

Topic Page: [Deism](#)

Definition: **deism** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(1682) : a movement or system of thought advocating natural religion, emphasizing morality, and in the 18th century denying the interference of the Creator with the laws of the universe

de·ist \dē-ist, dā-\ *n*, often cap

de·is·tic \dē-is-tik, dā-\ *adj*

de·is·ti·cal \-ti-kəl *adj*

de·is·ti·cal·ly \-ti-k(ə-)lē\ *adv*

Summary Article: **Deism**

From *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*

Deism is a rationalistic, critical approach to theism with an emphasis on natural theology. The Deists attempted to reduce religion to what they regarded as its most foundational, rationally justifiable elements. Deism is not, strictly speaking, the teaching that God wound up the world like a watch and let it run on its own, though that teaching was embraced by some within the movement.

Deism arose in the 17th century and reached its heyday in the 18th. It includes such well-known figures as Thomas Hobbes, Conyers Middleton, John Toland, Matthew Tindal, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and Voltaire. Deism made its influence felt in early America, as shown in such American statesmen as Thomas Paine, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin.

The Deists set forth a reductionist theology, which pared down religion to what they thought were its bare essentials. For example, Lord Herbert of Cherbury in his *Concerning Truth* (1624) summarized religion as consisting in five points: (1) there is a God, the highest being; (2) he is to be worshiped; (3) worship consists of piety and virtue; (4) deviations from virtue (i.e. sin) must be repented of, and if there is repentance there will be forgiveness; (5) evil will be punished and virtue rewarded in a future life. John Toland, in his *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), taught that we should retain the simple elements of Christianity — such as God and immortality — but abandon the mysterious elements of the faith as superstitious. Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730) argued that the Gospel is just the reiteration of the original, natural religion. The role of religion is to inculcate morality; it is enough if one leads a good and moral life.

As is evident from the foregoing summaries, the Deists valued religion primarily for its ethical content. They also denied the unique, super-natural doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, Christ's miracles, his deity, and his resurrection. This same tendency is clearly evident in Thomas Jefferson's distillate of the Gospels. In the introduction to his compilation he states: “The question of his [Jesus] being a member of the Godhead, or in direct communication with it, claimed for him by some of his followers and denied by others, is foreign to the present view, which is merely an estimate of the intrinsic [ethical] merits of his doctrines.”

It is significant that Jefferson's Bible begins with Mary already pregnant and ends with Jesus still in the

tomb.

In terms of the Bible, the Deists were notably selective as to which portions they valued. They were amenable to those texts that spoke of God being revealed in the creation (e.g. Ps. 19:1), and those that presented ethical content they found congenial (e.g. the golden rule, the Sermon on the Mount). They disliked the miracle accounts and those texts that set forth the unique doctrines of historic orthodoxy (e.g. the bodily resurrection, deity of Christ, original sin). They tended to take a higher critical approach to the Scriptures, questioning the authenticity of certain books.

The emphases of Deism, including its rationalism, antisupernaturalism, acceptance of higher critical methodology, and the denial of historic, Christian orthodoxy find their way into modern liberal theology. Most recently, the so-called “Jesus Seminar” breathes the Deistic spirit, and Robert Funk’s dedication of their work to Thomas Jefferson is telling.

SEE ALSO: Butler, Joseph; Faith and Reason; Natural Theology

References and Suggested Readings

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