

DEISM

AN INTRODUCTION TO REASON-BASED RELIGION

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Part I: What is Deism

I. Defining Deism

My first introduction to Deism was in 8th grade American History. We were discussing the Revolutionary War time period. We were watching the wonderful movie *1776*. When the movie introduced Benjamin Franklin, my teacher gave us a little tid-bit about him: He was Deist. Our teacher gave us a simple definition of Deism. God created the world, and then abandoned it. She then proceeded to tell us about the clock-maker analogy.

At the time, I scoffed at the idea. I was a *goy* (Gentile) believer in Messianic Judaism. I believed that the *Torah* (Law of Moses) was revealed to the Jews, but was meant for a guide to all mankind. I believed that Jesus (whom I called by his Hebrew name, *Yeshua*) had come not to abolish the Law, but to be a Teacher of it. My faith taught me that God didn't abandon the Universe, but that he was very active in it even today, and required certain things of us. I kept the Jewish Dietary laws, observed the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, observed the Jewish festivals, and wore my *Tzitziot* (fringes that are to be worn at all times by Jews in accordance with Numbers 15) everyday.

The years flew by, and I forgot all about Deism. In the fall of my senior year, I was discussing with my best friend, Amanda, about religion. She is a Christian, a former Baptist who doesn't attend church anywhere. She confided in me that she had a couple problems with the Bible. The biggest one was the inferiority that the Bible gave to women. I gave her the typical Christian apologist's answer, but it got me to thinking. Next thing I know, I was doubting the Bible's infallibility, and considered going Atheist. I just couldn't believe in a sexist book. I knew deep in my heart that women were equal to men, and the Bible didn't teach that at all. In some places, particularly in Paul's epistles, it taught the exact opposite!

While doing searches on the internet, I came across Beliefnet.com forums and found a person discussing Deism. His screen name was Beyondhydrogen, and I followed him to a forum site called Dynamic Deism. On October 23, 2005, I took off my *Tzitziot*, and announced to my foster family I no longer believed in the Bible. I was a Deist!

I soon found out that the definition of Deism given to me by my 8th grade teacher was not completely accurate. Most Deists do believe in an inactive God, but not all do. Deism is hard to define because it came to be during a time when the Church ruled supreme, and the Papacy still told the “civilized world” what to think. Since Deism opposed faith in the Catholic clergy, the Papacy deemed them a threat. The people of Europe were told certain things about Deism, and these misconceptions have remained the Western World’s thoughts on Deism. Let’s take a crack for ourselves at discovering what Deism is.

Deism was a very diverse movement back when it was started during the European Enlightenment, and it is much more so today!!! To define Deism, we must find common ground between its followers and place this as the definition. Deists believe in God, as their name implies (Deism gets its name from the Latin word *deus*, meaning *God*). If this was the only tenant of Deism, then there would be no conflict for the majority of the world would have been Deist.

Deism was spawned during the Enlightenment. For those who don’t remember their world history classes, the Enlightenment was a time where the sciences flourished after centuries of being suppressed by the Catholic Church. People were beginning to see that there was a reasonable explanation behind all the various phenomena of nature. Some men began to speculate that since creation could be figured out via our Reason, maybe the Creator could also be figured out in this way. Reason became another tool of spirituality.

Soon, however, some of these same men noticed that the faith the Bible and the Church taught conflicted with their Reason. So they rejected the revelation that the church supposedly received from God in favor of their Reason. This leads to our definition:

Deism is the belief in a deity based upon Reason rather than revelation.

Since we got our definition, let’s also define a few words that reside in this definition:

A **deity** is a supreme being or force that is credited with the creation and/or maintenance of the Universe, and is traditionally labeled as a god or goddess.

Reason is the intellectual ability to form a rational conclusion by combining facts and rational premises.

Revelation is anything that has originated from a deity, typically in the form of written or oral instructions of what to believe and/or what to do.

Now that we have a definition of Deism, let's go on to discuss, in more detail, the concept which is central to Deism, which is Reason, and how it leads to its other central concept, the belief in Deity.

II. Reason

We have found that the majority of phenomena in the Universe have a rational explanation behind them. Unlike our distant ancestors, we need not explain them away by saying this god or that goddess caused the volcano to erupt, sent a pestilence that wiped out a village's livestock, or decreed the death of a newborn due to illness. Subjects such as geology and biology has helped us to better understand creation.

During the beginning of the Enlightenment when European scientists began to discover the laws that governed whether, the spread of disease, and other sciences, they began to speculate on something. If the Creation could be understood by using Reason, does that mean that maybe the Creator could also be understood by using Reason? For these people, Reason became essential for all knowledge, in spiritual matters as well as in scientific matters.

Why is Reason so important? It only takes a brief glance at the history of the religions that do not rely on Reason to answer that question.

Judaism celebrates the actions that their ancestors committed when entering the land of Canaan, the genocide of the Canaanites. In modern times, it has been used to justify the occupation of Palestinian Arab lands and the expulsion of these Arabs from their homes.

Christianity has a very horrendous history indeed, starting with the declaration of Anathema against all those who departed from orthodox Christian teachings at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Then, we come to the Crusades where the Christians invaded Muslim-controlled lands. Then there is the Inquisition the Catholics brought upon all "heretics" of the Christian religion. Then there is the Witch hunts throughout the middle ages and into the early modern era. There were the wars between Catholic states and Protestant states during and after the Reformation.

In more modern times, the Holocaust happened from 1933-1945, in which 12 million people in Europe died at the hands of the Christian Nazis. There is the Ku Klux Klan and other such hate groups that are Christian organizations. And of course, there is

the modern day “War on Terror” which is egged on mostly by Christian Fundamentalists drumming up support for the Government’s continued presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Islam has a horrendous history as well. The Islamic religion only spread so quickly in its infancy because it demanded a choice of either forced conversions or a burdensome tax (and in some situations, death) upon those conquered by the Muslims. There is the Crusades, which the Muslims did little to try and stop, instead declaring that it was Allah’s will to destroy the Christians. And there is also the extremist Islamic Terrorism that has occurred on a more regular basis and more horrifying magnitude throughout the last century.

Without Reason, religious leaders often are able to persuade their followers to do horrendous acts in the name of their god. The spiritual bondage that religious leaders are able to exert over others who do not use Reason is often much more burdensome than one is able to bear, as well as the financial burden the religions often place upon its subjects (an example is the tithe).

So how is Reason to be used? There are many methods, but one effective one stems from the use and application of the Scientific Method.

The Scientific Method defines the methodology used by Scientists when creating theories and establishing facts. This consists of identifying the problem, gathering information (through research), coming up with a hypothesis (by reasoning out a rational solution using the facts gathered), and then testing the hypothesis through experimentation (if possible). If experimentation does not prove your theory, come up with another hypothesis and test it.

Using Reason to hypothesize on spiritual matters is very similar. First, identify the problem you wish to solve. Second, research anything that may even remotely deal with what you are dealing with. Third, come up with a rational hypothesis that provides a solution to your problem. Most the time, you cannot test a hypothesis regarding spiritual matters by using experiments, so you must test your hypothesis by having others point out any irrationalities within your theory. If these critiques prove your theory to be irrational, then form another hypothesis and have it critiqued as well.

For an example, let’s use the question of origins. To research this, we may look at archaeology. Every pre-modern culture that we know about asserts a deity (or deities)

that created the universe. If we study astronomy, we may notice a certain design in the make-up of the universe. If we study paleontology and biology, we may conclude that the odds of life evolving simply by chance from inanimate matter without guidance to be far too improbable to accept rationally. Taking all this information together, we may conclude that there was a Creator, who is generally referred to in our society as God.

When we go to discuss this with others, we will get one of three replies. Many will agree on the existence of God. Others will disagree, and will critique our reasoning to show how irrational your position is. Still others will say that there is not enough evidence either way to prove or disprove the existence of God.

Deists believe that this reasoning proves the existence of God, and it is for this reason that we believe in Deism, the belief in God through Reason rather than revelation.

Speaking of Revelation, you may be wondering what is wrong with it. Well, this is the subject of our next chapter!

