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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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Chapter Three: *The moral philosopher*

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§1: Introduction

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After the publication of his medical studies, Morgan devoted time to putting his religious views on paper more extensively. His chief work, *The moral philosopher*, was published anonymously and printed for the author in London in February 1737. Morgan did not think it wise to publish this book under his own name. As he informs his readers: ‘Whatever fate these papers may meet with in the world, one thing is pretty sure, that the silversmiths will be all in an uproar for Diana’.¹

But only a few months later Morgan’s authorship was widely known by the reviewers and critics on the continent.² The famous Independent minister, Philip Doddridge, already knew in June 1737 that Morgan was the author of *The moral philosopher*, writing full of abhorrence about it in a letter to his friend, Samuel Clark.³ As it turned out, Doddridge set the tone for a mostly negative reception of the book, as we will see later in Chapter Four. Indeed, *The moral philosopher* has received many bewildering and sometime conflicting comments during the last three centuries. Some comments are about the style of the book, others about its contents. ‘This writer has originality and controversial vigour; but he is rash and extravagant beyond example’, one author said.⁴ Another defined it as an ill-written book.⁵ But one also finds praise for its vigorous language and criticism of the style that savoured of self-assurance.⁶ We encounter similar comments up till today. In our time, *The moral philosopher* has been referred to as Morgan’s ‘most interesting, sustained and provocative theological treatise’. But elsewhere it is called a diffuse and haphazard work.⁷ All these observations offer little encouragement to read *The moral philosopher*. Probably this is one of the reasons why Morgan is the least known of all the deists.

¹ (Morgan), *The moral philosopher*, preface xi. It is a warning to possible reactions of religious authorities on his work with reference to Acts 19 verses 28 and 34, in which there is talk of the uproar of the silversmiths against the Apostle Paul.

² *Bibliothèque Britannique, ou histoire des ouvrages des savans de la Grande-Bretagne*, 9/1 (1737) 216: ‘Mr.Morgan, docteur en médecine, qu’on dit l’auteur de *Moral Philosopher*’; *Bibliothèque Raisonnée des Ouvrages des Savans de l’Europe*, 18 (1737) 488: ‘On ne doute point que Mr.Morgan ne soit l’auteur du *Philosophe Moral*’.

³ G.F. Nuttall, ed., *Calendar of the correspondence of Philip Doddridge DD (1702-1751)*, (Historical Manuscript Commission Joint Publications 26), London, 1979, 84: June 12th 1737: ‘I have just read Morgan’s detestable, inconsistent, immoral & insolent Book’.

⁴ Cairns, *Unbelief*, 94.

⁵ Overton, ‘The Deists’, in: Abbey and Overton, *The English church*, 89; the same phrase in German by F.C. Schlosser, *Geschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts und des neunzehnten bis zum Sturz des französischen Kaiserreichs*, volume 1, Heidelberg, 1836, 406: ‘seinem schlecht geschriebenen Buche’.

⁶ Colligan, *Eighteenth century nonconformity*, 2.

⁷ R.A. Rosengarten, *Henry Fielding and the narration of providence*, New York, 2000, 48; Paget, *Jews*, 293.

At any rate, since the 1930s, it has been *bon ton* to conclude that Morgan did not contribute much that was new to the deist debates.⁸ As I hope to show this judgment should be revised. What is more to the point is the observation that little is said by Morgan, which had not been insinuated by one of his predecessors, ‘but, the point to be marked is that it *was* now said, not merely insinuated’.⁹

The moral philosopher is a dialogue between a deist supporter of Paul and a Judaizing supporter of Peter, in which Paul continues the teaching of Jesus.¹⁰ The principal point is that the self-styled Christian deist Thomas Morgan, makes a sharp distinction between the two Testaments. St. Paul is his hero, the man who in his view liberated the Christian message from its Jewish roots. This anti-Judaic strain would, as we will see, in Morgan’s case, end in pure anti-Semitic pronouncements. It has been asserted that in *The moral philosopher* for the first time in modern history, the Old and New Testament, Judaism and Christianity, were sharply separated.¹¹ In the history of the disparagement of the Old Testament Morgan’s work can be formulated as the ‘nearest significant approach to Christian rejection of the Old Testament since Marcion’.¹²

Though as far as we know there was no concrete occasion for Morgan to start writing *The moral philosopher*, it is clear that he very much wanted to show the public his opinions about Christianity. This public consisted of his former co-religionists within the Presbyterian and Independent circles. It was especially from those circles - as we shall see - that he would receive harsh criticisms on his *Moral philosopher*. Morgan reacted to these criticisms in Volumes two and three of *The moral philosopher*, which were to appear in 1739 and 1740 respectively.

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§2: Why should it have the title *The moral philosopher*?

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The leading title of Morgan’s publication runs *The moral philosopher, in a dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew*. As was common at the time, there follows an extensive subtitle which highlights important issues in the book:

In which the grounds and reasons of religion in general, and particularly of Christianity, as distinguish’d from the religion of nature; the different methods of conveying and

⁸ A.L. Leroy, *La critique et la religion chez David Hume*, Paris (1931), 171; Orr, *English deism*, 144; E.C. Mossner, *Bishop Butler and the age of reason. A study in the history of thought*, New York, 1936, 140; Stromberg, *Religious liberalism*, 54; Cragg, *Reason and authority*, 68; P. Gay, *Deism, an anthology*, Princeton, 1968, 140.

⁹ Overton, ‘The Deists’, 90.

¹⁰ L. Salvatorelli, ‘From Locke to Reitzenstein: the historical investigation of the origins of Christianity’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 22 (1929) 263-369 (265).

¹¹ Schmidt, *Religion*, 63: ‘In dieser Schrift wurden erstmalig in der Neuzeit Judentum und Christentum, AT und NT scharf voneinander geschieden und Tendenzen sichtbar, die bei Schleiermacher und Harnack wiederauf lebten’. The same observation is made by Gerdmar, *Roots*, 32: ‘Morgan was probably the first to take such a radical stand against the Old Testament in England’, and 31: ‘Central theme ... is the contrast between Judaism and Christianity’.

¹² D.L. Baker, *Two Testaments, one Bible. A study of some modern solutions to the theological problem of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament*, Leicester, 1976, 56, formulated this phrase with regard to Schleiermacher, but the same can be said of Thomas Morgan as well.

proposing moral truths to the mind, and the necessary marks or criteria on which they must all equally depend; the nature of positive laws, rites and ceremonies, and how far they are capable of proof as of standing perpetual obligation; with many other matters of the utmost consequence in religion, are fairly considered, and debated, and the arguments on both sides impartially represented.

These eighteenth-century subtitles have a length which seem to mix up a lot of things. But the main thing in this case is clear. What makes Christianity so special in comparison with the religion of nature? What are the criteria to discern the difference between the two? A part of this subtitle: *the grounds and reasons of religion*, reminds us of the title of another famous deist work: *A discourse of the grounds and reasons of the Christian religion*, by Anthony Collins in 1724 (reissued in 1737 and 1741).¹³

Reason will be an important factor as is clear from the rest of the title page of *The moral philosopher*, which also lists a quotation from the Book of Job, 32 Verse 8, where Elihu says: 'There is reason in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth him understanding'. It is a telling quotation, indicating the importance Morgan wishes to give to human reason. One may wonder why he wished to incorporate the term 'moral philosophy' in the title of what would become his principal work, as its contents have nothing to do with moral philosophy as a branch of ethics or ethical philosophy as we know it from the countless moral philosophies which have been published since times immemorial. With some exceptions in the many books about the history of moral philosophy Morgan's name will therefore not be found.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there is a reason for this title because, in good deist vein, Morgan held that the Bible did not explain our ideas of God and the good, but that our ideas of God and the good dominated the explanation of the Bible.¹⁵ In other words, one needed to be a moral philosopher to interpret the Scriptures.

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§3: A dialogue between Philalethes a Christian Deist, and Theophanes a Christian Jew

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The main body of *The moral philosopher* consists of a dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew.¹⁶ It is the result of conversations held by

a society, or club of gentlemen in the country, who met once a fortnight at a gentleman's house in a pleasant retired village, with a design to enter impartially into the consideration of the grounds and principles of religion in general, and particularly of Christianity as a revelation distinct of the religion of nature. These debates and conferences were continued regularly for almost two years.¹⁷

¹³ O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 244; Collins was a justice of the peace and later a deputy-lieutenant at Great Baddow in Essex.

¹⁴ Exceptions are Bourke, *History of ethics*, Volume 1, 210; J. Rohls, *Geschichte der Ethik*, 2nd edition, Tübingen, 1999, 361; J.B. Schneewind, *Essays on the history of moral philosophy*, Oxford, 2010, 229, 233.

¹⁵ See G. Gawlick, 'Vorwort des Herausgebers', in: Lechler, *Geschichte*, xx-xxi. 'Der Titel drückte sein Programm aus: Morgan war wie seine Vorgänger davon überzeugt, dass sich nicht unsere Ideen von Gott und dem Guten nach der Bibel, sondern die Auslegung der Bibel nach unseren Ideen von Gott und dem guten richten muss'.

¹⁶ *The moral philosopher* has an undated preface of twelve pages, the main body starts on page 13 and consists of nearly 440 pages, and an index of nine pages.

¹⁷ *The moral philosopher*, preface vii-viii.

This genre of the dialogue was very popular in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One need only think of the famous dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, by George Berkeley (1713). There are more than five hundred eighteenth-century English titles on religion and philosophy containing the form of a dialogue or dialogues.¹⁸ The dialogue has the advantage of enlivening the topic of conversation, but in the case of Morgan the dialogue has the tendency to continue too long. As we will see, after the first volume he gave up the literary instrument of the dialogue. Fictitious though these dialogues may be, Morgan, who was a staunch controversialist, would in reality certainly have participated in many discussions about these topics in this way. Without doubt, it is Philalethes, the lover of truth, who serves as Morgan's spokesman.¹⁹

Philalethes speaks much more in this dialogue than Theophanes, which may be an indication of Morgan's egocentricity and self-assurance. A peculiar element in the book is the fiction of the circumstantial sermon which Philalethes preaches on Ephesians 1:7 (pp. 119 - 208), a sermon with a pause on page 138. The dialogical character of the book disappears on these pages. In addition to Philalethes and Theophanes other people appear on the stage but they do not participate in the conversation.²⁰

From time to time, we hear of certain interruptions in the dialogue. Thus, Philalethes says at one point: 'The bell, I hear, rings to dinner ... We will dine and refresh ourselves a little' (p.118). Later he asks for 'a large glass of wine, with a little water in it' (p.138). And much later he says: 'It grows late, and we may better resume the discourse in the morning' (p.246). In the preface Morgan refers to 'Judaizing Christians' and 'Christian Judaizers', a theme that will be one of the objects of his book.²¹ In the main part of the book he uses the terms 'Christian Jews' or 'Jewish Christians'.²² These are not ethnical terms but refer to those people in the church who found Christianity upon Judaism.²³ In the second volume of *The moral philosopher* he uses the terms 'Circumcised Christians', 'Nazarene Jews', 'Nazarenes', and 'Messiah-men', but then he refers normally to the historical situation of the New Testament.²⁴

With the title 'A dialogue between Philalethes a Christian Deist, and Theophanes a Christian Jew', the main body of the book begins on page 13. This contrast between a Christian Deist

¹⁸ See *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* sub voce, retrieved 13.12.2017; Morgan is not mentioned in M. Prince, *Philosophical dialogue in the British enlightenment: theology, aesthetics and the novel*, (Cambridge Studies in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Thought 31), Cambridge, 1996; Jackson-McCabe, ' "Jewish Christianity" and "Christian Deism" ', 107-11: 'the rhetorical strategy of *The Moral Philosopher*'.

¹⁹ Jackson-McCabe, ' "Jewish Christianity" and "Christian Deism" ', 108.

²⁰ *The moral philosopher*, 246, 449: the symbolic names 'Rabbi Ben Aron', 'Agricola, a country farmer' and 'Eusebius, the priest of our parish'.

²¹ *The moral philosopher*, preface v-vi; see about this terminology of Morgan H. Lemke, *Judenchristentum – zwischen Ausgrenzung und Integration. Zur Geschichte eines exegetischen Begriffes*, (Hamburger Theologische Studien 25), Münster, 2001, 161-66.

²² *The moral philosopher*, 71, 76, 185, 189, 199, 328-9, 362, 364-5, 378.

²³ *The moral philosopher*, 185; Lemke, *Judenchristentum*, 161: 'Nicht die Herkunft, sondern ein bestimmtes, "jüdisches" Verständniss vom Christentum ist ausschlaggebend'.

²⁴ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, xxxii, 6, 31, 55-6, 78, 87, 91, 226, 250, second part 25.

and a Christian Jew is the central theme of the book. By this contrast Morgan wishes to indicate his aim to distinguish between Christian Deism and a Christianity which is malformed by Jewish elements. This contrast repeats itself throughout the book.

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§4: “The liberty to represent things in my own way”

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As it is for so many deists, liberty is a highly important notion for Morgan. Thus, he starts his *Moral philosopher* by asserting that he wishes to be free to write what he wants. Already in the preface he refers to liberty six times, culminating in his assertion on the last page: ‘I have taken the liberty to represent things in my own way’.²⁵ Further on he refers various times to liberty of conscience as part of true religion.²⁶ Now liberty to pronounce one’s opinions was for deists a chief concept. It was Anthony Collins who coined the term ‘free-thinking’ in his *Discourse of free-thinking, occasion’d by the rise and growth of a sect call’d free-thinkers* (1713).²⁷ The *Discourse* was reprinted many times. Collins proposed that we have the right to think freely.²⁸ Among the free-thinkers in early ages he mentions besides Greek and Latin authors such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Horace and Virgil, also the Jewish prophets and King Solomon. In England he lists as free-thinkers Bacon, Hobbes and Archbishop John Tillotson.²⁹ The *Discourse* was attacked severely for its inconsistencies and errors by the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, Richard Bentley, in his *Remarks upon a late discourse of free-thinking*, which was reprinted eight times until 1743. Generally, the opinion was held that Bentley defeated Collins.³⁰

Morgan, who probably knew of the controversy, was much more prudent. In any case, he avoids the use of the term free-thinking, with some exceptions, for example when he refers to the Apostle Paul as ‘the great free-thinker of his age, the bold and brave defender of reason against authority’.³¹

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§5: Christian Deism

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Interestingly, from 1737 onwards, he calls himself a Christian Deist. He does so both in the title and the contents of *The moral philosopher*.³² ‘I am a Christian, and at the same time a Deist or, if you please, this is my Christian Deism’. Likewise he declares: ‘I take, as you

²⁵ *The moral philosopher*, preface iv-v, xi.

²⁶ *The moral philosopher*, 120, 302, 310, 313, 359, 387.

²⁷ Collins also published *A philosophical inquiry concerning human liberty*, 1717; O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 244; U. Horstmann, *Die Geschichte der Gedankenfreiheit in England am Beispiel von Anthony Collins: a discourse of free-thinking*, (Monographien zur Philosophischen Forschung 197), Königstein, 1980.

²⁸ (A. Collins), *A discourse of free-thinking*, London, 1713, passim.

²⁹ (Collins), *Discourse*, 98-139; he calls many more on p.139.

³⁰ O’Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 79.

³¹ *The moral philosopher*, 71, 449. *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 48, 272. The term ‘freethinking’ returns in the preface to the second volume of *The moral philosopher*, iii; and ‘freethinkers’ in his last book, *A brief examination*, 1.

³² *The moral philosopher*, title page, 13, 165, 392.

know, Christianity to be that scheme or system of Deism, natural religion, or moral truth and righteousness, which was at first preached and propagated in the world, by Jesus Christ and his apostles'.³³ What did Morgan mean with the label "Christian Deist"? As noted above, this label is of great importance to him. When he uses the term Deism in general in 1737, he defines it as the religion of nature. Elsewhere he defines it as the religion of God and nature.³⁴ We remember the observations by the Jesuit John Constable who criticized Morgan and wrote in 1739: 'A Christian Deist is indeed neither Christian nor Deist'.³⁵ The term 'Christian Deism' has been the subject of much speculation. Christian Deism has been called the most contradictory and confusing variant of Deism.³⁶ Some have stated that English Deism was a cautious Christian Deism, largely restricted in influence to the upper classes. Others accept the idea that a number of influential seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers claimed for themselves the title of Christian deist, because they accepted both the Christian religion based on revelation and a deistic religion based on natural religion.³⁷ But I cannot find anyone among the so-called deists who named himself a Christian deist, with the exception of Thomas Morgan.³⁸ One scholar calls all English deists without exception "Christian Deists". But then the term "Christian Deist" loses its specific flavor.³⁹ Thomas Woolston and Thomas Chubb have been labelled Christian deists but they themselves abstain from employing the term or applying it to themselves.⁴⁰ Many authors state that Matthew Tindal called himself a Christian deist.⁴¹ This opinion has rightly been criticized.⁴²

³³ *The moral philosopher*, 394, 412; similar phrases on 96-7, 439.

³⁴ *The moral philosopher*, 17, 434.

³⁵ (Constable), *Deism and Christianity*, 242; cf Introduction § 7.

³⁶ Barnett, *The enlightenment*, 70.

³⁷ W. Walker, *A history of the Christian church*, reprint, New York, 1985, 584; E.V. McKnight, *Jesus Christ in history and Scripture. A poetic and sectarian perspective*, Macon, GA, 1999, 96.

³⁸ Contra J. Waligore, 'Christian deism in eighteenth century England', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 75 (2014) 205-22.

³⁹ H.J. Hillerbrand, 'The decline and fall of the true Christian church: the view of the English deists', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 60 (2008), 97-110; H.J. Hillerbrand, *A new history of Christianity*, Nashville, TN, 2012, 219.

⁴⁰ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, index; Israel, *Enlightenment contested*, 124, 665.

⁴¹ B.A. Atkinson, *Christianity not older than the first gospel-promise*, London, 1730, 5, 10; Leland, *A view*, 2nd edition, Volume 1, 213; W. Van Mildert, 'Review of the author's life and writings' in: *The works of the rev. Daniel Waterland d.d.*, Volume 1 Part 1, Oxford, 1823, 156; Stephen, *History of English thought*, Volume 1, 129; Overton, 'The deists', 94-5; W.A. Spooner, *Bishop Butler, his life and writings*, London, 1901, 138; S. Cheetham, *A history of the Christian church since the reformation*, London, 1907, 177; J.M. McCabe, *A biographical dictionary of modern rationalists*, London, 1920, 800; W. Stoker, *De christelijke godsdienst in de filosofie van de Verlichting*, (Philosophia Religionum 19), Assen, 1980, 2; G. Gawlick, 'Reimarus und der englische Deismus', in: K. Gründer ed., *Religionskritik und Religiosität in der deutschen Aufklärung* (Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung 11), Heidelberg, 1989, 43-54 (52); Krolzik, *Evangelisches Lexikon*, 409; J.E. Force, 'Biblical interpretation, Newton, and English deism', in: R.H. Popkin and A. Vanderjagt, eds., *Scepticism and irreligion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 37), Leiden, 1993, 282-305 (282 note 2); J.M. Byrne, *Religion and the enlightenment from Descartes to Kant*, Louisville, 1997, 111; R.E. Olson,

Tindal, who was a Fellow of All Souls College, Cambridge and Doctor of Law, only refers to Samuel Clarke when he says in connection with Clarke's *Discourse of the unchangeable obligation of natural religion, and the truth and certainty of the Christian revelation*: 'These true Christian deists, as, I think, the Dr. ought to call them'.⁴³ He refers to those deists who according to Clarke also accepted the Christian revelation. He did not use the term for himself.

The orthodox theologian Daniel Waterland, writing against 'infidelity' in 1732, spoke also of Christian deists, formulating his observation in a negative way as follows: 'These men we call Deists ... Some would have us add the epithet of Christian to it, and to style them Christian Deists: a phrase which it will be hard to make sense of ... There may be Pagan Deists and Jewish Deists, and Mahometan Deists, and Christian Deists; ... to call them Christian Deists is a great abuse of language'.⁴⁴ For Waterland it is contradictory to combine the two terms. Deism is in his opinion only 'the folly of man, set up in opposition to the wisdom of heaven'.⁴⁵ So he defended the absoluteness of Christianity against infidelity.

But this does not mean that one cannot find people in eighteenth-century England who called themselves Christian deist. Thus, for example, the Deputy-Lieutenant of the Tower in London Lieutenant-General Adam Williamson did call himself seriously a Christian deist in a note in his prayer-book.⁴⁶ There may have been more people who did so, but it is remarkable that none of the other so-called deists defined himself as such.

Morgan may have found the term "Christian Deist" through authors like Tindal and Waterland, but he used it for his own purpose. I think that he was quite serious when he linked Deism and the message of Christ in the Gospel. His Christian Deism is nothing other than the moral preaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospel, be it without all the elements he declares to be Jewish. Therefore he can refer to the adversaries of these Christian deists as the Christian Jews, or Jewish Christians, they who found Christianity upon Judaism.⁴⁷ This implies his criticism of the Old Testament.⁴⁸ He is proud in to use the label deist as a positive qualification. In this respect he differs from all other so-called deists.

The story of Christian theology. Twenty centuries of tradition & reform, Downers Grove, IL, 1999, 529; C. Brown, 'Enlightenment period', in: St.E. Porter, ed., *Dictionary of biblical criticism and interpretation*, New York, 2007, 92-101 (94); A.C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: an introduction*, Grand Rapids, 2009, 137.

⁴² Lator, *Matthew Tindal*, 148: 'Tindal did not say that he is a Christian deist, nor did he frame any scheme of Christian deism'; Hudson, *Enlightenment*, 12, doubts about Tindal: 'It is less certain that he claimed to be a "Christian Deist" '.

⁴³ (M. Tindal), *Christianity as old as the creation*, London, 1730, 333; compare also 336-7; (an other edition, London, 1730, 368, compare also 371 and 373).

⁴⁴ D. Waterland, *Christianity vindicated against infidelity*, London, 1732, 62-3.

⁴⁵ Waterland, *Christianity vindicated*, 76.

⁴⁶ J.Ch. Fox, ed., *The official diary of lieutenant-general Adam Williamson, deputy-lieutenant of the Tower of London 1722-1747*, (Camden Third Series, 22) London, 1912, 5-19: 'introduction', 15: 'On the end of the fly leaf (of his prayerbook) he writes: "I desire it may be known that the author of the foregoing remarks and corrections is a Christian Deist" '.

⁴⁷ *The moral philosopher*, 185.

⁴⁸ See below § 9.

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§6: The criterion of religion: The fitness of things

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In the preface to *The moral philosopher*, Morgan refers to ‘the moral truth, reason, and fitness of things’ as the only true foundation of religion.⁴⁹ This ‘fitness of things’ – and all its derivatives, for that matter – is an important phrase, which he uses more than fifty times. One finds it already in his earlier works, in more places in *The moral philosopher*, in its other volumes, and in later works, such as the *Physico-Theology*.⁵⁰ The fitness of things is a typical eighteenth-century phrase, originating from the philosophy of Samuel Clarke.⁵¹ Morgan confirms this origin in his reply to John Chapman in Volume 2 of *The moral philosopher*.⁵² He highly appreciated Clarke and called him ‘the excellent and truly learned Dr. Samuel Clarke’.⁵³ But Morgan did not derive his Deism from Clarke.⁵⁴ Clarke gives no definition of this fitness.

The Baptist minister, John Gill, wrote ironically a nice description of the concept in 1738:

Nothing is more frequently talked of in this enlightened age, this age of politeness, reason and good sense, than *the nature and fitness of things*; or, *the reason and nature of things*; phrases which to many, at least, that use them, are unmeaning and unintelligible sounds; and serve only as a retreat, when they have been fairly beaten out of an argument by the superior force and evidence of divine revelation.⁵⁵

Indeed, one finds the term throughout the 18th century. We encounter it among orthodox theologians, such as John Conybeare, and among deists like Thomas Chubb. An anonymous author wrote at the end of the century: ‘Some talk and write, as though the whole system of

⁴⁹ *The moral philosopher*, preface v.

⁵⁰ Morgan, *The grounds and principles*, 92; Morgan, *A letter to mr. Thomas Chubb*, 35-6; Morgan, *A defence of natural and revealed religion*, 20, 36; *The moral philosopher*, 84, 86, 90, 96, 147, 201, 205, 271, 393, 417, 419; (Morgan), *A defence of the moral philosopher*, 39; *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, v, vii, ix, xi, xiii, xxiii, Part one, 3, 20-1, 30, 40, 44, 46, 48-9, 53, 110, 143, Part two, 28-9, 69, 72; (Th. Morgan), *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, London, 1740, iii, 137, 144, 161; Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 78, 80, 106, 121-2, 138, 147, 162, 217, 326; Morgan, *A vindication*, 5, 66-7; (A society of Gentlemen), *A brief examination*, iii, lxxxi, 18, 48.

⁵¹ S. Clarke, *A demonstration of the being and attributes of God*, London, 1705, 3, 118, 236, 250; see J.E. LeRossignol, *The ethical philosophy of Samuel Clarke*, Leipzig, 1892, 39-48: ‘The fitness of things’; A.R. Humphreys, ‘The eternal fitness of things: an aspect of eighteenth century thought’, *Modern Language Review*, 42 (1947) 188-198.

⁵² *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, Part two, 28: ‘I can assure you, that I meant the same thing by it that Dr. Clarke does’.

⁵³ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 137.

⁵⁴ Contra Ch.G. Shaw, sub voce ‘The Enlightenment’, in: J. Hastings and J.A. Selbie, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 5, London, 1912, 310-6 (315).

⁵⁵ J. Gill, *The moral nature and fitness of things considered. Occasioned by some passages in the Reverend Mr. Samuel Chandler’s sermon, lately preached to the Societies for the Reformation of Manners*, London, 1738, 3.

morals was based on the fitness of things. Yet what they mean by things and by fitness, is not so easy to determine'.⁵⁶

There is no simple definition of the term. The most probable meaning of 'the fitness of things' is something like initiating a phrase with 'it is suitable' or 'it is appropriate'. But the vagueness remains.

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§7: The criterion of revelation: Miracles no proof of revelation

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This brings us to the question of the value of revelation. According to Morgan, there is no such thing as divine faith upon human testimony. There is only one criterion of divine truth, or of any doctrine, as coming from God, and that is 'the moral truth, reason or fitness of the thing itself'. This concept, as we already saw, permeates nearly all the Morgan's publications. He further argues that there have always been two kinds of religion in the world:

the first is the religion of nature, which consisting in the eternal, immutable rules and principles of moral truth, righteousness or reason ...

But besides this, there is another sort or species of religion, which has been commonly call'd positive, instituted, or revealed religion ... the political religion, or the religion of the hierarchy.⁵⁷

Every positive religion has to be scrutinized by the above mentioned criterion. There follows a discussion about the value of miracles as proof of revelation, in which Morgan clearly states that there can be no connection between the power of working miracles, and the truth of doctrines taught by these miracle workers: 'Miracles alone consider'd can prove nothing at all'. Miracles can never be a proof of revelation because by that way we are exposing ourselves to all the enthusiasms and impostures in the world.⁵⁸ For this viewpoint, which made of Morgan a more radical thinker, he was attacked by the Scottish Anglican theologian George Turnbull in *A philosophical enquiry concerning the connexion between the miracles and doctrines of Jesus Christ*. Turnbull retorts that it must be absurd to say that miracles or works can never be a proof of doctrines. He thinks that miracles are samples of sufficient knowledge to instruct certain truths.⁵⁹

There is a clear development in Morgan's thinking about miracles. In 1726, he thought miracles possible and perhaps a sufficient evidence of revelation.⁶⁰ But as we saw before, there is a development in his thinking.⁶¹ Eleven years later, in 1737, he states that the events ascribed by the Hebrew historians to miracles had other more natural and proximate causes:

⁵⁶ N.N., 'An enquiry concerning the origin of moral obligation', *The Theological Magazine*, 1 (1796) 371-7 (375).

⁵⁷ *The moral philosopher*, 84, 86, 94.

⁵⁸ *The moral philosopher*, 98-9.

⁵⁹ G. Turnbull, *A philosophical enquiry concerning the connexion between the miracles and doctrines of Jesus Christ*, 3rd edition, London, 1739, appendix 89-98 (95); on Turnbull see J.M.G. Paris, *The philosophy of George Turnbull*, Ph.D. thesis, Otago, Dunedin, 2013.

⁶⁰ Morgan, *A collection*, x-xi: 'Perhaps it may be said, that miracles, the clear irrefutable testimony of miracles, is a sufficient evidence and criterion of a revelation from God'.

⁶¹ See Chapter 2.

‘Miracles can prove nothing’.⁶² In 1739, he argues that it is highly improbable that God should work miracles, or interpose by an immediate divine power, outside the way of natural agency.⁶³ In Israel, everything was a miracle, for they were such a stupid people. He discusses the miracles of Moses in the desert in the same vein.⁶⁴ In the second volume of *The moral philosopher*, he tells his antagonist John Chapman that ‘we cannot safely depend on miracles for the certain truth of doctrines, or infallibility of persons, any farther than the nature, and reason, and moral fitness of the doctrines themselves will go’.⁶⁵

He refers in this context to John Locke: ‘I take Mr Locke’s definition of a miracle to be the best that has hitherto been given’.⁶⁶ We remember Locke’s definition of a miracle in his *Reasonableness of Christianity*: ‘A miracle then I take to be a sensible operation, which, being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his opinion contrary to the established course of nature, is taken by him to be divine’.⁶⁷ But though Morgan praises Locke, he does not accept the reality of miracles. Afterwards, in the *Physico-Theology*, he praises Locke again, although he differs from him on certain points.⁶⁸ Morgan esteems Locke by quoting him three or four times in relation to miracles and innate ideas.⁶⁹ This may seem fairly few, but he in general quotes only a few people.⁷⁰

Morgan would return to the subject of miracles in the third volume of *The moral philosopher*. Like Spinoza, Toland and other radical thinkers he looks for a natural explanation of miracles. The plagues in Egypt are the common calamities of Egypt, arising from natural causes. About the miracles performed by the prophets, he writes sharply: ‘The miracles said to have been wrought by those prophets, were private facts, done in a corner, and before none but friends, and staunch believers, who would be sure not to lessen the miracle, if they did not invent the story’. Similarly the miracles of the prophet Elisa are also romance and fiction.⁷¹

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the picture is a little bit different. Morgan has his doubts about the virgin birth: ‘I cannot pretend to say, that this supernatural fact was not true,

⁶² (Morgan), *A defence of the moral philosopher*, 39.

⁶³ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 32; nearly the same phrase in Volume 3, 169.

⁶⁴ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 39, 65-7.

⁶⁵ *The moral philosopher*, volume 2, second part, 13.

⁶⁶ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, second part, 30; see on Locke J.J. Macintosh, ‘Locke and Boyle on miracles and God’s existence’, in: M. Hunter, ed., *Robert Boyle reconsidered*, reprint, Cambridge, 2003, 193-214 (203): Locke on miracles.

⁶⁷ I.T. Ramsey, ed., *John Locke, The reasonableness of Christianity with a discourse of miracles*, Stanford, 1958, 79.

⁶⁸ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 73-4, 169.

⁶⁹ S.G. Hefelbower, *The relation of John Locke to English deism*, Chicago, 1918, 169: ‘The references that Morgan makes to Locke show that he knew him and esteemed him highly, but they do not prove that he is dependent on Locke in any matter of importance’.

⁷⁰ Hefelbower, *The relation*, 167: ‘Morgan ... makes little use of what others have said’; this is confirmed by Jackson-McCabe, ‘“Jewish Christianity”’, 106, who finds ‘no clear indications – explicit or implicit – of dependence on Toland’; on the quotations made by Morgan see Appendix § 5.

⁷¹ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 41, 310.

or that the thing is impossible; but ... the evidence for it was not so clear'.⁷² He has his doubts about the gift of tongues at Pentecost.⁷³ He refers in a neutral way to the miracles and mighty works of Christ and the Apostles, without criticizing them.⁷⁴

In the third volume of *The moral philosopher*, we encounter more criticism: 'As for Christ himself, we have nothing at all written by him, but must depend intirely on the credit of his disciples, who were very apt to mistake him'. With respect to the healings by Peter and Paul in the Book of Acts, he says: 'These, perhaps, are some of the strongest instances of enthusiasm, and the power of imagination, that ever were known'.⁷⁵ Because all this material Morgan's work has been called a forceful restatement of the deists' arguments against miracles.⁷⁶ Morgan restates many arguments against miracles without mentioning any sources. But it cannot be denied that he stands in a tradition which became manifest in the course of the 17th century.⁷⁷ There are a number of well-known predecessors on this topic. Some make only insinuations or tentative indications.⁷⁸ Others - like Spinoza - are quite open and clear on the subject. With the passing of time, we see a radicalization on the subject.

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§8: Morgan's views on miracles in contemporary context

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In what sense does Morgan diverge from contemporary views on miracles and more particularly from other deists' views? Starting in the 17th century Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1653) did not question the miracles of Scripture, but 'seeing ... miracles now cease, we have no sign left, whereby to acknowledge the pretended revelations, or inspirations of any private man'.⁷⁹ Morgan knew the *Leviathan*, referring to Hobbes various times.⁸⁰ Now we also know that Morgan defended himself against Peter Nisbett's reproach of being an adept of Hobbes: 'But you here very unlucky refer me to Hobbs's *Leviathan*, as a book which you presume I must have by me'.⁸¹

Among the other predecessors, it is without a doubt Spinoza who stands out. Well known is the famous Chapter Six 'On miracles' of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, published anonymously in Latin in 1670. Spinoza's central observation is that no event can occur to contravene nature, which preserves an eternal and fixed order. That means that the word miracle can be understood only with respect to men's beliefs and means simply an event

⁷² *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 197.

⁷³ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 230; Volume 3, 326.

⁷⁴ According to Burns, *The great debate*, 71, Morgan 'seems quite genuine in his insistence that the miracles of Jesus were indeed performed'.

⁷⁵ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 133, 201.

⁷⁶ J.A. Herrick, *The radical rhetoric of the English deists. The discourse of skepticism, 1680-1750*, Columbia, 1997, 20.

⁷⁷ See Burns, *The great debate*.

⁷⁸ Overton, 'The Deists', 90.

⁷⁹ Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. Macpherson, reprint, Harmondsworth, 1985, 414.

⁸⁰ Morgan, *A collection*, 51, 303.

⁸¹ Morgan, *A collection*, 481.

whose natural cause we – or at any rate the writer or narrator of the miracle – cannot explain by comparison with any other normal event.

This has consequences for the so-called miracles in the Scriptures. These can mean nothing other than natural events, which surpass or are believed to surpass human understanding. There is no possibility of gaining knowledge of God through miracles. But we should not be worried: If we find some things in Scripture for which we can assign no cause and which seem to have happened beyond – indeed contrary to – nature's order, this should not perplex us. We need have no hesitation in believing that what truly happened, happened naturally. We may conclude with absolute assurance that everything related in Scripture as having truly happened came to pass necessarily according to the laws of nature as everything does. Whatever is contrary to nature is contrary to reason, and whatever is contrary to reason is absurd, and should therefore be rejected.⁸²

Undoubtedly, one here encounters the material that has been used by all who came after Spinoza, consciously, or unconsciously. Spinoza has been called a proto-deist. It has been said that some of Morgan's sayings sound just like paraphrases of Spinoza.⁸³ Ephraim Chambers, the Editor of *The History of the Works of the Learned*, already thought that Morgan 'gathered all the principles of his work, from Hobbes, Spinoza, Toland, Tindal, and other such worthies'.⁸⁴ John Chapman sees in *The moral philosopher* 'little more than a fresh retail of the old Manichees and Marcionites, of Spinoza, Toland, and *Oracles of reason*'.⁸⁵ William Warburton also refers to the influence of the philosophy of Spinoza. Writing for the 1744 edition comments on the text of the *Dunciad* by Alexander Pope, he says about Morgan: 'A writer against religion, distinguished no otherwise from the rabble of his tribe than the pompousness of his title; for, having stolen his morality from Tindal and his philosophy from Spinoza, he calls himself, by the courtesy of England, a *Moral philosopher*'.⁸⁶ This phrase was an adaptation of the text he had published already in the fourth volume of his *Divine legation of Moses*.⁸⁷

Now Spinoza is mentioned only once by Morgan, in *A postscript to the nature and consequences of enthusiasm* of 1720.⁸⁸ Morgan is not mentioned in the bibliography of Spinoza's influence in England. Spinoza's influence among English deists has been sought,

⁸² B. de Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, translated by Samuel Shirley, Leiden, 1989, 125, 127, 130, 133-4.

⁸³ W.I. Boucher, *Spinoza. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century discussions*, Volume 4, Bristol, 1999, 158; J. Guttmann, *Kant und das Judentum*, Leipzig, 1908, 61 note 3: 'gerade wie eine Paraphrase Spinozas'.

⁸⁴ *The History of the Works of the Learned*, 2 (1737) 13-38 (24).

⁸⁵ J. Chapman, *Eusebius*, Volume 2, London, 1741, iv.

⁸⁶ J. Sutherland, ed., *The Twickenham edition of the poems of Alexander Pope*, Volume 5: *The Dunciad*, 3rd edition, London, 1963, 322.

⁸⁷ W. Warburton, *The collected works of William Warburton*, Volume 4, reprint of the 1811 edition, London/New York, 2005, 15; see for the details J. van den Berg, '“Morgan and Mandeville could prate no more”, Pope's *Dunciad* II 414', *Notes and Queries*, 57 (2010) 78-9.

⁸⁸ (Th. Morgan), *A postscript to the nature and consequences of enthusiasm consider'd etc., occasion'd by Mr. Bradbury's discourse*, London, 1720, 12: 'the opinions of Machiavel, Hobbs, or Spinoza'.

but no trace of influence of Spinoza on Morgan has been found.⁸⁹ But Morgan's view on miracles in his later works undoubtedly breathe the atmosphere of Spinoza's arguments. We can safely assume that somewhere between 1726 and 1737 he had become acquainted with the work of Spinoza. Translations in English of the *Tractatus* had appeared in London in 1689 and 1728. He may have been familiar with these translations, although he does not refer to them.

Among the deists one finds different opinions about miracles. As to Morgan's countrymen, Charles Blount was one of the first followers of Spinoza. In 1683, he anonymously wrote a tract entitled *Miracles, no violation of the laws of nature*, which in fact is a translation of the sixth chapter of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.⁹⁰ In the 'Premonition to the candid reader' we learn that one finds in Scripture 'many memorable things related as miracles, which yet notwithstanding proceeded from the fixt and immutable order of nature'.⁹¹ Later, Blount states in *The oracles of reason*, published posthumously, that God seldom alters the course of nature. But mostly it is an error in the manner of reading Scripture.⁹² All in all, this means that Blount was definitely moving away from the orthodox view of miracles.

John Toland is the most discussed of the English deists.⁹³ He defines in *Christianity not mysterious* a miracle as 'some action exceeding all humane power, and which the laws of nature cannot perform by their ordinary operations'. Miracles are produced according to the laws of nature, though above the ordinary way in a supernatural manner. According to Toland a miracle is contrary to reason.⁹⁴ Later, he offers a more rational way of criticizing the Pentateuch. Thus, he relates in the *Tetradymus* that third of the miracles in the Pentateuch are not really miracles. The only example of this kind of criticism he gives is the 'Hodegus; or, pillar of cloud and fire, that guided the Israelites in the wilderness, not miraculous: but a thing equally practis'd by other nations'.⁹⁵

Anthony Collins, an acquaintance and friend of Toland, argues in his *Discourse of the grounds and reasons of the Christian religion*: 'miracles can never render a foundation valid, which is itself invalid; can never make a false inference true'. He promised a treatise on

⁸⁹ W.I. Boucher, *Spinoza in English: a bibliography from the seventeenth century to the present*, reprint, Bristol 2002; Colie, 'Spinoza and the early English deists'; Colie, 'Spinoza in England, 1665-1730'; see Stephen, *History*, volume 1, 33: 'Few of the deists, it is probable, read his works'.

⁹⁰ Boucher, *Spinoza in English*, 7 nr.33.

⁹¹ (Ch. Blount), *Miracles, no violation of the laws of nature*, London, 1683, premonition.

⁹² Ch. Blount, 'A letter to my worthy friend mr. Gildon', in: *The oracles of reason*, London, 1693, 12, 8.

⁹³ G. Carabelli, *Tolandiana: materiali bibliografici per lo studio dell' opera e della fortuna di John Toland (1670-1722)*, Florence, 1975.

⁹⁴ J. Toland, *Christianity not mysterious*, 2nd edition, London, 1696, 144, 150, 146; Lechler, *Geschichte*, 193 note 1, calls him 'ein rationaler Supranaturalist'.

⁹⁵ J. Toland, *Tetradymus*, London, 1720, 5, 1-60; cf St.H. Daniel, *John Toland: his methods, manners, and mind*, Montreal, 1984, 125.

miracles, but it never materialised.⁹⁶ Significantly, Collins made no statements about the truth or falsity of the miracles of the New Testament.⁹⁷

Another friend of Collins, Matthew Tindal, made proposals for a second volume of *Christianity as old as the creation*, in which at least five chapters were planned to discuss miracles, but it never went to the press.⁹⁸

The most radical scholar with respect to the miracles of Jesus was Thomas Woolston. He lost his fellowship of Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge early in the 1720s after a series of conflicts. He started in *The Moderator between an infidel and an apostate* to allegorize the miracles. This allegorizing method had serious consequences. The miracles of Jesus in the Gospels were never performed.⁹⁹ He also maintained that no good proof existed for the resurrection of Christ. In six discourses on the miracles of our Saviour he explained himself a bit more:

The literal history of many of the miracles of Jesus, as recorded by the evangelists, does imply absurdities, improbabilities, and incredibilities, consequently they, either in whole or in part, were never wrought, as they are commonly believed now-a-days, but are only related as prophetic and parabolical narratives of what would be mysteriously and more wonderfully done by him.¹⁰⁰

With the help of the allegorizing method of the Fathers of the Church, using many Greek and Latin quotations of the Fathers, such as Origen, Hilary, Augustine, Cyril, Ambrose, Jerome and Theophylact, Woolston abandons the faith in the historicity of the miracles in the Gospels, repeating his view that the story of many of Jesus' miracles is literally absurd, improbable, and incredible. Referring to the resurrection of Jesus, he states that Christ's resurrection is a complication of absurdities, incoherences, and contradictions. He repeats this theme again and again.¹⁰¹ Woolston, who was a mystic rather than a deist, is the only English freethinker at that time who was put into prison for his published convictions. He was remanded to King's Bench Prison in Southwark in 1729, guilty of blasphemy, where he waited five months for his sentence.¹⁰²

Morgan, who was much more on his guard since he had been ordered to attend the House of Lords in November 1724, does not quote any of these earlier deists with respect to miracles. All of them had died before the publication of *The moral philosopher*. He was not known to them as a deist. It might well be that he wanted to avoid further complications, but he stands in the same tradition of diminishing the significance of Biblical miracles as proof of divine

⁹⁶ (Collins), *A discourse*, 31-2; O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 164, on base of the communication in Th. Woolston, *A discourse on the miracles of our Saviour*, 2nd edition, London, 1727, 69.

⁹⁷ O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 177.

⁹⁸ Lalor, *Matthew Tindal*, 163-4; D. Berman and St. Lalor, 'The suppression of Christianity as old as the creation, vol. II', *Notes and Queries*, 31 (1984) 3-6.

⁹⁹ Th. Woolston, *The moderator between an infidel and an apostate*, 3rd edition, London, 1729, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Woolston, *A discourse*, 4.

¹⁰¹ Woolston, *A discourse*, 22, 57, 65-6.

¹⁰² W.H. Trapnell, sub voce 'Woolston, Thomas', in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Volume 60, Oxford, 2004, 284-6; W.H. Trapnell, *Thomas Woolston: madman and deist*, Bristol, 1994, 69-71.

revelation. We may prudently conclude that he was influenced to some extent by the tradition of critical views of Hobbes and Collins, with whose works he was familiar.

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§9: Morgan's view on the Old Testament

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In the context of his search for 'true Christian Deism', Morgan raises the question 'whether the Christian revelation is contained in the books of the Old Testament?'.¹⁰³ This will appear to be a central concept in his thinking: the difference between the two Testaments. How can it be that the Jewish book still has a function in the Christian revelation? The Old Testament has been 'a stumbling block ... since the days of Marcion and still is'.¹⁰⁴ Morgan takes a prominent place in the history of this disparagement of the Old Testament. Theophanes tries to answer the question by explaining the Christian value of the Old Testament not in an explicit and literal sense, but as obscure and under types and shadows. Philalethes retorts in a mode of ridicule:

Literal Judaism then, it seems, was figurative Christianity, and literal Christianity is mystical Judaism; the letter of the law was the type of the gospel, and the letter of the gospel is the spirit of the law; the law was the gospel under a cloud; and the gospel the law unveil'd and farther illuminated; Moses was the shadow of Christ, and Christ is the substance of Moses; ... it must, as I imagine, be a little puzzling to vulgar understandings.¹⁰⁵

This text does presuppose Morgan's knowledge of the discussion about the prophecies in the 1720s.¹⁰⁶ It reminds us clearly of a text in Collins' *Grounds and reasons*: 'Christianity is the allegorical sense of the Old Testament, and is not improperly call'd mystical Judaism'. Collins' *Grounds and reasons* was a reaction to William Whiston's *Essay towards restoring the true text of the Old Testament* (1722), in which Whiston tried to prove that the Jews corrupted the text of the Old Testament. But in contrast to Morgan, Collins accepts - at least in name - the Old Testament: 'Christianity is founded on Judaism, or the New Testament on the Old', and 'The Old Testament is the Canon of Christians'.¹⁰⁷ Phrases like these Morgan would never utter in *The moral philosopher*. But Collins criticized the Christian interpretation of the prophecies of the Old Testament. The typological interpretation of prophecy was not defensible. It meant the unreliability of Scripture. So he had a different aim in assessing the Old Testament.

¹⁰³ *The moral philosopher*, 19; Gerdmar, *Roots*, 37: 'The Old Testament has no relevance to Morgan's own theology'.

¹⁰⁴ J.S. Preus, *From shadow to promise. Old Testament interpretation from Augustine to the young Luther*, Cambridge, Mass., 1969, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *The moral philosopher*, 19; Herrick, *The radical rhetoric*, 58, and R.D.Lund, *Ridicule, religion and the politics of wit in Augustan England*, Farnham, 2012, 123, quoted this whole section as an example of rhetorical ridicule.

¹⁰⁶ O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins*, 155-199: 'the attack on the prophecies'; St. Snobelen, 'The argument over prophecy: an eighteenth-century debate between William Whiston and Anthony Collins', *Lumen*, 15 (1996) 195-213.

¹⁰⁷ (A. Collins), *A discourse of the grounds and reasons of the Christian religion*, London, 1724, 92, 4, 13; reissue London, 1741, 82.

One of the famous instances of Biblical criticism employed by deists and others was the Old Testament story about Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac (Gen.22). It comes as no surprise that Morgan is among those who firmly criticize the story. In his *Absurdity of opposing faith to reason* he is still convinced that Abraham in this case proceeded upon the highest and best understanding.¹⁰⁸ But fifteen years later he wonders what proof Moses could give that Abraham had any such revelation or command from God. Perhaps Moses misunderstood the case when writing the story. But to refer it to the will of God was absolutely incredible.¹⁰⁹ Referring to the same story two years later in the second volume of *The moral philosopher*, he writes: 'That God himself should command this to try what Abraham would do in such a case, as if God did not know as well without it, is the most absurd and ridiculous supposition in the world'.¹¹⁰ Abraham's faith was an irrational enthusiastic persuasion. In 1741, Morgan supposes that the whole story is nothing more than 'a fictitious account of things, drawn up by some ignorant enthusiastic bigots in after-ages, without any original truth or foundation at all'.¹¹¹ Morgan's battle against Enthusiasm, which began in the pamphlet war around Salters' Hall against the Presbyterian ministers¹¹², is now directed at the Biblical patriarchs as well. This may be taken as another sign of his development towards a more rational and deistical viewpoint.

As noted above, the story of Abraham's sacrifice was also a popular topic for other deists. Thomas Chubb, in his *The case of Abraham re-examined*, criticizes the underlying image of God in this story. 'God gave the command to Abraham with an intent to recall it, and thereby to shew to Abraham and to all his posterity the unfitness of all human sacrifices'.¹¹³ Chubb said earlier that 'the thing commanded, was in itself morally unfit'.¹¹⁴

Other deists, like Toland, had resolved the question by quoting from Hebrews, Chapter 11:17-19, about the unconditional intellectualist faith of Abraham.¹¹⁵ Tindal did not say more about it than 'the Jews cou'd not think it absolutely unlawful for a father than to sacrifice an innocent child'.¹¹⁶ God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son did not make Collins happy either.¹¹⁷ All this demonstrates Morgan's radicalism in relation to other deists. He

¹⁰⁸ Morgan, *The absurdity*, 23.

¹⁰⁹ *The moral philosopher*, 133-4.

¹¹⁰ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 128-9.

¹¹¹ Morgan, *A vindication*, 18.

¹¹² See Chapter 2 §2-3.

¹¹³ Th. Chubb, *A supplement to the vindication of God's moral character ... to which is added, the case of Abraham with regard to his offering up of Isaac in sacrifice, re-examined*, London, 1727, 47.

¹¹⁴ Th. Chubb, *A supplement to the previous question with regard to religion ... in which God's moral character is more fully vindicated*, London, 1725, 18.

¹¹⁵ Toland, *Christianity not mysterious*, 131; cf R.E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the deist controversy: a study in adaptations*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, 64, 126, about the intellectualist idea of faith.

¹¹⁶ (Tindal), *Christianity*, 97; on p.240 Tindal says: 'there are several mistakes crept into the Old Testament, where there 's scarce a chapter, which gives any historical account of matter'.

¹¹⁷ (Collins), *A discourse*, 31-2.

brought with his observations the deistical interpretation of Genesis 22 to its logical conclusion.¹¹⁸

One of Morgan's major criticisms of the Old Testament is concerned with Moses. The law of Moses is 'an intolerable yoke of darkness and bondage, tyranny and vassalage, wrath and misery'.¹¹⁹ In that context, Morgan criticizes how the Jews were

encouraged and directed by Moses himself to extend their conquests as far as they could, and to destroy by fire and sword, any or every nation or people that resisted them, and that would not submit to become their subjects and tributaries, upon demand: The inhabitants of Canaan were to be utterly destroy'd root and branch without mercy, not sparing or leaving alive man, woman or child.¹²⁰

Morgan is especially critical about the Levites and the priests in ancient Israel as the men responsible for the misery of the ordinary people. The Levites had a special position in Israel. Although they were servants in the temple, they had greater rights and immunities than any prince or magistrate. In this context, he refers to the instance of the drunken Levite and his concubine in the Book of Judges. He exclaims that this whole transaction was 'a scene of wickedness, injustice, and priestcraft'.

Priestcraft: with this derogatory word Morgan, like so many deists, expresses his hatred towards all kinds of situations 'where any body or set of men have an interest separate from, and inconsistent with the interests of the state or society'. He uses this word some eight times in *The moral philosopher* where it always has a negative connotation. The power of priestcraft works upon ignorance and fear. Later on, he compares priestcraft with modern church tyranny. The priesthood was developed by Joseph in Egypt.¹²¹ Moses established his government on the very same plan.¹²² He did it with a vast revenue for his own tribe and family.¹²³ The two brothers Moses and Aaron were mere worldly politicians who looked after the interests of their own tribe and family.¹²⁴ Afterwards, Philalethes relates extensively about the relation king-prophet in the books of the Old Testament. He gives several instances in which the prophets brought about their own predictions by accomplishing in a natural way what they had resolved upon before. Samuel versus Saul, Eliah versus Ahab, Elisha versus

¹¹⁸ Gawlick, 'Abraham's sacrifice', 577-600.

¹¹⁹ *The moral philosopher*, 29.

¹²⁰ *The moral philosopher*, 28; this text is quoted by O. Ilany, 'From divine commandment to political act: the eighteenth-century polemic on the extermination of the Canaanites', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73 (2012) 437-61 (442) as an example of deist criticism of the extermination commandment.

¹²¹ *The moral philosopher*, 140-2, 237, 431, 239-42.

¹²² *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 22.

¹²³ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 135.

¹²⁴ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 110; see for the view of the deists about Moses G. Gawlick, 'Zwischen Religionsphilosophie und Religionskritik: Was die Deisten über Moses dachten', in: W. Schmidt-Biggemann and others, eds., *Kritische Religionsphilosophie: eine Gedenkschrift für Friedrich Niewöhner*, Berlin/New York, 2010, 237-54, about Morgan especially 243-46.

Hazael, and many others. By these wrong politics in religion this nation has been an example and warning to all other nations.¹²⁵

Theophanes concludes that Christianity upon such a foot – based on the message of the Old Testament- would be but slightly grounded. Philalethes thinks it doubtful whether Moses and the prophets understood Christianity and foresaw the Gospel. At the end, Philalethes says: ‘I do not intend ... to oppose revelation to reason, or to set up the religion of nature in opposition to Christianity as such’.¹²⁶ He returns to the central theme of the book that there is no room for the Old Testament as part of the canon. After the rejection of the Jewish canon, Philalethes states: ‘I am a Christian upon the foot of the New Testament’.¹²⁷ But that does not imply that the books of the New Testament need no critical scrutiny. Thus he thinks the Apocalypse is full of the Jewish gospel. Even Theophanes admits that ‘the people of Israel at first, and their remains afterwards, called Jews, were a most untoward, grossly ignorant, amazingly superstitious, and desperately wicked generation of men’.¹²⁸

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§10: From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism

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With these kind of phrases in mind one easily understands why Morgan has acquired a particular place in the history of anti-Semitism.¹²⁹ However, most deists were not anti-Semites as such; they were anti-Judaic, which means against the Jewish religion.¹³⁰ Most of Morgan’s predecessors spoke in the same way. Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, wrote in his *Characteristics of men, manners, opinions, times*, published in 1711: ‘The Jews were naturally a very cloudy people’. We already find the same text in his *Letter concerning enthusiasm*, published in 1708.¹³¹ Another predecessor, Collins, wrote in *The discourse of freethinking* with respect to the historian Josephus: ‘I have often wish’d he had had a better subject, than such an illiterate, barbarous, and ridiculous people’.¹³² But according to Frank Manuel, Collins ‘betrayed no particular animus against the Jews’.¹³³ Matthew Tindal claimed the following: ‘The Jews, as they were most superstitious, so were they most cruel’.¹³⁴ According to Diego Lucci, Tindal’s *Christianity* ‘did not present any contemptuous judgment

¹²⁵ *The moral philosopher*, 282-4, 288-329.

¹²⁶ *The moral philosopher*, 346-7.

¹²⁷ *The moral philosopher*, 359.

¹²⁸ *The moral philosopher*, 265; cf Gerdmar, *Roots of theological anti-Semitism*, 37: ‘In Morgan, the Jews of the past and present melt together in one’.

¹²⁹ Poliakov, *The history of anti-Semitism*, Volume 3, 65; Julius, *Trials*, 389 : ‘Morgan’s account on the Jews is hostile in the extreme’; Glassman, *Protean prejudice*, 19: ‘The most rabid Jew hater of the group’.

¹³⁰ D. Lucci, ‘Judaism and the Jews in deists’ attacks on revealed religion’, *Hebraic Political Studies*, 3 (2008) 177-214, calls only Morgan and Annet ‘anti-Judaic deist thinkers’.

¹³¹ A.A. Cooper, 3rd earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of men, manners, opinions, times*, edited by J.M. Robertson, Volume 1, Indianapolis, 1964, 22; (Shaftesbury), *A letter*, 46.

¹³² (Collins), *A discourse of freethinking*, xxxvi.

¹³³ Fr.E. Manuel, *The broken staff: Judaism through Christian eyes*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, 186.

¹³⁴ (Tindal), *Christianity*, 134.

about the Jews'.¹³⁵ Most deists had some kind of anti-Jewish feelings, like most people in England had at the time.

Apart from anti-Christian sentiments, the age of Enlightenment in England was also full of anti-Jewish sentiments, as demonstrated by the countless comedies, melodramas and satires that were produced in the 18th century in England. Famous persons who are involved in the discussions about the superstitions of the Jewish religion and those execrable Jews can be found in authors like Joseph Addison, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift.¹³⁶ Not only in literature but also in practice did these anti-Jewish feelings have consequences. In 1732 a mob attacked several London Jews living around Broad Street following an accusation of murder.¹³⁷ The Jewish population in England was estimated in 1730 to have been about 6000 persons.¹³⁸

With the notable exception of John Toland, most English deists have a place in the history of anti-Judaism.¹³⁹ Toland was much more positive towards Judaism and published anonymously in 1714 his *Reasons for naturalizing the Jews in great Britain and Ireland, on the same foot with all other nations. Containing also a defence of the Jews against all vulgar prejudices in all countries*. The book is dedicated to the Archbishops and Bishops of the established church, asking them to be 'their friends and protectors in the British Parliament'. He refers to the same rights already established for the Protestant dissenters. He praises the working power of the Jews as shepherds, builders and husbandmen in Old Testament times. 'What they suffer'd from the hands of the heathens, may be learnt from the books of the Old Testament'.¹⁴⁰ The book is an impressive tract for tolerance. Clearly, in this respect English Deism is once again not unified.

The moral philosopher on the contrary has been called one of the most emblematic examples of Enlightenment anti-Semitism, and Morgan 'an anti-judaic deist thinker'. More specifically it was named a partly secularized instance of the medieval *Adversus Judaeos* genre.¹⁴¹ We can say that the anti-Jewish elements of *The moral philosopher* rapidly developed into anti-Semitic statements. This will be more clear in the second and third volume of *The moral philosopher*.

¹³⁵ Lucci, 'Judaism', 204.

¹³⁶ H.R.S. van der Veen, *Jewish characters in eighteenth-century English fiction and drama*, reprint of the 1935 edition, New York, 1973, 99-106; see also T.M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714-1830: tradition and change in a liberal society*, reprint, Chicago, 1999, 86-117: 'Anti-Jewish sentiment – religious and secular'.

¹³⁷ A.M. Hyamson, *A history of the Jews in England*, London, 1908, 263; C. Roth, *A history of the Jews in England*, 3rd edition, Oxford, 1978, 204.

¹³⁸ R.D. Barnett, 'Anglo-Jewry in the eighteenth century', in: V.D. Lipman, ed., *Three centuries of Anglo-Jewish history*, London, 1961, 45-68 (60).

¹³⁹ S. Ettinger, 'Jews and Judaism as seen by the English deists of the 18th century', *Zion*, 29 (1964) 182-207 (in Hebrew); Poliakov, *The history*, Volume 3: from Voltaire to Wagner, 59-69: 'The English deists'; Lucci, 'Judaism'.

¹⁴⁰ (J. Toland), *Reasons for naturalizing the Jews in great Britain and Ireland, ... containing also a defence of the Jews against all vulgar prejudices in all countries*, London, 1714, Dedication, 22; M. Wiener, 'John Toland and Judaism', *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 16 (1941) 215-42 (219): 'John Toland stands out in the history of the Enlightenment by reason of his unique attitude toward Judaism'; Poliakov, *The history*, Volume 3, 61-3.

¹⁴¹ D. Lucci, *Scripture and deism: the biblical criticism of the eighteenth-century British deists*, (Studies in Early Modern European Culture 3), Bern, 2008, 195; Lucci, 'Judaism', 204-10; Julius, *Trials*, 389.

Philaletthes thought highly of the Apostle Paul. According to Morgan the Apostle had very great problems with the Jews and their traditions. 'The law of Moses was originally a mere piece of carnal, worldly policy'. The theme of the difference between the two Testaments continues in his reasoning: 'St. Paul preached a new doctrine, contrary to Moses and the prophets'.¹⁴² For Morgan, a standing controversy exists between St. Paul and the teachers of circumcision. How this matter stood in St. Paul's time one can see in various chapters in the Book of Acts. He gives a prolific paraphrase of what is written in these chapters.¹⁴³ But in the eyes of Morgan, St. Paul was not content with the Jerusalem decree and it was clearly his opinion that all the converts to Christianity, whether Jews or gentiles, ought to be exempted from any obligation to Jewish law. He concludes, as we saw before, that 'St. Paul was the great free-thinker of his age, the bold and brave defender of reason against authority'.¹⁴⁴ Although Morgan never made anti-Semitic statements about contemporary English Jews, his anti-Jewish point of departure led to anti-Semitic phrases.¹⁴⁵ There is a difficulty in the definitions of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism (against the Jews as a race) seems to be a prolongation of anti-Judaism (against the Jewish religion).¹⁴⁶ Morgan, who started as an anti-Judaist, ends up as a person who uttered vigorous anti-Semitic phrases. In Volumes two and three he repeats the same observations as in *The moral philosopher*, but with a sharper tone. He states about the Jews that 'they had understandings, but little superior to the beasts; they were always a grossly ignorant and superstitious people'. He says: 'This people from first to last could scarce ever be said to be civilized at all. They were not endued with any common sense'.¹⁴⁷ A phrase which he repeats again and again is the remark that the God of Israel was a local tutelar God, diminishing in this way the status of the Old Testament notion of God.¹⁴⁸ Proceeding to New Testament times he maintains that when Christianity came to be preached, Judaism was the greatest obstacle to it.¹⁴⁹ This whole section is full of anti-Semitic observations. About the election of Israel as the chosen people he says:

The Hebrew historians every where discover a visible and strong prejudice and prepossession in favour of their nation, whom they continually represent as God's peculiar and most beloved people, his chosen, his inheritance, portion, and delight. But that these

¹⁴² *The moral philosopher*, 40-1.

¹⁴³ *The moral philosopher*, 54, 55-80.

¹⁴⁴ *The moral philosopher*, 71; see Kl. Scholder, 'Paulus und die Aufklärung', *Rondom het Woord*, 13 (1971) 121-31 (125): 'Paulus ist für Thomas Morgan wie für viele andere englische und deutsche Aufklärer gerade als Gegner der Judenchristen der Repräsentant eines reinen und freien Christentums der Vernunft und der Sittlichkeit'.

¹⁴⁵ J. Katz, *From prejudice to destruction: anti-Semitism, 1700-1933*, Cambridge, Mass., 1980, 31.

¹⁴⁶ Cf H. Jansen, *Christelijke theologie na Auschwitz: deel 2: Nieuwtestamentische wortels van het antisemitisme: band 1*, 's Gravenhage, 1985, 21-51: 'Ambivalentie in betekenis en gebruik van de termen "antisemitisme" en "anti-judaïsme" '; Gerdmar, *Roots of theological anti-Semitism*, 6-8.

¹⁴⁷ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 38, 27.

¹⁴⁸ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 62; the same at Volume 2, 118; (A Society of Gentlemen), *A brief examination*, passim.

¹⁴⁹ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 60.

high pretensions were all owing to their pride, vanity, and superstition, is sufficiently prov'd from their own history which they give us themselves.¹⁵⁰

Morgan refers many times to the bias of the Biblical historians. In general they were most prejudiced and superstitious. They accommodated themselves too much to the mob and rabble. In their language and style, they accommodated themselves to the superstitions of the common people.¹⁵¹ The same observation returns in Volume three. The Biblical author had a constant appetite for accommodation to the ignorance of the common people: 'They continually accommodate themselves, in all their writings, to the ignorance, superstition, and gross apprehensions of the vulgar'.¹⁵² At the end of his life, he made vigorous anti-Semitic statements like this: 'It would have been a greater mercy to this miserable people, to have been all drowned together in the Red sea'.¹⁵³ His anti-Judaism turned into anti-Semitism. As has been said before, Morgan's opinions were no exception in the 18th century, but of all the so-called deists he was the most radical in his time.¹⁵⁴ There is in general an 'ambiguous attitude of the Enlightenment toward the Jews'.¹⁵⁵ Morgan's position was more radically anti-Jewish, entailing radical criticism against the Old Testament and its people.

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§11: Christianity: A revival of the religion of nature

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Given his views on the Old Testament and the Jews, what then is Morgan's particular view of Christianity? Clearly his view of Christianity developed from an orthodox confession of faith during his ordination in Frome in 1716 to a more radical and deistical vision of revelation in the 1730s. For Morgan the 'Christian revelation ... is a revival of the religion of nature, or a complete system and transcript of moral truth and righteousness'.¹⁵⁶ A phrase which reminds us of the subtitle of Tindal's *Christianity as old as the creation, or, the gospel, a republication of the religion of nature*. This book has been called by the Irish divine Philip Skelton 'The Bible of all deistical readers', and Tindal himself 'The apostle of Deism', phrases that since then have gained popular status.¹⁵⁷

On the basis of this comparison 'republication // revival of the religion of nature' it may be said that Tindal must have exerted some kind of influence on Morgan. This influence has since long been stated by many. William Warburton wrote on August 17th 1737 to Thomas Birch about *The moral philosopher*: 'It is composed principally of scraps ill put together from "Christianity as old as the creation", larded with some of the most stupid fancies of his

¹⁵⁰ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 28.

¹⁵¹ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, 29, 64.

¹⁵² *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 41-2.

¹⁵³ (A society of gentlemen), *A brief examination*, 67.

¹⁵⁴ Cf Gerdmar, *Roots of theological anti-Semitism*, 36: 'Morgan's prejudice against the Jews is an essentialist and racist one'.

¹⁵⁵ Lucci, 'Judaism and the Jews', 214.

¹⁵⁶ *The moral philosopher*, 412; see above in § 7 for Morgan's view on the religion of nature.

¹⁵⁷ Skelton, *Deism revealed*, Volume 2, 265.

own'.¹⁵⁸ Since then, Tindal is mentioned everywhere in the literature about Morgan. John Leland and many others note that Morgan treads in the footsteps of Tindal.¹⁵⁹ On the basis of the comparison between 'republication' and 'revival' one may prudently conclude that in this aspect Morgan stands in the line of Tindal. But he does not quote Tindal and they do not otherwise have much in common. There is only one place in which Tindal's book is mentioned in *The moral philosopher*, where Morgan is quoting Leland's answer to Tindal.¹⁶⁰ Remarkably, it is the other way round: Tindal quotes Morgan's *Collection of tracts* once.¹⁶¹

For Morgan 'Religion is purely an internal thing, and consists ultimately in moral truth and righteousness, considered as an inward character, temper, disposition or habit in the mind'. He compares moral philosophy with the religion of nature and refers to Solomon and the author of the Book of Ecclesiasticus. This moral philosopher can say a prayer to 'the all-wise and all-powerful creator, governor, and dirigent of the whole, ... : O thou eternal reason, father of light, and immense fountain of all truth and goodness ...'. This seems to be the most rational way of addressing God.¹⁶² This prayer has been classified as a proof of the piety of the English deists.¹⁶³ But this piety is the religion of nature. A man can hear the clearly intelligible voice of his maker. Any other method for information in matters of faith and religion will be nothing other than confusion and distraction. Such is the piety of a Christian deist.

Morgan sums up: 'By Christianity, I mean that complete system of moral truth and righteousness, justice and charity, which, as the best transcript of the religion of nature, was preach'd to the world by Christ and the apostles'. 'Christianity ... restores the eternal, immutable rule of moral rectitude, or the religion of God and nature'.¹⁶⁴ So the Christian religion has indeed become for Morgan a moral philosophy in which not the Scriptures, but human philosophy has become the standard measure.

¹⁵⁸ Nichols, *Illustrations*, Volume 2, 70.

¹⁵⁹ J. Leland, *The divine authority of the Old and New Testament asserted*, Volume 2, London, 1740, 128 note; E.A. Sayous, *Les déistes anglais et le christianisme principalement depuis Toland jusqu'à Chubb*, Paris, 1882, 159; Overton, 'The Deists', 89; F. Vigouroux, *Les livres saintes et la critique rationaliste. Histoire et réfutation des objections des incrédules contre les saintes écritures*, Volume I/2, 3rd edition, Paris, 1890, 139; W.R. Sorley, 'Berkeley and contemporary philosophy', in: A.W. Ward, ed., *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, Volume 9, Cambridge, 1920, 279-304 (294); C. Constantin, sub voce 'Rationalisme', in: *Dictionnaire de la théologie catholique*, Volume 13/2, Paris, 1937, 1688-1778 (1743); H.E. Allison, *Lessing and the enlightenment*, Ann Arbor, 1966, 16; Lucci, *Scripture*, 16; Lucci, 'Judaism and the Jews', 204; Hudson, *Enlightenment*, 76; D. Lucci, 'An eighteenth-century skeptical attack on rational theology and positive religion: "Christianity not founded on argument" by Henri Dodwell the younger', *Intellectual History Review*, 22 (2012) 1-26 (7); more or less the same by E. Troeltsch, sub voce 'Deismus', in: *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd edition, Volume 4, Leipzig, 1898, 532-559 (544-5).

¹⁶⁰ *The moral philosopher*, Volume 3, 180.

¹⁶¹ (M. Tindal), *A second address to the inhabitants of the two great cities London and Westminster*, London, 1730, 63: 'the judicious Dr. Morgan'.

¹⁶² *The moral philosopher*, 416, 418, 428.

¹⁶³ J. Waligore, 'The piety of the English deists: the personal relationship with an active God', *Intellectual History Review*, 22 (2012) 181-97 (190).

¹⁶⁴ *The moral philosopher*, 430, 439; similar phrases on 96-7 and 412.

He cannot believe, however, everything that was afterwards reported concerning this great prophet Jesus. His disciples and followers interpolated, added, and altered several passages in the original books, and they ascribed several miracles to him, in which there could have been only an exertion of power without wisdom or goodness.¹⁶⁵ Morgan does not give any indication of details about these interpolations and additions, nor does he report to which miracles he refers. When discussing the second and the third volumes of *The moral philosopher*, we will see more details about these additions.

Morgan's view on the primitive Christians in the ancient church, who maintained the liberty of conscience against the Catholic church and were branded as 'Gnosticks, because they pretended to be wiser than the Church, and claimed a Right of judging for themselves' is still interesting.¹⁶⁶

For Morgan there is one central issue: 'He that feareth God and worketh righteousness shall be accepted of him, whether he has lived under the gospel or not: and on the other hand, God in the day of accounts will certainly reject all the workers of iniquity, whatever faith they may have had in Christ'.¹⁶⁷ Christianity loses its absoluteness. There is for Morgan no contradiction in being a Christian and a deist. In this respect, God is for him the common father of mankind and the wise and righteous governor of the world. The Anselmian doctrine of satisfaction has no place in Morgan's theology. In the 16th century, Fausto Paolo Sozzini and his followers did reject the propitiatory view of atonement. The Enlightenment in general broke with the belief in the propitiatory passion of Christ. It has been said by Kühler that deism is a continuation of Socinianism.¹⁶⁸ Morgan refers various times to Socinians and Socinianism in his discussion with Cumming and Chapman in a neutral way.¹⁶⁹

The righteousness of Christ cannot be placed to our account. Christ was not punished for our sins, and we are not rewarded for his righteousness. The doctrine of imputed righteousness and merit is based upon some metaphorical expressions of St. Paul.

The books of the New Testament, therefore, ought to be read critically, with an allowance for persons, circumstances, and the situation of things at that time, and not taken in gross, as if everything contain'd in them, had been at first infallibly inspired by God, and no corruptions could have ever since happen'd to them.¹⁷⁰

In this phrase, we recognize a harbinger of the historical critical method, of which we will find more specimens below when we turn to Volumes two and three of *The moral philosopher*.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ *The moral philosopher*, 439-40.

¹⁶⁶ *The moral philosopher*, 381.

¹⁶⁷ *The moral philosopher*, 144-7.

¹⁶⁸ J.A.B. Jongeneel, *Jesus Christ in world history*, (Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 149), Frankfurt am Main, 2009, 170-1; J.A.B. Jongeneel, *Het redelijke geloof in Jezus Christus, een studie over de wijsbegeerte van de Verlichting*, Wageningen, 1971, 91-96 (93-4); W.J. Kühler, *Het Socianisme in Nederland*, (reprint of the edition Leiden 1912), Leeuwarden, 1980, 273.

¹⁶⁹ Morgan, *The grounds and principles*, 37, 70, 73-8; *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, second part, 47.

¹⁷⁰ *The moral philosopher*, 442.

¹⁷¹ Chapter 5.

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§12: Summary

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It has been stated that Morgan's uncompromising rejection of the Old Testament as part of the Christian Bible is his particular contribution to the deistic debate and as such it represents a landmark in English religious history. It has been observed that his work marks the high point of the deist onslaught on the Old Testament.¹⁷² Because of this rejection, he has for long been called by many a modern Marcion.¹⁷³ Morgan has often been compared with the second-century Marcion of Sinope, who is known for his radical stand against the Jewish Old Testament. The latter's influence was so great as to establish Marcionite churches in the entire Roman empire. A Marcionite church existed in the East at least until the tenth century.¹⁷⁴ Morgan himself never refers to Marcion. He simply calls himself 'a Christian upon the foot of the New Testament', leaving no room at all for the Jewish part of the Scriptures. This is all the more remarkable since in England the cultural influence of the Old Testament was impressive.¹⁷⁵

In this way, Morgan was a harbinger of the disparagement of the Old Testament in modern theology. This disparagement of the Old Testament returns in the concepts of later German theologians, such as Semler, Schleiermacher, Harnack, Hirsch, and Slenczka.¹⁷⁶ It has been correctly said that Morgan 'heralds themes and makes analyses that would recur in Enlightenment theology and exegesis throughout the two centuries that followed'.¹⁷⁷ Morgan argues that revelation and miracles as contained in the Scriptures are not to be believed at face value, but have to be scrutinized for their moral truth and reason. His view on miracles doubtless breathe the spirit of Spinoza, but whether he was directly influenced by Spinoza remains an issue.¹⁷⁸ Morgan adopts a Christian Deism, 'purified' from Jewish

¹⁷² H. Graf Reventlow, *The authority of the Bible and the rise of the modern world*, London, 1985, 398, 396; J.W. Rogerson, *Old Testament criticism in the nineteenth century: England and Germany*, London, 1985, 153.

¹⁷³ Lechler, *Geschichte*, 387; W. Gass, *Geschichte der protestantischen Dogmatik in ihrem Zusammenhange mit der Theologie überhaupt*, Volume 3, Berlin, 1862, 355; L. Diestel, *Geschichte des Alten Testaments in der christlichen Kirche*, Jena, 1869, 545; J. Coppens, *De geschiedkundige ontwikkelingsgang van de Oudtestamentische exegese vanaf de Renaissance tot en met de Aufklärung*, Antwerpen, 1943, 16; A.J. Heschel, *The prophets*, New York & Evanston, 1962, 372; Gawlick, 'Abraham's sacrifice', 592; M.R. Schlimm, 'Defending the Old Testament's worth: John Wesley's reaction to the rebirth of Marcionism', *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 42 (2007) 28-51 (35); and many others.

¹⁷⁴ M.G. Morony, *Iraq after the muslim conquest*, Princeton, 1984, 402; M. Frenchkowski, 'Marcion in Arabischen Quellen', in: G. May and K. Greschat, eds., *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung*, Berlin, 2002, 39-63 (46-9, 62).

¹⁷⁵ W.B. Selbie, 'The influence of the Old Testament on Puritanism', in: E.R. Bevan & Ch. Singer, eds., *The legacy of Israel*, reprint, Oxford, 1969, 407-431; A. Meier, *Die alttestamentliche Namengebung in England*, (Kölner Anglistische Arbeiten 22), reprint of the Bochum 1934 edition, New York, 1966; H. Schöffler, *Abendland und Altes Testament*, (Kölner Anglistische Arbeiten 30), reprint of the Bochum 1937 edition, New York, 1966.

¹⁷⁶ See Chapter 8.

¹⁷⁷ Gerdmar, *Roots*, 35.

¹⁷⁸ The fact that Spinoza is mentioned by Morgan only once, and that in his pre-deistic phase, does raise doubts about the extent to which Morgan was influenced by Spinoza.

elements, in which he from time to time crosses the bounds of virulent anti-Semitism. His type of anti-Judaism we find more often in the time in which he lived. Moral criticism by Morgan on the Old Testament message is abundant, but the New Testament has been spared, although there are indications of maltreatment of the texts and assertions and they need to be read critically. In many aspects, Morgan is more radical in his moral criticism of the Bible than his deist predecessors.

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