The American Deists

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The nineteenth century’s first decade witnessed the final and rather pathetic convulsions of Enlightenment deism in the United States. Palmer, the leader of American deists, died in 1806; Paine, the grand old man of free thought, in 1809. A new generation of rational religionists, including such figures as Abner Kneeland and Robert Owen, would emerge in midcentury. But they were of a different stripe from their colonial and Early Republic predecessors, influenced less by Enlightenment rationalism than by Spencerism and social utopianism. Deism as an offshoot of the eighteenth century’s New Learning, then, fizzled out with a whimper by the end of 1811. The short-lived and anemic *Theophilanthropist* was its swan song.

Following Palmer’s death, the Deistical Society of New York and its kindred societies in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere tended to break apart and dissolve. In a last-ditch effort to salvage something of the movement’s earlier vitality, the New York Society of Theophilanthropy was organized shortly before Paine’s death. *The Theophilanthropist* was launched in January 1810 as the society’s official organ. Originally intended as a monthly, only the first five issues appeared on schedule. Four more followed, irregularly and undated, between June 1810 and late 1811.

As financially precarious as *The Temple* and the *Prospect* had been, *The Theophilanthropist* was even more straitened. Its money problems illustrated in part the decline of popular interest in deism; subscriptions by and large were limited to the sparse membership of the society. But the obvious lack of quality, imagination, and fervor in *The Theophilanthropist*’s pages probably also contributed to its lack of appeal. Its articles, quite frankly, made for dull reading. There was certainly nothing original in either the topics covered or the way in which they were approached. Unlike its two sister periodicals, *The Theophilanthropist* had no intrinsic philosophical merit, and its value today is primarily historical.

Even the periodical’s title was secondhand. Theophilanthropy as a “system” was first introduced in September 1795, when a small work appeared in Paris entitled *Manual of the Theoantropophiles*. Although the somewhat barbarous name was soon amended, for obvious reasons, its message remained the same. A theophilanthropist was a lover (philos) of both God (theos) and man (anthropos). The original Parisian fraternity, of which Paine was a member,
had but two creeds, both expressed in the 1795 *Manual*: “Les Théophilanthropes croient à l’existence de Dieu, et à l’immortalité de l’âme.” [The Théophilanthropists believe in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.] But the way in which these two tenets were spelled out in the *Manual* revealed them to be thoroughly deistic in nature. Paine himself admitted that the principles of the Parisian society were identical to those defended in his *Age of Reason*. The word *theophilanthropy* presumably was adopted first by the Parisians and later by the descendants of the New York Deistical Society because it had more benign connotations than *deism*, which smacked too much in the popular mind of infidelity and atheism. The very fact that the last American periodical devoted to deism chose to style itself in this fashion indicates the extent to which the movement had shed its earlier unashamed militancy.

Most of *The Theophilanthropist* was devoted to reprinting previously published essays by Paine. Occasionally, however, there were original pieces. As can be seen from the selections included here, none of them evoke the vitality of either *The Temple* or the *Prospect*. Both the “Prospectus” and “Introductory Address” are predictable statements of deistic principles which deplore supernaturalist superstition and insist on the primacy of reason and science. The “Character of Jesus Christ” repeats a favorite theme of American deism: the original purity of Jesus’ religious teaching and its subsequent corruption by metaphysical nonsense. Of all the pieces to appear in the periodical, “Intercourse between Intelligent Beings” is the most interesting. In it, the author appeals to the Great Chain of Being metaphor to dismiss the possibility of revelatory knowledge. Just as human capacities render the race incapable of communicating with “inferior” species, so they likewise preclude direct intercourse with “superior” ones—including God. Consequently, the scriptural claim of direct communication between humans and the divine is logically unacceptable: “All direct and immediate communications must be made between beings in some degree, and in some circumstances, respectively consonant and equal to each other; but what degree of equality, or relationship, or consonancy or correspondence, can there possibly be between a limited and an unlimited being; between finite and infinite?—None.”

The final selection, “Humanity,” reiterates American deism’s faith in the liberating effects of popular education. If ignorance and fear breed oppression, it follows (at least for *The Theophilanthropist*) that universal education will encourage open-minded tolerance as well as the desire to promote the welfare of all members of the human family. This argument, of course, had been asserted by earlier American deists (and, indeed, by the entire Enlightenment tradition) time and again. The tragedy of *The Theophilanthropist* was its assumption that merely echoing that tradition, instead of aggressively pursuing its actualization, was sufficient.
Prospectus (January 1810)

The object of this publication is, to present to the public such critical, moral, theological and literary essays, as may tend to correct false opinions, promote the progress of reason, and increase the sum of human happiness.

Truths, which we deem important, will be boldly advocated, and pernicious errors exposed in all their deformity. Bigotry and superstition, those tyrants, which have so long held the world in bondage, and destroyed the peace and repose of man, will meet with merited chastisement; and the mild, tolerant religion of virtue, which the Creator has wisely revealed to the consciences of all mankind, will be asserted and maintained.

Of all subjects, correct religious opinions are the most important to the happiness of man; but, unfortunately, there are none in which deceit and imposture have been more successfully practised.

Theologians, by their contempt of virtue, and by substituting in its place puerile, nonsensical creeds, have bewildered the mind of man, and involved it in darkness, mystery and terror.

The sincere enquirer after truth, checked in his progress by contradictory opinions, called orthodox by their respective votaries, and claiming divine authority under the cabalistic term mystery, finds himself under the necessity of making a choice of absurdities, or of retiring from a pursuit which promises so little satisfaction. “The dreams of the timid and whimsical—the cheats of the cunning—the suborned villainies of the wicked—every tale, folly and contradiction huddled together, are called religion!—What violence to language!”

How a system, where never-ending and excruciating torments are pronounced the doom of the wicked, and according to which, all have been criminal can be benign and consolatory, outdoes all the labyrinths and repugnances of theology. When it is observed that men, the dreams of a shadow, believe they may suffer immortal punishment, who can refrain pronouncing with Pliny, “that man is at once the most vain, and miserable of all animals.”

To have faith in a system which preaches torments infinite in excess and duration, is to stand on a precipice with closed eyes, that you may fling yourself into immeasurable destruction.

The last and consummate effort of the soul, is the religion of philosophy: whose only dogma is, that one God superintends the universe; whose mysteries are the means most conducive to human happiness; whose ceremonial acts of charity, benevolence, generosity, and public spirit; whose discipline and designs are to refine the sympathies, direct the passions, strengthen and enlarge the mind, and facilitate the communication of wisdom and science.

Our feeble talents shall be exerted to establish these holy principles, so natural, and so consoling to the human mind; and from which nothing but the most villainous imposture could have deluded it.
We shall avail ourselves of the works of those luminaries of thought, whose lives have been devoted to humanity, and whose writings are little known by the public in general; and we solicit the co-operation of all who may be disposed to volunteer in this cause.

Biographical sketches, and critical reviews of modern literary productions, will form a part of this publication.

Improvements in agriculture; the advancement of American manufactures; useful discoveries; and new invented machinery for lessening labour, will be duly noticed.

Occurrences, important to the future historian; political essays upon general, and liberal principles; and articles of mere amusement, will occasionally find admittance in this work.

Communications on any of the above subjects will be gratefully received.

Introductory Address (January 1810)

It is highly proper, at the threshold of this work, to develop the views and motives of the publishers more particularly than has been done in the Prospectus. This we shall do with that candid frankness, which is at all times the companion of truth, and the handmaid of reason. Although the principles indicated by the title of the work, are as ancient as philosophy, and, in fact, co-existent with man, the term *Theophilanthropist* has but lately been introduced into our language. It may, therefore, be pertinent accurately to define its meanings, in order to silence ignorant fanaticism, and interested priestcraft; whose clamorous declarations we expect to encounter, for our exposition of the frauds, which have been, and still are practised on the great majority of mankind. Unappalled, however, by these clamours, we shall march straight forward in the path, to which truth and reason point.

*Theophilanthropist* is of Greek origin, and is compounded of three of the strongest words in that refined and sonorous language, viz. *Theos*, God; *philos*, a lover, and *anthropos*, man. It therefore means a lover of God and man; or one who not only entertains a profound respect for his Creator, but unites therewith, kind and benevolent affections towards his fellow creatures, not merely on account of human sympathies, but from a conviction of the relative situation they stand in, along with himself, to “the great first cause of all.”

From this definition it is easy to comprehend the creed of the *Theophilanthropist*. His dogmas are contained in the name he bears. He believes in one supreme and incomprehensible Deity, and with pious reverence acknowledges his power and perfections. He adores and venerates him as the Creator and conservator of the universe. Hence his devotion partakes not of that debasing servility which characterizes Christian and Mahometan worshippers, but is merely the spontaneous and genial effusion of the soul.

From his relative situation in the scale of being in which he is placed, he
readily learns the duties he owes to his fellow men. He at once perceives that the nature of these are simple, and are in unison with the best affections of the human heart, and may be comprehended under the general titles of justice and benevolence. From his very nature, he with equal ease perceives that the duties he owes to himself, consist in the due regulation of his passions. His, therefore, may emphatically be styled the religion of nature. His creed and his duties are imprinted on every leaf of its vast volume. When he contemplates the planets as they roll; the variety, the order, the economy and the harmony of the little globe he inhabits: he is fired with devotion, and penetrated with astonishment at the sublimity, and grandeur of the scene, and his mind is naturally elevated to contemplate the all perfect Deity, by whose wisdom the wonderful system of nature is preserved, and by whose power it was originally created.

In reviewing the beautiful perspective, he painfully perceives that man has not profited as he ought by the superior reason with which he has been endowed. Tracing him through every state of society, he observes that the greatest portion of the species have been the ready dupes of the crafty, or the willing slaves of superstition; that the image of the incorruptible God has been defaced, the empire of reason overturned, and the horrors of Cimmerian darkness permitted to brood over the human mind. He perceives that though civil tyranny carries along with it the elements of its own destruction, that, which is founded on religion, is strengthened by age, and entailed on its unfortunate victims from generation to generation. From this picture of debased reason he turns with disgust, and truly and sincerely pities the condition of the votaries of superstition. With these impressions we shall not hesitate to expose the cheats practised on degraded man, under the pretended sanction of religion; and shall endeavour to uproot from the social garden, those prejudices, which like noxious weeds are destructive to the soil, and pestiferous to the atmosphere. We are aware of the extent of the task, which we have voluntarily imposed on ourselves; but we shall not shrink from the irksome duty, for if we did, we should be unworthy the name of Theophilanthropists.

It is time that man return to reason, which he has so ungratefully abandoned; that he relinquish his chimerical fears; that he at length place confidence in the justness and goodness of that God, who is not the patron of any particular sect or nation, whether Jew or Gentile, but the Creator and preserver of all nature and of all worlds; “of whose existence no mind can doubt, without being involved in the most inextricable absurdities; but in search of whom, o'erstretched idea bursts, and thought rolls back on darkness.” This God, to whom the speculative opinions of mankind must be sovereignly indifferent, punishes naught but crimes, and those in proportion to their magnitude. What a consoling reflection to the moral man! He sees the path of salvation and happiness open before him, which he cannot mistake without doing violence to that best gift of God to man, his reason: to which all Bibles, Korans and
Vedams, must eventually make their final appeal.

We shall urgently press upon our readers the importance of this subject; the necessity of discharging those puerile prejudices, which they imbibed with their mother’s milk, which their nurses have copiously infused, and which their spiritual guides still continue through interested motives, to rivet upon them. We by no means wish to wound the feelings of theological teachers, they do exactly the same as other men would do in their situation. The people oblige them to preach the stupid doctrine, which they have inherited from their forefathers. Let the people change, and their teachers will soon follow. Let the people build temples of reason, and they will soon find priests to officiate at their altars. This fact has been proved in France, where formerly monkish priestcraft reigned triumphant. The sun of reason arose; it was permitted to shine; its rays spread like lightning throughout the nation; priests and people became illumined, and chanted together the funeral dirge of superstition. But in that country, unfortunately, the monster despotism, which cannot flourish in the meridian sun of reason, is again nursing and invigorating the decrepit hag, superstition. So much light, however, had been shed abroad in France, that its tyrant dare not attempt to stifle it wholly at once. He has therefore only declared that the government is Catholic; intending thereby to render that religion fashionable, knowing that the greatest portion of mankind are governed by fashion.

In fine, America is the only country in which “reason is left free to combat error.” If we do not profit by this privilege, the fault will lie at our own door. Let us then think freely, and express our thoughts like freemen. We shall on our part endeavour to demonstrate the genial influence of true religion upon the morals and social happiness of men; and, at the same time, shall warn our readers against the baneful effects of fostering ignorance and superstition, those deadly enemies to all the joys of life; which, having broken down all the barriers established by Deity, between virtue and vice, right and wrong, and not content with robbing man of the little happiness which this world might afford, insulting threat him with an eternity of misery in the world to come.

Character of Jesus Christ (February 1810)

Much as we esteem Mr. Volney, and highly as we prize his literary productions, we cannot agree with him in doubting the existence of Jesus Christ. Although much mythological fable has been artfully interwoven into his biography, by his interested followers, yet we fully believe that such a person lived in Judea, about two thousand years ago. Tacitus, who, by the way, is the only historian that says anything that can be supposed to relate to Jesus Christ (the passage in Josephus respecting him having been proved to be an interpolation) observes, that a sect arose at this time, (the period in which Christ is supposed to have lived) which made some disturbance in Judea. The Jewish tradition, al-
though no doubt interlarded with fable, is at least some evidence of the fact; which acknowledges that such a person actually sprang up amongst them, and after, as they say, deluding many, suffered an ignominious and cruel death. We therefore have no more doubt on our minds that there was such a man, than we have that there existed such legislators as Moses and Mahomet.

In that age it appears that the Mosaic superstition, which, from its commencement, was a grievous burthen on the Jewish nation, had been shamefully corrupted, and that the priests possessed unbounded power over the property and consciences of the people—hence they increased the rituals of worship to such a pitch as to render them an intolerable tyranny. The Romans also, at that period, had partially subdued the Jewish nation, and left them but the shadow of their ancient independence.

At this important crisis, this obscure reformer, whose youth had been spent in the mountainous parts of Palestine, daringly attacked their national prejudices, and attempted to uproot that corrupt system of religious mummery, with which they were oppressed.

His political principles were those of a republican, for he taught the lessons of political equality.

His religious dogmas were those of the Theophilanthropist, for he inculcated reverence to the deity, and benevolence towards the whole human family. It is true that his tenets have since been veiled and enshrouded in the robes of impiety by the knavery and craft of some of his fanatical disciples;—but we shall, in future numbers, endeavour to sift and separate the wheat from the chaff, and show that the morality which he preached to his followers was the same as that taught by Plato, Socrates and Epictetus, who lived before him.

In that rude and barbarous age, it was the practice of men who wished to govern the passions of the ignorant, to pretend to be messengers sent from heaven; it is therefore probable that Jesus Christ, like many of his contemporaries, made use of this stratagem, more powerfully to enforce his doctrines upon the minds of the vulgar. However that may be, we find that the Jewish Sanhedrin became alarmed at this growing popularity; for, from his obscure retreat, we find him advancing into their very capital, and in their very temple bearding their authority; ridiculing their ridiculous superstitions, and assuming a controul over the pettifoggling retailers of offerings in the porches, and also over the horde of usurers that infested the temple. After numerous expedients had failed, they at length hit upon one, which they hoped would be effectual, to take off their dangerous rival. They therefore denounced him as a traitor, and an enemy to Caesar.

The Roman governor, to gratify the revenge of the infuriated priests, whose power he had shaken delivered him over to their will, after a mock trial; at the same time declaring that he found him guiltless. They therefore doomed him to suffer crucifixion, the common punishment for heinous offences.
Thus the man who had humanely endeavoured to ameliorate the condition of his countrymen, and to rescue them from civil despotism and religious tyranny, prematurely fell a victim to the bigotry and superstition of the age in which he lived, and became a martyr in the cause of philanthropy. His character was adorned with an assemblage of amiable virtues, and his ethics were calculated to render his fellow-creatures individually happy, and socially benevolent.

Such, in our opinion, are the true characteristics of Jesus Christ. But, several centuries after his death, interested and fanatical men founded a monstrous and impious system of religion in his name. —It is not pretended that he wrote a single line of this himself. His expositors however, to suit their own purposes, taking the heathen mythology as their guide, first deified him, and then intermixed with his rational ethics the most abominable frauds that were ever imposed upon human credulity.

**Intercourse between Intelligent Beings (March 1810)**

The intercourse between intelligent beings depends entirely on their capacity for reciprocating intelligence. This faculty in man is improved by education: it is also improvable, and by the same means, in dogs, horses, and other quadrupeds. The congeniality, in some particular points, of their natures with ours, appears indispensably necessary to this intercourse. With fish and fowl, the ability to correspond is, on both sides, very inadequate: but it is in exact proportion to the disparity of their several natures. Descend still lower on the scale of existence, and man, though surrounded by myriads of sentient beings, finds society totally at an end. 'Tis the same if he attempts to ascend the scale. The reports of the existence of such beings as angels, it is difficult to conceive. We necessarily conclude that as the exercise of power and intelligence universally indicate mind, the infinite power and intelligence manifested in the organization of vegetables, animals, and the world, must have proceeded from an infinitely powerful and wise being; and these conclusions are the only possible intercourse that we are capacitated ever to have with such a being. For if neither our physical, nor our moral powers, qualify us for corresponding with the beings the next below, or the next above us, on the great scale of existence, how is it possible that we should hold communication with beings a great many degrees higher? And if such intercourse with finite beings is impossible, how much more impossible must it be to correspond *viva voce*, with the highest and first of all beings, viz. with the Infinite and Eternal Mind? It also must appear, from the great disparity between the infinite mind and the effects of its operations, that the infinite being cannot, in our present circumstances, communicate, or hold correspondence with us, in any other manner, or by any other means, than through the medium of the vast creation, or, its operations on matter. The small degree of power and intelligence in the being called man, is not sufficient, as yet, to comprehend the organization of even a blade of grass,
or a grain of wheat; and for such a being to pretend to hold a direct, spontaneous, and immediate intercourse and correspondence with the great creating and sustaining cause of grass and grain, an intercourse he is not capacitated for, and therefore cannot be benefitted by, is a pretence that can be founded only on extreme ignorance and presumption—or worse.

In tracing the manifestation of power and intelligence, whether in a solar system, a man, or a grain of wheat, we find that they all, universally and necessarily lead to the same conclusions, and the same source; i.e. to a perfectly intelligent and powerful cause, that must have designed, and made them all exactly what they are, consequently must have had this perfect power, intelligence and design, before they had existence; and that without the aid of such a cause it is not possible to account for their existence, organization, or nature, at all.

I am led to say, "that the infinite and eternal mind cannot correspond with a limited and finite mind, except through the operations of the creation, or of what is, in other words, commonly called nature," from the necessary impossibility of such a correspondence. Let us not start at the supposition. All direct and immediate communications must be made between beings in some degree, and in some circumstances, respectively consonant and equal to each other; but what degree of equality, or relationship, or consonancy or correspondence, can there possibly be between a limited and an unlimited being; between finite and infinite? —None.

The marks of the perfections of the eternal mind, or intelligent cause of that most great and complete effect which we call nature, are, to us, so manifest and so numerous, that we cannot suppose anything imperfect, or absurd, in that cause; for it follows, that if we did, we should suppose a manifest contradiction.

Circumscribed as our knowledge is of the vast creation, we know, however, finite and frail as we are, and it is a great deal for us to know, that infinite power and wisdom cannot contradict itself; cannot cause a greater number to be taken from a less; cannot cause two hills without a valley between them; cannot cause a thing to be, and not be, at the same time; cannot cause a part to be equal to the whole. The laws that govern the universe, appear to have been the offspring of an infinitely powerful, wise, and immutable mind. All *viva voce* correspondence, therefore, between this mind and man, for any particular purpose whatever, suggests a mutability which all nature loudly contradicts; and all such reports and pretensions, must consequently be founded on ignorance, presumption, policy, or imposture.

Humanity (April 1810)

*Humanity* is the child of sensibility, the parent of charity, and the companion of philosophy; the possessor of this inestimable attribute can never be truly
The Love of God and Man

unhappy, for he is in the constant enjoyment of a quiet conscience. The recollection of the past, and the anticipation of future acts of benevolence, so absorb his reflections, that no vacuum remains to be filled by the gloomy meditations of the niggardly, or the plodding designs of the monopolist.

Like the light of heaven, humanity dispenses its favours with impartiality; the wretched and desponding seek her castle, and there find an antidote and a home; the houseless beggar, the widow and the orphan, the lame and the blind all claim kindred with this angel of beneficence, and “have their claims allowed.”

Our city has produced many charitable institutions, where the humane citizen may give his aid to suffering humanity, and to the great work of forming and reforming the rising generation. Education is a principal and almost indispensable source of morality; it is the best security for liberty, the greatest boon of freemen; as its suppression by the tyrants of Europe constitutes their only safety against the just vengeance of their insulted subjects. Education in a free country, conducted on the principles of sound philosophy prepares the mind for those great efforts of genius, which render society useful and happy; it tends to substitute wholesome and just laws, in the place of those tyrannical and oppressive systems of Europe, which are the bane of social felicity. It lessens labour by the ingenuity of artificers, erects comfortable mansions in the place of miserable thatched hovels, and converts a howling wilderness into fruitful fields and populous cities.

Whilst on the subject of education it would be unpardonable not to bestow a tribute of praise on the establishment of the New-York free-school, which if not the most important institution of the city, promises to become a nursery of morals and useful knowledge.

Happy the individual, who, considering himself one of the great family of mankind, knowing and acknowledging the necessity of reciprocal dependence and mutual protection, the happiness of extending and receiving alternate benefits, contributes his aid to the promotion of education, of moral virtue, and the enaction of humane laws. Such an individual fulfils the duties of humanity, and feels thrilling through his heart the indescribable pleasure of doing good.

How different the selfish worldling, who, concentrating all his hopes and wishes in the gratification of sordid passions, without sensibility, pine, dissatisfied in the midst of plenty and luxury, because his inordinate wants cannot be supplied, or his unbounded avarice satiated. How basely mean is the man in office, who exercises power but to extort and torment? How cruelly unjust the pawn-broker, who demands the usurious interest of one dollar weekly for the loan of twenty, and reimburses himself by the sacrifice of ten dollars worth of the borrowers property! How void of humanity must that creditor be, who can consign to a loathsome prison, where no provision is made for his sustenance, an unfortunate but honest debtor!
How doubly unfeeling and brutal is that landlord, who, at quarter day can wrest the bed from under a sick woman, to remunerate himself for an exorbitant rent!

Such beings unfortunately exist; they belong to the numerous family of evils that afflict this world, which otherwise might have continued a paradise of bliss.

But with all their ill-gotten gains they are not happy; thrice more happy, in most instances, are the objects of their cruelty, their perfidy and injustice.

The image of a reproaching conscience continually haunts them and disturbs their repose.

The blush of guilt, suffusing itself through the paleness of a tortured visage, leaves to the sight, nothing but the horrid picture of inhumanity.