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RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE: JONATHAN EDWARDS VERSUS THE GOD OF DEISM

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INTRODUCTION

Of the many possible answers to the question ‘Why should we study Jonathan Edwards?’ the one that matters for us in the context of theological education is that we think he has something distinctively beneficial to say to the contemporary church. If this is not so, then we ought to pursue other priorities. But I think that Edwards *does* have something truly unique to contribute. This appraisal is not only an appreciation of his godliness and genius, which were indeed extraordinary in their own right, but also a product of his location in history. He lived before the divisions between science and religion, philosophy and theology, and church and state became walls. He lived in a time when the prospects for achieving a total synthesis of all human endeavours under Christian auspices still appeared to be close at hand. He was thus able to construct an all-encompassing, unified vision of reality that can seem almost beyond the imagination to contemporary Christians living in our virtual ghettos, consigned as we are to the margins of intellectual, cultural, and political life.

Yet Edwards also lived during the Enlightenment, in a world in which most of modernity’s demons were making their polite *début*. Edwards noticed them. He was in fact highly sensitive to the challenges most of the characteristic Enlightenment thought-forms presented to orthodox Christianity, and nearly all of his output could be understood as an apologetic in response to them.² But in so doing Edwards was not acting

¹ This paper was given to the Free Church of Scotland College Theological Society, 26 October 2005. My thanks to Dr Iain D. Campbell, Prof. David Fergusson, and the participants in the Society’s post-lecture discussion who commented on this paper. Any errors, of course, remain my own.

² See Stephen J. Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: the Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003).

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as a mere reactionary.³ He was in some ways himself a child of the Enlightenment, one who welcomed the opportunities afforded by the age and readily accepted many of its intellectual tools.⁴ He took them up, however, not to capitulate to the proto-liberalism he deplored, but in order to ‘set forth divine and Christian doctrines in a clear light, and unravel the difficulties that attend them, and defend them with great strength and clearness of reason’.⁵ In this interpretive/apologetic work of presenting the truth as clearly and persuasively as possible, Edwards was participating in God’s own project in creating the universe, which was to communicate himself to his intelligent creatures in ever-increasing streams of noetic, affectional, and ontological self-revelation.⁶ And so, in our age that retains a strange deference to a number of key Enlightenment projects while also embracing postmodernism when it suits, Edwards can yet help us. He helps us not only by lending us his formulations, some of which are indeed ripe for wholesale appropriation, but perhaps more so by giving us a paradigm of what it means to apply God’s eternal truths to one’s own situation in a relevant and compelling way. This is indeed the perennial task given to theologians and ministers of every generation.

³ Peter Gay saw this slightly differently: ‘His mind was the opposite of reactionary or fundamentalist. Yet his history was both. Such apparent contradictions are a sign of something extraordinary; with Jonathan Edwards, they are the mark of tragedy.’ (Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966], p. 104.)

⁴ ‘A son of the Enlightenment who adopted key Enlightenment assumptions, Edwards nevertheless spent his life fighting Enlightenment religion.’ (Gerald McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], pp. 3-4.) See also George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 456-8.

⁵ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 5: Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 303. Edwards was not here applying these words of millennial expectation to himself, but the description would seem to fit his self-understanding. See also Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 18: The "Miscellanies"*, 501-832, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 86.

⁶ See for example Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 8: Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 443. Edwards’ Trinitarian doctrine of revelation, in which divine communication entails knowing, loving, and becoming like God, is the subject of my forthcoming doctoral dissertation.

So Edwards was well placed, equipped, and inclined to confront Enlightenment ideology. And this ideology manifested itself most radically in the theological realm as deism, the 'Enlightenment philosophy of religion'.⁷ Edwards saw deism as an ominous threat, and it was a refutation of this religious manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* that most occupied Edwards throughout his theological career.⁸ This paper will argue that, although often described in other terms, the syndrome known as deism still represents a problem for the contemporary Western church; and, that in addition to his larger example of thoughtful and faithful engagement with the corrosive intellectual currents of one's own day, Jonathan Edwards provides us some specific directions to oppose it. First, let me establish briefly the relevant historical context.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was many things: philosopher, scientist, theologian, pastor, evangelist, missionary, university president, not to mention head of a remarkable Christian family.⁹ He came to Christian faith not by hearing something new, but in what would become a *motif* in his ministry, by apprehending the sublime beauty of a truth he already knew: God's sovereignty over human destiny.¹⁰ Edwards graduated MA from the young theological college in New Haven, Connecticut, now known as Yale University. Most of his ministry was spent at Northampton, where he served first as assistant minister and then as successor to his esteemed grandfather Solomon Stoddard. There he saw the Great Awakening come and go, and much of his earlier writings were concerned to explain, defend and moderate this challenge to conventional

⁷ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Der Deismus' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 1925, quoted in Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, reprinted 1985), p. 289.

⁸ 'It is also clear from Edward's sermons that he considered deism Reformed Christianity's foremost nemesis... deism could be seen on the New England horizon, if usually only in the form of its underdeveloped cousin Arminianism' (McDermott, *Confronts*, p. 46).

⁹ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 1-2; 10; 13-14; Appendix C. See also Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (eds), *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 1.

¹⁰ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 40-41.

religious life. Edwards was eventually expelled from his pulpit over his decision to depart from Stoddard's practice of admitting unconverted churchgoers to the Lord's Table. He then spent the next seven years as a missionary to the Housatonic Indians of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. There in the frontier of the American wilderness, he wrote his main theological treatises such as *Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*. He died in 1758 from the effects of a faulty smallpox vaccination, mere weeks after being installed as the president of Princeton.¹¹

Edwards' theology was standard Calvinist orthodoxy in its essence. The admiring editor of some of his posthumous publications said 'he was a Protestant and a Calvinist in judgment, adhering to the main articles of the reformed religion with an unshaken firmness, and with a fervent zeal'.¹² But his expressions of these articles could not always be described as 'standard'. As we have already noted, his theology was done with a view towards making the old orthodoxy intelligible, and thus defensible, to the Enlightenment milieu in which he lived. And in accordance with this mission, Edwards theologised with a characteristic independence from his predecessors. He seemed sensitive to implications that the Reformed tradition was sliding from *Sola Scriptura* into a wooden deference to Calvin, and felt compelled to distance himself from presumptions that this might be operative in his own theology: 'I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in everything just as he taught'.¹³ He was highly appreciative of post-Reformation greats Peter van Mastricht and Francis Turretin, but explicit references in his works even to these figures utterly pale in comparison to citations of Scripture.

Edwards' work is also characterized by a willingness to speculate. He was rarely satisfied with overly bare statements of dogma he inherited; he could 'not content himself with anything but an immense theology of universal, eternal scope'.¹⁴ To accomplish this, he sometimes felt at liberty to piece together scant elements of scriptural data and extrapolate. In

¹¹ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 345-61; 490-94.

¹² Editor's Preface to *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), p. 144 (hereafter *Works in 2 Volumes*).

¹³ Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1: Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 131.

¹⁴ Rachel Susan Stahle, 'The Trinitarian Spirit of Jonathan Edwards' Theology', unpublished Ph.D. diss. (Boston University, 1999), p. 13.

a moment of youthful enthusiasm, he even boasted ‘I am not afraid to say twenty things about the Trinity which the Scripture never said.’¹⁵ Although this was an entry in a semi-private notebook not repeated in published pronouncements, it is clear that he agreed with the Westminster Confession of Faith’s judgment that ‘good and necessary consequence[s] may be deduced from Scripture’ as well as explicit statements.¹⁶

But if Edwards was given to speculation, he was also careful not to ignore the definite limits Scripture places on speculation. Peter Gay reports, lamentably from his view, that ‘Jonathan Edwards philosophized in a cage’, the cage of Puritan fidelity to biblical authority.¹⁷ This was a far cry from the kind of philosophy practised by his Enlightenment contemporaries who revelled in ‘free-thinking’ they imagined to be controlled only by the dictates of reason. Rather, biblical exegesis held an ‘all consuming hold’ on Edwards’s thought.¹⁸ Herein lies the essence of his great usefulness to the church of his own and succeeding generations: Edwards was a speculative genius of the first rank who also happened to believe that every word of the Old and New Testaments were the very words of the living God.¹⁹

One final relevant aspect of Edwards’ thought would be its aesthetic nature. In Perry Miller’s estimation, ‘Edwards was infinitely more than a theologian. He was one of America’s five or six major artists, who happened to work with ideas instead of poems or novels.’²⁰ Miller’s point was not that Edwards was simply good at communicating his ideas through language, though indeed he certainly did this as well. Miller meant that the ideas themselves were beautiful. To use an analogy from another discipline, Einstein is not typically listed among the artists, yet those who become caught up in his vision of reality are often compelled to use

¹⁵ Miscellany 94 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 13: The “Miscellanies”*, a-500, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 257.

¹⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith I:4.

¹⁷ ‘he sought to express the old religion in new ways. But the results were, as they had to be, pathetic: Jonathan Edwards philosophized in a cage that his fathers had built and that he unwittingly had reinforced... Edwards went right on accepting the testimony of Scriptures as literally true.’ Gay, *Loss of Mastery*, pp. 113-14.

¹⁸ Hatch, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Experience*, p. 9.

¹⁹ See also John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*, (Tyndale House, 1987).

²⁰ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloan Associates, 1949), p. xvi.

aesthetic rather than scientific or mathematic valuations. We might speak of Einstein's description of the universe in terms of being 'breathtaking' and 'beautiful', not merely 'consistent with the evidence' or 'valid'. The same could be said of Edwards. Going a step further, we might say that this comparison bespeaks more than mere analogy. Perhaps we find both Einstein and Edwards aesthetically moving for the same reason: they both provide us with unusually able descriptions of God's infinite artistry.

DEISM

Now let us turn again to consider Edwards' antagonist, the god of deism. The term refers to a philosophical abstraction (or alternatively, a construction) arising out of the British Enlightenment of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. It was in one sense an abstraction from historic Christianity, and specifically, from Puritan Christianity. If Jensen is right when he says that the Enlightenment was basically a secularisation of Puritanism,²¹ then we must understand the characteristic religion of the Enlightenment – Deism – to be a secularisation of Puritan religion. The Puritans wanted to strip the Church of England of every artefact of human invention, using the rule of Scripture as expressed in the regulative principle. So too, the deists wanted to strip Christianity of all that was extraneous, using instead the rule of human reason. All teachings of Christianity that did not accord with reason, such as the Trinity or the incarnation, were to be excised forthwith, and the result was deism.

From another perspective, deism could perhaps also be understood as a construction arising from some of the principal forces of the age; at any rate, such forces certainly fostered its growth. One of these was reflection on the wars of religion following the Reformation. It seemed to many that adherence to dogmatic religion, whether under the absolute authority of the Pope or anything else, led only to irreconcilable disputes and bloodshed. Therefore, a new source of universally accessible authority must be sought in reason. Another force was Europe's increasing interaction with world religions facilitated by the Age of Exploration. On the surface, various world religions seemed to share much with Christianity. Surely, there must be a way to distil that which all religions share, and to affirm this

²¹ 'America has no foundation but the Enlightenment and the Puritanism of which Enlightenment was the secularization.' (Robert W. Jensen, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988], p. 195.)

commonality rather than fight over disputable peripheries particular to each group.

The particular force that would give deism its characteristic machine form, however, stemmed from the discoveries of Isaac Newton and the Scientific Revolution. Newton had discovered that the universe operated according to elegant mathematical formulae verifiable by any observer. Newton was not himself a deist, but those looking for an alternative to the Christian God found in his discoveries a likely avenue. Terry Muck puts it vividly: ‘The transcendent selves wanted a world they could run so that they could control it. Such a world was provided by the physics of Isaac Newton, a world that ran with machinelike precision.’²² And the mechanistic character of such a world, and the character of its Designer, was an easily blurred distinction.²³ All of the foregoing, plus the idealist epistemology popularised by John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1695) came together to shape and help disseminate deism in all its manifestations.

What then, did the deists believe? As far as a theology proper, the deists tended to think of the Creator as impersonal and essentially absent. God was theoretically powerful as the original Creator, yet he was now reticent to interfere in human affairs, whether in word or deed.²⁴ Perhaps most significantly, he was silent, willing to let Muck’s ‘transcendent selves’ get on with their lives.

What then, was the deist creed? In the absence of an authoritative confession, Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s five *notitiae communes* (common notions) may serve as a rough guide: 1. God exists; 2. God ought to be worshiped; 3. Moral virtue is man’s duty; 4. Moral failures can be expiated by repentance; 5. There is reward and punishment after life and death.²⁵

²² Terry C. Muck, ‘After Selfhood: Constructing the Religious Self in a Post-Self Age’ in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:1 (March 1998), p. 111.

²³ In the words of a contemporary proponent of deism, ‘With scripture and revelation removed, all that remains to know God is personal reason and observation of the universe. Essentially, this is getting to know the artist by studying the artwork’ (<http://www.deism.org/frames.htm>; accessed 27 Dec. 2005).

²⁴ ‘God does not act arbitrarily, or interpose unnecessarily; but leaves those things, that can only be considered as means (and as such are in their own nature mutable) to human discretion, to determine as it thinks most conducing to those things, which are in their own nature obligatory.’ (Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation* [London, 1730], p. 115.)

²⁵ Herbert, *De Veritate*, in Reventlow, *Authority of the Bible*, p. 188.

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These notions were taken to be known innately by all, though later deists would modify the list and eliminate its Platonic assumptions.

With this rather bare confession of faith, it is to be expected that the deists would have major problems with a number of Reformed doctrines. Or perhaps the deists' pre-existing objections to Reformed doctrines led them to adopt this rather bare confession of faith. In any case, that which was offensive to deist sensibilities can be categorized under three main headings: God, God's word, and God's dealings with mankind.

1. God

- a. The Trinity
- b. The incarnation
- c. Miracles

2. God's word

- a. The necessity of special revelation
- b. The nature of special revelation
- c. The content of special revelation (mystery)

3. God's dealings with mankind

- a. Original sin
- b. Hell
- c. The blood atonement
- d. Sovereignty
- e. Salvation by faith alone

Such doctrines were offensive to deist thinkers since they were so clearly in violation of their genteel notions of Reason, and were thus to be rejected out of hand. Moreover, they postulated that any book (such as, say, the Bible) that taught such things should also be rejected as a perverse imposture.

EDWARDS' RESPONSE

Edwards proposed to disabuse his reason-obsessed generation of its unreasonable objections to God's truth. As a general introduction to his response to the deist mode of thinking, let me quote at length from his conclusion to the *Freedom of the Will*. Edwards is here commenting on the attitude of those who thought, if doctrines such as divine sovereignty were true, then God is unjust and cruel, and guilty of manifest deceit and double-dealing, and the like.

Yea, some have gone so far, as confidently to assert, that if any book which pretends to be Scripture, teaches such doctrines, that alone is sufficient warrant for mankind to reject it, as what cannot be the word of God. Some, who have not gone so far, have said, that if the Scripture seems to teach any such doctrines, so contrary to reason, we are obliged to find out some other interpretation of those texts where such doctrines seem to be exhibited. Others express themselves yet more modestly: they express... themselves as not daring to embrace some doctrines, though they seem to be delivered in Scripture, according to the more obvious and natural construction of the words. But indeed it would show a truer modesty and humility, if they would more entirely rely on God's wisdom and discerning, who knows infinitely better than we what is agreeable to his own perfections, and never intended to leave these matters to the decision of the wisdom and discerning of men: but by his own unerring instruction, to determine for us what the truth is, knowing how little our judgment is to be depended on, and how extremely prone vain and blind men are to err in such matters.²⁶

In his response, Edwards clarifies what is prior in his opponents' minds, and discloses what is prior in his own. The deists presupposed that 'Reason', defined in Lockean terms but heavily flavoured by various sentiments of the age such as human autonomy, was the only competent guide to truth. If the deist's inherently anti-supernatural and humanistic presuppositions of what constitutes reason are followed, then the Bible is false almost by definition. Edwards, on the other hand, is happy to confess that he presupposes God and his revealed word to be true, and argues that the alternative is far less plausible. This is his basic epistemological position, one which we today we might associate with presuppositionalism.²⁷ But throughout most of *Freedom of the Will* and in many other instances, Edwards simply adopts one or more of his opponents' stated or implicit assumptions in order to expose internal inconsistency and/or faulty logic.²⁸ He did this in response to nearly all of

²⁶ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, Conclusion, in *Works in 2 Volumes*, Vol. I, p. 89.

²⁷ Proponents of both major camps of apologetics have naturally claimed Edwards as their own; see for example John H. Gerstner, 'Outline of the apologetics of Jonathan Edwards' (four-part essay), *Bibliotheca sacra* 133, no. 529-32 (1976): 3-10; 99-107; 95-201; 91-8 and K. Scott Oliphint, 'Jonathan Edwards: Reformed Apologist', *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (1995): 165-86.

²⁸ Marsden points out that *Freedom of the Will* is less explicitly reliant on Scripture than *Original Sin*, where Edwards made it clear that 'In the last

the points at issue with the deists enumerated above, but for the present purpose, let us focus our discussion on but four of them: miracles, the necessity of special revelation, mystery, and sovereign election.

1. Miracles

Classical machines are characterized by a lack of initiative or development over time; they follow an established pattern of action according to set rules. Such was the god of deism. God created the universe and set it in motion according to Newton's laws, and then stepped away from it. Just because the creation and its laws are perfect, there is no need for God to intervene in it, or, more to the deists' point, to *interfere* with it. There is thus no room for miracles in the traditional sense of the word.²⁹ As exceptions to, or rather, transgressions of, the Laws of Nature, miracles would be admissions that the Machine was imperfect or had been overtaken by events not accounted for by its Designer. Such transgressions would be as unworthy of God as if he had broken the moral law.

In a characteristic move, Edwards subsumed the disputed point under a vastly intensified affirmation of the larger truth. This was done through the doctrine of continuous creation. In Edwards' understanding, the original creation was simply the first instance in an infinite series of immediate creative acts that continues even now: 'It [is] most agreeable to the Scripture, to suppose creation to be performed new every moment.'³⁰ This may sound novel, but it is not essentially at odds with the traditional doctrine of providence, wherein God is constantly influencing all reality for his purposes. Exegetically, Edwards based his thinking on passages such as Amos 5:8, where God's ongoing action in the cycle of day and night is intermingled with his ongoing creation of stars and sea, and passages such as Hebrews 1:3 where Christ 'upholds all things by the word of his

analysis the argument came down to what Scripture said – and the plain meanings of Scripture were sometimes philosophically difficult.' (*Jonathan Edwards*, p. 457.)

²⁹ Toland, who was far more moderate in his critique of miracles than later deists, wrote 'whatever is contrary to Reason can be no Miracle, for it has been sufficiently proved already, that contradiction is only another word for impossible or nothing. The miraculous action therefore must be something in itself intelligible and possible, though the manner of doing it be extraordinary.' (*Christianity not Mysterious* [London, 1696], p. 90.)

³⁰ Edwards, *Miscellany* 346 in *Works*, Volume 13, p. 418.

power'.³¹ Philosophically, Edwards held theories of causality and ontology that precluded even momentary independence from God.³²

In contrast, the deists conceived of the Newtonian universe as a set of self-existent entities each having their own momentum, requiring nothing more to explain or sustain their endurance throughout time. If God were to be removed from the scene, the universe would continue on in its self-regulating motions just as it had.³³ But Edwards insisted that there could be only one *a se* entity, and that is God. The planets, the atoms, the universe as a whole, are not self-existent phenomena; their existence is fully contingent upon God, and this is true not only at the time of the original Creation but at every moment since. Nothing exists for an instant outside the will of Christ, and thus, in effect, all things are being continually created. Jensen sums it up: 'That atoms or other masses should be, even if created once upon a time, self-possessing in their being and action denies God. Edwards was one of the first to see this with full clarity.'³⁴

Where does this doctrine leave miracles? It upholds them in the strongest possible way. Miracles are no exceptions to the 'Laws of Nature', they are precisely reminders that *there are no Laws of Nature* per se. There is only a sovereign Creator actively upholding his universe at all times according to his own wisdom and good pleasure, the usual outcomes of which are described by Newton. The deists needed a god who would create the universe and then walk away from it, a god who would refrain from intervening in their affairs. Edwards said their very existence at each moment was upheld by God's personal creative activity, which was no less an exertion of God's power than the biblical miracles they so abhorred.

2. Need for Special Revelation

I remember seeing in a military museum a Soviet air-to-air missile that looked suspiciously like an early version of the United States' AIM-9 'Sidewinder' missile. Apparently, a Sidewinder had been shot at a Chinese MiG-17 during the Taiwan Strait conflict of 1958. The missile became lodged in the aircraft's extended tailpipe without exploding, allowing it to

³¹ Edwards cites Job 9:9; Ps. 65:6; Isa. 40:22, 44:24; and Amos 5:8 in *Miscellany* 346 (*ibid.*).

³² See for example *Miscellanies* 149, 151 and 177, in *Works, Volume 13*, pp. 295, 326.

³³ Of course, later atheistic science would follow the path indicated by the deists to its logical conclusion.

³⁴ Jensen, *America's Theologian*, pp. 26-7.

land without further incident. In a paradigmatic case of reverse engineering, Soviet scientists then picked it apart and produced a near-identical replica.³⁵

The point is that, given enough careful observation, you can learn all there is to know about a machine and then use the knowledge to mimic its creator. For the deists, everything we need to know about the universe and the god who made it can be learned through the exercise of reason and the scientific method. The inference seems to be, that were humans given sufficient time and resources, we too could reverse-engineer a universe just as good as the original. There is therefore no need for God to send us anything like a spoken word, for everything is plain to the eye of the enlightened observer in the possession of almighty reason. We might even say that ‘the fundamental principle of all deist thought, [is] that a purely rational religion has no place for supernatural revelation, for the content of revelation is either irrational or superfluous’.³⁶

In response, Edwards first wanted to say that the picture the deists painted of the sufficiency of human reason was fatally optimistic: ‘The world has had a great deal of experience of the necessity of a revelation; we may see it in all ages, that have been without a revelation. In what gross darkness and brutal stupidity have such places, in these matters, always been overwhelmed’³⁷ He notices that native reason does not seem to have been of much benefit to parts of the world wholly untouched by biblical revelation:

all the Gentile world hath run into the grossest theological errors... we cannot help ascribing all the true religion in the world to divine instruction; and all the frightful variety of religious errors to human invention, and to the dark and degenerate nature, by the imaginary light of which, deists suppose the right idea of God may be easily and universally discovered.³⁸

For all the deist’s talk of self-evident or universally received notions, there appeared to be strangely few enlightened deists among the heathen benefiting from this ‘imaginary light’.

³⁵ See also the Federation of American Scientists website file on the AA-2 Atol (<http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/missile/row/aa-2.htm>, accessed 26 Dec. 2005).

³⁶ Chamberlain, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works, Volume 18*, p. 27.

³⁷ Edwards, *Works in 2 Volumes*, Vol 2, p. 463.

³⁸ Edwards, *Works in 2 Volumes*, Vol 2, p. 477.

As for what might have produced all this error in human religious opinion, Edwards points to the ethical dimensions of original sin. Previous thought on this issue tended to emphasize the finitude of human faculties, and therefore our inability to reach the infinite.³⁹ Edwards, on the other hand, seemed to think that our rational capacity, though finite, is yet good enough to discern God's truth.⁴⁰ The real problem has nothing to do with the intellect; the problem is that fallen people 'choose that which their own reason tells them is unreasonable and vile'.⁴¹ They simply don't want to listen to the truth, whether it comes from their own reason or from special revelation, because they don't like it. Sin has distorted human inclinations and taste so that however much they should be able to know about the creator, they yet end up in idolatrous error.⁴² For natural man, this is why, for instance, 'the things of the gospel seem all so tasteless and insipid'.⁴³ Sin has clouded our *taste* far more than our intelligence, so that whatever is true about the state of our mental capacity, we end up thinking and choosing wrongly.

So human reason, as it stands in post-fall *situ*, is wholly unable to do what the deists want it to without revelation. But Edwards moves on to talk about a larger issue that makes revelation indispensable in an absolute sense, something his opponents have completely missed. The deists framed the debate as if man and God were machines, and the only question was whether or not our systems require a download from God's database. Edwards makes the crucial point that communication is far more than the mere exchange of information. Communication is a natural act between intelligent beings living in community with one another. God has obviously made us with the ability to communicate with one another; would it then make any sense for him not to speak with us? Edwards says:

If man's natural reason were never so perfect, and however little need we had of revelation for the enlightening our darkness and correcting our errors, yet it would be most unreasonable to suppose that there never should be any revelation made to man... God made spirits to have communication; and will he not have any communion with them himself, although they are made for this very end, to meditate on him and to love [him]? How unreasonable is it then to suppose, that God will so abscond himself from

³⁹ See McDermott, *Confronts*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ See Edwards, *Works in 2 Volumes*, Vol. 1, pp. 155-9.

⁴¹ Edwards, *Works in 2 Volumes*, Vol. 2, p. 919.

⁴² See Edwards, *Works in 2 Volumes*, Vol. 1, pp. 157-8.

⁴³ Edwards, *Miscellany 123 in Works, Volume 13*, p. 287.

these his understanding creatures, that were made to be conversant about him!⁴⁴

So the question of whether or not we *need* revelation to provide us with data becomes an entirely secondary issue. The primary issue is that God is a communicative being by nature, and would certainly communicate with us even if we possessed exhaustive notional knowledge.

3. *Mystery*

John Toland's monumental work of Enlightenment theology was entitled *Christianity not Mysterious*. The deists saw 'mysteries', doctrines such as the Trinity, etc. as corruptions from some pure original religion, foisted upon a gullible laity by duplicitous and greedy priests.⁴⁵ If God is himself reasonable, they argued, then any words that might come from him would have to be reasonable as well. Moreover, if God's very purpose in giving a revelation was to reveal truth in a clear way, how could his alleged revelation contain mysteries?

In his response, Edwards reminds us that the Bible is not the only place one encounters mystery. Aspects of the physical world are mysterious. Elements of mathematics and philosophy are mysterious. And if we stop to think about the concept of an infinite God communicating things concerning another world to finite beings, we might expect revelation to contain mystery. Edwards says:

'Tis very unreasonable to make it an objection against the Christian revelation, that it contains some things that are very mysterious and difficult to our understandings, and that seem to us impossible. If God will give us a revelation from heaven of the very truth concerning his own nature and acts, counsels and ways, and of the spiritual and invisible world, 'tis unreasonable to expect any other, than that there should be many things in such a revelation that should be utterly beyond our understanding, and seem impossible.... If many of those positions in philosophy, which are now received by the learned world as indubitable truths, had been revealed from heaven to be truths in past ages, they would be looked upon

⁴⁴ Miscellany 204 in *Works, Volume 13*, p. 339.

⁴⁵ 'As for charging Church-men with being the Authors and Introducers of the Christian Mysteries, they must be my Enemies for telling the Truth, who are displeased at it: for there is no matter of Fact more evident from every Page both of the Civil, and Ecclesiastick Histories.' (Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, author's preface.) See also pp. 69-74.

as mysterious and difficult, and would have seemed as impossible as the most mysterious Christian doctrines do now.⁴⁶

So, as analogous with the non-self-evident nature of scientific discoveries ('positions in philosophy') upon their initial disclosure, Edwards thinks we must likewise expect non-self-evident elements in a revelation of divine truth. In a similar vein, he postulates that 'the more persons or beings are in themselves and in their own nature above us, the more are doctrines or truths concerning them mysterious to us, above our comprehension and difficult to our belief'.⁴⁷ Far from self-evidence being the sole mark of legitimacy, Edwards implies that if revelation were fully comprehensible in every respect it would thereby prove suspect.

4. Sovereign election

In their interactions with humans, machines do not display an arbitrary will: they deal with one person as they would with any other given comparable circumstances. In the case of a vending machine, one deposits a coin, presses the desired button, and the machine dispenses the candy. It does not withhold it to some and give it to others for reasons only it knows, unless of course it is faulty. When the machine is faulty, and it does behave in such an inconsistent way, we are likely to become angry with it in its failure to adhere to its set program, for apparently displaying a will independent of our own. Similarly, 'The Enlightenment could not brook an arbitrary God. After the intellectual and social violence of the seventeenth century, the Age of Newton felt more secure with a God bounded by laws similar to the gravity that kept the planets from spinning wildly into the cosmos.'⁴⁸

Edwards is very full in his rejoinder to the deists on this issue of divine sovereignty. Although Edwards' masterpiece *Freedom of the Will* was ostensibly written against Arminianism, he reveals in a private letter that the real targets were actually deists such as Chubb. Moreover, as some have noted, Arminianism is in some ways but an 'underdeveloped cousin' of deism.⁴⁹ In any case, there is no difference between these schools as to the question, 'Who ultimately determines human decisions?' Both answered, people do. There is no external agency determining the course of events, man is his own master. And thus, each choice is made in the

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Miscellany* 585 in *Works, Volume 18*, pp. 118-19.

⁴⁷ Edwards, *Miscellany* 839 in *Works, Volume 20*, p. 55.

⁴⁸ McDermott, *Confronts*, p. 218.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46..

context of total contingency; in other words, the decision is unbounded by any philosophic necessity.

As I intimated, Edwards had a lot to say on this topic, but we have time to consider only one of his lines of argumentation here. Edwards began from something everyone of his day took as given: God knows the future. God therefore knows from all eternity whether one of his creatures will choose to do action (a) or action (b). And God's knowledge is certain; it cannot later prove to be false. Therefore, the things God foreknows are as certain as if they had already happened in the distant past. And therefore, there is no actual possibility that things could be otherwise.

Contingency, as it is held by some, is at the same time contradicted by themselves, if they hold foreknowledge. This is all that follows from an absolute, unconditional, irreversible decree, that it is absolutely impossible but that the things decreed should be. The same exactly follows from foreknowledge, that it is absolutely impossible but that the thing certainly foreknown should precisely come to pass.⁵⁰

One cannot, with consistency, hold to both divine foreknowledge and true contingency. If God knows in advance an event will happen, it will happen, and it is nonsense to speak of the possibility that could have been otherwise in any ultimate sense. By demonstrating this irreconcilable difficulty, Edwards anticipates that attempts to hold on to the traditional Arminian position with rigid philosophic consistency must finally devolve into open theism.⁵¹

Edwards argues instead for his revised concept of free will, which is simply the freedom to do what we want. Contingency is an illusion. What happens will certainly happen as God ordains; it is a philosophic necessary if we believe in an omniscient deity. But necessity does not imply compulsion, as the Arminians and deists of all ages want to insist. No one forces us to choose as we do; we do what we freely decide, even though God stands ultimately behind our decisions. But as we know, Edwards' reassurances on this compatibility are still not enough for those bent on claiming a piece of autonomy. Perhaps they should be reminded that even if there were 'territories of reality where God is not sovereign, our claim to them remains preposterous; then no one is sovereign there. But just that

⁵⁰ Miscellany 74 in *Works, Volume 13*, p. 243.

⁵¹ The point has not been lost on contemporary respondents to open theism. See, for example, Samuel J. Storms, 'Open Theists in the Hands of an Angry Puritan' in D. G. Hart et al. (eds), *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003).

preposterous human claim to a piece of creation wherein we are autonomous is a main impulse of modern Western history.⁵²

CONCLUSION

As we might have noticed, Edwards pursued a relentless quest for reality in his war against deism.⁵³ He unmasked their god for what it really was: a delusional projection of man's nihilistic desire to be free from the living God. Not that this constituted much of an innovation. The deist writer Matthew Tindal was almost correct in his title *Christianity as Old as Creation*: more precisely, deism was as old as the doctrine Satan first preached to Eve in the garden shortly *after* creation: 'you will be like God' (Gen. 3:5). You can become autonomous, capable of existence and moral judgment without reference to God. You can relegate God to the role of clockmaker whence he cannot interfere with your predictable world and your sovereign decisions.

But was this bracing dose of reality enough; did Edwards win this fight? On paper, it seems clear enough that, whether through his work or under its own weight, deism as a self-contained faith was indeed defeated. Effective replies to Edward's polemic never came. And whatever was left of the deist position philosophically was soon finished off by the hugely influential critiques of Hume and Kant. But in a way not unlike American military history in Vietnam and in Iraq, a superior tactical force can yet lose the battle for the hearts and minds of the people. More on that subject presently. But importantly, Edwards' critique was not solely on logical grounds as were Hume's and Kant's. As one who believed that the *sine qua non* of regenerate experience was seeing the *beauty* of God, it was also aesthetic. Edwards showed us that deism was as ugly and impoverished as it was false.

Edwards fought against deism because he saw it as a threat to the church. The question remains as to whether we regard it as such today. It would not seem so, on the face of it. We have already said that deism failed philosophically. And to take the American situation as a rough gauge of the position's popularity, self-proclaimed deists amount to far less than 1% of the population according to a recent survey.⁵⁴ The fact is, deism has never flourished as a conventional religious system, and probably never

⁵² Jensen, *America's Theologian*, 106-7.

⁵³ Wilson H. Kimnach, 'Jonathan Edwards's Pursuit of Reality' in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, eds Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 102-17.

⁵⁴ American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS), 2001.

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will. But it makes itself felt in other ways. And it is in these other ways that the Christian theologian and minister must be concerned. To make this connection, let us consider a series of representative sentiments to be found on modern deist websites:

[Hell is] an obviously mythical torture chamber fabricated by the early church to spread fear in unbelievers.... The worship of a naked body, grotesquely mutilated, oozing with blood, and displayed on a cross, could only appeal to those with a macabre sense of, or sadistic enjoyment in, the reflection of a horrible death.⁵⁵

[T]hose that are fed-up with ‘organized religion’ and being told what to think are the ones we seek. In the end it’s the individual that must decide and should have the freedom to do so. That doesn’t make one wrong or damned if they decide to follow another path, there is no Hell in Deism. Deism has no creed or dogma. [Deists] retain... moral codes, belief in God, etc. but reject obvious nonsense such as Original Sin, damnation, the divinity of Jesus... etc. They accept what is reasonable and reject what is nonsense.... [U]nder Deism the human race is basically good and we strongly reject the doctrines of total depravity, original sin, and predestination nonsense of Christianity.... Deism works best as a philosophy that moderates and influences other faiths. It has forced revealed religion to take a close look at itself and change from the inside.... Mainline Protestant churches are a good example... the influence of both Deism and Arminianism⁵⁶ have in many cases moderated their theology.... Applying reason to holy books such as the Bible has left official Christian dogma in ruins.⁵⁷

Notice the familiar themes that emerge from these statements: belief in God and the keeping of a moral code are the only reasonable aspects of religion. Holy books like the Bible should be subjected to reason like anything else. Christian doctrines such as original sin, the divinity of Christ, his crucifixion, hell, and predestination are all repulsive nonsense. Notice also that the appeal throughout is made neither to formal logic nor to any pretended revelation, but merely to our common sense. And finally, it is perhaps significant that the deist does not point to institutions or numbers to chart the progress of his religion, but rather claims that it has

⁵⁵ Leland W. Ruble, ‘To Be Saved or Not To Be Saved’ in *Think!* (www.deism.com/thinksam11.htm; accessed 15 Oct. 2005).

⁵⁶ Such near interchangeability of terms on the mouth of a professed deist is of course interesting.

⁵⁷ www.sullivan-county.com/deism.htm; accessed 15 Oct. 2005.

been working insidiously from within mainstream religion, in a way not unlike a guerrilla insurrection.

What if the modern deist happens to be right? What if deist sentiments are actually the predominant religious presuppositions, not only in secular society but also in the church? If deism has ‘forced revealed religion to... change from the inside’ is it possible that this process is still operating now, even after the downfall of classic liberalism? If so, what might that look like today? In answer to these questions, I merely ask you to think about some of the disputes festering in the Anglo-American evangelical church. Open theism. Annihilationism. Soteriology derived from the new perspective on Paul. ‘Evangelical’ exegetes taking critical positions that would make a Socinian blush, while the theologians espouse doctrines of Scripture that are welcome in the academy. And yes, there is the triumph of Arminianism as the *de facto* orthodoxy in so many corners. What are the underlying concerns expressed in these things? Human sovereignty is sacrosanct. Eternal hell is unjust and unreasonable. Salvation by faith alone should be de-emphasized. Holy books like the Bible should be subjected to reason. If these concerns sound a bit familiar, it’s because the deist we have forgotten about is nodding here in smug approval. Just because these issues are coming from within the church, deism as broadly conceived still presents a significant threat.

This being the case, deism and its constituent sentiments must be the object of constant and diligent warfare by Christian theologians and ministers. We must be unafraid of the inevitable offence against ‘reason’ and ‘common sense’ we will create, and must rather be willing to bring up the very points that are sure to cause the greatest offence. We must take on the liberating task of disabusing people of their tacit belief in the deist machine, a task we do in the name of the only true liberator, Jesus Christ. And finally, in a nod to our title, what is it that drives left-wing political activists such as the 1990s alternative rock band *Rage Against the Machine*? Why do they rage against the ‘machine’ so loudly and passionately? Is it not because, on some level, they know that the machine model that dominates so much of our world is destructive, ugly and ought to be resisted? And can we, who have a replacement for this machine so much better than any sham alternative they can dream up, be any less activist? We dare not. What the church thus needs today is not reactionaries yearning for a return to the past, but in the mould of Jonathan Edwards, radical activists agitating for an infinitely truer and incomparably more beautiful vision of reality.