

A Basic Worldview Catalog

THE UNIVERSE NEXT DOOR

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A UNIVERSE CHARGED WITH THE GRANDEUR OF GOD

CHRISTIAN THEISM

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?*

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, "GOD'S GRANDEUR"

In the Western world up to the end of the seventeenth century, the theistic worldview was clearly dominant. Intellectual squabbles—and there were as many then as now—were mostly family squabbles. Dominicans might disagree with Jesuits, Jesuits with Anglicans, Anglicans with Presbyterians, ad infinitum, but all these parties subscribed to the same set of basic presuppositions. The triune personal God of the Bible existed; he had revealed himself to us and could be known; the universe was his creation; human beings were his special creation. If battles were fought, the lines were drawn within the circle of theism.

How, for example, do we know God? By reason, by revelation, by faith, by contemplation, by proxy, by direct access? This battle was fought on many fronts over a dozen centuries and is still an issue with those remaining on the theistic field. Or take another issue: Is the basic stuff of the universe matter only, form only or a combination? Theists have dif-

ferred on this too. What role does human freedom play in a universe where God is sovereign? Again, a family squabble.

During the period from the early Middle Ages to the end of the seventeenth century, very few challenged the existence of God or held that ultimate reality was impersonal or that death meant individual extinction. The reason is obvious. Christianity had so penetrated the Western world that whether or not people believed in Christ or acted as Christians should, they all lived in a context of ideas influenced and informed by the Christian faith. Even those who rejected the faith often lived in fear of hellfire or the pangs of purgatory. Bad people may have rejected Christian goodness, but they knew themselves to be bad by basically Christian standards—crudely understood, no doubt, but Christian in essence. The theistic presuppositions that lay behind their values came with their mother's milk.

This, of course, is no longer true. Being born in the Western world now guarantees nothing. Worldviews have proliferated. Walk down a street of any major city in Europe or North America and the next person you meet could adhere to any one of a dozen distinctly different patterns of understanding what life is all about. Little seems bizarre to us, which makes it more and more difficult for talk-show hosts to get good ratings by shocking their television audiences.

Consider the problem of growing up today. Baby Jane, a twentieth- and twenty-first-century child of the Western world, often gets reality defined in two widely divergent forms—her mother's and father's. Then if the family breaks apart, the court may enter with a third definition of human reality. This poses a distinct problem for deciding what the shape of the world actually is.

Baby John, a child of the seventeenth century, was cradled in a cultural consensus that gave a sense of place. The world around was really there—created to be there by God. As God's vice regent, young John sensed that he and other human beings had been given dominion over the world. He was required to worship God, but God was eminently worthy of worship. He was required to obey God, but then obedience to God was true freedom since that was what people were made for. Besides, God's yoke was easy and his burden light. Furthermore, God's rules were seen as primarily moral, and people were free to be creative over the external universe, free to learn its secrets, free to shape and fashion it as God's stewards

cultivating God's garden and offering up their work as true worship before a God who honors his creation with freedom and dignity.

There was a basis for both meaning and morality and also for the question of identity. The apostles of absurdity were yet to arrive. Even Shakespeare's *King Lear* (perhaps the English Renaissance's most "troubled" hero) does not end in total despair. And Shakespeare's later plays suggest that he himself had passed well beyond the moment of despair and found the world to be ultimately meaningful.

It is fitting, therefore, that we begin a study of worldviews with theism. It is the foundational view, the one from which all others developing between 1700 and 1900 essentially derive. It would be possible to go behind theism to Greco-Roman classicism, but even this as it was reborn in the Renaissance was seen almost solely within the framework of theism.¹

BASIC CHRISTIAN THEISM

As the core of each chapter I will try to express the essence of each worldview in a minimum number of succinct propositions. Each worldview considers the following basic issues: the nature and character of God or ultimate reality, the nature of the universe, the nature of humanity, the question of what happens to a person at death, the basis of human knowing, the basis of ethics and the meaning of history.² In the case of theism, the prime proposition concerns the nature of God. Since this first proposition is so important, we will spend more time with it than with any other.

¹One of the most fascinating studies of this is Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), which argues that the Greek gods became "Christianized"; that, as Julian the Apostate said, "Thou hast conquered, O Pale Galilean."

²Several books on the Christian worldview have been published since the earlier editions of the present book. Especially notable are Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Christian World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Arthur F. Holmes, ed., *The Making of a Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985); W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World from a Biblical Viewpoint* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991); Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984); and Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995). My own *Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990) elaborates themes from the present chapter. Most recent are David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004); J. Mark Bertrand, *(Re)thinking Worldview: Learning to Think, Live and Speak in This World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007); Charles H. Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library Publishers, 2008); and Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

1. Worldview Question 1: *Prime reality is the infinite, personal God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. This God is triune, transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign, and good.*³

Let's break this proposition down into its parts.

God is infinite. This means that he is beyond scope, beyond measure, as far as we are concerned. No other being in the universe can challenge him in his nature. All else is secondary. He has no twin but is alone the be-all and end-all of existence. He is, in fact, the only self-existent being,⁴ as he spoke to Moses out of the burning bush: "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14). He *is* in a way that none else is. As Moses proclaimed, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deut 6:4 KJV). So God is the one prime existent, the one prime reality and, as will be discussed at some length later, the one source of all other reality.

God is personal. This means God is not mere force or energy or existent "substance." God is personal. Personality requires two basic characteristics: self-reflection and self-determination. In other words, God is personal in that he knows himself to be (he is self-conscious) and he possesses the characteristics of self-determination (he "thinks" and "acts").

One implication of the personality of God is that he is like us. In a way, this puts the cart before the horse. Actually, we are like him, but it is helpful to put it the other way around at least for a brief comment. He is like us. That means there is Someone ultimate who is there to ground our highest aspirations, our most precious possession—personality. But more on this under proposition 3.

Another implication of the personality of God is that God is not a simple unity, an integer. He has attributes, characteristics. He is a unity, yes, but a unity of complexity.

Actually, in Christian theism (not Judaism or Islam) *God is not only personal but triune*. That is, "within the one essence of the Godhead we

³One classic Protestant definition of God is found in the Westminster Confession 2.1.

⁴For a consideration of the theistic concept of God from the standpoint of academic philosophy, see Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941); E. L. Mascall, *He Who Is: A Study in Traditional Theism* (London: Libra, 1943); H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 1-48. Other metaphysical issues dealt with here are discussed in William Hasker, *Metaphysics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983); C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985); Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991); J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

have to distinguish three ‘persons’ who are neither three gods on the one side, not three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God.”⁵ The Trinity is certainly a great mystery, and I cannot even begin to elucidate it now. What is important here is to note that the

There is but one living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty; most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION 2.1

Trinity confirms the communal, “personal” nature of ultimate being. God is not only there—an actually existent being; he is personal and we can relate to him in a personal way. To know God, therefore, means knowing more than that he exists. It means knowing him as we know a brother or, better, our own father.

God is transcendent. This means God is beyond us and our world. He is *otherly*. Look at a stone: God is not it; God is beyond it. Look at a man: God is not he; God is beyond him. Yet God is not so beyond that he bears no relation to us and our world. It is likewise true that *God is immanent*, and this means that he is with us. Look at a stone: God is present. Look at a person: God is present. Is this, then, a contradiction? Is theism nonsense at this point? I think not.

My daughter Carol, when she was five years old, taught me a lot here. She and her mother were in the kitchen, and her mother was teaching her about God’s being everywhere. So Carol asked, “Is God in the living room?”

“Yes,” her mother replied.

“Is he in the kitchen?”

⁵Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Trinity,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 531.

“Yes,” she said.

“Am I stepping on God?”

My wife was speechless. But look at the point that was raised. Is God *here* in the same way a stone or a chair or a kitchen is here? No, not quite. God is immanent, here, everywhere, in a sense completely in line with his transcendence. For God is not matter like you and me, but Spirit. And yet he is here. In the New Testament book of Hebrews Jesus Christ is said to be “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). That is, God is beyond all, yet in all and sustaining all.

God is omniscient. This means that God is all-knowing. He is the alpha and the omega and knows the beginning from the end (Rev 22:13). He is the ultimate source of all knowledge and all intelligence. He is *He Who Knows*. The author of Psalm 139 expresses beautifully his amazement at God’s being everywhere, preempting him—knowing him even as he was being formed in his mother’s womb.

God is sovereign. This is really a further ramification of God’s infiniteness, but it expresses more fully his concern to rule, to pay attention, as it were, to all the actions of his universe. It expresses the fact that nothing is beyond God’s ultimate interest, control and authority.

God is good. This is the prime statement about God’s character.⁶ From it flow all others. To be good means to *be* good. God *is* goodness. That is, *what* he is is good. There is no sense in which goodness surpasses God or God surpasses goodness. As being is the essence of his nature, goodness is the essence of his character.

God’s goodness is expressed in two ways, through holiness and through love. Holiness emphasizes his absolute righteousness, which brooks no shadow of evil. As the apostle John says, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn 1:5). God’s holiness is his separateness from all that smacks of evil. But God’s goodness is also expressed as love. In fact, John says, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16), and this leads God to self-sacrifice and the full extension of his favor to his people, called in the Hebrew Scriptures “the sheep of his pasture” (Ps 100:3).

⁶Many people puzzle over the issue of evil. Given both the omniscience and the goodness of God, what is evil and why does it exist? For an extended analysis of the issue, see Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1986), and Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994). I have addressed this issue in chapters 12 and 13 of *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

God's goodness means then, first, that there is an absolute and personal standard of righteousness (it is found in God's character) and, second, that there is hope for humanity (because God is love and will not abandon his creation). These twin observations will become especially significant as we trace the results of rejecting the theistic worldview.

2. Worldview Question 2: *External reality is the cosmos God created ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system.*

God created the cosmos ex nihilo. God is He Who Is, and thus he is the source of all else. Still, it is important to understand that God did not make the universe out of himself. Rather, God spoke it into existence. It came into being by his word: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Theologians thus say God "created" (Gen 1:1) the cosmos ex nihilo—out of nothing, not out of himself or from some preexistent chaos (for if it were really "preexistent," it would be as eternal as God).

Second, God created the cosmos as *a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system*. This phrase is a useful piece of shorthand for two key conceptions.⁷ First, it signifies that the cosmos was not created to be chaotic. Isaiah states this magnificently:

For this is what the LORD says—
 he who created the heavens,
 he is God;
 he who fashioned and made the earth,
 he founded it;
 he did not create it to be empty [a chaos],⁸
 but formed it to be inhabited—
 he says:
 "I am the LORD,
 and there is no other.
 I have not spoken in secret,
 from somewhere in a land of darkness;
 I have not said to Jacob's descendants,

⁷This phrase comes from Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1972), p. 43. Chap. 8 of C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Fontana, 1960), p. 18, also contains an excellent description of what an open universe involves. Other issues involving a Christian understanding of science are discussed in Del Ratzsch, *Science and Its Limits* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), and Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles Thaxton, *The Soul of Science* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994).

⁸NRSV translation.

'Seek me in vain.'

I, the LORD, speak the truth,
I declare what is right." (Is 45:18-19)

The universe is orderly, and God does not present us with confusion but with clarity. The nature of God's universe and God's character are thus closely related. This world is as it is at least in part because God is who he is. We will see later how the Fall qualifies this observation. Here it is sufficient to note that there is an orderliness, a regularity, to the universe. We can expect the earth to turn so the sun will "rise" every day.

But another important notion is buried in this shorthand phrase. The system is *open*, and that means it is not programmed. God is constantly involved in the unfolding pattern of the ongoing operation of the universe. And so are we human beings! The course of the world's operation is open to reordering by either. So we find it dramatically reordered in the Fall. Adam and Eve made a choice that had tremendous significance. But God made another choice in redeeming people through Christ.

The world's operation is also reordered by our continued activity after the Fall. Each action of each of us, each decision to pursue one course rather than another, changes or rather "produces" the future. By dumping pollutants into fresh streams, we kill fish and alter the way we can feed ourselves in years to come. By "cleaning up" our streams, we again alter our future. If the universe were not orderly, our decisions would have no effect. If the course of events were determined, our decisions would have no significance. So theism declares that the universe is orderly but not determined. The implications of this become clearer as we consider humanity's place in the cosmos.

3. Worldview Question 3: *Human beings are created in the image of God and thus possess personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, gregariousness and creativity.*

The key phrase here is "the image of God," a conception highlighted by the fact that it occurs three times in the short space of two verses in Genesis:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his own image
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.
(Gen 1:26-27; compare Gen 5:3; 9:6)

That people are made in the image of God means we are like God. We have already noted that God is like us. But the Scriptures really say it the other way. “We are like God” puts the emphasis where it belongs—on the primacy of God.

We are personal because God is personal. That is, we know ourselves to be (we are self-conscious), and we make decisions uncoerced (we pos-

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Ps 8:3-8 NRSV)

sess self-determination). We are capable of acting on our own. We do not merely react to our environment but can act according to our own character, our own nature.

No two people are alike, we say. And this is not just because no two people have shared exactly the same heredity and environment but because each of us possesses a unique character out of which we think, desire, weigh consequences, refuse to weigh consequences, indulge, refuse to indulge—in short, choose to act.

In this each person reflects (as an image) the transcendence of God over his universe. God is totally unconstrained by his environment. God

is limited (we might say) only by his character. God, being good, cannot lie, be deceived, act with evil intent and so forth. But nothing external to God can possibly constrain him. If he chooses to restore a broken universe, it is because he “wants” to, because, for example, he loves it and wants the best for it. But he is free to do as he wills, and his character (*Who He Is*) controls his will.

So we participate *in part* in a transcendence over our environment. Except at the very extremities of existence—in sickness or physical deprivation (utter starvation, cooped up in darkness for days on end, for example)—a person is not forced to any necessary reaction.

Step on my toe. Must I curse? I may. Must I forgive you? I may. Must I yell? I may. Must I smile? I may. What I do will reflect my character, but it is “I” who will act and not just react like a bell ringing when a button is pushed.

In short, people have personality and are capable of transcending the cosmos in which they are placed in the sense that they can know something of that cosmos and can act significantly to change the course of both human and cosmic events. This is another way of saying that the cosmic system God made is *open* to reordering by human beings.

Personality is the chief thing about human beings, as, I think it is fair to say, it is the chief thing about God, who is infinite both in his personality and in his being. Our personality is grounded in the personality of God. That is, we find our true home in God and in being in close relationship with him. “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man,” wrote Pascal.⁹ “Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee,” wrote Augustine.¹⁰

How does God fulfill our ultimate longing? He does so in many ways: by being the perfect fit for our very nature, by satisfying our longing for interpersonal relationship, by being in his omniscience the end to our search for knowledge, by being in his infinite being the refuge from all fear, by being in his holiness the righteous ground of our quest for justice, by being in his infinite love the cause of our hope for salvation, by being in his infinite creativity both the source of our creative imagination and the ultimate beauty we seek to reflect as we ourselves create.

We can summarize this conception of humankind in God’s image by saying that, like God, we have *personality, self-transcendence, intelli-*

⁹Pascal *Pensées* 10.148.

¹⁰Augustine *Confessions* 1.1.1.

gence (the capacity for reason and knowledge), *morality* (the capacity for recognizing and understanding good and evil), *gregariousness* or social capacity (our characteristic and fundamental desire and need for human companionship—community—especially represented by the “male and female” aspect) and *creativity* (the ability to imagine new things or to endow old things with new significance).

We will consider the root of human intelligence below. Here I want to comment on human creativity—a characteristic often lost sight of in popular theism. Human creativity is borne as a reflection of the infinite creativity of God himself. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) once wrote about the poet who, “lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, . . . freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit.” To honor human creativity, Sidney argued, is to honor God, for God is the “heavenly Maker of that maker.”¹¹

Artists operating within the theistic worldview have a solid basis for their work. Nothing is more freeing than for them to realize that because they are like God they can really invent. Artistic inventiveness is a reflection of God’s unbounded capacity to create.

In Christian theism human beings are indeed dignified. In the psalmist’s words, they are “a little lower than the heavenly beings,” for God himself has made them that way and has crowned them “with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). Human dignity is in one way not our own; contrary to Protagoras, humanity is not the measure. Human dignity is derived from God. But though it is derived, people do possess it, even if as a gift. Helmut Thielicke says it well: “His [humankind’s] greatness rests solely on the fact that God in his incomprehensible goodness has bestowed his love upon him. God does not love us because we are so valuable; we are valuable because God loves us.”¹²

So human dignity has two sides. As human beings we are dignified, but we are not to be proud of it, for our dignity is borne as a reflection of the Ultimately Dignified. Yet it *is* a reflection. So people who are theists

¹¹Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*. See also Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Meridian, 1956), and J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), p. 37.

¹²Helmut Thielicke, *Nihilism*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 110.

see themselves as a sort of midpoint—above the rest of creation (for God has given them dominion over it—Gen 1:28-30; Ps 8:6-8) and below God (for people are not autonomous, not on their own).

This is then the ideal balanced human status. It is in failing to remain in that balance that our troubles arose, and the story of how that happened is very much a part of Christian theism. But before we see what tipped the balanced state of humanity, we need to understand a further implication of being created in the image of God.

4. Worldview Question 5: *Human beings can know both the world around them and God himself because God has built into them the capacity to do so and because he takes an active role in communicating with them.*

The foundation of human knowledge is the character of God as Creator. We are made in his image (Gen 1:27). As he is the all-knowing knower of all things, so we can be the sometimes knowing knowers of some things. The Gospel of John puts the concept this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.
(Jn 1:1-4)

The Word (in Greek *Logos*, from which our word *logic* comes) is eternal, an aspect of God himself.¹³ That is, logicity, intelligence, rationality, meaning are all inherent in God. It is out of this intelligence that the world, the universe, came to be. And therefore, because of this source the universe has structure, order and meaning.

Moreover, in the Word—this inherent intelligence—is the “light of men,” light being in the book of John a symbol for both moral capacity and intelligence. Verse 9 adds that the Word, “the true light . . . gives light to every man.” God’s own intelligence is thus the basis of human intelligence. Knowledge is possible because there is something to be known (God and his creation) and someone to know (the omniscient

¹³The word *logos* as used in John and elsewhere has a rich context of meaning. See, for example, J. N. Birdsall, “Logos,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 744-45.

God and human beings made in his image).¹⁴

Of course, God himself is forever so beyond us that we cannot have anything approaching total comprehension of him. In fact, if God desired, he could remain forever hidden. But God wants us to know him, and he takes the initiative in this transfer of knowledge.

In theological terms, this initiative is called revelation. God reveals, or discloses, himself to us in two basic ways: by general revelation and by special revelation. In general revelation God speaks through the created order of the universe. The apostle Paul wrote, "What may be known about God is plain to them [all people], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Rom 1:19-20). Centuries before that the psalmist wrote,

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge. (Ps 19:1-2)

In other words, God's existence and his nature as Creator and powerful sustainer of the universe are revealed in God's prime "handiwork," his universe. As we contemplate the magnitude of this—its orderliness and its beauty—we can learn much about God. When we turn from the universe at large to look at humanity, we see something more, for human beings add the dimension of personality. God, therefore, must be at least as personal as we are.

Thus far can general revelation go, but little further. As Thomas Aquinas said, we can know that God exists through general revelation, but we could never know that God is triune except for special revelation.

Special revelation is God's disclosure of himself in extranatural ways. Not only did he reveal himself by appearing in spectacular forms such as a bush that burns but is not consumed, but he also spoke to people in their own language. To Moses he defined himself as "I AM WHO I AM" and identified himself as the same God who had acted before on behalf of the Hebrew people. He called himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and

¹⁴For more extensive treatments of epistemology from a Christian perspective see Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977); W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); and chaps. 5-6 in my *Discipleship of the Mind*.

Jacob (Ex 3:1-17). In fact, God carried on a dialogue with Moses in which genuine two-way communication took place. This is one way special revelation occurred.

Later God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and revealed a long code of laws by which the Hebrews were to be ruled. Later yet God revealed himself to prophets from a number of walks of life. His word came to them, and they recorded it for posterity. The New Testament writer of the letter to the Hebrews summed it up this way: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (Heb 1:1). In any case, the revelations to Moses, David and the various prophets were, by command of God, written down and kept to be read over and over to the people (Deut 6:4-8; Ps 119). The cumulative writings grew to become the Old Testament, which was affirmed by Jesus himself as an accurate and authoritative revelation of God.¹⁵

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews did not end with the summary of God's past revelation. He went on to say, "But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things. . . . The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:2-3). Jesus Christ is God's ultimate special revelation. Because Jesus Christ was very God of very God, he showed us what God is like more fully than any other form of revelation can. Because Jesus was also completely human, he spoke more clearly to us than any other form of revelation can.

Again the opening of the Gospel of John is relevant. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, . . . full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). That is, the Word is Jesus Christ. "We have seen his glory," John continues, "the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father." Jesus has made God known to us in very fleshly terms.

The main point for us is that theism declares that God can and has clearly communicated with us. Because of this we can know much about who God is and what he desires for us. That is true for people at all times and all places, but it was especially true before the Fall, to which we now turn.

5. Worldview Question 3: *Human beings were created good, but through the Fall the image of God became defaced, though not so ruined as not to*

¹⁵See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

be capable of restoration; through the work of Christ, God redeemed humanity and began the process of restoring people to goodness, though any given person may choose to reject that redemption.

Human “history” can be subsumed under four words—*creation, Fall, redemption, glorification*. We have just seen the essential human characteristics. To these we must add that human beings and all the rest of creation were created good. As Genesis records, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Because God by his character sets the standards of righteousness, human goodness consisted in being what God wanted people to be—beings made in the image of God and acting out that nature in their daily life. The tragedy is that we did not stay as we were created.

As we have seen, human beings were created with a capacity for self-determination. God gave them the freedom to remain or not to remain in the close relationship of image to original. As Genesis 3 reports, the original pair, Adam and Eve, chose to disobey their Creator at the only point where the Creator put down limitations. This is the essence of the story of the Fall. Adam and Eve chose to eat the fruit God had forbidden them to eat, and hence they violated the personal relationship they had with their Creator.

In this manner people of all eras have attempted to set themselves up as autonomous beings, arbiters of their own way of life. They have chosen to act as if they had an existence independent from God. But that is precisely what they do not have, for they owe everything—both their origin and their continued existence—to God.

The result of this act of rebellion was death for Adam and Eve. And their death has involved for subsequent generations long centuries of personal, social and natural turmoil. In brief summary, we can say that the image of God in humanity was defaced in all its aspects. In *personality*, we lost our capacity to know ourselves accurately and to determine our own course of action freely in response to our intelligence.

Our *self-transcendence* was impaired by alienation from God, for as Adam and Eve turned from God, God let them go. And as we, humankind, slipped from close fellowship with the ultimately transcendent One, we lost our ability to stand over against the external universe, understand it, judge it accurately and thus make truly “free” decisions. Rather, humanity became more a servant to nature than to God. And our status as God’s vice

regent over nature (an aspect of the image of God) was reversed.

Human *intelligence* also became impaired. Now we can no longer gain a fully accurate knowledge of the world around us, nor are we able to reason without constantly falling into error. *Morally*, we became less able to discern good and evil and less able to live by the standards we do perceive. *Socially*, we began to exploit other people. *Creatively*, our imagination became separated from reality; imagination became illusion, and artists who created gods in their own image led humanity further and further from its origin. The vacuum in each human soul created by this string of consequences is ominous indeed. (The fullest biblical expression of these ideas is Rom 1–2.)

Theologians have summed it up this way: we have become alienated from God, from others, from nature and even from ourselves. This is the essence of *fallen* humanity.¹⁶

But humanity is redeemable and has been redeemed. The story of creation and fall is told in three chapters of Genesis. The story of redemption takes up the rest of the Scriptures. The Bible records God's love for us in searching us out, finding us in our lost, alienated condition, and redeeming us by the sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. God, in unmerited favor and great grace, has granted us the possibility of a new life, a life involving substantial healing of our alienations and restoration to fellowship with God.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray;
each of us has turned to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Is 53:6)

That God has provided a way back for us does not mean we play no role. Adam and Eve were not forced to fall. We are not forced to return. While it is not the purpose of this description of theism to take sides in a famous family squabble within Christian theism (predestination versus free will), it is necessary to note that Christians disagree on precisely what role God takes and what role he leaves us. Still, most would agree that God is the primary agent in salvation. Our role is to respond by repentance for our wrong attitudes and acts, to accept God's provi-

¹⁶See, for example, the discussion of the Fall and its effects in Francis A. Schaeffer's *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1972), pp. 69-101.

sions and to follow Christ as Lord as well as Savior.

Redeemed humanity is humanity on the way to restoration of the defaced image of God, in other words, substantial healing in every area—personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, social capacity and creativity. *Glorified* humanity is humanity totally healed and at peace with God, and individuals at peace with others and themselves. But this happens only on the other side of death and the bodily resurrection, the importance of which is stressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. Individual people are so important that they retain uniqueness—a personal and individual existence—forever. Glorified humanity is humanity transformed into a purified personality in fellowship with God and God's people. In short, in theism human beings are seen as significant because they are essentially godlike and though fallen can be restored to original dignity.

6. Worldview Question 4: *For each person death is either the gate to life with God and his people or the gate to eternal separation from the only thing that will ultimately fulfill human aspirations.*

The meaning of death is really part of proposition 5, but it is singled out here because attitudes to death are so important in every worldview. What happens when a person dies? Let's put it personally, for this aspect of one's worldview is indeed most personal. Do I disappear—personal extinction? Do I hibernate and return in a different form—reincarnation? Do I continue in a transformed existence in heaven or hell?

Christian theism clearly teaches the last of these. At death people are transformed. Either they enter an existence with God and his people—a glorified existence—or they enter an existence forever separated from God, holding their uniqueness in awful loneliness apart from precisely that which would fulfill them.

And that is the essence of hell. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that hell is a monument to human freedom—and, we might add, human dignity. Hell is God's tribute to the freedom he gave each of us to choose whom we would serve; it is a recognition that our decisions have a significance that extends far down into the reaches of foreverness.¹⁷

Those who respond to God's offer of salvation, however, people the plains of eternity as glorious creatures of God—completed, fulfilled but

¹⁷To pursue the biblical teaching on this subject see John Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), pp. 27-41.

not sated, engaged in the ever-enjoyable communion of the saints. The Scriptures give little detail about this existence, but its glimpses of heaven in Revelation 4–5 and 21, for example, create a longing Christians expect to be fulfilled beyond their fondest desires.

7. Worldview Question 6: *Ethics is transcendent and is based on the character of God as good (holy and loving).*

This proposition has already been considered as an implication of proposition 1. God is the source of the moral world as well as the physical world. God is good and expresses this in the laws and moral principles he has revealed in Scripture.

Made in God's image, we are essentially moral beings, and thus we cannot refuse to bring moral categories to bear on our actions. Of course, our sense of morality has been flawed by the Fall, and now we only brokenly reflect the truly good. Yet even in our moral relativity, we cannot get rid of the sense that some things are "right" or "natural" and others not.

For years homosexual behavior was considered immoral by most of society. Now a large number of people challenge this. But they do so not on the basis that no moral categories exist but that this one area—homosexuality—really ought to have been on the other side of the line dividing the moral from the immoral. Homosexuals do not usually condone incest! So the fact that people differ in their moral judgments does nothing to alter the fact that we continue to make, to live by and to violate moral judgments. Everyone lives in a moral universe, and virtually everyone—if they reflect on it—recognizes this and would have it no other way.

Theism, however, teaches that not only is there a moral universe but there is an absolute standard by which all moral judgments are measured. God himself—his character of goodness (holiness and love)—is the standard. Furthermore, Christians and Jews hold that God has revealed his standard in the various laws and principles expressed in the Bible. The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the apostle Paul's ethical teaching—in these and many other ways God has expressed his character to us. There is thus a standard of right and wrong, and people who want to know it can know it.

The fullest embodiment of the good, however, is Jesus Christ. He is the complete man, humanity as God would have it be. Paul calls him the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45-49). And in Jesus we see the good life incar-

nate. Jesus' good life was supremely revealed in his death—an act of infinite love, for as Paul says, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man. . . . But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:7-8). And the apostle John echoes, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10).

So ethics, while very much a human domain, is ultimately the business of God. We are not the measure of morality. God is.

8. Worldview Question 7: *History is linear, a meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity.*

"History is linear" means that the actions of people—as confusing and chaotic as they appear—are part of a meaningful sequence that has a beginning, a middle and an end. History is not reversible, not repeatable, not cyclic; history is not meaningless. Rather, history is teleological, going somewhere, directed toward a known end. The God who knows the end from the beginning is aware of and sovereign over the actions of humankind.

Several basic turning points in the course of history are singled out for special attention by biblical writers, and these form the background for the theistic understanding of human beings in time. These turning points include the creation, the fall into sin, the revelation of God to the Hebrews (which includes the calling of Abraham from Ur to Canaan, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law, the witness of the prophets), the incarnation, the life of Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection, Pentecost, the spread of the good news via the church, the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. This is a slightly more detailed list of events paralleling the pattern of human life: creation, fall, redemption, glorification.

Looked at in this way, history itself is a form of revelation. That is, not only does God reveal himself in history (*here, there, then*), but the very sequence of events is revelation. One can say, therefore, that history (especially as localized in the Jewish people) is the record of the involvement and concern of God in human events. History is the divine purpose of God in concrete form.

This pattern is, of course, dependent on the Christian tradition. It does not at first appear to take into account people other than Jews and Christians. Yet the Old Testament has much to say about the nations sur-

rounding Israel and about God-fearers (non-Jewish people who adopted Jewish beliefs and were considered a part of God's promise). And the New Testament stresses even more the international dimension of God's purposes and his reign.

The revelation of God's design took place primarily through one people—the Jews. And while we may say with William Ewer, “How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews,” we need not think that doing so indicates favoritism on God's part. Peter once said, “God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35).

Theists look forward, then, to history's being closed by judgment and a new age inaugurated beyond time. But prior to that new age, time is irreversible and history is localized in space. This conception needs to be stressed, since it differs dramatically from the typically Eastern notion. To much of the East, time is an illusion; history is eternally cyclic. Reincarnation brings a soul back into time again and again; progress in the soul's journey is long, arduous, perhaps eternal. But in Christian theism, “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Heb 9:27). An individual's choices have meaning to that person, to others and to God. History is the result of those choices that, under the sovereignty of God, bring about God's purposes for this world.

In short, the most important aspect of the theistic concept of history is that history has meaning because God—the Logos, meaning itself—is behind all events, not only “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3) but also “in all things . . . [working] for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Behind the apparent chaos of events stands the loving God sufficient for all.

CORE COMMITMENT

What then fuels the fire of consistent Christian theists? What provides the driving motive for their lives?

9. Worldview Question 8: *Christian theists live to seek first the kingdom of God, that is, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*

The Christian worldview is unique in many ways, but not the least of which is the way in which it serves as the focus for the ultimate meaning of life, not just the meaning of human history or human existence in the

abstract, but the meaning of life for each Christian. As God himself is the really real, the ultimate ground of being and the creator of all being other than himself, so devoted Christians live not for themselves but for God. "What is the chief end of man?" asks the Westminster Shorter Catechism.¹⁸ And the answer is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." To glorify God is not just to do so in religious worship, singing praise and enacting the traditional rites of the church. To glorify God is to reveal his character by being who we were created to be—the embodiment of the image of God in human form. When we are like him, we glorify him. And what is he like? He is not just the awesome I AM, shaking the heavens and the earth with his thunderous voice and transcendent being. He is Jesus. He is Immanuel, "God with us." To be like Jesus, then, is to be like God who is himself all the glory there is.

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, embodying in his earthly existence the presence of the Father's kingdom (Mk 1:14). We are to imitate him, to obey his command to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt 6:33). Lo and behold, when we do this we both avoid the tragic consequences of selfishness and pride and receive what really fulfills our lives. All the happiness and joy we seek when we substitute our desires for God's glory comes to us as a result of yielding our will to his. Human flourishing, then, while not being a primary goal, is a result of turning one's attention toward God and his glory.¹⁹ "All these things will be given to you as well," Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:33). To glorify God then, as the catechism says, is to enjoy him forever.

There are, of course, other ways to personalize this core commitment. Some Christians say it is to obey God; or to love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and their neighbors as themselves; or to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. Others may cast their answers in rather unique ways, but if these answers truly reflect a grasp and commitment to the Christian understanding of reality, they will emphasize the centrality of God and his good pleasure in what they say. They will not point first of all to happiness; happiness or joy will be a consequence, not a goal. Life is all about God, they will say, not about themselves.

¹⁸Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1.

¹⁹*Human flourishing* is a term frequently used today to describe the proper end toward which human life should be directed. Each worldview, however, has a different conception of just what human flourishing involves and whether it is in any way tied to transcendence. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007), pp. 16-20.

THE GRANDEUR OF GOD

It should by now be obvious that Christian theism is primarily dependent on its concept of God, for theism holds that everything stems from him. Nothing is prior to God or equal to him. He is *He Who Is*. Thus theism has a basis for metaphysics. Since He Who Is also has a worthy character and is thus *The Worthy One*, theism has a basis for ethics. Since He Who Is also is *He Who Knows*, theism has a basis for epistemology. In other words, theism is a complete worldview.

So the greatness of God is the central tenet of Christian theism. When a person recognizes this and consciously accepts and acts on it, this central conception is the rock, the transcendent reference point, that gives life meaning and makes the joys and sorrows of daily existence on planet earth significant moments in an unfolding drama in which one expects to participate forever, not always with sorrows but someday with joy alone. Even now, though, the world is, as Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote, “charged with the grandeur of God.”²⁰ That there are “God adumbrations in many daily forms” signals to us that God is not just in his heaven but with us—sustaining us, loving us and caring for us.²¹ Fully cognizant Christian theists, therefore, do not just believe and proclaim this view as true. Their first act is toward God—a response of love, obedience and praise to the Lord of the Universe, their maker, sustainer and, through Jesus Christ, their redeemer and friend.

²⁰“God’s Grandeur,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 66.

²¹Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1970), p. 216.

THE CLOCKWORK UNIVERSE

DEISM

*Say first, of God above or man below,
What can we reason but from what we know?
Of man what see we but his station here
From which to reason, or to which refer?
Through worlds unnumbered though the God be known,
'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.*

ALEXANDER POPE, *ESSAY ON MAN*

If theism lasted so long, what could possibly have happened to undermine it? If it satisfactorily answered all our basic questions, provided a refuge for our fears and hope for our future, why did anything else come along? Answers to these questions can be given on many levels. The fact is that many forces operated to shatter the basic intellectual unity of the West.¹

Deism developed, some say, as an attempt to bring unity out of a chaos of theological and philosophical discussion which in the seventeenth century became bogged down in interminable quarrels over what began to seem even to the disputants like trivial questions. Perhaps John Milton

¹A brief but helpful sketch of the transition from Christian theism to deism can be found in Jonathan Hill, *Faith in the Age of Reason* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004). See Charles Taylor's massive *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007) for a detailed study of the transition from Christian theism through deism to naturalism.

had such questions in mind when he envisioned the fallen angels making an epic game of philosophical theology:

Others apart sat on a Hill retir'd
 In thoughts more elevatèd, and reason'd high
 Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate,
 Fixt Fate, Free will, Foreknowledge absolute,
 And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.²

After decades of wearying discussion, Lutheran, Puritan and Anglican divines might well have wished to look again at points of agreement. Deism to some extent is a response to this, though the direction such agreement took put deism rather beyond the limits of traditional Christianity.

Another factor in the development of deism was a change in the location of the authority for knowledge about the divine; it shifted from the special revelation found in Scripture to the presence of Reason, “the candle of God,” in the human mind or to intuition, “the inner light.”³ Why should such a shift in authority take place?

One of the reasons is especially ironic. It is linked with an implication of theism which, when it was discovered, was very successfully developed. Through the Middle Ages, due in part to the rather Platonic theory of knowledge that was held, the attention of theistic scholars and intellectuals was directed toward God. The idea was that knowers in some sense *become* what they know. And since one should become in some sense good and holy, one should study God. Theology was thus considered the queen of the *sciences* (which at that time simply meant knowledge), for theology was the science of God.

If people studied animals or plants or minerals (zoology, biology, chemistry and physics), they were lowering themselves. This hierarchical view of reality is really more Platonic than theistic or Christian, because it picks up from Plato the notion that matter is somehow, if not evil, then at least irrational and certainly not good. Matter is something to be transcended, not to be understood.

But as more biblically oriented minds began to recognize, this is God's world—all of it. And though it is a fallen world, it has been created by God and has value. It is indeed worth knowing and understand-

²John Milton *Paradise Lost* 2.557-61.

³Avery Cardinal Dulles, in “The Deist Minimum” (*First Things* [January 2005], pp. 25-30), gives a remarkably lucid account of the rise and decline of deism.

ing. Furthermore, God is a rational God, and his universe is thus rational, orderly, knowable. Operating on this basis, scientists began investigating the *form* of the universe. A picture of God's world began to emerge; it was seen to be like a huge, well-ordered mechanism, a giant clockwork, whose gears and levers meshed with perfect mechanical precision. Such a picture seemed both to arise from scientific inquiry and to prompt more inquiry and stimulate more discovery about the makeup of the universe. In other words, science as we now know it was born and was amazingly successful.

At the same time, of course, there were those who distrusted the findings of the scientists. The case of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) is famous and, in a quite distorted form, is often cited today as proof of the antiscientific nature of Christian theism. In fact, Galileo as well as other renaissance scientists such as Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) held fully Christian worldviews.⁴ Moreover, in Bacon's words, knowledge became power, power to manipulate and bring creation more fully under human dominion. This view is echoed in modern parlance by J. Bronowski: "I define science as the organization of our knowledge in such a way that it commands more of the hidden potential in nature."⁵ If this way of obtaining knowledge about the universe was so successful, why not apply the same method to knowledge about God?

In Christian theism, of course, such a method was already given a role to play, for God was said to reveal himself in nature. The depth of content, however, that was conveyed in such general revelation was considered limited; much more was made known about God in special revelation. But deism denies that God can be known by revelation, by special acts of God's self-expression in, for example, Scripture or the incarnation. Having cast out Aristotle as an authority in matters of science, deism began to cast out Scripture as an authority in theology and to allow only the application of "human" reason. As Peter Medawar says, "The 17th-century doctrine of the *necessity* of reason was slowly giving way to a

⁴Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton point out that "on the whole the Catholic church had no argument with Galileo's theories as science." Rather, it was actually more opposed to "Galileo's attack on Aristotelian philosophy" than to any undermining of Christian belief. See *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994), pp. 38-40.

⁵J. Bronowski, *Science and Human Values* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 7.

belief in the *sufficiency* of reason.”⁶ Deism thus sees God only in “Nature,” by which was meant the system of the universe. And since the system of the universe is seen as a giant clockwork, God is seen as the clock-maker.

In some ways, we can say that limiting knowledge about God to general revelation is like finding that eating eggs for breakfast makes the morning go well, and then eating *only* eggs for breakfast (and maybe lunch and dinner too) for the rest of one’s life (which now unwittingly becomes rather shortened!). To be sure, theism assumes that we can know something about God from nature. But it also holds that there is much *more to know* than can be known that way and that there are *other ways to come to know*.

BASIC DEISM

As Frederick Copleston explains, deism historically is not really a “school” of thought. In the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century more than a few thinkers came to be called deists or called themselves

Whatever God hath revealed is certainly true: no doubt can be made of it. This is the proper object of faith: but whether it be a divine revelation or no, reason must judge; which can never permit the mind to reject a greater evidence to embrace what is less evident, nor allow it to entertain probability in opposition to knowledge and certainty. There can be no evidence that any traditional revelation is of divine original, in the words we receive it, and in the sense we understand it, so clear and so certain as that of the principles of reason: and therefore Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with, the clear and self-evident dictates of reason, has a right to be urged or assented to as a matter of faith, wherein reason hath nothing to do.

JOHN LOCKE, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 4.18

deists. These men held a number of related views, but not all held every doctrine in common. John Locke (1632-1704), for example, did not re-

⁶Peter Medawar, “On ‘The Effecting of All Things Possible,’” *The Listener*, October 2, 1969, p. 438.

ject the idea of revelation, but he did insist that human reason was to be used to judge it.⁷ Some *cold* deists, like Voltaire (1694-1778), were hostile to Christianity; some *warm* deists, like Locke, were not.⁸ Some, like Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), believed in the immortality of the soul; some did not. Some believed God left his creation to function on its own; some believed in providence. Some believed in a mildly personal God; others did not. So deists were much less united on basic issues than were theists.⁹ Moreover, as we will see below, some forms of popular deism, such as *moralistic therapeutic deism*, are thought of by some people as fully Christian.

Still, it is helpful to think of deism as a system and to state that system in a relatively extreme form, for in that way we will be able to grasp the implications the various “reductions” of theism were beginning to have in the eighteenth century. Naturalism, as we shall see, pushes these implications even further.

1. Worldview Question 1: *A transcendent God, as a First Cause, created the universe but then left it to run on its own. God is thus not immanent, not triune, not fully personal, not sovereign over human affairs, not providential.*

As in theism, the most important proposition regards the existence and character of God. *Warm* deism, such as that of Franklin, who confessed, “I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence,” retains enough sense of God’s personality that Franklin thought this God “ought to be worshipped.”¹⁰ But *cold* deism eliminates most features of personality God is said to display. He is only a transcendent force or energy, a Prime Mover or First Cause, a beginning to the otherwise infinite regress of past causes. But he is really not a *he*, though the personal pronoun remains in the language used about him. He does not care for his creation; he does not love it. He has no “personal” relationship to it at all. Certainly he did not become incarnate in Jesus. He is purely monotheistic. As Thomas Paine said, “The only idea man can affix

⁷Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), 5:162-63.

⁸I owe the terms *cold* and *warm* to philosopher Daniel Synnestvedt (private correspondence).

⁹Peter Gay’s *Deism: An Anthology* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1968) is a useful collection of writings from a wide variety of deist writers.

¹⁰Benjamin Franklin, Letter to Ezra Stiles, March 9, 1790 <<http://www.franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedNames.jsp>>.

to the name of God is *first cause*, the cause of all things."¹¹

A modern deist of sorts, Buckminster Fuller, expressed his faith this way: "I have faith in the integrity of the anticipatory intellectual wisdom which we may call 'God.'"¹² But Fuller's God is not a person to be worshiped, merely an intellect or force to be recognized.

To the deist, then, God is distant, foreign, alien. The lonely state this leaves humanity in was, however, not seemingly felt by early deists. Almost two centuries passed before this implication was played out on the field of human emotions.

2. Worldview Question 2: *The cosmos God created is determined, because it is created as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system; no miracle is possible.*

In *cold* deism the system of the universe is closed in two senses. First, it is closed to God's reordering, for he is not "interested" in it. He merely brought it to be. Therefore, no miracles or events that reveal any special interests of God are possible. Any tampering or apparent tampering with the machinery of the universe would suggest that God had made a mistake in the original plan, and that would be beneath the dignity of an all-competent deity.

Second, the universe is closed to human reordering because it is locked up in a clocklike fashion. To be able to reorder the system, any human being alone or with others would have to be able to transcend it, get out of the chain of cause and effect. But this we cannot do. We should note, however, that this second implication is not much recognized by deists. Most continue to assume, as we all do apart from reflection, that we can act to change our environment.

3. Worldview Question 3: *Human beings, though personal, are a part of the clockwork of the universe.*

To be sure, deists do not deny that humans are personal. Each of us has self-consciousness and, at least on first glance, self-determination. But these

¹¹Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, part 1, chapter 10, first sentence <http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/thomas_paine/age_of_reason/part1.html#10>.

¹²Buckminster Fuller, *Ideas and Integrities*, quoted by Sara Sanborn ("Who Is Buckminster Fuller?" *Commentary*, October 1973, p. 60), who comments that "Fuller's Benevolent Intelligence seems compounded out of the Great Watchmaker of the Deists and Emerson's Over-Soul" (p. 66).

have to be seen in the light of human dimensions only. That is, as human beings we have no essential relation to God—as image to original—and thus we have no way to transcend the system in which we find ourselves.

Bishop François Fénelon (1651-1715), criticizing the deists of his day, wrote, “They credit themselves with acknowledging God as the creator whose wisdom is evident in his works; but according to them, God would be neither good nor wise if he had given man free will—that is, the power to sin, to turn away from his final goal, to reverse the order and be forever lost.”¹³ Fénelon put his finger on a major problem within deism: human beings have lost their ability to act significantly. If we cannot “reverse the order,” then we cannot be significant. We can only be puppets. If an individual has personality, it must then be a type that does not include the element of self-determination.

Deists, of course, recognize that human beings have intelligence (to be sure, they emphasize human reason), a sense of morality (deists are very interested in ethics), a capacity for community and for creativity. But none of these, while built into us as created beings, is grounded in God’s character. None has any special relationship to God; each is on its own.

4. Worldview Question 4: *Human beings may or may not have a life beyond their physical existence.*

Here there is a distinction between *warm* and *cold* deists. Deism is the historical result of the decay of robust Christian theism. That is, specific commitments and beliefs of traditional Christianity are gradually abandoned. The first and most significant belief to be eroded was the full personhood and trinitarian nature of God. Reducing God to a force or ultimate intelligence eventually had catastrophic results. In fact, as we shall see, not only naturalism but nihilism is the final result. Were the history of worldviews a matter of the immediate working out of rational implications of a change in the idea of the really real, a belief in an after-life would have immediately disappeared. But it didn’t. Nor did a belief in morality; that took another century. So *warm* deists, those closest to Christian theists, persisted in the notion of an afterlife, and *cold* deists, those further away, did not.

¹³François Fénelon, *Lettres sur divers sujets, métaphysique et de religion*, letter 5. Quoted in Émile Bréhier, *The History of Philosophy*, trans. Wade Baskin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 5:14.

5. Worldview Question 5: *Through our innate and autonomous human reason and the methods of science, we can not only know the universe but we can infer at least something of what God is like. The cosmos, this world, is understood to be in its normal state; it is not fallen or abnormal.*

In deism human reason becomes autonomous. That is, without relying on any revelation from the outside—no Scripture, no messages from God via living prophets or dreams and visions—human beings have the ability to know themselves, the universe and even God. As John Locke put it,

Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with, the clear and self-evident dictates of reason, has a right to be urged or assented to as a matter of faith, wherein reason has nothing to do.¹⁴

Because the universe is essentially as God created it, and because people have the intellectual capacity to understand the world around them, they can learn about God from a study of his universe. The Scriptures, as we saw above, give a basis for it, for the psalmist wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Ps 19:1). Of course, theists too maintain that God has revealed himself in nature. But for a theist God has also revealed himself in words—in propositional, verbalized revelation to his prophets and the various biblical writers. And, theists maintain, God has also revealed himself in his Son, Jesus—“the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). But for deists God does not communicate with people. No special revelation is necessary, and none has occurred.

Émile Bréhier, a historian of philosophy, sums up well the difference between deism and theism:

We see clearly that a new conception of man, wholly incompatible with the Christian faith, had been introduced: God the architect who produced and maintained a marvelous order in the universe had been discovered in nature, and there was no longer a place for the God of the Christian drama, the God who bestowed upon Adam “the power to sin and to *reverse the order.*” God was in nature and no longer in history; he was in the wonders analyzed by naturalists and biologists and no longer in the human conscience, with feelings of sin, disgrace, or grace that accompanied his presence; he had left man in charge of his own destiny.¹⁵

¹⁴John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 4.18.10 (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 2:425-26.

¹⁵Bréhier, *History of Philosophy* 5:15.

The God who was discovered by the deists was an architect, but not a lover or a judge or personal in any way. He was not one who acted in history. He simply had left the world alone. But humanity, while in one sense the maker of its own destiny, was yet locked into the closed system. Human freedom from God was not a freedom *to* anything; in fact, it was not a freedom at all.

One tension in deism is found at the opening of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1732-1734). Pope writes,

Say first, of God above or man below,
 What can we reason but from what we know?
 Of man what see we but his station here
 From which to reason, or to which refer?
 Through worlds unnumbered though the God be known,
 'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.¹⁶

These six lines state that we can know God only through studying the world around us. We learn from data and proceed from the specific to the general. Nothing is revealed to us outside that which we experience. Then Pope continues,

He who through vast immensity can pierce,
 See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
 Observe how system into system runs,
 What other planets circle other suns,
 What varied being peoples ev'ry star,
 May tell why heav'n has made us as we are.
 But of this frame the bearings and the ties,
 The strong connections, nice dependencies,
 Gradations just, has thy pervading soul
 Looked through? or can a part contain the whole?¹⁷

Pope assumes here a knowledge of God and of nature that is not capable of being gained by experience. He even admits this as he challenges us as readers on whether we really have "looked through" the universe and seen its clockwork. But if we haven't seen it, then presumably neither has Pope. How then does Pope know it is a vast, all-ordered clockwork?

One can't have it both ways. Either (1) all knowledge comes from expe-

¹⁶Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man* 1.17-22.

¹⁷Ibid., lines 23-32; cf. lines 233-58.

rience and we, not being infinite, cannot know the system as a whole, or (2) some knowledge comes from another source—for example, from innate ideas built into us or from revelation from the outside. But Pope, like most deists, discounts revelation. So we have a tension in Pope's epistemology. And it was just such tensions that made eighteenth-century deism an unstable worldview.

6. Worldview Question 6: *Ethics is intuitive or limited to general revelation; because the universe is normal, it reveals what is right.*

Deism's ethics in general is founded on the notion that built into human nature is the capacity to sense the difference between good and evil. Human reason is not "fallen" as in Christian theism; so when it is employed by people of good will, it results in moral discernment. Of course, human beings are free not to do what they discern as good; evil then is a result of human beings not conforming to their inherent nature.¹⁸

So much for human good and evil. But what about natural evil? Natural events—floods, hurricanes, earthquakes—bring disaster, massive pain and suffering to so many. Deists do not consider either human reason or the universe itself to be "fallen." Rather it is in its normal state. How, then, can the normal universe in which we experience so much tragedy still be good? Isn't God, the omnipotent Creator, responsible for everything as it is? Doesn't this world reflect either what God wants or what he is like? Is God, then, really good?

While it is probably unfair to charge deism itself with the confusion illustrated by Alexander Pope, it is instructive to see what can happen when the implications of deism are exposed. Pope writes:

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
 All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
 All discord, harmony not understood;
 All partial evil, universal good;
 And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
 One truth is clear, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT.¹⁹

This position ends in destroying ethics. If whatever is is right, then

¹⁸From the standpoint of Christian theism there is much to commend in this notion of *natural law*. C. S. Lewis bases his opening argument in *Mere Christianity* on the universality of the notion of good and evil.

¹⁹Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man* 1.289-94.

there is no evil. Good becomes indistinguishable from evil. As Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) said, "If God exists, he must be the devil." Or, worse luck, there must not be *good* at all. For without the ability to distinguish, there can be neither one nor the other, neither good nor evil. Ethics disappears.

It is surely necessary to point out that not all deists saw (or now see) that their assumptions entail Pope's conclusions. Some felt, in fact, that Jesus' ethical teachings were really natural law expressed in words. And, of course, the Sermon on the Mount does not contain anything like the proposition "Whatever is, is right." A deeper study of the deists would, I believe, lead to the conclusion that these early deists simply were inconsistent and did not recognize it.

Alexander Pope himself is inconsistent, for while he held that whatever is is right, he also berated humanity for pride (which, if it is, must be right!).

In pride, in reas'ning pride our error lies;
 All quit their sphere and rush into the skies.
 Pride still aiming at blessed abodes;
 Men would be angels, angels would be gods. . . .
 And who but wishes to invert the laws
 Of order sins against th' Eternal Cause.²⁰

For a person to think of himself more highly than he ought was pride. Pride was wrong, even a *sin*. Yet note: a sin not against a personal God but against the "Eternal Cause," against a philosophic abstraction. Even the word *sin* takes on a new color in such a context. More important, however, the whole notion of sin must disappear if one holds on other grounds that whatever is, is right.

7. Worldview Question 7: *History is linear, for the course of the cosmos was determined at creation. Still the meaning of the events of history remains to be understood by the application of human reason to the data unearthed and made available to historians.*

If deists were to be consistent to the clockmaker/clockwork metaphor, they would be little interested in history. As Bréhier has pointed out, they sought knowledge of God primarily in nature as understood in the grow-

²⁰Ibid., lines 123-26, 129-30.

ing content of natural science. The course of Jewish history as recorded in the Bible was largely dismissed as legend, at least partially because it insisted on God's direct action on and among his chosen people. The accounts of both Testaments are filled with miracles. The deists say miracles can't happen. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), for example, produced *The Life and Morals of Jesus*, better known as The Jefferson Bible. His popular version excluded narratives of all the miracles. By such a procedure the Bible became largely discounted as giving insight into God or human beings or, especially, the natural order. Jefferson became the judge of what could be true or worthy of belief. At best the biblical narratives were illustrations of divine law from which ethical principles could be derived. Then too H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768) attempted "to reconstruct the life and preaching of Jesus with the tools of critical history."²¹ And John Toland (1670-1722) argued that Christianity was as old as creation; the gospel was a "republication" of the religion of nature. With views like those, even the specific acts of history are not important for true religion. The stress is on general rules. As Pope says, "The first Almighty Cause / Acts not by partial but by gen'ral laws."²² God is quite uninterested in individual men and women or even whole peoples. Besides, the universe is closed, not open to his reordering at all.

Nonetheless intellectuals, historians and philosophers with a basically deistic bent were, as Synnestvedt says, "fascinated by history." He cites major works by seven major deistic scholars, including a *History of England* by David Hume (1711-1776), *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* by Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794).²³ All of these "histories" are, of course, based totally on the autonomy of human reason; none of them appeal to perspectives derived from revelation. As a result they display a wide variety of interpretations of the meaning and significance of human events.

²¹Dulles, "The Deist Minimum," p. 29.

²²Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man* 1.145-46.

²³Others mentioned by Synnestvedt in private correspondence include *The New Science* by Giovanni Battista Vico (1688-1744), *The Age of Louis XIV* and *Essay on Manners* by Voltaire, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* by Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke (1679-1751), and *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

8. Worldview Question 8: *Cold deists use their own autonomous reason to determine their goal in life; warm deists may reflect on their commitment to a somewhat personal God and determine their goal in accordance with what they believe their God would be pleased with.*

Because, unlike Christian theism, there is no orthodox deism, each deist is free to use reason, intuition, tradition, or whatever squares with his or her view of ultimate reality. Deists' core commitments will thus reflect their personal passions or, in common parlance, what turns them on—the flourishing of their individual personal life, their family life, public life. Early deists such as Franklin and Jefferson took public welfare as a key commitment. Others like Paine combined their commitment to public life with a passion for their own personal freedom (and the freedom of everyone in the commonwealth) from the dictates of religion. But the more a deist becomes divorced from allegiance to a personal God, the less religious mores and traditional goals characterize their core commitments. As a result, societies themselves become more pluralistic and less socially cohesive. Thus the tie between deism as a worldview and freedom as a personal and social goal inspired the bloody violence of the French Revolution and spurred on the development of democracy and eventually the vast cultural diversification of American society. Each year the Western World, especially America, becomes more pluralistic than the year before.

MODERN DEISM

As can be seen from the above description, deism has not been a stable compound. The reasons for this are not hard to see. Deism is dependent on Christian theism for its affirmations. It is dependent on what it omits for its particular character. The first and most important loss was its rejection of the full personal character of God. God, in the minds of many in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, kept his omnipotence, his character as creator and, for the most part, his omniscience, but he lost his omnipresence (his intimate connection with and interest in his creation). Eventually he lost even his will, becoming a mere abstract intelligent force, providing a sufficient reason for the existence of the universe whose origin otherwise could not be explained. The spectrum from full personality to sheer abstraction is represented by a variety of deistic types. We have already noticed the differences between *warm* and *cold*

deism as represented by early deists. Now we will examine some modern forms and introduce new labels for them: (1) *sophisticated scientific deism*, (2) *sophisticated philosophic deism* and (3) *popular deism* of which *moralistic therapeutic deism* is a particular illustration.

Sophisticated scientific deism. A *cold* deism continues to thrive in some scientists and a few humanists in academic centers across the world. Scientists like Albert Einstein, who “see” a higher power at work in or behind the universe and want to maintain reason in a created world, can

It’s hard for me to believe that everything out there is just an accident. . . . [Yet] I don’t have any religious belief. I don’t believe that there is a God. I don’t believe in Christianity or Judaism or anything like that, okay? I’m not an atheist. . . . I’m not an agnostic. . . . I’m just in a simple state. I don’t know what there is or might be. . . . But on the other hand, what I can say is that it seems likely to me that this particular universe we have is a consequence of something which I would call intelligent.

ROBERT WRIGHT, *Three Scientists and Their Gods*

be considered deists at heart, though no doubt many would not wish to claim anything sounding quite so much like a philosophy of life.²⁴

Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking also leaves room for a deistic God. The fundamental laws of the universe “may have originally been decreed by God,” he writes, “but it appears that he has since left the universe to evolve according to them and does not now intervene in it.”²⁵ His rejection of a theistic God is clear. Actress and New Age leader Shirley MacLaine once asked Hawking if there is a God who “created the universe and guides his creation.” “No,” he replied simply in his computer-generated voice.²⁶ After all, if the universe is “self-contained, having no boundary or edge,” as Hawking suspects is true, then there is no need for a Creator; God becomes superfluous.²⁷ Hawking therefore uses “the term

²⁴Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Bonanza, 1954). See also Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: Warner, 1978).

²⁵Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988), p. 122.

²⁶Michael White and John Gribbin, *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science* (New York: Plume, 1992), p. 3.

²⁷Hawking, *Brief History*, p. 141.

God as the embodiment of the laws of physics.”²⁸ Hawking is not alone among scientists and other intellectuals in holding such a view.²⁹

Sophisticated philosophic deism. Recently Antony Flew, a long-time vocal atheist and opponent of Christian theism, has declared himself a deist. His change of mind came from his growing sense that a variety of arguments, from those of Aristotle to the fine-tuning of the universe, are really compelling. As he put it, “he simply had to go where the evidence led.”³⁰ God, for Flew, has most of the “classical theological attributes.” Though he rejects the notion of special revelation from this God, he is open to its possibility. The authenticity of this move by such a formerly convinced atheist has been questioned, but the evidence for it is rock solid.³¹

One of the clearest exponents of a more humanistic *warm* deism is Václav Havel, the playwright, public intellectual and former president of the Czech Republic. The defining characteristic of Havel’s worldview is his understanding of prime reality, his answer to the first worldview question. Havel uses several terms to label his answer: *Being, mystery of being, order of existence, the hidden sphere, absolute horizon* or *final horizon*. All of these terms suggest a *cold* deism. But there is nothing cold about his experience of this sheer Being. Havel, for example, ponders why, when he boards a streetcar late at night with no conductor to observe him, he always feels guilty when he thinks of not paying the fare. Then he comments about the interior dialogue that ensues:

Who, then, is in fact conversing with me? Obviously someone I hold in

²⁸Kitty Ferguson, *Stephen Hawking: Quest for a Theory of the Universe* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1991), p. 84.

²⁹Another possibility is that scientists who see intelligence in the workings of the universe are *panentheists*. Panentheism is a sort of halfway house between theism and pantheism. In panentheism the universe is *not* God but *in* God. Or God is the *mind* of the universe, not equated with it but not separate from it. This worldview tends to be held only by highly intellectual people. Physicist Paul Davies, for example, was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. See his “Physics and the Mind of God: The Templeton Prize Address,” *First Things* (August/September, 1995), pp. 31-35; and also *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); and *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

³⁰See Antony Flew with Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007); and Gary Habermas, “Antony Flew’s Deism Revisited,” *Philosophia Christi* 9, no. 202 (2007), also on the Web at <www.epociety.org>.

³¹See Flew’s response to Richard Dawkins’s suggestion in *The God Delusion* that Flew’s conversion is the result of old age not rational consideration (“Documentation: A Reply to Richard Dawkins,” *First Things* [December 2008], pp. 21-22).

higher regard than the transport commission, than my best friends (this would come out when the voice would take issue with their opinions), and higher, in some regards than myself, that is, myself as subject of my existence-in-the-world and the carrier of my "existential" interests (one of which is the rather natural effort to save a crown). Someone who "knows everything" (and is therefore omniscient), is everywhere (and therefore omnipresent) and remembers everything; someone who, though infinitely understanding, is entirely incorruptible; who is for me, the highest and utterly unequivocal authority in all moral questions and who is thus Law itself; someone eternal, who through himself makes me eternal as well, so that I cannot imagine the arrival of a moment when everything will come to an end, thus terminating my dependence on him as well; someone to whom I relate entirely and for whom, ultimately, I would do everything. At the same time, this "someone" addresses me directly and personally (not merely as an anonymous public passenger, as the transport commission does).³²

These reflections are close, if not identical, to a fully theistic conception of God. Surely some Being that is omniscient, omnipresent and good, and who addresses you directly and personally, must himself (itself just doesn't fit these criteria) be personal.

Havel too sees this. And yet he draws back from the conclusion:

But who is it? God? There are many subtle reasons why I'm reluctant to use that word; one factor here is a certain sense of shame (I don't know exactly for what, why and before whom), but the main thing, I suppose, is a fear that with this all too specific designation (or rather assertion) that "God is," I would be projecting an experience that is entirely personal and vague (never mind how profound and urgent it may be), too single-mindedly "outward," onto that problem-fraught screen called "objective reality," and thus I would go too far beyond it.³³

So, while Being manifests characteristics that seem to demand a commitment to theism, Havel avoids this conclusion by shifting his attention from Being (as an objective existent) to himself (as a reflector on his conscious experience). What Havel does draw from this experience—to very good advantage, by the way—is that Being has a moral dimension. Being, then, is the "good" ontological foundation for human moral responsibility.³⁴

³²Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga; June 1979-September 1982*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), p. 345-46.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 346.

³⁴Havel has a profound understanding of his whole worldview; this has been analyzed in my

Popular deism. Popular deism is popular in two senses. It is both a simple, easy-going belief in the existence of an omnipotent, impersonal, transcendent being, a force or an intelligence, and it is a vague belief held by millions of Americans and, I suspect, millions more in the rest of the Western world.

In its *cold* versions, God is simply the abstract force that brought the world into existence and has largely left it to operate on its own. My guess, and it is only a guess, is that many well-educated people, especially academics and professionals, would acknowledge the probable existence of such a being but would largely ignore his existence in their daily lives. Their moral sensitivity would be grounded in the public memory of common Christian virtues, the mores of society, the occasional use of their own mind when dealing with specific issues, such as honesty in business, attitudes to sexual orientation and practices. They live secular lives without much thought of what God might think. Surely a good life will prepare one for life after death, if, indeed, there is such a thing.

In its *warmest* versions, God clearly is personal and even friendly. University of North Carolina sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton recently conducted a massive study of the religious beliefs of teenagers. Their conclusion was that most of these teenagers adhered to what they called *moralistic therapeutic deism*. They summed up this world view as follows.

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.³⁵

God, ultimate reality, in this view makes no demand on his creation to be holy, righteous or even very good. "As one 17-year-old conservative Protes-

Václav Havel: *The Intellectual Conscience of International Politics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), now out of print but available from jsire@prodigy.net.

³⁵Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 162-63.

tant girl from Florida told us [the researchers], 'God's all around you, all the time. He believes in forgiving people and whatnot and he's there to guide us, for somebody to talk to and help us through our problems. Of course, he doesn't talk back.'³⁶ When asked what God is like, a Bryn Mawr College student drew a big smiley face and wrote, "He's one big smiley face. Big hands . . . big hands."³⁷ This form of deism is certainly not limited to youth; it is, I suspect, very much like that of their parents and adult neighbors.

AN UNSTABLE COMPOUND

Enlightenment deism did not prove to be a stable worldview. Historically it held sway over the intellectual world of France and England from the late seventeenth into the first half of the eighteenth century. Then its cultural significance declined. But few, if any, major shifts in worldview disappear completely. Deism is indeed still alive and well.

What made and continues to make deism so unstable? The primary reasons, I think, are these:³⁸

First, autonomous human reason replaced the Bible and tradition as the authority for the way ultimate reality was understood. Everyone could decide for themselves what God was like. Once the concept of God was up for grabs, there was no stopping his being reduced from the complex Christian theistic idea of God to a minimal, simple force or abstract intelligence. The gradual slide from a full-blooded Christian theism was thus inevitable; what replaced the biblical God was a variety of gods, each with fewer and fewer features of personality.

Second, autonomous human reason replaced the Bible and tradition as the authority for morality. At first autonomous reason and traditional morality tracked well together. The human mind exposed to the surrounding culture assumed that, for the most part, those cultural values were in fact reasonable. In the early years, deists placed confidence in the universality of human nature; people who used their reason would agree

³⁶Ibid., p. 164.

³⁷From a survey conducted in 1992 by students before my campus lecture.

³⁸To these reasons Dulles adds these internal tensions: "[1] If there is an omnipotent God, capable of designing the entire universe and launching it into existence, it seems strange to hold that this God cannot intervene in the world. . . . [2] If God was infinite in being, . . . was it not unreasonable to reject the notion of mystery? . . . [3] If God had never intervened in the world, His existence could only be, from a human perspective, superfluous" (Dulles, "The Deist Minimum," p. 28).

on what was right and wrong.³⁹ This eventually turned out to be a false hope. However universal human nature may be, in practice people do not agree on matters of good and evil or what constitutes “good” behavior as much as the early deists thought.

Third, deists rejected the biblical notion of the Fall and assumed that the present universe is in its normal, created state. As Pope said, “whatever is, is right.” One could derive one’s values from clues from the natural order. One clue was the universality of human nature. But if whatever is, is right, then no place is left for a distinctive content to ethics.

Fourth, since the universe is closed to reordering, human action is determined. What then happens to human significance? People become cogs in the clockwork mechanism of the universe. Human significance and mechanical determinism are impossible bedfellows.

Fifth, today we find even more aspects of deism to question. Scientists have largely abandoned thinking of the universe as a giant clock. Electrons (not to mention other even more baffling subatomic particles) do not behave like minute pieces of machinery. If the universe is a mechanism, it is far more complex than was then thought, and God must be quite different from a mere “architect” or “clockmaker.” Furthermore, the human personality is a “fact” of the universe. If God made that, must he not be personal?

So historically, deism was a transitional worldview, and yet it is not dead in either popular or sophisticated forms. On a popular level, many people today believe that God exists, but when asked what God is like, they limit their description to words like *Energy*, *The Force*, *First Cause*, something to get the universe running and often capitalized to give it the aura of divinity. As Étienne Gilson says, “For almost two centuries . . . the ghost of the Christian God has been attended by the ghost of Christian religion: a vague feeling of religiosity, a sort of trusting familiarity with some supreme good fellow to whom other good fellows can hopefully apply when they are in trouble.”⁴⁰

In what was to follow even the ghost of the Christian God disappeared. It is to that worldview we now turn.

³⁹Dulles says, “Although deism portrayed itself as a pure product of unaided reason, it was not what it claimed to be. Its basic tenets concerning God, the virtuous life, and rewards beyond the grave were in fact derived from Christianity, the faith in which the deists themselves had been raised” (ibid., p. 28).

⁴⁰Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1941), pp. 106-7.