

DEISM

Deism was a pattern of religious thought that emerged in Europe in the 17th century with the advance of scientific knowledge and peaked in the 18th century. Deists worshipped Reason. This is almost the opposite of Christianity, a holistic religion of the soul. It is comparable to the heresy of Gnosticism in seeing knowledge as the path to God rather than faith. In America it reached its peak of influence after the American Revolution. It expired in the early 19th century as liberal religion evolved from Deism into Unitarianism, the opposite of earlier Calvinist Puritanism, especially among the educated classes in New England in the 1780s. This Unitarianism was remarkably similar to Deism, except that it was organized and accepted some Biblical revelation and divine Providence.

There were no Deist churches. Deism was the personal religion of a relatively few educated men--women not so much, having hearts as well as heads. In the late 18th century educated people were inclined to demonstrate their intellectual currency by calling themselves Deists much as many intellectuals in the mid-20th century called themselves Existentialists. Although some Deists tried to reconcile their beliefs with Christianity, Deism was in effect a rejection of Christianity in favor of "natural religion," based upon Reason and the scientific study of Nature, their Bible. The most famous Deistic works of literature are Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* [in which he ultimately rejects Deism as impractical because it has no morality], and Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. There were moderate Deists such as Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and George Washington, and radical Deists such as Voltaire, Paine, and Ethan Allen.

TENETS OF DEISM

1. God is the perfect creator and rational governor of the universe, hence the universe is rationally ordered, like a machine.
2. God works his will through unchangeable natural laws, hence miracles are to be rejected as impossible.
3. God cannot control man's thoughts or actions, hence man is a free agent, completely responsible for his actions.
4. Man is a rational creature, capable of understanding the natural laws of the universe through observation and exercise of Reason.
5. Man is probably immortal, with a future life in the realm of God.
6. Man may learn of God through the study of Nature, which shows rational design and must therefore be an expression of God. Paine said, "The word of God is the creation we behold."
7. The Bible is not the inspired word of God, and it is good only insofar as it reflects "natural religion."
8. Christ was not divine, but a great and good man, whose ethical teachings and moral example should be revered.
9. Such Christian doctrines as the deity of Christ, the Trinity and the atonement are the products of superstition and the inventions of priests.
10. A church is not necessary to religion. Paine: "My mind is my own church."
11. Man may perfect himself through the process of education and his goals should be personal perfection and universal happiness.
12. Practical religion for the individual should consist in achieving virtue through the rational guidance of conduct. Franklin: "The most acceptable service to God is doing good to man."

[Among 18th century intellectuals] "The most characteristic and prevalent position towards religion was 'Deism,' which attempted to demonstrate the truths of religion without recourse to revelation. By means of 'reason' Deistic philosophers such as Shaftesbury found a 'Universal Harmony' in Nature, a general fittingness and concord in the relations of the part to the whole, which was evidence of the existence of a rational and benevolent God. In some cases, especially in the earlier phases of Deism, the attempt was made to demonstrate the essential rationality of Christianity and the agreement of revelation with reason. Locke, John Tillotson (1630-1694), Archbishop of Canterbury, and John Toland (1670-1722) all argued--to employ the title of Locke's book--for 'The Reasonableness of Christianity.' And Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), after Locke the leading philosopher in England, found that natural morality, though based on the necessary order of things, is both confirmed and strengthened by revelation.

As the Enlightenment progressed, however, it became more usual for exponents of natural religion to discard revelation entirely. *Christianity as Old as Creation*, a book by Matthew Tindal (1653?-1733) which came to be known as 'the Deists' Bible,' argued that natural religion was complete without special revelation, and made the essence of religion lie in a moral attitude based on the recognition of the unerring rationality of nature. Where social conditions were favorable, this worship of nature led to a kind of 'cosmic Toryism' which made 'all discord harmony not understood.' Lord Henry Kames (1696-1782), for example, found that 'even the follies and vices of men minister to the wise designs' of nature, and thought that 'every thing Nature has made is good.' But in France the rational Order of Nature was used to highlight human folly and waste. And Voltaire's *Candide* is the classic denunciation by a Deist of Deist complacency, either about man or about the unqualified friendliness of Nature.

Though it enjoyed a considerable vogue during the eighteenth century, there is little doubt that Deism was a failure as a version of religion. Its two major arguments for the existence of God--the argument for a First Cause and the argument for Design--were subjected to devastating criticism by the skeptical Hume and the atheistic Bacon D'Holbach (1723-1789). Even more important than the validity or invalidity of its arguments, however, was the exclusively intellectualistic and moralistic context to which Deism reduced the discussion of religion. The Deists made the truth-value of religion primary, thereby placing both religion and truth under excessive strain. Furthermore, the moral message which they found in religion was largely exhausted in specific and limited ideals--for example, the elimination of religious intolerance--and there was little place in the Deist vision of the moral life for the transcendent ideals and the sense of the radical disparity between human aspirations and human capacities which have played so central a role in traditional religions. In the end, Deism passed into agnosticism and atheism not nearly so much by logic, as by default. Its arguments were unconvincing, but this was not nearly so important as the fact that they were uninteresting. To find religious feeling best exemplified in the Enlightenment one must turn not to the avowed defenses of religion but to the avowed attacks upon it--to systematic atheism and materialism."

Charles Frankel
"The Philosophy of the Enlightenment"
A History of Philosophical Systems
ed. Vergilius Ferm
(The Philosophical Library 1950) 276-77

"The belief that God exists but has not revealed himself except in the normal courses of nature and history. Deists have been very cautious about describing God or offering any hope that he will save men from disaster or death. Deism flourished in England, France, and the U.S.A. in the 18th century, but more recently people so suspicious of personal religion have usually described themselves as agnostics, particularly since modern studies have sharply raised the question whether God can be known in nature or history."

The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought
eds. Alan Bullock, Stephen Trombley, assisted by Bruce Eadie
(Harper & Row 1977) 210

"The religion of those who believe in a God who rules the world by established laws but who do not believe in the divinity of Christ or the inspiration of the Bible; 'natural' religion, based on reason and a study of Nature as opposed to 'revealed' religion. The scientific movement which grew out of the new

knowledge of the world and the universe following upon the discoveries and theories of Columbus, Copernicus, Galileo, Francis Bacon, and later the members of the Royal Society, furthered the development of a rationalistic point of view which more and more tended to rely upon reason instead of upon revelation in the consideration of the relationship of human beings to God and the Universe. *Deism* was a product of this general point of view. It also absorbed something from the theological movements of Arianism (opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity) and Arminianism (which stressed moral conduct as a sign of religion and opposed the doctrine of election...The prevalent notion that the deists believed in an 'absentee' God, who, having created the world and set in motion machinery for its operation, took no further interest either in the world or in human beings is not applicable to all eighteenth-century deists, some of whom even believed in God's pardoning of the sins of a repentant individual.

The following statements fairly represent the point of view of the English deists: (1) The Bible is not the inspired word of God; it is good so far as it reflects 'natural' religion and bad so far as it contains 'additions' made by superstitious or designing persons. (2) Certain Christian theological doctrines are the product of superstition or the invention of priests and must be rejected; e.g., the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the theory of the atonement for sins. (3) God is perfect, is the creator and governor of the Universe, and works not capriciously but through unchangeable laws (hence 'miracles' are to be rejected as impossible). (4) Human beings are free agents, whose minds work as they themselves choose; even God cannot control their thoughts. (5) Since human beings are rational creatures like God, they are capable of understanding the laws of the universe and as God is perfect, so can human beings become perfect through the process of education. They may learn of God through a study of Nature, which shows design and must therefore be an expression of God. (6) Practical religion for the individual consists in achieving virtue through the rational guidance of conduct (as exemplified in the scheme for developing them moral virtues recorded by Franklin in his *Autobiography*)."

C. Hugh Holman

A Handbook to Literature, fourth edition

Based on the original edition by William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard

(ITT Bobbs-Merrill 1936-80) 122-23

"The arguments of the deists which were quoted to be refuted appeared to me much stronger than the refutations. In short, I soon became a thorough deist....I began to suspect that this doctrine, tho' it might be true, was not very useful....[His creed contained] the essentials of every known religion and [was] free of everything that might shock the professors of any religion....That there is one God who made all things. That he governs the world by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving. But that the most acceptable service to God is doing good to man. That the soul is immortal. And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice, either here or hereafter."

Benjamin Franklin

Autobiography (1789) 8

On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature (1815)

On one fix-d point all nature moves,
Nor deviates from the track she loves;
Her system, drawn from reason's source, [God]
She seems to change her wonted course.

Could she 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.

Unsettled in its first design
And erring, when it did combine
The parts that form the vast machine,

The figures sketch'd on nature's scene.

Perfections of the great first cause
Submit to no contracted laws,
But all-sufficient, all-supreme,
Include no trivial views in them.

Who looks through nature with an eye
That would the scheme of heaven descry,
Observes her constant, still the same,
In all her laws, through all her frame.

No imperfection can be found
In all that is, above, around --
All, nature made, in reason's sight
Is order all, and *all is right*.

Philip Freneau

"Freneau's views of God, man, and nature are fairly well summarized in this poem. The references to the 'great first cause' and the acceptance of an uninterrupted order of nature are Deistic in tendency, and it is possible to regard Freneau as philosophically akin to Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson. He had perhaps less faith in man than they; as Professor Leary says, his philosophy is one of 'optimistic resignation'."

Theodore Hornberger
The Literature of the United States I
(Scott, Foresman 1953, 1966) 532-33

Michael Hollister (2015)