

# *The Christian Deist Writings of Benjamin Franklin*

ABSTRACT: The solution to characterizing Benjamin Franklin's religious beliefs is realizing there were English deists who labeled themselves "Christian deists." Christian deists believed in miracles and thought Jesus was a deist: he taught only piety and morality. They claimed Jesus's message had been corrupted by priests who wanted money and power. By 1735, Franklin had given up his unorthodox deism and, in essays defending Reverend Samuel Hemphill, espoused Christian deist ideas. Franklin was possibly converted to Christian deism by James Pitt, a popular English writer whose essays Franklin frequently reprinted. Franklin also espoused Christian deist ideas at the end of his life.

**B**ENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS have been difficult for scholars to characterize because they seem to combine real piety with Enlightenment irreligiosity. Franklin wrote that while a teenager, in the early 1720s, he "became a thorough Deist."<sup>1</sup> In 1725, Franklin published a pamphlet, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*, which was so unorthodox it has been described by one scholar as "sacrilegious," and "radical, even atheistic."<sup>2</sup> Three years later, in 1728, Franklin wrote an essay, "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion," in which he maintained that the deity who created the universe was too distant from his creation to care about it. Franklin believed this distant God had delegated lesser divine beings to watch over every solar system, including ours.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars, such as Alfred Owen Aldridge, Kevin Slack, and Benjamin E. Park, focus on Franklin's earliest works and see Franklin as basically irre-

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Mineola, NY, 1966), 43.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 2006), 1:271, 287.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion," Nov. 20, 1728, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (hereafter *PBF*), ed. Leonard Labaree et al., 41 vols. to date (New Haven, CT, 1989–), 1: 101–9, and also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=101a>.

ligious.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars do not focus on Franklin's earliest writings, and instead consider the many devout statements he made later in his life. Carla Mulford, for example, shows how Franklin's ethics were deeply connected to his piety and "belief in the presence of divinity in the world."<sup>5</sup> She neglects, however, Franklin's longest religious writings, ones written in 1735 to defend the Reverend Samuel Hemphill. In one newspaper article and three tracts defending Hemphill, a Philadelphia minister accused of heresy and deism, Franklin referred to Jesus as "*Jesus Christ*, the Redeemer of Mankind" or "Our Saviour."<sup>6</sup> He continually described the Bible as the "sacred Scriptures" and the "holy Scriptures."<sup>7</sup> He stated Christianity was "the Christian Revelation," and he declared the apostles "were endued [*sic*] with the Gifts of the Holy Ghost."<sup>8</sup> By making these statements while simultaneously attacking the clergy and privileging reason over biblical revelation, Franklin was not being inconsistent. Instead, he was revealing that he was part of a significant eighteenth-century school of thought, one that scholars have long neglected. This school of thought is best described as *Christian deism*.

### *Christian Deism*

American scholars are most familiar with the term "Christian deism" from David Holmes, who uses it in reference to the founding fathers. Holmes was trying to understand public figures who generally kept their religious views private and who often left no religious writings. Therefore, to decide if George Washington or James Madison should be classified

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, NC, 1967), 29–33 ; Kevin Slack, "Benjamin Franklin's Metaphysical Essays and the Virtue of Humility," *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture* 2 (2013): 42–46; Benjamin E. Park, "Benjamin Franklin, Richard Price, and the Division of Sacred and Secular in the Age of Revolutions," in *Benjamin Franklin's Intellectual World*, ed. Paul E. Kerry and Matthew S. Holland (Madison, NJ, 2012), 119–35, esp. 124–25.

<sup>5</sup> Carla Mulford, "Benjamin Franklin, Virtue's Ethics, and 'Political Truth,'" in *Resistance to Tyrants, Obedience to God: Reason, Religion, and Republicanism at the American Founding*, ed. Dustin Gish and Daniel Klinghard (Lanham, Maryland, 2013), 85–104, 93.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *A Defence of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill's Observations: or, an Answer to the Vindication of the Reverend Commission* (Philadelphia, 1735), 19, 35. In *PBF*, 2:90–126, and also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=28&page=090a>.

<sup>7</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill's Observations*, 33–35; Franklin, *A Letter to a Friend in the Country, Containing the Substance of a Sermon Preach'd at Philadelphia, in the Congregation of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill, Concerning the Terms of Christian and Ministerial Communion* (Philadelphia, 1735), 9, 30. In *PBF*, 2:65–88, and also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=28&page=065a>.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill's Observations*, 19; Franklin, *Letter to a Friend*, 20.

as a Christian, a deist, or a Christian deist, Holmes focuses on actions such as regularly attending church, receiving the Christian sacraments, or using Christian terminology. Holmes does not clearly state his theological criteria for someone to be considered a Christian deist, but in his book he seems to identify being a Unitarian with being a Christian deist. He maintains that Abigail Adams, who was a Unitarian, was a Christian deist. He also states that John Adams “was a Unitarian—a faith that in Adams’s case, could be described with some accuracy as ‘Christian deism.’” Holmes discusses the fact that Franklin was not a stereotypical deist—he believed in miracles and providence—but Holmes also does not consider Franklin a Christian deist.<sup>9</sup>

I offer another way of defining Christian deism, one that focuses on a person’s theological writings. To be considered a Christian deist, a person must first be a deist: one who privileges natural religion—the religion humans arrived at through their natural faculties—over revealed religion. Many deists accepted the possibility and actuality of divine revelation, but they judged any revelation by the human standards of morality, fairness, and benevolence contained in natural religion. Secondly, Christian deists claimed to be Christian and even considered their interpretation of Christianity to be the only uncorrupted Christianity. The vast majority of Christian deists also had a special place for Jesus in their religious worldview. This special place generally ranged from seeing Jesus as divine to seeing him as the greatest teacher of morality and religion in human history. To exclude those thinkers who just claimed to be Christian to avoid persecution, I only include as Christian deists those who were so passionate about restoring pure Christianity that the majority of their religious works focused on articulating and spreading their interpretations of Christianity.

Many scholars scoff at the concept of Christian deism. For example, James Byrne argues that the idea of Christian deism was an “apparent oxymoron.” Byrne contends that a thinker only labeled himself a Christian deist as “a tactical move to deter accusations of heresy.”<sup>10</sup> A review of the contemporary scholarship on the Enlightenment and deism might help skeptical scholars see that someone could sincerely claim to simultaneously be a deist and a Christian.

<sup>9</sup> David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (Oxford, 2006), 53–57, 134–41, 73–78.

<sup>10</sup> James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville, KY, 1997), 111.

In the last twenty years, scholars have shown that many Enlightenment thinkers did not fit into the once pervasive narrative that the period was a grand march from religious superstition to rational, scientific thought.<sup>11</sup> In particular, scholars have shown that English thinkers were generally much more pious than French thinkers. In England, ministers emphasized rationality and science. For this reason, some scholars say England had an Enlightenment led by clerics.<sup>12</sup>

Because of these changes in understanding the Enlightenment and English culture, a few scholars have been re-evaluating English deism. These scholars, in particular Jeffrey Wigelsworth and Wayne Hudson, maintain that English deism needs to be seen more as an aspect of English religious culture than as part of the irreligious, continental Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Fifteen of the sixteen most prominent English deists believed in miracles. Many of them also believed in divine revelation and prayer. Even more importantly, eleven of these sixteen English deists believed in direct divine inspiration: the belief that God or angels implanted thoughts into people's minds. Therefore, the vast majority of English deists believed in an active God who was involved in people's lives.<sup>14</sup>

This new scholarship on both the Enlightenment period in general and on English deism in particular means that scholars should not claim all deists believed in a distant, inactive God. Instead, a deist should be defined as a thinker who believed in God and privileged natural religion over external revelation. Natural religion did not exclude the supernatural; instead, it emphasized the moral standards these thinkers saw as inherent in natural law. These standards included justice, fairness, and benevolence. This meant that, unlike Calvinists, who emphasized God's sovereignty, deists emphasized God's goodness, fairness, and impartiality. Many deists believed God could and did make revelations, but they maintained that any true revelation had to be consistent with the concepts of justice, benevolence, and fairness inherent in natural religion. Because they privileged

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1061–80.

<sup>12</sup> B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, 1998), 3, 14–15; Roy Porter, "The Enlightenment in England," in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge, UK, 1981), 5–6.

<sup>13</sup> Wayne Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity: The English Deists and Reform* (London, 2009); Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics, and Newtonian Public Science* (Manchester, UK, 2009), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Waligore, "The Piety of the English Deists: Their Personal Relationship with an Active God," *Intellectual History Review* 22 (2012): 181–97.

natural religion, deists boldly rejected the Christian doctrines and practices they saw as inconsistent with it. A great number of them also attacked and mocked ministers and priests who, they believed, had established false religions that served ecclesiastical interests, adding doctrines only to increase their power and money.

Even though English deists rejected many traditional Christian doctrines, several of them labeled themselves Christian deists. Thomas Morgan (d. 1743), a doctor and a writer, wrote that he was a “*Christian Deist*.” Morgan contended Christian deism was the “original, real, and indisputable Christianity,” which “was preach’d to the World by Christ and the Apostles.”<sup>15</sup> Another prominent English deist, Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) stressed several times in his book *Christianity as Old as the Creation* that people who shared his ideas were “*true Christian Deists*.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, the writer Thomas Amory (1691?–1788?) asserted that he believed in “original Christianity,” which was “that *pure Christian deism*, which the Lord of life and glory preached to the world.”<sup>17</sup> Both Tindal and Morgan frequently called Jesus “our Saviour” and “Christ.”<sup>18</sup> Amory went further, calling Jesus “*Christ, the appointed Mediator . . . our Blessed Saviour*.” Amory also discussed “God’s pardon granted to us by his blessed Son.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet, these three self-identified deists declared that true Christianity as taught by Jesus was solely concerned with virtue and morality, and they held many unconventional beliefs about miracles, revelation, and prayer. Thomas Amory maintained that God did not work through secondary causes at all and instead accomplished everything by continual miracle. Amory said all natural phenomena “ought to be ascribed to the *immediate operation* of the *Deity*,” as “he constantly interposes. The Divine Power is perpetually put forth throughout all nature.” Amory believed that God directly caused gravity, tides, earthquakes, and even muscle movements. Amory also maintained that people who prayed often and focused on godliness could “become *partakers of a divine nature*.” He contended that holy people were filled with the indwelling presence of God and “are the visible epistle of Christ to the world, written not with ink, but with the spirit of

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (London, 1738), 1:165, 439.

<sup>16</sup>Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1731), 337, 340, 342.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Amory, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (London, 1755), 61; Amory, *The Life of John Buncke, Esq.*, 2 vols. (London, 1756–66), 1:380, 451.

<sup>18</sup>Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 49, 391, 42–43, 46, 384; Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 153–55, 144.

<sup>19</sup>Amory, *Life of John Buncke*, 1:15, 12.

the Living God.”<sup>20</sup> Thomas Morgan believed God and angels sometimes implanted thoughts directly into people’s minds, and he gave advice on how to receive divine inspiration.<sup>21</sup> Like these three self-identified Christian deists, Franklin used traditional Christian terminology and believed in miracles, revelation, and prayer.<sup>22</sup>

Morgan, Amory, and Tindal were the only three English deists who identified themselves as Christian deists. But there were other deists living in England who claimed to be restoring pure, genuine Christianity. These Christian deists lived in the same country, during the same time period, with a similar theology: that true Christianity was focused solely on piety and morality. Christian deism was not an organized movement with a leader or a set of beliefs to which everyone had to adhere. The members also did not agree about every point. Nevertheless, they shared enough characteristics to be considered members of a shared school of thought.<sup>23</sup>

The Christian deists should be not conflated with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ministers who were theologically liberal. These ministers were called Latitudinarians if they were members of the Church of England; they were called rational Christians or liberal Christians if they were not. In their edited volume on the role of reason and religion in the American founding era, Dustin Gish and Daniel Klinghard show that for the founders, reason and Biblical religion were not irreconcilable; instead, they were “intertwined strands shaping the American historical and political experience from the beginning.”<sup>24</sup> The political beliefs of the Christian deists, the Latitudinarians, and the rational Christians were similar, and understanding the founding of America does not depend on placing a founder in one category or the other. Making this distinction is important, though, in order to understand the founder’s theology and the century’s religious milieu.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1:173–74, 2:511, 1:393.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Morgan, *Physico-Theology* (London, 1741), 318–19; Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 1:429–30.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Waligore, “Christian Deism in Eighteenth Century England,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 75 (2014): 205–22.

<sup>23</sup> While these thinkers did not usually label themselves Christian deists, scholars often apply to historical figures terms they did not claim during their lives. For example, most of the seventeenth-century liberal, English theologians we now call Latitudinarians did not label themselves that term, as it was commonly used as a reproach by their enemies. Martin I. J. Griffin Jr., *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England*, annotated by Richard H. Popkin, ed. Lila Freedman (Leiden, 1992), 3–8.

<sup>24</sup> Dustin Gish and Daniel Klinghard, “The Mutual Influence of Biblical Religion and Enlightenment Reason at the American Founding,” in Gish and Klinghard, *Resistance to Tyrants*, 1–15.



Latitudinarians and rational Christians were willing to reject a few Calvinist doctrines they saw as inconsistent with natural religion, such as predestination and justification by faith. But they defended many other important Christian teachings and practices against the deists' charge that these teachings and practices were inconsistent with natural religion. Prominent Latitudinarians and rational Christians defended the authority of all the books of the Bible, the divine institution of the sacraments, the idea that earthquakes were warnings of God's displeasure, and the belief God ordered the genocidal destruction of Israel's enemies.<sup>25</sup> The main point of caution for Latitudinarians was that they had to refrain from publishing any anti-Trinitarian views. But rational Christians living in England did not even have to do that after the 1719 conference at Salters' Hall.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, Christian deists rejected all Christian doctrines and practices they considered inconsistent with natural religion's emphasis on human standards of morality, more aggressively insisting on the Enlightenment values of rationality, free inquiry, and morality than did the Latitudinarians or rational Christians. For example, Thomas Morgan rejected the Old Testament, significant parts of the New Testament, and any ceremonies or sacraments that were not part of natural religion.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, in many important areas, Latitudinarians and rational Christians privileged the Bible over natural religion, whereas Christian deists privileged natural religion over revelation. This theological distinction was so significant in the eighteenth century that it was seen as the difference between being a good Christian who respected God and the Bible and an infidel who attacked Christianity. While Latitudinarians and rational Christians were highly respected members of eighteenth-century European and American society, Christian deists were often arrested, excommunicated, or disinherited. They had to keep their religious views to themselves or publish them anonymously or posthumously.

All of the Christian deists claimed to be Christian, and the vast majority of them claimed they were the only ones advocating the Christianity Jesus

<sup>25</sup> For the authority of the Bible, see Joseph Priestley, *Unitarianism Explained and Defended* (London, 1796), 6; and Theophilus Lindsey, *The Catechist* (London, 1781), xvii, xi; for sacraments, see Samuel Clarke, *Sermons on Several Subjects* (London, 1738), 180–81; on the Canaanite genocide, see William Paley, *The Works of William Paley*, ed. Edmund Paley, 6 vols. (London, 1830), 6:309–10; on earthquakes, see Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse on Rev. XV. 3d, 4th* (Boston, 1755), 5–6.

<sup>26</sup> James C. Spalding, "The Demise of English Presbyterianism: 1660–1760," *Church History* 28 (1959): 63–83, 78–81.

<sup>27</sup> Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 1:v, 298, 359–61, 442.

taught. A better name for them might be “Jesus-centered deists” because they identified Christianity with Jesus’s moral teachings.<sup>28</sup> Calling them “Jesus-centered deists” rather than “Christian deists” has the advantage of sidelining the contentious question about whether they actually were Christians. None of the Christian deists, however, described themselves as “Jesus-centered.” Instead, they all described themselves as “Christian.” Moreover, using the name “Jesus-centered deist” could be taken to imply that they should not be considered “Christian.” It is more historically accurate to refer to them as they referred to themselves, so I will stick with calling them “Christian deists.” By calling them that name, however, I do not mean to give the impression I am agreeing that they should be considered “Christian.” While I refer to them as “Christian” deists, if the reader wants to call them a more cumbersome name like “Christianish” deists or deists who considered themselves Christian, that is understandable.

### *Franklin’s Hemphill Writings*

Franklin’s 1735 Christian deist writings were all in defense of the Reverend Samuel Hemphill, who had arrived in Philadelphia in 1734 as the assistant minister for the city’s Presbyterian church. Unlike other ministers, who emphasized Presbyterian doctrines, Hemphill emphasized virtue, morality, and reason. Franklin enjoyed Hemphill’s popular sermons, describing them as “most excellent discourses.” Franklin commented, “I became one of his constant hearers, his sermons pleasing me.”<sup>29</sup> Because Hemphill’s sermons did not mention traditional doctrines such as justification by faith alone and original sin, he was soon accused of deism and heresy. Some of his accusers argued Hemphill was “a *Deist*, one who preach’d nothing but *Morality*.”<sup>30</sup>

Presbyterian ministers convened a trial to decide if Hemphill was so unorthodox that he should be expelled from the church. Before the trial, Franklin wrote and published a short piece, “A Dialogue between Two Presbyterians,” in his newspaper. In this piece, Franklin laid out his beliefs that true Christianity was solely concerned with piety and morality. He

<sup>28</sup> Brad Hart, “Franklin: A Jesus-Centered Deist,” American Creation, accessed November 2, 2015, <http://americancreation.blogspot.com/2008/10/franklin-jesus-centered-deist.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Some Observations on the Proceedings against the Rev. Mr. Hemphill*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1735), 5. In *PBF*, 2:37–65 (as “Observations on the Proceedings against the Rev. Mr. Hemphill”), and also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=37a>.



asserted that the Reformation had not gone far enough in removing the priestly corruptions that had been added to original Christianity.<sup>31</sup> Despite this defense, Hemphill was expelled. In response, Franklin wrote three long, argumentative tracts defending his and Hemphill's interpretation of true Christianity.<sup>32</sup>

There are five main reasons to consider these 1735 writings as a more important expression of Franklin's religious beliefs than his earlier religious writings, which have received greater scholarly attention. First, his writings in defense of Hemphill are considerably longer than his earlier religious writings. In the Yale *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, these later writings total ninety-five pages. On the other hand, his four earlier religious works (*A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*, "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion," "Doctrine to be Preached," and "On the Providence of God in the Government of the World") total only thirty pages altogether. The length of these Hemphill writings indicate Franklin expended time and effort on them. Second, he was significantly more mature when he composed them. Franklin's *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity* was written when he was nineteen, while the Hemphill tracts were produced ten years later, when he was twenty-nine. Third, he never disowned the Hemphill writings. On the other hand, he declared in his *Autobiography* that his only other published religious work, his *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*, was "an erratum" because some error had "insinuated itself unperceiv'd into my argument, so as to infect all that follow'd."<sup>33</sup> Fourth, he still believed the ideas he espoused in his Hemphill writings at the end of his life.

The final reason to consider Franklin's defense of Hemphill as more important than his other early theological writings is that he was clearly stating his own beliefs in these 1735 works. Many scholars consider Franklin an ironic writer who used many different masks in his writings.<sup>34</sup> However, in these Hemphill writings, Franklin did not utilize any masks or irony. He used no fictional or satiric frame by adopting the voice of a charming, funny persona.<sup>35</sup> Instead, these writings are densely packed

<sup>31</sup> Franklin, "Dialogue between Two Presbyterians," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Apr. 3–10, 1735, 2–4. In *PBF*, 2:27–33, and also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=27a>.

<sup>32</sup> Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 2:247; Melvin H. Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (State College, PA, 1975), 234. I follow Melvin H. Buxbaum and J. A. Leo Lemay in ascribing to Franklin the entire pamphlet *A Letter to a Friend in the Country*.

<sup>33</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, 33, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Slack, "Benjamin Franklin's Metaphysical Essays," 32.

<sup>35</sup> Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin*, 112.

with close theological arguments about Jesus's teachings and the nature of Christianity. In his defense of the minister, Franklin forthrightly stated his beliefs about traditional Christian doctrines and their relationship to morality and reason. Scholars commonly agree that Franklin was sincerely stating his religious convictions in these writings. Melvin H. Buxbaum avers, "Franklin defended Hemphill because he believed in his cause and thought his theology generally sound."<sup>36</sup> J. A. Leo Lemay maintains that Franklin defended Hemphill because he was "setting forth his own religious beliefs."<sup>37</sup> Douglas Anderson not only declares that Franklin was expressing his "own religious convictions"; he even compares Franklin's passion to that of a religious revivalist or a religious enthusiast.<sup>38</sup> Christian deists generally expressed this kind of passion in their writings because they believed they were showing people the one right way to earn God's favor and eternal rewards.

### *James Pitt's Possible Influence on Benjamin Franklin*

As with any intellectual school of thought, the English Christian deists shared many beliefs while differing over others. Franklin's beliefs resembled those of the important English Christian deist James Pitt, the only Christian deist we know that Franklin read between the late 1720s, when he was radically unorthodox, and 1735, when he advocated Christian deist ideas. Franklin's Christian deist compositions have many deep similarities to Pitt's, both in the ideas expressed and in the style of writing. It seems Pitt influenced Franklin to convert to Christian deism. But we cannot be certain of this, as Franklin never discussed it or wrote about it.

James Pitt was born in Norwich and first worked as a schoolmaster. In early 1729, he was hired by the English government to edit and write political articles for the *London Journal*. Pitt not only wrote political articles supporting the government's policies, but he also wrote many pieces about his own religious views. In these articles, Pitt declared that the original Christianity Jesus taught was solely piety and morality. He further declared that throughout history crafty and greedy priests and ministers had added other doctrines and rituals. Because of his total focus on piety

<sup>36</sup> Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin*, 114.

<sup>37</sup> Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 2:261.

<sup>38</sup> Douglas Anderson, *The Radical Enlightenments of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore, 1997), 84, 82.

and morality, as well as his emphasis on reason and his attacks on priest-craft, Pitt was often considered a deist by his contemporaries.<sup>39</sup>

With the government's support, the *London Journal* became the most popular newspaper in England during Pitt's tenure. Considering how eighteenth-century newspapers were consumed, each one of Pitt's essays was likely read or heard by as many as a hundred thousand people.<sup>40</sup> The newspaper was even read in America. Franklin started publishing the *Pennsylvania Gazette* not long after Pitt began writing for the *London Journal*, and between 1730 and 1735 Franklin reprinted nine of Pitt's Christian deist essays in his own newspaper.<sup>41</sup> These nine Christian deist essays contained the essentials of Pitt's Christian deism, and Pitt's beliefs were very similar to Franklin's 1735 Christian deist beliefs.

So far I have assumed that James Pitt wrote these religious articles in the *London Journal*, but these articles did not carry the byline "James Pitt." Instead, the author was always listed as either "Socrates" or "Publicola." It is highly likely the same person wrote all the Christian deist articles the newspaper published between December 1728 and May 1734, as these pieces advocated the same Christian deist ideas. They were also written in the same style, used the same words and phrases, shared the same type of references, and showed the same level of education. It is almost certain that the author of these articles was James Pitt. First, they appeared at the time he was hired as the editor and main writer of the newspaper, and they stopped when he ceased his association with the newspaper. Second, James

<sup>39</sup> Eustace Budgell, *The Bee: or, Universal Weekly Pamphlet*, 9 vols. (London, 1733), 1:14; *Weekly Miscellany*, Jan. 27, 1733, 1, col. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Targett, "Pitt, James," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, 61 vols. (Oxford, 2004), 44:440.

<sup>41</sup> Here and following all the Pitt articles were on page one of the *London Journal* unless otherwise noted. The Franklin reprints were all in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. 1) "A Dialogue between Philocles and Horatio," Pitt: Mar. 29, 1729; Franklin: June 18–23, 1730. 2) "A Second Dialogue between Philocles and Horatio," Pitt: Sept. 20, 1729; Franklin: July 2–9, 1730. 3) "An Essay on Original Primitive Christianity," Pitt: Nov. 15, 1729; Franklin: July 9–16, 1730. 4) "A Second Essay on Original Primitive Christianity," Pitt: Nov. 22, 1729; Franklin: July 16–23, 1730. 5) "A Third Essay on Original Primitive Christianity," Pitt: Dec. 6, 1729; Franklin: July 23–30, 1730. 6) "An Essay on Temperance," Pitt: Dec. 20, 1729; Franklin: Oct. 7–14, 1731. 7) "A Discourse in Honour of the Queen," Pitt: Aug. 26, 1732; Franklin: Feb. 1–8, 1733. 8) "A Discourse on the Principles of some Modern Infidels," Pitt: Nov. 25, 1732; Franklin: June 14–21, 1733. 9) "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Summum Bonum, or Chief Good of Man," Pitt: Aug. 12, 1732; Franklin: July 17–24, 1735. Before Franklin bought the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, the previous publisher reprinted two other Pitt essays. "On Superstition" was originally published in the *London Journal* on February 15, 1729. It was reprinted July 11, 1729. "A Second Letter on Superstition" was printed in the *London Journal* on April 26, 1729, and reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on July 18, 1729.

Pitt was arrested for blasphemy for writing one of Publicola's articles, "A Second Letter on Superstition."<sup>42</sup> Third, it is well-known that Pitt wrote the political articles signed "Francis Osborne" and that under that name he occasionally discussed the true nature of religion in the same unorthodox terms as he did in the articles signed "Socrates" and "Publicola."<sup>43</sup> Most other scholars agree with my assessment, as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* says that between 1729 and 1734 James Pitt wrote many articles in the *London Journal* under the pen names of "Francis Osborne," "Socrates," and "Publicola."<sup>44</sup>

Pitt never outright labeled himself a Christian deist, but, considering that he had already been arrested for blasphemy, he came as close to it as was prudently advisable. He started by saying he was a Christian, declaring he had the "greatest reverence" for "true original primitive christianity."<sup>45</sup> He then cautiously identified true Christianity with the ideas of the well-known philosopher and deist Lord Shaftesbury, whom he declared "the wisest and most reasonable writer on *Moral Virtue* and *Deity* that ever appeared in the world."<sup>46</sup> Pitt then argued that Shaftesbury's ideas, which emphasized piety and morality, were real deism: "by *Deists* we declare once for all, that we mean only those who are in Lord *Shaftesbury's System of Morality and Deity*; for that System alone is *true Deism*."<sup>47</sup> The important claim Pitt made was that Jesus's teachings emphasized only piety and morality and were thus identical with Shaftesbury's teachings. Pitt concluded that true Christians were true deists and vice versa. He stressed, "*Lord Shaftesbury* is (upon this *true Plan* of Christianity,) a *real Christian*, without the Name of Christian; and *such* Christians, are *real Deists*, with the Name of Christians."<sup>48</sup> In this roundabout manner, Pitt cautiously declared himself a Christian deist.

<sup>42</sup> "Port News," *Daily Journal*, May 8, 1729, 1; "Affairs of Great Britain and Ireland," *Monthly Chronicle*, May 1729, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Pitt, "A Second Discourse on the Causes and Remedies of Corruption," *London Journal*, Mar. 27, 1731, col. 2; Pitt, "Discourse in Honour of the Queen," *London Journal*, Aug. 26, 1732, col. 2 (the discussion of Clarke and Wollaston); Pitt, "A Review of the Principles which have been Laid Down in these Papers," *London Journal*, July 22, 1732, cols. 1–2.

<sup>44</sup> Targett, "Pitt, James," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 44:440.

<sup>45</sup> Pitt, "On True Religion," *London Journal*, Feb. 8, 1729, col. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Pitt, "A Vindication of Lord Shaftesbury's Writings and Character," *London Journal*, June 10, 1732, col. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Pitt, "The Vindication of Lord Shaftesbury's Writings Continued," *London Journal*, June 17, 1732, col. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, col. 1.

*The Basic Christian Deist Beliefs of James Pitt*

The foundation of Christian deist theology was the belief that conventional Christians were not practicing true Christianity. Christian deists thought that priests and ministers had twisted Jesus's original religion into superstition in order to increase their power. "*Crafty and Ambitious Men*," Pitt asserted, "thro' an unreasonable Love of Power, have, by Degrees, in most Parts of the World, established what they call *Religion*, but what is, in reality *Superstition*."<sup>49</sup>

Instead of listening to priests and ministers who had perverted Christianity, Christian deists urged people to use reason to examine all religious claims. As Pitt wrote,

*By Reason* they must judge of all Things, visible and invisible, natural and supernatural, divine and humane; by this, they must judge of the Authority and Meaning of all Books; the Truth of all Doctrines, and the Reality of all Miracles. This *Divine Principle* they must never give up on any Pretence whatever.<sup>50</sup>

Pitt believed people should not just accept the religion they had been taught; instead, he insisted, all religious doctrines had to be examined by reason.

The most crucial point scholars miss about Christian deists is that, while they emphasized reason, theirs was not a modern, secular view of reason. Pitt called reason a "*Divine Principle*" and "our celestial Guide, and divine Light."<sup>51</sup> Christian deists called reason a divine principle because they believed reason itself gave humankind reliable knowledge about God and morality. Reason did this because it included innate moral ideas, a conscience, or a moral sense that God had implanted in humans. Pitt said that people could tell right from wrong as easily as they could distinguish one geometrical figure from another. Pitt insisted a person "is as able to distinguish *Justice* from *Injustice*, and *Benevolence* from *Cruelty*, as he is to distinguish a Cube from a Square." Pitt asserted that these ideas of right and wrong did not come from our social training but were part of our constitution. He thought there were "*natural Ideas*; or Ideas of Right and

<sup>49</sup> Pitt, "A Third Essay on Original Primitive Christianity," *London Journal*, Dec. 6, 1729, col. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Pitt, "On True Religion," *London Journal*, Feb. 8, 1729, col. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; Pitt, "An Answer to Mr. Woolaston's Third Question," *London Journal*, Mar. 14, 1730, col. 3.

Wrong, which *naturally* grow up with us, and thrust themselves upon us whether we will or not, without any Teaching or Instruction.” Pitt then concluded God was teaching us through these implanted moral ideas: “In this Sense, we are all *taught of God*; and these Ideas, all Men, of all Countries, and of all Ages, do agree in, or would agree in were they not *led wrong*, by Men whose *Interest* ’tis to deceive them.”<sup>52</sup>

Christian deists did not believe that reason and conscience had been perverted through original sin. Instead, they maintained that humanity had turned away from natural religion because priests and ministers misled them. They believed that Jesus had been sent by God only to bring people back to the knowledge of natural religion. According to Pitt, Jesus “was *Sent of God*.”<sup>53</sup> He also believed that disputes about Jesus’s nature and whether he was part of the Trinity were fruitless. As he argued,

All those Controversies which have been so hotly agitated at the Expence of the Peace, and Blood of the Christian World, about the Person of Jesus Christ, concerning the Trinity, and a Thousand other Things, make us neither *wiser nor better*. We may embrace one Scheme, or t’other, or neither, as Evidence appears to us, and be equally good Christians, and faithful Subjects of the Kingdom of God.<sup>54</sup>

As long as a Christian was moral, Pitt believed that person could have any view about Jesus’s nature. Pitt personally believed, however, that Jesus would raise people from the dead on the Day of Judgment, implying that he thought of Jesus as more than human.<sup>55</sup>

The Christian deists revered Jesus and equated true Christianity with his teachings and the similar first sermons of the early apostles. For this reason, Pitt pronounced,

The *first Sermons* of Christ and his Apostles must contain the *whole Will of God* in relation to the Salvation of Men, because Thousands were *converted*, or *made Christians*, by those Sermons; which could not have been, had not the Sermons contained *all that was necessary* to make them Christians.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Pitt, “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Summum Bonum, or Chief Good of Man,” *London Journal*, Aug. 12, 1732, col. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Pitt, “An Essay on Original Primitive Christianity,” *London Journal*, Nov. 15, 1729, col. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Pitt, “An Answer to Mr. Woolaston’s Third Question Continued,” *London Journal*, Mar. 21, 1730, col. 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Pitt, “An Essay on Original Primitive Christianity,” *London Journal*, Nov. 15, 1729, col. 1.



Pitt believed Jesus's sermons could only have had salvific efficacy if they had contained all that was essential to be a Christian. The rest of the Bible was superfluous to him; as he wrote, "we may be saved without understanding the true Meaning of the rest of the Bible."<sup>57</sup>

Most importantly, Christian deists believed Jesus taught only natural religion, meaning that Jesus taught that piety and morality were enough to earn an eternal reward. Pitt pointed out that the first discourses of Jesus, which Pitt was convinced contained all that was necessary for our salvation, were focused purely on piety and virtue:

In these *first Discourses* we find nothing inculcated but the Practice of moral Virtue, or *Obedience to the Eternal Universal Law of God written in Mens [sic] Hearts*. . . . Jesus Christ therefore, the *Messiah or Sent of God*, could come amongst us with no other Intention than to *repeat, restore and enforce the great Law of Nature*.<sup>58</sup>

Pitt declared that on the Day of Judgment, Jesus would reward "those who have done well to everlasting Life." Pitt was sure, however, that Jesus would only reward the virtuous, writing that "*Happiness and Misery* were, by him [Jesus], always join'd to *Virtue and Vice*; not to *Opinions or Speculations; to Rites or Ceremonies*."<sup>59</sup>

According to Christian deists, Jesus restored natural religion, a religion all humans could understand because of the innate ideas or conscience God had instilled in them. Human moral standards were the same as those that applied to the actions of every intelligent moral being, whether that being was a human, an angel, or God. "*Wisdom and Goodness* are the same in all intelligent Beings in the Universe," Pitt believed.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, Christian deists were certain God's actions were always moral. Pitt had confidence that the will of God "is always in Conjunction with Right."<sup>61</sup> He also insisted, contrary to the Calvinists who emphasized God's sovereignty, that God could never deviate from the laws of reason. God, Pitt declared "is obliged by the *eternal Laws of Reason*, from which he can never deviate."<sup>62</sup>

Because humans had innate ideas of morality and God acted by the same standards of morality that humans did, Christian deists reasoned

<sup>57</sup> Pitt, "A Second Essay on Original Primitive Christianity," *London Journal*, Nov. 22, 1729, col. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Pitt, "An Essay on Original Primitive Christianity," *London Journal*, Nov. 15, 1729, col. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Pitt, "An Answer to Mr. Woolaston's Third Question," *London Journal*, Mar. 14, 1730, col. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Pitt, "An Enquiry into the Original of Right," *London Journal*, Dec. 14, 1728, col. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Pitt, "An Essay upon Piety," *London Journal*, Jan. 17, 1730, col. 2.

individuals had a reliable rule to judge whether something was a divine revelation. Christian deists declared that a person should only accept an alleged revelation as divine if it agreed with the individual's internal moral standards. Pitt asserted that "in order to know whether *that Message* be from God, we must *compare* what the Messenger delivers *in his Name* with what by the Light of *Nature* and *Reason* we already *know* of Him, and see whether they *agree*."<sup>63</sup>

Because of the conviction that natural religion gave people the criteria to judge any revelation, Christian deists were willing to reinterpret or reject any part of the Bible that did not accord with natural religion. For example, Pitt agreed that many biblical passages emphasized faith, but he disagreed with the traditional Protestant doctrine that people were justified by faith alone. Instead, Pitt reinterpreted these passages to say that faith was always related to virtue. To Pitt, faith meant "*Faith of a moral nature*; not a Sett [*sic*] of speculative Opinions; not *Faith* absolutely considered in itself; but *Faith as it relates to Virtue*." He explained that true faith was a belief that God had ordered the universe so that morally good people would be rewarded in the next life. Pitt thought Christ came to teach this belief, and so he wrote, "This Faith in Jesus Christ, *as the Messiah, or Sent of God*, is a *supernatural Means* of believing in God, or acknowledging the Truth of this practical Proposition, *That God will finally make Good Men happy*."<sup>64</sup>

While Christian deists emphasized natural religion, almost all of them thought it included supernatural elements, and all of them saw natural religion as a form of spirituality in which a person had a personal relationship with God. Pitt believed Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that Saint Paul performed miracles.<sup>65</sup> He also thought that natural religion included duties to God such as adoration, prayer, worship, and service to others. Pitt thought God's goodness was obvious, not only because God created and governed us, but also because God made laws that worked in "every way tending to make us *good and happy*." For these reasons, Pitt believed humans owed God homage and gratitude: "As *his Creatures*, we owe him the most profound Veneration, Worship, and Homage, the most humble Acknowledgments, and the highest Gratitude."<sup>66</sup> The best kind of

<sup>63</sup> Pitt, "The Vindication of Lord Shaftsbury's Writings Continued," *London Journal*, June 17, 1732, col. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Pitt, "An Essay on Original Primitive Christianity," *London Journal*, Nov. 15, 1729, cols. 2 and 3.

<sup>65</sup> Pitt, "A Second Essay on Original Pure Christianity," *London Journal*, Nov. 22, 1729, cols. 1 and 3; Pitt, "An Answer to Mr. Woolaston's Third Question Continued," *London Journal*, Mar. 21, 1730, col. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Pitt, "An Essay upon Piety," *London Journal*, Jan. 17, 1730, col. 2.

homage and service people could do to God was to help others. For this reason, Pitt wrote that “Piety to God, is *Love to Mankind*.”<sup>67</sup> He thought that God wanted individuals to serve others; “it follows, that doing all the Good we can to Men, is *true Religion*. He who promotes the Happiness of Men to the utmost of his Power, his Will is One with the Will of God.”<sup>68</sup>

*Franklin’s Christian Deist Beliefs in the 1735 Hemphill Writings*

Understanding Franklin’s Christian deism starts by realizing that he considered himself a Christian. He wrote, “I am conscious I believe in Christ, and exert my best Endeavours to understand his Will aright, and strictly to follow it.” Furthermore, Franklin saw himself as part of the Christian community. He referred to “us Christians,” and “My Brethren of the Laity.” Moreover, he talked of “our common King *Jesus*,” and he considered the Protestant Reformation as “our happy Reformation from Popery and religious Slavery.”<sup>69</sup>

Franklin agreed with Pitt and the other Christian deists that it was in the nature of ministers and priests to desire power and authority and to teach doctrines that perverted true Christianity. Franklin contended that the clergy made “exorbitant Claims to Power & Authority” and that “the Generality of the Clergy were always too fond of Power to quit their Pretensions to it.”<sup>70</sup> Franklin was full of vitriol in attacking the ministers who were judging Hemphill. He called these clergy “*Rev. Asses*,” full of “contemptible Stupidity” who “propagate Doctrines tending to promote Enthusiasm, Demonism, & Immorality in the World.”<sup>71</sup>

Because priests and ministers wanted power, lay people, Franklin believed, could not trust their priests’ or ministers’ interpretations of Christianity. Like other Christian deists, Franklin emphasized that individuals had to use their faculties of reason to examine traditional religious beliefs. Franklin thought religious prejudices formed by education and custom were deeply ingrained, and he praised people who could interrogate their religious convictions. In a tract solely concerned with the need to question religious training, he wrote, “how glorious a Conquest they make,

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Pitt, “On True Religion,” *London Journal*, Feb. 8, 1729, col. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Franklin, *Letter to a Friend*, 22, 23, iv, 14, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 7, iv.

<sup>71</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill’s Observations*, 31, 41, 18.

when they shake off all manner of Prejudice, and bring themselves to think *freely, fairly, and honestly*. This is to think and act like Men.”<sup>72</sup>

Franklin emphasized reason, although it is not clear if he agreed with the other Christian deists that humans had innate ideas of morality. He did not mention inherent ideas in the Hemphill writings. In an essay written in 1732, however, he said that simplicity was “innate and original” to human nature, and in the essay he either identified or came very close to identifying simplicity with honesty, virtue, and goodness.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, in another essay written in 1732, he accepted or seemed close to accepting that humans had a moral sense implanted in them by God.<sup>74</sup> Finally, at the height of the Hemphill controversy, Franklin reprinted the Pitt essay “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Summum Bonum, or Chief Good of Man” that defended the idea that God implanted natural moral standards in humans.<sup>75</sup> This essay declared that people could as easily distinguish good from evil as light from dark or a cube from a square. It also argued that following these natural, God-given ideas of right and wrong was the same as being taught by God. Therefore, Franklin, at least in 1735, most likely agreed with Pitt and the other Christian deists that humans had a moral standard implanted in them by God.

Franklin, similar to Pitt and the other Christian deists, thought human reason had not been perverted in the Fall. Franklin also believed God sent Jesus to help humanity, but, like Pitt, did not think it was important to specify Jesus’s exact nature. While he rejected many other traditional Christian doctrines, Franklin wrote nothing in the Hemphill tracts about the doctrine of the Trinity. These tracts do, however, imply he saw Jesus as divine. Franklin stated that “God sent his son into the world,” suggesting an otherworldly origin. In a similar, but complicated, passage, Franklin asserted that Jesus “came from Heaven,” again implying Jesus was in heaven before he was born.<sup>76</sup>

Franklin agreed with Pitt that Jesus taught everything Christians needed to believe and that these teachings were natural religion. Franklin contended, unlike the more orthodox Christians who also emphasized Paul’s epistles, that “*Jesus Christ*, the Redeemer of Mankind, elsewhere

<sup>72</sup> Franklin, *Letter to a Friend*, iii.

<sup>73</sup> Franklin, “Dialogue between Two Presbyterians,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Apr. 6–13, 1732.

<sup>74</sup> Franklin, “To the Printer of the Gazette,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 23–30, 1732.

<sup>75</sup> Franklin, “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Summum Bonum, or Chief Good of Man,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 17–24, 1735.

<sup>76</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill’s Observations*, 36, 37.

gives us a full and comprehensive View of the Whole of our Religion, and of the main End and Design of the Christian scheme.”<sup>77</sup> Franklin agreed that Jesus taught only piety and virtue. He insisted that Jesus taught a

full and comprehensive View of the Whole of our Religion, and of the main End and Design of the Christian scheme, when he says, *thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy Soul, and with all thy Mind, and thy Neighbour, as thy self.* and [*sic*] he plainly tells us, that these are the most necessary and essential parts of God’s Law, when he adds, *on these two Commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*<sup>78</sup>

Franklin believed Jesus’s command to his followers to love God and their neighbors was “a full and comprehensive View” of Christianity and that doing this was enough to be rewarded in the next life. Franklin declared that Jesus came into the world “to promote the Practice of Piety, Goodness, Virtue, and Universal Righteousness . . . and by these Means to make us happy here and hereafter.”<sup>79</sup>

Franklin privileged natural religion’s emphasis on fairness and benevolence, and thus reinterpreted or rejected any passages in the Bible that were not consistent with natural religion. Franklin reinterpreted passages of the Bible dealing with faith in much the same way Pitt did.<sup>80</sup> He was more forthright than Pitt, however, in rejecting outright some biblical passages, such as those that supported the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original sin could not be true, Franklin insisted, because it was “arbitrary, unjust and cruel.” This meant it was “contrary to Reason and to the Nature and Perfections of the Almighty God.” It was also “contrary to a thousand other Declarations of the same holy Scriptures.” Franklin even proclaimed the doctrine of original sin was the “teaching of Demonism” and that any scriptural passage advocating the doctrine of original sin could not be genuine. Even “if there was such a Text of Scripture” that advocated original sin, he elaborated, “for my own Part, I should not in the least hesitate to say, that it could not be genuine, being so evidently contrary to Reason and the Nature of Things.”<sup>81</sup> Franklin also rejected the doctrine that only Christians were saved because the idea God would damn people to hell

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill’s Observations*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> Franklin, “Dialogue between Two Presbyterians,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Apr. 3–10, 1735, 3, col. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill’s Observations*, 32–33.

who had never heard of Christianity was “utterly impossible to reconcile . . . with the Idea of a good and just God; and is a most dreadful and shocking Reflection upon the Almighty.” He finally advised the judges of Hemphill, who were preaching traditional Presbyterian doctrines, “to take the utmost Care of saying any thing, or interpreting Scripture after a Manner injurious to the infinite Justice, Goodness and Mercy of God, and contradictory to Reason.”<sup>82</sup>

Franklin focused his 1735 tracts on defending Hemphill from the judges’ charges and so had no reason to discuss miracles in these tracts. In an essay written a few years earlier, however, Franklin said he believed in miracles. In this essay, entitled “On the Providence of God in the Government of the World,” Franklin maintained that God “sometimes interferes by his particular Providence” and performed miracles. Furthermore, he assumed a deity who did not perform miracles was not worthy of the name. He pronounced a deity who “never alters or interrupts” the course of nature “has nothing to do; he can cause us neither Good nor Harm; he is no more to be regarded than a lifeless Image.”<sup>83</sup>

In his 1735 tracts, Franklin declared that God was responsible for other supernatural activities besides miracles. He believed that some people were blessed with the gifts of the Holy Ghost in apostolic times. He asserted that “the Apostles . . . were endued [*sic*] with the Gifts of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>84</sup> Franklin also believed the New Testament was the Christian revelation. In one place he stressed that “the surest way to find out the End and Design of the Christian Revelation, or what View the Author of it had in coming into the World, is, to consult the Revelation itself.” In another passage, Franklin pronounced that the principles of loving God with all one’s heart and one’s neighbor as oneself were “Revelations the Almighty has made to Mankind.”<sup>85</sup>

Franklin agreed with Pitt that humans had a duty to worship God and promote the goodness of others. He affirmed that natural religion “oblige[s] us to the highest Degrees of Love to God, and in consequence of this Love to our almighty Maker, to pay him all the Homage, Worship and Adoration we are capable of.” Because of this love of God, Franklin

<sup>82</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill’s Observations*, 39, 38, 33, 40.

<sup>83</sup> Franklin, “On the Providence of God in the Government of the World,” [1732], in *PBF*, 2:264–69, and also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=264a>.

<sup>84</sup> Franklin, *Letter to a Friend*, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Franklin, *Defence of Hemphill’s Observations*, 19, 20.



thought, people should “do good Offices to, and promote the general Welfare and Happiness of our Fellow-creatures.”<sup>86</sup>

In his 1735 writings defending the Reverend Hemphill, Franklin emphasized reason and morality like other deists. He also claimed to be a Christian and passionately advocated for his view of Christianity. These are the hallmarks of Christian deism and show that Franklin was a Christian deist at this time.

### *Franklin's Later Religious Beliefs*

This article has focused on showing that Franklin espoused Christian deist views in his defense of Reverend Hemphill. These works were written in 1735, when Franklin was about thirty years old. A discussion of whether he continued to maintain any or all of these beliefs at every point in his later life lies outside the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, Franklin did still espouse the most important of these views at the end of his life. Shortly before he died, Franklin wrote a letter to Ezra Stiles describing his religious views. At this time, Franklin reaffirmed his agreement with the most important Christian deist beliefs he advocated in 1735.<sup>87</sup>

Franklin still had a special place for Jesus in his religious outlook. He professed, “As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw, or is likely to see.” Franklin still did not concern himself with Jesus’s exact nature, merely commenting that he had “some Doubts as to his Divinity: tho’ it is a Question I do not dogmatise upon, having never studied it.”<sup>88</sup>

Unlike in 1735, Franklin did not viciously attack priests and ministers for having corrupted Christianity. Instead, he moderated his critique, just claiming it had “received various corrupting Changes.” While we cannot know what Franklin meant by “corrupting charges,” considering his very harsh 1735 attacks on the Christian clergy, he probably still thought the clergy had purposefully corrupted Christianity.<sup>89</sup>

Franklin also continued to emphasize that one’s moral conduct determined one’s status in the next life. He maintained, “the Soul of Man is

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>87</sup>Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, Mar. 9, 1790, available at <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp>.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this.” He believed that people were not saved by faith or by being part of the Christian church or by performing any ritual but were rewarded due to their conduct in life.<sup>90</sup>

Further, Franklin maintained humankind’s obligation to worship God. He stressed that God existed and that “he ought to be worshipped.” As before, he argued that the best service a person could do for God was to help other people, noting that “the most acceptable Service we can render to him [God], is doing Good to his other Children.”<sup>91</sup>

Finally, Franklin showed that he did not care about traditional Christian doctrines. He first mentioned his creed contained a few basic doctrines of natural religion such as God existed and we ought to worship him. Then Franklin proclaimed, “These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion.” He did not include in his creed any exclusively Christian doctrines.<sup>92</sup>

Franklin did not mention miracles in his letter to Stiles. However, in a letter written in 1784, he was sure God did miracles to help the Americans win the Revolutionary War.<sup>93</sup> Thus, he still believed in miracles and an active God at the end of his life.

### *Conclusion*

Benjamin Franklin’s longest religious writings, defending a minister accused of deism, were a passionate defense of nontraditional Christianity. It is hard to understand the significance of these writings unless we realize that Christian deism was a viable theological option in England. Recent scholarship on English deism has shown that three important English deists called themselves Christian deists and that their beliefs were significantly different from conventional deists who believed in a distant, cold deity.

Christian deists claimed to be restoring the pure, original Christianity that Jesus taught. They thought the priests and ministers had perverted true Christianity for their own purposes by adding extraneous doctrines and rituals to it. According to them, Jesus taught nothing but natural

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Benjamin Franklin to William Strahan, Aug. 19, 1784, available at <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin//framedVolumes.jsp>.

religion, which was centered on piety and morality. They believed any passage or book of the Bible inconsistent with natural religion had to be reinterpreted or rejected. Christian deists believed in miracles, revelation, and other forms of divine activity in the world. They also thought people should worship and pray to God. In his 1735 writings defending Reverend Hemphill, Franklin seems to have sincerely shared all these beliefs. Therefore, these writings should be classified as Christian deist writings.

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