

## D. Sources of Theology

Historically, theological beliefs have been derived from a number of sources, traditions, and revelation.

Upon examination, these sources appear to contract to four major sources: reason, religious experience, ecclesiastical authority, and revelation.

### 1. Reason as the source of religious beliefs concerning God and His relations to the universe

A prime example of this source is Deism, which as a movement began at the end of the 17th century, following the Act of Toleration (1689). This Act, which offered toleration to the dissenters within the Church of England, enlarged the bounds of permissible theological discussion. The deists were concerned with a reasoned and reasonable Christianity, stripped of doctrinal accretions, devoid of reliance on miracles and supernatural intervention in natural events, and freed of the weight of institutional and clerical control. Many of Deism's ideas appear to have been anticipated by the earlier Cambridge Platonists and Latitudinarians.

Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648) never called himself a deist but has been called "the father of English Deism". His *De Veritate* (1624) laid down the first principles of Deism. These principles are: (1) that there is one supreme God; (2) that he ought to be worshiped; (3) that virtue and piety are the chief parts of divine worship; (4) that man ought to be sorry for his sins and repent of them; (5) that divine goodness dispenses rewards and punishments both in this life and after it. These truths, he argued, are universal, and may be apprehended by reason. Herbert treated Scripture as ordinary history, ridiculed bibliolatry, and overtly attacked priestcraft; and disavowed faith as a basis for religion.

John Toland of London (1670-1722) produced the first important work of the deistic controversy: *Christianity Not Mysterious: or, A Treatise Shewing that there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd a Mystery* (1690). Toland opposed not only biblical mysteries, but also challenged the validity of the biblical canon and pointed out corruptions in biblical texts. He mocked the implicit faith of the Puritans and their bibliolatry, and severely censured the vested interests of priests of all denominations.

The principal ideas advanced in his book are:

- (1) There is nothing mysterious or incomprehensible in Christianity.
- (2) True religion must be reasonable and intelligible.
- (3) Reason is the judge of what is regarded as revelation.
- (4) No event can be called miraculous which is contrary to reason.
- (5) Though the clergy may seek to hide the message of Christianity behind the veil of revelation, man can penetrate to the inherently reasonable nature of the New Testament.