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A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF DEISM AND METHODISM

AN ESSAY IN

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The first half of the eighteenth century in England is one of the most bewildering periods in Christian thought and history. On one hand, there were the Deists arguing fiercely for a rationalistic natural religion apart from any kind of revelation, portraying an impersonal deity that is remote and detached from human life. On the other hand, the Methodists in the Evangelical Revival pushed for a highly personal and experiential religion, stressing the importance of the revealed Word of God and the involvement of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of the Christian life. The Deists were often seen as pure rationalists that championed nothing but reason. The Methodists, in the other extreme, were often accused of “enthusiasm” (or more accurately in the eighteenth century context “religious fanaticism”), dangerously “overvaluing feelings and inward impressions... and undervaluing reason, knowledge, and wisdom, in general.”<sup>1</sup> These two contrasting movements both appeared within the first few decades of the eighteenth century, one following closely after the other. The Deistic controversy began in the last decade of the seventeenth century and culminated around the 1730s. The Methodist movement also came into being during the 1730s beginning with the conversions of the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield. The question is: how did these two seemingly contrary thoughts come into place during the same period of time? How different were they? Or were they not so different after all? Upon closer look at the source materials, it is not difficult to observe that the Deists were in fact very “enthusiastic” in certain ways and the Methodists were actually very “rational”. This paper will compare and contrast Deism and Methodism by looking at some of their key leading figures, such as John Toland, John Wesley, and George Whitefield, and show that while the leaders from both

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<sup>1</sup> Kinghorn, Vol. III, 64.

camps were radically different in their philosophical and religious convictions, they also shared some very similar traits, both influenced by the prevailing sociological, theological, and epistemological trends in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

Although emerging Deistic thoughts can be traced back to as early as 1624 from Lord Herbert of Cherbury's *De Veritate*, nothing made Deism a subject of intense public debate and elicited that kind of excitement until John Toland's *Christianity Not Mystrious* published in 1696.<sup>2</sup> It can be said Toland publicized and elevated the deistic controversy when the time became opportune. In 1695, just one year prior to *Mystrious* being published, John Locke published his highly influential work *The Reasonableness of Christianity* that encouraged critical approaches to biblical texts. Being a disciple of Locke, Toland took advantage of the momentum set forth by his mentor, pushing the agenda of introducing "a religion of reason" one step further. One way of how Toland propagated his deistic thoughts, James Herrick argues, was through his association with coffeehouse societies, professional guilds, secret societies, and free-thinking clubs.<sup>3</sup> Those were places "where radical religious and political ideas were discussed and refined and where strategies for their propagation were developed."<sup>4</sup> There is some evidence showing that such Deistical clubs included "heavy drinking, ribald joking, reading of obscene poetry, songs lewdly mocking clergy and other public figures, strange rites of

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<sup>2</sup> Herrick, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Herrick, 18, 35, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Herrick, 35.

initiation, and forbidden sexual activity.”<sup>5</sup> This can be compared and contrasted with the Holy Club formed by the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield in Oxford. While the free-thinking men indulged in debauchery, the Methodists gathered in pursuit of holiness. They were expected “to abstain from alcohol, to keep the Sabbath, ‘to be patterns of diligence and frugality, of self-denial, and taking up the cross daily’.”<sup>6</sup> Although both camps were fundamentally different in their practices, their aims and aspirations were similar. These learned men were gathering outside the Church and other establishments to cultivate ideas for an alternate religious outlook, if not a religious reformation. In addition, these religious movements also had political implications. The Deist and Freemason societies “functioned as cells for the discussion of liberal political ideas and for criticism of the social conservatism and political power of the Anglican Church.”<sup>7</sup> The Methodists were also influenced by the Pietists from the continent, which favored developing “their own forms of religious expression outside the established order in church and state”, in response to the compromised Peace of Westphalia and the lifeless orthodoxy of the established church.<sup>8</sup> Such evidence shows that both Deism and Methodism were part of the same current responding to the religio-political context of their times.

Another area where Deism and Methodism can be compared and contrasted is their use of rhetoric and persuasion. In James Herrick’s *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*, he argues that “the doctrines of the Deists, though highly varied, are best

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<sup>5</sup> Herrick, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Mursell, 90.

<sup>7</sup> Herrick, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Brown & Tackett, 6-7.

understood as rhetoric”.<sup>9</sup> One might expect the self-professed rationalists like the Deists “to pursue rigorous and serious argumentation guided by a recognized critical method”, yet they “developed a discourse of subterfuge characterized by strategic lying, linguistic camouflage, scandalous allegation, and scathing ridicule.”<sup>10</sup> The reason they extensively utilized the rhetoric device of ridicule was because it could “mock the ideology of an established clerical/aristocratic class” and create “a social inversion wherein those of a lower social station were momentarily superior to their betters.”<sup>11</sup> They wrote for a “literate though not well-educated urban audience” and took advantage of “an emerging reading public which was interested in questioning the established authority of a clergy that often seemed out of touch with the realities of the laboring classes.”<sup>12</sup> By doing so, they intentionally antagonized the public audience to further their case against the Establishment. John Toland, in his popular discourse *Christianity Not Mysterious*, employed to commonsensical language and illustrations that ordinary folks could understand. For example, pointing out the absurdity of the idea of transubstantiation and consubstantiation, he ridiculed: “To say, for instance that *a Ball is white and black at once*, is to say just nothing; for these Colours are so incompatible in the same Subject, as to exclude all Possibility of a real positive Idea or Conception.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the ideas of the Trinity and God’s omnipotence were not exempt from derision, as he said: “To say, for example, that *a thing is extended and not extended, is round and square at once*, is to say nothing; for these Idea’s destroy one another, and cannot subsist together in the same

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<sup>9</sup> Herrick, vii.

<sup>10</sup> Herrick, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Herrick, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Herrick, 211.

<sup>13</sup> Gay, 55.

Subject.”<sup>14</sup> Against ecclesial and scriptural authority, he also pointed out the logical error and paradoxical nature of their confusing interdependence, where authority is derived mutually from the one another. He exclaimed: “Hey-day! are not these eternal Rounds very exquisite Inventions to giddy and entangle the Unthinking and the Weak?”<sup>15</sup> He was also unashamed of using profanity to add some sensationalism to his rhetoric, when he referred to church doctrines as “ridiculous Fables of the Church of *Rome*... *Eastern Ordures*, almost all receiv’d into this *Western Sink*”.<sup>16</sup> This appealed to the vulgar working classes and heightened the antagonism. Most interestingly, however, is that he also quoted from the Scriptures extensively to serve his arguments, yet out of context most of the times.<sup>17</sup> This shows that the readers still revered the Scriptures to a certain extent, although they were not very familiar with the Scriptural contexts, such that these rhetoricians could exploit their ignorance and appear sincerely pious. All of this rhetoric appeared persuasive to many readers, and that is the reason why the Deists took England by storm in the early eighteenth century. The Deists were not exactly rational, but rather sensational, or one could say, actually quite “enthusiastic”.

The Methodists were also no less in their rhetoric skills. John Wesley was known for preaching with much rhetorical prowess, stirring up emotions of the listeners while appealing to men of reason also. In his own words, John Wesley described good style

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<sup>14</sup> Gay, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Gay, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Gay, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Just within the first chapter, Toland selectively quoted from the Old and New Testaments eleven times, including: 1 Tim. 1:7, Matt. 15:9, 1 Cor. 14:8-9, Rom. 12:1, 1 Cor. 14:11, 2, Acts 14:17, Num. 23:19, Ephes. 4:14, 7, 18.

being “Perspicuity, purity, propriety, strength, and easiness joined together.”<sup>18</sup> When he explained the reason why he abandoned a more elaborate style and spoke in plain terms, he said: “when I talked to plain people in the castle or town I observed they gaped and stared. This obliged me to alter my style.”<sup>19</sup> His target audiences were the commoners and the working classes, just as how the deists appealed to the vulgar population.

Nonetheless, he was not short of reasoning power. Townsend argues that Methodism emancipated itself from the danger of exalting faith into something independent of reason, was due to “the emphasis laid by Wesley throughout his life upon logic and argument. In the case of other leaders a religion that set out to overthrow the dogmas of rationalism by its vindication of the claims of a living experience might have degenerated into a disastrous appeal to emotion and feeling. But Wesley, by teaching his followers to think, set before his societies a better ideal.”<sup>20</sup> Wesley’s reasoning power came from his training in college and later his experience of being a lecturer in logic and philosophy.<sup>21</sup> He also wrote his famous treatise called *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* in 1743, written to thoughtful clergymen and lay people, and to the scholarly world generally, where he systematically and rationally defended the doctrines of Methodism and refuted the idea that Christianity was not founded on argument.<sup>22</sup> George Whitefield, another man from Methodism who possessed extreme rhetoric eloquence combined with strong charismatic appeal, is evidence that faith and fervor need not be mutually exclusive to reason and argumentation. In his sermon *The Indwelling of The Spirit, The*

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<sup>18</sup> Townsend, 222.

<sup>19</sup> Townsend, 222.

<sup>20</sup> Townsend, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Townsend, 178-9.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, 139.

*Common Privilege of All Believers*, Whitefield demonstrated his powers of persuasion. He argued forcefully for the necessity of the Holy Spirit, while putting the burden of proof back onto those who deny the authority of the Holy Scriptures, the doctrine of original sin, and the divinity of Jesus Christ. He deployed a series of rhetorical questions, causing his opponents to self-contradict and become speechless. Throughout his sermon, he also used words and phrases such as “for this reason”, “the reasonableness of this doctrine”, “let us reason together”, “it is evident that”, “as another argument to prove”, “from this plain reasoning”. Even the contents of the sermon might not indicate as such, the wordings he used showed that his rhetoric was characteristic of early eighteenth century rationalistic discourses. Actually this sermon highly influenced Wesley and anticipated much of the rational arguments appeared in *Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* that was written four years later.<sup>23</sup> Whitefield was also associated with the Countess of Huntingdon, where his preaching highly impacted the aristocratic class and the elites of society.<sup>24</sup> Based on the above evidence, it is shown that the Methodists were not merely religious “enthusiasts”, for which they were constantly accused of being. They were in fact very rational persons, utilizing the language and skills of reason in their rhetorical persuasion and defense of the Christian faith. The deists used rhetoric to ridicule the so-called irrational and mysterious doctrines, yet their frivolous propaganda exposed their lack of serious reasoning and intellectual integrity. The Methodists, in contrast, showed much intellectual rigor in their use of reason and persuasion without falling into the traps of sensationalism. Both, however, were undeniably influenced by

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, 91.

<sup>24</sup> Townsend, 269-70.

the epistemological shift (from appealing to tradition and authoritative texts to relying on reason and evidence) that occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is unquestionable that the deists, such as John Toland and Anthony Collins, were influenced by the Lockean philosophy of empiricism. John Locke “condemned ideas not derived from the sense, or from rational reflection on the evidence of the senses, as ‘rubbish’”.<sup>25</sup> In principle, his disciples sought after empirical evidence, yet in practice they seldom sought serious evidence in their argumentation, because they resorted to ridicule most of the time. It was rather their opponents who did that. During the pinnacle of the deist controversy, a generation of adept Christian apologists was raised up to refute the deist criticisms, and they “sought to combat ridicule with a serious approach to the evidences.”<sup>26</sup> Ever since then, the method of evidentialism to prove the validity of biblical miracles became normative in Christian apologetics. Herrick argues that such an approach was not without shortcomings, because it treated miracles as simply historical events that were stripped out of their religious and theological contexts.<sup>27</sup> It was only a matter of time that these isolated miracle stories became hardly defensible under the scrutiny of empirical science. If the prevailing epistemological shift in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was from a fideistic to an evidential view of religion, both Deism and Methodism basically have inevitably fallen prey to the same paradigm shift. The Methodists sought for salvific assurance based on the Holy Spirit’s internal witness, while the Deists sought for empirical evidence based on reason. Both tried to find

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<sup>25</sup> Herrick, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Herrick, 164.

<sup>27</sup> Herrick, 210.

something that can validate their religious experiences and beliefs. Wesley's legendary Aldersgate conversion experience was all about assurance. When the Moravian Christians confronted him whether he *knew* he was a child of God or that he had any proof of it, it was not that he did not believe in Jesus' salvation, but that he did not have the assurance for it. Recalling the Aldersgate experience, he said: "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."<sup>28</sup> Although assurance was an important aspect of Wesley's theology, Wesley himself disliked the word because it lacked scriptural warrant,<sup>29</sup> and that he eventually abandoned his hard line on the necessity of assurance as a prerequisite for salvation.<sup>30</sup> What is interesting is that as an eighteenth century man, he had this unquenchable need for evidential proof in his religious experience, apart from scriptural warrant, church tradition, and credo formulas. This marks the epistemological shift that was happening. Evidence and experience were the prevailing keywords of the time. The main problem of the seventeenth and eighteenth century was the problem of epistemology. Both the Deists and the Methodists sought to locate their religious certitude in their experiences. This change anticipated the later liberal Protestantism and the evangelical subjectivity.

It may seem that Deism was a totally rationalistic movement and Methodism an enthusiastic one, but it is shown above that both involved the head and the heart, even to

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<sup>28</sup> Heitzenrater, 101.

<sup>29</sup> Mursell, 94.

<sup>30</sup> Heitzenrater, 96.

a point of exhibiting a reversal of the two impressions. Gay concluded Deism was “a product of the confluence of three strong emotions: hate, love, and hope.”<sup>31</sup> By that he meant, “The deists hated priests and priestcraft, mystery-mongering, and assaults on common sense. They loved the ethical teachings of the classical philosophers, the grand unalterable regularity of nature, the sense of freedom granted the man liberated from superstitious. They hoped that the problems of life – of private conduct and public policy – could be solved by the application of unaided human reason, and that the mysteries of the universe could be, if not solved, at least defined and circumscribed by man’s scientific inquiry.”<sup>32</sup> In combination of these three characteristics, they were “powerful agents of modernity”<sup>33</sup>. The Methodists, on the other hand, released religion from the grip of the Church of England. With Wesley addressing to the common people and Whitefield preaching to the aristocrats, they hand in hand conquered the spiritual soil of England and the Americas with emotion and reason. Both the Deists and the Methodists popularized religious discourse and emancipated it from the four walls of the church. They took advantage of the religious liberty they gained in forming clubs and societies to discuss and practice alternative religious approaches. They published massive literature and tracts to fill the diet of the literate public. They made it accessible to the masses and made it relevant to the sentiments of the people. They also utilized rhetoric to make their cases persuasive. Nonetheless, they were both swimming in the currents of the emerging modernity. It is important for Christians in all ages to be aware of the prevailing cultural,

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<sup>31</sup> Gay, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Gay, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Gay, 13.

philosophical, and epistemological influences, because one could be not very different from one's supposed enemy.

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