

An Enlightened Piety: A Rereading of English Deist Thinkers

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Abstract

*The mainstream discourse has maintained that the 17th century Age of Enlightenment was a secular movement against Christian dominance, an antithesis of fervent religiosity. However, on examining the origins of the Enlightenment, its close relationship with Christianity becomes evident. Considered as a form of religion most associated with the Enlightenment, Deism is conceptualized as directly opposed to Christian theism. Based on reason and rationality this position is considered to question the core aspects of Christianity. In an attempt to understand the development of Enlightenment Deism and to explore how closely related it was to Christian sensibilities, this paper explores the English Enlightenment. Specifically, by utilizing three main primary sources—Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*, Toland’s *Christianity not Mysterious*, and Collins’s *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*—this paper argues that Deism developed within the boundaries of Christian thought, rather than attacking the foundational ideologies of Christianity.*

Keywords: Deism, Enlightenment, Locke, Toland, Collins, Christianity

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1. Introduction

Mainstream historiography has maintained the position that the 17th century Age of Enlightenment was a secular, reactionary movement against Christian dominance, and an antithesis of fervent religiosity that had guided European life in the medieval and early modern eras. However, on closer examination of the origins of the Enlightenment, one realizes that the two developments are closely enmeshed. Enlightenment-spurred scholars—many of them Christian—tried to evaluate Christianity and its authority with reason. Hence, the traditional dichotomization between the Enlightenment and Christian thought in historical literature need to be reassessed critically.

A prime method of displaying the complex relationship between Enlightenment and Christian thought is through an exploration of Deism. Considered as a form of religion most associated with the Enlightenment, Deism is largely conceptualized as directly opposed to Christian theism. It is a philosophical position based on reason and rationality which is largely perceived as rejecting core aspects of Christianity, including miracles, revelations, or the divinity of Christ (Bistrow, 2017). In this sense, Deism can serve as a theological manifestation of the virtues that the Enlightenment espoused, a conception of god as filtered through the lens of logic and reason.

Mainstream interpretations have often characterized several scholars of religious thought during the Enlightenment era—including John Toland and Anthony Collins—as Deist thinkers. However, a closer examination shows that such “Deist” thinkers were actually deeply dedicated to a thoroughly Christian interpretation of Enlightenment values. Therefore, in an attempt to understand the development of Enlightenment Deism and to explore how closely related it was to Christian sensibilities, this paper explores the English Enlightenment, the birthplace of Deist thought in the 17th century. Specifically, it focuses on the ideas of John Locke and two Lockean “Deists,” John Toland and Anthony Collins. In an early attempt to reconcile Enlightenment impulses with Christian sensibilities, in his works, Locke aimed to establish the compatibility of reason and the teachings of Christianity. This paper argues that a thorough assessment of Toland’s and Collin’s writings also reveals a commitment to a similar project. The paper utilizes three main primary sources—Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*, Toland’s *Christianity not Mysterious*, and Collins’s *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*—to build the argument that Deism developed within the boundaries of Christian thought, rather than as a method of attacking the foundational ideologies of Christianity. In other words, this paper attempts to show that, although Enlightenment thought—as manifested through Deism—has been considered as a philosophy that is antithetical to Christian theology, it was actually a movement that was inevitably contained within Christian tradition.

2. Theoretical Considerations on the Enlightenment and Christianity

Historical narratives have consistently described the ideological relationship between the Enlightenment and Christianity as antagonistic. For instance, German philosopher Immanuel Kant defined Enlightenment thinking as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (Kant, 2013). In other words, Enlightenment comes about when an individual is able to make and execute rational decisions independently. Traditionally, Christianity is not thought to be rational due to its emphasis on the divine acts of Jesus in the Gospel, acts that seemingly cannot be given rational sense. Evidently, these two ideologies seem antithetical.

However, historians such as Jonathan Sheehan (2005), Peter Gay (1966), and James Byrne (1997) challenged this mainstream perspective by discussing the enmeshed development of Enlightenment and Christian thought—i.e., “Enlightened Christianity.” They argued that rather than being a reactive and essentially secular movement, the Enlightenment was cultivated within the sphere of Christian ideology, deeply entrenched in religious sensibilities. Often, so-called Enlightenment scholars were Christians who merely preferred to interpret and analyze the doctrine through alternative, perhaps more “reasoned” modes.

This reading of Enlightenment Christianity is interesting particularly in assessing the Deist movement of the 17th century. Deism, as stated previously, is a philosophical belief that is commonly considered as a rejection of the core aspects of Christianity, including miracles, revelations, or the divinity of Christ. While Deism is typically thought to be a critical reaction to mainstream Christianity, some scholars, including Barnett (2013), assert that the perceived “threat” of Deism was overstated by both 16th–18th century thinkers as well as recent historians. Instead, a new interpretation characterizes Deism as an essentially Christian movement led by Dissenters, who simply sought to establish a new center of Christian power within the confines of divinity.

Here, Sheehan’s (2005) concept of the “cultural Bible” provides a useful basis for discussing how Christian theology came to define much more than religious orthodoxy. The “cultural Bible” implies that different ways of interpreting the Bible became ways to assert one’s political, social, and economic viewpoints, and to identify with a particular cultural sensibility. He explained that the “Enlightenment Bible,” an interpretation of the Bible based on culturally widespread “rational” sensibilities, did not seek to dispel doctrine as a whole. Instead, such alternative interpretations worked to undermine the authority of the *institution* of the Catholic Church, allowing for different nodes of power to emerge in narrating Christian scripture (Sheehan, 2005).

During the English Reformation and throughout the Enlightenment, public emphasis on education and reason led to the spread of awareness regarding the corrupt practices of the Anglican Church, in turn leading Dissenters to increasingly opt for Reformist Protestantism. In retaliation, the Church began to attack the Enlightenment movement, which largely comprised Protestant thinkers, especially ones who attempted to analyze and interpret Christianity through reason and rationality. In order to portray them as enemies of religion, the High Church condemned them as Deist or atheist (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). Sheehan (2005) noted that, throughout the 18th century as well, there were impulses to separate the Bible into multiple “cultural Bibles” in order to create various sectarian spheres of religious influence. Therefore, the Bible became a battleground on which divergent doctrinal interpretations fought to impose their own theologies onto others. Sheehan’s (2005) analysis lends ample room to critically reassess what Deism was in relation to Christian thought, as it implies that the former was not a reactive movement against the philosophy of Christianity, but rather a political and/or sectarian movement *within* Christianity, which embraced parts of Enlightenment thinking as a way of putting forth an “alternative” theology.

In *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity*, Barnett (2013), furthered this idea by claiming that the size and impact of the 17th century Deist movement were heavily exaggerated by Anglican prelates, who portrayed the Protestant acceptance of rationality as a “threat to Christianity.” They did not do so because such dissenting thinkers were actually non-believers; their actions were motivated by their belief that Deism undermined the authority of the High Church by disrupting the social order of England. Barnett (2013) went so far as to state that “in any meaningful definition of the term... the Deist movement never existed” (p. 13), in the sense that there was no real “secular” movement that attempted to thwart religious thought itself.

Again, this analysis highlights the need for a critical reading of the generally-accepted conception of the Enlightenment as non-Christian. The juxtaposition between the two ideas was an artificial construct put forth by the then-dominant Anglican Church, one that would dispel rivaling sectarian considerations. These considerations imply that Deism—as a religious manifestation of the Enlightenment—was not based on the rejection of Christianity.

Further, although the Enlightenment is generally characterized as a movement towards secularity, religiosity in the Age of Enlightenment does not seem to have been “under attack.” Instead, a dedication to critical thinking may have merely challenged the *mainstream* interpretation of the Bible while pushing forth an alternative interpretation and practice of piety.

3. Locke’s Interpretation of Christianity

In order to obtain a holistic understanding of the history of Deist thought and its relation to Christianity, it is essential to examine John Locke’s theology because his works are considered fundamental to the development of English Deism. As one of the first British Empiricists, Locke is commonly credited with motivating and inspiring Deism through a thoroughgoing acceptance of the mind as a *tabula rasa* (Locke, 1948), which suggests that all thought occurs as a result of imprinting via experience (Uzgalis, 2020). Locke’s rejection of the presence of innate ideas and the widespread acceptance of this Lockean thesis meant that the possibility of “revelation” was to be analyzed through the empiricist’s conception of the mind and rationality, and hence, so was Deism (Mooney & Imbrosciano, 2005). Surprisingly, then, a constant theme throughout Locke’s works was the devout acceptance of Christian theology, but through the lens of the Enlightenment virtues of reason and rationality. Throughout his works, Locke essentially intended to show that Christianity is the most *reasonable* religious institution.

Most individuals tend to believe that the Enlightenment is antithetical to Christianity—or any religion, for that matter—because the latter’s scripture contains descriptions of miraculous actions and revelations, such as Jesus turning water into wine in the process of convincing people that he is the Messiah. Followers of the religion accept and revere these accounts as fact, which some scholars claim are incompatible with rationality. However, Locke claimed that these miracles and revelations actually serve to make Christianity a completely *rational* religious institution. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695/1824), Locke took into consideration the socio-political tensions of the setting in which Jesus spread his Gospel in the Old Testament. He claimed that these miracles were the primary methods by which people identified Jesus as the “Messiah,” and that this was exactly as Jesus intended. As the Messiah, Jesus had to conceal his identity to avoid persecution by the Roman government of Judaea on grounds of blasphemy. Therefore, he never explicitly claimed to be the Messiah, and instead, he let people arrive at their own conclusions after seeing his miracles. In addition, when he was taken and tried before Pontius Pilate, these actions protected Jesus from immediate persecution as his seemingly miraculous acts could not be brought to testimony as any kind of substantial evidence. According to Locke, this was the most reasonable outcome out of all the other possible versions of Jesus’s persecution. He claimed that, alternatively, if Jesus were to have actively preached to the people that he was the Messiah, God could have used his divine powers to intervene and make Pilate pronounce Jesus innocent. However, Locke then questioned the reasonableness of such a scenario and argued that future generations of people would have been rightly suspicious of its rationality and validity. Upon this logic, he claimed that this particular utilization of miracles in Christianity and Christian scripture is *reasonable* (Locke, 1695/1824).

In addition, Locke explained that Jesus performed these miracles to teach people certain moral and ethical lessons. Given this, he asserted that Jesus’s use of miracles in order to do this was the “surest, the safest, and most effectual way of teaching: especially if we add this further consideration, that as it suits the lowest capacities of reasonable creatures, so it reaches and satisfies, nay, enlightens the highest” (Locke, 1695/1824, p. 147). In other words, Locke believed that Jesus’s use of miracles to convey these thoughts allowed for even the least intelligent of people to comprehend the moral lessons behind each event, and therefore, this was the most reasonable method that Jesus could have utilized, more so than a blatant explanation of moral and ethical thought. Here, Locke claimed that Christianity and its attendant revelatory doctrines are not only merely consistent with reason, but are explicable through reason. With reference to the miracles themselves—which seemingly cannot be rationalized by any scientific explanation—he asserted that they were not *meant* to be understood by human reason. Rather, the role of God is to be the sole divine entity capable of explaining these miracles. Locke further affirmed this position in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke & Nidditch, 1979).

As part of his conviction that the Enlightenment and Christianity are compatible, in his works, Locke expressed a clear distaste for those who denied the divinity of God. Scholars such as Diego Lucci interpreted Locke’s hostility towards Deism by pointing to his frequently-self-proclaimed piety. In other words, Locke believed that relying far too extensively on natural reason alone led to the complete disregard of certain indispensable aspects of Christianity. In this sense, Locke, whose texts are usually cited as the birthplace of English Deism, fundamentally rejected the Deist claim.

4. John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious*

John Toland (1670–1722) is widely known as an anti-Christian thinker because of the radical nature of his works. Despite accusations of atheism, Toland was raised Catholic, and although he converted to Protestantism at the age of 16 years, he retained his dedication to theology. His conversion to Protestantism proved to be a significant component of his academic career, as he received multiple scholarships provided by wealthy English Dissenters who wished to invest in the possibility of Toland becoming a minister for Dissenters (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021).

As an academic, Toland wrote works in the Dissenter tradition, questioning traditional Christian theology. Consequently, his writings immediately sparked controversy throughout Europe. In *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696–1722*, historian Justin Champion (2003) described how, as the controversy surrounding him grew, after 1696, public association with Toland became “a dangerous thing” (p. 7). Recognizing this, many scholars disassociated themselves from him, including fellow Enlightenment thinker John Locke.

The circumstances of Toland's life warrant a revised interpretation of his life as a “Deist.” Throughout his life, Toland rarely had opportunities to explain the intentions behind his writing. In one of the earliest biographies on Toland's life, Pierre des Maizeaux (1722) stated that the Irish Parliament condemned *Christianity not Mysterious* and ordered Toland's arrest without the judges having read it. Toland was portrayed as “a most formidable enemy of Christianity,” (des Maizeaux, 1722, p. 16), despite the fact that he was Christian himself. In a letter to the Bishop of London, Toland confirmed, “The religion taught by Jesus Christ and his Apostles... is that which I infinitely prefer before all others” (des Maizeaux, 1722, p. 45).

Considering this background, a close examination of *Christianity Not Mysterious* reveals that Toland's proclamation of piety may have been wrongfully dismissed in contemporary interpretations of his works. In his seminal text, Toland contended that there is nothing in Christian scripture that is “contrary to Reason, nor above it; and that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd a Mystery” (1696, p. 6), an argument usually thought to prove his atheist thinking. While this initially seems to be a denial of the divinity of God, Toland explained his argument stating, “nothing can be said to be a Mystery, because we have not an adequate Idea of it... for then everything would be a Mystery” and that it is exactly this lack of incomprehensible mysteries that makes Christianity superior to other faiths (Toland, 1696, p. 74). Toland also claimed that his reason for centering the work around rational analysis of the authenticity and divine origins of the Bible was “to defend it from attacks by nonbelievers” (Toland, 1696, p. 125).

Here, we need to note that Toland did *not* hold that the mysteries of the scripture are perfectly explicable to *human* reason but that Jesus's acts in Christian scripture must be *somehow* explicable, perhaps, to reasonable beings (such as God), who have rational abilities that exceed those of humans. That is, Toland's position on the issue of divinity is not that of outright denial but rather that of *reinterpretation* of divinity in the language of rationality, albeit one which denies the possibility of comprehension through *human* rationality. Therefore, Toland concluded that, although these mysteries could be seen as contrary to “the false Reasoning of all that will not know what it is to reflect or consider... [they are not] above the Possibility of their Reason” (Toland, 1702, p. 65)—meaning that although the explanations of these mysteries are above any human levels of understanding—they may be comprehensible to those with elevated levels of knowledge and intelligence.

However, contemporaries such as John Locke also accused Toland of being Deist, and attempted to disassociate themselves from him. Locke, for one, believed that Toland's claim that nothing in the Gospel is contrary or above reason meant that Toland denied the aspects of the Gospel that accounted for the divinity of God. However, Toland defended himself from these charges in his *VindictusLiberius*(1702). He claimed that he was in no way guilty of the “horrible charge of Atheism,” and condemned it severely. He also reaffirmed his dedication to the Christian faith, claiming that he had “no doubts concerning the Excellence, Perfection, and Divinity of the Christian Religion” and that he “willingly and heartily conform[s] to the Doctrine and Worship of the Church of England in particular” (Toland, 1702, p. 257), indicating that an atheist or even Deist reading of Toland may be an unfair assessment of his work.

Scholars such as Barnett (2013) also asserted that the Deist interpretation of Toland's works are largely due to the Deism scare that was prevalent in Europe at the time. In other words, *Christianity Not Mysterious* may be closer to being a Reformist Protestant work, many of which denied traditional tenets of the religion such as sacraments. Barnett (2013) noted that Toland's works contained little to no analysis attacking Christian scriptures and that they merely attempted to analyze and explain components of traditional Christian theology with reason. Considering this perspective, it is likely that, contrary to the popular opinion that Toland was a Deist or an atheist thinker, he was a dedicated Protestant whose goal was to question and interpret certain aspects of mainstream Christianity with rationality.

5. Andrew Collins's *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*

Andrew Collins (1676–1729) was a prominent English philosopher best known for coining the term “free-thinking,” which indicates “the Use of the Understanding, in endeavouring to find out the Meaning of any Proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature and Evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming Force or Weakness of the Evidence” (Collins, 1713, p. 5). In his treatise *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, he discussed the role of free-thinking in reference to the better understanding of faith and religion. He, like Toland, attracted immense controversy and was often labeled as Deist or atheist; however, also like Toland, he consistently proclaimed himself to be true to the Christian faith.

One point to note is that Collins was closely acquainted with Locke and they frequently exchanged similar perspectives on free-thinking and reason. In fact, Collins's treatise is often considered to be a Lockean text, even by scholars who deny Locke's Deism and affirm Collins's. For example, it is evident from Collins's works that he largely accepted the framework of the three types of mysteries, as outlined by Locke: ones explainable by reason, ones above reason, and ones contrary to reason. Like Locke, Collins explicitly rejected mysteries contrary to reason, but accepted those that are merely above reason. Therefore, although he did not accept transubstantiation—where bread and wine is believed to transform into the flesh and blood of Christ after consummation—he accepted the resurrection of Christ (Collins, 1713, p. 24).

Collins attempted to integrate reason into an interpretation of the Bible by maintaining that free-thinking is integral to being faithful to a religion: “as there can be no... believing any religion at all, but by means of free-thinking” (Collins, 1713, p. 43). He believed that this is especially so regarding the “mysteries” depicted in Christian scripture. Collins asserted that a person cannot be expected to believe what is not understandable given their level of intellect (Collins, 1713). Therefore, as he stated that free-thinking enhances the capabilities of one's mind, it becomes integral to the comprehension of the *meaning* of these mysteries. This is not to say that Collins denied the divinity and revelatory nature of such doctrines; rather, he claimed that revelation cannot be contrary to reason, meaning that reason and revelation must be compatible concepts in which reason acts to clarify the meaning of revelations to the faithful (Collins, 1713).

Instead of condemning the doctrine of Christianity, Collins condemned the High Church for attempting to limit free-thinking. He stated that the Anglican Church has often been guilty of spreading dogma in order to deceive followers of faith into believing certain superstitions and falsehoods to be the truth. Collins also addressed one of the primary objections against his work, the claim that free-thinking leads to atheism. Collins assumed a clear stance against atheism, stating “ignorance is the foundation of Atheism and Free-Thinking the Cure of it” (Collins, 1713, p. 105). In other words, Collins thought that free-thinking enables one to better comprehend the clearly rational meanings behind the revelatory doctrines of Christianity, and therefore, *not* become an atheist.

Several modern historians confirm Collins's claims of piety, and point out that Collins merely supported a Protestant cause that was critical of the High Church. For example, Lucci (n.d.) noted that Collins's works hold many references to Protestant ideas. In attempting to advocate for political and social reform, he asserted that Collins and many other Enlightenment writers labelled as “Deist” used Protestant concepts to argue for a freer and a more tolerant religious society, not an atheist one (Lucci, n.d.).

6. Conclusion

From the 16th to 18th century, England was defined by a general hostility between Enlightenment thinkers and the Anglican Church. Therefore, those who wrote interpretations of Christian doctrine in regards to the Enlightenment ideas of reason and rationality were often heavily criticized by the Church for being anti-Christian, Deist, or atheist. This paper shows that John Toland and Andrew Collins shared such a fate. The theologies of these scholars must be analyzed taking background contextual factors into consideration, such as the scholars' Protestant identities, their stances on the significance of revelation, and, perhaps most importantly, their continuity with the theological position of Locke. When this is done, it becomes evident that their aims were to reconcile Christian theology with the Enlightenment ideas of reason and rationality. To characterize these thinkers as secular, atheist, or perhaps even Deist would be to concede to the 17th century High Church interpretations of dissenting thinkers, which dispelled any theology that was contrary to Anglican tradition. Rather, as self-identifying Enlightenment and Christian scholars, those like Toland and Collins did not attempt to challenge the divinity of their religion, but to further its authority and its integral nature within human affairs. From this perspective, it becomes evident that the Enlightenment—as manifested through Deism—was not antithetical to Christianity but it was contained within the institution as a reinforcement of its authority and validity.

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