

DEISM IN PHILADELPHIA DURING THE AGE OF FRANKLIN

BY HAROLD E. TAUSSIG*

HOW deeply did rationalistic persuasion penetrate colonial society? Carl Bridenbaugh writes of deism in Philadelphia, "Just as English Methodism made its way among the emotionally susceptible in the city on the Delaware, so did eighteenth-century rationalism find a home among all classes of intellectuals."¹ What evidence can be advanced for this assertion? This article is a study of the nature of deism as it found expression in the upper strata of pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia. It is a survey of the religious ideas of the forty-eight members of the American Philosophical Society as of January 26, 1768.² The chief sources are the relevant manuscripts and imprints housed in the Library of the American Philosophical Society and the Library Company of Philadelphia.

What was deism? Herbert Morais suggests the following working definition: "Most American Deists . . . contented themselves with the innocuous common sense truths of the pure and simple religion of Nature with its basic premise of a First Cause, its acceptance of a future state and its emphasis on virtuous living."³ From Morais' statement we isolate four components: (1) God as first cause, (2) the religion of nature (and science), (3) immortality, and (4) virtuous living. Franklin included most of these ideas when he summarized his own faith:

Here is my creed. I believe in one God, creator of the universe. That He governs it by His Providence. That He ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable ser-

*The author is Chairman of the Department of History at Kentucky Southern College.

¹Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen* (New York, 1942), 20.

²*Early Proceedings of American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 22, Part 3, 3-4, APS Library.

³Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York, 1934), 15.

vice that we render Him is doing good for His other children. That the soul of man is immortal and will be treated with justice in the next life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental principles of all religions, and I regard them, as you do, in any sect I meet them.⁴

Franklin's statement suggests that American deism aspired to a certain catholicity. William Smith reinforces this impression:

Tis to be hoped that we all agree . . . that the whole human Species are one Brotherhood, being one flesh and the Work of his Hand; and that we were designed for social Life, being by nature both fitted and disposed to increase each others' Happiness. . . . These Principles partly constitute a kind of Universal Religion.⁵

In addition to these theological characteristics, cultural historians will wish to take note of two additional matters. First, deism was more covert than overt; hence, as a threat to Christianity it was more insidious than militant. Secondly, most writers seem to agree that deism was a movement which circulated chiefly in the upper levels of society. Franklin in his statement of faith to Ezra Stiles asks that Stiles would "not expose me to criticism and censure by publishing any part of this communication."⁶ Morais writes of both these aspects of deism:

During most of the eighteenth century deistic speculation circulated almost exclusively among "rich and well born" liberals who used it for the purpose of overthrowing such vestiges of the old regime as the union of church and state. The upper class however did not desire to destroy religion and therefore they immunized the anti-Christian implications of the deistic philosophy.⁷

Josiah Quincy writing of religion in Philadelphia in 1773 noted that deism was an elite manifestation. He also furnished a clue as to why it avoided militancy. He said:

The most influential, opulent and first characters scarce ever attend public worship anywhere. . . . They who call

⁴ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 777.

⁵ William Smith, "Sermon Preached before the Ancient and Honorable Society of the Free and Accepted Masons [June 1755]," APS Library.

⁶ Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 777.

⁷ Morais, *Deism*, 8-9.

themselves Christians much sooner encourage and vote for a Deist or an infidel than one who appears under a religious persuasion different from their own.⁸

* * *

The forty-eight men who were members of the American Philosophical Society in January 1768 answer Josiah Quincy's characterizations of Philadelphia deists—"the most influential, opulent and first characters." The severe competition between the two learned societies in Philadelphia, the APS and the American Society for the Advancement of Useful Knowledge, reflected some of the social issues. The political struggle between the Proprietary and Anti-Proprietary parties of the Assembly found its counterpart in the two organizations. The APS membership read like a Who's Who in Philadelphia, having adhered to the Proprietary party line.

Though members of the APS were ostensibly elected for their scientific interests, political qualifications predominated. Franklin himself was a member only because he had founded the original group. In 1768 he was president of the rival American Society. Brooke Hindle says of the American Philosophical Society:

Its membership boasted a handful of physicians, a couple of teachers, and a self-taught astronomer, David Rittenhouse, elected because of scientific interests. At the same time all the important political and civil leaders of the province had been elected despite the fact that most of them had no scientific interests worth mentioning. . . . It was because of the large non-scientific membership and particularly because of their prevailing Proprietary affiliation that Bond's intention to elect Franklin president was defeated. Instead James Hamilton was elected and Governor John Penn agreed to become the patron of the society. The American Philosophical Society assumed a sparkle that made the American Society just a little callow and dull beside it.⁹

In 1769 the two societies merged and gradually the political struggle subsided, allowing the APS to concentrate on scientific

⁸ Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen*, 21.

⁹ Brooke Hindle, *The Pursuit of Science in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1956), 130.

interests. Since the list of men studied here is composed of those who were added at the peak of the political struggle to give "sparkle"—that is political, social and intellectual prestige—to the Society, a study of their religious ideas will help test Morais' statement that deism thrived in the "aristocratic cult . . . residing in relatively large cities."¹⁰

What were the denominational affiliations of the APS members? There were ten Quakers, ten Presbyterians, seven Episcopalians, and one Baptist. Franklin, Dickinson, and Rittenhouse were not members of any denomination. In the case of seventeen members information about religious affiliations did not appear. Most of this group were not Quakers, for the characteristic "thee" and "thou" did not appear in their letters. The relative scarcity of the Quakers support Hindle's claim that the APS had a "Propriety-Anglican-Presbyterian orientation."¹¹ Two members, Thomas Bond and John Bartram, had been disowned as Quakers, while at least four others had been reared as Quakers, but had not continued in the Society of Friends. Every change of denomination which appeared was to the Anglican Church, a fact that tends to support the thesis of an upper class orientation in APS.

There were nine physicians, eight merchants, seven lawyers, four clergymen, four teachers (contrary to Brooke Hindle) and several in other scattered categories. The occupation of eleven members was not discovered. There was some overlapping, such as lawyers who were also merchants and doctors who were teachers.¹²

* * *

The Newtonian concept of natural law and a stress on the concept of cause and effect expressed itself religiously in deism by an emphasis on God as creator and sustainer of the physical

¹⁰ Morais, *Deism*, a7.

¹¹ Brooke Hindle, "The Quaker Background and Science and Colonial Philadelphia," *Isis*, XLVI (September, 1955), 246.

¹² Again, the vocational contours of APS tend to support the allegation that APS was selected from the upper economic strata of Philadelphia's society.

The names of seven of the 48 members did not appear in the records which were examined. In many other cases no information pertinent to the subject of deism was discovered. Any whose names appear in this paper who were not members of the APS are identified as such.

universe. This emphasis differs from the Christian concept only as a matter of degree for Christianity recognizes God as creator also. However the religious statements of the APS members suggest that the only important role of God in the universe was a causal one. God was the first cause. He could be deduced by the evidences of design in his creation. To Rittenhouse the task of the philosopher was:

. . . to discover the immediate causes of visible effects, to trace from those causes others more general and simple, advancing by slow and sure steps toward the Great First Cause of all things.¹³

Though the physical universe was usually the effect noted, Rittenhouse, as quoted by Benjamin Rush, extended this same cause and effect reasoning to the field of esthetics:

Give me leave to mention two or three proofs of infinite goodness in the works of creation. The first is possessing goodness in ourselves. Now it is inconsistent with all just reasoning to suppose that there is anything good, lovely or praiseworthy in us which is not possessed in an infinitely higher degree by that Being who first called us into existence . . . the beauty and fragrance of a single rose is a better argument for divine goodness than a luxuriant field of wheat.¹⁴

The titles given to God are especially revealing in connection with their belief in deity as first cause. To David Rittenhouse, the astronomer, God was "that Being who first called us into Existence" and the "Divine Architect,"¹⁵ whose designing mind was evident to his creation. To William Smith He was "Supreme Architect"¹⁶ with the attribute of sovereignty (another deistic emphasis) added to that of intelligent design. For William Coleman He represented the "over-ruling Providence"¹⁷ whose power

¹³ David Rittenhouse, "An Oration Delivered before the APS [February 24, 1775]," APS Library.

¹⁴ Benjamin Rush, "Eulogium on David Rittenhouse Delivered before the APS," 27-28, APS Library.

¹⁵ Rittenhouse, "An Oration. . . ."

¹⁶ Smith, "Sermon. . . ."

¹⁷ William Coleman to Dear Cousin, March 18, 1785, *Sellers Family Papers*, Vol. I, 48, APS Library.

to direct was doubly implied. Hugh Williamson, the versatile Presbyterian physician, mathematics professor, statesman, merchant and author, described God simply as the "Divine Being," the source of all existence.¹⁸ To both William Smith¹⁹ and William Logan²⁰ (eldest son of the Quaker luminary James Logan) He was the "Supreme Lord of the Universe," recalling God's role as sustainer of the planets and the stars. Logan also viewed God as the "Bountiful Donor"²⁰ whose gifts should point to the giver as effects point to the cause, the "omnipotent Author,"²¹ who had written his works in the sky, and more simply, the "Creator."²² David Rittenhouse²³ and John Ewing²⁴ expressed this concept boldly when they called God simply "First Cause." William Shippen, noted physician, spelled the matter out by referring to "Origin of All Being" and the "Fountain of all Good."²⁵ More subtle is the name "Immortal Essence"²⁶ used by Dr. Thomas Bond. For Hugh Roberts, Franklin's old companion in the Junto, God was the "Omnipotent Ruler"²⁷ whose laws governed the universe.

Closely related to this concept of cause and effect was a teleological emphasis. John Ewing, the Presbyterian minister who succeeded William Smith as Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, was theologically orthodox, but also capable of worshipping at the shrine of Newton. God's purposefulness as seen through his creation was part of Ewing's dogma. He wrote:

The incomparable Newton appeared and laid down the few following rules . . . a variety of causes, to produce the same effect is needless, and therefore cannot be sup-

¹⁸ David Hosack, *Collective Biography*, 81, APS Library.

¹⁹ Smith, "Sermon . . .," 9.

²⁰ William Logan, "Medical and Philosophical Papers Read Before the Physico Medical Society of Edinburgh" (1769), 67, Library Company.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 67.

²³ Rittenhouse, "An Oration. . . ."

²⁴ John Ewing, *Natural Experimental Philosophy* (Philadelphia, 1809), 15.

²⁵ William Shippen, Sr., to Deward Shippen, September 24, 1770, Misc. Manuscript Collection, APS Library.

²⁶ Thomas Bond, "Anniversary Oration Delivered May 21st before the APS for the year 1782," APS Library.

²⁷ Roberts to Franklin, June 1, 1758, "Selections From the Correspondence Between Hugh Roberts and Benjamin Franklin," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXVIII (1914), 289.

posed to take place, in the workmanship of Him, who does nothing in vain.²⁸

William Logan seemed to suggest that human happiness depended on grasping the teleological relationship:

Enjoy them [nature's gifts] under a due sense of gratitude . . . the beautiful and exact order of which in all its outward parts you here observe and how wisely and determinedly each is made to answer to its proper end. This order you are to imitate in what is left in your own power your wills and your affections. This therefore do and be completely happy.²⁹

Rittenhouse also warned against a failure to comprehend the purposefulness of life. "Let us not complain of the vanity of this world, that there is nothing capable of satisfying us. Happy in those wants, happy in those restless desires, forever in succession to be gratified, happy in continual approach to Deity."³⁰

Deists are difficult to identify because at times they differ from Christians only in emphasis. But it is possible to identify deistic influences. Perhaps the most orthodox, the most devoutly Christian man on the roster of the APS was the Presbyterian physician, John Redman. But neither men like Redman, nor hoary doctrines such as the sovereignty of God escaped the taint of Deism in circles such as the APS.

Redman could think of no higher praise for the evangelist Elhanan Winchester than to call him "our theological Newton." Redman's belief in the sovereignty of God suggests something akin to immutable natural laws. Whitfield Bell says of him, "His Christian conviction that God has ordained all things made him cautious in initiating radical treatments or claiming credit for cures."³¹ He half apologized to Benjamin Rush for asking him to visit his ailing wife. Says Redman:

And though I hope the sickness is not unto death but for the glory of God . . . and though to depart and be with Christ I know would be far better for her, but to remain

²⁸ Ewing, *Natural Experimental Philosophy*, 16.

²⁹ Logan, "Medical and Philosophical Papers . . .," 67.

³⁰ Rittenhouse, "An Oration . . .," 26-27.

³¹ Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., "John Redman, Medical Preceptor, 1722-1808," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXXI (April, 1957), 164.

longer here I hope would be better for me; nevertheless . . . as all prudent means are rational . . . a visit from you will be very acceptable and much oblige your old (paternal) friend.³²

If deism were to influence Christian doctrine one might expect what one, in fact, finds—a notable stress on the sovereignty of God. If any aspect of Calvinism or Augustinian theology appears constantly in the utterances of the orthodox in the APS it is this ancient doctrine that God is sovereign. The connection between a sovereign God and God as First Cause is not tenuous. The belief that God is omnipotent seems to monopolize, almost to exclude, other Christian truths.

How is truth apprehended? Morais writes that “Eighteenth century deism accepted the sufficiency of natural religion and implicitly or explicitly rejected the need or truth of divine revelation.”³³

Though Franklin doubted the accuracy of certain Old Testament passages, deists seldom openly attacked the Christian doctrine of divine revelation through the scriptures. Only in Ebenezer Kinnersley, the Baptist clergyman (and Franklin’s cohort in electrical experimentation) does one meet the phrase that scripture was “the only Rule of Faith and Practice.”³⁴ For most there was another guide—God manifest in nature. This revelation was expected to support and supplement (if not supplant) scripture. William Logan wrote “therefore nature in this sense signifies the same as its divine author.”³⁵ Again it is a matter of emphasis. One undoubtedly finds more in the APS documents about natural revelation than about special revelation.

This interest in nature leads naturally to a devotion to science. Francis Hopkinson, an Anglican lawyer, poet and musician, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, expressed this devotion in rhyme in a poem entitled simply, “Science.”

Goddess sublime! On whose adventurous wing,
Like the sweet lark, fleet fancy mounts to sing . . .

³² John Redman to Benjamin Rush, February 25, 1782, Rush Manuscripts, APS Library.

³³ Morais, *Deism*, 8.

³⁴ Ebenezer Kinnersley, “Letter to the Ministers of the Baptist Congregations.” Library Company.

³⁵ Logan, “Medical and Philosophical Papers . . .,” 5.

The pleasing toil delights the enquiring youth,
 And Science guides him to the entangled truth . . .
 Thus shall his eye important truths pursue,
 And through his works the great creator view.³⁶

The scientific method furnished clues that gave meaning to the universe. Because nature was regular it could be studied and laws could be adduced. William Logan expressed it this way:

By nature I mean that energetic Power which is implanted in the several parts of the Creation by its Omnipotent Author for supporting and continuing them in the order by him established by the Law first impressed in them.³⁷

John Ewing noted the same stability in nature.

All these situations and motions are produced by certain fixed and determined rules, which are denominated the laws of nature; as they are the invariable appointment of the First Cause of all things, whereby he determined that certain natural causes should always . . . produce the same effects.³⁸

But science was more than a means of discovering laws for a mechanistic universe. It was an aid to knowledge in all fields. John Bartram declared, "It is through the telescope I see God in his Glory."³⁹ Dr. John Blair (not a member of the APS) in his sermon at Ewing's funeral said, "Science was to him a powerful assistant in the labors of his sacred office. She was with him a handmaid to religion and aided by her, he was an able champion of the cross."⁴⁰ David Hosack delivering an address as a memoir to Hugh Williamson also spoke of this mixture of science and religion. Williamson was "the portrait of virtue, science and religion blended as they ever ought to be in the character of an accomplished Physician."⁴¹

³⁶ Francis Hopkinson, "Science: A Poem" in *Essays*, Vol. 3, 93-97, APS Library.

³⁷ Logan, "Medical and Philosophical Papers . . .," 5.

³⁸ Ewing, *Natural Experimental Philosophy*, 15.

³⁹ Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen*, 20.

⁴⁰ Ewing, *Natural Experimental Philosophy*, 15.

⁴¹ *Collective Biography*, APS Pamphlets, Vol. 30, 10, APS Library.

In an address remarkable for its deistic implications, Dr. Thomas Bond noted that the most important benefits of science are in the field of morals—the queen of sciences. This division of science, however, was not independent of the other divisions according to Bond.

Although moral philosophy unquestionably takes the lead of other branches of Science, they are not withstanding, preparatory and contribute considerably to this grand object. . . . By mathematics the Manners are sensibly corrected and improved—the Affections composed and rectified—the fancy calmed and settled, and the understanding raised and excited to more divine Contemplations.⁴²

Bond was even more emphatic as to the scope of the scientific method:

In Enquiries of this Sort we are not abandoned to uncertain Conjecture—Moral subjects being equally capable of Demonstration with those which respect the World of Matter.⁴³

The pursuit of science in Philadelphia during the age of Franklin constituted an important aspect of the culture. Benjamin Franklin, David Rittenhouse and John Bartram were of such stature in the world of science that they were scarcely outranked anywhere in Europe. Interest in the sciences notably affected the curriculum of the infant University of Pennsylvania which “inaugurated a novel program calling for nearly forty percent of the students’ classroom time to be devoted to scientific subjects.”⁴⁴ In defending this action Provost William Smith made the inevitable connection between science and religion.

. . . the interests of Christianity will be advanced by promoting the interests of Science. But it hath been the author’s misfortune, in endeavoring for the latter, to meet with men, who seeming to consider the advance of Knowledge and Enquiry as unfriendly to their illiberal

⁴² Bond, “Anniversary Oration . . .,” 19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁴ Hindle, *Pursuit of Science*, 16.

System, have set themselves up with rage almost Gothic to stifle the infant Sciences here. For this reason he [Smith] thought . . . to show them at large that they were in effect waging war, not only with everything elegant and useful in life, but even with the extension of our common Christianity and the best interest of our species.⁴⁵

Benjamin Franklin among others of his deistic brethren, was not content to make his religion a matter of cold reason. A need for emotion in his faith prompted him while in England to help form the "Society of 13" which allowed for worship according to his deistic tenets. Fellow member, David Williams, recalled Franklin's motives:

Franklin with some emotion declared he never passed a church during the public service, without regretting that he could not join in honestly and cordially. He thought it a reproach to philosophy that it had not a Liturgy and that it skulked from the profession of its principles.⁴⁶

Had Franklin desired to form such a society in America he could no doubt have found a ready company of those who were willing to worship at the altar of science. The stellar universe particularly evoked a response of worship. Hugh Williams noted with astonishment:

Fifty thousand solar systems, each containing at least one hundred worlds! Five million of worlds all inhabited by rational beings! [His biographer does not indicate how he arrived at this startling conclusion.] How do we seem to dwindle into littleness? How small, how few, are the ephemerals of this little globe, when compared with the countless myriads who inhabit five millions of worlds? All those worlds and every one of their inhabitants are under the constant care of the Divine Being. Not one of them is neglected.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ William Smith, "A Discourse," iii, University of Pennsylvania Rare Book Room.

⁴⁶ Hans Nicholas, "Franklin, Jefferson and the English Radicals at the End of the Eighteenth Century," APS Library *Bulletin*, 1954.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Hosack, *Collective Biography*, APS Pamphlets, Vol. 30, 29-30.

John Bartram wrote in a similar vein to Dr. Alexander Garden:

I don't dwell in the vegetable kingdom as though I thought the wisdom and power of God were only manifest therein. The contemplation of the mineral and especially the animal will equally incline the pious heart to overflow with daily adorations and praises to the Grand Giver and Supporter of universal life. But what amazing distant glories are declared in a midnight scene? Vast the bodies which roll in the immense expanse! Orbs beyond orbs without number, suns beyond suns, systems beyond systems, with the proper inhabitants of the Great Jehovah's empire, how can we look at these without amazement or contemplate the Divine Majesty which rules them without the most humble adoration? Esteeming ourselves with all our wisdom, but as one of the smallest atoms of dust, praising the living God, the great I Am!⁴⁸

And, of course, Rittenhouse joined the worshipers:

Many other and very various orders of things unknown to, and inconceivable by us may and probably do exist, in the unlimited regions of space. And all yonder stars innumerable, with their dependencies, may compose but the leaf of the flower in the creators garden, or a single pillar in the immense building of the divine architect.

Rittenhouse followed this anthem of praise with the exclamation, "Here is ample provision for the all grasping mind of man!"⁴⁹

This was the corollary of the religion of Nature—man must be capable of perceiving, discovering, and measuring the physical universe. The rational mind, in teleological terms, was made to acquire knowledge. Thus deism extolled man's power to reason and was, in part, a branch of English rationalism. Thomas Bond, in his "Oration," said of the human soul:

When unclogged and properly cultivated [it] is capable of such exertions as greatly dignify human nature and justify the beautiful picture our excellent Shakespeare

⁴⁸ William Darlington, *Memorials of John Bartram* (Philadelphia, 1849), 399.

⁴⁹ Rittenhouse, "An Oration . . .," 26.

has drawn of it. "What a piece of work is Man! How noble in Reason! How infinite in Faculty! In form how moving, how express and amiable! In action how like an Angel! In apprehension how like God! The Beauty of the World! The paragon of Animals!"⁵⁰

Though less poetic than Shakespeare, Bond was more explicit about the place of man:

The most decisive Proof of the Dignity of Man is, his being made capable of extending his Enquiries to the intellectual world—of forming an idea of truth and beauty—and of ascertaining the duties incumbent on him as a rational, dependent Social Creature.⁵¹

Similarly for William Logan:

The Powers of Reason, from which alone our species derive all its excellency and superiority . . . the powers of Reason if duly exercised and applied are sufficiently able to check every Passion when not at first indulged. For this and by these means only man becomes a rational and consequently an accountable Creature.⁵²

But again, one seldom discovers either rationalism or faith except in some kind of mix. Christianity was much more than a vestige among these men of the APS. Some seemed to compromise their faith; others seemed willing to expand upon it. Benjamin Rush (who joined the APS after our date), delivering the Eulogium of Rittenhouse before the APS, said hopefully:

It remains to be determined whether all the moral as well as natural attributes of Deity may not be discovered in the form and economy of the material world, and whether that righteousness which descended from heaven near eighteen hundred years ago, may not wait for philosophical truth to spring up from the earth, in order by uniting with it to command universal belief and obedience.⁵³

* * *

⁵⁰ Bond, "Anniversary Oration . . .," 26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵² Logan, "Medical and Philosophical Papers . . .," 52.

⁵³ Benjamin Rush, "Eulogium on David Rittenhouse," APS Library.

An intellectual scheme which claims to apprehend truth through human reason, is perhaps less authoritarian than revelational religion. Quaker tolerance may have been buttressed by rationalism in eighteenth century Philadelphia. At any rate tolerance was invoked in the name of reason. Franklin's communication with Ezra Stiles illustrates this point:

I have let others enjoy their religious sentiments without reflecting on them for those that appeared to me un-supportable and even absurd. All sects here, and we have a great variety, have experienced my good will in assisting them with subscriptions for building their new places of worship; and as I never opposed any of their doctrines, I hope to go out of the world in peace with them all.⁵⁴

Barton comments on the religious tolerance of David Rittenhouse in these words:

[Rittenhouse] never gave a very decided preference to any one regular society of Christians, over others . . . his charity in regard to theological opinions and others concerns of religion, was great.⁵⁵

Tolerance in religious matters tends to eliminate controversy. An outline of William Smith's sermon to the Masons illustrates the kind of innocuous content that tolerance in religion is apt to produce. (1. Love the brotherhood, 2. Fear God. 3. Honor the King.)⁵⁶ Rittenhouse "felt no disposition to observe anything like a scrupulous adherence to such tenets or rites, as he deemed less essential to mankind."⁵⁷ Franklin, ever the politician, knew how to promote the doctrine of tolerance among what he must have regarded as a people more bigoted than himself. He came upon a story about tolerance which has been traced to the Persian of Sadi's *Bustan*. Franklin rewrote this story in scriptural style as a "Parable Against Persecution," and having memorized it used to pretend to read it. He finally had it printed and bound up in his own Bible as the 51st chapter of Genesis.⁵⁸

Tolerance, however, may be a euphemism for sanctified

⁵⁴ Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 778.

⁵⁵ William Barton, *Memoirs of the Life of David Rittenhouse* (Philadelphia, 1813), 501.

⁵⁶ Smith, "Sermon. . . ."

⁵⁷ Barton, *Memoirs*, 431.

⁵⁸ Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 292.

skepticism. As commonly understood, it frequently does not seem to guard the right to believe what one wishes to believe so much as it raises doubts about whether one can determine whether his belief is right or wrong. This concept of tolerance was well stated by Franklin himself:

I imagine a man must have a good deal of vanity who believes, and a good deal of boldness who affirms, that all the doctrines he affirms are true and all he rejects are false. And perhaps the same may be said of every sect, church and society of men, when they assume to themselves that infallibility which they deny to the Pope and councils.⁵⁹

Rittenhouse said of a certain clergyman "he appears to me to be a Mystical Philosopher, and you know that I care not a farthing for anything but sober Certainty in Philosophy."⁶⁰ In this way the astronomers passed from tolerance to skepticism. By "certainty" he meant knowledge obtained rationally and perhaps empirically. Important defections from the Christian verities could be predicted as a result of this kind of epistemology, and John Bartram was read out of the Quaker Meetings because he could not believe that Christ was God.⁶¹

Does the path which begins in faith in man's reason end in skepticism? For Benjamin Franklin this seemed to be the case. At least in the point (a central one for Christianity) concerning the deity of Christ he was very plain:

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the morals of his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received several corrupt changes, and I have with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity, though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I soon expect an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble.⁶²

* * *

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶⁰ Barton, *Memoirs*, 230.

⁶¹ *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, XVII (Spring, 1928).

⁶² Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 777.

Deism, as usually defined, includes a stress on the transcendence of God (as opposed to his immanence) and the concept of a world which has been created, then made relatively independent of its creator. These doctrines were not emphasized by Philadelphia's deists. On the contrary, such abstractions seemed to be studiously avoided, as were most questions of speculative theology. Tastes of APS members ran more to utility. Even the devout John Redman, a constant reader of devotional literature, avoided "dogmatic theology."⁶³ Rittenhouse says of theology:

The philosophy of Newton disdains to make use of such subterfuges [vague terms and phrases]; it is not reduced to the necessity of them, because it pretends not to be of natures privy council or to have access to her most unscrutable mysteries, but to attend carefully to her works.⁶⁴

The APS as a body sanctioned the following statement, seeming to repudiate theology and metaphysics in favor of utility:

Knowledge is of little use when confined to mere speculation. But when speculative truths are reduced to practice, when theories, grounded upon experiments, are applied to the common purposes of life; and when by these agriculture is improved, trade enlarged, the arts of living made more easy and comfortable, and of course the increase and happiness of mankind promoted; knowledge then becomes really useful.⁶⁵

Hugh Roberts had the same aversion, the same test of utility:

When I consider the unhappy exit of some of our old members, I am convinced that a little speculative knowledge on various Subjects, tho it tends to give a short elevation and some small esteem with a part of mankind, does not essentially contribute to happiness or even the prospect of it.⁶⁶

⁶³ Bell, "John Redman . . ." 164.

⁶⁴ Rittenhouse, "An Oration. . ."

⁶⁵ *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, preface, APS Library.

⁶⁶ Roberts to Franklin, June 1, 1758, "Correspondence Between Hugh Roberts and Benjamin Franklin," 289.

Clergyman William Smith outlined the purposes of the APS as "paying particular attention to all such Mechanic Arts, Inventions, and useful Improvements, as tend to shorten Labor, to multiply the Conveniences of Life and enrich the Community."⁶⁷ Thus did religion and science seem to concur in the emphasis on utility, implying that theology and abstract philosophy were not "useful." The Religion of Nature, in contrast with revealed Christianity, infected religious thought with skepticism about matters which, in a more credulous age, had been thought to be very useful indeed.

* * *

Deist doctrine agrees with the Christian position regarding the immortality of the human soul. The Christian however, adds to this the dogma of the resurrection, as distinct from, and even in contrast to, the concept of immortality. ("Handle me and see, for a Spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have.") Francis Hopkinson was content to console himself with immortality, seeming to deny bodily resurrection:

Death must this transitory frame destroy,
Earth must to earth, the spirit to her flight,
For with its parent source shall each unite.⁶⁸

Numerous mentions of life after death could be cited from the religious utterances of our subjects, but not a single reference to the resurrection. In contrast also with orthodoxy the references to death, though solemn, are often tinged with hints of universalism. Mention of future judgment, in any traditionally Christian sense, are conspicuously absent.

A few representative quotations will suffice to give the flavor of the references to immortality by the men of APS. Hugh Williamson prayed ". . . when my feet touch the cold stream of the waters of Jordan, my eyes may be steadily fixed on the heavenly Canaan, so that I may say 'death where is thy sting.'"⁶⁹ William Shippen speaks of the "endless joy and happiness in the life

⁶⁷ Smith, "Oration before the APS in January, 1773," APS Library.

⁶⁸ Francis Hopkinson, "An Elegy to Mr. Ann Graeme," *Essays*, Vol. 3, 130, APS Library.

⁶⁹ Hosack, *Collective Biography*, APS Pamphlets, Vol. 30, 90.

to come."⁷⁰ Rittenhouse seemed to view the next life as an opportunity to continue his scientific research:

I must confess that I am not one of those sanguine spirits, who seem to think that when the withered hand of death hath drawn up the curtain of eternity, almost all distance between the creature and the creator, between finite and infinite will be annihilated. Every enlargement of our faculties, every new happiness conferred upon us, every step we advance toward the perfections of divinity, will very probably render us more and more sensible to his inexhaustable stores of communicable bliss, and his unaccessible perfections.⁷¹

William Smith, delivering his eulogium to Franklin before the APS, overlooked Franklin's doubts about Christianity, citing Franklin's strong belief in immortality as evidence for his admission to the society of the faithful. In what might be called a prayer to Saint Benjamin, Smith says:

We must soon follow and we know where to follow thee!
May we seek to follow thee by lives of virtue and benevolence like thine—then shall we surely find thee—and part with thee no more forever.⁷²

Concerning future judgment Rittenhouse was "firmly persuaded that we are not at the disposal of a Being who has the least tincture of ill will."⁷³ Barton says that Rittenhouse believed in a "final restitution of all things in harmony and happiness in another state of existence."⁷⁴ Francis Hopkinson wrote "we cannot reasonably suppose that God will compel any man to be either happy or miserable."⁷⁵ Dr. William Shippen, Jr., who speaks fondly in his journal of attending Whitefield's services in London, was one of the orthodox who succumbed to the spell of liberal religion.⁷⁶

* * *

⁷⁰ William Shippen to Edward Shippen, August 1770, Misc. Manuscript Collection, APS Library.

⁷¹ Rittenhouse, "An Oration . . .," 26-27.

⁷² William Smith, "Eulogium on Benjamin Franklin," Library Company.

⁷³ Barton, *Memoirs*, 440.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 431.

⁷⁵ Francis Hopkinson, *Essays*, Vol. 1, 53.

⁷⁶ Casper Wistar, "Eulogium on Dr. Shippen," *Collective Biography*, Vol. 30, 34, APS Library.

Virtue alone is stable here,
Naught but Religion is sincere.⁷⁷

Thomas Bond and other deists agreed with the poet Francis Hopkinson on the importance of moral virtues. Said Bond: "The Science of morals is the most important that can engage his attention . . . this teaches him his supreme felicity and Perfection."⁷⁸ Emphasis on the moral life is, like belief in immortality, not distinctively deistic. But when morality is made to attend on its own, apart from doctrine its variance with orthodox Christianity becomes apparent. When Franklin was asked about Jesus of Nazareth, he praised his morals but doubted his divinity. For Franklin the relation of man to God was, at best, second in importance to the relationship of man to man. The first commandment was not "thou shalt love the Lord thy God" but "doing good to his other children."⁷⁹ In this Franklin seemed to typify the men of the APS.

Rittenhouse provides the best illustration of the moralistic emphasis of the APS membership. Barton says, "He loved that sort of Christianity which inculcated sound morals; his charity in regard to theological opinions . . . was great."⁸⁰ Rittenhouse told his fellow members of the APS:

Were we even assured that we shall perish like flowers of the garden, how careful would a wiseman be to preserve a good conscience during the short period of his existence; because by his very constitution, which he cannot alter, this is his pride and glory, and absolutely necessary to his present happiness; because this would insure him at the approach of death, the soothing reflection, that he was going to restore pure and uncorrupted, that drop of divinity within him, to the original ocean from whence it was separated. How much more anxiously careful ought we to be if we believe, as powerful arguments compel us to believe, that a conduct in this life depending on our choice will stamp our characters for ages to come. Who can endure the thought of darkening his faculties by an unworthy application . . . wherein

⁷⁷ Francis Hopkinson, "An Evening Hymn," *Essays*, Vol. 3, 106, APS Library.

⁷⁸ Bond, "Anniversary Oration . . .," 16.

⁷⁹ Van Doran, *Benjamin Franklin*, 777.

⁸⁰ Barton, *Memoirs*, 501.

he may find both his power and inclination to obtain wisdom and exercise virtue exceedingly diminished?⁸¹

The possibilities of man obtaining high moral status on his own seemed good. This optimistic view of human nature clashed directly with Calvinism. Writing to an Episcopalian minister, Rittenhouse said:

Whatever is said of our original sin, the depravity of our nature and our propensity to all evil, though men are said to be wolves to men, yet I think I can see abundance of goodness in human nature, with which I am enamoured. I would rather give up my interest in a future state, than be divested of humanity.⁸²

* * *

The patterns of rationalist thought in the religious expression of the APS members tend to confirm the generalizations made by writers like Morais and Bridenbaugh. What intellectual historians have failed to stress is that deism did not crystalize as a religion in the beliefs of most educated Philadelphians. Rather it tended to highlight certain emphases in the Christianity of those who came under its influence. That the religion of the APS members indicates the strength of the Enlightenment generally and of scientific thinking in particular is quite beyond question.

As for the relationship between deism and class structure it is unthinkable that significant numbers of the uneducated classes would be drawn into a religious system which rested on the kind of religious and philosophical abstractions that seemed to appeal to APS members who came clearly from Philadelphia's "upper crust." Potential converts to the evangelical faith of George Whitefield were not likely to be affected by deism.

⁸¹ Rittenhouse, "An Oration . . .," 27.

⁸² Rittenhouse to Rev. Dr. Barton, September 1755, quoted in Barton, *Memoirs*, 501.