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# Re-Discovering Ethan Allen and Thomas Young's Reason the Only Oracle of Man: The Rise of Deism in Pre-Revolutionary America

Benjamin Kolenda

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RE-DISCOVERING ETHAN ALLEN AND THOMAS YOUNG'S *REASON THE ONLY ORACLE OF  
MAN* (1784): THE RISE OF DEISM IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

by

BENJAMIN KOLENDA

Under the Direction of Reiner Smolinski

ABSTRACT

In 1784, Ethan Allen (1738-1789), the leader of the Green Mountain Boys and legendary Revolutionary War hero, and his friend Thomas Young (1731-1777) published *Reason the only Oracle of Man*. In their opus, America's premier text formally introducing Deism, Allen and Young systematically dismantle the ecclesiastical foundations of New England by specifically targeting the undemocratic principles of the Congregational Church. Allen and Young wrote *Reason* as a revolt against the encroaching ecclesiastical domination. The duo focused upon many topics central to the European Enlightenment: substance and matter, formation versus creation, immortality, the soul, the nature and motives of prophecy, and time and eternity. Thomas Young, a student of deism, mentored a teenage Allen and instilled in him a distinctly British ideology (one based on the writings of Charles Blount and John Locke) that, paired with Allen's upbringing in an anti-Calvinist home, materialized into America's premier deist text.

INDEX WORDS: Ethan Allen, Thomas Young, American Enlightenment, American Deism, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*

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MAN*: THE RISE OF DEISM IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Jennifer, who tirelessly stood at my side always knowing that this document existed somewhere, sometimes deep, within me.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Reiner Smolinski for his guidance on this project. Without his dedication to my future, I am sure that I would not have completed the job. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Paul Schmidt and Dr. Malinda Snow, for their time spent reading my work and for suggesting valuable revisions. I also want to thank the faculty at Georgia State University who have helped along the way, namely, Chris Kocela, Mary Hocks, and Calvin Thomas. Finally, I want to thank my parents, Robert and Gail, for their support of all my educational endeavors.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethan Allen (1738-1789) first gained fame as the legendary leader of the Green Mountain Boys. He was a boisterous and intimidating historical figure. Allen and his militia, with the aid of General Benedict Arnold and his own troops, captured Fort Ticonderoga. The capture of the fort was an immediate answer to the turmoil growing between England and America, which began in Lexington and Concord. The legend says that Allen called out to the British to lay down their weapons and come out in peace—which, since he had caught them while they were sleeping, they did immediately. This is the story Americans have heard since Allen's induction into wartime celebrity, and it is the same one perpetuated at the Allen Homestead in Vermont as well as by his biographers. Allen was also considered a *free-thinker*—a statement bolstered by G. Adolph Koch's theory from *Religion of the American Enlightenment* (1930) that his care-free lifestyle heavily influenced his philosophy (49).

The most pervasive speculation concerning *Reason the Only Oracle of Man or a Compendious System of Natural Religion* (1784) is that of the author. Was it Ethan Allen or Dr. Thomas Young (1731-1777)? Scholars like John Pell, George Pomeroy Anderson, and Clarence Rife insist that Young wrote more of *Reason* than Allen did on the basis that Young had the maturity and knowledge, while Allen was just a teenager when they met and did not possess the wherewithal to write this book. However, a reading of Allen's appendix, *An Essay on the Universal Plenitude of Being and on the Nature and Immortality of the Soul and Its Agency* (1873), reveals some insight into Allen's rhetorical strategies and indeed demonstrates his ability as an articulate philosopher. For the purpose of my study, I contend that the authorship question of this text is irrelevant. Furthermore, the importance of the text (a rational argument against organized religion founded upon the greatest ideas of the Enlightenment era) is in its unique status as the first text of its kind on American soil. In "Ethan Allen, an Interpretation" (1929), American historian Clarence Rife admits that whether or not Allen is the author, the systematic deconstruction of one religion by way of "nature's laws and rights, was a task which passionately interested Ethan Allen" (250). *Reason*

*the Only Oracle of Man* can be labeled anti-Christian, blasphemous, deistic, or “curious,” and deservedly so on the basis of its content. Allen deconstructs the religious hegemony in Calvinist New England, thereby destabilizing his own community. For example, Allen and Young state, “It is nevertheless to be regretted [*sic*], that the bulk of mankind, even in those nations which are most celebrated for learning and wisdom, are still carried down the torrent of superstition, and entertain very unworthy apprehensions of the BEING, PERFECTIONS, CREATION and PROVIDENCE of GOD...” (*Reason* 24). Creation, the Mosaic account, miracles and prophets, as well as time and eternity, were central ideas in the Christian religion and were hotly debated by European thinkers—a clear demonstration of the philosophical kinship between Allen and his intellectual contemporaries. A completely annotated edition of *Reason* would go a long way to revise our understanding of Ethan Allen as a significant deistic figure in the early national period.

For a full examination of Allen’s work, one must also accept the task of re-discovering Dr. Thomas Young. In this manner, *Reason* will stand beside the men who likely co-authored it, discussed its contents, and popularized ancient Epicurean materialism on the American continent. Adolph Koch, an American sociologist whose doctoral dissertation “Republican Religion” (1933) was later reprinted as *Religion of the American Enlightenment* (1968), explains that “Through Young, Allen had a second-hand acquaintance with Charles Blount, the English deist” and author of *Oracles of Reason* (London, 1693), a radical work of Enlightenment philosophy which may have supplied the title of Ethan Allen’s work (35). Young was a member of the Sons of Liberty in Boston.<sup>1</sup> Other members included Samuel Adams, John Hancock and Paul Revere; his relation to these notable Americans demonstrates that Young deserves a more prominent place in our nation’s history. His contribution to America’s intellectual revolution must be re-examined, for his authorship of *Reason* can no longer be questioned or overlooked. Young’s British deism, fueled by his understanding of Blount and Locke, is founded on the sixth century BCE debates of the atomists Leucippus and Democritus, whose importance to the emerging Enlightenment philosophes of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Thomas Young see my Selective Bibliography entries for Brother John, Henry Herbert Edes, Pauline Maier, and Vernon Turner.

the eighteenth century is still debated. *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* is America's premier text elucidating the contemporaneous reaction to an ancient debate.

Ethan Allen is one of the most important authors of early American literature who has been largely forgotten. The most recent biography on Allen, William Sterne Randall's *Ethan Allen: His Life and Times* (2011), did not treat *Reason* outside of merely mentioning its existence. Biographers, such as Willard Sterne Randall (2011), John Pell (1929), Charles Jellison (1969), and Michael Bellesiles (1993), have examined Allen with a historical lens; however, they all but disregarded his philosophical discourse. There has been some new work within the last fifteen years explicating Allen's contribution to American deism, but none draws connections to the contemporaneous thought of his time. In their article "Ethan Allen, His Philosophical Side" (1999), Edward and Maria Madden examine Allen's life in order to discuss his philosophy. Surprisingly, they do not link Allen with European thinkers such as John Toland, Charles Blount, Benedict Spinoza, or Thomas Hobbes—even though these writers' arguments can be found on every page of Allen's work. Charles Angoff perceptively comments in *A Literary History of the American People*, "Why [Allen] has been passed over by all the *literati* of America is one of the mysteries of our history. He wrote very little, but what he did write had fire in it. His *Reason*, though it contained no new ideas, can still be read with profit" (219). According to John Pell's article "Ethan Allen's Literary Career" (1929), Allen and Young, after "long winter evenings" pouring over several essays covering "Natural Rights," the two "copied passages, wrote out comments and deductions, and talked about getting out a book which would shatter the smug platitudes of the orthodox" (591). He speculates that the essays Dr. Young brought "with him to the frontier—in his saddlebags or his memory"—were Locke's *Essay on Civil Government*, the *Essay on Human Understanding*, Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*, Watts' *Sermons*, and Salmon's *Geographical Grammar* (591). Here we have an unmistakable connection to the European philosophers, especially John Locke, to whose thought Young paid particular attention. It is also important to note that the remaining three authors are also all of European origin. The fact that Allen and Young were obviously influenced by their work is the key to bridging the gap between the contemporaneous American and European thought.

Scholars have examined Allen, and their due diligence has bolstered the prevailing opinion that he was a hero of the American Revolution. His captivity narrative, *A NARRATIVE OF COLONEL ETHAN ALLEN'S CAPTIVITY* (1779), was published in six editions and distributed to increase morale among the colonial American troops during the Revolutionary War. American troops were exhausted by the battles with the British Redcoats, yet Allen inspired his fellow revolutionaries with fortitude and confidence to press on for freedom. Allen's biographers, even as recently as Willard Sterne Randall, continue to harp on Allen's importance as a military leader in our nation's history. However, that is where the examination ends—Allen's legendary status has not been challenged, but his significance as a philosophical thinker has almost been completely ignored. Even modern historians and biographers continue to commemorate the lives of our heroes selectively: any untidy matters that do not support our myth-making aims are swept under the rug. In our imagination, we still prefer our Washingtons, Franklins, and Jeffersons as white busts in our pantheon of intellectual leaders, whose stainless representations must be preserved at all costs. Perhaps scholars do not wish to tarnish Allen as a Revolutionary War hero—one end that justifies their treatment of *Reason* with benign neglect. Perhaps scholars do not wish to canonize *Reason* because the widely accepted belief is that Allen *did not* write this book alone. The importance, ultimately, is not the author's name because by all accounts Young and Allen co-authored the work, but that the book's significance lies in its transmission of ancient atomist theories and Enlightenment philosophy to the American continent.

In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1984), Martha Strom dismisses Allen as a philosophical author. She states that *Reason* was offensive and that the printer burned the manuscript (15). The information Strom provides is unfairly short and lacks sound research. The entry is written almost as if Strom was content to summarize previously printed information and prematurely end her investigation. So, too, in his biographical entry in *Dictionary of American Biography* (1928) Allen Johnson explains that *Reason* "was a curious book...most of it having been destroyed in a fire at the printer's [shop]" (188). Johnson refers to the fire as a judgment of God or that perhaps the printer himself could not bear to place his

name on such an anti-Christian publication. These sentiments follow Allen's text through time: critics dismiss it as the first atheistic text of its kind composed and printed on American soil. Why else would Randall not bother to study *Reason* in his biography? If the *Annals of American Literature*, the *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, and the *Cambridge History of American Literature* pigeonhole Allen as a person of little or no importance, it only makes sense that fellow scholars will follow suit.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1784, Ethan Allen and Dr. Thomas Young published *Reason the Only Oracle of Man, or a Compendious System of Natural Religion* to silence the ecclesiastics residing in the New Hampshire Land Grants, a colonial frontier colony that later became the state of Vermont. Allen was a Revolutionary War hero, the author of his imprisonment narrative, and a self-proclaimed natural philosopher. Allen and Young challenged the ecclesiastical superstructure of their era because they firmly believed that organized religion dealt in superstition and assumptions. *Reason* stands as the first American text that employed European Enlightenment thought to deliberately undermine the validity of the Bible and its reliability as a divinely inspired text. Contemporaneous clergymen such as Josiah Sherman and Lemuel Hopkins, as well as early nineteenth-century ministerial titans such as Timothy Dwight and Ezra Stiles, loathed the work and mercilessly denounced it from their pulpits. The original manuscript was all but completely destroyed in the print shop where its first copies lay.<sup>2</sup> Later, because of its damning critical reception from the pulpit, *Reason* was largely consigned to oblivion. Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* (1794-1803)—a distinct and intuitive demoralization of Christianity—has been generally considered as the premier deistic text of the radical Enlightenment in America, yet this distinction really belongs to Allen's and Young's *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, which was published in America ten years before Paine's first edition was printed in England. Unlike Paine, Allen and Young ably ground their epistemology in natural law theory rather than purely biblical exegesis. The laws of nature are also the guiding principles in Allen's posthumously published work, *An Essay on the Universal Plenitude of Being* (1873), which validates the philosophical core of *Reason*. Allen writes, "Nature will not conform to [us]...we must conform to nature, which is the standard of truth and reality" (280). My intention is to re-examine *Reason* to demonstrate why this huge treatise, and not Paine's, should be regarded as the first of its kind on American soil.

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<sup>2</sup> It is unclear what caused the fire that burned most of the copies of *Oracles of Man*, but the religious press of the time speculated that a lightning bolt from God wanted Allen's work to be destroyed; a more pedestrian explanation is that the printer probably found himself trapped in a moral dilemma to the extent that he burned his own shop.

Jared Sparks, President of Harvard College (1849-53) recalls in his research of Ethan Allen that the frontier “afford[ed] some of the most remarkable incidents in American history” (229). For centuries Americans have remembered Ethan Allen as the hero-leader of the Green Mountain Boys and the author of his captivity narrative. Young, on the other hand, is a man history has all but forgotten. His story is that of a prolific Bostonian writer who stirred the American Revolution through his incendiary newspaper articles. Young was also a member of the Sons of Liberty, the political activists who helped mastermind the Boston Tea Party and supported those who later became our nation’s Founding Fathers. However, Young is not credited in the scholarship concerning *Reason*; at best, he is mentioned as co-author. The combination of Allen’s religious principles and upbringing paired with Young’s philosophical understanding ensured that *Reason* would stand as a symbol of American revolt against the America’s clerical regime. It is time that critics return to Allen and Young in order to correctly establish their credibility as authors and credit their opus as a milestone in the transmission of European Enlightenment thought to the American colonies.

*Reason* was published at a time when New England’s Congregational Church controlled the tax revenue of all the other denominations within the geographical limits of its sphere of influence. As the official state church of New England until the revocation of its status in 1833, Puritan congregational churches enjoyed the power of privilege in each community in which they functioned as the established church.<sup>3</sup> Religious doctrine played a major part in the everyday lives of early Americans, and for Allen and Young to introduce a text that countered the established belief system was a frontal attack on traditional faith. In *Ethan Allen: His Life and Times* (2011), his most recent biographer Willard Sterne Randall says that true to the age of Locke and nationalist philosophies Allen insisted that “reason through rational thought had to replace reliance on miracles” (502). Science and religion were to be separated at all costs and, even though our authors’ deist rationale included a God, clergymen like Sherman, Stiles, and Dwight labeled Young and Allen as heretics and blasphemers of the highest rank. It is clear that *Reason* intended

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<sup>3</sup> See especially John D. Cushing’s “Notes on the Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780-1833.”

to subvert the credibility of the ecclesiastics of his time. Paine, on the other hand, attacked verse by verse the textual inconsistencies of Bible itself, which he does in great detail in *Age of Reason, Part II* (1794). Allen and Young also censure the textual reliability of Bible in several chapters of *Reason*, but they clearly pursue a deist rationale by focusing on the epistemological foundation of the Mosaic creation account. As the American historian Henry May tells us, “the most revered passages of Scripture went contrary to the precepts of natural religion, received morality, and even public order” (22). Men of Allen’s and Young’s character who found their immediate communities divided into socio-political, -religious, and -economic ranks would do anything in their power to ensure the survival of their livelihood. Allen and Young lacked the prestige later afforded Paine, a clear marker as to why their work was largely ignored, but they certainly had the wherewithal and the experience to challenge the hegemony of the Congregational Church. A systematic subversion of the specifics of revealed religion as seen in the Bible, *Reason* presents an argument more closely related to those of the European deists and natural philosophers than any other work by an American author of the period.

The overarching socio-economic atmosphere of the state church in the late eighteenth century was overshadowed by the power struggle between individual congregations seeking fiscal autonomy and non-members who resented having to pay a mandatory tax in support of the dominant parish church. John Cushing, former librarian of the Massachusetts Historical Society, points out that the churches “formed a system that has often been described as the ‘establishment’” (169). Establishing a common governing body, the Congregational Church advocated a system of communal worship and church membership, which also controlled who was eligible to run for public office in each community. Cities and towns would establish a church, elect a minister, provide a place of worship, and collect taxes to pay for the services then rendered. The boundaries of the towns coordinated with those of the churches in order to systematically divide the inhabited area into a seemingly corporate body. Cushing highlights the inherent problem,

Dissenters had a constitutional right to maintain their own societies, but freedom of conscience, an inalienable right, was quite distinct from the power to raise money for a public purpose, and



any argument to exempt a dissenter from his parish taxes ‘seems to mistake a man’s money for his conscience.’ A contribution to the support of the regular churches, [Massachusetts Chief Justice Theophilus] Parsons reasoned, was a contribution to the welfare of the state, and a man had no more right to be exempt from supporting a church he could not attend than to be free from school taxes because he had no children. (184)

Whether or not a person was a member of the congregation made no difference, thus sparking decades of ecclesiastical constitutional amendments and laws, and finally culminated in the separation of church and state in 1833. Cushing thus outlines the very power struggle with the Congregational Church in which Ethan Allen and Thomas Young were entangled. *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* attacked the foundations of church doctrine in order to subvert the powerful priest- and statecraft of the Congregational Church, which unfairly imposed its clerical taxation on all residents within its parish precinct whether they were church members or no.

It is clear that Paine’s celebrity status places him ahead of Allen and Young, putting both *Reason* and the early American deists at a great disadvantage. Another disadvantage to the early deists was the lack of solidarity among them. Deists, atheists, agnostics, as well as those denounced as heretics, were reviled and persecuted for their anti-Christian beliefs, but no united effort existed among these dissenters to overturn the status quo effectively. As the long eighteenth century was maturing, finer lines were being drawn between revealed and natural religion. Owen Aldridge’s article “Natural Religion and Deism in America Before Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine” (1997) nicely separates the two epistemologies: “Revealed religion,” he writes, “is a set of divine truths specifically communicated by God,” whereas natural religion is “a real system of truths available to all by the use of unaided reason” (836). These definitions make it easy for readers to see what Allen and Young subscribed to in their own discussions—the work of the European thinkers was always subject to systems, laws, and their connections. Reason, rational thought, and natural religion sprang from similar seeds. If the Enlightenment radical Charles Blount can be labeled the original European deist, this distinction can now be bestowed upon the authors of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*. Deism was changing from an attack on revealed religion to a system of belief in

the supremacy of natural laws, which is exactly what *Reason* offered its readers. Allen and Young, influenced by the European deists, attempted to reconcile the systems founded on natural law and morality, which transcended denominational claims.

Allen and Young challenged the ecclesiastical superstructure of their era because they believed the Church, as well as those appointed by the Crown, had overstepped its boundaries and therefore needed to understand, in the plainest terms available, that an individual's opinion counted regardless to what degree it opposed time-honored dogmas. They viewed the Old Testament to be "the footsteps by which we may trace the sacerdotal dominion to its source and explore its progress in the world" (*Reason* 279). The text explains that the use of rational thought—or *reason*—was more powerful and trustworthy than mere superstitious faith in an ancient anthology of scriptures deemed sacred because of time-honored tradition. The scientific method began to change the way people viewed their world and came to recognize that no power, person, organization, or ruler can reasonably explain what reality is. Like the ancient atomists and European Enlightenment thinkers, our authors challenged the concepts of *creatio ex nihilo*, the definitions of creation and formation, miracles, revelation and prophecy, and the validity of the Bible as a scientific text. Through the publication of their private discussions, they created the first American publication synthesizing Enlightenment teleology—a deist exposition inexorably grounded on the uniform and all-governing laws of nature. What mankind experiences, deists argued, is a self-governing but incomprehensible universe, which man cannot rationally explain—let alone comprehend—and therefore attributes to an omnipotent deity. Randall says, "Allen never understood how full-grown, otherwise intelligent people could take the Bible seriously" (500). Allen was aware of his world, and to the best of his ability he opposed the metaphysical grounds of Christianity and superstitious nonsense, and offered in its place a natural religion as God's best possible outcome under His supervision. According to Henry May's *Enlightenment in America*, early pro-deistic movements were actually the result of the anti-deist publications (38). This meant that laymen, whose interests were clearly anti-clerical and anti-Calvinist, were finding ways to separate themselves from the established hierarchy. Readers should easily see that the disenchanting masses

were looking for another way to protect their moral integrity, not to mention their economic footing, however unorthodox the methods may have been.

*Reason the Only Oracle of Man* is indeed a “curious” book, filled with the Enlightenment philosophy of two colonial Americans who, other than their wide reading, had no personal ties to European philosophers. Allen, as the critic John Pell points out, had access to the writings of Locke, Watts, Warburton, and Salmon (“Ethan Allen’s Literary Career” 591). *Reason* employed the concepts of natural religion to argue against structured religion and the priesthood. Dana Doten, another recent critic, asserts Allen “with the same passion that he hated civil injustice...hated priestcraft; with the same courage and proud egotism he would fight them both,” that being a Yankee invoked his hatred of all tyranny, that he would fight them as the Massachusetts farmers fought the British Army (363). The very fact that a deistic text of this kind was written by an America cannot be overemphasized because *Reason* evinces the transference and popularization of Enlightenment ideas in America. It is a testament to what men on the colonial American frontier were made of, their strengths and weaknesses, their beliefs, and most importantly, their undeniable quest for equality.

Allen says in the preface that he hopes readers find that his system “accords with the original principle [reason]” (Preface). *Reason* contains fourteen chapters in all: ranging from the “The Duty of Reforming Mankind from Superstition and Error, and the good Consequences of it” to “An Historical Testimony of Miracles insufficient to prove irrational Doctrines.” Allen and Young debate “The ETERNITY and INFINITY of GOD,” “The ETERNITY of CREATION,” “Argumentative Revelations on SUPERNATURAL and MYSTERIOUS REVELATION in general,” and “The vagueness and unintelligibleness of the Prophecies.”<sup>4</sup> From the start our authors assert,

THOUGH ‘None by searching can find out God, or the Almighty to perfection;’ yet I am persuaded, that if mankind would dare to exercise their reason as freely on those divine topics, as they do in the common

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<sup>4</sup> A complete chapter outline can be found in Appendices 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3.

concerns of life, they would in great measure rid themselves of their blindness and superstition and make better members of society, and acquire many powerful incentives to the practice of morality, which is the last and greatest perfection that human nature is capable of. (24-25)

This excerpt demonstrates its authors' proposed epistemology and its immediate similarity to contemporaneous authors. Paired with what we know about life on the frontier, this quote undoubtedly reveals the intensity of colonial American philosophical theory. One could easily make the assumption that colonial New Englanders took the first and considerably the hardest step toward Enlightenment when their Puritan ancestors left England, for in emigrating to the New World, they would inadvertently escape what the German philosopher Immanuel Kant would later call in 1784 the "self-incurred tutelage" of those in power ("What is Enlightenment?"). A noteworthy contemporary of Allen and Young, Kant asserts in this famous essay that man is participating in the "Age of Enlightenment" but has not yet reached the "Enlightened Age": man tends to fall all over himself when employing *reason*, but through his experimentation with freedom of thought and philosophical reasoning, he also moves toward his eventual emancipation (4). Kant's essay remains a pivotal point in Western philosophy while our authors' work is considered a crude example of early deism. However, what the two treatises do have in common is their equal desire to accommodate a growing number of people who wish to think freely, act judiciously, and be treated with dignity.

The most trenchant arguments in *Reason* can be found in the chapters that examine time and eternity, creation versus formation, miracles, and revelation and prophecy. It is in these areas that readers will clearly understand the importance of Allen's and Young's work. Our authors explain that belief in miracles implies that the laws of nature are flawed and need repeated tune-ups. They write, "To alter or change that which is absolutely perfect, would necessarily make it cease to be perfect. [A]n alteration could not meet with the divine approbation" (235). Allen and Young do not hide their intentions to dispute revelation. The first sentence of chapter six begins, "There is not any thing [*sic*], which has contributed so much to delude mankind in religious matters, as mistaken apprehensions concerning supernatural

inspiration or revelation” (200). The final chapter of my examination will investigate the authors’ explanations of the true nature of God, creation, and eternity. Allen and Young argue that the Mosaic hexaemeron inadvertently places God in time, which is “incompatible with the just idea of the eternity and infinity of God” (72). Utilizing the methodologies from the Greek atomists and European thinkers, Allen and Young rejected the Bible’s reliability as a divinely inspired text, which, instead of bolstering one’s faith in a supreme deity, merely accommodates an incomprehensible universe to the needs of an illiterate people.

Over two centuries have passed since *Reason* saw the light of print. Since that time, the text has been pushed aside for more notable authors of the period. The initial criticism from renowned clergymen was also responsible for its dismissal. The ambivalence that exists concerning *Reason* is no longer important. It may be that scholars do not wish to tarnish Allen’s name—one end that justifies their lack of attention to his text. The rise of deism in pre-Revolutionary America did indeed begin before 1784, but *Reason* allowed the movement to take hold. I think Clarence Rife’s essay says it best when he states, “perhaps it is just as well that the appraisal has been delayed to these later days when we are better able to understand the complexity of the factors involved” (561). The importance though is not the authors’ names because this is clearly the work of both Young and Allen, but that the book stands as the undisputed center of the transmission of Enlightenment philosophy to the American continent. A thorough re-examination of the text needs to call necessary attention to early American philosophy and the need to critically explore America’s overlooked figures. This essay includes an appendix (Appendix 1.1), which collates the four extant editions of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*. There are no previous examinations of this type, so I invite my audience to peruse that section to see the immediate benefit of such a study on this particular text.

## 1 TIME, ETERNITY, AND THE DEBATE ABOUT FORMATION VS CREATION

The ontological discussions concerning matter, substance, creation versus formation, and time versus eternity, have engaged philosophers for millennia. From the ancient civilizations through the Enlightenment Era (and still today), clergymen, philosophers, and scientists exhaust themselves, as well as their resources, in hopes of proving or disproving the biblical account of creation. Ethan Allen and Thomas Young understood Enlightenment teleology and how their contemporaneous publications assisted an American opposition to the metaphysical grounds of Christianity, which ultimately condemned superstition and popularized Natural Religion. Reason and rational thought gained prominence throughout the eighteenth century. “The problem of the nature of matter,” suggests James Byrne, a historian of the philosophy of religion, “turns out to be of crucial significance in understanding what was at stake between science and religion in the Enlightenment” (157). Therefore, to underscore God’s goodness and perfection, Allen and Young embraced the ancient Epicurean and Aristotelian theory that God and creation were coeval; in essence, they killed time to save eternity. Other Enlightenment authors such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Baruch Spinoza, Baron d’Holbach and others, argued that the notions of matter and nature, creation and formation, were pivotal to comprehending God and the universe. The distinguished Italian historian Paolo Rossi tells us that “In our post-Darwinian world, the history of the universe, the history of the solar system, the history of the earth, and the history of the human species are entities constructed on vastly differing chronological seals,” inconsistencies which I believe were the driving force behind *Reason* (120). The religious environment, a battleground where the clergy struggled to stave off philosophy and science while maintaining the validity of the Bible, in both Europe and colonial America, also played a significant role in the ecclesiastical pursuits of the period. Atheism, agnosticism, deism, paganism, natural religion, and natural philosophy brought unorthodox ideologies to otherwise pious communities, thus shattering the stability of doctrinal faith. My aim is to demonstrate that this forgotten work is one of the linchpins of the American Enlightenment. In the following chapter, I will team Allen and Young with their European forebears to explain how *Reason*—in a very similar fashion to

its contemporary texts—dismantles the concepts of time and eternity and strikes at the foundation of the early American ecclesiastical superstructure, much like the Enlightenment philosophers had done before them in Europe.

My examination of *Reason* would be remiss if it did not follow a similar logic as its forebears. First, Allen and Young established that God and matter are infinite and co-existent. From the outset, Allen and Young asserted, “God did not come to be, but was, nor did he exist from eternity, but eternally existed and will eternally exist” (39). According to C. C. W. Taylor, the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus (460-370 BCE), student of Leucippus (5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE), conjectured a distinct and real coeval relation between the gods and the universe (138). In fact, Democritus postulated that the celestial gods are *not* the creators of the universe nor seated at the controls of the natural world, but co-existed all along with pre-existing matter. Allen and Young utilize a similar strategy as they appropriated their understanding of atomism through their reading. *Reason* attacked Moses’ creation account by stating, “But if GOD be admitted to have been eternal, he may as well be supposed to have been eternally active, or in other words eternal exertion would have been inseparably [*sic*] connected with his existence as God, and if eternally active, why not as well eternally create? [namely], coeval with the preceding eternity” (52). Allen and Young assert that God could not have been inactive for an eternity before the creation of the universe because inactivity is irreconcilable with the concept of his Being. They argue that because man believes in an incomprehensibly eternal being he should not have problems believing that creation is also eternal—our faculties are limited to measuring eternity but not in believing their coeval and infinite existence. They continue, “But when we speak of the act, exertion or creation of God, we should conceive of them, as not being confined or limited to the order of time...for such conceptions circumscribe and limit the power of God” (55). To speak of a “beginning” is therefore illogical, because “eternal” means “neither a beginning nor end.” When Moses confined God to a finite period (one with a definite beginning), otherwise known as “Genesis,” the Almighty, by implication, is no longer infinite—for if he is not eternal then he is not God. Following Aristotle’s logic closely, Allen and Young insist that to exist in time means that this being must be *measured* in time (Barnes 374, emphasis mine). In adopting Aristotle’s concept of time

and eternity, the two American iconoclasts strike at the foundation of the Mosaic creation account. They tell readers that “infinitude cannot be compounded of parts, or measured by time, nor repleted by any thing which pertains to, or operates by succession,” thereby asserting that infinity has no beginning or end, no bounds or borders, and forever remains incalculable to any finite being (57). Even if man could estimate the duration of creation time, the concept of infinity trumps that notion. This inexplicable ontological state is especially displeasing to ecclesiasts as they depend on scriptural examples to prove otherwise.

Early on, Allen and Young state that the universe as we know it reveals a system, that God’s plan was not random or speculative, but, precise and purposeful. This God should also accord with ancient examinations, namely, that he is infinite, incomprehensible, omniscient, immutable, and eternally existent. Allen and Young write, “if God has been eternal, the duration of his existence must have been also eternal, whether we are able to calculate it or not” (69). They advocated a philosophy of their own concoction and disseminated in the American colonies what they knew of the Enlightenment debates going on in Europe. Instead of breaking new ground, they imported the European philosophical movement and accommodated it to the needs of the local gentry. Allen and Young used the pamphlets and essays Young kept from his studies at Yale to advocate the trustworthiness of reason in opposition to the clergy’s reliance on the supremacy of revelation. In doing so, Allen and Young leaned on David Hume’s (in)famous essay *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), which established the importance of founding a theological treatise on empiricism, which eliminated digression from, as well as the tendency toward, convoluted and confusing dogmatic structures. Hume tells his readers that many learned men concur that an “invisible and intelligent power [exists] in the world,” which openly exhibits “the widest difference in the popular systems of theology” (Flew 122). For Allen and Young to consider Enlightenment thought, they found it wise to decide on the traits of a God who suited their system of reason. The duo says that this being should not only possess the aforementioned qualities, but that any anthropomorphic conception of the deity “impedes the cause of true religion and morality in the world, and [is] diametrically repugnant to the truth of the divine character” (*Reason* 48). For Allen and Young, theological systems, especially oppressive and ambiguous



dogmatic organizations, must not impede freedom of thought, nor should free thinkers be made to fear the inquisition. Rather, in their time and age, clerical opposition must not hamper free inquiry into all dogmas and hallowed traditions. As a colonial American farmer, a man with unquestionable integrity and the wherewithal to defend it, Allen would not be ignored or unfairly taxed, especially by a state church in New England, which did not support any other denomination but Congregational Calvinism. *Reason*, then, is the premier grassroots offensive through which the superstructure of revealed religion was to be replaced by Enlightenment philosophy with its roots in Cartesian mechanism and Democritean atomism. Clearly, Allen's and Young's adherence to an atomistic foundation bolsters the logos of their treatise.

Atomists like Aristotle, Leucippus, and Democritus profoundly influenced the early European deists. What readers must understand is that ancient atomism addressed the perennial question about the nature and properties of all matter—the significance of all physical phenomena being situated in their most basic components. The first discussions of matter and substance, at least the ones of which we have evidence, began centuries before the Common Era. Jonathan Barnes, author and scholar of ancient philosophy, has translated several of Aristotle's texts and states that “the necessary in nature, then, is plainly what we call by the name of matter...” (Barnes 342). Through Barnes' work, we know that Aristotle clearly divided his world into that which he could comprehend and that which he could not. This simple concept, that everything is made of something, remains essential today. Following in Barnes's lead, Taylor, author of *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments* (1999) states,

The ‘Corpuscular Philosophy’<sup>5</sup> provided the conceptual model for the leading scientists and philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, Newton, and Locke, and that philosophico-scientific movement provided the conceptual underpinnings of the scientific world view which remains dominant to the present day. (160)

Without a basic understanding of Aristotle's epistemology, science and philosophy would not exist as they do today. Allen's upbringing in an Arminian and Unitarian household, during the period of the Great

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<sup>5</sup> Corpuscular Philosophy supposes that miniscule, microscopic particles comprise all matter.

Awakening (1730-49), as well as Young's education at Yale and familiarity with the atomists, explains why their belief in atomism is central to their argument in *Reason*.<sup>6</sup>

Our authors postulate the following: "God is a rational, wise, understanding Being, because he has in degree made [mankind] so, and his wisdom, power and goodness is visible to [humanity] in his creation and government of the world" (53). Reason and natural philosophy had the power to clearly divide incomprehensible and comprehensible concepts—these were the clearest systems of understanding: there was nature and the universe, and there remained an infinite, infallible God. The Enlightenment deist Charles Blount, author of *Oracles of Reason* (1693), paved the way for English deism with his resurrection of ancient wisdom. His book openly professed that "if an Atom, or the smallest Particle of Matter existed before the *Mosaical* Epoque [the five books of Moses], I am of opinion that the whole Mass of the Universe did the same" (61). Blount's radical claims gave Allen and Young the necessary push to do much the same. When they perused Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, discussed the anti-deist backlash of William Warburton and of Isaac Watts, and examined the maps and historical information provided by Thomas Salmon, the two American radicals created a perfect environment for the birth of American deism.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, Baron d'Holbach, and David Hume rank among the elite Enlightenment philosophers whose works were widely read in Europe. Their

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<sup>6</sup> Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) was a Dutch theologian who, after examination of the Scriptures, rejected his teacher's insistence upon Godly election. Instead, he argued that election should be conditional on faith, that man can actively embrace grace. The Arminian doctrine was "more democratic than Calvinism in widening opportunities for salvation" (Koch 46-7). The Unitarians maintain the invalidity of the Holy Trinity, as well as the doctrines of original sin and predestination. Ethan Allen's frontier life and this particular combination of dogmatic influences proved to be some of the toughest opposition the Calvinists of his time had ever come across.

<sup>7</sup> William Warburton (1698-1779) published *Divine Legation of Moses demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist* (2 vols., 1737-1741), which was an ingenious attack on deism that originated from deist principles. Isaac Watts' (1674-1748) *Logic, or The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth With a Variety of Rules to Guard Against Error in the Affairs of Religion and Human Life, as well as in the Sciences* (1724) was probably included in the sermons Young carried with him. In *Logic*, Watts makes several references to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as well as to empiricism on the whole. Thomas Salmon (1679-1767) published *The New Geographical and Historical Grammar* (1749), which was the first of thirteen subsequent editions. The text is a representative of an 18th-century geographical grammar. In this, Salmon's most popular and successful work, historical and geographical information is arranged spatially with the continents described in order and by nation-state.

published exegetical discussions embraced Cartesian mechanism (matter in motion), as well as a variety of empiricist and rationalist methodologies to attack the superstructure of the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Science and philosophy began to break the bonds of organized religion. These philosophers critically examined and quoted one another's work, which elevated their anonymous underground pamphlets to the position of leading publications. The clergy inundated the public with refutations rallying steadfast piety and denouncing the new philosophical texts available from renegade printers. The catalogues of private libraries in colonial America, according to the American historian Henry May, were filled with numerous European books, and "did so with surprising speed, which show[s] a remarkably catholic reception of European thought and a clear preference for what was moral and moderate" (36). The growing availability of atheistic texts inadvertently led to the mass production of anti-clerical, anti-Christian—deist—publications. Although avid readership of deist tracts evinces their popularity, the term *deism* itself was still quite unclear. "The term *deism*," as Owen Aldridge explains, "is so elusive that it should be taken merely as a label of convenience rather than a reference to a precise system of thought" (836, emphasis mine). The Bible, the most widely read book during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was considered the true history of mankind, and was believed to be the repository of all learning. However important the Bible was to the colonists, there were many who felt that it was saturated with inconsistency and ambiguity. Hundreds of European Enlightenment publications explained the misappropriations of the concepts of time and eternity, as well as the definitions of creation and formation. Allen and Young believed it was time for an American publication to do the same. Closely related to their re-conceptualization of time and eternity is their re-examination of God's alleged activity.

A supreme being could not be lord of the manor without a kingdom to rule; the traditional Mosaic conception of God who was somehow inactive before he created the universe out of nothing was simply illogical, Allen and Young thought, for this simplistic explanation simply limited God's power. To them, God and matter had to be coeval, for if nothing existed for an eternity before the world came into being,

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<sup>8</sup> "Universal Mechanics" states that the universe is reducible to mechanical principles, or, the results of the motion of matter and substance.

God would have been a passive entity—not an Almighty God at all. Per definition, God and matter had to be coeval, or else he would be brooding over emptiness. As the ancient atomist philosophy enjoyed a renaissance among European philosophers, the atomists passed to the Enlightenment thinkers the lever with which to unhinge the Mosaic creation account. Substance and matter, they argued, undeniably coexisted with God. Their infinite natures may be incomprehensible to man, but that, for the Enlightenment, was not the issue. To be infinite and infallible meant God was indeed the Great Supreme.

In redefining God's nature, Allen and Young walked in the footsteps of Hume and d'Holbach and their circles in France. It is therefore no surprise that in his *System of Nature* (1770), d'Holbach offers a similar dialectic. A man of letters, Baron Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach (1723-89) dislodged the intended meaning of the Mosaic creation when he writes that it is not chance that brought about universal nature, but that "nature exists necessarily from all eternity" (1: 57). The Frenchman strikes at the heart of the Bible, telling his audience that God and nature must be coeval, that a beginning defies eternity and therefore negates the power of the biblical deity. D'Holbach's influence on *Reason* is more than likely. Hume and d'Holbach probably debated the eternal nature of things with their peers in the salons around Europe, while Allen and Young did their part to undermine the social hierarchy of their community.

At the core of European Enlightenment teleology, d'Holbach writes, "To produce from nothing, or the CREATION, is a term that cannot give us the least idea of the formation of the universe; it presents no sense, upon which the mind can rely" (1: 54). The learned community who knew better than to make blind assumptions never accepted the concept of "something from nothing," especially while they were trying to strip the Bible of its dogmatic stranglehold on its readers. They targeted a massive community of believers, which blindly accepted the dogmas of their church. David Hume, for instance, seems to think that the atomists may have had the best explication of the creation of the universe. He writes, "The ancient mythologies, indeed, seem throughout to have rather embraced the idea of generation than that of creation or formation, and to have thence accounted for the origin of this universe" (Flew 122). Indeed, spontaneous generation was something heavily debated during the seventeenth century, and atomism was under fire for its reliance on chance. C.C.W. Taylor, Oxford Professor emeritus of Philosophy, explains

that Democritus struggled with this very subject, yet the basic underlying feature to this doctrine was that “Nothing comes in being from what is not, or passes away into what is not” (58). Biblical accounts of creation and formation were ontologically inconsistent if not unworthy of an Almighty God. As the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) put it in his famous essay “What is Enlightenment?” mankind must liberate itself from the bondage of the church and learn to think for itself.

As mentioned above, God’s eternal nature as ruler of the universe necessitates his providence over subjects. In other words, to be considered a king he needs a kingdom in which to rule. Allen claims,

The complex idea of a God contains in it an idea of his providence, as much as the complex idea of a king includes that of subjects, or the idea of parents that of an offspring: to suppose a king without subjects, parents without issue, or a God without a providence, is equally chimerical, and to suppose a providence previous to creation, is as romantic a supposition as either of the former.

*(Reason 58)*

When Moses wrote the creation account, the Hebrew lawgiver implied that there was nothing before. However, such a claim is absurd to Allen and Young because as a ruler, God cannot be thought of as a monarch over nothing, over emptiness. Matter and God must therefore have been coexistent because the Almighty needed a physical terrain and spiritual universe as his dominion. In Allen’s posthumously published essay, *An Essay on the Universal Plenitude of Being and on the Nature and Immortality of the Human Soul and Its Agency* (1873), he writes, “We must conceive of things as they are in nature, or else we deceive ourselves” (280). He argues that man must conform to the incomprehensibility of nature rather than to force nature to conform to man’s limited understanding. For Allen and Young, substance and matter—creation, nature, the universe—coexisted with God, and God merely shaped the universe out of pre-existing matter. In *Reason* they write, “nor is death, decay, and dissolution any thing else but dissolution of forms, and not annihilation or a dissolution of creation [i.e. formation], all forms in general are indebted to [formation] for their existence” (71). Our authors rejected the Mosaic creation account as an unscientific narrative, because they believed that instead of bolstering one’s faith, it merely strengthened the

despotic grip of organized religion on an otherwise ignorant community. Moses, to Allen, Young, and their contemporaries, was the author of a simple tale devised to control a fractious people.

Despite the storm of criticism the duo encountered, Allen's and Young's definitions of creation and formation remain essential to their philosophy. They, in accord with Democritus, believed that "[the gods] did not create the physical universe," and that those same gods existed coevally with the universe (Taylor 138). For centuries, the Book of Genesis had been considered a scientific account of the *creation*, not *re-formation*, of the universe: Our authors claimed that God merely shaped the universe from pre-existing matter:

Formation [of the universe] belongs to that, which we call the eternal series of causes and effects, which we have been frequently describing as surpassing our calculations by numbers, and though it is eternal, it is in the eternal order of nature dependent on creation, and creation as eternally dependent on the eternal self-existent cause. (*Reason 70*)

Creation—the incomprehensible event when God and matter came to be—happened before recorded time and remains an unsolvable mystery. Thus, when the God of Moses separated light from darkness and created the plants, animals, and man, he did so by reshaping (through natural causation) the material that had coexisted with Him all along and did not, as Moses wrote, create the universe *ex nihilo*.<sup>9</sup>

Allen and Young were conscious of the risks they were taking; they knew that attempting to undermine religion was a radical attack on the established order. However, the duo firmly believed in their right to express themselves. In their early investigations of the Mosaic hexaemeron they write, "The foregoing theory of creation and providence [which I offered] will probably be rejected by most people in this country, inasmuch as they are prepossessed with the theology of Moses" (*Reason 72*). Moses, for Allen and Young, pigeonholed God into a finite existence when he limited God to six days of labor. Accordingly, our authors argue that a universe as immense as ours could not have been created in one week's time. In his *Essay on the Plenitude of Being*, Allen states, "Such [Christian] traditions which are believed to be

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<sup>9</sup> In Latin, *Ex nihilo* means "out of nothing." It often appears in conjunction with the concept of creation, as in *creatio ex nihilo*, meaning "creation out of nothing" and is found mainly in philosophical or theological contexts.

from God have a natural tendency to prejudice the mind against the progressive discovery of the truth or science, and fix it down to whatever tradition it may have received as sacred” (282). Man’s skepticism in the Bible peaked as the eighteenth century was coming to a close.<sup>10</sup> Like Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, Locke, Spinoza, d’Holbach and others, Allen and Young viewed the rise of *reason* as a chink in the armor of organized religion—deism was making its mark on American soil. This new way of explaining our world allowed for rational thought to break the bonds of religion in the Western hemisphere.

When Allen and Young borrowed Enlightenment thought to breach the footings of ecclesiastic power, the clergy became infuriated. American historian and President of Harvard College, Jared Sparks (1789-1866), author of the *Life of Ethan Allen* (1834), perhaps best speaks for the incensed clergymen of the early nineteenth century. He discerned the atomist underpinnings in *Reason*, which he believed clearly bolstered the subversion of the standing ministerial power. Obviously upset with the cleverness of the text, Sparks retaliated: “[*Reason*] is a crude and worthless performance, in which truth and error, reason and sophistry, knowledge and ignorance, ingenuity and presumption, are mingled together in a chaos, which the author denominates a system” (350). Sparks’ criticism bespeaks the irritation of American clergymen who resented the encroachment of self-appointed philosophers on their domain. Jared Sparks and his colleagues would have disagreed with Paolo Rossi, who believed a compromise was possible: “It is possible to speak of the history of the physical world, of the formation of the solar system, of change, of time, of the history of the universe and the history of the earth, and still avoid the impiety of the atheist and materialist traditions” (54-55). *Reason* did attempt this feat only to be condemned to silence and scholarly neglect. Ministers blasted its thesis and denounced it as a hell-bound book written by atheists. This clerical counterattack may well explain why *Reason* was sidelined by those in power.

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<sup>10</sup> Scientific experimentation successfully refuted and disproved religious doctrine—empirical evidence from the likes of Joseph Glanvill, Henry More, and Cotton Mather clearly demonstrated the disparities in man’s understanding of his world. In 1590 José Acosta shattered the world in his treatise *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies* by way of its detailed and realistic view of the natural world, a move which poignantly deflated the Bible as a scientific text.

*Reason* was indeed an anti-clerical and anti-Christian document, one that embodied everything from the Greek atomism to the early European Enlightenment philosophy. Its explosive impact can be measured in Jared Sparks' condescension that "Allen's 'presumptuous way of reasoning upon all subjects' represents 'the habits acquired by his pursuits in a rude and uncultivated state of society'" (Koch 30). This legerdemain dismissal of *Reason*, however, belies the deist creed that "...creation is nothing short of an infinite exertion of God, who being eternally omnipresent, the operation or exertion of the act of creation was eternally everywhere" (55). Although Allen and Young did not succeed in diminishing the power of the New England clergy, their writing demonstrates the intellectual and cultural shift in America's frontier following the First Great Awakening and Whitefield's Revivalist movement.<sup>11</sup> Allen's and Young's re-definition of formation and creation propagated a kind of skepticism of the superstructure of the established church that came to a full flowering in the twentieth century. Their deconstruction of the Pentateuch would pave the way for later movements such as American Transcendentalism.

Even two hundred years after the highly contentious Enlightenment debates, the puzzles of the concepts of time and eternity continue to baffle mankind, and a concrete resolution lies very much beyond our comprehension. Allen insists, "we must therefore abstract the Idea of the essence of God from the essence of his creation, and conceive of him to be the author of nature, but not of nature itself; and however inconceivable the Divine nature is to us, we must ascribe absolute perfection of God, in our conception of him, [or] we un-God him" (282). *Reason* is a significant document in the evolution of theological philosophy or, as our authors refer to it, Natural Religion. Like many before and after them, Allen and Young tried to come to terms with the tangible aspects of our world to answer the questions posited by the incomprehensibility of our existence. The arguments that follow rely on the definitions we have set forth in this chapter. As we continue, we will see the breadth of early deism in America as evinced by Allen's and Young's appropriation of European Enlightenment thought. Readers will continue to see how their brand

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<sup>11</sup> George Whitefield (1714-1770) was a prominent Anglican preacher who moved to open-air pulpits when his unorthodox ideas of total forgiveness offended many of the standing clergy. During his time at Oxford University he converted to a life trusting in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He traveled around England and the American colonies preaching outdoors to hundreds of thousands of his followers.



of natural law—an attempt to explain our world rationally without reliance on miracles—opposed the generally accepted ecclesiastical doctrine, which yoked mankind to organized religion.

## 2 ON MIRACLES

The Age of Enlightenment is also known as “the long eighteenth century.” It spanned from about 1650 to 1800 and includes some of the greatest accomplishments in science and learning the world has ever witnessed. Learned men questioned every facet of their lives, which quickly became problematic for organized religion. Natural science stripped mystery from the world around these men—ontological chaos grew exponentially. Science and learning shook the foundations of the established hierarchical order; no longer were scepter and miter the ultimate authorities on how the world worked and what one should believe.<sup>12</sup> Allen and Young were no strangers to this new order; in fact, their geographic location fostered the rapid dissemination of their ideas. Focusing on widely held belief in miracles, they claimed, “Was the order of nature to change, the great improvements which have been made in learning and science, would be nullified” (*Reason* 237). For our authors, God’s perfection implies that man’s discoveries of the eternal laws of nature were part of God’s intended plan for mankind. Miracles—the supernatural interruption of natural laws—are therefore contrary to the perfection of God’s grand machine. Because they could not be explained, certain purely natural phenomena were deemed miracles, and believers embraced them as proof of God’s infinite power and wisdom.

For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers, creeds based upon miracles were falling out of vogue. They may have had their place at one time, but the investigation of miracles showed they were more like parlor tricks—smoke and mirrors, slight of hand, collusion with assistants planted in the audience. The scientific discoveries of this period demonstrated the inconsistencies involved in the traditional

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<sup>12</sup> See Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (2002); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (2009); and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (2011).

faith in miracles. No one could recreate the miraculous events from the Bible, like parting seas or stopping the sun and moon in their course, but the clergy demanded that church members suspend their disbelief about events for which there existed no natural explanation. Learning and science alerted mankind to charlatans, impostors, and pretenders; that is why *Reason* warns, “it should prompt us to be very suspicious of the reality of [miracles]...” (262). Allen and Young stress that those who place faith in miracles should carefully examine any and all events purported to be miraculous. The Reverend Timothy Dwight, an early nineteenth-century clergyman, the president of Yale College and friend of Ezra Stiles, stood diametrically opposed to Allen’s and Young’s rationale and dismissed their book “simply as a contemptible plagiarism of English Deist authors...” (Madden 277). Dwight, like other clergy, insisted upon a blind faith in miracles, which led church members to believe in Calvin’s arbitrary election and limited atonement—concepts Allen and Young found absolutely repugnant. Miracles never had a place in their explanation of natural law.

Much of what Allen and Young argue is based upon the theory of the laws of nature—the epistemological scheme of *Reason* centers itself on God’s universe and his governance or what is now called natural law. When they found revealed religion counterintuitive to natural law, they uncovered the contradictions European philosophes had examined earlier. Our authors write, “...miracles are opposed to, and counteract the laws of nature, or...they imply an absolute alteration in either greater or lesser degree, in the eternal order, disposition and tendency of it...” (232). Allen and Young focus much of their attack on the Old Testament, which at the time stood as a reliable story of mankind’s existence but which also relied heavily on miracles. Several incidents that defy natural law take place in this section of the Bible: the universe was created in six days; the animal kingdom was created in a single day; serpents spoke to humans; the Red Sea was parted; Joshua stopped the sun, and many more fabulous tales intended to inspire the faithful with awe in the supreme power of God. In other words, our authors insisted that miracles—instead of attesting to God’s power—actually questioned the supreme perfection of his creation. For if God had to offset the laws of nature to accommodate the needs of individuals, his creation was anything but perfect. This disruption implied that his grand machine needed periodic fixing, or as the poet Philip

Freneau put it, “Could she [Nature] descend from that great plan / To work unusual things for man, / To suit the insect of an hour—/ This would betray a want of power” (“On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature,” lines 5-8). This point, that miracles represent an ecclesiastical linchpin to faith (therefore, anything depending on them remains questionable at best) called for a rational and empirical re-examination of the church’s venerable traditions.

Young’s time at Yale turned him into an enthusiastic follower of the deists and the likes of John Locke and David Hume. The influence of the European Enlightenment on Young (and his upon Allen) remains unmistakably clear. Their relationship mirrored the activity in European salons where men openly discussed the affairs of their world, places where Cartesian mechanism and Newtonian physics interacted with faith in and reliance on the Bible. As I said before, Young and Allen spent long winter nights learning and discussing the aforementioned authors, “and talked about a book which would shatter the smug platitudes of the orthodox” (Pell 591). Allen and Young wanted to change the game; they wanted to even the playing field; they hoped that *Reason* would overthrow decades of priestly dominance in New England. Our authors attempted to rectify this idea:

We are told, that the first occasion and introduction of miracles into the world, was to prove the [existence of a] divine authority, and the mission of its first teachers; be it so; upon this plan of evincing the divinity of [a supreme being’s authority], it would be necessary that its teachers should always be vested with the power of working miracles; so that when their authority should at any time be questioned, they might work a miracle; or that in such a case God would do it; which would end the dispute, provided mankind were supposed to be judges of miracles which may be controverted. (*Reason* 262)

So, our authors insist that the clergy who defend miracles should have the ability to either recreate a miracle or call upon God for divine intervention. Furthermore, Allen and Young also say that even if this were possible, the finite mind of mankind would not be able to discern reliably whether or not a miracle had indeed occurred. Natural law, as postulated by Spinoza, Hobbes, and Blount, gives man the right to rationally judge his world, but it does not privilege faith-based ecclesiastical explanations. Reason, then,

rather than marginalizing God's providence, allows for a greater understanding of the universe and of God's operation. French philosopher, avid writer, and proprietor of French salons, Baron d'Holbach reaches further and asserts that any explanation of miraculous events demonstrates mankind's overt ignorance to the actual causes of the likely natural phenomena (*Système de la nature* 108). Historically, clergymen knew that frightening the vulgar masses all but forced the community to follow whatever doctrinal guidelines were set. When churchgoers hear of the terrible consequences visited upon a recalcitrant people, like those of Sodom and Gomorrah, they will quickly fall in line. Blatant disregard for moral rectitude was met with ecclesiastic threats of eternal damnation. This type of manipulation of believers with fear and punishment became the target of *Reason*.

Miracles could rarely be investigated, because the power of the Bible rests upon their absolute possibility; miraculous events were therefore unequivocally employed to prop up the superstructure of revealed religion. Never happy with priestcraft as they encountered it, Allen and Young appropriated Enlightenment thought which they had gleaned from reading Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Understanding* (1748). In doing so, *Reason* follows a distinct pattern wherein experience leads to knowledge, thereby excluding anything based upon incomprehensible ideas and concepts. "By Miracles," writes Hobbes in *Leviathan*, "are signified the Admirable works of God. And because they are for the most part, done, for a signification of his commandment...men are apt to doubt...what he hath commanded" (202). He explains that miraculous events related in biblical texts give these particular events a prestige not afforded to similar occurrences found in nature itself. He felt that believers of miracles must note whether or not these "events" proceeded from natural phenomena, or if they were the tales of wonder, superstition, and ignorance, which bolstered clerical determination. Hobbes, a man who lived in exile for his own safety, reveals that miracles were completely misunderstood—that man should be cautious in what and in whom he believes. What he divulges cuts deeply into the foundation of the established Church. His contemporary, Benedict Spinoza, wrote such intuitive exegetical explications that he was ultimately ostracized from the Amsterdam Jewish community. In his *Theologico-Politicus Tractatus* he writes, "...the term 'miracles' can be understood only

with respect to human beliefs, and that it signifies nothing other than a phenomena whose natural cause cannot be explained” (84). His discussion of miracles includes a consistent disdain for conventional religious dogmas, which he claims are based upon mistaken notions. In “Discourse of Miracles,” Locke follows his predecessors and states that miracles are convoluted parts of information that pass from one fallible being to another: “What is a miracle is made uncertain”; what is fact to one person becomes opinion to another and hearsay to the next (Nuovo 44). Locke’s position argues the undeniable incomprehensibility of miracles and man’s inability to empirically prove their existence. John Locke’s and David Hume’s stance on miracles deeply influenced Allen’s and Young’s discussion. The duo’s strict adherence to empiricism cannot be understated—Young’s extensive knowledge of Locke and Hume, paired with Allen’s determination, created a significant argument for the reliance on natural phenomena over one couched in incomprehensibility. Clarence Gohdes, late editor-in-chief of *American Literature*, explains that Allen’s emancipation from dogmatic rule in New England is largely due to his comprehension of Locke’s psychology and Humean empiricism (136). Hume’s epistemological polemics were founded upon his and his predecessors’ conceptions of natural laws of the universe. Hume’s argument in “Of Miracles,” relays a stark message for Christianity:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. (Flew 68)

Hume was a member of the republic of letters, which included the wealthy, intelligent, worldly socialite Baron d’Holbach—a member of the coterie of French Enlightenment philosophes who published many important works. He also played host to some of the greatest philosophers of his time as a French salon owner. His contributions to the Enlightenment make him one of the more dynamic characters of the period. In d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature*, he describes miracles as “...impossible, because nothing can suspend the necessary course of beings, without the whole of nature arrested...” (1:109). *Reason* clearly embodies European Enlightenment thought; this document represents an outstanding example of the

eighteenth-century's international movement to dismantle priestcraft and clerical power structures. Allen and Young combined their understanding of the above-mentioned works with their individualized spirit of revolt against organized religion; they employed their own form of pragmatism to smash the foundations of the colonial American clergy.

Ethan Allen and Thomas Young found the clerical emphasis on miracles to be one of the root causes of privilege in colonial America. The Bible is filled with stories of miraculous events to strengthen the faith of believers. The Puritan dogma of saving grace, an idea couched in privilege with which Allen and Young did not agree, was never bestowed upon the whole of mankind, they objected. Their democratic conception of mankind embraced the belief that God's grace was available to everyone, not just a small group of the elect arbitrarily chosen by a discriminating deity who subjected all others to a form of double indemnity. They echoed the ideas of Charles Blount's *Oracles of Reason* (1693), which says that "Mutations in both Doctrine and Matters of Faith . . . must still be seconded by some private temporal Interest, and have some humane Prop to support them, or else all will not do" (167). In other words, miracles that seem to favor specific individuals or nation may be nothing more than a tall tale borne out of priestly license and royal decree to adapt historical events to partisan interest. *Reason* asserts, "We cannot for certain determine but that the successors have since corrupted [the message of miracles], and altered it to answer their own sinister designs, and thereby provoked God to withdraw from them the power of working miracles..." (263-64). Allen's brush with the Calvinist church pushed him to expose the manipulation of power within their ranks. This undemocratic behavior continued to control the ignorant masses ad nauseam. However, when Enlightenment philosophers began to question the Bible's validity, they also opened the investigation of the superstructure of hierarchical power. Early examinations of miracles were just the beginning; these biblical events were easy to attack, and the ignorant masses could be quickly swayed with reason. Allen and Young extrapolated their thesis from Hume, Locke, d'Holbach, and others in order to explain to their uneducated audience the inconsistency miracles represented. The duo realized that an argument against ecclesiastic reign via reason and rational thought was the simplest way to bring the complexities of European Enlightenment to their fellow colonial Americans. Edward and Marian

Madden's article asserts that the refutation of miracles in *Reason* is based on this summary: "Miracles imply that God is a poor craftsman and occasionally has to tinker with a malfunctioning universe, they are incompatible with God's omniscience, they are not instructive, and the term itself is subjective and wildly misappropriated throughout time" (277). In order for Allen and Young to destabilize the Bible's monolithic status as an inspired text, they needed to strike at what they believed were the major weaknesses within it. Revealed religion relied heavily on miracles; therefore, Allen and Young attacked this proposal with surgical accuracy. Throughout their text, they argued that God's creation was perfect and that supernatural intervention is a violation of natural laws. This is consistent with Spinoza's idea that "Miracles could *only* bring [men] to acknowledge that there is a deity" (Israel 88, emphasis mine). Natural phenomena and the examination of the laws of nature proved that something greater than mankind existed. Their rejection of miracles artfully voices their discontent with America's religious power structure.

*Reason* establishes an infinite God whose omniscience presents mankind with a perfect universe in which to observe his providence. Miracles, or alterations in natural law, imply an imperfection of the great machine: "To suppose that God should subvert his laws," Allen and Young explain, "would be to suppose him to be mutable; for that it would necessarily imply, either that their eternal establishment was imperfect; or that a premised alteration thereof is so" (235). Allen and Young say that if natural law is not perfect, then the universe is not perfect, and it follows then that God is not perfect either. They clearly reject the possibility of miracles, because supernatural intervention not only implies an imperfection in the universe, but also the need for God's occasional fixing or adjusting of his grand machine. *Reason* asserts that God designed the universe perfectly; and any deviation from this design would imply God's finite existence. Miracles, actions that in many cases defend revealed religion against all odds, negate God's power.

Allen and Young, like their contemporary philosophes, bestow the deistic title "architect of the universe" upon God. As previously discussed, they argued that God created the universe, but he did not create matter. As modern Epicureans and Cartesian mechanists, they argued that God formed the universe

from pre-existing matter. *Reason* states, “God...has so constructed [nature], that it never needs to be rectified” (238). Therefore, Allen and Young explain that to introduce miracles into the system implies that the system contains flaws, which indicates an imperfect architect. If the Bible is the Word of God—one revealed to the authors by God himself—then the perfection of his creation would be jeopardized. Any form of errors seriously undermines the Bible’s credibility. “For ignorant people,” writes d’Holbach, “miracles are just supernatural events of natural origin” (3: 18). Uneducated observers believe that anything they cannot explain must be a miracle. Enlightenment authors argued that priests and ecclesiastics the world over used miracle stories to enchant their flocks and keep them in subjection. Attacks against revealed religion did not remain unnoticed. As Yale President Timothy Dwight responded, “Decent nonsense may possibly amuse an idle hour, but brutal nonsense can be only read as an infliction of penal justice” (Shapiro 237). Dwight understood the negative impact a book like *Reason* could have on Calvinist congregations. Leisure was best used to deepen one’s faith and examine the mysteries of life within the limited scope of church dogma. Allen and Young wanted nothing more than to disenfranchise the all-pervasive power of New England’s Calvinist church. The object of *Reason* was to establish freedom of thought and contemporary philosophy in place of out-dated and clearly biased religious doctrines. Pell writes, “[Allen’s] whole life was a rebellion against Calvinistic determinism. His abandonment of accepted dogma belongs in the same category as his abandonment of the Crown” (597-98). Allen and Young could not accept the idea that God, or any other force for that matter, needed to intervene in universal events. The duo conceded that in the period in which the Bible was initially written miracles had a place and were an accepted fact of life, but the advent of the scientific revolution obviated any need for facile miracle stories. If the members of the congregation spent their days reading *Reason*, then they would be able to appreciate the grandeur of the universe without the need to be kept entertained with supercilious stories of the primitive past. Had Allen’s and Young’s text caught on, as Paine’s *Age of Reason* did later, the dominance of the established church would have been retrenched at a much faster rate.

Allen and Young approach the Scriptures philosophically from an Enlightenment perspective, and they find that its implications threatened the existing social order. The American Enlightenment, as Henry



May suggests, was kindled by a “hatred of lukewarmness and cynacism, its demand for absolute commitment, its dedication to intolerance, its constant invocation of the instincts of the people against the sophistication of the learned” (154). As men who regularly fought against the oppression by the clergy and the community elite, Allen and Young were not going to stand idly by while their rights to freedom of thought were dragged through the mud. *Reason* was not just waging war against organized religion—it was a wholesale revolt against the privileged order as controlled by the state churches of New England. “Ethan Allen’s Americanization of Locke,” according to Shapiro, “has a peculiar significance for our understanding of the basically conservative nature of the aims of an American ‘rebel and iconoclast’” (246). The duo’s appropriation of Enlightenment thought afforded them the opportunity to breach the foundation of the Congregational church by threatening its economic basis. The American brand of Enlightenment philosophy censured clerical dominance and fought for inalienable rights of men.

How threatening this challenge proved to be to the clergy can be seen in the passionate response of one of its representatives. In 1787, Josiah Sherman (1729-1789) published *A Sermon To Swine*, in a direct attack on *Reason*. Sherman, a pastor in Massachusetts and later in Connecticut, is described as “an eloquent preacher,” and is remembered as being “always of such character as to command the respect and attention of his audience” (Roberts 104). As a contemporary to our authors, Sherman had to defend his livelihood, which depended upon the belief in miracles and the Bible’s use thereof. In this particular sermon, Sherman refers to Luke 15:16, or more specifically, the story of the prodigal son, in order to demonstrate the dangerous message of *Reason*. Sherman’s preaching implied that Allen’s and Young’s work was feeding husks to those who would have them. The husks stood for the anti-religious messages while the swine referred to “Deists, Infidels, and all who deny the divine original and authority of the holy scriptures, and substitute the light of nature, and the oracles of reason, or the dictates of conscience” (*Sermon* 9). He warns that revealed religion is the “truth the [prodigal] son wasted,” resulting in the loss of God’s protection (*Sermon* 5). Sherman’s defense of dogmatic rule demonstrates that Allen and Young effectively cornered organized religion into explaining its source of power—a less-than-desirable position that angered the clergy. Our authors wanted their audience to understand that men made a conscious

choice to believe, and if men accepted things blindly, humanity would have to answer more questions than those who could rationally explain the world. This meant that many issues were inexplicable, of course, but it also allowed reason and philosophy to gain strength as plausible means of investigation. Sherman makes a quick but half-hearted apology stating that “[he] would by no means say anything to depreciate the value of reason,” even as he insisted that “reason never was given for a rule in matters of religion” (*Sermon 7*). His intention to shield his flock against unbelief and protect his livelihood is couched in his efforts to keep rational thought at bay for fear that he may lose his own footing.

But authority and influence were always the ultimate goals—the Bible was for many centuries the history of man and the source of power for legions of kings. Sherman, an opponent to *Reason* from its inception, asks, “Shall we, who are so imperfect in our knowledge and wisdom, reject the known laws of our Creator?” (*Sermon 8*). These “known laws” were the Ten Commandments. Allen and Young say that natural law, not the Mosaic laws, is God’s law. Man enjoys the universe “under the unerring guidance of the providence of God” (238). Reason and rational thought, for Allen and Young, are part of God’s universe. They are the gifts that God gave mankind to understand nature, God’s providence, and the harmony of the universe. Unable to reconcile with *Reason*, Sherman writes, “[Mankind’s] imperfection of knowledge and wisdom...increases their obligation to put an *implicit* confidence in the wisdom, an *implicit* faith in the Word, and yield an *implicit* obedience to the known command of their all-wise and benevolent Creator” (*Sermon 8*). In order to receive the grace of God and to avoid the errors of a prodigal son, Sherman intones, mankind must absolutely believe in the Word of the God. Sherman wants his audience to clearly understand that God demands a faith that surpasses the value of reason and rational thought. It is true that reason is at odds with revelation, but *Reason*—to be sure—was written to curb mankind’s departure from God’s laws. Allen and Young simply used similar terminology and the ideas and concepts of the European Enlightenment to stake their claims. They wrote, “Those things in nature which we do understand, are not miraculous to us, and those things which we do not understand, we cannot with any propriety adjudge to be miraculous” (254). American clergymen, as well as the educated men of the period, had access to the works by European thinkers. They also knew the implicit danger

these publications posed for people of faith in Europe as well as in America. This new way of thinking surely meant that they might have to defend the Bible's underpinnings, the belief in miracles and supernatural events that could not be scientifically proven.

The final way Allen and Young argued against biblical miracles was their inherent lack of instructive wisdom: miracles interrupted natural law, but they did not explain why such a disruption was necessary. Never had miracles communicated to man the disadvantages or benefits they bestowed upon the universe. As Spinoza points out, nothing can be learned from, nor can God's existence be proved from, miracles (Israel xix). Furthermore, Hume explains miracles as evidence of mankind's love of wonder, which binds him to his religious doctrines. If this is the case, Hume asserts, "There is an end to common sense; and human testimony...loses all pretensions to authority" (Flew 72). Allen's and Young's interpretation of the doctrinal lessons derived from these supernatural occurrences held no weight—the unctuous orations of self-serving priests constitute little more than misunderstood, ignorant, and barbarous tales of primitive peoples. "Miracles," for Allen and Young, "might evince the divine mission of the clergy, and the divinity of the Christian revelation to us...[yet] they are not calculated to expound or explain it, but would perplex and confound us, in our logical and doctrinal speculations, nature and reason being opposed to them" (269). If miracles had any ground in history, Allen and Young seem to imply, tales of wonder and divine intervention in the course of nature were no longer effective tools to captivate rational man. In an age when humanity discovered some of the universe's greatest secrets ever known, Allen and Young embarked on a knight's errand to combat any religion based on supernaturalism.

It should now be clear how Allen and Young employed European Enlightenment thought to attack the biblical conception of miracles. In this chapter, we have read the arguments of Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, d'Holbach, and Hume through the revolutionary work of two Americans. Allen and Young cleverly demonstrated the fallibility and unreliability of miracles. By doing so, *Reason* leveled the playing field of colonial America's socio-religious hierarchy. Allen and Young questioned miracles, which the established church felt the need to defend to protect the integrity of the Bible. We may now clearly see how

their masterpiece, through reason and rational thought, undermines the superstructure of the Congregational Church, while establishing natural law as a viable means of faith. In the following chapter, we will examine the debate on revelation and prophecy as it is presented in *Reason* and elucidate the presence of European thought in their work. In doing so, I will further clarify the pre-Revolutionary rise of Deism on the American continent.

### 3 REVELATION AND PROPHECY

So far, this examination of *Reason* clearly demonstrates Ethan Allen's and Thomas Young's discipleship to Enlightenment teleology, as well as their work's significance as an opposing force to the dominant Calvinist church in New England. The duo appropriated an atomistic philosophical position and argued that an eternal being presided over a system of natural religion, a synonym for natural law, to which God himself was subject. Next, they attempted to undermine the belief in miracles or divine intervention—ideas that become problematic to faith in an infallible supreme being. In this chapter, we will examine Allen's and Young's position on revelation and prophecy. These concepts are no strangers to opposition; attacks upon the validity of the Word of God, as well as the speculation surrounding its delivery, are legion. Allen and Young, following their European peers, dismantled doctrinal power as they targeted revelation and prophecy.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, they adopted the Hobbesist and Spinozist position that divine communication with prophets is unreliable and uncertain because God spoke to his messengers in dreams, visions, and voices. As Hobbes put it, to claim that God had spoken to the prophet in a dream,

is no more then to say he dreamed that God spake to him; which is not of force to win beleeif from any man, that knows dreams are for the most part naturall, and may proceed from former thoughts ; and such dreams as that, from selfe conceit, and foolish arrogance, and false opinion of a mans own goodlinesse, or other vertue, by which he thinks

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<sup>13</sup> Authors already discussed include Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, John Locke, Charles Blount, Benedict Spinoza, and Baron d'Holbach.

he hath merited the favour of extraordinary Revelation. To say he hath seen a Vision, or heard a Voice, is to say, that he dreamed between sleeping and waking: for in such manner a man doth many times naturally take his dream for a vision, as not having well observed his own slumbering. To say he speaks by supernaturall Inspiration, is to say he finds an ardent desire to speak, or some strong opinion of himself, for which hee can alledge no naturall and sufficient reason. So that though God Almighty can speak to a man, by Dreams, Visions, Voice, and Inspiration; yet he obliges no man to beleeve he hath so done to him that pretends it; who (being a man) may erre, and (which is more) may lie. (174-75)

If Hobbes' rationalist argument constitutes a serious blow to those who defended the Bible's supernatural origin in divine revelation, then Spinoza's claim that the prophets were little more than uneducated madmen, who, as in the case of Micaiah, were easily deceived, delivered the final blow. Owen Aldridge says that "by rejecting revelation, [Allen and] Young turned natural religion in American into outright deism. The process was not necessarily one of progression but of transition" (848). For our co-authors, then, man's rational faculty was the only safeguard against deception and priestcraft. Reason thus became the most effective weapon in the arsenal against the power of the Congregational church in New England.

As mentioned previously, Allen and Young established a system of natural religion predicated upon the natural world. The duo did not believe in the trustworthiness of alleged mysteries, for such inconsistent, irrational, and speculative events were the playthings of the ecclesiastics and others who fervently defended the Bible as the Word of God. Allen and Young could not believe in a book that embraced enigmas but brushed aside reason. The idea that an infinite being would deign to communicate with man in this haphazard and capricious manner, especially when God's book of nature offered to all clear and unmistakable meaning, seemed completely irreconcilable with his supremacy: the natural world, and nothing else, represented God's communication to mankind. Darlene Shapiro states that revelation must be a message for the whole of man, and not just one or a few of the race, "otherwise, it could not be understood or received" (252). Biblical prophets, sometimes described as "mad," or men who spoke in

tongues, as well as men who walked naked through the streets babbling, could not be mediators of the Word of God.<sup>14</sup> Allen and Young were diametrically opposed to putting any trust in such articles of faith because they deemed prophecy highly subjective and untrustworthy. For God to resort to such unreliable means of communicating his eternal plan to mankind was simply incredible. Given the philosophical power of *Reason*, Allen and Young launched their deist weapon at the purported prophecies in the Bible more than a decade before Thomas Paine published his (in)famous *Age of Reason* (1794).

Allen and Young, in their efforts to ensure that the clergy could not easily disregard *Reason*, struck at the heart of the Bible: “The infinitude and wisdom of God’s creation, providence and moral government will eternally remain supernatural to all finite capacities, and for that very reason we can never arrive to the comprehension of it” (205). They argue that the biblical accounts of God’s communication with man cannot be true, that reason and rational thought negate the credibility of such incomprehensible activities. God may have told Noah to build a ship; he may have spoken to Moses in the burning bush or on Mt. Horeb; God may even have spoken to Job. But if God’s message had been so important, Allen and Young assert, why did the Almighty entrust his proclamations to obscure men in an obscure corner of the world rather than pronounce his dicta to all mankind simultaneously?<sup>15</sup> Was the wisdom of God truly foolishness in the eyes of man? To Allen and Young, John Locke’s metaphysical theories seemed so much more rational. Locke writes, “There is no selectivity—all Christians should get a revelation; how can a Christian modestly deny this fact” (*Immediate Inspiration* 39). If God is the Supreme Being, should he not be more careful to whom he entrusts his message? More importantly, God’s supremacy as ruler of the universe was the very basis of the Bible, so selective transmission of divine messages to far-flung individuals in primitive times was something deists found utterly difficult to accept. The influential seventeenth-century author and English deist, Charles Blount, states, “No Rule of Revealed Religion was, or ever could be made known to all men. Therefore no Revealed Religion is necessary to future happiness” (*Oracles of Reason* 198). Blount’s sentiment bolstered our authors’ pursuits. Allen desired the freedom

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<sup>14</sup> See Isaiah 20:2-3 and Micah 1:8 (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, 938; 1241).

<sup>15</sup> See Genesis 6:14, Exodus 3:4, and Job 38-41 (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, 14; 88; 726).

his frontier life afforded him. Young wanted an end to the oppressive British rule, and their collaborative effort brought the European Enlightenment to colonial America. For Allen, New England's Calvinists were overextending their rule. Young felt that King George III's divine right ought to have limits. In both instances, the Bible had been the authority as to who held influential appointments in the community. The idea that an ancient book—one founded upon superstition, miracles, and unlikely events—bestowed civil privileges on church members, magistrates, and despotic rulers, was utterly repulsive to those who quested for freedom to worship in the church of their own mind. The American Enlightenment's embrace of European thought noticeably marks the rise of deism on the continent. Evidence of the continental movement away from clerical rule can be found in the similarities between *Reason* and Benedict Spinoza's *Theologico-Politicus Tractatus* (1670), which spends considerable time reviewing the pros and cons of revelation and prophecy. Spinoza concludes that “the prophets disagreed among themselves in philosophical matters and their narratives of things are very much adapted to the presuppositions of their respective times, and therefore we may not infer or explain the meaning of one prophet from clearer passages in another, unless it is absolutely evident that they both held exactly the same opinion” (10). Invoking Spinoza, the authors of *Reason* tried to curtail the socio-economic privilege of New England's established church.

The debate concerning the Word of God cannot be ignored. Theologians and clergy believe in verbal inspiration, a text literally dictated to illiterate men. Many also believe that the manifestations of the will and mind of God are contained in the Word. And yet, no distinction appears to be made in the Bible between human and divine elements. As Blount states, “all Reveal'd Religions are different from each other; and you cannot prove any one of them to be truer than the rest” (*Oracles of Reason* 201). For instance, although Christian and Islamic texts contain many similarities and differences, both lay claim to being God's genuine revelation. Jonathan Israel, editor of Baruch Spinoza's *Theologico-Politicus Tractatus*, asserts that “[Spinoza] demonstrate[d] prophecy is not the divine inspiration in the way that most people believed, and is not the work of divine wisdom in action, but is rather a consequence of certain indi-

viduals being endowed with a particularly powerful ‘imagination’” (ix). Again, because a person’s *imagination* is subjective its musings amount to wishful thinking, there is no factual truth in dreams, visions, or voices. The process of determining the source of one’s imagination is as nebulous as an examination of supernatural phenomena. As the clergy perpetuated the divine nature of the Bible, Allen and Young questioned its trustworthiness by claiming that whatever has been labeled incomprehensible or mysterious, cannot be understood—there is no middle ground: “To reveal is to make known, but for a mystery to compose any part of a revelation is absurd; for it is the same as to reveal and not to reveal at the same time; for was it revealed, it would cease to be mysterious or supernatural, but together with other parts of our knowledge would become natural” (*Reason* 207). Mystery and faith remain the cornerstones of Christianity, and their sanctity was to be protected at all costs—to lose them was perilous. Even though natural religion included a God, it dismantled the reliability of the Word of God. *Reason* created a system in which Western Enlightenment philosophy challenged centuries of social hierarchy; *Reason* tried to extinguish clerical rule on American soil. It is plain to see that the deist publications of the period had a deep impact on Allen and Young.

*Reason* maintains a system of “Natural Religion” in so much that nature provided the basis for understanding God’s universe. Allen and Young state, “None will pretend, that the natural reflections of our minds are dictated by the immediate agency of the divine spirit; for if they were thus dictated, they would be of equal authority with any supposed inspired revelation” (221). Therefore, God or any other higher power does not direct man’s imagination. The infinite nature of God does not concern itself with a finite mind, thus any claim to divine authority of revelation and prophecy is null and void. It also follows that mankind cannot communicate with God because man cannot comprehend something so powerful; it is impossible for a finite being to understand one greater than itself. Allen’s and Young’s discussion echoes Locke’s when he says that “Faith is of things not seen and faith shall be swallowed up in vision and therefore vision puts an end to faith” (*Immediate Inspiration* 37). Nature empirically proves a vast yet seemingly infinite number of phenomena. The biblical explanations of natural events relied on faith. *Reason* never discounted a God or Supreme Being, but it did argue against one that could be circumscribed



by a dogmatic framework. The study of nature and its unalterable laws, according to Allen and Young, is the only way to understand, become one with, and know a great First Cause.

*Reason* also drew sustenance from Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, which lambasted revelation and prophecy at considerable length. One of his most stinging criticisms of the Word of God occurs in the following passage: "All prophecy originates in a gift from God, one which many admire and choose to believe before Reason and Judgment are applied. Therefore, men must be careful of prophets because mankind's natural inclination to rule and reign gives rise to false prophets, imposters, and pretenders" (200). Hobbes cautions his readers to avoid men who claim to understand otherwise incomprehensible things in the universe. Allen and Young seem to echo Hobbes' caution: "when we have the vanity to rely on dreams and visions to inform ourselves of things, or attempt to commune with the invisible finite beings, or with the holy spirit, our deceptions, blunders and confusions are increased" (*Reason* 225). Nonetheless, the dominant Congregational church in New England relied on the Bible and on conversion experiences to determine membership and societal privilege. Allen resented this monolithic ecclesiastical power, especially because the state church taxed all citizens, whether they subscribed to its tenets or not.<sup>16</sup> *Reason* democratized religion and by implication extended salvation to all. Since total depravity and arbitrary election were two of the constituting dogmas of Calvinism, the clergy vehemently opposed the idea that all men would be saved.<sup>17</sup>

The ambiguity surrounding revelation and prophecy sparked much Enlightenment debate. Allen and Young assert that in all probability prophecy can be characterized as the "judgment of future events by guess-work" (*Reason* 284). They posit that supernatural assistance is so unreliable that if a prophet should twist words and speak vaguely, there was a good chance that in due time the "prophecy" would

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<sup>16</sup> See John D. Cushing's "Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780-1833."

<sup>17</sup> The five points of Calvinism, or "the doctrines of grace" are as follows: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. The doctrines meant that individuals would surrender themselves to God as their only salvation. Then God would choose or *elect* that person in advance and then reveal the choice, which calls for a deep belief that Jesus Christ atoned for their sins. Then God's grace empowers the elect to cooperate fully with the will of God and Christ, which enables the chosen to lead a life of sanctification until death.

come to fruition. Another pitfall to revelation and prophecy lies in its transmission from one source to the next. Literacy outside the learned community during Biblical times was virtually non-existent, so men would have had to pass on the revelations by word of mouth, thus exponentially increasing the possibility of error. Baruch Spinoza states, “God never maintained one style of revealing his message” (*Theologico-Political Tractatus* 32). This idea, paired with his conclusion that images, visions, languages, interpretations of similar objects varied noticeably, points to inaccuracy as the only constant in biblical passages. Again, the learned men of the eighteenth century from both sides of the Atlantic agree that God’s revelations, had they been so important, should contain universal and absolute messages to the whole of mankind. Thomas Hobbes writes of the unintelligibility of God’s message: that God’s speech or speech-act was not of this plane. “Prophecy,” says Hobbes, “is not an art, nor a constant Vocation; but an extraordinary, and temporary Employment from God” (197). Mankind does not receive the call often enough to comprehend God’s communication. God himself was incomprehensible to man; it follows that anything he transmits to mankind via our senses, other than what we experience in nature, is also beyond our understanding. Allen and Young make this point clear when they denote God as the only infinite being; therefore, no finite being possesses the capability of conversing with God. Finally, because one event or another in a prophecy did not have a particular time allotted to it, or could be applied to multiple events, past or present, the multiplicity of interpretations actually undermined the significance of the experience. There are innumerable instances of men speaking with God directly in the Bible, which for critics negates the authority of the Bible rather than strengthens it.

Among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers in our discussion, the instructional value of revelation and prophecy was also a cause for concern. Unintelligibility hinders the ability to learn a lesson or provide a deeper understanding of an experience. “Dreams, Visions and Voices, and Inspirations,” Hobbes tells readers, “cannot be proved to be so by God; therefore the reliability of the recipients is indeterminate” (175). For instance, in Acts 2:4-13, the Apostles prophesy by speaking in tongues, as a

crowd gathers around them.<sup>18</sup> The crowd is perplexed, asking why and how the Apostles were speaking in the native languages of each member of the crowd. Peter says that the Holy Spirit has commanded the Apostles to prophesy to perhaps signal the beginning of Christian witnesses. But Allen and Young believe that prophecy offers no pedagogical edge. Prophecy and revelation, they say, “remain the arbitrary prerogative of fanatics to prescribe their events in any age or period of time, when their distempered fancies may think most eligible” (*Reason* 285). No matter how much the two authors tried, they could not concede to a doctrine that allowed gross misreading to trump rational explanation. The discussion of revelation and prophecy in *Reason* closely mirrors David Hume’s own insightful work. Hume says that “Eloquence, when at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason and reflection, but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding” (Flew 72). These philosophes tell readers that revelation and prophecy do not add to our understanding of the Bible, its teachings, or the universe itself. The only advantage afforded by such a loose system of proofs goes to liars, cheats, imposters and pretenders—they very people Hobbes warned readers of in 1651. The great Italian historian Paolo Rossi sums up the pedagogical deficiencies of the Bible when he writes, “Anyone who discusses [the biblical period] has to refuse to project into it the categories of reason and must realize that *that* humanity was different from our own, that those minds were ‘not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized,’ but were instead ‘entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body’” (180, emphasis mine). The mindset of the Bible’s early audience, when compared to that in the Enlightenment, presents a significant problem to Allen and Young. To them, the Bible is largely a work of statecraft to keep a fractious people under control.

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<sup>18</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them: “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’ Some, however, made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine.’” (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1858).

In their efforts to destabilize organized religion in New England, Allen and Young stay true to their system of natural religion by stating ad nauseam that man's ability to comprehend himself is confined to the visible universe. They assert that "if the subject matter of a supposed inspired revelation is above or beyond our natural capacity," then humanity does not possess the wherewithal to examine, hypothesize, conjecture, or explain it (*Reason* 292). Furthermore, rules, precedents, and formulas for these inquiries did not exist. In the eighteenth century, there simply was no way, outside investigations of natural phenomena, to prove whether or not a prophet was a true conduit of God's revelation or merely imagined future events to preserve order within the body of believers. This uncertainty, if not unreliability, is all the more apparent because prophets were to perform a miracle of sorts to validate their claims to a divine affiliate. As discussed in the previous chapter, true miracles are out of the question because God's true nature and will are manifest in the unalterable laws of nature, not in their alleged interpretation. The best way to understand God's will is to study his natural laws—not to take imaginative leaps like illiterate prophets. Even the ancients were aware of the fickle nature of personal revelation and required proof of its trustworthiness through a sign or miracle. This type of verifiable proof thus registered the distrust with which even the ancients viewed such alleged revelations. As Spinoza put it in his *Theologico-Political Tractatus*, "prophecy is inferior to natural knowledge since it [natural knowledge] has no need of any sign but provides certainty by its very nature" (28). The true will of God, Spinoza argues, can be found only in nature. Since nature, according to Spinoza, visibly manifest God's eternal plan, revelation and prophecy could not but fail to provide unmistakable evidence of God's will. Rational proof based on empiricism was therefore the only reliable means to understanding the Almighty. In dismantling revelation and prophecy, then, Allen and Young ensured that their ecclesiastical opponents could no longer hide behind doctrines or blind faith. In time, revelation and prophecy, coupled with the textual and philosophical problems of composition and transmission, irrevocably diminished the Bible's power as the inspired Word of God, even as the clergy rose in their pulpits to denounce this new breed of apostates.

*Reason* presents indisputable evidence of Allen's and Young's following the footsteps of their European forebears. The two men state that "When we hear any public discourse, but few of us have a

memory to repeat or write it so perfectly that any considerable part would agree with the original” (*Reason* 230). Allen and Young effectively dismiss blind faith in the Bible as the hobgoblin of ignorant minds. Hume says that what humanity has learned about the world through its experience within it vastly differs from its understanding of the universe as explained in the Bible. In other words, because the Bible is the product of an ancient civilization, and because the original authors’ motives were shaped by the temporal needs of ancient society, modern man must learn to distinguish between the temporal and eternal stricture of the Bible. Only unchanging nature can provide insight into timeless and universally accepted truths of God. In this way, Allen and Young channel David Hume’s theory that “the authority, either of the scripture or of tradition, is founded merely in the testimony of the apostles. Our evidence, then, for the truth of the *Christian* religion is less than the evidence for the truth of our senses; because, even in the first authors of our religion, it was no greater; and it is evident it must diminish in passing from them to their disciples” (*Of Miracles* 63). Hume’s explanation can best be illustrated by the children’s game, “Whisper Down the Lane,” in which a story or phrase is presented to a sequential number of participants who, after it is revealed to them from the person before them in line, are to repeat the story to their neighbors. As a member of the republic of letters, Baron d’Holbach artfully added to this highly contentious debate. In his *System of Nature* (1770), d’Holbach says that “Man is generally credulous as a child upon those objects which relate to superstition; he is told he must believe them; as he generally understands nothing of the matter,” and he faithfully follows the workings of priests and clergy because he is confident that they fully understand what he cannot (4: 486 ff). The Frenchman explains that humanity is predestined to gullibility; uneducated men and women will believe what they are told out of ignorance. From their pulpits the New England churches corralled the same ignorance through their demands for social order and threats of eternal hellfire. Through *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, Allen and Young found a way to foster man’s ascent from ignorance and blind dependence to knowledge and liberation. They posit that mankind has advanced far beyond the times of the biblical writings and should reexamine their validity

lest the credulity of former ages obtrude their unphilosophical and inconsistent revelations upon us, as sacred and infallible truth. It is high time we were roused from our leth-

argy and superstition and that we demand of our spiritual teachers, reason and solid argument, for the ground of our faith and confidence. (464)

The time had come for mankind to break the chains of religious bondage. Allen and Young pulled at the heartstrings of their fellows in order to sever the community's ties to organized religion. The duo explains that during biblical times adherence to the scriptures was justified; its rule was a necessary evil because other choices simply did not exist. However, that time had passed, and mankind had arrived at the Age of Enlightenment; it was time for another system to replace the archaic system of ignorance, gullibility, and priestcraft.

As Allen and Young dismantled the validity of revelation and prophecy, they struck at the heart of organized religion. *Reason* strongly opposed a faith based upon the exclusionary nature of the Word of God—the message should be disseminated among mankind and not just received by a few individuals. Furthermore, the Word of God was never unequivocally determined. In concordance with earlier Enlightenment publications, Allen and Young defer all explanations of God's will to the laws of nature; the universe embodies God's message. Finally, *Reason* demonstrates that revelation and prophecy never increased man's true understanding of God. Thus Allen's and Young's brand of deism, an Americanized adaptation of Enlightenment thought, proved to be a powerful weapon against New England's established church. *Reason* offered the possibility of a God whose existence needed no verification through incomprehensible or mysterious events. Indeed the publication of *Reason* unmistakably represents the flowering of deism in pre-Revolutionary America at least a whole decade before Thomas Paine or even Benjamin Franklin were credited with having paved the way.

## CONCLUSION

*Reason the Only Oracle of Man* thus illustrates that American thinkers had liberated themselves from the self-incurred tutelage of their ancestors; furthermore, the work embodies the transmission of Enlightenment philosophy from Britain and continental Europe to colonial America. The two authors marched boldly toward an enlightened future in which freedom of thought, tolerance, and the separation of church and state became the hallmark of nineteenth-century America. Charles Blount, a leading seventeenth-century deist, might well have offered his blessing to Allen and Young, saying, “If there be a God,” his necessary omniscience will prevent those who apply reason and rational thought from ill-conceived notions (*Oracle of Reason* 181). Unfortunately, the Bible never seems to explain that in nature mankind communes with the Supreme Being, that the universe displays God’s eternal plan for mankind, or that God’s incomprehensibility is the best proof of his existence. As *Reason* puts it, “The benefit accruing to us from reasoning and argument as it respects our knowledge and practice, is to explore the truth of things, as they are in their own nature, this is our wisdom. All other conceptions of things are false and imaginary” (35). Allen and Young, like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Benedict Spinoza, and Baron Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach before them, attacked the Bible to prove the inadequacies of organized religion. Like their European peers, Allen and Young refused to allow superstition, priestcraft, and manipulation of the faithful to go unchallenged.

*Reason* promotes rational thought and free inquiry because the majority of mankind possesses the capacity to acknowledge reason over faith. For Allen and Young, faith was misplaced if it was based on unreliable texts, alleged miracles, and a God who frequently changed his mind to accommodate the temporary needs of hapless men. In this way, Allen and Young tried to dismantle New England’s Congregational church. Readers now understand how the duo attacked miracles, explaining that reliance on such phenomena nullifies God’s power as creator. Finally, the deconstruction of revelation and prophecy asserted that God’s mysterious revelation impeded, rather than improved, his status as divine being. Allen and Young, like the European counterparts, believed that nature is the only true “revelation” of God. Like Euclid’s geometry, nature’s laws speak the universal language, which requires no translators and is not

subject to the vicissitudes of time and change. As Darlene Shapiro aptly states, “Allen liberated man from the bond of Calvinist theology” (254). He and Young challenged the ecclesiastical superstructure of their era because they firmly believed that organized religion dealt in superstition and make belief. It is truly regrettable that *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* has been ignored for more than two centuries. A modern critical edition of this forgotten work may do much to resurrect this challenging work and assure Ethan Allen and Thomas Young a well-deserved place in the pantheon of American thinkers side by side with the likes of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1.1: A Textual Analysis of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*

Perhaps *Reason* was pushed aside because of Thomas Paine's celebrated *Age of Reason* (1794). He had already penned *Common Sense*, the most widely circulated anti-British pamphlet of the American Revolution, and one that relied on scriptural allusions to incite emotion. The print shop fire that destroyed most copies of Allen's and Young's *Reason* also prevented its distribution and dissemination in New England. In stark contrast, *Age of Reason* was widely available in Britain and the American continent. Allen's and Young's opus received considerable criticism from the pulpits of New England, thus further precluding widespread readership. True, Paine's *Age of Reason* received similar treatment, but his fame ensured that it garnered widespread attention. It shares many ideas previously proliferated by Allen and Young, but Paine's notoriety completely eclipsed *Reason*. Modern biographers are also guilty of suppressing Ethan Allen's part in composing *Reason*. They made sure that Allen would forever be remembered as the leader of the Green Mountain Boys and the author of his own captivity narrative. Thomas Young died in complete obscurity, and many of his incendiary pamphlets were lost. Worse, his affiliation with Allen and *Reason* largely remained only a matter of speculation. The ecclesiastic desire to protect its economic interests in New England prompted a wholly negative response to Allen's and Young's work, and until now, many scholars accepted Paine's *Age of Reason* as the premier American deistic text.

For this textual analysis, I examined the four extant editions, as well as the printers and publishing houses from which the texts originated. The original MS, published in 1784, is the main text, and henceforth will be known as the "source" text. The remaining editions, those from 1836, 1854, and 2011, will be regarded as textual "variants" for the remainder of this study. My analysis of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* is the first of its kind; consequently, I have devised a table assisting my explanation (Appendix 3.1), which shows the variations between the four editions. The purpose of this study completes my examination by demonstrating the differences between the texts. I offer this examination as a preface to a critical edition of *Reason*. The initial criticism from the contemporaneous clergy was enough for many to

discount the value of this deist document, so it is understandable that other scholarly pursuits took precedence. However, I also think that early scholars should be held accountable for their blunder in consigning *Reason* to American archives and rare-book rooms. The Internet access available from the university greatly improved the success of my searches, and I cannot thank *Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)* enough for the use of their catalogue. However, I cannot help but think that many of the clergy who rejected *Reason* were also the most qualified men to study its origins and importance. Men like Timothy Dwight, Jared Sparks, and Ezra Stiles had access to vast university libraries as well as to the leading circles of thought of their time. I suppose that the pervading sentiment towards anything considered anti-clerical kept these learned men from giving any philosophical credit to Allen and Young. It cannot be simpler than this: the clergy protected their livelihoods and tax-paying followers by sidelining a radical document that diametrically opposed the Bible and its message.

The 1784 edition exists today as a facsimile copy of the original. A complete copy can be found at *ECCO*, Google Books, or Amazon.com. Anthony Haswell and David Russell published the original MS in Bennington, VT. Nothing more is known about the printers. Readers can expect the usual markings from a text such as this: misspelled words, smeared lines of text, and a complete lack of footnotes or references. For the most part, the text itself is legible once readers get used to the typeface of the period.

In 1836, G.W. and A.J. Matsell of New York published an abridged edition of the text. In that same year, as the title page of this edition shows, William Sinclair also published a copy in Philadelphia, PA. This edition is the first variant text. The “Preface” contains omissions, while an anonymous “Introduction” was added. There remain a few sections that are true to the source text—some sections are missing one paragraph, one entire chapter (IV from the source text) is completely omitted, and other sections are vastly edited for style and content. My immediate speculation is that G.W. Matsell is the now famous premier New York Police Commissioner George Washington Matsell. If this is correct, it means that his edition of *Reason* was published when Matsell was in his early twenties, before he became involved in New York law enforcement. Matsell has a brief but rich history as a police officer, but his printing days



remain uninteresting.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps A.J. Matsell holds the key as to why *Reason* was re-published in the early nineteenth century. He specialized in printing “controversial literature” during this period.<sup>20</sup> There is one curious interpolation not found in the source edition. It occurs in “Section Three” of Chapter Ten (XI from the source edition) and is as follows: “John’s gospel, verse 1 and 3, the Christian’s God is the creator of the devil and consequently the original cause of evil in heaven—and among men he planted the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and knew at the time he planted it of the awful consequences that would follow” (*Reason* 1836, 135). This particular section examines the devil’s origin and Adam and Eve’s renunciation of God’s supreme power. It is important to note that this passage is also part of the 1854 variant. The 1836 edition also contains two sections that are not previously included in the source text: first is an “Index,” and second, there is an essay, “Critical Remarks on the Truth and Harmony of the Four Gospels with Observations on the Instructions Given by Jesus Christ and the Doctrines of Christianity.” The author’s name is not given although the work is credited to a “Free Thinker.” This was most likely Ethan Allen himself but the fact remains that the publication of this edition and additional essay were posthumous. A further search led me to Robert Carlile, an Enlightenment printer and publisher, as well as a leader of the freedom-of-the-press movement. He is known to have published works by Thomas Paine along with many other incendiary texts and pamphlets of the period. This leads me to believe that Matsell may have been a free thinker himself, publishing this edition of *Reason* to subtly assert his own agenda.

J.P. Mendum is the publisher of the 1854 variant of *Reason*. Not much is known about Mendum; however, one may search titles published under his name. Many of these titles can be considered “controversial literature.” Mendum’s edition contains hand-written notes that describe the thoughts of Timothy Dwight, Lemuel Hopkins, and one other person whose identity I cannot determine. These notes, randomly

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<sup>19</sup> George Washington Matsell (1811 – July 25, 1877) worked as an apprentice in his father’s bookstore before owning one himself. Around 1840 he became a police officer. He is best known for his law enforcement reforms that later influenced national programs, streamlining police work. In 1859 he wrote *Vocabulum, or, the rogue's lexicon: compiled from the most authentic sources*, which stands as the first law enforcement dictionary.

<sup>20</sup> “Controversial literature” is that which can be described as an atheistic, deistic, or otherwise anti-religious text.

occurring in this edition, are actually well-known responses to *Reason* and can be found earlier in this examination. The remainder of this edition seems to be a copy of the 1836 variant. All of the changes and additions from the former are present in the latter. Finally, the “Index” and the “Critical Remarks” essay have been omitted from this edition.

In 2011, Bob Johnson, Founder and Director of the World Union of Deists, published the latest edition of *Reason* without any critical introduction, annotations, or index. Johnson formed this organization in 1993. The World Union of Deists website offers a bookstore to its visitors where they may purchase texts focusing on deism. *Reason* is available in a modern typeface but without any guidance to modern readers. The information concerning the contents of the text is probably the work of some editor who has skimmed the biographical, rather than the scholarly sources on Allen and Young. Nowhere does Johnson mention why his organization reprinted *Reason*. I assume Johnson came across Allen during his search of deism, probably reading contemporaneous authors of the Enlightenment period. The edition contains no annotations, nor does it mention that it is a reprint of the 1784 original.

Appendix 3.1 contains all of the information concerning the differences and similarities between each edition of *Reason*. Much of what I discussed above is visually prepared in a basic format. I also included a key to the table for easy reference. A critical edition will include a more comprehensive model of this table. Also included is a comprehensive list of each section of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (Appendices 2.1-2.3).

**Appendix 2.1: Chapter List of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man***

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Chapter I</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section I</i></p> <p>Of Reforming Mankind From Superstition And Error, And The Good Consequences Of It</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section II</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Of The Being Of A God</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section III</i></p> <p>The Manner Of Discovering The Moral Perfections And Attributes Of God</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section IV</i></p> <p>The Cause Of Idolatry, And The Remedy Of It</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Chapter IV</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section I</i></p> <p>Speculation On The Doctrine Of The Depravity Of Human Reason</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section II</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Containing A Disquisition Of The Law Of Nature, As It Respects The Moral System, Interspersed With Observations On Subsequent Religions</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Chapter II</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section I</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Of The Eternity Of Creation</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section II</i></p> <p>Observations Of Moses's Account Of Creation</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section III</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Of The Eternity And Infinitude Of Divine Providence</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section IV</i></p> <p>The Providence Of God Does Not Interfere With The Agency Of Man</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Chapter V</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section I</i></p> <p>Argumentative Reflections On Supernatural And Mysterious Revelation In General</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section II</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Containing Observations On The Providence And Agency Of God, As It Reflects The Natural And Moral World, With Strictures On Revelation In General</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Chapter III</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section I</i></p> <p>The Doctrine Of The Infinity Of Evil And Of Sin Considered</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section II</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Moral Government Of God As Incomptable With Eternal Punishment</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section III</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Human Liberty, Agency And Accountability, Cannot Be Attended With Eternal Consequences, Either Good Or Evil</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section IV</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Of Physical Evils</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Chapter VI</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section I</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Of Miracles</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section II</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">A Succession Of Knowledge, Or Of The Exertion Of Power In God, Incomptable With His Omniscience Or Omnipotence, And The Eternal And Infinite Display Of Divine Power Forecloses Any Subsequent Exertion Of It</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Miraculously</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section III</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rare And Wonderful Phenomena No Evidence Of Miracles, Nor Are Diabolical Spirits Able To Effect Them, Or Superstitious Traditions To Confirm Them, Nor Can Ancient Miracles Prove Recent Revelations</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Section IV</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Prayer Cannot Be Attended With Miraculous Consequences</p>

## Appendix 2.2: Chapter List of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*

### Chapter VII

#### *Section I*

The Vagueness And Unintelligibleness Of The Prophecies, Render Them Incapable Of Proving Revelation

#### *Section II*

The Contentions Which Subsisted Between The Prophets Respecting Their Veracity, And Their Inconsistencies With One Another, And With The Nature Of Things, And Their Omission In Teaching The Doctrine Of Immortality, Precludes The Divinity Of Their Prophecies

#### *Section III*

Dreams Or Visions Uncertain And Chimerical Channel For The Conveyance Of Revelation; With Remarks On The Communication Of The Holy Ghost To The Disciples, By The Prayers And Laying On Of The Apostles Hands, With Observations On The Divine Dictations Of The First Promulgators Of The Gospel, And An Account Of The Elect Lady, And Her New Sectary Of Shakers

### Chapter VIII

#### *Section I*

Of The Nature Of Faith And Wherein It Consists

#### *Section II*

Of The Traditions Of Our Forefathers

#### *Section III*

Our Faith Is Governed By Our Reasoning, Whether They Are Supposed To Be Conclusive Or Inconclusive, And Not Merely By Our Own Choice

### Chapter IX

#### *Section I*

A Trinity Of Persons Cannot Exist In The Divine Essence Whether The Persons Be Supposed To Be Finite Or Infinite: With Remarks On St. Athenasuis's Creed

#### *Section II*

Essence Being The Cause Of Identity, Is Inconsistent With Personality In The Divine Nature

#### *Section III*

### Chapter X

#### *Section I*

Observations On The State Of Man, In Moses's Paradise, On The Tree Of Knowledge Of Good And Evil, And On The Tree Of Life; With Speculations On The Divine Prohibition To Man, Not To Eat Of The Fruit Of The Former Of Those Trees, Interspersed With Remarks On The Mortality Of Innocent Man

#### *Section II*

Pointing Out The Natural Impossibility Of All And Every Diverse Species Of Biped Animals, Commonly Termed Man, To Have Lineally Descended From Adam And Eve, Or From The Same Original Progenitors

#### *Section III*

The Origin Of The Devil Or Of Moral Evil, And Of The Devil's Talking With Eve; With A Remark That The Doctrine Of Apostasy Is The Foundation Of Christianity

### Chapter XI

#### *Section I*

Imputation Cannot Change, Alienation Or Transfer The Personal Demerit Of Sin; And Personal Merit Of Virtue To Others, Who Were Not Active, Therein, Although This Doctrine Supposes An Alienation Thereof

#### *Section II*

The Moral Rectitude Of Things Forecloses The Act Of Imputation

#### *Section III*

Containing Remarks On The Atonement And Satisfaction For Original Sin

#### *Section IV*

Remarks On Redemption, Wrought Out By Inflicting The Demerits Of Sin Upon The Innocent, Would Be Unjust, And That It Could Contain No Mercy Or Goodness

The Imperfection Of Knowledge In The Person  
Of Jesus Christ, Incompatible With His Divinity

**Appendix 2.3: Chapter List of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man***

**Chapter XII**

*Section I*

Of The Impossibility Of Translating An  
Infallible Revelation From Its Original Copies,  
And Preserving It Entire Through All The  
Revolutions Of The World, And Vicissitudes Of  
Human Learning To Our Time

*Section II*

The Variety Of Annotations And Expositions Of  
The Scriptures, Together With The Diversity Of  
Sectaries Evinces The Fallibility

*Section III*

the Variety Of Annotations And Expositions Of  
The Scriptures, Together With The Diversity Of  
Sectaries Evince Their Fallibility

*Section IV*

On The Compiling Of The Manuscripts Of The  
Scriptures Into One Volume, And Of Its Several  
Translations. The Infallibility Of The Popes, And  
Of Their Chartered Rights To Remit Or Retain  
Sins, And OF The Impropriety Of Their Being  
Trusted With A Revelation From God

**Chapter XIII**

*Section I*

Morality Derived From Natural Fitness, And Not  
From Tradition

*Section II*

Of The Importance Of The Exercise Of Reason,  
And The Practice Of Morality, In Order To The  
Happiness Of Mankind

**Chapter XIV**

*Section I*

An Historical Testimony of Miracles insufficient  
to prove irrational doctrines

*Section II*

Morality, derived from Natural Fitness, and not  
from Tradition

*Section III*

Of the Importance of the exercise of Reason, and  
Practice of Morality, in order to the Happiness of  
Mankind

**Appendix 3.1: A visual key to my textual analysis of *Reason the Only Oracle of Man***

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<b>Ch 1</b>	Sec 1	T	T	T	<b>Ch 9</b>	Sec 1	<b>8/C</b>	<b>8/C</b>	T
	Sec 2	C	C	T		Sec 2	<b>8/T</b>	<b>8/T</b>	T
	Sec 3	C	C	C		Sec 3	<b>8/C</b>	<b>8/C</b>	T
	Sec 4	CO	CO	T	<b>Ch 10</b>	Sec 1	<b>9/T</b>	<b>9/T</b>	T
	Sec 5	4-T	4-T	T		Sec 2	<b>9/C</b>	<b>9/C</b>	T
				Sec 3		<b>9/C</b>	<b>9/C</b>	T	
<b>Ch 2</b>	Sec 1	C	C	T	<b>Ch 11</b>	Sec 1	<b>10/C</b>	<b>10/C</b>	T
	Sec 2	CO	CO	T		Sec 2	<b>10/C</b>	<b>10/C</b>	T
	Sec 3	CO	CO	T		Sec 3	<b>10/C/A</b>	<b>10/C/A</b>	T
	Sec 4	CO	CO	T	<b>Ch 12</b>	Sec 1	<b>11/T</b>	<b>11/T</b>	T
	Sec 5	CO	CO	T		Sec 2	CO	CO	T
	Sec 6	2-C	2-C	T		Sec 3	CO	CO	T
	Sec 7	3-C	3-C	T		Sec 4	<b>11/2-C</b>	<b>11/2-C</b>	T
	Sec 8	4-C	4-C	T		Sec 5	<b>11/3-C</b>	<b>11/3-C</b>	T
				Sec 6		<b>11/4-C</b>	<b>11/4-C</b>	T	
<b>Ch 3</b>	Sec 1	T	T	T	<b>Ch 13</b>	Sec 1	<b>12/C</b>	<b>12/C</b>	T
	Sec 2	C	C	T		Sec 2	CO	CO	T
	Sec 3	C	C	T		Sec 3	<b>12/2-T</b>	<b>12/2-T</b>	T
	Sec 4	T	T	T		Sec 4	<b>12/3-T</b>	<b>12/3-T</b>	T
<b>Ch 4</b>	Sec 1	CO	CO	T	<b>Ch 14</b>	Sec 1	CO	CO	T
	Sec 2	CO	CO	T		Sec 2	<b>13/1-C</b>	<b>13/1-C</b>	T
	Sec 3	CO	CO	T		Sec 3	<b>13/2-C</b>	<b>13/2-C</b>	T
<b>Ch 5</b>	Sec 1	<b>4/C</b>	<b>4/C</b>	T					
	Sec 2	<b>4/C</b>	<b>4/C</b>	T					
<b>Ch 6</b>	Sec 1	<b>5/C</b>	<b>5/C</b>	T					
	Sec 2	<b>5/C</b>	<b>5/C</b>	T					
<b>Ch 7</b>	Sec 1	<b>6/C</b>	<b>6/C</b>	T					
	Sec 2	<b>6/C</b>	<b>6/C</b>	T					
	Sec 3	CO	CO	T					
	Sec 4	<b>6/3-C</b>	<b>6/3-C</b>	T					
	Sec 5	CO	CO	T					
	Sec 6	<b>6/4-C</b>	<b>6/4-C</b>	T					
<b>Ch 8</b>	Sec 1	<b>7/C</b>	<b>7/C</b>	T					
	Sec 2	<b>7/C</b>	<b>7/C</b>	T					
	Sec 3	<b>7/C</b>	<b>7/C</b>	T					

**KEY**

Italicized # - The *italicized* # is the new section number  
 Bold # - The **bolded** # is the new chapter number  
 T - True to original text (1784 edition)  
 C - Omissions or abridgements  
 CO - Section or Chapter is completely omitted  
 - Additions (only one appears in the 1836/1854 editions that is not in the 1784/2011 editions)  
 A