

William Law, Controversialist and Mystic.

In the third place, Law again comes before us as a controversialist, but this time in the realm of philosophy and theology. Amongst the subjects of controversy in the eighteenth century, Deism takes a large place, and is eminently characteristic of the period. Law himself played no very great part in the struggle, and only one writing, apart from those produced during his mystical period, is concerned with it. It may not seem necessary, therefore, to give much time to this subject, but this would be a mistake, as much light may thereby be thrown on Law's age and his thought. Though he was a determined opponent of the Deists, he shared with them certain common views. Deists believed in God, and they were "eminently respectable." They had a real concern for morality. This shuts out immediately writers like Shaftesbury, to whom the idea of God was no necessity, and like Mandeville whose Fable of the Bees counted private vices public benefits. (We note that Law has a short but indignant book (1724) rebutting the errors of this latter work).

The emphasis in Deism falls upon the sufficiency of natural reason to establish religion and enforce morality. Its unwitting parent was Lord Herbert of Cherbury, whose *De Veritate*, 1624, found reason competent for religious truth. Other fore-runners include Hobbes, who considerably weakened confidence in tradition, and the Cambridge Platonists, who acclaimed "Reason as the divine governor of man's life." For them there could be no ultimate contradiction between philosophy, science, and the Christian Faith (Inge, 287, *Christian Mysticism*), and they believed that the purified reason was receptive of Divine illumination. The process was further helped by Locke the philosopher, to whom religion was moral philosophy. In his *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), Locke proceeds to discriminate amongst the contents of the creed. He attempts to simplify Christianity, and he uses miracles and prophecy as powerful evidence of its truth. He strives to present God as utterly impartial, yet seeks to give the privileged place to revealed religion. He was not a Deist, but "he laid down the lines on which the controversy was destined to move."

Amongst those properly regarded as Deists the most important are Toland, Collins, and Tindal. In 1696 Toland produced his *Christianity, Not Mysteriorious*, showing that there-

is nothing in the Gospel contrary to Reason or above it, and that no Christian doctrine can properly be called a mystery.

He rightly discerned that in the New Testament the word "mystery" means "open secret," but he goes on to assert that what is beyond our comprehension is thereby false. Man can know God and His attributes. Reason is competent in every sphere. Original Christianity contained nothing with which the mind could not cope, and later Christianity with its miracles had resulted from the pleasant attentions of unscrupulous priests and the introduction of heathen Jewish and Platonic ideas. These sneers at priestcraft were very popular in the eighteenth century, and most Deists revelled in them, especially the author whom we now pass on to consider.

This is Anthony Collins, whose *Discourse on Free Thinking* appeared in 1713. He strives to secure unlimited freedom for reason, and gives an historical sketch to show the futility of the application of force to govern opinion. The basis of his argument is of course the adequacy of reason, and he seeks to set morality free from all mysterious sanctions.

He was followed by Matthew Tindall, who issued in 1730 *Christianity as Old as Creation, or the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature*. In this sober and restrained work Deism reached its zenith. For him, the religion of nature is sufficient, and revealed religion a superfluous addition. At the heart of all religions, including revealed, there is a common core. He lays down simple rules whereby all men may discover it.

This brief survey of Deistic writers (which owes a good deal to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* art. *Deism*) will have sufficiently shown that in these works arrogant claims were advanced on behalf of reason. These were the claims which Law came to deny. He calls his book *The Case of Reason*, 1731. It has been well said that he shows reason to have no case at all. Hear what he says. "It was as truly reason that made Medea kill her children, that made Cato kill himself, that made Pagans offer their sacrifices to idols, that made Epicurus deny a Providence, Mahomet pretend a revelation . . . that made Muggleton a lunatic and Rochester a libertine. It was as truly human vision that did these things, as it is human reason that demonstrates mathematical propositions." Man's reasonable attitude in the presence of the inscrutable majesty of God is humility. Man is called on to accept and obey Divine revelation rather than to account for it and investigate it. Law makes no attempt to present the emphatic conclusions of Christian experience, but trusts entirely to argument. In fact, on both sides, the witness of the soul is neglected. Little is made of the personal contact of the individual with God. Also Deism and

Orthodoxy alike are almost equally remote from a true estimate of Jesus Himself. It was not until he had studied Boehme that Law made an adequate reply to the Deists. Here he is content to rely for proofs on miracles and prophecies.

Law was not alone in his defence of Christianity, and Orthodoxy was well represented by Butler's famous *Analogy of Religion*. Butler avoided Law's mistake and recognised the validity of the appeal to reason while insisting on the mind's necessary limitations. But by far the most damaging attack came from a philosopher, Hume, who dealt soundly with both Deists and Orthodox. He labelled all religion as inexplicable and was especially severe on miracles. He disposed of the Deists' cherished Golden Age and scattered their pleasant visions of early religion.

It remains to point out that both Deists and their opponents shared a defective view of God. He was indeed regarded as a person but as external to the world. His relation to it resembled that of a watchmaker to a watch. Interferences and interpositions were possible but says the Deist not probable. For both sides there was a gulf between God and His creation. God was almost wholly transcendent.

Here is a sufficient reason for that lack of religious enthusiasm in the eighteenth century so bewailed by Law—namely the remoteness of God. Worship under such conditions could only be perfunctory and latitudinarianism became the order of the day. Bishops Hoadly and Tillotson pressed for calm and quietness, and the Deists led their supporters to further indifference. To all this the author of the *Serious Call* would give no consent, but for him also, God was almost wholly a transcendent Being. He could say "There is but one God and Father of us all whose glory fills all places, whose power supports all beings, whose providence ruleth all events." But elsewhere he shows that this is not his accustomed view. For example, he says, "Imagine yourself placed in the air as a spectator of all that passes in the world," and then goes on, "now if you were to see as God sees,"—a clear statement of God's external relation to the world.

If, therefore, extreme views of God's transcendence are to be called Deistic, and extreme views of His Immanence are to be called Pantheistic, Law in his early period did not lead in the direction of Theism. In fact, it was a philosopher named Berkeley (1753) who showed the way to a true view. For him "the material world was the language of God," and between God and man there was continuous communication.

The Deistic controversy therefore, as a whole, was sterile. The problems were largely left unsolved despite much clever

dialectic. The controversy itself perished of inanition and the Evangelical Revival almost obliterated it. In this great movement orthodoxy discovered, through Wesley, its hidden powers, and overwhelmed that mass of infidelity and sin which Deism, with its talk of sincerity, so conspicuously failed to conquer.

The only really valuable result of the controversy was the impetus it gave to Biblical criticism and the study of early church history. Toland's *Amyntor* (1699) had insinuated that canonical and uncanonical workings alike were the "off-spring of superstition and credulity," while his analysis of church history had far from satisfied orthodox opinion. Law, however, shows no signs of being inspired to such scholarly pursuits, and one cannot help but regret that his vigorous intellect and ready skill did not find in such study a congenial and fruitful field.

Lastly there remains Law the mystic. As such, he is a strange portent in the eighteenth century and has as his only English companion, Wm. Blake, visionary, poet and artist. Law had always been interested in mysticism from his early days and he had studied representative writers. At the age of forty-six he came across the writings of Jacob Boehme, the illiterate German shoemaker (1575-1624). Their perusal put him into a "perfect sweat," he says, and their effect was permanent. Warburton could say "Boehme's works would disgrace Bedlam at full noon," and Wesley could characterize them as "sublime nonsense, inimitable bombast, fustian not to be paralleled," but Law accepted the obloquy which attached to mystical enthusiasm as serenely and courageously as he had followed his conscience as a Non Juror. His writings henceforth become mystical treatises, practical and philosophical, and they include the following:—

1737. *The Lord's Supper*, a reply to Hoadly in which Law says "that everything adorable in the redemption of mankind, everything that can delight, comfort and sustain the heart of a Christian is found in this Holy Sacrament."

1740. *An appeal to all that doubt*, a new apologetic addressed to Deists, Arians, and Socinians or nominal Christians.

1749. *The Spirit of Prayer*, which has been described as the work of an English mystic who expresses with a strength and beauty which Plotinus himself has rarely surpassed the longing of the soul for union with the Divine.

1752. *The Way to Divine Knowledge*, an exposition of Boehme's main principles, and

The Spirit of Divine Love, his most beautiful book. "The copestone and crown of all his compositions."

Like all mystics Law passionately asserts the unity that underlies all diversity, "the one changeless life in all the lives."

There is a uniform life in all the creations of God. "All are raised, enriched and blessed by the same life of God divided into different kingdoms of creations." "There is, therefore, one nature as unalterable as that God from whom it arises and whose manifestation it is." "Nature is God's great book of revelation," and "true religion is the religion of nature." The same laws operate in every sphere—God, nature, angels, man, vegetables and flints. There is but one thing that is life and one thing that is death. Desire is to be found in all. The astringency of the fruit, the fire hidden in the flint, are the same in nature as that desire in God which resulted in creation, and as that desire in man which draws him to God. Light and spirit, sun and wind, also are one and the same operation; producing in the seed fruition, and in the reborn soul, life with God. Despite this interpretation, or because of it, Law finds it possible to continue his emphasis on self-mortification. Man in this world is a creature fallen from Paradise. His forefather, Adam, lost his original body which was open to the influence of light and spirit, and he became subject simply to the influences of sun and wind and heir of all ills and pains. As a poor slave in a prison of bestial flesh and blood man is in his wrong place in this world, and his only hope is to rise and return to Paradise. Self-denial is a peeling of the husk, a death which enables the inner principle to find life and growth. To this end, therefore, those practices recommended in the *Serious Call* retain their hold on Law's mind.

His view of God in his mystical theology is Trinitarian. We notice that he attempts a complete theological statement, but full discussion is impossible here. "The Father is the first unbeginning thought, will or desire." He wills and generates from eternity to eternity the Son, from which eternal generating the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds, and this is that Infinite Perfection or Fulness of Beatitude of the life of the Triune God."

An interesting development of his Trinitarian view is his doctrine of the new birth. The Triune God, concerned in the creation of man, is still concerned about him after the Fall. The Father draws and attracts. His desire is kindled and anguished and reaches out toward man. The Son of God becomes the Regenerator or raiser of a new birth in us that He may be that to the soul in its state which He is to the Father in Deity. The Holy Ghost is the Sanctifier or Finisher of the Divine life restored in us, because in the Deity the Holy Ghost proceeds from Father and Son, as the amiable and blessed Finisher of the Triune Life of God. He deals with this more particularly in his *Treatise on Christian Regeneration*, (1750).

Here is surely a deeper and more adequate view of the relation of God to the human soul. The spectator of human affairs found in the *Serious Call* and the sultan or prince, arbitrary and capricious, beloved of the Deists have given place to richer conceptions of God as both Transcendent and Immanent. Also the indwelling of the Holy Ghost is no longer merely a quotation from the New Testament. It has become a living idea.

He presses home also the idea of the new birth as man's supreme necessity. We are all dead as the result of Adam's fall. May be we have little realization of the fact, but this is due to the kindly influence of this world's light and air, which produce a faint mirage of the heavenly life.

In truth we are dead, but only in a certain sense. The soul, the breath of God is alive but only as fire is alive in a flint or as life is imprisoned in a seed. It needs to be set free, for it has died (in this sense) to the Divine Life. This can only be done by the Redeemer, who alone can bring back man's soul to the Kingdom of Heaven by a birth of the life of the Triune God. "Salvation," he says, "can be nothing other but this regenerated life of the soul." It cannot be achieved by outward grace, but only by inward birth. He rightly rejoices in the notion that this is religious enthusiasm, and he here makes a discovery which many in the eighteenth century failed to appreciate.

It would have been a great gain if the *Serious Call* could have been re-written in the light of this great principle. The emphasis would have been transferred from rules to inner life, and from laws to the Holy Spirit. The true relation of morality would have been set forth, e.g., "Faith lays hold on Christ, puts on the Divine nature, and in a living and real manner grows powerful over all our sins."

Law also gives great place to his view of God as love, always and eternally. "God's goodness and compassion," he says, "is always in the same infinite state, always flowing forth in and through all nature, in the same infinite manner; nothing wants it but that which cannot receive it." He goes on, "whilst the angels stood, they stood encompassed with the infinite source of all goodness and compassion. They fell, not because He ceased to be an infinite open fountain of all good to them, but because they had a will which must direct itself."

Evil, moral and physical, is not of God, but results from the misdirected will or desire of angels and men. We notice here, "a realization of the momentous quality of the will," a discovery which has been described as the "secret of every mystic." Desire or will is "the only workman in nature," and everything is its work. God, therefore, is altogether loving and it is not His

will that angels should fall or men should perish. Hell is not to be charged as a responsibility on God. Even He is shut up to the facts. He cannot acclaim men other than they are. Righteousness cannot be imputed. The final judgment is only the last separating of everything to its eternal place. It is the leaving of everything to be that in eternity which it has made itself to be in time, for there is no annihilation.

It may be interesting to add here that Law, like other mystics acclaims experience as the way to understanding. This is admirably shown in his remarks on the Trinity. "No person," he says, "has any fitness, pretence, nor any ground from Scripture to think or say anything about the Trinity till such time as he stands in the state of the penitent returning prodigal. The way to truth is not by way of reason and philosophy but by the exercise of this mystical faculty.

In the *Case of Reason* Law ridiculed the pretensions of reason and he does so again as a mystic, but not because he is relying on miracles or prophecy but because he is trusting to the witness of the soul. Reason is called a poor and groundless fiction, but only because he now has vision.

In conclusion, we must give Law's great declaration to the Deists of the supreme and final worth of Christianity. "There is one God, one nature, one religion, one salvation, only one way of kindling the heavenly life in the soul. Jesus is the one and only Saviour of all that can anywhere or at any time be saved."

The mystical writings of Law therefore contain much excellent material and many ideas which are near the heart of Christianity. There is much that is strange, but throughout the temper and spirit are gloriously Christian. Those by whom the *Serious Call* may remain unheard, may find in these later writings, if they give to their study patience and insight, much that will make a profound appeal. In these days of emphasis upon religious experience and the inner life, days which Law himself has helped to bring to their dawning, his writings ought not to be forgotten, nor his importance be regarded as simply historical. The man who could write this following passage surely has a vital message for to-day.

"There is but one salvation for all mankind and the way to it is one; and that is, the desire of the soul turned to God. This desire brings the soul to God and God into the soul: it unites with God, it co-operates with God, and is one life with God. O my God, just and true, how great is Thy love and mercy to mankind, that heaven is thus everywhere open and Christ thus the common Saviour to all who thus turn their hearts to Thee."

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