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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 Six: Morgan's *Physico-Theology*

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§1: Introduction

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After his major work, Morgan wrote another voluminous book. In April 1741, he published his *Physico-Theology: or, a philosophico-moral disquisition concerning human nature, free agency, moral approvement, and divine providence*, dated March 18th 1740.¹ He had already indicated in 1739 that he was working on this treatise: 'I hope shortly to clear up these matters a little farther in a distinct treatise, concerning providence, moral government and free agency'.²

The biographer Leslie Stephen and many others call *Physico-Theology* the fourth volume of *The moral philosopher*.³ But one may wonder whether they are correct in their assessment of this work.⁴ At any rate, Morgan does not acknowledge it as such, and more importantly, *Physico-Theology* hardly deals with the major topic of *The moral philosopher*, Biblical criticism.⁵ For this reason, I shall discuss it separately.

Morgan's biographer Peter Harrison suggested that with the appearance of this book 'Morgan generated further controversy by casting doubt upon the moral probity of the Old Testament patriarchs', resulting in a conflict with Samuel Chandler'.⁶ But this is a strange remark in light of the fact that Chandler's work was published two months before the publication of the *Physico-Theology*. Moreover, in the *Physico-Theology* Morgan says nothing about the patriarchs. The Preface makes this already clear:

I can expect no thanks or favour from the divines, for explaining and defending the religion of God and nature, while revelation, I mean the Word, has been left out of the account. They will make me, I presume, an atheist, for demonstrating the being, providence, continual presence, and incessant agency and concurrence of the Deity in all the works and ways of nature.⁷

¹ This date may be probably Old Style; it has a preface of four pages, a main body of 353 pages and an index of fifteen pages.

² *The moral philosopher*, Volume 2, second part, 60, in which he refers to God's governing of the world.

³ Stephen, *History of English thought*, Volume 1, 166; also Stephen, *Dictionary*, 36; Hohlwein, *Die Religion*, 1135; S. Ikeda, *David Hume and the eighteenth century British thought*, Tokyo, 1986, 420; O'Neill, *The Bible's authority*, 50 note 4; Schmitt, *Kirchenlexikon*, 118; Busche, *Lexikon*, 470; Sell, "'The gospel its own witness"', 203; Hayes, 'Historical criticism of the Old Testament canon', in: Saebo, ed., *Hebrew Bible Old Testament*, 985-1005 (1003 note 76).

⁴ The same opinion by Gawlick, 'Einleitung', in: (Th. Morgan), *The Moral Philosopher*, 7: 'Wie sie dazu kommen, ist unklar'.

⁵ The *Physico-Theology* has no critique on the morality of the Old Testament, contra J. Rogerson, 'The Old Testament', in: P. Avis, ed., *The history of Christian theology*, Volume 2: *The study and use of the Bible*, Basingstoke/Grand Rapids, 1988, 3-150 (104).

⁶ Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary*, 149.

⁷ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, vi.

Clearly, Morgan does not want to be known as an atheist. His new work, he says, has nothing to do with revelation; it is very critical of it. He stresses that we must judge religion not by revelation, but by reason.

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§2: *Physico-Theology*

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The work has a title which reminds us of William Derham's famous work, entitled *Physico-Theology; or, a demonstration of the being and attributes of God from his works of creation*, being the Boyle's lectures of 1711-2, and published in 1713. This book reached no less than sixteen editions in the 18th century alone.

Derham's *Physico-Theology* deals with theology based on the natural world, reading in nature the miracles of the Creator. The natural world gives proofs of God's existence. Derham also wrote an Astro-Theology. Other eighteenth-century botanists and zoologists studied nature looking for proofs of the existence of the Creator. This led to the most spectacular titles of – mostly German Protestant - books like, Pyro-theology, Litho-Theology, Bronto-Theology, Ichthyo-Theology and Testaceo-Theology.⁸

Morgan uses the same title as Derham. But there the likeness seems to stop. Apart from the first chapters, Morgan's book resembles more a study of moral philosophy. Perhaps that is the reason why Leslie Stephen found it appropriate to call it the fourth volume of *The moral philosopher*. *Physico-Theology* has seven chapters: on matter in general; on the nature of light; on human nature; on power, liberty and free agency; on moral self-regimen; on moral right and wrong; and on divine providence.

The work has been called 'a full-blown system of natural theology based on Newtonian physics'.⁹ Indeed, in the first two chapters one encounters the spirit of Isaac Newton. Morgan declares: 'Sir Isaac Newton, a man of the most elevated and uncommon genius, made several great discoveries'. He also calls him a great philosopher.¹⁰ We have seen before the influence that Newton had on Morgan's medical works.¹¹ But in the theory of light Morgan goes his own way. Motion is caused by light, and all bodies 'are immersed in this universal fluid as the common medium and vehicle of all their actions'.¹²

Apart from Newton, Morgan refers in this book to John Locke, praising him as follows: 'I must own Mr. Locke as my master, and the first guide and director of my understanding'. However, 'I am forced to differ from that great philosopher and master of reason, Mr. Locke, who denies and argues against all innate ideas in general'.¹³ We saw above how Morgan referred to Locke's concept of miracles, without following him.¹⁴

⁸ B. Willey, *The eighteenth-century background*, reprint, Harmondsworth, 1972, 32-46: 'The wisdom of God in the creation'; Jongeneel, *Het redelijk geloof*, 64-7; U. Krolzik, sub voce 'Physikotheologie', in: *Theologische Realenzyklopedie*, Volume 26, Berlin/New York, 1996, 590-6.

⁹ D.C. Hoffman, ' "The creation we behold", Thomas Paine's *The age of reason* and the tradition of physico-theology', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 157 (2014) 281-303 (288).

¹⁰ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 29, 298; Hudson, *Enlightenment*, 119, calls him 'a significant Newtonian theorist'.

¹¹ In Chapter 2 § 13-14.

¹² Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 41-2; on this topic see Wigelsworth, *Deism*, 158-161: "Morgan and the power of light".

¹³ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 73-4.

¹⁴ Chapter 3 § 7; cf Hefelbower, *The relation*, 169.

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§3: Deism and atheism in the *Physico-Theology*

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Morgan did not give up his deist convictions in the *Physico-Theology*. He gives an interesting definition of a deist in contrast with an enthusiast: the true and real characteristic of a deist lies in the rational light and sense of divine presence and power, truth and order, which shine and display themselves through the whole creation.¹⁵ At the end of the book, he refers to ‘The Christian and Gospel Deism, which I have espoused, and which I cannot but think most rational’. In the index of the book he calls deism ‘a medium between bigotry and atheism’.¹⁶ There is still another remarkable comparison between atheism and deism: an atheist is only a self-inconsistent, enthusiastic deist.¹⁷ He remarks that true philosophy will always be on the side of deism and explode atheism.¹⁸ So one cannot accuse Morgan of atheism.¹⁹ There has for long been discussion about the relationship between atheism and deism.²⁰ This relationship between deism and atheism was already described by the famous French Bishop of Meaux, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet.²¹ This relationship – deism is disguised atheism – has long been stipulated.²² The most ambivalent and comic phrase in this context was formulated by the French conservative politician, Louis Gabriel Ambroise, Vicomte de Bonald, in his *Pensées sur divers sujets*, published in 1817: ‘A deist is someone who has not lived long enough to become an atheist’, a phrase which has been developed into a popular dictum.²³ Morgan would not have endorsed this view. He was a deist, but a very special one as we will see in the next paragraph.

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§4: God acts by natural laws

¹⁵ Morgan, *Physico-Theology* 158.

¹⁶ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 353, 356.

¹⁷ Morgan, *Physico-Theology* 141.

¹⁸ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 170.

¹⁹ As was done by the bibliographer J.G.Th. Graesse, *Trésor de livres rares et précieux*, Volume 4, Dresden, 1863, 607.

²⁰ Hudson and others, ‘Introduction’, in: Hudson, *Atheism*, 1-12 (4): ‘In much of the historiography it (deism) has been seen as a halfway house between theism and atheism’.

²¹ J.B. Bossuet, *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*, 6th edition, Volume 1, Paris/Brusselles, 1718, 213 : ‘la voie ouverte au Déisme, c’est à dire, à un athéisme déguisé’. I. Rivers, *Reason, grace, and sentiment: a study of the language of religion and ethics in England 1660-1780*, Volume 2: *From Shaftesbury to Hume*, Cambridge, 2000, 10: ‘There is something to be said for the clergy’s repeated assertion that deism is disguised atheism’.

²² Hudson and others, ‘Introduction’, in: Hudson, *Atheism*, 1-12 (7): ‘Many historians assumed that deists were atheists in the making who had not arrived yet’.

²³ L. de Bonald, *Pensées sur divers sujets*, Volume 1, Paris, 1817, 253: ‘Un déiste est un homme qui, dans sa courte existence, n’a pas eu le temps de devenir athée’; there has been much misunderstanding about the origin of this maxim, see J. van den Berg, ‘A deist is someone who has not lived long enough to become an atheist’, *Notes and Queries*, 60 (2013) 596-7.

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Deism has always been explained as the belief in a Creator who, after his initial work stopped interfering in the course of his creation: the clockmaker who pushed the pendulum only once and never more. This analogy of the watchmaker we find nearly everywhere, but most famously in the *Natural theology or evidences of the existence and the attributes of the deity* of William Paley (1802). But Morgan's deism is not in line with this explanation. At the end of Chapter 1 of the *Physico-Theology* he quotes

the shrewd reasoning of those, who would exclude God out of the world, and dismiss the deity from any farther care or trouble, after they had employed him in a jobb to make the world for them, which might, in all time to come, or to all eternity, preserve and govern itself, ... but when the thing was done, they had no farther occasion for the workman; for if he had not finished his work once for all, so as to be set aside for ever after, it could only prove him an imperfect contriver; and an ill artist, not much better than a common mechanick.²⁴

For Morgan, God is more than that only. He declares that there is an active force or energy continually exerted through the whole universe: the action of some universal, intelligent cause.

According to Morgan, there must be some universal agent or cause of motion. Therefore the material world is governed and directed by reason, wisdom, and active power.

The question remains whether God gave these original powers to bodies, by an original, simple act of will, or whether he still continues to impress and act upon them, by the same force or energy as first? Further on, he concludes the existence of the free agency of the Deity, or first universal cause and incessant mover, and preserver of nature. Any other supposition must terminate in atheism.²⁵ But,

because God acts by general laws, and does not frequently alter the rules and measures he had prescribed to himself, therefore it has been supposed that he does not really act at all in these cases, and he now as much ceases from acting in nature, as he ceases from creating new worlds, or from working miracles.²⁶

He states: 'When we say that God acts by general laws, the meaning surely cannot be, that he does not act at all'.

Morgan says that what we call the laws of nature, as taking place throughout the whole material creation, are nothing other than the rules and principles of eternal, immutable wisdom and reason, upon which the Deity continues to act, and incessantly exerts his active power. God never alters the established course, order and laws of nature, to answer any particular ends or purposes, not foreseen and provided for in the general law and rule of action. God governs the world not by particular and occasional laws, but by general, uniform, and established laws. The reason why He does not miraculously interpose is because this would subvert the whole order of the universe, and destroy all the wisdom of the first plan.²⁷

²⁴ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 25.

²⁵ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 26, 28, 57-9.

²⁶ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 61.

²⁷ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 62, 77, 89, 96.

It is not without reason that one might say that the clearest assertion of the divine presence and activity in the world to be found in any deistic writer is contained in the work of Thomas Morgan.²⁸

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§5: God's preserving and governing the world

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Religion for Morgan consists in the moral truth and rectitude of sentiments, dispositions, and actions. True happiness is the true and only test of religion. Morgan mentions the eternal, immutable laws and conditions of truth, reason and order, originally settled by the deity for the preservation and government of the world, by his continued power and presence, or incessant, active and intelligent energy. He calls this the divinity and theology of innocent nature, before the corrupt, animal appetites and passions usurped the throne of reason.²⁹ About miracles he shows himself to be quite certain: his views are entirely in line with his earlier observations in *The moral philosopher*:

Our divines ... have never been able to define, or ascertain a miracle. If by particular interpositions, or particular providence, they mean any particular, immediate agency of the Deity, suspending, destroying, or setting aside the general laws of nature on particular occasions, I am fully satisfy'd they will never be able to proof any such thing, in any one single instance. But it will not follow from hence, that God does not govern the world in wisdom and righteousness.³⁰

It has been correctly said that 'Morgan's view of God did not allow for miracles'.³¹ Morgan raises the question how God may govern the world, in truth, wisdom and righteousness, without priestly miracles. He admits that the spirit of prayer lies in a constant, firm dependency on the deity. He speaks of God's continued presence, agency, and concurrence in all human affairs. God is the fountain of all truth, order and rectitude. Even 'a profess'd atheist may be a true devotionist, and a lover of God, without knowing or owning it'.³² The *Physico-Theology* seems to be the final word of a Christian deist, believing in the rational religion of God and nature.

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§6: Reactions to the *Physico-Theology*

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In contrast to *The moral philosopher*, the *Physico-Theology* received few reactions. Suggestive is the reaction of Bishop George Berkeley who wrote about the work in a letter from Cloyne to his friend Thomas Prior, founder of the Royal Dublin Society, dated May 19th 1741: 'The Physico Theology you mention of dr. Morgan is not the book I want; but I should

²⁸ So A.R. Winnett, 'Were the deists "deists"?', *The Church Quarterly Review*, 161 (1960) 70-7 (75).

²⁹ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 240, 295.

³⁰ Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 297.

³¹ Wigelsworth, ' "God always acts suitable to his character, as a wise and good being" ', in: Hudson and others, eds., *Atheism and Deism revalued*, 157-172 (171); cf also D. Lucci and J.R. Wigelsworth, ' "God does not arbitrarily, or interpose unnecessarily": providential deism and the denial of miracles in Wollaston, Tindal, Chubb, and Morgan', *Intellectual History Review*, 25 (2015) 167-189.

³² Morgan, *Physico-Theology*, 312, 325.

nevertheless be glad to have it, and therefore desire you to get it'.³³ It is not known what he really thought about its contents.

A long, very critical, unfriendly, and anonymous review appeared in the journal *The History of the Works of the Learned* in September and October 1741: 'Our author has taken care to say very few things in this book, which may not be found in others'.³⁴ Ironically, the reviewer speaks of the 'sagacity of our excellent Physico-theologer'.³⁵ The Editor, Jacob Robinson, wrote:

These articles, on the *Physico-Theology* of Dr. Morgan, were communicated by a correspondent, who chuses, I find, to be concealed, with regard to his name and abode; all I can say of him is, that by the similitude of the MSS. I believe him to be the person who drew up the account of the *Treatise on human nature*, which was printed in the months of November and December 1739.³⁶

In the December 1741 edition a critical article appeared, which Morgan himself received from 'a gentleman from the North'. The Editor wrote: 'We cannot but approve of Dr. Morgan's impartiality, and take pleasure in obliging him, so long as he maintains the character (as we hope he always will) of a genteel and candid disputant'.³⁷ Genteel and candid are not the words that come to mind when we oversee the pamphleteering career of Thomas Morgan. But the interest in this work slowly disappeared, probably because of the confusion about its title.

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§7: Summary

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The *Physico-Theology* is Morgan's last great work. It does not belong to the series of *The moral philosopher*, because it is not acknowledged as such by the author and contains no Biblical criticism as do the three volumes of *The moral philosopher*. It did not receive the interest of the reading public, which was aroused by *The moral philosopher*. In comparison with other published physico-theologies it makes a different impression because of its chapters about moral philosophy in the latter part of the text. In this book, Morgan follows the theories of Newton, with the exception of the theory of light as the 'universal fluid'. Morgan wrote a *Physico-Theology* in which the theme of the rational religion of God and nature is the final word of this Christian deist. It is 'the Christian and Gospel Deism', which keeps out atheism. He believes in 'the Deity, or author of nature, (who) continues to act, and incessantly exerts his active power and energy', without performing miracles. It is the terminal point of his theological development.

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³³ A.C. Fraser, ed., *Life and letters of George Berkeley, D.D., formerly Bishop of Cloyne*, Oxford, 1871, 265.

³⁴ N.N., *The History of the Works of the Learned*, (1741), ii, 203-234 (203); 235-257.

³⁵ N.N., *The History of the Works of the Learned*, (1741), ii, 211.

³⁶ N.N., *The History of the Works of the Learned*, (1741), ii, 257.

³⁷ N.N., *The History of the Works of the Learned*, (1741), ii, 395-413 (395).