

Gerrish argues, reasonably enough, that

[t]he eighteenth century did not invent the contrast between natural and revealed theology, but in the course of the Deist Controversy the inherited priority was reversed. The insufficiency of the light of nature had formerly been the basis of the Protestant appeal to Scripture: reason was unambiguously subordinated to revelation, and the mainline theologians did not expect to discover beyond Christianity anything but superstition and idolatry. Indeed, that is what the Puritans found in Roman Catholicism and even, in smaller measure, in Anglicanism. They agreed with Calvin's verdict that human nature is a 'perpetual factory of idols,' and that only Scripture can clarify 'the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds. . . .

The Deist Controversy in England led to a reversal of the old belief that the weakness or perversity of human reason required revelation to supplement and correct it: the Deists countered that every human claim to possess a revelation is subject to rational scrutiny. Fundamental to their approach was the view that naïve privileging of Christian discourse, resting as it did on the assumed possession of an unparalleled revelation, had to yield to a pluralist interpretation of Christianity as one religion among others.

Elsewhere he develops the same argument as follows:

The Deists were not all of one mind. But we find repeatedly in their writings the view that a pure religion is accessible to all by nature and that Christianity, like every other historical religion, partly exhibits the religion of nature, partly obscures and corrupts it. The familiar scheme of Protestant orthodoxy is turned upside down. Revelation does not, after all, clarify our confused natural knowledge of God; quite the contrary, our innate knowledge of God enables us to judge every pretended revelation and to sort out truth and error even in Christianity itself (*Thinking with the Church*: 12, xvi; *Saving and Secular Faith*: 90).

But as reasonable as this all seems to me to be, it's equally reasonable to point out that and why the Deists could have appealed to none other than Martin Luther in arguing their case.

Luther argues, first of all, that even the heathen would have been saved if only they had simply gone with the knowledge of God and of God's will that God had naturally manifested to them, instead of proceeding to develop it under the guidance of a sinful, self-serving reason, which supplied the minor premise to the "practical syllogism," the major premise for which God had provided by God's original self-manifestation (*LW*, 25: *Lectures on Romans*: 157 ff.).

But Luther also argues, secondly—as P.S. Watson points out in interpreting his doctrine of vocation—that

it is impossible to attend rightly to our vocation by setting up a fixed rule of behaviour, an unvarying code of conduct. Every new situation that arises for us demands fresh treatment, new decisions, and the adjustment of our actions to its needs.

If we ask Luther [Watson adds] on what principles we are to base our decisions, how we are to know the right thing to do, he will reply: You must ask what love requires, or what reason dictates. By that he means that we must consider the situation, not in the light of our own wishes and desires and preconceived ideas, but 'objectively,' as we should say, to see what really needs to be done and what can be done for the best. It is interesting to observe how he sets 'reason' and 'love' side by side, quite sure that the reasonable thing to do is just what love would want done ("Luther's Doctrine of Vocation": 371 f.).

Luther also argues, thirdly, in ways such as the following:

It was not Moses that was the author of the Decalogue, but from the foundation of the world the Decalogue has been inscribed on the hearts of all men. . . . For there has never been any nation under the sun so brutal or barbarous and inhuman as not to be aware (*quin senserit*) that God is to be worshipped and loved . . . even if it has gone astray in the manner and methods of worshipping God. Similarly with regard to honour and obedience toward parents and superiors; likewise they detested vices, as is to be seen in the first chapter to the Romans . . . . So Moses was only as it were the interpreter and illustrator of laws written on the minds of all men wherever they are in the world under the sun.

If the natural law were not written and given in the heart by God, one would have to preach long before the conscience were smitten. One would have to preach to an ass, horse, ox or cow for a hundred thousand years before they accepted the law, although they have ears, eyes and heart as a man. They too can hear it, but it does not enter their heart. Why? What is wrong? Their soul is not so formed and fashioned that such a thing might enter it. But a man, when the law is set before him, soon says: Yes, it is so, he cannot deny it. He could not be so quickly convinced, were it not written in his heart before (quoted by P.S. Watson, *Let God Be God!* 98, n. 44; 99, n. 52).