manuscripts, first the Gospel of Barnabas and secondly the early medieval Irish Codex Armarchanus. Shrouded in scholarly reference Toland gave a learned, but accessible, account of these monuments of Christian antiquity, carefully contrived to expose all of the doctrinal, theological and ecclesiastical certainties of the established clerical order. In one sense this text epitomises the form and content of the deist attack in England. Embedded in the text are arguments about the relationship between reason, virtue and religion; there is a sustained indictment of priestcraft; the influences of Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, Richard Simon and James Harrington are ubiquitous; Christian mystery and dogma exposed: all of this published in the guise of Christian scholarship. Some unsuspecting readers were deluded by the rhetoric of the work to consider it sincere. The continental journals were profoundly hostile to the work: faculties of theology in Germany and the Low Countries turned their researches to countering Toland's false scholarship. The irony of course is that this form of deism was not simply a rejection of Christian mystery and scripture, but that as part of an oppositional discursive strategy, it actually immersed itself in the traditions and arguments of orthodoxy: in effect as part of his polemic Toland fashioned himself into a learned and erudite Biblical scholar. It may be for this reason that historians have mistakenly characterised him and the deist enterprise as a theological moment.

Here concentration has focused upon two of the main deistical authors - Blount and Toland - there were of course many more writers between 1660 and 1740. Matthew Tindal's *Rights of the Christian Church* (1706) and *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730) were important contributions. The writings of Thomas Chubb (1679-1747), Peter Annet (1693-1769), Thomas

Woolston (1670-1733), William Woollaston (1660-1724), Henry Dodwell (d.1784), amongst many others, carried forward the arguments of Blount and Toland against mystery, miracles and priestcraft into the eighteenth century. These published works, for which many of the authors suffered imprisonment and clerical persecution, provide a canon of deistical works which were plundered by continental freethinkers like d'Holbach and Rousseau. Much of the intellectual work that underpinned the High Enlightenment's attack upon the pillars of the *ancien regime* had been mapped out by the English deists. Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* (1794-5), often characterised as the cynosure of Enlightenment irreligion, far from being an innovative assault on Christian mystery and in particular the authority of the Bible, drew many of its arguments from the earlier deistical writing. Paine might dismiss the Bible as poetry or myth; he might discuss the inconsistencies and contradictions in the received versions; he might throw doubt on the authorship of the Psalms or the Book of Samuel. None of this however was new. The savage contemporary reaction to the perceived blasphemy of the *Age of Reason* might alert us to the profound radicalism of the attack on the Bible contrived by Blount and Toland half a century or more earlier.

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