



On Religion & Reason

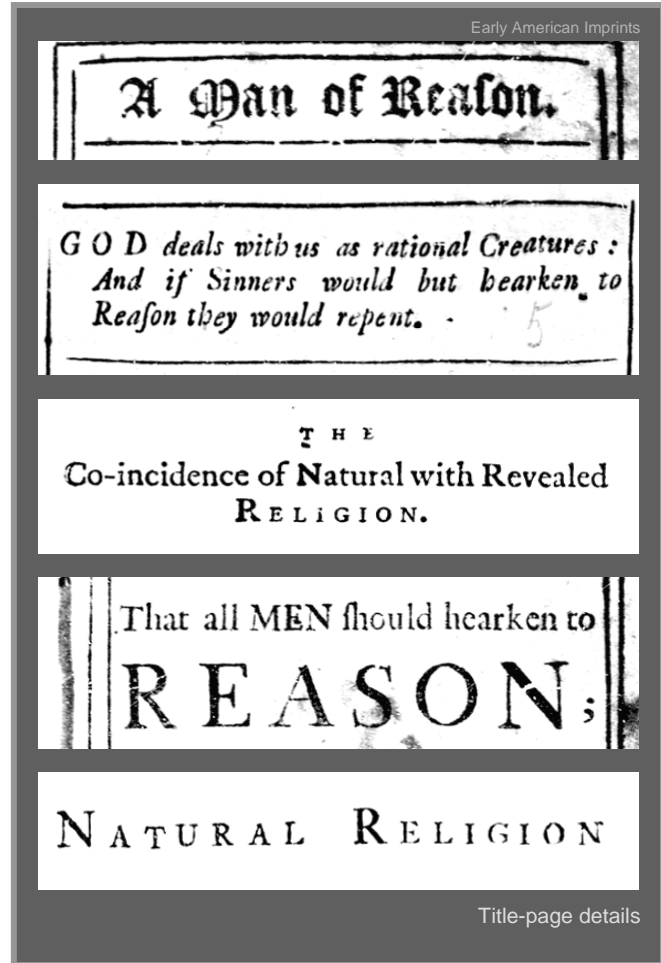
A Puritan discussion of man's reason
 — and the proper use of reason

1718-1775

Among the salient theological issues of the 1700s — free will and predestination, the path to salvation, the elect of God — none had more roots in Enlightenment thinking than the place of reason in man's relationship with God.

- ◆ Was reason a God-given tool for moral guidance and divine insight, or was it a secular temptation to "atheistical" views?
- ◆ Could man gain knowledge of the divine only through scripture and religious experience ("revealed religion") or could he also study nature and the universe to perceive divine meaning ("natural religion")?
- ◆ Could revealed and natural religion co-exist, each complementing the insights of the other?
- ◆ What use of reason, a God-given attribute, leads to the glory of God? What misuse leads to sin?

Here we read four Puritan ministers consider man's use of reason to understand two aspects of God's creation — moral law and the natural universe. "Philosophy [i.e., science] is no Enemy," asserts Cotton Mather, "but a mighty and wondrous Incentive to Religion." Others weren't so sure.



Rev. COTTON MATHER

A Man of Reason

A Brief Essay to demonstrate that all MEN should hearken to Reason, and, What a World of EVIL would be prevented in the World, if Men would once become so REASONABLE

Essay, 1718, excerpts.

First. The Man who does not *Hearken to Reason* does *Rebel* against the Glorious GOD, who has placed Man under the Guidance of *Reason*. . . . We never *Transgress* any *Law of Reason* but we do at the same time *Transgress* the *Law of GOD*. Now, there is always a *Sin*, the blackest thing in the World! in such a *Transgression*. GOD sets up *Reason* in Man. If we do not keep *Reason* in the *Throne*, we do to *Dethrone* the Infinite GOD Himself. The voice of *Reason* is the *Voice of GOD*. . . .

Secondly. The Man who does not *Hearken to Reason* is very *Unthankful* to GOD for Endowing, Enriching, Ennobling of him with *Reason*. . . 'Tis a *Noble Thing*. It makes *Man* a *Noble Creature*. It is the *Glory of Man*. It is the *Glorious Image* of GOD upon him. . . .

National Humanities Center, 2008: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds. (1) Sermons accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending. (2) Mather's *Christian Philosopher* in Cotton Mather, *The Christian Philosopher*, ed. Winton U. Solberg (University of Illinois Press, 1994); permission pending. Spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

Thirdly. The Man who does not *Hearken to Reason* does the part of a *Brute*, yea, he does worse than a *Brute* that is destitute of *Reason*. We read of *Brutish Men* and of those who are, *Jude 10. As Brute Beasts: Men, who as far as they can, quit the order of Men & rank themselves with Brutes. . . .*

Fourthly. There is a *Conscience* in the Case. The Man that will not *Hearken to Reason* goes against the *Light* of his *Conscience*. . . . The *Conscience* of a Man forewarns him, and assures him, of a *Punishment* reserved in another World. . . His *Reason* will give him some warning of it. . . .

But there are many things in the *Scriptures* which are *Above Reason*. . . *Faith, Faith* is here to interpose.

But then also, Vain Man, Do not imagine that thy Light within, or the Light of Reason, is a Sufficient Guide without the Scripture to bring thee unto Salvation.

Reason, Stand thou by with an humble *Reverence*, an awful [full of awe] *Silence*. In the *Scriptures* there is nothing *Against Reason*, tho' there be some things *Above Reason*. It must also be remembered that, by our Fall from GOD, the strength of *Reason* is much impaired in us. The Eye of *Reason* is darkened, is depraved, is miserably wounded. . . .

Proud Man will try to make his *Reason* invent a World of objections against this *Glorious Gospel of the Blessed GOD*. But if there be Scripture for anything, lay this down for a Maxim: There is *Reason* for it. Perhaps we can't see the *Reason*; But *Reason* says The *Scripture* is a *Revelation* from GOD. And *Reason* says what GOD has *Revealed* must be *Reasonable*. But then also, Vain Man, Do not imagine that thy *Light within*, or the *Light of Reason*, is a *Sufficient Guide* without the *Scripture* to bring thee unto *Salvation* . . . We must *Hearken to Right Reason*; but beware, Lest we ascribe too much to our own *broken Faculties*.

Rev. COTTON MATHER

The Christian Philosopher¹

A Collection of the Best Discoveries in Nature, with Religious Improvements

Treatise, 1721, excerpts.

THE INTRODUCTION_____

The ESSAYS now before us will demonstrate that *Philosophy* [i.e., science] is no *Enemy*, but a mighty and wondrous *Incentive to Religion*; and they will exhibit that *PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGION*, which will carry with it a most sensible *Character* and victorious *Evidence* of a *reasonable Service*. **GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST**, and **GOOD WILL TOWARDS MEN**, animated and exercised; and a Spirit of *Devotion* and of *Charity* inflamed, in such *Methods* as are offered in these *Essays*, cannot but be attended with more *Benefits*, than any *Pen* of ours can declare or any *Mind* conceive.

. . .

The Christian Philosopher

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¹ Plants. ² Birds.

¹ *The Christian Philosopher* is considered the first American compilation of the scientific knowledge acquired to that time. The term "natural philosophy" referred to the pursuit of scientific knowledge; thus the "Christian philosopher" studies scientific knowledge within a perspective of Christian theology.

ESSAY IV: *Of the SUN*._____

Sir *Isaac Newton*, as well as Dr. *Hook*, takes the *Sun* to be a solid and opaque Body. Dr. *Hook* thinks this Body to be encompassed with a vast Atmosphere, the Shell whereof is all that Shines. The *Light* of the Sun he takes to be from the Burning of the more superficial Parts, which are set on fire, which may be without hazard of being burnt out in a vast Number of Ages. And Sir *Isaac Newton* thinks the *Sun* to be a sort of a mighty Earth, most vehemently hot; the Heat whereof is conserved by the marvelous Bigness of the Body, and the mutual Action Re-action between *That*, and the *Light* emitted from it. Its Parts are kept from fuming away not only by its *Fixity*, but also by the *Density* of the Atmosphere incumbent on it, and the vast Weight thereof. The *Light* seems to be emitted much after the manner as *Iron*, when heated unto such a Degree, as to be just going into Fusion, by the vibrating Motion of its Parts emits with Violence plentiful Streams of liquid Fire. So great a Body will continue its Heat a great while, perhaps in proportion to its Diameter. . . .

The apparent Diameter of the *Sun* being sensibly greater in *December* than in *June*, it is plain, and Observation confirms it, in *Summer*. It is also confirmed by the Earth's moving swifter in *December* than in *June*; which it does about five Fifteenths. And for this reason there are about eight Days more from the *Sun's* vernal *Equinox* to the autumnal, than from the autumnal to the vernal.

ESSAY XXXII. *Of MAN*._____

The BODY of MAN, being *most obvious* to our view, is that which we will first begin with: a *Machine* of a most astonishing Workmanship and Contrivance! *My God, I will praise Thee, for I am strangely and wonderfully made!* . . .

The Variety of the Parts whereof the Body is composed cannot but oblige our Admiration, cannot but compel our admiring Souls to acknowledge our glorious Maker!

The *Variety* of the *Parts* whereof the Body is composed cannot but oblige our Admiration, cannot but compel our admiring Souls to acknowledge our glorious Maker!

The *Bones* in a Skeleton are two hundred and forty-five, besides the *Ossa Sesamoidæa*, which are forty-eight.

The *Muscles* of the Body are four hundred and forty-six.

The *Nerves* which come immediately out of the Skull, from the *Medulla oblongata*, are ten Pair.

The *Nerves* which come out between the *Vertebræ* are thirty Pair. . . .

Who can behold a Machine composed of so many Parts, to the right Form and Order and Motion whereof there are such an infinite number of Intentions required, without crying out, *Who can be compared to the Lord!* . . .

The Union between the SOUL and the BODY is altogether inexplicable, the *Soul* not having any *Surface* to touch the *Body*, and the *Body* not having any *Sentiment* as the *Soul*. The *Union* of the *Soul* and *Body* does consist, as Monsieur *Tauvry* expresses it, in the *Conformity* of our *Thoughts* to our *Corporeal* Actions; *but*, says he, *for the Explication of this Conformity, we must have recourse to a superior Power*. Truly, *Sirs*, do what you can, you must quickly come to *that!* . . .

Atheism is now forever chased and hissed out of the World. Everything in the World concurs to a Sentence of *Banishment* upon it. *Fly, thou Monster, and hide, and let not the darkest Recesses of Africa itself be able to cherish thee; never dare to show thyself in a World where everything stands ready to overwhelm thee!* A BEING that must be *superior* to *Matter*, even the *Creator* and *Governor* of all *Matter*, is everywhere so conspicuous, that there can be nothing more *monstrous* than to deny the *God that is above*.

Having dispatch'd the *Atheist* with bestowing on him *not many* Thoughts, yet *more* than could be deserved by such an *Idiot*; I will proceed now to propose two general Strokes of *Piety*, which will appear to a *Christian Philosopher* as unexceptionable as any Proposals that ever were made to him.

First, the Works of the glorious God exhibited to our View. 'Tis most certain they do *bespeak*, and they should *excite* our *Acknowledgments of His Glories* appearing in them — the Great GOD is infinitely *gratified* in beholding the Displays of His own infinite *Power* and *Wisdom* and *Goodness* in the Works which He has made; but it is also a most acceptable Gratification to Him, when such of His Works as are the *rational beholders* of themselves, and of the rest, shall with devout Minds *acknowledge* His Perfections which they see shining there. Never does one endued with *Reason* do anything more evidently *reasonable* than when he makes everything that occurs to him in the vast Fabrick of the World an *Incentive* to some agreeable Efforts and Sallies of *Religion*. . . .

And then, secondly, the CHRIST of God must not be forgotten, who is *the Lord of all*. *I am not ashamed of the Gospel of CHRIST*, of which I will *affirm constantly*, that if the *Philosopher* [scientist] do not call it in, he *paganizes*, and leaves the finest and brightest Part of his Work *unfinished*. . . .

O CHRISTIAN, *lift up now thine Eyes, and look from the place where thou art* to all Points of the Compass, and concerning *whatever thou seest*, allow that all these things were formed *for the Sake* of that Glorious-One, who is now *God manifest in the Flesh* of our JESUS. 'Tis on *His Account* that the eternal Godhead has the *Delight* in all these things which preserves them in their Being, and grants them the *Help* in the *obtaining* whereof they *continue to this day*.

__Rev. BENJAMIN COLMAN__

God Deals with Us as Rational Creatures

And If Sinners Would but Hearken to Reason They Would Repent

Sermon, Boston, 1723, excerpts.

ISAIAH 1:10. *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD.*

THUS GOD deals with us *as with rational Creatures*, and according to the nature and faculties he has given us: Wherein as he *puts honour* on Man's reason, so he shows how *great a Sin* it is in man to violate his own Reason and offend against it. We ought to *use* the Reason GOD has given, yea, and to *reverence* it. It is the rule and law of the Eternal and perfect *Infinite Mind* inscribed on us and *for us*: we shou'd reverence it as the *Wisdom of GOD*, as indeed it is. . . .

IF *Sinners would but hearken to reason they would repent*. If men would but govern themselves by reason and act rationally, they would not continue in Sin. For,

1. *RIGHT reason is a Divine Law to Man*: the law of GOD in us, the voice of GOD to us. It is the Eternal and immutable rule of truth, goodness and righteousness. There can be no transgression of it, nor Deviation from it without Sin. It is the law and light of Nature; the Law that Angels act by, the Rule of all GOD's perfect Acts and Works. . . .

2. *IF reason had been hearkened to, Man had never fallen² from GOD, or sinn'd against him*. Had he attended to the voice of his own upright Conscience, he had preserv'd his Integrity. . . .

O hearken to the Reasonings of GOD! Hear and your soul shall live. Hear him for *his own sake*, that he may have glory from thee. Hear him for *thy own sake*, for it is in tender pity to thy poor Soul that he argues with thee. Hearken to him for *CHRIST's sake*, for it is Wisdom's Voice, He whose Delights from Everlasting were with the sons of Men.

² I.e., would never have fallen.

__Rev. ANDREW ELIOT__

A Discourse on Natural Religion

Sermon, Harvard College, Boston, 1771, excerpts.

The Christian Religion is contained in the book we call the Bible. It remains the same whether men attend to it or not, whether they act agreeably to it or not. The Bible is the standard, the rule to which Christians are to appeal in all differences of opinion and practice. In like manner, the religion of nature is written in the book of nature, in the works of God. Man may read there the being and perfections of God. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handy work; day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge; there is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. . . ."

The great truths of Religion are founded in the reason and nature of things. Man hath natural powers capable of seeing and approving these truths. By a diligent use and improvement of these powers, he may make great proficiency in knowledge, not only of the things of nature, but of the things of God and Religion. . . .

THERE is nothing in Christianity that is contrary to reason. God never did, He never can, authorize a

THERE is nothing in Christianity that is contrary to reason. God never did, He never can, authorize a religion opposite to it, because this would be to contradict himself.

religion opposite to it, because this would be to contradict himself. The Gospel is not designed to abrogate the Religion of Nature. It always supposes an eternal rule of righteousness from which man had deviated, and by which he was condemned. Man had rebelled against his Maker and Lord; had renounced his dependence on God, and set himself up in opposition to Him; in all which he acted contrary to the Religion of Nature. The design of the Gospel was to reduce him to a right state, to bring him to live on God, to submit to his authority, to resign to his will, and to rely upon him for every good thing. . . .

HOWEVER Christianity comes to us, or however supernatural the way in which it was originally communicated, it so far coincides with the Religion of Nature that it is founded in the perfections of God, and is perfectly consonant to the reason of man. . . .

. . . The capacity of thinking and reasoning with which God hath distinguished man, however it hath been neglected or perverted, will, whenever he is led to make a proper use of it, enable him to distinguish between true and false religion.

__Rev. SAMUEL LANGDON__

The Co-incidence of Natural with Revealed Religion

Sermon, Harvard College, Boston, 1775, excerpts.

The *religion of nature*, considered in the most perfect view, is that which we suppose investigable by the natural powers of the human mind without the assistance of any revelation from heaven. If therefore the question is stated in this view, and the inquiry is — What System of religion *Reason* alone would trace out when exercised on this grand subject — we must proceed on the supposition that the rational powers are exercised in full strength without the least prepossession or wrong bias, to blind the mind or pervert the judgment. By such a perfect exercise of the rational faculties, the most essential characters of God might perhaps be learned from the signatures of them marked on all parts of the creation. By just observations on the grandeur, order, and beauty of the universe; the natures, purposes, and powers of the various ranks of Beings, animate and inanimate; together with the many indications of the constant

agency of some supreme Intelligence in continuing the established order of things, providing for all possible changes of circumstances, and exercising a more immediate government over mankind, agreeable to their rational faculties and moral state; we may suppose the mind would naturally be led to such reflections as these —

“Surely this stupendous universe is the work of some invisible Agent, beyond all comparison and conception superior to man; for such a grand complete System, so infinitely complicate, and yet so exactly adjusted in all its parts, the most minute as well as the grandest, that all kinds of symmetry and perfection concur to complete the whole, could never be the effect of chance or the product of endless essays [attempts] and mutations of the matter. This Agent must have an unlimited mind to comprehend these vast innumerable works in one perfect Idea before they were made. . . .

May all that are educated in this Seminary of Learning [Harvard College] consider the excellency of the holy Scriptures above all the Wisdom of this world;

My dear Pupils, let me entreat you to read the Scriptures with the most serious and earnest attention. Make them your delightful study. Remember they teach divine science communicated from heaven to mankind . . .

and as they desire the true knowledge of God, and to find the way to peace and satisfaction in this life, and happiness in the world to come, may they never treat the sacred Oracles with bold contempt, or careless neglect! My dear Pupils, let me entreat you to read the Scriptures with the most serious and earnest attention. Make them your delightful study. Remember they teach divine *science* communicated from heaven to mankind — *science* which tends to elevate the soul, enlarge its views, fortify it against all tears in this world, and direct it in the way to heavenly glory. Prefer the word of God to the best productions of human genius, that you may grow in wisdom every day, and not only be acquainted with the duties which nature teaches, and that Literature which may conduce to your credit and usefulness in this world, but also may know Jesus Christ the divine Savior of miserable men, rejoice in his instruction and government, yield to the power of religion, live a life of true godliness and virtue, and having done eminent service in your generation, may in the world to come obtain that glorious immortality which is the great promise of the Gospel.

A M E N.
