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Thomas Morgan (1671/2-1743): from presbyterian preacher to Christian deist : A contribution to the study of English deism

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Thomas Morgan considered as deist

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§1: An introduction

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During the course of my theological studies in Amsterdam in the 1970s, while I was writing my MA thesis on Old Testament interpretation, I came across Thomas Morgan (1671/2-1743), who had said some awful things about the stories of the Old Testament. Everyone who studies with pleasure the Jewish part of the Scriptures is struck when he encounters someone who is determined to kick the Old Testament out of the Canon. The history of Christian theology has seen some particular examples of this attitude. Naturally, the name of Marcion springs to mind. But we find kindred spirits in later ages, including the prominent German scholar, Adolf von Harnack, and most recently the Berlin theologian, Notger Slenczka.¹ Thomas Morgan is commonly classed as a deist, particularly on the basis of his most famous publication, *The moral philosopher*, which appeared anonymously in three volumes between 1737 and 1740. With Morgan, we enter the arena of English Deism, and Deism in general. Nowadays, Deism presents the historian with various complex questions about its history, its concepts, and its proponents, even leading some scholars to ask the fundamental question whether such a thing as a deist movement existed in the 18th century.

In general, Deism has had a negative reputation for a long time. In the mid-1960s, Peter Gay observed in his classic work on the Enlightenment that the reputation of the deists was not high: ‘they lie unread and are in fact for the most part unreadable’.² This certainly seems to apply to Morgan’s major work, *The moral philosopher*: in 1860, a writer who signed himself Fitzhopskins remarked: ‘The style of *The moral philosopher* is not inviting, and I should not read the three volumes’.³ He probably did not read them.

Reading the catalogues of the British Library during a stay in London in the 1970s, at a time when Internet search was not yet possible, I found that Thomas Morgan was not only a religious writer, but that he had been a Presbyterian minister and a medical practitioner as well. As an author, he was quite active, publishing some 3500 pages about philosophy, theology, and the practice of medicine, respectively. Moreover, he turned out to have been a vigorous pamphleteer. He was at odds with nearly everyone, quarrelling with many in the religious and medical world around him. He seems to have been much disliked by his contemporaries. There was much gossip about his life and morals, especially after his death. Since John Leland’s classic *View of the principal deistical writers that have appeared in England during the last and the present century* (1754-1756), Thomas Morgan has been steadfastly reckoned among the deists.⁴ It is all the more surprising therefore that his name does not appear in some late 20th-century and early 21st-century encyclopedias about the

¹ N. Slenczka, ‘Die Kirche und das Alte Testament’, in: E. Gräb-Schmidt, ed., *Das Alte Testament in der Theologie*, (Marburger Jahrbuch für Theologie 25), Leipzig, 2013, 83-119.

² P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: an interpretation*, Volume 1: *The rise of modern paganism*, reprint, London, 1973, 374; in spite of his criticism of the reputation of the Deists, Gay has called the historical significance of the Deists considerable: ‘They redrew the religious map of Europe’.

³ Fitzhopskins, ‘Mosheim and Morgan’, *Notes and Queries*, second series, 10 (1860) 518.

⁴ J. Leland, *A view of the principal deistical writers*, Volume 1, London 1754, 177-213, letter ix; in later editions Morgan is referred to in letter x.

Enlightenment and the 18th century.⁵ In many historical and theological handbooks, he is only mentioned incidentally.⁶ Only in some well-respected, older theological encyclopedias one does encounter very short articles about the author of *The moral philosopher*. One does find Morgan in the literature about Anti-Semitism.⁷ Although in the present day some highly interesting articles exist about him in specialised journals, there is as yet no modern biography about him. Jeffrey Wigelsworth has observed that ‘Eighteenth-century English deism is enjoying something of a renaissance in scholarly interest’.⁸ This dissertation hopes to contribute to the fresh scholarly interest in Morgan’s life and work.

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§2: Deism in the view of its English opponents

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Although it may seem rather strange to begin an exposition about Deism with some anti-deist views, there is a certain logic to it, because for a long time Deism was known only through the description given of it by its opponents. In past centuries, Deism was generally referred to in a negative fashion.⁹ Leslie Stephen would remark later on that against deist writings, ‘appeared all that was intellectually venerable in England’.¹⁰ There are indeed a host of anti-deist utterances, nearly all of them referring to the destructive dimension of deist convictions. This negative view has accompanied Deism from the very beginning.

Looking at the *Early English Books Online* one finds some fifty English books and pamphlets with the word *deism*, *deist*, or *deists* in the title, published in the 17th century. The *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* contains more than 370 English books and pamphlets with these words in the title. Nearly all these titles characterize Deism as something negative. It was common among adversaries of Deism to point to the critical mind of the deists. In one of the first books published in England on the question of Deism, Edward Stillingfleet’s *Letter to a deist* (1677), the deist is advised by the future Anglican Bishop ‘not to hunt up and down the

⁵ Such as J.W. Volton, ed., *The Blackwell companion to the Enlightenment*, Oxford, 1991; G. Newman, ed., *Britain in the Hanoverian age 1714-1837, an encyclopedia*, New York/London, 1997; A.Ch. Kors, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, 4 volumes, Oxford, 2003; H. Chisick, *Historical dictionary of the Enlightenment*, Oxford, 2005.

⁶ Such as W. Gericke, *Theologie und Kirche im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, (Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen iii/2), Berlin, 1989, 63; A. Beutel, *Die Kirchengeschichte im Zeitalter der Aufklärung, ein Kompendium*, Göttingen, 2009, 321.

⁷ B. Glassman, *Protean prejudice: Anti-semitism in England’s age of reason*, Atlanta, 1998, 19; L. Poliakov, *The history of anti-Semitism*, volume 3: from Voltaire to Wagner, translated by M. Kochan, Philadelphia, 2003, 65; A. Julius, *Trials of the diaspora; a history of anti-Semitism in England*, Oxford, 2010, 389.

⁸ J.R. Wigelsworth, ‘Review of Hudson, *The English deists*’, in: *English Historical Review*, 126 (2011) 449-51 (449).

⁹ W. Hudson and others, ‘Introduction: Atheism and deism revived’, in: W. Hudson and others, eds., *Atheism and deism revalued: Heterodox religious identities in Britain, 1650-1800*, Farnham, 2014, 1-12 (4): ‘deism has long been trivialized and neglected’; Hudson, ‘Atheism and deism demythologized’, in: Hudson, *Atheism*, 13-23 (22) claims that ‘deism ... is a neglected field of research’; cf G. Gawlick, ‘Vorwort des Herausgebers’, in: G.V. Lechler, *Geschichte des Englischen Deismus*, reprint of the Tübingen 1841 edition, Hildesheim, 1965, v.

¹⁰ L. Stephen, *History of English thought in the eighteenth century*, Volume 1, London, 1876, 86.

Scriptures for every thing that seems a difficulty to you'.¹¹ In the eyes of the Bishop, deists did not believe that the Bible was a revelation of God Almighty. Likewise, the Anglican divine William Stephens complained of the growth of Deism and he defined Deism as 'a denial of all reveal'd religion'.¹²

Many pamphlets against Deism were published in those years.¹³ Some anti-deists saw the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza as the evil impetus behind all this. Thus, the Master of Wye Grammar School in Kent, Matthias Earbery, wrote *Deism examin'd and confuted. In an answer to a book intituled, Tractatus Theologico Politicus* (1697) in which he quotes a deist who 'threw away his Bible, and set up this Book in the room of it'.¹⁴ The impact of Spinoza's Bible criticism is a particular topic in relation to Deism.¹⁵

Joseph Smith, Chaplain to the Princess of Wales, tried to prove *The unreasonableness of deism* (1720), maintaining that Deism is 'the not believing such a thing as a revelation of the will of God'.¹⁶

Some tried to diminish its importance by stating that deists were hardly read. Thus, at the end of the 18th century, Edmund Burke remarked:

Who born within the last forty years has read one word of Collins, and Toland, and Tindal, and Chubb, and Morgan, and that whole race who called themselves freethinkers? Who now reads Bolingbroke? Who ever read him through? Ask the booksellers of London what is become of all these lights of the world.¹⁷

¹¹ (E. Stillingfleet), *A letter to a deist, in answer to several objections against the truth and authority of the Scriptures*, London, 1677, 135.

¹² (W. Stephens), *An account of the growth of deism in England*, London, 1696, 4.

¹³ N. Taylor, *A preservative against deism shewing the great advantage of revelation above reason*, London, 1698; N.N., *The case of deism fully and fairly stated*, s.l., 1706; Th. Smith, *Two compendious discourses: ... Published in opposition to the growing atheism and deism of the age*, London, 1708; W. Brown, *Impiety and superstition expos'd: a poetical essay. With a discourse by way of preface, wherein is discovered the original of deism, libertinism and superstition. The three great enemies of religion*, Edinburgh, 1710; N.N., *The prodigious appearance of deism in this age*, London, 1710.

¹⁴ M. Earbery, *Deism examin'd and confuted*, London, 1697, 3; see on Earbery, L. Simonutti, 'Spinoza and the English thinkers. Criticism on prophecies and miracles: Blount, Gildon, Earbery', in: W. van Bunge and W. Klever, eds., *Disguised and overt Spinozism around 1700*, (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 69), Leiden, 1996, 196-211 (205-9); see also R.L. Colie, 'Spinoza and the early English deists', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20 (1959) 23-46; R.L. Colie, 'Spinoza in England, 1665-1730', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 107 (1963) 183-219.

¹⁵ I shall return to this below in Chapter 3 § 8.

¹⁶ J. Smith, *The unreasonableness of deism*, London, 1720, 226; other works had likewise titles as W. Lorimer, *Two discourses against deism*, 2nd edition, London, 1721; J. Henley, *Deism defeated, and Christianity defended*, London, 1731; G. Adams, *The deist confuted. Wherein his principal objections against revealed religion, especially against Christianity are briefly stated and answered*, London, 1734; (E. Smith), *The cure of deism*, 2 volumes, London, 1736.

¹⁷ E. Burke, *Reflections on the revolution in France*, 5th edition, London, 1790, 133.

Now Burke may have had his own reasons for his sarcasm, but as far as Morgan is concerned, he was right: by 1800 Morgan had practically been forgotten. The anecdotist William Seward, for example, called him in one of his ‘Drossianas’ in *The European Magazine, and London Review* in 1790 the author of a now-forgotten performance against religion.¹⁸ Only the London booksellers were still familiar with his name.¹⁹

In the 20th century there are still many orthodox Christian theologians who have quite a negative view of Deism. Deism placed reason on the throne above either Church or Bible, it was said with some disdain in 1934 by the Calvinist, John Orr.²⁰ In the 1970s the future Roman Catholic Cardinal Avery Dulles called Deism the first full-fledged attack on the traditional Judaeo-Christian notion of revelation.²¹ In a similar vein, by the end of the 20th century, Deism was still seen by an evangelical author as the foremost threat to Christianity.²² In short, in the opinion of anti-deists the major lamentable issues of Deism were the denial of revelation and the criticism of Scripture. This denial of revelation implies the criticism of miracles and priestcraft and the existence of natural religion, as we will see later. This brief sketch shows the relevance of Deism, at least in the eyes of its opponents.

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§3: Deism as natural religion

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In the Preface to his religious poem *Religio Laici*, the poet John Dryden called Deism ‘the principles of natural worship’. Natural religion is the other side of the coin of Deism, as something that is known about religion without the knowledge of revelation. Deism is ‘the sufficiency of natural religion and the superfluosness of revealed religion’.²³

In the poem, Dryden gives in a neutral way the opinion of the deist:

The deist thinks, he stands on firmer ground;
cries *eureka*: the mighty secret’s found:
God is that spring of good: supreme, and best;
we, made to serve, and in that service blest.

And further on:

But stay, the deist here will urge anew,
no supernatural worship can be true:
because a general law is that alone,
which must to all, and every where be known.²⁴

¹⁸ (W. Seward), ‘Drossiana viii’, *The European Magazine: and London Review*, 17 (1790) 329-33 (332).

¹⁹ See Appendices §§ 2-3.

²⁰ J. Orr, *English deism: its roots and its fruits*, Grand Rapids, 1934, 23.

²¹ A. Dulles, *Revelation theology: a history*, London, 1970, 52.

²² D.N. Daily, *Enlightenment deism: the foremost threat to Christianity and the role it has played in American Protestantism*, Pittsburgh, 1999.

²³ P. Byrne, *Natural religion and the nature of religion: the legacy of deism*, London/New York, 1989, xiii.

²⁴ J. Dryden, *Religio Laici or a laymans faith, a poem*, London, (1682), preface, 3, 11; see on the origin of *Religio Laici* M.B. Prince, ‘*Religio Laici* v. *Religio Laici*: Dryden, Blount, and the origin of English deism’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 74 (2013) 29-66.

In the 18th century, many books were published about the religion of nature. Well known is William Wollaston's *Religion of nature delineated* (1722).²⁵ In it, he refers to the definition of the religion of nature as 'the pursuit of happiness by the practice of reason and truth'.²⁶ Viscount David Shute Barrington wrote about the several dispensations of God to mankind with the subtitle *A short system of the religion of nature and scripture* (1728). Most famous is the publication by Matthew Tindal: *Christianity as old as the creation: or, the gospel, a republication of the religion of nature* (1730). Tindal received many contemporary criticisms on this book.²⁷

Some antagonists of Deism tried to explain it in another way. Francis Gastrell, the future Bishop of Chester, mentions as the first and main principle of Deism a pure ethical device: 'Follow nature; and do no man any wrong'.²⁸ Gastrell's view seems to anticipate that of the well-known German student of Deism, Günther Gawlick, who views the history of English Deism to some extent as 'the history of successive efforts to settle the mutual relation between ethics and revealed religion'.²⁹ Thomas Halyburton, Professor of Divinity at the University of Saint Andrews, took a more historical stand. He recalled that 'the first sect of Deists ... did satisfy themselves with the rejection of all supernatural revelation. The learn'd Lord Herbert was the first who did cultivate this notion, and lick'd Deism'. He called Herbert 'the great patron of Deism', which in later literature has led to the term 'Father of Deism'.³⁰ But natural religion was not only insufficient, according to Halyburton; it became dangerous in the eyes of others. The poet and painter William Blake offers a typical instance for the identification of Deism and natural religion in the beginning of the 19th century, when he states in his *Jerusalem*: 'All the destruction therefore, in Christian Europe has arisen from Deism, which is Natural Religion'.³¹ Blake fought against Deism all his life.³²

²⁵ Quoted by Th. Morgan in his *Physico-Theology: or, a philosophic-moral disquisition concerning human nature, free agency, moral government and divine providence*, London, 1741, 224. In the 18th century eight editions and many reprints of Wollaston's book appeared. See on Wollaston D. Lucci, 'William Wollaston's Religion of nature', in: Hudson, *Atheism*, 119-138.

²⁶ (W. Wollaston), *The religion of nature delineated*, s.l., 1722, 37. For similar ideas of Morgan see Chapter 3 § 7 and Chapter 6 § 5 below.

²⁷ St. Lalor, *Matthew Tindal, freethinker. An eighteenth-century assault on religion*, London, 2006.

²⁸ Fr. Gastrell, *The principles of deism truly represented and set in a clear light*, London, 1708, 67; it was a very popular tract, which reached the 5th edition in 1729.

²⁹ G. Gawlick, 'Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac viewed by the English deists', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth century*, 56 (1967) 577-600 (577); see also Gawlick, 'Vorwort des Herausgebers', in: Lechler, *Geschichte*, xxi; the same author described Deism later as 'Grundzug der Religionsphilosophie der Aufklärung', see G. Gawlick, 'Der Deismus als Grundzug der Religionsphilosophie der Aufklärung', in: W. Walter and others, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694- 1768), ein 'bekannter Unbekannter' der Aufklärung in Hamburg* (Veröffentlichungen der Joachim Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften), Göttingen, 1973, 15-43.

³⁰ Th. Halyburton, *Natural religion insufficient; and reveal'd necessary to man's happiness in his present state*, Edinburgh, 1714, 219, title page.

³¹ W. Blake, *Jerusalem: the emanation of the giant Albion*, ed. by M.D. Paley, Princeton, 1998, 213.

³² S.F. Damon, *The Blake dictionary: the ideas and symbols of William Blake*, Hanover, 2013, 111.

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§4: Did an English deist movement exist?

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Turning to the question of whether the English deists constituted a movement, one might point to the observation of church historian Norman Sykes, who has spoken of Deism as a complex and amorphous movement.³³ Whereas in the older historiography reference was made of the deist movement,³⁴ according to a modern historian Deism was not in fact an organized ideological movement.³⁵ It was not even a organized group. Perhaps to a certain extent for safety reasons, its representatives did for the most part not call themselves deists. The nineteenth-century church historian John Henry Overton stated that it is extremely difficult to assert or deny anything respecting the deists as a body, 'for as a matter of fact they had no corporate existence. They formed no sect ... they were genuinely "freethinkers" '. According to him, we look in vain for any common doctrine, and there is little or nothing in common between the heterogeneous body of writers who passed under the vague name of deists.³⁶ Questions about whether this Deism can be regarded as a movement have augmented in modern times.³⁷

Most critical of all is the historian S.J. Barnett, who claims that the scare surrounding Deism was a great propaganda coup, the results of which can be felt till today. He maintains: 'Beyond the virtual reality of history books, the deist movement never existed'. According to Barnett, to make a list of deists is problematic in numerical terms, and also with respect to their set of beliefs. There was only a tiny group of European intellectuals who advocated deistic or similar ideas.³⁸ Barnett's views have been criticized without much comment by Wayne Hudson, one of the current prominent scholars of Deism, as an underestimation of the significance of Deism in England.³⁹ But even according to Hudson there is not much proof for that which is normally called the English deist movement. He has justly remarked that 'it is not certain that the writers dubbed "the English deists" regarded themselves as deists'. Only Thomas Morgan and Peter Annet claimed to be deists. According to Hudson the term English

³³ N. Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker. Aspects of English church history 1660-1768*, Cambridge, 1959, 169.

³⁴ J.M. Attenborough, 'The deists and the deistic movement of the eighteenth century', *Westminster Review* 156 (1901) 620-41; E. Royston Pike, *Slayers of superstition: a popular account of some of the leading personalities of the deist movement*, New York and London, 1931.

³⁵ R.M. Burns, *The great debate on miracles from Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*, Lewisburg, PA, 1981, 13.

³⁶ J.H. Overton, 'The Deists', in: Ch.J. Abbey and J.H. Overton, *The English church in the eighteenth century*, new edition revised and abridged, London, 1887, 75-112 (76-77).

³⁷ Gawlick, 'Der Deismus' (18): 'Die Deisten waren ... in der Regel auch voneinander isoliert; es gibt keine deistische "Schule" im Sinne einer kontinuierlichen Überlieferung und Weiterbildung deistischer Gedanken'; Byrne, *Natural religion*, 146: 'If any thing unites the thinkers now called 'deists', it is there readiness to question aspects of traditional revealed religion'; D.A. Pailin, 'Deism', in: P.A.B. Clarke and A. Linzey, eds., *Dictionary of ethics, theology and society*, London, 1996, 222-226 (224): it is a mistake ... that the deists formed a clearly identifiable group'; W. Hudson, *The English deists: studies in early Enlightenment*, (The Enlightenment World 7), London, 2008, 19: 'These writers were not united by a single philosophy, Spinozist or otherwise'.

³⁸ S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and religion: the myths of modernity*, Manchester, 2003, 12, 13, 19, 20.

³⁹ W. Hudson, *Enlightenment and modernity: the English deists and reform*, (The Enlightenment World 13), London, 2009, 172 note 2.

deists is used as ‘a label for constellationally related writers whose historical significance depends on contextually related publications’.⁴⁰ It is not so clear what he means by constellationally related writers or contextually related publications. The so-called English deists did not belong to the same constellation, nor did their publications emerge in the same context. They did not belong to the same religious family, nor were they members of the same social-economic group. Most of them were not in contact with each other.

Hudson states correctly that ‘the notion that there was something called “English deism” ... needs also to be called in question’.⁴¹ In accordance with Hudson’s view, I do not believe that there was something like an organized deist movement.⁴² In general, it can be said that they are lumped together by their opponents. Of course, there were persons with deist convictions. Most of them were critical of divine revelation.

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§5: The study and definition of English Deism

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Wayne Hudson has noted that ‘the history of deism has been misunderstood insofar as historians have projected generic conceptions of deism onto the deists’.⁴³ Whereas the term ‘English deists’ was used in the 18th century, it seems that the term ‘English Deism’ was, as far as I know, only used for the first time in the early 19th century by the Reverend A. Holmes in a Letter to the Editor of *The General Repository and Review*, the Unitarian preacher Andrews Norton, dated May 27th 1813.⁴⁴ In nineteenth-century Germany the orthodox theologian August Tholuck was one of the first to speak of ‘English Deism’. With the appearance of the *Geschichte des englischen Deismus* (1841) by Gotthard Victor Lechler English Deism grew into an established concept. Lechler defined Deism as the raising of natural religion as norm for all positive religions.⁴⁵ He discussed all the known deists from Leland’s list.

The modern study of English Deism started with Lechler. In the 20th century many publications about Deism followed. It became fashionable to look on Deism as something that belonged to modernity, for example, as the beginning of modernity in English theology.⁴⁶ The deists were, in the view of Hudson, catalysts of Enlightenment.⁴⁷ It also became increasingly

⁴⁰ Hudson, *Enlightenment*, 1.

⁴¹ Hudson, *The English deists*, 3.

⁴² Cf also G.C.B. Roberts, *Historical arguments in the writings of the English deists*, thesis Oxford University, 2014, 3: ‘there was never an organized deist movement’.

⁴³ Hudson, ‘Atheism and deism demythologized’, in: Hudson, *Atheism*, 13-23 (21).

⁴⁴ A. Holmes, ‘Reply’, *The General Repository and Review*, 3 (1813) 312-15 (313).

⁴⁵ A. Tholuck, ‘Abriss einer Geschichte der Umwälzung, welche seit 1750 auf dem Gebiete der Theologie in Deutschland stattgefunden’, in: *Vermischte Schriften grösstentheils apologetischen Inhalts*, volume 2, Hamburg, 1839, 1-147 (24); Lechler, *Geschichte des Englischen Deismus*, 460: ‘eine auf den Grund freier Prüfung durch das Denken gestützte Erhebung der natürlichen Religion zur Norm und Regel aller positiven Religion’.

⁴⁶ F.R. Tennant, *Miracle & its philosophical presuppositions*, Cambridge, 1925, 96; cf R.S. Franks, *The work of Christ. A historical study of Christian doctrine*, London, 1962, 475: ‘Modern theology begins with the deist movement in England’.

⁴⁷ Hudson, *The English deists*, 25-6: ‘Catalysts of Enlightenment’.

problematic to define Deism.⁴⁸ Roland Stromberg, in his well-known study on eighteenth-century religious liberalism, devoted a whole chapter to the definition of Deism, formulating it cautiously in the following manner: ‘We do by usage classify as deists a group who thought, at least, that they occupied ground between traditional Christianity and atheism. They believed in some august First Cause, and in some sort of natural religion without a special act of revelation’.⁴⁹ In general, like the ancient opponents of Deism, modern literature has regarded Deism as a denial of revelation.

David Pailin made some sharp observations about the use and abuse of the term ‘deist’. The notion of ‘Deism’ is unclear and has been used to refer to a wide range of positions. ‘When people describe others as “ deists ”, they are not in practice conveying much more than that they judge the latter to be deficient in unspecified beliefs which the former consider to be essential to authentic religious faith’.⁵⁰ It is interesting to see how our friend Morgan was of the same opinion: ‘Our Christian divines ... cry out and complain of the growth of deism, by which they mean nothing else but opinions contrary to their own’.⁵¹

Paul Hazard resolved the problem in another way by accepting various Deisms: ‘it is clear that there was not one deism, but several, all different, all mutually opposed, and even at daggers drawn with one another’.⁵² Another scholar has argued that ‘Deism is a term which in the early eighteenth century was used with only a loose connotation, rather as is the epithet “radical” today. It could cover almost any derivation from the orthodoxy’.⁵³ So we are back again to the observation made more than fifty years ago: ‘What deism really is still needs to be discussed in depth’.⁵⁴ Deism requires more study. This thesis wants to be a contribution to this. In spite of all the difficulties around the concept of Deism I will in this thesis use the term for the sake of convenience.

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§6: Who were the English deists?

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⁴⁸ S.G. Hefelbower, ‘Deism historically defined’, *American Journal of Theology*, 24 (1922), 217-223 (217), stated that there is no accepted definition of deism; A.E. Baker, *Bishop Butler*, London, 1923, 2: ‘Deism is difficult to describe, impossible to define’; P. Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the religions in the English enlightenment*, Cambridge, 1990, 62: ‘This label is notoriously difficult to describe with any degree of precision’.

⁴⁹ R. Stromberg, *Religious liberalism in eighteenth century England*, London, 1954, 52-69: ‘chapter 5: the definition of deism’ (56).

⁵⁰ D.A. Pailin, ‘Should Herbert of Cherbury be regarded as a ‘deist’?’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 51 (2000) 113-149 (130-1).

⁵¹ (Th. Morgan), *The moral philosopher*, London, 1737, 177.

⁵² P. Hazard, *European thought in the eighteenth century*, translated from the original *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle*, by J.Lewis May, reprint, Harmondsworth, 1965, 417-59 (417); cf also the plural in the titles of W. Schröder, ed., *Gestalten des Deismus in Europa*, (Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 135), Wiesbaden, 2013; and G. Artigas-Menant, and others, eds., *Déismes et déistes à l’âge classique*, (La Lettre Clandestine 21), Paris, 2013; Hudson, *The English deists*, *passim*, speaks also of ‘multiple deisms’.

⁵³ B.M.G. Reardon, *Kant as philosophical theologian*, London, 1988, 189 note 10.

⁵⁴ Fr. Venturi, ‘The European Enlightenment’, in: *Italy and the Enlightenment. Studies in a cosmopolitan culture*, ed. by St. Woolf and translated by S. Corsi, London, 1972, 1-32 (5).

It is also difficult to determine who was a deist. According to some well-known students of Deism, even the so-called Father of Deism, Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, should not be regarded as a deist.⁵⁵ At the time, his paternity was not acknowledged by most of those who have commonly been described as deists. He did not deny revelation.⁵⁶ In spite of the various views according to which there is no such thing as 'English Deism', there existed such things as 'canonical' lists of deists in the 18th century. As mentioned above, Thomas Morgan got himself a name as a deist and would earn a place in such renowned lists of deists as those of Philip Skelton and John Leland. The Irish divine Philip Skelton was the first to put a canon of deistical writers on the title page of his work *Deism revealed* (1751). He lists most of the 'usual suspects' including: Herbert of Cherbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, Thomas Hobbes, John Toland, Matthew Tindal, Anthony Collins, Bernard Mandeville, Thomas Woolston, Henry Dodwell the younger, Thomas Morgan and Thomas Chubb. John Leland refined this list some years later by leaving Mandeville out, but by adding Charles Blount, David Hume, Henry Saint John, Lord Bolingbroke, and one anonymous author, whom we know to be Peter Annet.⁵⁷ In later times figures such as the moral philosopher William Wollaston and the Cambridge librarian Conyers Middleton were also considered deists.⁵⁸

There are earlier versions of these lists. With regard to Thomas Morgan it is interesting to note that he was assigned a position in a sort of deist genealogy. Thus, the Anglican John Chapman referred to 'the Blounts, Tindals, Shaftesburys, Woolstons &c' as Morgan's predecessors. He appeared, together with many others, as a member of 'the tribe of free-thinkers', which consisted of 'Toland, Tindal, Collins, Coward, Blount, Strutt, Chub, Dudgeon, Morgan, Tillard, and their fellows'.⁵⁹ One might adduce other instances which demonstrate that Morgan was viewed as belonging to a group of deists and freethinkers.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ D.A. Pailin, 'Herbert of Cherbury, a much-neglected and misunderstood thinker', in: C. Peden and L.E. Axel, eds., *God, values and empiricism: issues in philosophical theology*, Macon, 1989, 168-78; Pailin, 'Should Herbert of Cherbury be regarded as a 'deist'?', cf Harrison, *'Religion' and the religions*, 62: 'The problem of Herbert's relation to the deists'; Pailin, 'Deism', 224; Hudson, *The English deists*, 41: 'His relation to deism is contested and complex'.

⁵⁶ Pailin, 'Herbert of Cherbury', 176.

⁵⁷ Ph. Skelton, *Deism revealed, or, the attack on Christianity candidly reviewed in its real merits*, 2nd edition, 2 volumes, London, 1751, title page; Leland, *A view*; cf Hudson, *The English deists*, chapter 1: 'Who were the English deists?'.

⁵⁸ A. Altmann, 'William Wollaston, (1659-1724), English deist and rabbinical scholar', *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 16 (1952) 185-211; J. van den Berg, 'Should Conyers Middleton (1683-1750), principal librarian of Cambridge, be regarded as a deist?', *Notes and Queries* 56 (2009) 255-57.

⁵⁹ J. Chapman, *Eusebius, or the true Christian's defense against a late book entitul'd The Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge, 1739, 70; W. Warburton, *A critical and philosophical commentary on Mr. Pope's Essay on man*, London, 1742, xix; in a book ascribed to the satirist Jonathan Swift one finds Morgan among the wicked authors of the present age: 'The trumpery lately written by Tindal, Toland, Morgan', *A modest address to the wicked authors of the present age*, reprint, London, 1745, 15; see H. Teerink and A.H. Scouten, *A bibliography of the writings of Jonathan Swift*, 2nd edition, Philadelphia, 1963, 266 nr.78.

⁶⁰ The famous novelist and actress Eliza Haywood née Fowler noted that 'Toland, Woolaston (sic!), the Moral Philosopher, and a great number of other modern writers have, with impunity, contemned and made a jest of all the mysteries, by which either Jews or Christians hope salvation', (E. Haywood née Fowler), *The parrot*, London, 1746, nr.8; also the moralist and poet John Brown, a friend of Warburton, made such a list in his very

Since Collins' *Discourse of free-thinking* (1713) the terms deist and free-thinker are used side by side.

The various lists which circulated at the time contributed to the idea of the existence of the movement of English Deism. Grouping them together was the first step to construct the danger of English Deism. As to those figuring on these lists as deists, it must be said that not all of them were pleased to see themselves thus mentioned. At least one of those listed by Leland, David Hume, vehemently denied being a deist. Hume once said in a discussion with a lady who referred to him as a deist: 'I am no deist. I do not style myself so, neither do I desire to be known by the appellation'.⁶¹ Thomas Chubb denied in 1739-40 that he was a deist.⁶² John Toland also denied that he was a deist and Conyers Middleton reacted ironically to the accusation of being a deist.⁶³ Of course, one should not take such denials at face value. There were good reasons for trying to escape the label 'deist' since it might very well harm one's reputation.

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§7: Thomas Morgan as a 'Christian Deist'

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In the case of the central figure in these pages, Thomas Morgan, definitions of Deism become even more complicated because he styles himself a 'Christian Deist', a special label as we will see. He does so in the title of his most important publication *The moral philosopher, in a dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew*, anonymously published in London in February 1737. But not only in the title, also in the work itself does he call himself a Christian Deist.⁶⁴ What did he mean when he labelled himself in this manner? A contemporary critic of Morgan, the Jesuit John Constable, wrote cynically:

popular Estimate of the manners and principles of the times: 'These are your triumphs, o Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Tindal, Mandeville, Morgan, Hume!', J. Brown, *Estimate of the manners and principles of the times*, volume 2, London, 1757, 86; before this he combined some of them in a poem written in 1743, entitled 'Honour a poem', lines 174-5: 'Gordon's thin shallows, Tindal's muddy pages, And Morgan's gall, and Woolston's furious rage', in: R. Dodsley, ed., *A collection of poems by several hands*, 4th edition, volume 3, London, 1755, 293.

⁶¹ Reported by Lord James Charlemont and quoted by D. Coleman, ed., *Hume, Dialogues concerning natural religion and other writings*, (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy), Cambridge, 2007, xxviii, note 30; see also Th.S. Yoder, *Hume on God: irony, deism and genuine theism*, London, 2008, 51-76: 'Hume and deism', (especially 76): 'it is a mistake to name Hume a deist'; cf F. Müller, *David Humes Stellung zum Deismus*, Dissertation Leipzig, 1906; J. O'Higgins, 'Hume and the deists: a contrast in religious approaches', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 22 (1971) 479-501; G. Gawlick, 'Hume and the deists: a reconsideration', in: G.P. Morice ed., *Hume bicentenary papers*, Austin, 1977, 128-38; J.C.A. Gaskin, 'Hume's attenuated deism', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 65-6 (1983) 160-73; and the confusion in D. O'Connor, *Routledge philosophy guidebook to Hume on religion*, London, 2001, 16: 'Hume is a deist, in one sense of the term, and at the same time an atheist, in one sense of that term'.

⁶² Th. Chubb, *The true gospel of Jesus Christ vindicated*, London, 1739, 73; Th. Chubb, *An enquiry into the ground and foundation of religion*, London, 1740, 119.

⁶³ Hudson, *The English deists*, 3; van den Berg, 'Should Conyers Middleton ... be regarded as a deist?'; the same about Wollaston, see Ch. Chapin, 'Was William Wollaston (1660-1724) a deist?', *American Notes and Queries*, 7 (1994) 72-6.

⁶⁴ (Morgan), *The moral philosopher*, 165, 392.

‘A Christian Deist is indeed neither Christian nor Deist’.⁶⁵ For Constable Christianity was the true religion, while Deism denied the Christian revelation and its absoluteness. As far as Morgan is concerned, he belonged to those persons who more or less denied revelation in Scripture.

In his *Moral philosopher* Morgan never refers to others as deists.⁶⁶ There is only one clear reference to the battle around Collins’s *Scheme of literal prophecy considered* (1727), when he – without mentioning Collins – refers to ‘the learned men among us, who of late years have attempted to defend the literal accomplishment of the prophecies, (who) have been so manifestly baffled and confound’.⁶⁷ Only once, late in his life, did Morgan speak ironically and mockingly in the name of ‘a society of gentlemen’: ‘We the Deists and Free-thinkers of *Great-Britain*’.⁶⁸ Even Warburton attributed the authorship to Morgan, calling him ‘the forwardest Devil in the crew’.⁶⁹ Warburton may have referred to ‘the tribe of freethinkers’, but the crew consisted of one man only, as was confirmed by the printer Thomas Cox who promoted this book as Morgan’s in the *London Magazine* for May 1741.

Morgan is a fine example of how a man, educated in the tradition of English dissenting Christianity, turns away from his traditional faith, looking for the truth, criticizing the Biblical message, and finding himself in the position of a deist, even styling himself a Christian Deist. His rebellion against authority brings him from a traditional credo to a rational view of the Christian message. His theological position is radical, but not so radical as some students of the radical Enlightenment would like to have it. An earlier student of Deism did go so far as to characterize Morgan as a conservative and a moderate deist.⁷⁰

Morgan has very rarely been seen as a radical deist.⁷¹ Jonathan Israel has defined the radical Enlightenment as ‘all deistic, naturalistic, and atheistic systems that exclude divine providence, revelation, and miracles including reward and punishment in the hereafter’. Following this definition, Morgan is only partially an adept of the radical Enlightenment. Indeed, Israel calls Morgan a providential deist and an advocate of divine providence.⁷²

⁶⁵ (J. Constable), *Deism and Christianity fairly consider’d ... to which is added ... two letters to a friend upon a book intitled The Moral Philosopher*, London, 1739, 242. In a totally different context the American jurist at Harvard Law School Alan Morton Dershowitz noted that ‘Christian deist’ is an oxymoron, a figure of speech that combines contradictory terms, see A.M. Dershowitz, *Blasphemy: how the religious right is hijacking our Declaration of Independence*, Hoboken, 2007, 81.

⁶⁶ See Appendix § 5.

⁶⁷ (Th. Morgan), *The moral philosopher*, volume 2, second part, London, 1739, 33; see J. O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins the man and his work*, (Archives Internationales d’Histoire des Idées 35), The Hague, 1970, 155-90: ‘the attack on the prophecies’.

⁶⁸ (A Society of Gentlemen), *A brief examination of the Rev. Mr Warburton’s Divine Legation of Moses*, London, 1742, 1.

⁶⁹ J. Nichols, *Literary anecdotes of the eighteenth century*, volume 2, London, 1812, 152 note.

⁷⁰ W.M. Merrill, *From statesman to philosopher, a study in Bolingbroke’s deism*, New York, 1949, 24, 119, 192.

⁷¹ Morgan has been called ‘a radical deist’ by A. Altmann in his commentary on Moses Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*, Lebanon, NH, 1983, 202-4.

⁷² J.I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford, 2001, 13; ‘Providential deist’ is a term which Israel uses to indicate such different figures as Boulainvilliers, Challe, Lessing, Gottsched, Morgan, Reimarus, Turgot and Voltaire; see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, passim; J.I.

Sometime he is called a Christian rationalist.⁷³ How complex this all is for a just characterization of Thomas Morgan we can see in an attempt by Hudson to describe him as ‘a Presbyterian rationalist and Newtonian physico-theologian with a genuine concern for the inner spiritual life’ and as ‘a complex and many-sided figure who had to earn his living in a world where very few agreed with his theological views’.⁷⁴

The fact that Morgan calls himself a *Christian Deist* makes him all the more interesting as the topic of this study. In what follows it is my intention to explore the meaning of this term in the context of the intellectual development of this highly interesting person. It seems appropriate to look into Morgan’s life and work more seriously. A major question will be: what did Morgan mean with the term ‘Christian Deism’? How did this term relate to his views on the Old Testament? To what extent can he be said to be original in his religious views? More generally, what was his vision of Christianity? The analysis of these and other issues should help us to answer the question of how Morgan is to be positioned among English deists. In a wider sense, this study of the ‘Christian Deist’ Morgan hopes to contribute to the complex relation between religion and Enlightenment. All this will be placed in the context of his life, which has never been dealt with in a separate monograph.

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§8: The structure of the thesis

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The first chapter will provide the reader with the description of the life of Thomas Morgan in the historical context of early eighteenth-century England. Then we will discuss his theological and medical writings prior to the publication of his main work, *The moral philosopher* (chapter 2). Chapter 3 deals extensively with *The moral philosopher*. The next two chapters are devoted to contemporary reactions to *The moral philosopher* as well as to Morgan’s answers to his critics.

Chapter 6 is devoted to Morgan’s *Physico-Theology*. In Chapter 7 we study the reactions following Morgan’s death, at home and abroad, whereas Chapter 8 is dedicated to Morgan as harbinger of the disparagement of the Old Testament in modern theology. The thesis ends with conclusions, followed by five appendices, a bibliography and two indexes.

Israel, *Enlightenment contested: philosophy, modernity and the emancipation of man 1650-1752*, Oxford, 2006, 960; J.I. Israel, ‘Bayle’s dual image during the Enlightenment’, in: W. van Bunge and H. Bots, eds., *Pierre Bayle (1647-1706): the Philosophe of Rotterdam: philosophy, religion and reception*, (Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 167) Leiden, 2008, 135-152 (143); J.I. Israel, *A revolution of the mind, radical Enlightenment and the intellectual origins of modern democracy*, Princeton, 2010, 7, 113; J.I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: philosophy, revolution and human rights, 1750-1790*, Oxford, 2011, 712; as far as I see Israel in this last book only once called someone – Jean Levesque de Burigny – ‘a radical deist’, 1049.

⁷³ C.Fr. Stäudlin, *Geschichte des Rationalismus und Supernaturalismus*, Göttingen, 1826, 25.

⁷⁴ Hudson, *Enlightenment*, 74.