

Lecture 24 – All Things to All People (concluded); Overview of Deism

“Deism is the religion of the great majority of Americans.” Jerram Barrs

Key Terms

Half-way house, Reformation, science, common denominator, war, God, conduct & worship, Matthew Tindal, Historical Criticism, individualism & pluralism, views of God, views of the human problem

Objectives

- *Describe briefly the beliefs of deism.
- *Identify the practical outworking of deism in our contemporary culture and church.
- *Identify possible bridges for communication, noting also their dangers.

Introductory Remarks

Outline of final exam

Principles of Communication (concluded)

7. Challenge: The need to challenge the heart, mind and will (cont.)
 - e. Making the challenge

Deism

The religion of the great majority of Americans, a half-way house for people on the move between Christianity and secularism.

J. Sire. *The Universe Next Door*. IVP, 1976.

John Orr. *English Deism: Its Roots and Its Fruits*. Eerdmans, 1934.

A. Origins

Lord Herbert of Cherbury, c.1620-1650. *De Veritate* (1625), *De Religione Gentilium* (1639).

1. Factors in the rise of deism
 - a. Desire to push the Reformation further
 - b. Travel
 - c. New scientific revolution
 - d. Wars
2. Herbert asked some questions requiring answers:
 - a. How may truth be distinguished from error?
 - b. How can we express/formulate a faith/belief that receives the assent of all people, in a world where other religions exist?
 - c. How can we find a religion that can avoid the bitter wars/controversies that have destroyed Europe?
3. His answers to these questions:
 - a. Universal consent
 - b. What will all people agree to?
 - 1) Comparative religions
 - 2) The ‘oracle within’

B. Beliefs of deism

1. There is a supreme power, God.
2. This God must be worshipped.
3. Good conduct constitutes the most important aspect of divine worship.

4. All vices and crimes should be expiated and effaced by repentance.
5. There are rewards and punishments after this life.

Boiling down of all religions ('natural' or 'common sense' religion).

One universal church

Revelation = 'every divine and happy sentiment' within our conscience

C. History of deism

Enormous impact, inside and outside the church. William Law, 1700, Christianity universally scoffed at.

1. Impact on the Church

- a. Cambridge Platonists
- b. John Locke
- c. John Toland
- d. Matthew Tindal
 - 1) Four arguments for natural religion
 - 2) Five basic beliefs
- e. Thomas Chubb
- f. Thomas Morgan

2. Why deism declined

- a. The answers given by Christians demolished the deist arguments.
- b. The evangelical revival
- c. The philosophy of David Hume

3. Consequences of deism

- a. Widespread influence in France
- b. Rise of historical criticism in Germany
- c. Flourishing of deism in U.S.A.

D. Deism today

1. Factors favoring deism today

- a. Emphasis on individualism
- b. Our pluralistic society
- c. Emphasis on tolerance and respect for other people's views
- d. Reaction against unpopular Christian doctrines
- e. Confused teaching in mainline churches

2. Beliefs of deism today

- a. A distant creator god
 - b. All religions are basically the same.
 - c. Natural law
 - d. Moral order in the world
 - e. No sense of corruption of human nature
 - f. Confidence in human reason and moral conscience
 - g. Pursuit of personal happiness
 - h. Vague optimism about future
 - i. Vague belief in afterlife, but no real sense of judgment
- Openness to New Age ideas

Excursus

Why did deism lose ground in Europe but not in the U.S.A.?

Deism went hand in glove with the Enlightenment - the trust in human nature, in human reason. But the Enlightenment's influence in Europe was destroyed by existentialism in the 1900's (e.g. Thomas Hardy - alienation, pessimism, ultimate absurdity, etc., also Sartre, Camus, etc.). The inadequacy of human reason to

answer the big questions had a stronger impact on Europe than in the U.S.A., which still maintained a sense of optimism (although less so in the cities and the youth). Gradually, however, this American optimism is being eaten away.

Children of deists become humanists unless they become Christians. True Christianity can degenerate in two ways:

1. Nominal Christianity - the form with no power
2. Legalistic fundamentalism - pharisaic righteousness

Both are human centered and both have deism as their seed. True Christianity > Legalistic righteousness or Nominal Christianity > Deism > Humanism > Skepticism. There is a progression as you break away from Christianity; you can often see this occurring in generations of families.

Steps in this direction. Danger signals for the evangelical faith - in movement toward deism:

1. Softness on other religions, i.e. that they have truth also; see the documents of Vatican II, a radical transformation in the Catholic view of truth, saying that there are a lot of true things about other religions, they have part of the truth; see a similar direction in recent evangelical writings
2. Sincerity, not doctrine, is most important
3. Hesitancy about the supernatural, reluctance to talk about God's intervention in history now
4. Soft on all kinds of moral issues, influenced by the culture and not the Word of God