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

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Conclusions

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Deism is commonly regarded as a major religious expression of the Enlightenment. Much has been written about various aspects of Deism, including questions about the label as such, whether Deism covers a movement, or even whether it is a myth. Since David Hume there has been discussion about the so-called deist movement, and who belonged to it. Thomas Morgan called himself a Christian deist, but he did not belong to any organized group of deists. The literature since Leland brought them together as English deists. But an organized group of deists in England never existed. This notion has been questioned by various authors.
As to the term deist, so much is clear that hardly any so-called deist wanted to be labelled as such since it was seen by many as a defamatory label. Only few used the term in a positive sense. Thomas Morgan was one of them. In contrast to other deists he was proud to call himself a deist. He even went so far as to call himself a "Christian Deist". What did he mean with this particular label? What did it involve in this case? What are the differences between 'Chistian Deism' and Deism as such? These are questions which are central to this dissertation. Let us now turn to a few concluding remarks on the basis of the analysis of Morgan's life and work in the preceding chapters.

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From traditionalism to Christian Deism

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Thomas Morgan was not a Christian deist from the start. What we know about the first stages of his life tells us that he gradually developed into a position, which is commonly labelled as deist. About the first period of his life little is known. On the basis of the few sources available, we have seen that he started out with an orthodox confession of faith when he was ordained a Presbyterian preacher in 1716. Soon, however, he started to participate in discussions about Arianism in which he took the Arian viewpoint, as his contributions to the pamphlet war around Salters' Hall on the Non-subscriber's side make sufficiently clear. At the same time, Morgan still showed himself to be a strong adherer to the sufficiency of the Scriptures.
But reason was increasingly becoming an important element in every discussion. At this stage of his life, he was – in his own words – 'at the same time defending both Scripture and Reason'. He shows a development in his thinking about reason. In 1722, he thought it absurd to oppose faith to reason. In the Scriptures he found a rational religion. In a Lockean sense he felt that Christianity was highly reasonable. Four years later, he disposed of doctrines, which he considered absurd and inconsistent. In 1737, in his major work *The moral philosopher,* he opted for the Clarkean 'reason, and fitness of things' as the only true foundation of religion. Two years later, he vindicated moral truth and reason, defining religion as 'reason and common sense' and reason as 'a natural revelation of God' in the same Lockean style. In his medical studies he would follow Newtonian principles.
Besides Arianism, Morgan's favourite battlefield in the early stages of his public career was the struggle against Enthusiasm. He started to defend *Christianity against the power of enthusiasm* (1722) and in many other pamphlets during the 1720s. With the term 'enthusiasts' he denoted in general his less rational opponents.
It is important to note that in those years he was certainly not a deist. He himself denied being one of them, and when he was described as such by Peter Nisbett (in 1723) he was not amused. In the conflict which arose with Thomas Chubb in the later 1720s he again did not wish to accept deist convictions.
When, in 1724, Morgan was dismissed from the Marlborough congregation because of his Arianism, he turned to medicine, with the financial support of his father-in-law. In that same year he succeeded in gaining a doctorate in medicine at Glasgow University. From 1725

onwards, he was active as a writer of medical books, while at the same time he practiced medicine, first in Bristol, then in London.
Then, in 1737, Morgan published, anonymously, what would turn out to be his most important work, simply entitled *The moral philosopher*. More than anything else this work shows that by that time he had completely broken with the religious opinions of his youth and adulthood. He now happily called himself a "Christian Deist". One of the major characteristics of *The moral philosopher* is the author's fierce criticism of the Bible, and especially of the Old Testament. It is this publication, which put Morgan in the forefront of discussions about Deism and Biblical criticism.
As we saw, *The moral philosopher* called forth an impressive series of published reactions which on the whole were quite negative. His opponents disliked his negative view on the Old Testament and his defamation of the Jews. Nor could they agree with his disavowal of the doctrine of the redemption by Christ, his negation of divine inspiration, his dislike of miracles in general and the alleged dichotomy which he found between Peter and Paul. His style of writing, which at times bordered on the cynical, and his self-complacency did not help his readers to look favourably on the author.
From Morgan's responses to five of his antagonists – Chandler, Chapman, Hallett, Leland and Lowman –, we can infer that his views did not alter. On the contrary, they were sharpened. Given his combatant spirit, Morgan apparently was not a man who strove for peace in the church. Once having entered the battlefield, he would keep on fighting.

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Morgan as a Christian Deist

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What did Thomas Morgan mean when he called himself a 'Christian Deist'? What made him different from other deists who did not employ the adjective 'Christian'? From what we have seen in the previous pages he employed the term 'Christian Deism' to indicate the moral truth and righteousness which was preached and propagated by Christ and the Apostles. He wants to present himself as a 'Christian upon the foot of the New Testament'. That is, central to his religious conviction is the moral message of Christ, but without all the Old Testament elements, which he declares to be 'Jewish'.
What then distinguishes Morgan's Christian Deism from deism as such?
In the first place, one could point to his respect for the great prophet Jesus, the preacher of moral truth and righteousness. The message of Jesus is the best transcript of the religion of nature. Therefore, Morgan can state: 'I take, as you 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', and further on: 'I am a Christian and at the same time a Deist or, if you please, this is my Christian Deism'. There is for Morgan no contradiction in being a Christian and being a deist. I think Morgan is quite serious when he calls himself a Christian.
In the second place, he wants to distinguish sharply between the two Testaments. How can it be that the Old Testament still has a function in the Christian revelation? 'Paul preached a new doctrine, contrary to Moses and the prophets'.
In the third place, his view on the standing controversy between the Apostles Paul and Peter. 'Paul was the great free-thinker of his age, the bold and brave defender of reason against authority'.
Fourthly, Morgan is more radical than the other deists in his moral criticism of Old Testament stories. Thus, he brought the deistical interpretation of Genesis 22 - about Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac - to its logical conclusion as he describes it as 'a fictitious account of things, drawn up by some ignorant enthusiastic bigots in after-ages, without any original truth or foundation at all'.

Fifthly, Morgan is proud to use the term deist as a positive qualification. In this respect, he differs from all other so called deists (with the exception of Peter Annet). They did not even accept the term deist for themselves, let alone the term 'Christian Deist'. In this respect, Morgan stands apart and his 'Christian' Deism may be interpreted as a 'perhaps prudential' apologetic point of support of his views. At any rate, he did not consider 'Christian Deism' as an oxymoron, as his contemporaries did and as some modern authors do. The term 'Christian Deism' has been the subject of much speculation.

Furthermore, more than any of the other English deists, he was a harbinger of the historical critical method with his plea to read the Bible 'critically, with an allowance for persons, circumstances, and the situation of things at that time'. Morgan has been praised by many scholars for his sound principles of Biblical criticism, intelligent observations on the authorship and antiquity of Biblical writings, and as a pioneer of modern historical science. *The moral philosopher* contains some interesting specimens of Morgan's Biblical criticism concerning the Pentateuch, the prophet Isaiah and post-exilic books in general. One of the significant dimensions of Deism is it stance towards the Old Testament, resulting in this part of the Bible losing its character as supernatural revelation.

Morgan's negative view on the Old Testament in general has given him the opportunity – especially in Volumes two and three of *The moral philosopher* – to develop critical insights on the process of the origin of the Old Testament books. Insights which later developed into modern historical criticism.

As to the New Testament, with the dichotomy he observes between the Apostle Paul and the teachers of circumsion, Morgan also lays the foundation for a critical study of the New Testament as conceived by Semler in Halle and later by Baur. In this respect, one might view Morgan as a forerunner of the renowned Tübingen School which has had such an impact on modern Biblical criticism.

The anti-Judaic opinions in *The moral philosopher*, which he clung to till the end of his life rather quickly turned into anti-Semitic phrases. But, as I hope to have shown, he is not an anti-Semite in the modern sense of the word.

Among English deists, Morgan takes a special place, not merely because of his 'Christian Deism', but also in that he wished to distance himself from kindred spirits. He hardly referred to them in his works. Some of his texts show him to be familiar with the views of his deist predecessors and contemporaries. Indeed, one can hardly believe that he was unaware of what prominent deists, such as Toland, Tindal, and Collins had advanced in their much-discussed publications. Morgan's views show too many similarities with theirs not to assume that he had a good knowledge of their work. It is highly likely that Morgan proceeded in this way for tactical reasons. He clearly did not want to be associated with those figures. We should not forget that deist contemporaries such as Thomas Woolston and Peter Annet suffered imprisonment for their convictions.

That he was less of a loner than he wished to present himself as is also to be inferred from his views on that particular popular issue among deists, miracles. Remarkably, again, he did not quote any of his fellow deists with respect to this issue. As we saw, Morgan's views with respect to miracles developed throughout the years. Whereas in 1726 he thought miracles to be possible, in 1737 he stated that miracles could prove nothing, only to argue in 1739 that it was highly improbable that God should work miracles. He looked for a natural explanation of Biblical miracles.

In his *Physico-Theology*, which can be seen as the final word of this Christian Deist, he states that he believes in 'the Deity, or author of nature, (who) continues to act, and incessantly exerts his active power and energy', without performing miracles. God acts, preserves and governs the world by natural laws.

To sum up, if one has to characterize the specific position of Morgan as a 'Christian Deist', one should point to his positive view on the moral message of Jesus Christ, his negative view on the Old Testament and everything Jewish, the dichotomy of Peter and Paul, above the 'normal' deist convictions, such as the rejection of revelation, divine inspiration and miracles.
Finally, a few words with regard to the ongoing scholarly debate on Deism and particularly on Morgan. This thesis has brought many details of his life to light, which were unknown in the older literature, such as for example his year of birth, his citation for the House of Lords in 1724, the date of his dismissal from the Marlborough congregation, his medical doctorate at Glasgow University and the correction of some wrong attributions by modern authors.
Another point is the recognition of a development in his thinking and publishing. From a Presbyterian preacher he became an Arian and a deist. But he was not always a deist; he only became one in the late 1730s. This has not been sufficiently understood by some modern authors. In contrast to what is said in the older literature, we have found many contemporary reactions to *The moral philosopher*. A strange erratum is the ongoing opinion about Warburton's alleged publication against Morgan. Various modern authors have discussed only the first volume of *The moral philosopher* and not the later volumes, and have therefore missed Morgan's historical reflections in these later volumes. One of the main conclusions of this thesis is the particular position of Morgan amidst the so-called English deists. Being one of the last, he has formerly uncorrectly been portrayed as a minor figure in the literature about Deism. Only recently has this image been changed, by authors like Hudson and Wigelsworth. More study of Morgan has led to the conclusion that he is 'a complex and many-sided figure'. This thesis has corroborated this opinion.
Most important of all is that Morgan was a harbinger of the disparagement of the Old Testament in modern theology. This concept returns in later theologians like Semler, Schleiermacher, Harnack, Hirsch, and most recently Slenczka. But not only among German liberal theologians, also among ordinary people in the church have 'neo-Marcionite' feelings gained ground.

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