
Deism Revisited: A Modern Approach

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An evaluation of the history of Deism and its modern counterpart, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, in light of Theistic Naturalism is done in order to place the several forms of deism into a proper context in modern society. My hoped for outcome is that perhaps we can view Deism as a progressive rather than an archaic belief system that still has a purpose in American religious culture.

Within American society, there is a diversity in religious thought. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and those with no religious affiliation at all are a few of the worldviews that make up our heterogeneous society. All of these worldviews have slightly different ways of approaching ontological issues such as the nature of the soul and humanity's origination and purpose. Even within the Christian faith alone, one can observe pluralistic thought, evidenced by the plethora of denominations. These groups vary in their scriptural interpretations, religious traditions as well as doctrine.

For instance, consideration of divine providence in Calvinism holds that God has a set plan for our lives, directly acting in our world to guide us along the way. However, other denominations view God's actions more loosely and indirectly, incorporating notions such as free will and chance. At the far end of this philosophical spectrum is Deism. Deism, a historic derivative of the Christian faith, maintains that God created the world but lets it run its course.

Consequently, God maintains a passive role in our affairs, instead allowing natural laws to maintain structure in the universe. While some view this perspective as insignificant or even blasphemous, this viewpoint still remains relevant in our

contemporary society, shaping American religious identity. As such, Deism should be acknowledged rather than dismissed.

Moreover, by fully analyzing the Deistic movement, we can add to our own theological understanding and practice.

Rise of Deism

In order to fully understand the Deistic movement, one needs to be aware of the cultural and historical shifts occurring within the period. The rise of the Enlightenment, for instance, paralleled the rise of Deism and created an environment where the philosophy could thrive. Beginning in 17th century Europe, philosophers began giving precedence to human reason over the supernatural. For example, through his theory of gravity, Isaac Newton demonstrated that there was an order to the universe—an order that could be understood primarily through human reason. Newton's discoveries prompted other scholars to investigate new ideas and question long held assumptions through the lens of reason, even outside of the scientific realm. It was this line of thinking that led scholars to question the authority and teachings of the Church, which eventually paved the way for the Deistic movement.¹ While Deism is traditionally associated with the Enlightenment, as described above,

¹ "Enlightenment, Age of," 2015

several other events also prompted its rise. The Reformation, although two centuries removed from the Deistic movement, still fostered Deistic thought by weakening the authority of the Catholic Church. Religious authority was no longer infallible, which opened the way for religious exploration. Thus, the Reformation promoted the rise of pluralism within the Christian faith, and more denominations brought more diversity. In the 17th century, the Glorious Revolution similarly introduced new, radical religious and political ideas with the dethroning of James II. Additionally, the new monarchy weakened censorship laws, allowing for further religious expression.^{2,3} Combined, these movements created a culture for Deistic thinking to thrive.

Deism itself began in the mid-17th century with the English nobleman Lord Herbert of Cherbury. In his works, Herbert neither referred to himself as a Deist nor intended to spearhead a new religious movement. Nonetheless, he laid the foundations for Deism through his novel religious beliefs. Per Enlightenment thought, Herbert believed that every individual was born with an innate sense of reason. Using reason alone, one could come to understand the principal religious truths and reject false teachings.^{4,5} More specifically, Herbert proposed that all individuals were born knowing five central truths: the need to believe in God, the need to worship God, the need to live a moral life, the need to repent from one's sins, and the knowledge of an afterlife with repercussions for our Earthly actions. To Herbert, all religious teachings essentially boiled down to these key ideas. Thus, differences between religious denominations and even between religions

themselves were insignificant. It is not surprising then that most Deists, including Herbert, were opposed to religious intolerance and persecution. Many even believed that Christianity itself did not hold "unique moral authority."⁶ Following Herbert, other scholars began professing similar religious sentiments. Notably, in 1730, Matthew Tindal published *Christianity as Old as Creation*, also known as the "Bible of Deism."⁷ In it, he expands on Herbert's tenets, again emphasizing the importance of human reason. Furthermore, Tindal explicitly attacks the authority of the Church. Priests, he argues, abuse their position to gain power and respect; their authority is founded on superstition rather than reason.⁸ Many Deistic thinkers, such as Thomas Woolston, also rejected literal interpretations of the Bible in favor of more reasoned approaches. Rather than emphasizing Jesus' miracles, Deistic thinkers focused on his moral teachings. Along these same lines, many considered Jesus a moral teacher akin to Buddha or Muhammad rather than the Son of God. This divinity arose from Church doctrine rather than natural religion.⁹ While modern audiences might find these views incompatible with the Christian faith, this thinking fit well within the Deistic framework. Most Deists viewed God more as a "Great Watchmaker" rather than a figure intimately involved with everyday life.¹⁰

Outside of Europe, Deism spread quickly to the American colonies where it took on new form. American Deism emphasized God through the natural world, especially given the vast American expanse. These Deists believed God created the

² Curry, 2010, pp. 207-215

³ Manuel & Palin, 2015

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Dulles, 2005, p. 25

⁶ *Op. cit.* 2.

⁷ *Op. cit.* 5, p. 26

⁸ *Op. cit.* 2, pp 211-229

⁹ *Op. cit.* 3.

¹⁰ Taylor, 2005, pp. 462-3

natural world and bestowed it upon humanity. With our God given reason, we could use the land for our own benefit. Additionally, Deists held that the universe functions through the mechanistic natural laws established by God. By studying the natural world, humans could begin to understand both creation and their creator.¹¹ Deism was especially influential among American political figures—especially Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, particularly, espoused Deistic beliefs. For example, he advocated for religious freedom and separation of Church and state. He even composed a “Jeffersonian Bible,” a text that omitted all of the miraculous events of the New Testament to focus on Jesus’ moral teachings.¹²

Despite its influence, the Deistic movement began to decline in the early to mid-19th century. Scholars attribute this fall to a number of different factors. During this period, Christianity experienced revitalization throughout America and Europe with the second Great Awakening. This revival shifted religion away from reason and towards emotion and the supernatural; audiences now expected a message of love and hope. Without the appeal to reason, Deism lost much of its support. Additionally, Deism attracted many followers by attacking the authority of religious institutions, which Deists believed abused their power and corrupted religious truth. However, as time progressed, churches generally became less tied with political institutions and oppression. They also became less associated with tyranny and persecution, as more denominations accepted the principles of religious tolerance. Through this shift, Deism became a less unique and attractive philosophy. Many audiences also had difficulty reconciling with the Deist perspective on

divine intervention. As previously mentioned, Deists believed that God created the world but does not actively intervene in its affairs. However, if God had the power and motivation to create the world, why would he choose to stand by as an onlooker? To many audiences, this type of distant God seemed unnecessary and unattractive; such a God would neither respond to prayer nor intervene on others’ behalf. Thus, as a religious institution, Deism lost its footings in society and quickly fell into obscurity.¹³

How, then, is Deism relevant in modern society? Outside of history and philosophy classes, most Americans are unfamiliar with the Deistic movement, let alone America’s Deistic roots. There is no established “Church of Deism”—or anything of the like. In fact, the only organized Deist groups currently in existence are merely offshoots on Internet forums and blogs. If anything, we can establish that few people, if any, explicitly label themselves as “Deists.” Despite this, remnants of Deism and Deistic thinking are rampant throughout American society. For the many Americans that practice religious tolerance, many do not find authority in the Church and reject supernatural occurrences in their day-to-day lives. One could argue these attitudes did not originate from Deism but rather from scientific and societal shifts. However, as Steven Waldman of *The Wall Street Journal* notes, Americans are increasingly distancing themselves from religion; in one recent survey, as many as 15% of respondents professed no religious affiliation. While some of these religious “Nones”—as they are often referred to—rejected a divine creator, half of this group expressed a belief in God. And a quarter of these respondents believed in a distant God. This indicates that, at some level, Deistic thinking does exist within contemporary

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 463

¹² *Op. cit.* 5, pp. 26-7

¹³ *Op. cit.* 5, pp. 28-9

society.¹⁴ Again, one could argue that this one survey does not represent the American religious public, that these respondents would identify as agnostic, or that these numbers do not truly reflect significance in society. However, these findings serve to reinforce the idea that even though Americans do not expressly identify as Deists, they still hold Deistic beliefs. More specifically, two patterns of thinking have arisen in modern societies that reflect this Deistic thought: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and Theistic Naturalism.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)

In 2005, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton introduced the concept of MTD, a religious trend growing among American youth. While this trend is most apparent among those of the Christian faith, Smith notes that it also applies to those of other faiths as well—such as those of Buddhist, Islamic, and Hindu faiths. Similar to modern Deism, no adolescents explicitly identify themselves as a Moralistic Therapeutic Deists; rather the term reflects implicit religious beliefs commonly adopted by American youth. Paralleling Herbert's five tenets, the sociologists characterized the movement based on five religious principles: belief in a creator that observes the Earth, belief in a creator who wants a moral people, belief in happiness as life's central objective, belief in a distant creator who occasionally intervenes, and belief that moral people will be rewarded in the afterlife. Within this movement, there is a great emphasis on being a moral person. This includes everything from being polite and responsible to being well liked by peers. Moreover, MTD emphasizes happiness and "feeling good about oneself."¹⁵ Praying, going to church, and other religious practices serve

primarily to fulfill these ends. Thus, as a religious movement, it places the individual rather than the community at the center.

Within this framework, God assumes an interesting role in the world. As previously mentioned, God created the world and its laws; however, he distances himself from our lives most of the time. Though when we beckon him, God intervenes at a moment's notice. As Smith states, this creator is "a combination [of a] Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist."¹⁶

Contrasting MTD with Historical Deism

By unpacking these tenets, we can juxtapose the historical Deistic movement with MTD. First, both belief systems accept the existence of a distant creator. However, the two differ with regard to the root and extent of this belief.

Traditional Deists believed in a distant God that accommodated for their rational approach to life; this belief excluded unexplainable, miraculous events. Its modern counterpart believes in a distant God to fit with movement away from religiosity within society. Nevertheless, the appeal to hope and emotional fulfillment allows for this God to intervene in our affairs when needed. From this, we can gather that both movements reflect other cultural shifts occurring within their respective periods.

Historical Deism reflects Enlightenment attitudes while MTD embodies individualistic American culture. This individualistic perspective also demonstrates a difference in the goals of the two groups. MTD emphasizes self-fulfillment above all else while historical Deism focuses on communal issues—such as attacking the authority of the Church. That said, both groups do find less authority in religious institutions and the biblical text

¹⁴ Waldman, 2009

¹⁵ Smith, 2005, pp. 46-8

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 48-50

in contrast to their more orthodox peers. Also, both groups value religious tolerance.

There are, as well, differences in demographics between the two. Deism of the 18th century appealed to the educated upper classes and was explicitly embraced. This modern derivative, though, attracts broad audiences of a younger demographic. Furthermore, its members accept the principles of MTD without embracing the identity. While these are clearly two separate movements with distinct belief systems, it is evident from this analysis that the basic values of Deism still remain relevant among wide audiences.

Role of Theistic Naturalism

Theistic Naturalism or Theistic Evolution, as it is sometimes referred to, echoes the rational theology of the historical Deistic movement. With the introduction of Darwinian evolution in the mid-19th century, many religious figures were forced to grapple with God's role in creation and the natural world. Some have adopted literalist interpretations of Genesis and maintain that God created the world in seven days, a belief system known as Creationism. Through this position, Creationists effectively reject evolution. However, others believe that the Bible can be read through the lens of evolutionary processes. God created evolutionary forces, which continue to function in our natural world. Scholars who uphold this position are sometimes known as Theistic Naturalists. While this is not a monolithic belief system, Harbin contends these individuals hold two common beliefs. They both maintain God created the world and its natural laws and they accept Darwinian evolution as a valid natural process.¹⁷ It is the latter belief that varies widely among Theistic Naturalists.

Weak Theistic Naturalists argue that God works through the natural laws of the universe, such as evolution, but allows for divine action outside of this realm. For example, some believe that the human soul arose supernaturally rather than by natural forces alone.^{18, 19} Strong Theistic Naturalists, by contrast, postulate that God only works through the natural laws of the universe and reject supernatural intervention. It is this form of Theistic Naturalism that is most often compared to historical Deism.²⁰ However, even Strong Theistic Naturalists vary in this mechanistic view of God's actions. Some have a "front-loaded" approach, wherein God created the world preprogrammed with natural laws that would inevitably carry out his will. Thus, there is no need for God to actively intervene in our daily affairs.²¹ Others view God working in the natural world through evolution "in a creative interplay of chance and law" without a fixed plan for the universe or its inhabitants.²² From this perspective, God acts continually in our world rather than solely at its beginning.

The historical Deistic movement and Theistic Naturalism clearly share some common ground. The two philosophies both place great emphasis on science and reason: historical Deism through the Newtonian perspective and Theistic Naturalism through the Darwinian perspective. Proponents interpret God and scripture in light of these scientific breakthroughs. Moreover, both view God acting in a less direct and distant manner. Unlike MTD, members embrace both the identity and the ideas of the movements, as they are organized systems. This reflects in the diversity of thought found in both philosophies. Added, their membership bases are virtually identical: educated scholars with some investment in

¹⁷ Harbin, 1997, pp. 639-641

¹⁸ Cooper, 2013, pp. 479-80

¹⁹ Knight, 2009, pp. 535-6

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 536

²¹ Fowler, 2010, p. 274

²² Junghyung, 2011, pp. 97-8

theology. That being said, these perspectives do differ in substantial ways. For instance, Weak Theistic Naturalism allows for the incorporation of some supernatural elements. But even Strong Theistic Naturalism can allow for a more direct role of God through the creative forces of evolutionary processes. Traditional Deism, however, maintained the “Great Watchmaker” ideal. The goals of the movements, too, are quite distinct. Historical Deism, as previously discussed, attacked religious institutions and sought religious tolerance. Theistic Naturalism instead opposes Creationism as well as prejudices against evolution. Additionally, Theistic Naturalism upholds the unique moral authority of Christianity, and thus applies exclusively to the Christian faith. Most Theistic Naturalists maintain the divinity of Jesus, while the same cannot be said of historical Deists. However despite these differences, Theistic Naturalism demonstrates the pervading influence of Deistic thought among religious scholars.

Deism’s Theological Implications

Now that we have established Deism’s relevance in society, we can now explore its theological implications and applications. In contemporary religious circles, audiences tend to immediately reject the Deistic movement—the word itself has developed a negative connotation even. In the midst of Evangelicalism, a Deistic God can seem archaic if not sacrilegious. Modern audiences prefer a personal God that acts directly and intimately in their lives, a figure they can develop a relationship with. However, these audiences also tend to define Deism by its most well-known idea:

the “Great Watchmaker” God of William Paley. Many are unaware of the other aspects of the movement. While I am not a Deist nor believe that it is an appropriate theological response for others, perhaps we should leave room for the supernatural in our faith and understand that others want to do the same. That being said, I find truth in elements of Deistic thought and do not believe we should dismiss it outright. For instance, historical Deists were the first to champion religious freedom and tolerance, leading society away from religious persecution and corruption. This ecumenical approach promotes both unity and humility within the Christian faith. Furthermore, I appreciate Deists’ willingness to incorporate religious traditions outside of Christianity. These traditions can add depth to our prayers, worship, and faith as a whole.

Outside of religious tolerance, I respect the Deist approach to Biblical interpretation. Rather than viewing the text literally, Deists approach scripture from its context and from a lens of reason. This perspective removes the dissonance between science and religion, allowing audiences to accept new scientific advancements, such as evolution. That being said, I understand how extreme forms of Deism can conflict with contemporary Christian beliefs—especially with regard to the divinity of Jesus. While these tenets are not unique to Deism, I believe they are elements of Deism that should be considered when evaluating the philosophy as a whole. In light of these principles, perhaps we can view Deism as a progressive rather than an archaic belief system that still has purpose in American religious culture.

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