

Chapter 1

The Historical Background

Gotthold Lessing's thought, like that of any significant philosopher, is both a product of and a reaction to the age in which he lived, and as such, can only be understood within its historical context. Moreover, because of the highly polemical and occasional nature of his writings this truism is doubly applicable to him. His philosophy of religion constitutes an extended polemic with his contemporaries, and it thus becomes necessary to preface this study with an examination of the main religious-philosophical tendencies of Lessing's age, that is, of that period in the history of Western civilization commonly known as the "Enlightenment." The most apt general characterization of this period was expressed by Kant, whose oft-quoted words should form the starting point of any study of eighteenth-century thought:

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere Aude!* "Have courage to use your own reason!"—that is the motto of the enlightenment.¹

In its application to religion this motto entailed both a theoretical and a practical aspect. From the theoretical standpoint it implied the necessity of subjecting any alleged revelation to rational criteria. Christianity was placed on a level with the other religions, and its veracity had to be established before the bar of reason. Enthusiasm, superstition, and "implicit belief" of all sorts were universally anathematized. The direct result of this rationalistic approach to the problem of revelation was that the truth or falsity of the Christian religion, its claim to be the revealed

word of God, was conceived of as a question of historical fact, and as such susceptible, at least in principle, of an empirical answer. Thus, if it can be shown that the events related in the Gospel narratives are true, if God did in fact become man at a certain point in history, in a remote corner of the Roman Empire, if he preached, performed miracles, suffered, died, and was resurrected, then the Christian religion is true, and its doctrines must be accepted by any reasonable man. If, however, the evidence does not substantiate these claims, then Christianity must be rejected as a malicious fraud that has tyrannized over the human spirit for eighteen centuries. Such was the manner in which the problem was understood by all parties concerned, and it forms the underlying presupposition in terms of which all of the arguments for and against the Christian religion were formulated.

In its practical aspect the Enlightenment was marked by a strong resurgence of humanistic values, based upon man's heightened awareness of his intellectual and moral powers. This found its expression both in the tendency, widely prevalent in the rationalistic English theology, to treat the Christian religion essentially as a supernatural sanction for morality, and in the utter rejection or radical reinterpretation of those aspects of traditional Christian doctrine, that is, original sin, total depravity, impotence of human reason, and the vicarious satisfaction, which clashed with the prevailing moral sentiments. In this respect the religion of the Enlightenment can be viewed with Cassirer as a renewal of the struggle between Augustine and Pelagius, Renaissance humanism and the Reformation, Luther and Erasmus, and finally between the ideal of human freedom and autonomy and the belief in the bondage and depravity of the will.² This time, however, the liberal tendencies, reinforced by two centuries of scientific discovery, by vastly increased anthropological knowledge, and by the beginning of historical criticism of the Bible, emerged victorious in a Europe devastated by over a century of religious wars and bloody persecutions.

The old religious system, the Protestant scholasticism, which was developed and codified in both the Lutheran and Reformed churches during the latter part of the sixteenth and the entire seventeenth centuries, proved to be completely out of tune with these new insights. The theology of this period, which was contained in carefully constructed dogmatic systems, was thoroughly rooted in Augustine (as interpreted by Luther and Calvin) and centered around the two main principles of the Reformation: the emphasis upon "sound doctrine," and the reliance upon the Bible as the sole authority. This led to a conception of Christianity as a body of true propositions, based upon an infallible sacred text, which served as the objective standard of truth. Thus understood, the Bible was in no

way a human book, but rather the literal word of God, dictated by the Holy Ghost to men who functioned merely as mechanical transcribers of the divine revelation. Carried to its logical extreme, this infallibility covered not only the religious and ethical doctrines, but also the history, geography, and natural science contained therein. Some went so far as to defend the infallibility of the vowel points in the Masoretic text, and elaborate harmonies were constructed to reconcile apparent discrepancies in the various Biblical accounts. These extreme tendencies were more prevalent within the Lutheran Church, but were not unknown within the Calvinistic tradition, which maintained as its supreme principle the omnipotent will of God and its corollary of absolute predestination.³

Isolated voices such as Hugo Grotius, and the Dutch Armenians, the German Pietists, Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Cambridge Platonists were raised throughout the seventeenth century against various aspects of this grim, intolerant, and coldly intellectualistic conception of religion, but among the first generally influential representatives of the new way of thought were the English Latitudinarians or rational theologians and their chief philosophic spokesman, John Locke.

I. ENGLISH RATIONAL THEOLOGY AND DEISM

As Leslie Stephen has shown,⁴ English rational theology of the seventeenth century provided the presuppositions and laid the foundations for the deistic critique of revelation in the eighteenth century. In their polemic with Rome these divines attempted to construct a rational theology capable of gaining the reasoned consent of an impartial examiner. It was their firm conviction that only if religion is established on such a basis can all human claims of infallibility and attempted justifications of persecutions be utterly refuted. Their theology was based upon the twin pillars of Scripture and natural reason. It was believed that from these two sources a list of universally acceptable fundamental doctrines could be derived, and these fundamentals were identified with "true Christianity." Deism was merely the logical development of this principle. Rather than limiting the true faith to those fundamental doctrines shared by all Christians, it simply broadened the perspective and located the true faith in the "religion of nature," that is, in those basic rational beliefs shared by all men in all ages. This attempt had already been made by Herbert of Cherbury in his *De Veritate*, 1624, in which he sets forth the five fundamental principles of natural religion, and later by Spinoza, but it was not until the eighteenth century that it became a major tendency in European religious thought.

Locke

This rationalistic tradition formed the intellectual background for John Locke, who in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* attempted to give it a firm epistemological foundation. This is undertaken in chapters 17 through 19 of book 4, wherein he carefully defines and distinguishes the respective provinces of faith and reason. The key to his position lies in the distinction between propositions that are according to, above, and contrary to reason:

- a. "According to reason" are such propositions whose truth we can discover by examining and tracing those ideas we have from sensation and reflection; and by natural deduction find to be true or probable.
- b. "Above reason" are such propositions whose truth or probability we cannot derive from those principles.
- c. "Contrary to reason" are such propositions as are inconsistent with or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct ideas.⁵

Upon this basis Locke proposes to consider faith, which "is nothing but a firm assent of the mind: which, if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything but upon good reason; and so cannot be opposite to it."⁶ In chapter 17 Locke presents the framework in terms of which the problem of the relationship between reason and revelation must be understood. It is clear from the preceding quotation that faith must in some sense be reasonable, or at least not contrary to reason, but the content of this faith and its precise manner of reasonableness are discussed in the next chapter. Here Locke delineates the boundaries between faith and reason, and assigns each their proper sphere:

"Reason," therefore, here, as contradistinguished to "faith," I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths, which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties; viz. by sensation or reflection.

"Faith," on the other hand, is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deduction of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men, we call "revelation."⁷

Thus, the proper content of faith is that which is revealed, the word of God insofar as it has been communicated in history to man, and

correlatively the function of reason is to determine whether or not any alleged revelation is genuine. Reason fulfills this function by examining both the content and the external evidences for the divine origin of the revelation under consideration. The external evidences are primarily provided by miracles, which Locke shows in his *Discourse on Miracles* (1702) to be the proper credentials of a revelation,⁸ and to a lesser extent by fulfilled prophecy. In the *Essay*, however, Locke's main concern is with the content of revelation. His basic principle is that we can never receive anything as true that directly contradicts our clear and distinct knowledge, for there can be no evidence that anything is actually revealed by God stronger than the certainty derived from the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our clear and distinct ideas.⁹ If this be denied, he argues, all criteria of knowledge will be destroyed, leading either to universal skepticism or enthusiasm¹⁰ (in refutation of which he added chapter 19 in the fourth edition).

Thus, no revelation can be accepted that contradicts the plain dictates of reason. It may communicate certain truths that are discoverable by reason, but in such cases the knowledge that it is revealed can never amount to as great a certainty as the knowledge drawn from the comparison of ideas. This is merely the application of the preceding principle, but it clearly implies the theologically dangerous proposition that revelation, or rather the proof that any particular doctrine is actually revealed, is always of a lower order of certainty than rational insight.

Hence, by a process of elimination, the proper subject matter of revelation is seen to be the second class of propositions: those that are above reason. However, since one of the main purposes of the *Essay* was to prove that the fundamental principles of natural religion—the existence and providence of God—are rationally demonstrable, the only propositions Locke can supply as examples of this third category are the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and the assertion that some of the angels rebelled against God.¹¹ These and kindred, but not specified, propositions, although not strictly discoverable by reason, contain nothing contrary thereto, and when ascertained to have been revealed by God “must carry against the probable conjectures of reason.”¹²

The logical conclusion to be drawn from a careful consideration of the argument of the *Essay* is that revelation is by and large superfluous, and this, in fact, was one of the basic principles of deism. However, as a professed Christian, Locke was obliged to maintain both the reasonableness and necessity of the Christian revelation, a task he undertook in the *Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695).

Locke's avowed purpose is to found the understanding of Christianity upon a “fair and unprejudiced examination of Scripture,” a procedure reminiscent of “the plain historical method,” advocated so strongly, if not

always practiced, in the *Essay*. He begins with a consideration of the Fall, the ultimate basis of the doctrine of redemption, which is in turn the central concept of the New Testament. However, already at this point the conciliatory nature of Locke's theology, and of the tradition he represents, becomes manifest. There are, he argues, two extreme positions:

Some men would have all Adam's posterity doomed to eternal, infinite punishment, for the transgression of Adam, whom millions had never heard of, and no one had authorized to transact for him, or be his representative; this seemed to others so little consistent with the justice or goodness of the great and infinite God, that they thought there was no redemption necessary, and consequently, that there was none; rather than admit of it upon a supposition so derogatory to the honour and attributes of that infinite Being; and so made Jesus Christ nothing but the restorer and preacher of pure natural religion; thereby doing violence to the whole tenor of the New Testament.¹³

These two positions, that of orthodox Calvinism and deism, are the Scylla and Charybdis between which the entire tradition had to move. To accept the former was to contradict the clearest dictates of moral reason, and consequently to deny the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment; while to accept the latter was to deny the very foundation of Christianity. Locke navigates between these two poles by means of his unbiased reading of Scripture. The Bible says nothing about original sin, eternal torments, or any such scholastic subtlety. It simply asserts that Adam disobeyed the command of God and for this was punished with the loss of immortality. Thus, for Locke the Fall is simply a fitting punishment for a breach of contract, which any reasonable Englishman would find equitable. There is no transmission of unwarranted corruption, but since all men have, like Adam, disobeyed God, that is, have not fulfilled the "covenant of works" God made with Moses in respect of the Hebrews, and which is also ingrained on the hearts of all men in the form of the law of nature, all have died. Clearly, this is no more than they deserve, but the New Testament further tells us that God, in his infinite mercy, contracted a new agreement with sinful man, "the covenant of faith," through the fulfillment of which one may be justified short of perfect obedience. This new agreement does not abrogate the old, for the obligation to obey still remains. "But by the law of faith, faith is allowed to supply the defect of full obedience; and so the believers are admitted to life and immortality, as if they were righteous."¹⁴

The problem now is to determine the nature of that which is required to be believed by the new covenant, and here Locke once again makes use of his straightforward method of interpretation. The New Testament does not teach us an elaborate system of mysterious doctrine, phrased in an unintelligible scholastic terminology, but simply declares that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, a statement, which is confirmed by his miracles, and by his precise fulfillment of the prophecies in the Old Testament. "This," argues Locke in a statement that epitomizes the Enlightenment's matter of fact approach to the problem of the truth of the Christian religion, "was the great proposition that was then controverted, concerning Jesus of Nazareth, 'whether he was the Messiah or no?' And the assent to that was that which distinguished believers from unbelievers."¹⁵

The acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah is thus the one essential, positive precept of Christianity, and belief in this, with sincere repentance, constitutes the sum total of God's requirements. "These two, faith and repentance, i.e. believing Jesus to be the Messiah, and a good life, are the indispensable conditions of the new covenant, to be performed by all those who would obtain eternal life."¹⁶ Having delineated his simple, scriptural, and eminently reasonable account of the Christian religion, Locke endeavors to meet the most common deistic objections.¹⁷ These concern the apparent partiality and arbitrariness of a God who could design a scheme of salvation that deprives a large portion of the human race of an infinite advantage simply because of the historical accident that they either lived before or never heard of the miraculous event, and consequently could not believe in the messiahship of Jesus. Locke divides this general problem in two parts. First, he treats the case of the Jews who lived under the old covenant. Through judicious citation of Scripture he is able to show that God accounted their trust in his future promises for righteousness. The real problem, however, as Locke clearly recognizes, concerns those untold millions "who, having never heard of the promise or news of a Saviour; not a word of a Messiah to be sent, or that was come; have had no thought or belief concerning him?"¹⁸

This is the crucial point that is raised again and again in eighteenth-century religious polemics. A God who could condemn these untold millions to eternal torments, or even deprive them of immortality because of something that was not their fault, could never be the object of a rational worship. Such a God was in the eyes of Locke and the whole Enlightenment a monstrous tyrant. However, if this is not the case, if God does not condemn these millions, what is the significance of the Christian revelation? This then was the dilemma faced by Locke and all those who endeavored to establish the rationality of the Christian religion. Either

it is morally offensive in its exclusivist pretensions or it is unnecessary since man can be saved without it.

Locke and his successors accept the second alternative in a highly qualified form. Since God had “by the light of reason” revealed to all mankind their immutable obligations, and also his justice and mercy, he who made use of the “candle of the Lord” to determine his duty, could not miss finding the way to reconciliation and forgiveness.¹⁹ Thus, acceptance of the Christian revelation is not absolutely necessary, for a man can be reconciled to God by following the principles of natural religion and morality. However, if Christianity is not absolutely necessary, it still has been of great advantage and has filled a practical need. For although man has reason enough to recognize God and his duties, he did not make use of it:

Though the works of nature, in every part of them, sufficiently evidence a Deity; yet the world made so little use of their reason, that they saw him not, where, even by the impressions of himself, he was easy to be found. Sense and lust blinded their minds in some, and a careless inadvertency in others, and fearful apprehensions in most (who either believed there were, or could not but suspect there might be, superior unknown beings) gave them up into the hands of their priests, to fill their heads with false notions of the Deity, and their worship with foolish rites, as they pleased: and what dread or craft once began, devotion soon made sacred, and religion immutable. In this state of darkness and ignorance of the true God, vice and superstition held the world. Nor could any help be had, or hoped for from reason; which could not be heard, and was judged to have nothing to do in the case; the priests, every where, to secure their empire, having excluded reason from having any thing to do in religion. And in the crowd of wrong notions, and invested rites, the world had almost lost the sight of the one only true God.²⁰

Given this wretched state of affairs, Locke shows that the advent of Christ offered several distinct advantages: (1) the clear revelation he brought with him “dissipated this darkness; made the ‘one invisible true God’ known to the world: and that with such evidence and energy, that polytheism and idolatry have no where been able to withstand it . . .”²¹ (2) It established for the first time a clear and rational system of morality, supported by Divine authority (this was evidenced by the miracles wrought on its behalf) and hence capable of functioning as a “sure guide of those who had a desire to go right . . .”²² (3) He reformed

the outward forms of worship, substituting “a plain, spiritual and suitable worship” for the superstitious rites that then prevailed.²³ (4) Through his teachings and his life he brought great encouragement to a virtuous and pious life,²⁴ and finally, (5) he brought to man a promise of divine assistance: “If we do what we can, he will give us his Spirit to help us to do what, and how we should.”²⁵

Thus, in lieu of its absolute necessity, Locke is able, through his catalogue of advantages, to illustrate the great usefulness of the Christian revelation. However, in making this compromise he has radically altered his original conception. For the content of this revelation is not, as the *Essay* would lead us to believe, a number of factual statements unaided reason cannot verify, but rather, those very principles of natural religion and morality, which the *Essay* endeavored to establish upon a firm and evident basis. The content of revelation is now completely rational. It yields only those truths ascertainable by natural reason, but it presents them in such a way that they can be grasped by and rendered authoritative to the plain man, who has neither the time, inclination, nor ability for philosophic speculation. In developing this new conception, Locke makes use of an argument we shall later see reappear in a radically transformed manner in Lessing. Revelation now functions as an anticipation of and substitute for reason. Its role is primarily pedagogical, giving man the first formulation of truths, which when once revealed he is able to grasp rationally. Moreover, he adds: “It is no diminishing to revelation, that reason gives its suffrage too, to the truths revelation has discovered. But it is our mistake to think, that because reason confirms them to us, we had the first certain knowledge of them from thence . . .”²⁶

From this standpoint, Christ is not simply the restorer, but rather the true founder of natural religion. He made it for the first time a practically effective system, and with his clear promise of immortality and appropriate rewards and punishments, he furnished the only sure foundation for morality. His teachings are so simple that they are readily accepted by any thinking person, but without their divine authority the bulk of mankind would have remained in perpetual darkness. For “the greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe.”²⁷

The theological positions just outlined constitute the prototype of the rational theology of the Enlightenment. The thoroughgoing rationalization of the content of revelation, which is still implicit in Locke, becomes explicit in thinkers such as Samuel Clarke and James Foster.²⁸ The result is that “reason is apparently exalted to such a pitch that revelation becomes superfluous.”²⁹ Christianity is reduced to a reaffirmation of natural religion and morality, together with a few positive precepts, which are “exactly consonant to the Dictates of Sound Reason, and the unprejudiced

Light of Nature, and most wisely perfective of it.”³⁰ However, despite the rationalization of the content, the historicity of the Christian revelation is rigorously maintained, and this very rationality, which shows it to be worthy of an omniscient and benevolent deity, as well as the confirmed facts of miracles and fulfilled prophecies, are used to prove its historicity. The general position was first developed in England, but as we shall see, it reappeared in a modified form in Germany, where it formed one of the main negative influences upon Lessing’s thought.

Deism

The rationalistic conception of Christianity forms the immediate background of deism, which originally was nothing more than the development of the logical implications of this view. Acutely conscious of the irreconcilability of a religion based upon abstract demonstration, such as delineated by Clarke, with a faith grounded in the acceptance of certain historical facts, the deists denied the reliability of these “facts” and rejected the few additional positive precepts defended by the rationalistic divines. Thus, what had already become superfluous—revelation—was explicitly recognized as such, and in some cases totally rejected. From the standpoint of the absolute sufficiency of reason, which was the fundamental doctrine of deism, no historical revelation could be of decisive significance. Moreover, a particular revelation was viewed as beneath the dignity of the Supreme Being, who operates only according to universal laws. Correlative with the a priori repudiation of the concept of revelation was a full-scale, a posteriori attack upon the claims of the Christian religion to be such a revelation. The arguments from miracles, fulfilled prophecies, and the miraculous growth of the early Church (which for Locke and his school constituted the decisive external evidence for the truth of the Christian religion) were systematically repudiated and shown to have been based upon fraud, forgery, and enthusiasm.

A typical manifestation of the latter tendency, often called “critical Deism,” is Anthony Collins, *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724). This work offers further evidence of the prevalence of the factual approach to the problem of the truth of the Christian religion. This truth, Collins argues, is based solely on the claim that Christ literally fulfilled the prophecies in the Old Testament and is thus the promised Messiah. If the evidence from prophecy be invalidated, Christianity falls to the ground. However, as he proceeds to show in great detail, the scriptural account of the life of Christ cannot reasonably be considered a literal fulfillment of these prophecies. Although Collins declines to draw the obvious conclusion, and instead piously suggests

the possibility of a symbolic fulfillment, his real intent is clear. This critical aspect of the deistic controversy attracted the most attention and was conducted with the most vehemence, but its details are of little philosophical significance.³¹ In each instance the critics shared the same basic premise with the defenders of Christianity—if certain historical claims are factually correct then the Christian religion is true—and only differed regarding the evaluation of the evidence cited.³²

The first major representative of this movement is John Toland, who in his *Christianity Not Mystrious* (1696) inaugurated the deist controversy in England. Like many of the other deists, Toland's argument is far more radical in its implications than in its outright assertions. Rather than openly denying either the facticity or necessity of the Christian revelation, he claims to have established Christianity upon a firm foundation by demonstrating its complete rationality. The general tenor of his thought is to be gleaned from the subtitle: *A Treatise Showing That There Is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason; nor Above It; and That No Christian Doctrine Can Be Properly Called a Mystery*. In the preface Toland delineates a threefold task. He will (1) show that the true religion must necessarily be reasonable and intelligible, (2) show that the requisite conditions are found in Christianity, and (3) demonstrate the divine source of the Christian revelation.³³ This was to be accomplished in three discourses, of which only the first was ever written.

He begins directly with a statement of the main issue: the claim that Christianity contains many exalted and incomprehensible mysteries and, consequently, that one must humbly submit one's reason to infallible authorities. In opposition to this Toland states categorically that "reason is the only foundation of all certitude; and that nothing reveal'd, whether as to its Manner or Existence, is more exempted from its Disquisitions than the ordinary Phenomena of Nature."³⁴

However, rather than proceeding directly to the problem at hand, Toland gives a preliminary analysis of the faculty of reason, which is almost a verbatim repetition of the main argument of Locke's *Essay*.³⁵ Then, armed with the Lockean epistemology, he resumes the discussion. The main issue, as he clearly sees it, is not whether we can accept manifest contradictions as the word of God—this was explicitly denied by the entire rationalistic tradition—but whether any divinely revealed doctrine may according to our conception of it be "seem directly to clash with our Reason?"³⁶ In raising the question Toland is challenging the basic premise of Locke's discussion of faith in the *Essay*, and by answering it in the negative he is refuting Locke with his own weapons. For, in terms of the Lockean epistemology, whereby knowledge is given a subjective intuitivist foundation, that is, in the perception of the agreement or disagreement

of ideas, there is no basis upon which one can distinguish between that which actually does and that which only seems to conflict with our most evident notions, and consequently the distinction between propositions above and propositions contrary to reason is shown to be without foundation.

Furthermore, Toland argues, if belief is to be meaningful, if it is to influence our actions, then its objects must be intrinsically intelligible. Thus, all mysterious rites, miracles, and incomprehensible dogmas are to be banished from religion. They have no more right in the realm of faith than in that of knowledge, for ultimately, faith itself is based upon knowledge.³⁷ As he later asks: “Could that Person justly value himself upon being wiser than his Neighbors, who having infallible Assurance that something call’d Blictri had a Being in Nature, in the mean time know not what this Blictri was?”³⁸

Upon this basis Toland criticizes Locke’s concept of revelation. For Locke, the divine origin of a proposition was an absolute guarantee of its truth, and the role of knowledge was merely to ascertain this origin through an examination of the content and outward evidence. With Toland, however, this notion undergoes a subtle, but decisive change, for if reason be the only judge, and the intelligible its only object, then the perception of this intelligibility can furnish the only grounds for our assent to a proposition. Thus, revelation loses its authoritative character, or as Toland expresses it: “It is not a motive of assent, but merely a means of information.”³⁹ The direct result of this argument is the rejection of all external evidence. A revelation is to be judged solely in terms of its content, and no supernatural signs can give it an authority it does not intrinsically possess. In short, we do not believe a proposition because it is revealed but because “we see in its subject the indisputable character of Divine Wisdom and Sound Reason; which are the only Marks we have to distinguish the Oracles and Will of God, from the Impostures and Traditions of Men.”⁴⁰

Toland, however, is conservative to the extent that he seems, with Locke, to take seriously the notion of revelation as a means of information—the communication of previously unknown, yet essentially intelligible matters of fact.⁴¹ Moreover, he argues at great length that the notion of mystery found in the New Testament and earliest Fathers signified precisely such hitherto undisclosed matters of fact,⁴² and upon this basis asserts that the pure, uncorrupted version of Christianity found in the Bible is not mysterious in the derogatory sense, but that this tendency only entered Christianity later, under the influence of the pagan rites.⁴³ Thus, although he rejects its authority, Toland does not explicitly deny the usefulness of revelation. This step, which was nec-

essary for the logical development of the principle of deism, was taken by Matthew Tindal.

In Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730) we have the most mature expression of English deism. In the development from Toland to Tindal we can detect a marked change in emphasis from a purely intellectual to an essentially moral critique of Christianity.⁴⁴ Eschewing any epistemological considerations, which played such a large role in Toland, Tindal argues purely on a priori grounds from the concept of God, and the presupposition of the identity of human nature in all times and places. Since God is an eternal, immutable, omniscient, benevolent, and completely self-sufficient being, it follows that he gave men from the beginning that religion, the practice of which renders them acceptable to him, and coming from an unalterable and perfect being, this religion must likewise be unalterable and perfect. Moreover, since such a being is necessarily completely fair, he must have provided all men, at all times, with the requisite means to recognize this religion, and consequently could not single out any particular people for a special revelation. Finally, since such a being is concerned only with the good of his creatures, and not with the enhancement of his glory, he could not reveal to, or require of men, anything morally indifferent. Thus, by a simple chain of reasoning from the very concept of God maintained by the rationalistic divines,⁴⁵ Tindal is able to establish that the true religion must consist solely in the practice of morality, that it is everywhere the same and as "old as creation," and that a just God must have given all men the capacity to recognize its essential ingredients.

This is the classic expression of the deistic principle of the sufficiency of reason, and it is grounded in a genuine awareness of the irreconcilability of the concept of God implied by the new science with the values of traditional Christianity. The deity of Newton and Clarke and of the Enlightenment in general is the Supreme Mathematician, the sovereign architect of an infinite and perfectly rational universe, and not the arbitrary, despotic ruler of a tiny Near Eastern principality. Thus, commenting upon the search for fundamentals, in the acceptance of which all Christians could unite, Tindal states:

Would not one think that a little honest reflection should carry them further, and make them see, that it is inconsistent with the universal and unlimited goodness of the common parent of mankind, not to make that which is necessary for the salvation of all men so plain, as that all men may know it? Though one would be apt to think, that by the number and oddness of those things, which in most Churches divines have made necessary

to salvation, they were more zealous to damn others than to save themselves, or at least, that they thought there was no room in heaven for any, but men of these our narrow principles.⁴⁶

From this standpoint any historical revelation is true only insofar as it conforms to the immutable dictates of natural religion, or, as Tindal expresses it, natural and revealed religion differ only in the manner in which they are communicated: “The one being the internal, and the other the external revelation of the same unchangeable will of a being who is alike at all times infinitely wise and good.”⁴⁷ Moreover, since natural religion is perfect, any deviation from or addition to it is inevitably a corruption, owing its origin to the artful deception of priests. Thus, the Christian revelation is true to the extent to which it is a “republication of the religion of nature”⁴⁸ and false to the extent to which it deviates therefrom. Furthermore, such deviations or additions are not only not pleasing to God, but they are injurious to men. Following Bayle, Tindal sees that the roots of superstition and persecution lie precisely in the recognition of the belief in and practice of things morally indifferent as necessary for salvation:

They who believe that God will damn men for things not moral, must believe, that in order to prevent damnable opinions from spreading, and to show themselves holy as their heavenly father is holy, they cannot show too much enmity to those against whom God declares an eternal enmity; or plague them enough in this life, upon whom in the life to come God will pour down the plagues of eternal vengeance. Hence it is that animosity, enmity and hatred, have over-run the Christian world; and men, for the sake of these notions, have exercised the utmost cruelties on one another; the most cursing and damning Churches have always proved the most persecuting.⁴⁹

Thus, the ethical and the a priori critiques of positive religion are conjoined in Tindal, with the latter laying the foundation for the former. The practice of one’s immutable and readily apparent duties is all that is pleasing to God or useful to men, and no alleged revelation that proclaims the contrary can be accepted as divine. This principle leads Tindal (again following Bayle) to a moral critique of various Old Testament narratives, of which the Hebrews’ wanton murder of the Canaanites furnishes his favorite example. Since this and innumerable similar deeds obviously contradict the evident dictates of natural law, they cannot have been commanded by God. Hence, the groundwork is laid for a complete rejection of the authority of the Old Testament, a task that

was systematically carried through by Tindal's disciple, Thomas Morgan, in his *Moral Philosopher* (1737).

Tindal concludes with a lengthy critique of Clarke. In essence he accepts Clarke's analysis of the clearness and sufficiency of the law of nature but rejects as inconsistent his argument for the necessity of certain supplemental revelations:

If Christianity, as well as deism, consists in being governed by the original obligations of the moral fitness of things, in conformity to the nature, and in imitation of the perfect will of God, then they both must be the same. But if Christianity consists in being governed by any other rules, or requires any other thing, has not the Doctor himself given the advantage to deism.⁵⁰

With this deism reaches its logical culmination. Christianity is true precisely to the extent to which it is superfluous. Nothing positive—nothing besides the practice of morality—deserves a place in the true worship of God, and thus the sum total of traditional Christian doctrine, as well as its historical claims, are not only religiously irrelevant, but morally pernicious.

II. PIERRE BAYLE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Bayle's relation to the Enlightenment is an ambivalent one. In many respects he is one of its most important progenitors. His attack upon superstition and intolerance and his moral critique of the Bible not only provided the inspiration but also much of the material for subsequent discussions.⁵¹ However, his radical skepticism and fideism stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing tendencies of the age and offered a significant challenge to its rationalistic approach to revelation. Nevertheless, because of his tremendous historical importance and especially because of his influence on the young Lessing, we shall here consider both aspects of his thought.

Superstition

Attacks on superstition are scattered throughout Bayle's writings,⁵² but the most systematic treatment is found in his first major work: *Miscellaneous Thoughts on the Comet of 1680* (1682). Here Bayle uses the popular belief that comets are divinely ordained presages of misfortunes as a pretext for a general repudiation of superstition. He offers all the standard scientific arguments against this and similar superstitions, but his main attack

is formulated from a theological standpoint. If, he argues, comets are presages of evil, then they are miraculous, and since they occurred with equal frequency before the advent of Christ, it follows that God performed miracles for the sole purpose of strengthening idolaters in their ways.⁵³ This conclusion is acceptable to orthodoxy, which argued that God performed miracles among the pagans to prevent them from falling into atheism. This, however, presupposes that atheism is a worse crime than idolatry or superstition, and it is precisely this claim, together with its corollary, that God would act to promote the latter at the expense of the former, which Bayle endeavors to refute.

In support of this paradoxical position, based upon Plutarch's *Essay on Superstition*, Bayle offers a detailed examination of paganism, which reveals a long and sordid history of debauchery and cruelty, combined with a firm belief in the existence of the gods. Such has been the historically verified result of superstition. The consequences of atheism, however, have not been nearly so pernicious.⁵⁴ Many atheists have led exemplary lives,⁵⁵ and a peaceful and law-abiding society of atheists is quite conceivable.⁵⁶ Thus, Bayle concludes "that if one considers pagans and atheists by their disposition, either of mind or heart; one would find as much disorder among the former as among the latter."⁵⁷

After showing at great length the moral superiority of atheists to the devotees of superstition, Bayle endeavors to explain this phenomenon in terms of a psychology of religious behavior. Believers can be inhuman tyrants (his favorite examples are Nero and Louis XI), and nonbelievers morally upright men, because belief is not the determining ground of action and prudence regarding a divine providence is not, as had been assumed by traditional religious psychology, a check upon the passions. All men, whether Christians, pagans, or atheists, generally act according to their present inclinations,⁵⁸ for as he later reflects: "If conscience were the cause determining men's actions, would Christians live such wretched lives?"⁵⁹

The most significant consequence of this rather pessimistic conception of human nature is the justification of ignorance or honest doubt, which for Bayle includes atheism. Since the acceptance of a certain set of beliefs is not in itself conducive to the moral life, an atheist may be as good a man as a believer and thus must not be condemned for his error. Superstition, however, since it works upon the passions and fosters the belief that rites rather than morality are demanded by God, has a negative moral effect and inevitably leads to excess and complete corruption.⁶⁰ With this Bayle establishes what Cassirer considers to be one of the fundamental axioms of the Enlightenment: the recognition that not doubt or ignorance but dogma, which if believed implicitly leads ultimately to superstition, is the real enemy of both morality and religion.⁶¹

Toleration

Although Bayle offers various arguments for the principle of unlimited religious toleration, they fall roughly into two classes.⁶² The first, grounded in his skeptical denial of the possibility of rationally determining which is the true religion, dominates his earlier treatments of the subject. From this standpoint Bayle attacks the attempted justifications of religious compulsion based upon “the rights of the truth.”⁶³ The Catholic Church had argued that, since it was in possession of the true faith and that without it an individual is doomed to eternal damnation, the veritable charity is to compel him to recognize this truth. Against this view Bayle contends that such a claim involves the confusion of one’s persuasion, or subjective conviction of the truth, with the truth itself. An individual’s belief is largely determined by the time and place of his birth and the nature of his education, and since the followers of each religion are equally convinced of the truth of their beliefs, any claim made in the name of truth must be reciprocally granted to all contending parties. Thus, for Bayle “the rights of the truth” are equally “the rights of the erring conscience,”⁶⁴ and consequently:

. . . the true church, whichever it may be, is as little justified in using coercion or persecution against the others as the others are in using them against it; for the only thing that could justify the true church in the persecutions which it exercises against the others consists in the fact that she is persuaded of their falsity. However, the others are no less persuaded of her falsity than she is of theirs; therefore they have the same right.⁶⁵

In the *Philosophical Commentary upon the Words of Jesus Christ: “Compel Them to Come In”* (1686), his major discussion of toleration, Bayle reiterates the skeptical argument, but subordinates it to a positive principle: the absolute primacy of moral reason.⁶⁶ This work, which was occasioned by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, is prefaced by a vitriolic attack upon the Roman Catholic Church, but the text itself is devoted to a dispassionate and logical argumentation. Catholic theologians from Augustine to Bossuet had used a literal reading of Luke 14:23, “And the Lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in that my house may be filled,” as justification for their policy of compulsion. Against this Bayle asserts the primacy of the universal moral reason which he defines as “a clear and distinct light which enlightens all men.”⁶⁷ Although this natural light has severe limitations regarding speculative matters, Bayle states:

I do not think that it should have any with regard to the practical and general principles which concern morals. I mean that we must, without exception, submit all moral laws to this natural idea of justice, which just as the metaphysical light, “enlightens every man who comes into this world.”⁶⁸

After some general remarks to the effect that constraint is incapable of inspiring religion and can only lead to hypocrisy,⁶⁹ and that a literal reading of this passage contradicts the entire spirit of the Gospel,⁷⁰ Bayle offers his doctrine of the primacy of moral reason as a key to the interpretation of the Bible. According to this principle, he argues, any reading that contradicts the plain dictates of morality must be erroneous. Now the literal interpretation of the passage “compel them to enter” obviously does just that, and it therefore must necessarily be false.⁷¹

This is Bayle’s most decisive statement concerning the primacy of moral reason. Its universal authority extends even to the content of revelation.⁷² Religious compulsion is shown to contradict the dictates of this natural light; thus, it categorically must be rejected, and any scriptural passages that appear to justify it must be reinterpreted. Moreover, this principle provides a new foundation for the theory of “the rights of the erring conscience.” False beliefs are now seen to possess an intrinsic worth, based upon the sincerity with which they are accepted. Each man who follows the dictates of his conscience in the profession of his religion is acceptable to God.⁷³ This position involves the extension of the Protestant emphasis upon the individual conscience as the ultimate authority in spiritual matters to the un-Protestant justification of the “erring conscience.” This extension gave birth to the concept of the innocence of error, one of the cardinal beliefs of the Enlightenment, and thus it is thoroughly in the spirit of his successors that Bayle declared: “there is no error in religion, of whatever sort one may suppose, that is a sin if it is involuntary.”⁷⁴

Skepticism

If, however, Bayle may be regarded as a genuine forerunner of the Enlightenment in view of his treatment of superstition and intolerance, his radical skepticism and fideism, rooted in the thought of Montaigne, Charron, La Mothe Le Vayer, and Gassendi, constitute a complete rejection of its basic conception of religion. This aspect of his thought was first developed in his monumental *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697, second edition, augmented 1702) and further amplified in the many controversies that occupied the last years of his life.

Bayle's theoretical skepticism, which admittedly stands in sharp contrast, if not direct contradiction, to his emphasis on the clarity and universal validity of moral reason,⁷⁵ finds its most precise formulation in the article *Pyrrhon*, especially in remarks B and C.⁷⁶ He begins with the reflection that Pyrrhonism is a danger only to theology, but not to natural philosophy or the state. Most scientists are skeptics concerning the ultimate nature of things and are content to find possible hypotheses and experimental data. Moreover, since a consistent Pyrrhonist has no dogmatic political views, he will readily conform to the customs of the country in which he resides.⁷⁷ In religion, however, where firm conviction requires absolute certainty, it is a different story. Here skepticism may constitute a positive danger, but Bayle concludes, ironically, that it is seldom of any great practical effect, because:

The grace which God bestows upon the faithful, the force of education in other men, and if you will, ignorance, and the natural inclination men have to be peremptory, are an impenetrable shield against the darts of the Pyrrhonists, though the sect fancies it is now more formidable than it was anciently.⁷⁸

This sets the stage for the main presentation of the skeptical position, which takes the form of a dialogue between two abbés concerning the contemporary significance of Pyrrhonism. The first, an orthodox abbé, asserts that he cannot understand how "there could be any Pyrrhonists under the light of the Gospel."⁷⁹ In reply, the second abbé proclaims that a contemporary skeptic would be even more powerful than his ancient counterpart because: "The Christian Theology would afford him unanswerable arguments,"⁸⁰ not to mention the advantages derived from the new philosophy.

After a brief treatment of the skeptical implications of modern philosophy,⁸¹ Bayle proceeds to the crucial issue between rationalism or dogmatism, and skepticism: the "criterium veritatis." If skepticism is to be refuted, there must be an infallible standard of truth. The rationalists, following Descartes, contend that "evidence is a certain character of truth."⁸² If this be denied, there is no certainty. Against this, the skeptical abbé makes the radical claim that there are propositions possessing clear evidence, which are rejected as false, and thus, evidence is not the mark of truth, and consequently there is no certainty.⁸³

In support of this contention the abbé cites several theological examples, of which two will suffice to illustrate Bayle's method. It is evident, he argues, that two things that do not differ from a third do not differ from each other. This principle is one of the bases of all our reasoning,

but nevertheless, we are convinced by the revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity that this principle is false.⁸⁴ Second, from the moral realm, the abbé argues: It is evident that evil ought to be prevented, and that it is a sin to permit it, when avoidable. However, Christian theology clearly shows us that this is false, for it teaches us that when God permits all the evil and disorders of the world, he does nothing inconsistent with his perfections.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the attempt to avoid these difficulties by arguing that the examples depend upon judging the Divinity by human standards is of no avail. Such a qualitative distinction between human and divine reason implies that the true nature of things is unknowable and thus leads us to an even more radical skepticism.⁸⁶

Finally, after systematically demolishing the claims of reason, Bayle offers (Remark C) the pious alternative of faith, as the only sure road to God:

When a man is able to apprehend all the ways of suspending his judgment, which have been laid open by Sextus Empiricus, he may then perceive that that logic is the greatest effort of subtilty that the mind of man is capable of; but he will see at the very same time that such a subtilty will afford him no satisfaction: it confounds itself; for if it were solid, it would prove that it is certain that we must doubt. Therefore there would be some certainty, there would be a certain rule of truth. That system would be destroyed by it; but you need not fear that things would come to that: the reasons for doubting are doubtful themselves: one must therefore doubt whether he ought to doubt. What chaos! What torment for the mind! it seems therefore, that this unhappy state is the fittest of all to convince us, that our reason is the way to wander, since when it displays itself with the greatest subtilty, it throws us into such an abyss. What naturally follows from thence, is to renounce that guide, and beseech the cause of all things to give us a better. It is a great step towards the Christian religion, which requires of us, that we should expect from God the knowledge of what we are to believe, and do, and that we should captivate our understanding to the obedience of faith.⁸⁷

Thus, Bayle's skepticism leads to a radical fideism, wherein the claims of reason are rejected before the sure standard of divine revelation. His major application of this position was to the problem of evil, regarding which he endeavored to establish the theoretical superiority of the Manichæan to the Christian hypothesis, and consequently to emphasize the need to reject the findings of reason and accept the Christian doctrine