The American Deists

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The deistic movement in eighteenth-century America is a fascinating but sadly neglected chapter in the history of American thought. In this anthology, I have collected and commented on the most pertinent deistic texts, many of them long out of print, and prefaced the whole with an introductory essay that examines the historical and intellectual background to the curious career of American rational religion as well as its influence on subsequent theological and philosophical thought. Selections have been gleaned from the major books and periodicals of the deistic movement, and this necessarily means that important but less central sources—such as selections from the writings of Joel Barlow or articles from the Newburgh Mirror—have been omitted. In dealing with a tradition that has as rich and extensive a literature as American deism, certain sacrifices must be made, however reluctantly.

I make no pretense of providing in this volume a social or political history of the American Enlightenment. Instead, I focus squarely on an examination and interpretation of deism in order to unravel its philosophical, theological, and ethical tenets. Those readers who wish to supplement this intellectual history with broader and more concrete treatments may consult the titles listed in the bibliographical essay, including my own Rational Infidels: The American Deists (1992).

Two editorial comments are in order here, one structural and the other stylistic. First, chapters 3 through 10 are introduced by short essays in which I provide summaries and pertinent historical information. The first two chapters, containing selections from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson respectively, employ a slightly more complicated format. In addition to the usual preliminary essays, I also preface each of the selections in the Franklin chapter, and many in the Jefferson one, with individual introductions that focus on their specific historical backgrounds and underscore their thematic continuity. Most of the Franklin and Jefferson selections are taken from private correspondence and journal memoranda rather than from systematic treatises or books. As a consequence, it seemed important that the reader have some idea of the two men’s correspondents as well as the context of their remarks. Given the number of readings in each of the first two chapters, the least confusing (although perhaps slightly cumbersome) strategy seemed to begin each selection with short explanatory prefaces.

Second, in preparing material for each of the ten chapters, I have corrected obvious misprints and idiosyncratic spellings that found their way into the
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eighteenth-century sources from which I worked. At times I have also altered punctuation to facilitate comprehension of more convoluted passages. In most instances, however, I have retained typical eighteenth-century stylisms, spelling, and grammar.

I wish to extend my thanks to the staff members of the following libraries who aided me in my research: Andover Library, Harvard Divinity School; Houghton Library, Harvard University; Lamont Library, Harvard University, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College; and Ellen Clarke Bertrand Library, Bucknell University.

The comments of Professors Roderick S. French (George Washington University) and Mark A. Noll (Wheaton College) on an earlier draft of this book rescued it from a number of ambiguities and downright gaffes, and I wish to take this opportunity both to thank them for their painstaking advice and to absolve them from responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation that may remain. Professor Jeffrey Turner (Bucknell University) graciously and expertly helped me translate the quotations from classical sources in the Thomas Jefferson chapter. Cynthia Miller, my editor at the University Press of Kansas, has been a constant source of good humor and support. Cynthia Ingham, my copyeditor, has been especially helpful. Her patient and meticulous reading of the manuscript both amazed and humbled me. My colleagues at Gettysburg College—Lisa Portness and Chan Coulter (Philosophy) and Lou Hammann (Religious Studies)—sustained me with generous measures of gracious patience, encouragement, and wit. As partial recompense, I dedicate this volume to them.

Finally, Kim Daubman has been my mainstay in this and past projects. The American Deists is also dedicated to her as an inadequate but heartfelt tribute.